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James K. Polk and the American presidency

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Dissertation

JAMES K. POLK AND THE AMERICAN PRESIDENCY
by

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INAUGURATION OF PRESIDENT FOLK.—APPROACH TO THE CAPITOL.
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INTRODUCTION

The Presidency of the United States is much more than what the Constitution and the laws of the United States proclaim it to be. Rather, it is an institution shaped primarily by the energy and vigor of past occupants. Or, as Professor Corwin states, Presidential authority is "...the function of two highly variable factors -- 'Crisis' and 'Personality.'" He also observes with some misgiving that it is still "...a highly discontinuous feature of our constitutional system." Therefore, to know what the office is today, it is essential to know what past incumbents have made it. This dissertation is an examination of the incumbency of one such man, James K. Polk.

In recent years, writers on the American Presidency have come to recognize Polk as one of the few genuine contributors to Presidential aggrandizement. Edward S. Corwin in his book, The President: Office and Powers, lists Polk as one of only ten Presidents who have contributed to the development of Presidential power. Professor Binkley states: "If Tyler saved the Presidency from suffering a backset, Polk carried it deliberately forward to a more firmly established place in our constitutional system."

2 Ibid., pp. 29, 325.
As is so often the case, it is impossible to determine at the time of a radical or revolutionary shift in Presidential leadership whether that change will have any lasting effect, or whether it is purely the result of the charisma of one great man appearing at a crisis period of American history. It is only in a later period, when we can observe a man of lesser magnitude being able to consolidate and build upon the changes which took place earlier, that we can properly judge and analyze the impact, the permanence, and the institutionalization of the revolutionary change.4

It is the central thesis of this dissertation that the administration of the Presidency under James K. Polk institutionalized those changes in the American Presidency which have become associated with the Jacksonian type of chief executive.

Taking a broad view of the Jacksonian administration, what then were its chief characteristics which have become identified with the Jacksonian type of President?

First, a Jacksonian President is distinguished on the basis of executive leadership based on a theory of direct responsibility to the people. Jackson was, as it has been observed, "the first popularly elected President."5 The controversy during his administration over the Second Bank of the United States became in large part a struggle between Jackson and the Congress, during which Jackson's course was strongly influenced "by his conviction that he bore a mandate fresh from the

4 For a more recent view of this situation, one has only to consider the Presidency of Harry S. Truman to witness the institutionalization of the Roosevelt New Deal. Incidentally, the parallel between James K. Polk and Harry S. Truman will be apparent throughout this dissertation.

It will be observed that President Polk, even more explicitly than Jackson, insisted that his first responsibility was to the people.

Secondly, a Jacksonian President is expected to be the dominant and commanding figure within the executive branch of the government. Jackson's dismissal of his Secretary of the Treasury stands as a monument to Jacksonian control. Nevertheless, while Polk's control was never so dramatic, it will be shown to have been more constant and encompassing.

Thirdly, a Jacksonian President must be the leader and symbol of the dominant issue of his day. Jackson became the personification of his time in its break from autocracy and in its yearning for popular democracy and its espousal of the "common man." Polk in a similar fashion became the champion of the great cause of his time so aptly described in the phrase, "Manifest Destiny."

Fourthly, a Jacksonian President is expected to be the protector of the national interest as opposed to the sectional or particular interests. When Jackson was faced with a serious threat to the union in the doctrine of nullification, he met it with decisive action made memorable by his phrase, "The federal union -- it must be preserved." Polk was faced with a serious threat of a similar nature to the union in the controversy over expansion of slavery into the newly-acquired territories and

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6Ibid., p. 63. See also Andrew C. McLaughlin, A Constitutional History of the United States, p. 423: "As a matter of plain fact we only exaggerate and overemphasize when we say that Jackson was in stark reality the first President of the American people."

he, too, labored hard, using all the strength of the Presidential office to preserve the union.

Finally, a Jacksonian executive is expected to be the head of his party as well as the head of the nation. In fact, probably more persons remember Jackson for his advocacy of the "spoils system" and "rotation" in office than for anything else. It will be observed that President Polk was always conscious of his political role, and in fact that in the matter of "spoils" he exceeded his mentor.

There remains to be stated a coordinate thesis of this dissertation, which is that President Polk, in his own right, made some important contributions to Presidential aggrandizement.

Prior to setting forth various hypotheses regarding Polk's contribution to the Presidency, it is necessary to state what is meant by a contribution to the Presidency. Such a contribution may take the form of an act or a series of acts which establishes a clear precedent for future action by a succeeding President; or it may be the reassertion of a Presidential prerogative which has lost its force through disuse; or it may be the establishment through repeated assertion of a prerogative which, although continually claimed, has never been generally acknowledged, but has been subject to continuous challenge. On occasion, it has been possible for a President to make a contribution to the Presidency through one single act which stands out in bold relief: e.g., Truman's decision to send troops into Korea; on other occasions the contribution has been the result of the totality of Presidential conduct. For example, while Washington probably contributed more to the Presidency than any of his successors, his greatest contribution was the respect, almost to the point
of reverence which he gave to the office. This was accomplished not by one magnanimous gesture but by his attributes of character and bearing which were displayed constantly throughout his eight years of office.

It is the contention of this dissertation that President Polk made the following contributions to Presidential aggrandizement:

Within the executive department, he established the absolute, unchallenged domination of the President over all lesser officials, and the right and responsibility of the President for all executive actions. He was able to bring the Treasury Department, which from the time of Alexander Hamilton had enjoyed a good measure of independent status, under his direct supervision. Significant also was his innovation of budgetary control, which enabled the President for the first time in our history to present a truly executive budget to the Congress.

He asserted the right and proved the ability of a President without a previous military background to be in fact as well as in name the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces. This right he exercised not only in time of peace, but during the Mexican War. In accomplishing this, he brought the Department of War and Navy under his direct control. In fact, as Commander-in-Chief he used his power to deploy the military forces in such a manner that, for all practical purposes, he transferred the power to declare war from the legislative branch to the executive.

If Thomas Jefferson's eminence as a President, as distinct from his fame as a political philosopher, rests in no small measure upon his acquisition of the Louisiana territory, then Polk must be credited with the distinction of making America into a continental nation. He demonstrated as Chief of Foreign Affairs how far a President who has the
courage to exploit his strategic position can go. He demonstrated the truth of the two axioms of leadership which Bernard De Voto so aptly phrases in his description of President Polk:

But if his mind was narrow it was also powerful and he had guts. If he was orthodox, his integrity was absolute and he could not be scared, manipulated, or brought to heel. No one bluffed him, no one moved him with direct or oblique pressure. Furthermore, he knew how to get things done, which is the first necessity of government, and he knew what he wanted done, which is the second.8

The material in this dissertation will be presented in terms of the traditional analysis of Presidential authority and operations. As Louis Brownlow reminds us, no cataloging of the various roles that the President plays would satisfy all students of the Presidency.9 Yet for purposes of analysis, it seems essential to attempt such a classification so that the tools of the political scientist can best be brought to bear on the subject. Thus Chapters II through VII are entitled, The First Dark Horse; Polk's Concept of the Presidency; The President as Commander-in-Chief; Chief of Foreign Affairs; Chief of Legislation; and Party Chief.

In order to bring out in greater relief the thesis of this dissertation, it is essential that a review be made of the character and contributions of the preceding Presidents' administrations from the Federalists, Washington and Adams, through the Jeffersonians to the Jacksonians and the Whigs. Chapter I will sketch such a development of the Presidential office.


Although there is no lack of materials covering the period of Polk's Presidency, there is a scarcity of studies on Polk himself and none that approaches the subject from the viewpoint of a political scientist. Until 1957, only E. I. McCormac's biography published in 1922 approached adequacy, and that is written from the standpoint of a historian and biographer rather than a political scientist. Last year, Charles Grier Sellers' biography, *James K. Polk: Jacksonian, 1795–1845*, was published. It represents the best in historical scholarship, but as it ends prior to Polk's election to the Presidency, it provides only useful background information for this study.\(^{10}\) Jenkins' biography written in 1851 is an obviously partisan treatment, and although useful for some historical data, is too restricted in its outlook and methodology to be of any real significance. Martha McBride Morrel's fictional account entitled *Young Hickory* is so inadequate in scholarship as hardly to deserve mention.

Fortunately, however, the four-volume diary of James K. Polk, edited by Milo Milton Quaife, presents a reliable source of information for the political scientist. Material is available in this diary which would take years of research to compile. Furthermore, the diary presents clearly both President Polk's actions and his thoughts on events at the time they occurred. Perhaps it will be felt that the dissertation makes too much use of the diary; however, to provide singleness of purpose and focus upon the Presidency and its occupant, its continued use has been necessary. To indicate that the writer is not alone in utilizing fully the Polk diaries, attention is called to Leonard D. White's significant

recent study, *The Jacksonians*, in which, when writing on the Polk administration, he relies heavily upon the Polk Diary.\textsuperscript{11}

The Polk papers which have been collected and are available at the Library of Congress have been a useful source, in spite of the fact that they have neither been edited nor indexed.

In addition to this material directly related to Polk, the newspapers, particularly the *Washington Union*, the organ of the Polk administration, periodicals of the day, the reporting of Congress in the *Washington Globe*, and other historical materials of the period have been very useful. All of these historical sources have been used, as well as contemporary studies by political scientists on the executive branch of our government.

One further note on methodology seems necessary. The writer has often been tempted to pursue tangential lines of inquiry, such as detailed examination of the conduct of the Mexican War, but in addition to the fact that such researches may already have been most skillfully done by qualified historians,\textsuperscript{12} these temptations have been resisted so that the dissertation could adhere to its thesis and maintain a sharp focus upon the Presidency.

The significant thing for an understanding of the developing role of the President during the Polk administration is not the facts *per se*,


but rather the President's interpretation of them. For example, on the subject of Presidential control over the military field commanders, it is not essential to know that General Taylor was so incompetent a commander and so politically motivated that it was necessary to shift the area of military action to another front, or that later General Scott, the highest-ranking military commander, was so inadequate as to necessitate his removal; but it is essential to know that this was President Polk's interpretation of the situation upon which he based his action.

This dissertation, written with its focus upon the President, attempts to demonstrate that the Polk administration exhibits all of the major characteristics of the Jacksonian-type executive, which, in turn, is significant because it served as the pattern and precedent for the strong type of executive leadership which has become characteristic of the American Presidency.
CHAPTER I

PRESIDENTIAL GROWTH FROM WASHINGTON TO POLK

This dissertation is a study of the American Presidency during the incumbency of one man, James K. Polk. It is justified as being an analysis of the Presidency when fundamental decisions were made which shaped the destiny of the nation. To understand what the Presidency is today, it is necessary to learn what that office has been in times past. The justification for any historical study is that it illuminates the present with the experience of the past. A study of the development of political institutions involves an appraisal of a particular institution at critical points in its history. To speak of the nature of something is to describe what it is. To trace the development of something is to study what it was at selected times in the past. Since the thesis of this paper is that the Polk Presidency serves as a nearly perfect example of the Jacksonian type of chief executive, it is essential that we examine, briefly at least, the development of the Presidential office from the time of its creation to the Polk incumbency, so that we may have an understanding of the state of the office prior to as well as at the close of his administration.

From the time of the Constitutional Convention to 1844, Presidential history may be conveniently divided into three periods, namely, that of the Federalists, Washington and Adams, who held office from 1789 to 1801;  

1This writer, as would be any writer on Presidential growth and development, is greatly indebted to Leonard D. White for his recent tril- ogy, The Federalists, The Jeffersonians, and The Jacksonians.
that of the Republicans, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, and John Quincy Adams, who held office from 1801 to 1829; and that of Jackson-Van Buren, whose terms of office extended from 1829 to 1840. Between 1840 and 1844 the office was held for one month by the Whig Harrison and for the remainder of his term by the first Vice-President to succeed to the Presidency, John Tyler.

The American Presidency is a political institution created by law and overwhelmingly influenced by custom. Any study which seeks, as this one does, to demonstrate a President's contribution to the office and to demonstrate that his administration embodies a concept of executive leadership enunciated by a predecessor, i.e., Andrew Jackson, must place great stress upon the impact which custom has had upon the office.

This chapter shall consider the administrations of the Federalist, Republican, and Jacksonian Presidents down to the inauguration of James K. Polk.

The Federalists

The Federalists were to control the executive branch for the first twelve years of the existence of the new nation. The fact that the nation still endures stands as a monument to their success. "The Federalists accepted the philosophy of government for the people but not government by the people."2 The moral standards of their administration have never been surpassed. They brought dignity and respect for the new government, qualities essential for its acceptance. They won the support of the "good," the "well-born," "the man of property," "the educated," the "natural

aristocrat," without whose support the government could not have lasted.

It was a common assumption of the founding fathers that George Washington would become the first President, an assumption well founded, since he became the only President to receive the unanimous vote of the electoral college. That fellow Virginian, Thomas Jefferson, probably provides us with the best description of Washington's traits:

His mind was great and powerful, without being of the very first order; his penetration strong; though not so acute as that of a Newton, Bacon or Locke; and as far as he saw, no judgment was ever sounder. It was slow in operation, being little aided by invention or imagination, but sure in conclusion....

He was incapable of fear, meeting personal dangers with the calmest unconcern. Perhaps the strongest feature in his character was prudence, never acting until every circumstance, every consideration, was maturely weighted; refraining if he saw a doubt; but when once decided, going through with his purpose, whatever obstacles opposed.

His integrity was the most pure, his justice the most inflexible I have ever known; no motives of interest or consanguinity, or friendship or hatred, being able to bias his decision. He was, indeed, in every sense of the words, a wise, a good, and a great, man.

His temper was naturally irritable and high-toned; but reflection and resolution had obtained a firm and habitual ascendancy over it. If ever, however, it broke its bonds, he was most tremendous in his wrath.

His heart was not warm in its affections; but he exactly calculated every man's value, and gave him a solid esteem proportioned to it....

[He took a] free share in conversation, [but] his colloquial talents were not above mediocrity, possessing neither copiousness of ideas nor fluency in words. In public, when called upon for a sudden opinion, he was unready, short and embarrassed. Yet he wrote readily, rather diffusely, in an easy and correct style....

His character was, in its mass, perfect, in nothing bed, in few points indifferent;... never did nature and fortune combine more
perfectly to make a man great....

Perhaps because of the general assumption that Washington would become the first President and because of his unanimous selection, he was prepared to exercise a broad general supervision; a willingness to become the symbol of national unity and national aspirations. In any event, when joined with that strong character Alexander Hamilton, Washington soon fell into the habit of acting a role befitting a monarch in a constitutional system. But even as long ago as 1790 it was necessary for a monarch to employ the services of a Prime Minister. Alexander Hamilton was all too willing to be the American counterpart to the younger Pitt in England. Hamilton even went so far as to request his friends to speak of him as the First Lord of the Treasury. Hamilton's assumption of Prime Ministerial functions was aided and abetted by the lack of strong Congressional leadership among the agrarian Republicans; while he, Hamilton, moved about freely and forcefully in the caucuses of the Congressional Federalists.

Not only did Congress accept Hamilton's leadership, but there is considerable evidence that the other departments also looked upon him as Premier, or at least permitted him to play that role. Professor Binkley assembles the evidence as follows:

On January 11, 1791 we find him replying to Jefferson's request for an opinion concerning our treaty with France and writing, "I have perused with attention your intended report to the President,


5Ibid., p. 32.
and will, as I am sure is your wish, give my opinion with frankness." Later Jefferson is asking him what the Senate would do in regard to certain proposals for a treaty with Algiers. Hamilton and not the Secretary of War wrote to the House "that it is the opinion of the Secretary for the Department of War that it is expedient and necessary that the United States should retain and occupy West Point."

Hamilton wanted to make all purchases for the War Department. When Knox demurred Hamilton persuaded Congress to give him such authority. Hamilton prepared the list of questions that constituted the agenda at the Cabinet meeting to consider the conduct of Genet. Washington had recopied the questions in his own handwriting but Jefferson knew the usurper of his prerogative in the field of foreign affairs. It was Hamilton and not Jefferson who issued the instructions to Jay when he went to London to negotiate the treaty that bears his name. Moreover Hamilton took liberties revising and altering important state papers prepared by other executive heads.6

Nevertheless, in spite of Hamilton's function as First Lord of the Treasury, the Federalists did not develop an executive-type budget, and we shall see that President Polk was the first President to insist on controlling this most vital tool of administrative management. Leonard White summarizes the budget process under the Federalists as follows:

For the most part, however, the figures submitted by the respective agencies were merely brought together in a single file by Joseph Nourse, the Registrar, and transmitted to the clerk of the House. There was no budget document, no balance of income and outgo, no budget message from the President, and no executive recommendation on general fiscal policy.7

While Washington failed to exercise legislative leadership, his Prime Minister Alexander Hamilton more than made up for his deficiencies. Prior to Hamilton's appointment as Secretary of the Treasury, there is no evidence of any Presidential attempt to persuade Congress on legislative matters, but within a week after Hamilton joined the Cabinet, the House Committee on Ways and Means was discharged and its affairs referred to

6Ibid., pp. 55-56. See also Leonard D. White, The Federalists, pp. 126-127.

Hamilton for a report.\(^8\) That leading Congressional actions such as tariff legislation and debt redemption had their origin in Hamilton's "Report on Manufacturing" is too well known to need retelling.

While Washington might have been willing in most fields to leave matters in the competent hands of his Secretary of the Treasury, he took the reins of government as Commander-in-Chief into his own hands. Washington throughout his administration suffered the inept leadership of two incompetent Secretaries of War. The first, affable, gigantic Henry Knox, had been an able military commander during the revolution, but his gambling instincts and his passion for being a "furious Federalist" did not enhance his skill as a civil administrator, except to make him a willing tool of Hamilton. After Knox came Timothy Pickering, who served only for a year. Washington looked in vain for an able successor to Pickering, finally settling on his fourth choice, James McHenry. The latter's chief claim to the office was Hamilton's endorsement, which was qualified, to say the least: "McHenry you know. He would give no strength to the administration, but he would not disgrace the office...." Three years later Hamilton's endorsement had weakened. "My friend McHenry is wholly insufficient for his place, with the additional misfortune, of not having the least suspicion of the fact..."\(^9\) However, when the Whiskey Rebellion in western Pennsylvania required immediate action, Washington provided the decisive leadership which it has been our custom to look for in the Presidential office.

\(^8\)Ibid., p. 56.
\(^9\)Ibid., p. 154.
...the contest being whether a small portion of the United States shall dictate to the whole Union, and, at the expense of those who desire peace, indulge a desperate ambition.\textsuperscript{10}

And after having stated accurately the cause, he personally led a force of 15,000 State Militia (a larger force than he had ever commanded during the revolution) into Pennsylvania. In the face of this determination the rebels laid down their arms and the Whiskey Rebellion ended without bloodshed.

In the area of foreign policy the Federalists, after an abortive attempt at cooperation with the legislative branch, proceeded to assert executive supremacy most effectively. In the first instance Washington took the opportunity of going to the Senate in person to consult with them and ask their advice on a treaty which he was in the process of negotiating with the Creek Indians. The Senate, fearful of Washington's domination of their deliberations, approved a motion to submit the President's proposal to the Senate for their deliberation. Washington is reported to have replied, "This defeats every purpose of my coming here," and Charles Francis Adams reports that Washington stated as he left the Senate chamber still flushed with anger "that he would be damned if he ever went there again."\textsuperscript{11}

While Washington never returned personally to the Senate for its prior advice on a treaty, he continued to request the Senate's views on treaties prior to their negotiation. In addition to Washington, Presidents Monroe, Jackson, and Van Buren also consulted the Senate prior to negotiating a treaty. It remained for President Polk, however, to utilize


\textsuperscript{11}George Fort Milton, The Use of Presidential Power (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1944), p. 27; see also White, The Federalists, pp. 60-61.
this practice as a deliberate maneuver to extricate himself from an untenable political position.12

Washington's neutrality proclamation touched off one of the most significant constitutional debates of our history. The debate concerned the proper construction to be applied to the clause that "the executive power shall be vested in a President of the United States." Hamilton argued successfully that, whereas the Constitution stated that "all legislative power herein granted shall be vested in a Congress of the United States," in the case of executive power the Constitution merely provided that "the executive power shall be vested in a President of the United States." Therefore, he argued, the grant of executive power to the President is a general grant of power. Hamilton clearly states the constitutional doctrine which grew out of these debates: "The general doctrine of our Constitution then is that the executive power of the nation is vested in the President, subject only to the exceptions and qualifications which are expressed in the instrument."13 This has become the accepted constitutional view as related to foreign affairs, while for all other powers the President must look to the specific grants of the Constitution or to specific statutes.

The achievements of the Federalists during the Washington adminis-


tration were many and significant. If the President did not personally attend to the details and initiate the policies which we have come to expect from our chief executive, he had an able lieutenant in his Secretary of the Treasury who could unify the executive and provide it with strength and vigor. In fact, with the possible exception of Thomas Jefferson's Presidency, the country was not to experience so vigorous an executive leadership until the Presidency of Andrew Jackson. The Federalists' accomplishments included, first of all, the provision of a strong moral leadership and moral climate in the executive branch which has not been equalled since. Secondly, the Federalists could not escape the necessity for organizing the government and they provided a basic structure which has endured. Thirdly, they brought to the government a public program which, although not enacted in all its details, was largely accomplished. Fourthly, in the area of foreign affairs they were notably successful in asserting the executive primacy; they were unafraid of executive power, rather they feared impotency in government. Fifthly, they were distrustful of the people and favored the rich and the well-born, thus providing the government with class ties to the lives of the property-owning class of the nation. Finally, they successfully asserted in the case of the Whiskey Rebellion the supremacy of federal law and the necessity for order. In this instance Washington quickly recognized the seriousness of the threat and used the Commander-in-Chief's power with all the vigor necessary for success.

But in spite of this outstanding record of achievement the executive authority was on the wane even before Washington left office, and with the arrival of Adams in the White House the slow retreat of executive authority
had turned into a rout. It seems certain that Washington would never have consented to a second term if there had not been trouble abroad. Yet the strong central control which Hamilton had wielded throughout the first term was nearly at an end. The Republicans had control over the lower house, and the harassment of Hamilton drove him from the Cabinet into private life. The third Congress demolished the system of executive leadership but failed to replace it with strong Congressional leadership. Albert Gallatin made a valiant but largely unsuccessful effort to organize the House through a newly-constituted Ways and Means Committee. Gradually the standing committee system developed to provide a semblance of order to the government.

In 1797 John Adams took over the Presidency and with it the Federalists were once again in control of both houses, but, as we shall see, he was unable to reassert executive control. Albert Gallatin's able leadership of the Republicans in the House was now supported by Thomas Jefferson in his role of President of the Senate. Within the executive branch John Adams found himself a prisoner. He felt he had to retain Washington's Cabinet. Party leadership, instead of residing with him, still rested with a private citizen, Alexander Hamilton. His department heads were not only holdovers from Washington's administration; they were to a man loyal to Adams' political enemy, Alexander Hamilton. For example, his Secretary of the Treasury was Oliver Wolcott, who had been auditor under Hamilton and depended almost entirely on Hamilton in matters of fiscal policy. In 1789 Adams wrote to Washington that he wished he could turn the Presidency over to him.\textsuperscript{14} A short time after this letter, on July 2, 1798, Adams

\textsuperscript{14}Milton, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 51.
nominated Washington as Lieutenant-General and Commander-in-Chief. There has probably never been such a blatant transfer of constitutionally granted powers from a President to another as occurred in this instance. To make matters worse for President Adams, he was forced against his own desire to nominate Alexander Hamilton as second-in-command to Washington. This was a very bitter pill for the proud Bostonian to swallow, but upon Washington's insistence he gave way. Yet in contrast to this debacle in leadership (another being the passage of the Alien and Sedition Acts) Adams showed unusual determination and principle in his successful efforts to avoid a war with France. He stood alone against Hamilton and the Federalist party with full knowledge that success of his negotiators in arriving at a settlement with France would lose for the Federalists the election of 1800.

In reviewing the Federalists' handling of the executive office it will be observed that under Washington, aided by Alexander Hamilton, executive power was established and vigorously exercised, but that with the Presidency of John Adams executive leadership was divided and weak. In 1800 the Jeffersonians were to take control until Andrew Jackson in 1829 issued into the executive branch a new concept of that office. The Federalists were never again to have the opportunity to control the executive.

The Jeffersonians

Mr. Jefferson became President in 1800 after one of the most bitterly fought contests in our history, a contest which reached its climax in the attempt to place Aaron Burr in the Presidency in his place. Of
might have expected the new President to conduct the affairs of office with the utmost partisanship; however, Jefferson was too big a man for that and set out to restore harmony in the nation. But how was this man, dedicated as he was to separation of powers and states' rights, to mold this new administration so that it could lead the nation. The record of the Republicans in Congress was not impressive. The last four years of Washington's administration had found the Republicans in control of the House of Representatives; yet that group of agrarian individualists had been unable to present any constructive program. The art of obstruction had been highly developed, and now the Republicans faced the responsibility of directing the energies of government.

Chief Justice Marshall, no friend of Jefferson, provides the clue to the understanding of both the success of Jefferson and the failure of his Jeffersonian heirs.

Mr. Jefferson appears to me to be a man who will embody himself with the House of Representatives. By weakening the office of President, he will increase his personal power. He will diminish his responsibility, sap the fundamental principles of government, and become the leader of that party which is about to constitute the majority of the legislature.16

How was Marshall's prophecy to come to pass? Jefferson was too wise to attempt to dominate Congress by means of external formal pressures from the executive branch; but with Gallatin's assistance he controlled Congress internally. Professor Binley reports, and Leonard White confirms, that during Jefferson's administration no Congressional official, whether Speaker of the House or committee chairman, was appointed except by the President's command. Once again the terms, "first lord of the treasury"

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and "chancellor of the exchequer," were being used, but in contrast to Washington's administration they were applied not to the Secretary of the Treasury but to the Chairman of the Committee on Ways and Means. And if the Chairman of the Committee on Ways and Means stepped out of line, as John Randolph did, then Jefferson saw to his removal. This was one of the means that Jefferson used to manage Congress, but, as we shall see, it was a two-edged sword which could be turned against a lesser figure in the Presidential office. Professor White summarizes this feature of control very succinctly:

The principal innovation was the establishment of a floor leader who was recognized as the spokesman for the President. Under the Federalists the floor leader had been an assistant to the Speaker, but not in any sense a representative of the President. Under Jefferson, floor leaders were presidential agents, appointed by the executive, and dismissed at his pleasure.

A second device utilized by Jefferson to coordinate the legislative and executive branches without violating the principle of separation of powers was the Republican caucus. The first recognition in Congressional debate of the existence of a caucus occurred in 1802. Jefferson is believed to have presided on occasion over the caucus meetings. Once again Leonard White summarizes very nicely the executive-legislative relationships developed under Jefferson and their implications for the future:

Jefferson, in short, built up a highly centralized system, operated for the most part by conference, consultation, and free discussion.

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rather than by harsher means of leadership. The development of this very machinery was to make possible... a radical change in the relationship between executive and legislature. If the House leaders should get control of the machinery of caucus, floor leader, and speakership, they would be in a position to control the whole executive administration. Precisely this development was to occur as Jefferson left the stage.20

With this shift to Congressional control over these agencies of direction would also come Congressional control over the President's own advisers, the heads of executive departments. This lack of Presidential control over his subordinates had been indirectly encouraged by Jefferson's passion for economy. For in his successful drive to repay the Federalist-acquired debt and achieve a budget surplus, Jefferson encouraged the Congress to appropriate funds only according to specific purposes narrowly defined. As usual, the greatest savings possible to the executive were in the area of military preparedness and Jefferson was pleased to discover that his own distrust of a large standing army so coincided with his desire to trim the budget. That Jefferson enjoyed the support of his Secretary of the Treasury in his low regard for the military is certain. Gallatin, writing to his wife in 1802, stated:

The distribution of our little army to distant garrisons where hardly any other inhabitant is to be found is the most eligible arrangement of that perhaps necessary evil that can be contrived. But I never want to see the face of one in our cities and intermixed with the people.21

For these reasons Jefferson never gave much thought to his responsibilities as Commander-in-Chief. In general, Jefferson approached the whole problem of administration with an unusual degree of naivété, which he

20 White, Jeffersonians, pp. 52-53.

expressed rather clearly in a letter written in 1817, nine years after he had left the Presidency. Referring to "the difficulties supposed to attend the public administration," he wrote:

There are no mysteries in it. Difficulties indeed sometimes arise; but common sense and honest intentions will generally steer through them, and, where they cannot be surmounted, I have ever seen the well-intentioned part of our fellow-citizens sufficiently disposed not to look for impossibilities. We all know that a farm, however large, is not more difficult to direct than a garden, and does not call for more attention or skill.22

However, despite Jefferson's low regard for administration and his high regard for Republican principles, in a matter of grave significance he did not let his views become fixed and doctrinaire. The greatest achievement of his administration, the Louisiana Purchase, was carried through despite his Constitutional doubts, because he had the vision to see the significance of this acquisition to the future of the nation. Frederick Jackson Turner argues that it had greater significance for the nation's constitutional development than all of Alexander Hamilton's measures.25 In summation then, Jefferson's most significant contribution to the Presidency was the consummation of the Louisiana Purchase, for while it is true that he was a most skillful manipulator of Congress, the very tools which he developed became a Frankenstein Monster which almost destroyed the independent executive.

History has stamped James Madison as one of the best Constitutional theorists but one of the worst Presidential practitioners. The Congressional caucus (shaped by Jefferson) had by 1808 passed from the control of the executive into the hands of Congress. Every succeeding President from

22A. A. Lipscomb, ed., The Writings of Thomas Jefferson, XV, p. 112; as quoted in White, Jeffersonians, p. 4.

Madison to Andrew Jackson was hand-picked by the Republican Congressional caucus. Madison was not even permitted to name his own Cabinet, being forced to name Robert Smith as his Secretary of State rather than Gallatin, whom the President wished to fill that post. The Congressional caucus, as a tool of legislative domination of the executive, was assisted by a radical change in the Speakership of the House of Representatives. In 1811 Henry Clay became Speaker and from that day until 1825 the Speaker dominated and organized the House leadership. Prior to 1811 the Speaker, while a partisan figure, acted primarily as an impartial moderator; but after that date he became the real party leader. Miss Follett believed that Clay was the most powerful man in the nation during his reign as Speaker from 1811 to 1825.24 Under Clay's direction the functioning of the old Committee of the Whole was largely abandoned in favor of standing committees, which under his direction became strong instruments of control. By 1825 there were over twenty standing committees which encompassed all of the activities of the various departments. Clay was not alone in the Congress in asserting that branch's predominance; he was aided by a number of young men about whom the nation was to hear much during the next thirty years. The trio of Clay, Webster, and Calhoun were to cause difficulty for many a chief executive.

Nor was Madison able strongly to contest this Congressional force. He refused to attempt to dictate policy to Congress, and even his messages were noted for their ambiguity. Professor Binkley states: "Madison's lack of leadership was matched by his lack of decision."25 Being unable

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25Binkley, op. cit., p. 56.
to lead or decide, Madison soon found that in spite of his own sincere desires for peace, the War of 1812 was being forced upon him. The Congressional Caucus, acting as the device to select the Republican nominee for President, kept Madison in doubt about his nomination until he had adopted a policy which made war inevitable.26

A close examination of the conduct of the War of 181227 forces one to concur with the severe judgment passed by Arthur Bermon Tourtellot that:

Madison was the worst wartime commander in chief ever visited upon the republic and his War of 1812 was a hodgepodge of mismanagement, bad appointments, disastrous reverses, embarrassing retreats and home-front disunity. We did not win the war; the British simply lost it. And the ultimate outcome was in spite of rather than because of Madison's employment of the command powers of the Presidency.28

While Monroe had a little better time as President than Madison, he was in no way better able to cope with a Congress determined to rule the executive branch. Three issues will serve to illustrate Monroe's reluctance to assume the mantle of leadership. One of the gravest issues in our history was in the process of being temporarily settled in the Missouri Compromise, yet there is no evidence that President Monroe took any interest in this most important measure. It seems impossible that he


27White, Jeffersonians, pp. 219-220. "Madison's lack of judgment in selecting field commanders was never more completely illustrated.... The events attending the British capture of Washington revealed the greatest confusion as to the proper function of the commander in chief, the Secretary of War, other members of the cabinet, and the general commanding in the field."

failed to recognize the significance of the election of the Speaker of the House, and yet when that matter was brought to his attention, he refused to participate in the choice. Even in the matter of granting recognition to the newly freed republics of South America he submitted the question to Congress and asked for its concurrence in the form of an appropriation for diplomatic representatives. The Presidential office under Monroe had fallen to such an insignificant place in the American scheme that, despite a severe economic depression in 1819, President Monroe was able to win almost unanimous re-election in 1820. Only twenty years later Van Buren was to discover that the people held the President responsible for such economic crises, and every President since has been held responsible for the economic state of the nation.

Before John Quincy Adams came to the Presidency in 1825, no President since Thomas Jefferson had appointed a completely new Cabinet. Nor had any President been elected save by Congressional caucus nomination. Indeed the tendency in 1825 was, as Binkley has observed: "the presidency bade fair to represent in time, not much more than a chairmanship of a group of permanent secretaries of the executive departments to which Congress at times paid more attention than to the President." John Quincy Adams was by makeup a man who would have asserted Presidential leadership if he could; but having received fewer electoral votes than Andrew Jackson and having been elected President by the House of Representatives, he had no mandate for leadership either from the country or from the electoral

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29 Binkley, op. cit., p. 60-63.
30 Ibid., p. 64.
college. After the mid-term Congressional elections Adams found himself the first President to face a Congress in which both Houses were in control of the opposition. Any thoughts Adams might have had about providing energetic leadership were doomed by that mid-term election.

In summary, the period of the Jeffersonian Presidents was a period of weak Presidents, and was marked by Congressional domination. In some respects Jefferson was the exception to this rule, yet the very agencies he created to manage Congress were by their very nature more adaptable to Congress' ruling the executive. As during the Federalist reign, no Jeffersonian President exercised control over appropriation. Rather the practice was as White has reported:

Nourse compiled the figures prepared by the departments, the Secretary of the Treasury transmitted them to Congress. No one apparently expected from the executive branch any coordination or general overall consideration in the interest of a balanced program. 51

The first war in our history was the most mismanaged of any conflict it has been our misfortune to enter. Once again Professor White has neatly summarized the situation:

The first war crisis found at the head of the government a man without talent for organizing the force of his country, for selecting its military leaders, for inspiring public confidence, or for providing national leadership. Fortunately in its succeeding military crises the country was not again to be so destitute of energy in the office of the Chief Executive. Its lack from 1812 to 1815 nearly destroyed the influence of the presidency at the time. 52

One thing that both the Federalist and Jeffersonian Presidents had in common was the fact that they were all "gentlemen" in that peculiarly Virginian use of the term. In fact, with the exception of the two Adamses,

51 White, Jeffersonians, p. 145.
52 Ibid., p. 43.
all were Virginians. The same social class which had dominated the Constitutional Convention and had put that Constitution in operation in 1789 had continued to occupy the Presidential office until 1829. Respectability and integrity were the cornerstones of the Federalist and Jeffersonian administrations. Perhaps here lies the explanation of why no President prior to 1829 had attempted to influence legislation or command leadership through the use of patronage.55 Government was operated upon a deliberation theory rather than a will theory.54 The role of the government was to refine by the use of intellectual process the unlearned and inarticulated aspirations of the people. Indeed the whole framework of government as devised by the founding fathers and as put into practice by both the Federalists and the Jeffersonians may be understood not only as a means of dividing power in order to protect the minority but also as being "a structure for eliciting from deliberation a judgment founded on the common good."
We shall see that with the Jacksonians an entirely different concept of government emerged. A concept based on a "will" theory of government rather than one based on Madison's concept of the public interest which may be refined "by passing it through the medium of a chosen body of citizens."55

33 Ibid., p. 43.
35 The Federalists, No. 10.
As has just been mentioned, the Jacksonians broke most decisively with their predecessors by acting upon a "will" theory of government. Not that either Federalists, Jeffersonians, or Jacksonians consciously thought of themselves as acting upon a theory of the role of government. On the contrary, politicians in the Anglo-Saxon countries have constantly taken pride in the fact that they act pragmatically and do not follow an ideological pattern. Therefore, it must be understood that in speaking of a "deliberative" or a "will" theory of government, one is not implying that these theories are the products of political philosophers consciously acted upon, but rather they should be considered as post-operative ideals which may help to explain the difference in orientation between the Federalist-Jeffersonian Presidents and the Jacksonians.

According to the will theory, the function of government is not to deliberate upon the common good, but to consult the sovereign people, which in practice means the majority, and inact their will. From this view follows the significance of Jackson's and Polk's claim to being a better image of the people than the legislative branch.

Jackson was the first President since Washington who was in no way indebted to Congress for either his nomination or his election. Also at this period the state legislatures had largely lost control over the selection of the Presidential electors. It is for these reasons that Binkley states:

Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., The Age of Jackson (Boston: Little Brown & Co., 1945). The writer wishes to acknowledge his indebtedness to Professor Schlesinger for his (the writer's) underlying concepts of the Jacksonian era.
He may be said to have been the first popularly elected President of the United States and his career in the executive office is strongly colored by his firm conviction that he bore a mandate fresh from the hands of the "sovereign" people.\textsuperscript{37}

The noted historian Claude G. Bowers makes the same point when he says:

> The reign of Andrew Jackson ushered in a new day in American political life. It organized the methods of a functional democracy. He had been swept into office despite the opposition of a major part of the press, the moneyed element, and the political leaders of long-established reputation. His support came from the mass of the people.\textsuperscript{38}

The vigor with which Jackson was to pursue his mandate from the people was to create a determined opposition. The Whigs, while giving lip service to the "will" theory of government, strongly maintained that the Congress rather than the President best knew the will of the people. President Harrison clearly expressed this view as follows:

> ...it is preposterous to suppose that a thought could for a moment be entertained that the President, placed at the capital, in the center of the country, could better understand the wants and wishes of the people than their own immediate representatives....\textsuperscript{39}

In addition, President Harrison further developed the concept of a weak President by pledging himself to a cautious use of the veto, stating that the power to recommend measures to Congress should not make the President the source of legislation, and advocating that the Constitution was in error in not making the Secretary of the Treasury independent of the President. And although Harrison died one month after taking office, Whig theories might have prevailed had not "the force of events and the strength

\textsuperscript{37}Binkley, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 68.


of personality of two Democratic Presidents, Jackson and Polk, set precedents that were destined to make the office of Chief Executive one of power and influence — Whig opposition notwithstanding.  

As is widely known, President Jackson's method of handling his Cabinet was to circumvent them through the use of a small cortege of personal advisers, which has come to be known as the "kitchen cabinet." It remained for Polk to re-establish the Cabinet as a functioning advisory body completely subservient to the chief executive. This is not intended to imply that Jackson permitted any member of the Cabinet to defy his will. When his Secretary of the Treasury attempted to do so by refusing to withdraw deposits from the Second National Bank, Jackson dismissed him. From Jackson's dismissal of Duane until 1861, no Cabinet officer disputed the ultimate supremacy of the President. Thus doggedly President Jackson asserted his own superiority within the administration while simultaneously asserting the domination of the President over Congress as the representative of the people.

In his first annual message to Congress Jackson recommended the direct election of the President in order that "as few impediments as possible should exist to the free operation of the public will." While this proposal was directed at overcoming the debacle that had occurred in 1825 when Adams had been elected by the House of Representatives, yet there was implied the principle of direct responsibility of the President to the people. In 1854, while asserting his supremacy over department heads,


41 Richardson, Messages, II, p. 443 (Dec. 8, 1829).
Jackson stated this position again: "The President is the direct representative of the American people, but the Secretaries are not." He certainly construed the election of 1852 as a vote of confidence from the people, supporting his veto of the Bank Charter renewal and as a mandate to continue his war on the Bank. His withdrawal of Federal funds from the Bank, which contributed to its failure, was Jackson's means of fulfilling the people's mandate.

Jackson's view on the direct representation of the people by the President was further developed by President Polk, who addressed Congress as follows:

The people, by the Constitution, have commanded the President, as much as they have commanded the legislative branch of the Government, to execute their will.... If it be said that the Representatives in the popular branch of Congress are chosen directly by the people, it is answered, the people elect the President. If both Houses represent the States and the people, so does the President. The President represents in the executive department the whole people of the United States, as each member of the legislative department represent portions of them....

A logical corollary to the theory of a government based on "will" rather than on "deliberation" was the theory of rotation in office. Prior to 1829 there had developed for forty years the practice of retaining able men in public office for, after all, and in spite of their possible political differences, they were all "gentlemen." Professor White states "one might have concluded in 1828 that the tradition of permanence and stability in public administration was as well established as the two-term tradition of the Presidency." But such a conclusion would have been mistaken,

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42Ibid., III, 90 (April 15, 1854).
45Ibid., IV, p. 664-665 (Dec. 5, 1848). A further treatment of Polk's action in this matter is presented in the chapter, "Polk as Chief Legislator."
44White, Jacksonians, p. 300.
for it reckoned not with the new spirit of democracy — a belief which insisted that self-government must include wide participation in government by the citizens. Yet the extent of proscription during the Jackson administration has been greatly exaggerated in the public mind. In total, the proportion of office-holders removed was probably not greater than ten per cent; it certainly did not exceed twenty per cent.45

In reviewing the Jackson Presidency one is struck by the fact that it was a period of flux, of intense struggle — struggle with Congress over the Bank veto, struggle within the administration over the dismissal of his Secretary of the Treasury, Duane, struggle with South Carolina over nullification, struggle of the common man to unseat the aristocrats from power. When viewed in this light, it is not surprising that new institutions, new habits of doing things were not firmly established during those tumultuous eight years. Nor was Van Buren, caught in the throes of economic panic brought on by the collapse of the Second National Bank, able to institutionalize the new order. To President Tyler, being the first man to be elevated to the Presidency by the death of the President, must go the credit for insisting that the Vice-President upon the death of the President became the "President," and not the "Acting President."46 He was able, through strong reliance upon the veto power, to prevent the tide from turning against the executive branch, but as a President without party or popular support he could not carry the revolution any further.


46 Robert J. Morgan, A Whig Embattled (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1954). The central theme of this University of Virginia dissertation is the significance of Tyler’s insistence upon being President in the full meaning of that term.
This chapter has achieved its purpose if it has conveyed to the reader the gradually changing character of the Presidential office from the time of its first incumbent, George Washington, to the time of the revolutionary changes brought about by Andrew Jackson.

Particular attention is directed to the evidence that the Presidents preceding Polk had to a large measure failed to exercise immediate or direct control over the executive departments. This was particularly true of the President's relations with the Treasury Department. Throughout this period there had been close relations between Congress and the Treasury Department. Occasionally, the initiative was with the Secretary of the Treasury, as was true of Hamilton and Gallatin, but usually the Department was subservient to the Ways and Means Committee of the House of Representatives. In dramatic fashion Jackson asserted his control over this Department, but it remained for President Polk to develop a day-by-day regularized Presidential supervision.

A second area of Presidential function which had to wait until the Polk Presidency to be asserted in its full scope and magnitude was that of Commander-in-Chief. While it is true that Washington did exercise this function with vigor during the Whiskey Rebellion, this does not serve as a reliable precedent for Presidential action as Commander-in-Chief because of Washington's unusual military reputation. Washington's action fails to establish that a civilian President could function effectively as Commander-in-Chief. John Adams, it will be recalled, abdicated this function, calling Washington out of retirement to assume the duties of Commander-in-Chief, thus almost destroying for all time the possibility of a President directing the military. Madison's role as Commander-in-Chief only served to
The next chapter will deal with the election of President Polk. It will attempt to give insight into his character, his political adroitness, his ambition, and his determination to be President in his own right. This is necessary for an understanding of the manner in which he was to conduct the office after the election.
CHAPTER II
THE FIRST DARK HORSE

A rallying cry of the Whigs during the election of 1844 was "Who is James K. Polk," but like most campaign slogans it represented only a partial truth. James K. Polk had been on the national scene almost as long as had Andrew Jackson, having been elected to Congress for his first term at the same election which had elevated Jackson to the White House. Moreover, Polk had served as Jackson's floor manager in his fight against the Bank and had gone on to become Speaker of the House of Representatives. Polk remained in the House of Representatives until he resigned to carry on a successful gubernatorial campaign in 1839. Even his campaign and term of office as Governor of Tennessee was not without its national overtones.

The Whigs of Tennessee had often charged during the gubernatorial campaign of 1839 that James K. Polk's main objective in winning the contest was to promote his candidacy as Vice-President in the election of 1840. Nor does it appear that this charge was entirely unwarranted. The return of the home state of Andrew Jackson to the ranks of the Democratic party was regarded as being of national significance. Polk's campaign had emphasized national issues rather than local ones, and his inaugural address as

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1 As Charles Grier Sellers, Jr., has just completed a thorough biography of Polk from 1795 to 1848, it is unnecessary to develop at any length his pre-Presidential career. Therefore, this chapter will be restricted to the events immediately preceding his election, with the aim of throwing light upon his character and political associations which were subsequently to influence his conduct of the Presidential office. Charles Grier Sellers, Jr., James K. Polk; Jacksonian: 1795-1848 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).
Governor of Tennessee had been almost entirely devoted to national issues.\(^2\) When, within days after Polk's inauguration, both houses of the Tennessee legislature began considering a resolution to nominate Polk as a Vice-Presidential candidate in 1840, it would appear that the Whigs were justified in their charge that Polk desired the governorship merely as a stepping-stone toward the higher national office.

Polk's chief opponent for the Vice-Presidential nomination was the incumbent, Richard M. Johnson, of Kentucky. There did exist a faction of the Democratic party that was bitterly opposed to Johnson's renomination, and they were anxious to support Polk as a rival candidate. Polk, however, in spite of his interest in the office, was opposed to putting himself up as a candidate of a faction of the party, and felt that out of party loyalty he must support the nomination of the Democratic convention.\(^3\) General Jackson, a continual strong supporter of Polk, wrote to Van Buren favoring Polk's selection as a running mate and advised Van Buren to abandon his Vice-President, Johnson:

> A man ought to be chosen that all the republicans in every state would cheerfully unite on, and if this is not done it will jeopardize your election — it ought to be a man whose popularity would strengthen you, not one that would be a dead weight upon your popularity.\(^4\)

Jackson's charge that the incumbent Johnson would be a dead weight upon


Van Buren's shoulders was not without foundation, for in 1836 when Van Buren was able to win an easy majority in the electoral college, Johnson failed to win a majority and the election of the Vice-President had to be determined in the Senate. Johnson is the only Vice-President who holds the dubious distinction of being elected by the Senate of the United States.5

Because of the split in the Democratic party over the choice of Vice-President, it seemed to many of the leaders that it would be best not to hold a convention at all. There was, of course, not a national committee with constitutional authority to call a national convention. But, acting on the past precedent of 1831 and 1835, the Democratic members of the New Hampshire legislature issued a call for a Democratic Convention to be held in Baltimore on May 4, 1840. The Democratic party responded to the call and adopted a platform of nine planks, supporting the current administration and the heritage of Andrew Jackson and Thomas Jefferson. Following the adoption of the platform, a resolution was unanimously passed presenting Mr. Van Buren to the voters for re-election as President of the United States.

However, the expected strife over the selection of a Vice-Presidential candidate did occur. After much debate the supporters of Johnson realized that they could not muster the necessary two-thirds vote of the convention. The convention, faced with a stalemate, passed the following resolutions unanimously:

5It will be recalled that the election of 1800, with its ensuing contest between Jefferson and Burr, occurred prior to the adoption of the 12th Amendment to the Constitution, and therefore the Senate did not enter into the situation. In 1824, while there were four candidates for the Presidency, they all ran on one ticket and Calhoun was the only Vice-Presidential candidate. Calhoun thus won all the electoral votes for Vice-President. In the contested election between Hayes and Tilden in 1879 when the disputed electors were credited to Hayes they also voted for Hayes' running mate,
Resolved, That the convention deem it expedient at the present time not to choose between the individuals in nomination, but to leave the decision to their Republican fellow-citizens in the several States, trusting that, before the election shall take place, their opinions shall become so concentrated as to secure the choice of a Vice-President by the electoral colleges.6

Six months prior to the Democratic Convention the Whigs had met in a National Convention on December 4, 1839.7 The Whigs, displaying a good degree of political astuteness, assembled a formidable group of dissident elements. United in their fear of federal and executive domination, under the Whig banner were the pro-bank, high tariff Northern Federalists and low tariff, anti-bank Southerners. To insure the stability of this alliance, at least for the duration of the campaign, the Whigs passed over their acknowledged party leader, Henry Clay, and selected an aged, impoverished military hero, General William Henry Harrison, as their standard bearer. Nor was their selection of Vice-President made on the basis of party principle. They selected John Tyler, who had been a Democrat during all his early career but had broken with Jackson over states'-right issues. His selection was dictated by the expediency of trying to capture dissident Southerners who resented Jackson's advocacy of a strong executive. To insure further their universal appeal, they totally ignored issues by failing to adopt a platform.

The campaign that followed the nominations was perhaps unique in

William A. Wheeler. Therefore, both the Presidential and Vice-Presidential candidates on the Republican ticket received a majority of the electoral votes.


Robert J. Morgan, A Whig Embattled, pp. 147-151. The information in this dissertation dealing with the Presidency of John Tyler relies heavily on this source.
its day for a failure to join issues. The Democrats made a fatal error early in the campaign when in an attempt to belittle Harrison they declared that he lived in a log cabin and drank hard cider. The Whigs were quick to seize these symbols and turn them into standard campaign equipment. At every Whig rally the center of attraction was a large log cabin from which there issued to the faithful an abundant supply of apple cider. The Virginia Democrats recorded:

...the Whigs have raised in this state seventeen log cabins ornamented by two stuffed bear skins, one living bear, together with coon skins, brooms, gourds, and cider barrels innumerable. 8

In such a campaign the Whigs went forth in "triumphant humbuggery" 9 to defeat the Democrats. In spite of the Democrats' feeling that the election of 1840 had been stolen from them by fraud and deceit, a probable greater cause for their defeat than the carefully selected Whig candidates and the campaign of circuses and cider, was the hard fact of the depression of 1837. A depression which Van Buren had inherited from Jackson's attack on the Second Bank of the United States. This depression, coupled with the general reaction which so often follows a period of rapid economic and social change, were the basic factors accounting for Van Buren's defeat.

Harrison received a substantial victory in the popular vote and nearly three-fourths of the electoral vote, i.e., 254 to 60. Little interest was shown in the Democratic electors' vote for Vice-President, and most of them, in the absence of a nominated candidate, did vote for the incumbent


9Morgan, op. cit., p. 149.
Johnson. The final tally of the Democratic electors for Vice-President was as follows: Richard M. Johnson of Kentucky, 48; Littleton W. Tazewell of Virginia, 11; and James K. Polk of Tennessee, 1.10

The Whig victory secured in the election of 1840 was a short one, for a month after taking office, General Harrison died. John Quincy Adams accurately prophesied difficulties for the first Vice-President to become President, remarking that:

...the policy of Mr. Tyler will look exclusively to his own election for the next four years, and that of Webster will be to secure it for him.... Mr. Clay... left to fight his own battles... will soon be in unequivocal opposition.11

Tyler's first course was to run foursquare against the most favored Whig measure, a national bank. On September 11, 1841, the break with the Clay Whigs was complete, for on that day, following his announcement that he would veto the second bank bill against the expressed wishes of his entire Cabinet, Tyler's first Cabinet resigned in mass. After this break, Tyler tried for some time to seek an alliance with those elements of the Whig party which opposed Henry Clay. In this endeavor Tyler was supported by Webster. But as this plan proved to be a failure, Tyler began to seek the open support of the Democrats. After Webster's resignation from the Cabinet in May of 1843, Tyler began selecting Democrats for Cabinet posts. Upshur, as Secretary of State, Thomas Gilmer, ex-Governor of Virginia, and William Wilkins, a Pennsylvania Democrat, were among those appointed to Tyler's Cabinet. Finally in 1844, Tyler had the opportunity to make additional appointments; selecting Calhoun to replace Upshur, upon the latter's


untimely death on the gunboat Princeton, and John Y. Mason to be Secretary of the Navy, Mason being appointed only after James K. Polk had declined to accept the post.

Polk, in his cautiously worded letter refusing the post in Tyler's Cabinet, was careful to point out:

...that all the public preferment which I have at any time enjoyed, I have received directly from the hands of the people, and since I have been in retirement I have often declared to my friends, that if I ever again filled any public place, I expect to receive it from the same source....

In a letter to Cave Johnson, he clearly indicated that he refused the position because he felt that if he were to accept, it might be construed by the Democrats as a face-saving retreat from his position as a potential Vice-Presidential nominee and thus prevent him from campaigning to secure the Vice-Presidential nomination at the Democratic Convention, which was only two months away.

At that time the nominees of both parties seemed a certainty. The Whigs were determined not to make the mistake they did in 1840 and were prepared to nominate Henry Clay, the genuine spokesman for their party, as their standard bearer. It was generally understood among Democrats that Van Buren would once again receive the nomination, enjoying as he did the advantage of being considered the party's candidate, and the legacy of Andrew Jackson. Thus it seemed certain that he would be nominated, although unenthusiastically, as the Democratic Presidential candidate in 1844.

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If the nomination for the Presidency was considered a decided issue, the contest for the Vice-Presidential nomination was wide open. As had been indicated earlier, Polk, ever since his election to the Governorship of Tennessee in 1839, had maintained an interest in the Vice-Presidential nomination. Six months before the nominations were to be made, Polk had been active in securing the support of General Jackson, and had been urging the General's associates to write letters in behalf of his candidacy to leading Democrats throughout the nation.15

Polk continued as a strong supporter of Van Buren, and refused to take part in any scheming with Cass or other potential candidates, feeling that his own chances for the Vice-Presidential nomination were best served by remaining loyal to Van Buren. These views were indicated in a letter to Cave Johnson as late as two months before the Democratic Convention.

...The movement which you say is on hand -- to profess publicly to support Van Buren with a secret intention to attempt to nominate Genl. Cass in the convention -- can receive no countenance from me.... If any such movement is being made in this State, it has not come to my knowledge. Should any such be made my name shall not be used in that way.... It is now settled that the preference of a large majority of the party is for Mr. Van Buren, and the whole party should yield to his nomination and make it unanimous....16

This remained Polk's position both privately and publicly until two

15 Letter of James K. Polk to Andrew J. Donelson, October 13, 1845. Tennessee Historical Magazine, III, 1917 (Nashville: Tennessee Historical Society), "Polk Donelson Letters," pp.52-54. "Andrew J. Donelson (1799-1871) was a nephew of the wife of General Jackson. He was long a member of Jackson's family, and was made the President's personal secretary. Thus responsible and familiarly associated with General Jackson, Dohelson established many long personal friendships with the circle of those politically close to the General.... It was to be expected that those who sought to learn the General's views or to impress their own upon him should seek the favor of one so closely in his confidence." Ibid., p. 51.

weeks prior to the Democratic National Convention in Baltimore. However, events had not remained unchanged. The issue of the annexation of Texas was rapidly crowding all other issues to one side. Both Van Buren and Clay, in an attempt to remove this issue from the forthcoming campaign, had publicly taken similar positions in opposition to the immediate annexation of Texas.17

Andrew Jackson from the days of his own administration had been a very strong advocate of the annexation of Texas. Thus, with the Convention only a month away, the Democratic party was badly split, with its two living ex-Presidents, General Jackson and Martin Van Buren, on opposite sides of this important issue. Undoubtedly, Van Buren felt assured that it was too late for anyone to prevent his nomination. Unfortunately for him, he underestimated the strength of General Jackson's intervention, who, although in poor health and in retirement at the Hermitage, was still the most important figure in Democratic circles. Jackson, quick to realize the significance of the Texas question and the error of Van Buren's stand, summoned Polk to a meeting at the Hermitage,18 which marks the beginning


18 A week prior to the publication of the Van Buren letter, Polk had written a letter expressing himself on this fateful issue. This letter was not published until May 6, only three weeks from the opening of the Democratic National Convention. Polk expressed himself as unequivocally in favor of immediate "reannexation." The politically clever term "reannexation" carried the implication that the United States had some legal claim to the territory of Texas. It was based on circuitous reasoning which claimed that the Louisiana Purchase had included Texas. In opposition to this interpretation was the historical fact that Texas had continually, until its independence, been under Mexican jurisdiction. It also conveniently ignored the fact that the United States in 1819 had surrendered, as part of the Florida purchase, any claim to territory beyond the Sabine River. See Justin H. Smith, The Annexation of Texas (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1941), pp. 5-9.
of Polk’s campaign for the Democratic nomination for President of the United States. Polk describes this historic meeting in some detail in two letters to his strong confidant and political adviser, Cave Johnson:

Strictly Confidential

Monday Night, May 13, 1844

At the urgent solicitation of Maj. Donaldson, Genl. Armstrong, and one or two other friends who wrote to me, I came to this place on yesterday. Today Genl. A. and myself visited the Hermitage.... He, Jackson, has no idea that Mr. V. B. can be nominated or if nominated that he can receive any Southern support. He is not excited but is cool and collected and speaks in terms of deep regret at the fatal error which Mr. V. B. has committed. He says however that it is done and that the convention must select some other as the candidate.... What you can or will do at Baltimore God only knows. My earnest desire is that you shall harmonize and run but one man. Genl. J. thinks that Mr. V. B. is becoming sensible that his opinions are not in harmony with those of the people and will withdraw and hopes he will do so. Genl. J. says the candidate for the first office should be an annexation man, and from the Southwest, and he and other friends here urge that my friends should insist upon that point. I tell them, and it is true, that I have never aspired so high, and that in all probability the attempt to place me in the first position would be utterly abortive.... I aspire to the 2nd office and should be gratified to receive the nomination.... I am however in their hands and they can use my name in any way they might think proper....

...Surely there is patriotism enough among these leaders yet to save the party. This can only be done by uniting upon one candidate and he must be favorable to the annexation of Texas. I have stood by Mr. V. B. and will stand by him as long as there is hope, but I now despair of his election — even if he be nominated....

The following day, Mr. Polk saw fit to write another letter to Cave Johnson in which he made the proposition of his own candidacy even clearer. Perhaps he felt that he had been too subtle in his letter of May 13, and he wrote:

...He, General Jackson, thinks the candidate for the Presidency should be an annexation man and reside in the Southwest, and he openly expresses (what I assure you I had never for a moment contemplated) the opinion

that I would be the most available man; taking the Vice-Presidential candidate from the North....

With this expression of the desires of General Jackson, the plans for Polk's nomination for President were launched, only a fortnight before the Baltimore Convention was scheduled to meet. That Polk directed his own strategy with the able assistance of Cave Johnson and Gideon Pillow is quite evident from the correspondence. Although Polk became an active seeker after the first place, he seemed always ready to fall back and be content with the Vice-Presidential nomination, if that was the best that could be made of the situation. In the letter already mentioned, dated the fourteenth, and in a second letter which was probably written the same day but may have been written on the 17th of May, Polk outlines to Cave Johnson the methods to follow to bring about the desired results:

...I have but little hope that union or harmony can be restored among the members of Congress, but I have hope that the Delegates "fresh from the people" -- who are not members of Congress -- and have not been so much excited can be brought together. Let a strong appeal be made to the Delegates as fast as they come in, to take the matter into their own hands, to control and overrule their leaders at Washington, who have already produced such distraction, and thus save the party.... I suggest as a practicable plan to bring them to act, -- to get one Delegate from each State who may be in attendance to meet in a room at Brown's Hotel or somewhere else and consult together to see if they cannot hit upon a plan to save the party. If you will quietly and without announcing to the public what you are at, undertake this with energy and prosecute it with vigor, the plan is feasible, and I think will succeed.... Some one has to take the lead and no one can do it with more prospect of success than yourself. Show this to Genl. Pillow confidentially who will be a most efficient man in carrying out such a plan. My old friend Williamson Smith of Miss. is a delegate and will do any and everything he can. So will Turner of Alabama. In setting on foot such a movement, of course you should keep your own counsels, -- for if known to all there would be troublesome spirits who would set to work to defeat it....


21 Ibid., p. 242.
In the second letter written to Cave Johnson on the 14th of May, Polk again reaffirms that he had never aspired to anything higher than the Vice-Presidential nomination, but informs Johnson that if Van Buren withdraws, he, Van Buren, will still be in a position to control the nomination, so that it will be necessary to handle the Van Buren forces with "delicacy" if the Presidential nomination is to be secured for Polk. He advises Johnson that Jackson has been active in his, Polk's, behalf:

If a new man is to be selected, my friends at Nashville think that my position and relations to the party give me more prominence than any other. You will be on the spot and will be best able to judge. Whatever is desired to be done, communicate to Genl. Pillow. He is one of the shrewdest men you ever knew, and can execute whatever is resolved on with as much success as any man who will be at Baltimore. Lead him therefore into all your views. He is perfectly reliable....

The Democratic National Convention met on May 27th; Polk kept constantly informed of the progress of the political maneuvers by a rapid exchange of letters. In particular Gideon J. Pillow, who was chairman of the Tennessee delegation, kept Polk informed of developments both prior to and during the convention. In these letters, Pillow assumes sole credit for Polk's nomination, but as we have already observed, the idea was hatched at the Hermitage, and Polk himself had taken his closest political adviser, Cave Johnson, into his confidence in personally planning political strategy. It appears that the credit for Polk's nomination must be broadly shared, with Genl. Pillow's chief function being that of the active contact man; diligently carrying out ideas and plans which, perhaps unknown to Pillow, had already been developed by Polk and Johnson. Nevertheless, Pillow's role was essential and his reporting of it to Polk provides us with an unusual

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view of the tempo of affairs during the Democratic Convention of 1844.

In a letter dated May 24th, Pillow demonstrates his political astuteness and for the first time mentions Polk as a possible Presidential candidate:

Dear Govr. Washington, May 24, 1844

Since my last letter to you our troubles have increased. The anti-Van Buren party are becoming stronger and though Van can get, agreeably to the best estimates I can make, about 145 votes in convention, yet I fear the Two thirds rule will be adopted. ... [Van Buren received 146 votes on the first ballot.] ...I regard everything as thrown into confusion and uncertainty. I would not still be surprised if a compromise were finally made by both parties factions taking you up, for the P________. This I give as a possibility.23

The following series of quotations from letters of General Pillow to Polk provide better than any other account the excitement and strategy of Polk's nomination at the Baltimore Convention:

Washington City Saturday 25th. May, '44

You have more friends here than any man in the field and if your name had been brought before the Country for the first place, we would have far more unanimity. ... Things may take that turn yet. We of the South cannot bring that matter up. If it should be done by the North it will all work right....24

May 28th, '44

My dear Sir

We have been all day engaged balloting for Candidates for President. We commenced at 149 for Van [146] and 82 for Cass. After 6 Ballotings we now stand 99 for Van and 116 for Cass — 32 for Johnson and 55 for Buckhannon [Buchanan]. We have for 2 hours past had the most extraordinary excitement in convention. The whole Convention had well-nigh got into a general pel-mell fight. The Ohio Delegation produced it all. At this moment the excitement is still wholly ungovernable by the Chair. If the balloting continues the chances will be for the nomination of Cass judging from the present vote. The V B_____ men will not go for Cass and the Buckhannon


24Ibid., May 25, 1844, p. 859.
men say they won't. I doubt very much if Cass can ever get 2/3 of
the votes. I have within the last few minutes received a proposition
from a leading delegate of the Pennsylvania and of Massachusetts to
bring your name before the Convention for President. I said to them
that your name was subject to the will of the Convention, that I
would not at present bring it before the Convention, that if it was
the will of the Convention the name should be brought out by the North.

There is, I think, a strong probability of your name ultimately
coming up for President. I do not think it prudent to move in that
matter now. I want the North to bring you forward as a Compromise of
all interests.

Time will alone tell what will be done. You shall hear from us.
We are about adjourning and it is night.

Yours,
Gid. J. Pillow25

[Baltimore] May 29, 1844

Dear Govr.

On this morning we brought your name before the Convention for
the Presidency. On the first ballot you received 42 votes — on
the 2nd. you received 266 votes, being every vote in the Convention....
Never was there such unanimity — never was there such enthusiasm
before seen or witnessed in any body. I held you up before the Con­
vention, as the "Olive Branch of Peace," and all parties ran to you
as to an ark of safety.26

Pillow faithfully reports the results and the excitement of the
Convention. Only a few additional words need be said on Polk's nomination.

The first vote that actually sealed Van Buren's fate was the vote on a mo­
tion introduced by General Saunders of North Carolina requiring a two-thirds
vote for the nomination. The importance of this motion was easily appar­
ent, for if it were defeated Van Buren was certain to be nominated, but if
the motion carried there was the chance that he might be defeated. The
motion carried by a vote of 148 to 118. It is ironical that the two-thirds
rule which was instituted in 1832 for Van Buren's benefit, to demonstrate to
the country that Van Buren was not dictated to the Convention by Andrew

26 Ibid., May 29, 1844, pp. 841-842.
Jackson but was the overwhelming desire of the party at large, should now be turned against him. It was not until the eighth ballot when the delegation from New Hampshire was polled that Polk received his first Convention vote. It did not appear that the ninth ballot would be conclusive until New York State was called upon; at that time they requested permission to retire to caucus. The roll call continued during their absence, but upon their return, B. F. Butler addressed the Convention and withdrew Van Buren's name in the interest of harmony and cast the vote of New York for James K. Polk. This was the signal for the stampede, as delegation after delegation rushed to change their vote so that they might demonstrate their loyalty to the new winner. A scene that has been constantly repeated in conventions since that day. Thus was completed the nomination of the first "dark horse" in American politics. Frazer, a delegate from Pennsylvania, probably best stated the motivation of the individual delegate when he informed the Convention that he had voted first for Van Buren as instructed, and next for Buchanan as a favorite son, and that finally he had voted for "James K. Polk, the bosom friend of Gen. Jackson, and a pure, whole-hogged democrat...."

The campaign began almost at once, for in Polk's acceptance of the nomination he stole one of the Whigs' main issues by disclaiming any intention of seeking a second term.


28 McCormic, op. cit., p. 236.
It has been well observed, that the office of President of the United States should never be sought nor declined. I have never sought it, nor shall I feel at liberty to decline it, if conferred upon me by the voluntary suffrage of my fellow citizens.... I deem the present to be a proper occasion to declare, that if the nomination made by the convention shall be confirmed by the people, and result in my election, I shall enter upon the discharge of the high and solemn duties of the office with the settled purpose of not being a candidate for reelection....

The Whig platform contained only four resolutions. The first proclaimed in general terms the fact that Clay and Frelinghuysen were dedicated to the principles of the Whig party. The last two resolutions were respectively eulogies of the Presidential and Vice-Presidential candidates; only the second resolution outlined the principles of the party:

Resolved, That these principles may be summed as comprising: A well-regulated currency; a tariff for revenue to defray the necessary expenses of the government, and discriminating with special reference to the protection of the domestic labor of the country; the distribution of the proceeds from the sales of the public lands; a single term for the presidency; a reform of executive usurpations; and generally such an administration of the affairs of the country as shall impart to every branch of the public service the greatest practical efficiency, controlled by a well-regulated wise economy.

In contrast to this brief statement of principle the Democrats adopted a lengthy series of resolutions, including the readoption of the nine planks in the Democratic platform of 1840. The first resolution indicated that the Democratic rancor over the way in which the campaign of 1840 had been fought still existed.

Resolved, That the American Democracy place their trust, not in factitious symbols, not in displays and appeals insulting to the judgment and subversive of the intellect of the people, but in a clear reliance upon the intelligence, patriotism, and the discriminating justice of the American people.

29 Jenkins, op. cit., p. 135; quoting James K. Polk, Letter of Acceptance, June 12, 1844.


51 Ibid., p. 215.
The Democrats had no complaint to make on the seriousness of the campaign of 1844; for there have been few campaigns in history where the issues were more clearly drawn or where the opponents were more representative of the divergent viewpoints of the two parties. It was in the final plank of the Democratic platform, however, that the new and decisive issues were clearly stated:

Resolved, That our title to the whole of the territory of Oregon is clear and unquestionable; that no portion of the same ought to be ceded to England or any other power; and that the reoccupation of Oregon and the re-annexation of Texas at the earliest practicable period are great American measures, which this convention recommends to the cordial support of the Democracy of the Union.52

The Democrats were to make the most of this final plank during their campaign, and by joining the Oregon question with the annexation of Texas were able to unite both the North and the South. In addition to these two issues, Polk stressed two others, the independent treasury and the tariff.

On the tariff question, as was the custom of the time, Polk wrote a letter to J. K. Kane which was carefully drafted for publication purposes. Although Polk was, and his record bore it out, a low tariff man, he wrote his Kane letter in such a manner that if a protectionist was anxious to misconstrue the letter in favor of protection he could do so; while at the same time there was really nothing inconsistent in the letter that Polk might later have to retract. It is significant that the letter was addressed to J. K. Kane of Philadelphia, for Pennsylvania was one of the doubtful states which favored a protectionist policy. Polk's instructions

52 Ibid., pp. 215-216.
accompanying the letter indicated his awareness of the importance of this letter. The significant paragraph of this letter is as follows:

I am in favor of a tariff for revenue, such a one as will yield a sufficient amount to the Treasury to defray the expenses of the Government economically administered. In adjusting the details of a revenue tariff, I have heretofore sanctioned such moderate discriminating duties, as would produce the amount of revenue needed, and at the same time afford reasonable incidental protection to our home industries.... In my judgment, it is the duty of the government, to extend as far as it may be practicable to do so, by its revenue laws and all other means within its power, fair and just protection to all the great interests of the whole Union, embracing agriculture, commerce and navigation.

The Democratic Convention too had assisted in holding the State of Pennsylvania, nominating for its Vice-Presidential candidate, after Senator Wright of New York rejected the nomination, George M. Dallas of Pennsylvania. In any event, between the carefully worded Kane letter of Polk and the hard campaigning of Dallas and Buchanan, Pennsylvania went Democratic by 6,000 votes out of a total of over 330,000 cast.

Another difficulty which the Democrats were to overcome was the independent candidacy of President Tyler. R. J. Walker, an early supporter of Polk, soon saw the danger of Tyler drawing Democratic votes from Polk and sounded out Tyler on a possible withdrawal. Tyler informed Walker that he had considered withdrawing but resented the attacks upon him and his administration in the Democratic papers, especially the Washington Union.

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53I have addressed a letter upon that subject to Hon. John K. Kane of Philadelphia, with a request that he would show it to Mr. Dallas and Mr. Horn, and if in their judgment it was absolutely necessary, they were at liberty to publish it, but not otherwise." Letter of James K. Polk to Cave Johnson, June 21, 1844, Tennessee Historical Magazine, I, 245.

54Letter of James K. Polk to Hon. J. K. Kane, June 19, 1844 (Polk Papers, Library of Congress). Generally known as the "Kane Letter." Later Kane was appointed District Judge of Easton, Pa.: Polk to John K. Kane, Jan. 11, 1846 (Polk Papers, Library of Congress).

When Polk learned of this he immediately contacted General Jackson requesting his help in silencing the Democratic attacks on Tyler. Jackson immediately took action which was joined by a chorus of pressure upon Tyler from various quarters. And on the 20th of August, Tyler's letter of withdrawal. Thus one more formidable barrier to Polk's election was removed. In spite of the Democratic success in the field of campaign strategy, the struggle for the election continued unabated. The Whigs, in a circular in South Carolina addressed to the voters of the Pendleton District, described Polk as follows:

...we will under no circumstances, vote for James K. Polk, having no confidence in him, and regarding him as wholly unworthy of the trust in every point of view.... He has made no sacrifice -- performed no service for his country, to entitle him to so distinguished a position.... He has originated no great measures for the benefit of his country, nor has he evinced his adherence to any other political principles than his party leaders, for the time being, have seen fit to dictate to him.... Having been twice rejected for the office of Governor in his own state -- having no hold upon the confidence or affections of his countrymen at home, and no talent to command respect for us abroad he is not the man for the times or for the Union....

At times the campaign became really venomous. Polk was accused of being both a duelist and a physical coward. His ancestors were accused of having been disloyal Tories during the Revolution (a charge which Polk most bitterly opposed). It was also rumored that a gang of slaves had been

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57 Letter of Andrew Jackson to Blair, July 26, 1844 (Jackson Papers, Library of Congress); see also Letter of Andrew Jackson to Lewis, July 28, 1844; Tyler, Letters and Times of the Tylers, Vol. II, pp. 143-146, see also pp. 338-339, and 341.

58 Henry Thomas Shanks, ed., The Papers of Willie P. Mangum (Raleigh, N.C., State Department of Archives and History, 1955) IV, 145.
seen on their way to a southern market branded with the initials "J.K.P."³⁹

Although the election was bitterly fought in all the states, probably no two were more fiercely contested than Tennessee and New York. Polk was naturally very interested in winning his own state and returning Tennessee to the Democratic ranks, but Clay, too, was active in winning his neighboring state of Tennessee. Both parties held their large rallies in Nashville, which were attended by the leading politicians from all sections of the nation. But in spite of the Democratic efforts Clay carried the state by 113 votes. Thus Polk became the only President in our history who failed to carry his own state.

At the close of the Democratic Convention in May, the situation for the Democrats in the State of New York looked dark indeed. The Convention had hoped to regain favor in New York after having rejected Van Buren for Polk, by nominating the then New York Senator and staunch supporter of Van Buren, Silas Wright, as the Vice-Presidential candidate. But, much to the consternation of the delegates, Wright telegraphed back that he refused to accept the nomination. So, reluctantly, as it has been already noted, the delegates turned to Mr. Dallas of Pennsylvania. Fortunately, Van Buren was quick to rally to Polk's aid and persuaded Silas Wright to run for Governor of New York.⁴⁰ This gave the ticket a strong leader and united all

³⁹McCormic, op. cit., p. 272. The London Times, 7 April 1846, reported a more vicious canard — "Presidential oath taken on a Bible bound in the skin of a Negro," quoted from Punch.

⁴⁰Letter of James K. Polk to Van Buren, January 4, 1845 (Van Buren Papers, Library of Congress). "The disinterested and magnanimous ground which you so promptly assumed, had the immediate effect to reconcile the party to a nomination which they had not anticipated.... My personal thanks are due to you for the cordial manner in which you gave your powerful support to my nomination, and thusly contributed so largely to my
factions. While the Democrats were reunited behind Wright and Polk, the Whigs of New York State were having their difficulties. Clay attempted, in his Alabama letter, to hedge on his anti-Texas letter. This attempt to represent himself as advocating one policy in the North and another in the South was costly. It failed to win votes in the South, but alienated many northern supporters. So much so, that many were persuaded to support the abolitionist candidate, James G. Birney, of New York. The final vote gave Polk a plurality over Clay in New York State of only 5,000 votes, while the abolitionist candidate polled nearly 16,000.

The loss of New York State by Clay was crucial, for Polk went on to win the election by 170 electoral votes to 105 for Clay; if Clay had carried New York, the vote would have been 141 for Clay and 134 for Polk.

Although there were the usual cries of fraud and deceit, the election was over. The President-elect began immediately to assume the responsibilities of his new position months before his inauguration. He

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perhaps of greater interest, in the light of previous information in this chapter, is the first paragraph of this letter of Polk's to Van Buren. "In the Spring of 1842, when I had the pleasure to see you last, I confidently anticipated that you would now occupy this position... It is scarcely necessary for me to say — that my nomination at Baltimore was unsought and unexpected. Until the moment it was made it was very far from my thoughts, that any state of circumstances could arise, which could lead to such a result."

For example: Polk's majority in Louisiana was 699. The parish of Plaquemines, near New Orleans, had voted in previous years, and in 1844, as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Democrat</th>
<th>Whig</th>
<th>Democratic Majority</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1840</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1842</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1843</td>
<td>310</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>274</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1844</td>
<td>1,007</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>970</td>
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This Democratic vote was larger than the entire white male population of all ages in the parish in 1840; and it took ten years before the parish could again register half as many Democratic votes as Polk received. See Stanwood, op. cit., pp. 224-225.
was soon to learn that the task of organizing and directing a new administration was a formidable one.42

The function of this chapter has been to acquaint the reader with Polk's attempt to secure the Presidency, and to provide a better understanding of Polk's character, ambitions, and his determination to be President in his own right. His unusual ascendancy to the office, the first "dank horse" President, left him in a position where he was freer than most men of commitments to party factions. His commitments were mostly personal ones to individuals such as Cave Johnson and General Pillow, to whom Polk recognized his indebtedness.

The next chapter will deal with the newly-elected President's conception of his office, including his relations with his cabinet and the executive departments.

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CHAPTER III
POLK'S CONCEPT OF THE PRESIDENCY

The most essential element of Presidential authority rests in these two simple and direct declarations in the Constitution: "The executive power, shall be vested in a President of the United States of America," and "he shall take care that the laws be faithfully executed." With these two simple grants of authority the President is made responsible for the administration of the entire executive branch of the government.

The constitution-makers were aware of the need for an agent who could bring the separate powers together and provide vigorous unified action. They were aware that government is a continuous action, and if the will of the majority is to prevail there must be unity. Perhaps the Presidency may have been originally designed to be no more than a pseudo-monarchy a presiding officer, about whom a myth of national loyalties could be spun. Yet included in The Federalist, the chief source of constitutional rationalization, is an awareness of the fact that

A feeble executive implies a feeble execution of the government. A feeble execution is but another phrase for a bad execution; and a government ill executed, whatever it may be in theory, must be, in practice, a bad government.

The leaders of the Constitutional Convention were aware that the chief defect of state constitutions was the weakness of the Governor. They knew how impotent was government by assembly, and being conservative they

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1 Article II, sec. 1, clause 1.
2 Article II, sec. 2, clause 1.
3 The Federalist, No. 70.
feared at the same time popular rule, so they provided for executive vigor by making the President potentially the greatest power of all. Alexander Hamilton, the leading advocate of a strong executive, was reasonably satisfied with the constitutional results, stating, "The executive department... combines, as far as republican principles will admit, all the requisites to energy." Yet, even if it be true that the Constitution provides the President with sufficient authority to be the dominating element of our government, it is also, nevertheless, true that this grant of authority must be exercised and recognized as such by the office holder. As someone has said, this constitutional grant is only a "hunting license," and what the President does with it is determined by the times which he faces and his own personality. As Professor Corwin states, Presidential leadership is "...the function of two highly variable factors -- 'Crisis' and 'Personality,'" and he goes on to observe that because of this "...presidential leadership is still... a highly discontinuous feature of our constitutional system."

In this chapter then we shall see how President James K. Polk interpreted and acted upon his grant of constitutional power; how he utilized his cabinet, how he administered his departments, and how he carried out the ceremonial functions of the office.

That Polk was ready to assume the responsibilities of the office of President of the United States is demonstrated by the fact that on inaugural day he outlined to Bancroft the four great measures of his administration:

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4The Federalist, No. 77.

the reduction of the tariff, the re-establishment of the independent treasury, the settlement of the Oregon question, and the acquisition of California.\(^6\) He had already without waiting for Congressional action begun to make choices of objectives. The inclusion of the acquisition of California on his list of goals disclosed an intent not previously indicated.

Polk was constantly aware that he and he alone must exercise the powers of the Presidential office and held fast to this view throughout his term of office. In February 1846, Polk became annoyed at Buchanan's attempt to dictate Presidential appointments and used the occasion to express his determination to be President in his own right.

He [Buchanan] may differ with me in opinion on public questions, and when he does, having myself to bear the responsibility, I will control. As long as he will carry out my policy and act faithfully I am willing that he shall remain in the office of Secretary of State; when he ceases to do so, he must cease to occupy that position.... If I would yield up the Government into his hands and suffer him to be in effect President,... I have no doubt he would be cheerful and satisfied. This I cannot do.\(^7\)

Although the President was determined to exercise fully the powers of that office, he nevertheless remained a basically humble and democratic man. So much so, that he was able to express the following sentiments on the fourth anniversary of his arrival in Washington to take up the Presidential task:

There have been four years of incessant labour and anxiety and of great responsibility. I am heartily rejoiced that my term is so near its close. I will soon cease to be a servant and will become a sovereign. As a private citizen I will have no

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\(^6\) George Bancroft, "James K. Polk," Appleton's Cyclopedia of American Biography, V, 55. See also Plate I, a, Political Cartoon entitled "Polk's Dream."

\(^7\) James K. Polk, Diary, ed. by Milo Milton Quaife, 4 volumes (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1910), I, 235. Hereafter cited as Polk, Diary.
one but myself to serve, and will exercise a part of the sovereign power of my country. I am sure I will be happier in this condition than in the exalted station I now hold.\(^8\)

Polk brought to the Presidency a high regard for the independency of the three branches of government. When a matter was before the courts, he could not be persuaded to utilize his influence. Ex-Governor Thomas of Maryland, a Democrat, argued long and hard to have the President interfere and stop a federal prosecution of the Governor in the Circuit Court of the District of Columbia. Polk records in his reply to this attempt to have the President interfere in a pending case a clear statement of his views on the separation of powers.

He [Polk] informed Gov. Thomas that he did not consider that he possessed any such power; that the Judiciary and the Executive were independent coordinate Departments, and that he had never known such a power exerted by the Executive of any State, and that he had never heard of it having been exercised by the President of the United States... [he] inquired of Gov. Thomas what power he would have to enforce such an order if he were to issue it? The Judges of the Court in this District would not be bound to obey him, and if they disobeyed him he would have no power to impose obedience; that according to the law as he understood it, the Court was the exclusive Judge of the propriety of permitting or ordering a nolle prosequi in any case pending before them, and without the assent of the Court it could not be done.\(^9\)

But, when it came to making appointments to the Supreme Court, Polk was as much aware as has been any holder of the Presidential office of the influence that the Court exercises on public policy. Polk was very careful to nominate for the Court a person in whose Republican views he had confidence. In spite of the insistence of his Secretary of State, Polk refused to nominate another in whom he did not have confidence. In this instance, Polk once again demonstrated his determination to be master

\(^8\)Polk, Diar\(\text{y}\), IV, 351-352. \(^9\)Polk, Diar\(\text{y}\), I, 51-52.
in his own house.

...in reference to the Judgeship I was responsible to the country for the appointment and did not select Mr. E.'s choice. He was most anxious to have Mr. John M. Read of Phila. appointed. Mr. Read, I learned, was until within 10 or 12 years ago a leading Federalist, and a Representative of that party in the Legislature. Although he has since that time acted with the Democratic party, I have no confidence in the orthodoxy of his political opinions or constitutional doctrines, and was therefore unwilling to appoint him to a station for life where he would almost certainly relapse into his old Federal Doctrines & been latitudinarian in his doctrines. I have never known an instance of a Federalist who had after arriving at the age of 50 professed to change his opinions, who was to be relied on in his constitutional opinions. All of whom have been appointed to the Supreme Court Bench, after having secured a place for life became very broadly Federal and latitudinarian in all their decisions involving questions of Constitutional power.... I resolved to appoint no man who was not an original Democrat and strict constructionist, and who would be less likely to relapse into the Broad Federal doctrines of Judge Marshall & Judge Story.... I have great confidence that Judge George W. Woodward was a sound, original, and consistent democrat, of the strict construction school, that he was a man of fine talents & well qualified.10

That Polk was a fine judge of character is indicated by the fact that Mr. Read in his later life became a Free-Soil Democrat and still later on a Republican.

On Christmas Day in 1845, the day after Polk had nominated Judge Woodward, Buchanan called, complaining of having had two sleepless nights over the Supreme Court appointment, and was particularly hurt that Woodward had been nominated, and that he, Buchanan, hadn't even been informed by the President. Polk promptly answered:

...that as President of the U. S. I was responsible for my appointments, and that I had a perfect right to make them without consulting my Cabinet, unless I desired their advice. Mr. E. said it had been done by all my predecessors. I told him I did not so understand it.... I told him... that I... knew his opinion and wishes, that I was not satisfied with Mr. Read, had made up my mind that I could not appoint him and that any further consultation with him [Buchanan] in reference to Mr. Read would have been useless.11

10 Ibid., pp. 137-138. 11 Ibid., pp. 144-145.
There are numerous testaments to Polk's strength of character, some evidence of which has already been given. Even the staunch Whig Horace Greeley pronounced him "one of the ablest men and the most powerful speaker in the south west." But in spite of his reputation as a strong character and a compelling speaker, Polk lacked personal magnetism, he developed no personal following, and he confided in but a few loyal and tested personal friends. He was anxious to keep separate his private and his public life. Writing to Mr. Campbell, who was managing his Mississippi plantation, he said:

I need only repeat to you my request, that as my private business does not concern the public, you will keep it to yourself. There is a great disposition with many persons — to parade everything connected with the president whether private or not before the public. — This I do not desire shall be the case.

He made no display of sentiment or virtues so as to attract favorable attention. For example, John Stilwell Jenkins, a contemporary and biographer of Polk, quotes George Bancroft as applying the following views on making a display of religious virtues to Polk:

Religion is the very best possession in the world, and the last to be spoken of. It should dwell quietly in the heart, and rule the life; not be hawked about as a commodity; nor scoured up like a rusty buckler for protection; nor be worn over the shoulders like a blanket for defence.

Polk was, however, capable of displaying rare political courage toward his friends. One day the Hon. Felix G. McConnell, Representative


13 Letter of Polk to Campbell, July 23, 1847, in the Polk Papers, Library of Congress.

from Alabama, called on Polk, requesting a loan of $100.00. Polk recognized that he was suffering from acute alcoholism, but nevertheless granted him the requested loan.\textsuperscript{15} Two days later, McConnell was found dead in a disreputable hotel room, a suicide. Polk was very grieved and wrote in his diary that McConnell "was a true democrat and a sincere friend of mine."\textsuperscript{16} Mr. Polk, accompanied by his Secretary of the Navy, Judge Mason, attended his friend's funeral.\textsuperscript{17}

Polk demonstrated his tolerance and democratic faith in other ways as well. Not only did he defend the Mormons in their right of religious freedom, regardless of how absurd it might seem to him, but he also affirmed their right to emigrate, in words that closely parallel a recent Supreme Court decision.\textsuperscript{18} Polk stated:

\begin{quote}
...that as President of the U. S. I possessed no power to prevent or check their emigration; that the right of emigration or expatriation was one which any citizen possessed.\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

On one occasion Mr. Polk was confronted with a fanatical Presbyterian minister, who, although desiring a chaplaincy for himself, accused Polk of fostering Catholicism, because he, Polk, had hired three Catholic priests to work in Mexico with the Army. Polk denounced the Protestant minister soundly and expressed a strong belief in the doctrine of separation of church and state, stating:

\begin{quote}
I told him that, thank God, under our constitution there was no connection between Church and State, and that in my action as
\end{quote}

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\textsuperscript{15}Polk, Diary, II, 123. \textsuperscript{16}Ibid., p. 131. \textsuperscript{17}Ibid., p. 153.
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\textsuperscript{18}"This court should... hold squarely that it is a privilege of citizenship of the United States... to enter any state of the Union, either for temporary sojourn or for the establishment of permanent residence therein...." Edwards v. California 314 U.S. 160, 183 (1941).
\end{flushright}

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\textsuperscript{19}Polk, Diary, I, 205.
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President of the U. S. I recognized no distinction of creeds in my appointment to office.\textsuperscript{20}

The only other time that Polk expressed as much indignation in his diary was when he heard that the following remarks had been expressed by a Senator as the kind of discipline good for a President, namely Polk.

\ldots\ the only way to treat an ugly Negro who was unruly, was to give him a d---n drabbing at the start, and he would learn to behave himself.\textsuperscript{21}

Polk stated he could not "express his contempt for a Senator who could be capable of such coarseness and vulgarity."\textsuperscript{22}

The President brought to the office a strong determination to make his own decisions and to be the dominating force of his administration. This determination was joined with a sincere respect for the basic liberal traditions of our Constitution and seasoned with a kindly regard for the welfare of his fellow citizens. It will now be observed how these attributes of mind and character operated to carry out the functions of the chief executive.

\textbf{The President as Head of the State}

The fact that the American President reigns as well as rules has proven to be both a liability and an asset. It has been a liability because of the tremendous additional burden placed upon him by the requirement that he perform all the ceremonial functions of a monarch.\textsuperscript{23} But an even more significant liability, one that is closely related to the asset

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\item Polk, \textit{Diary}, II, 188.
\item \textit{Ibid.}, pp.199, 203.
\item \textit{Ibid.}, p. 199.
\item In contrast to the present-day President, who spends much of his time seeing delegations of Boy Scouts, veterans, etc., Polk was occupied in seeing delegations of Indians, exchanging gifts, and smoking peace-pipes.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
side of the ledger, is that because he is so honored as Chief-of-State, the populace come to think of him as being omnipotent and infallible; so much so that they tend to regard any failure to come up to their expectations as a moral failure. What he does is judged by an absolute standard without regard as to whether he has the authority necessary to carry out his responsibilities. Sidney Hyman has characterized this dualism between his reigning and ruling character as follows:

He personalizes the eternal clash between the forces that attract us to the seat of power and those that repel us from it; between the conviction that nothing can be done without power, and the opposite conviction that those who wield it are either unworthy of it or invariably misuse it.24

On the asset side, the fact that the President reigns as well as rules creates a great storehouse of good will from which he can draw. The President personifies the national mood, its aspirations, and its hopes. The respect which he gains through reigning enables him to provide the leadership necessary to a successful administration.

Polk accepted the ceremonial and social functions of the position with good grace and held receptions twice a week, on Tuesday and Friday evenings, as well as the usual dinners and social affairs for special occasions. New Year's Day, for example, was always open house at the White House for all citizens.

Polk was, however, careful to observe all proprieties in entering into social functions. After the battle of Cerro Gordo, an American victory, an evening had been designated by the Mayor of Washington for the illumination of the city to honor the victory. Polk, upon learning

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that some of the public departments were planning to illuminate their buildings, forbade them to do so, citing the fire danger. He did, however, consent to having the Presidential mansion and the residences of each of the department heads illuminated.\(^{25}\) Polk also declined to attend a dinner party celebrating two war heroes, Generals Quitman and Shields, claiming that there was no precedent for a President doing so, and that he didn't think it would be consistent with official propriety.\(^{26}\) For similar reasons he had earlier refused to serve on a committee to solicit funds to raise a statue to General Jackson, although he did make a contribution of the maximum amount any one person was permitted to contribute, one hundred dollars.\(^{27}\)

Polk recognized a responsibility to invite various important persons to have dinner at the Presidential mansion, and often was host for leading Whigs as well as Democrats. In fact, he stated that he made it a policy at all social functions to include both Democrats and Whigs among his guests.\(^{28}\) He had Mr. Bancroft extend an invitation to John Quincy Adams to attend a dinner party; but was quite upset when Bancroft reported back that Adams declined to attend until the President had made some explanation of a charge against Adams which had been made during the campaign. Polk stated, "I would not think of inviting him to dinner; and that I had only thought of extending that courtesy as President of the U.S. which his age and the stations he had held seemed to make proper."\(^{29}\) Polk did, however, entertain his rival in the election of 1844, Mr. Clay, and records the following banter

\(^{25}\) Polk, Diary, III, p. 19.  \(^{26}\) Ibid., p. 268.  \(^{27}\) Ibid., I, p. 24.  
\(^{28}\) Ibid., III, p. 259.  \(^{29}\) Ibid., I, p. 131.
that occurred between Mr. Clay and Mrs. Polk:

As he [Clay] was leaving he remarked to Mrs. Polk in a very pleasant manner that he would visit her drawing room soon, that he had heard a general approbation expressed of her administration, but that he believed there was some difference of opinion about her husband's administration. She replied pleasantly that she was happy to hear from him that her administration was approved and added, if a political opponent of my husband is to succeed him I have always said I prefer you, Mr. Clay, and in that event I shall be most happy to surrender the White House to you.50

That Mrs. Polk exercised considerable influence over the social functions of the White House is evidenced by the fact that Polk reports that two or three times he had decided to invite John Van Buren (son of the ex-President) to dinner only to have his decision countermanded by Mrs. Polk, and she had, in fact, once burned John Van Buren's invitation to dinner, which Polk had given to his private secretary to mail.31 In general, though, Mrs. Polk enjoyed an enviable record as White House hostess and many of the occasions were quite lively affairs. Polk records his special pleasure in waiting on Mrs. Alexander Hamilton, who Polk found even at 88 to be intelligent and very interesting.32 Another distinguished guest of the White House was Mrs. Madison.33

The President had a high regard for the interest of historians in the Presidency. There are only two occasions recorded in the Polk Papers on which Polk wrote to ex-President John Tyler. On the first occasion Polk informed Tyler that he had discovered a paper belonging to Tyler and was returning it to him. The President hastened to add that he had not read the paper except to note that it belonged to Tyler.34 The second

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30 Ibid., III, p. 326. 31 Ibid., IV, p. 245-246. 32 Ibid., I, p. 226. 33 Ibid., IV, p. 276. 34 Polk to John Tyler, November 11, 1848. (Polk Papers, Library of Congress.)
instance occurred when Polk was packing in preparation for leaving the White House. The President had discovered "The Journal of Major George Washington," which had belonged to Tyler and Polk returned it to him.35

Polk records a most amusing conversation he held upon the subject of hand-shaking, which reveals him to have had quite a sense of humor and a mind that analyzed the smallest incident.

I told them that I had found that there was great art in shaking hands, and that I could shake hands during the whole day without suffering any bad effects from it. They were curious to know what this art was. I told them that if a man surrendered his arm to be shaken, by some horizontally, by others perpendicularly, and by others again with a strong grip, he could not fail to suffer severely from it, but that if he would shake and not be shaken, grip and not be gripped, taking care always to squeeze the hand of his adversary as hard as he squeezed him, that he suffered no inconvenience from it. I told them also that I could generally anticipate when I was to have a strong grip, and that when I observed a strong man approaching I generally took advantage of him by being a little quicker than he was and seizing him by the tip of his fingers, giving him a hearty shake, and thus preventing him from getting a full grip upon me. They were much amused at my account of the operation, which I gave to them playfully, but admitted that there was much philosophy in it. But though I gave my account of the operation playfully, it is all true.36

Polk did not, however, care for the formal reception of credentials from foreign emissaries or formal announcements of royal births, which he found at best amusing and at worst quite contrary to his democratic beliefs. Polk remarked how one minister had described in such detail the birth of a royal heir that one must have supposed that the minister had been the attending physician or midwife.37 On another occasion when a new minister delivered his credentials and addressed Polk in French, a language Polk didn’t understand, Polk replied in English without waiting for the minister’s remarks to be translated. When assured by the translator that his

35 Polk to John Tyler, Feb. 27, 1849, Polk Papers, Library of Congress.
36 Polk, Diary, IV, 264.
37 Ibid., II, 215-216.
remarks were proper, Polk stated that he had heard the same speech from foreign ministers so many times that he didn't need a translation in order to make the proper reply. To express his contempt for diplomatic etiquette and ceremony, Polk records the following anecdote about Mr. Jefferson:

An anecdote is told of Mr. Jefferson to the effect that the French minister, whom he invited to Dinner with the Diplomatic corps, had taken offence because he had not been assigned his proper place at the table. Mr. Jefferson had been informed that he was dissatisfied & that he intended to call for an explanation. While in his office his porter announced to him that the French minister was in waiting. Mr. Jefferson was in his shirt sleeves but said promptly, show him in. The French minister entered in State attired in his Court dress & found Mr. Jefferson with one foot up in the act of drawing on his boot. Mr. Jefferson turned his head as he entered & said, "Come in, Sir; we have no ceremonies here." The Frenchman was astonished, sat a few minutes & retired without making known his business, and afterwards said it was useless to raise any question of etiquette or ceremony with such a people.

One further incident is worthy of reporting because it furnishes an example of both Polk's democratic character and his sense of humor. Polk received a missionary from China who was accompanied by a Chinese youth. Polk records the close of the meeting as follows:

On taking leave of him, [the Chinese youth] and while shaking hands, he expressed in his own language, which was interpreted by Mr. Dean, that he had seen the King of this country, and said he would tell it to his countrymen when he got home. I told him through Mr. Dean that there was no king in this country, but that he had seen a citizen who had been chosen by the people to manage the Government for a limited time. This was explained to him by Mr. Dean, but I am not sure that he comprehended it.... He afterwards called on Mrs. Polk in the parlour.... I understood that he had said to her, he was glad he had seen the Queen.

The President as Administrative Head

One of the first problems to beset a President, a problem faced

\[38 Iibid., p. 285. \]  \[39 Iibid., p. 175. \]  \[40 Iibid., I, p.237-238. \]
even before he takes the oath of office, is the selection of those officials who will compose his family of personal advisers, the cabinet. The cabinet forms the top pyramid in the administrative structure, with the chief executive located at its apex. The cabinet serves a dual function for the President, acting as subordinate administrative officers concerning themselves with the details of day-to-day execution of governmental policy in their respective departments; and also comprising a council of advisers on questions of highest policy.

While it is true that there are few legalistic barriers to limit the choice of Presidential selection, the most noticeable restriction being that which forbids the appointment of members of the legislative branch to cabinet posts, and since the decisions made by the President are for the most part discretionary in nature, it has been generally accepted that the Senate ought not to turn down the President's selections. Yet there does exist in another sense a severe restriction upon the President's range of choice. Mr. Laski has noted some of the practical guides the President must follow in selecting his cabinet.

He must have one or two men who are likely to be influential with Congress.... One, at least, must be a person directly expert in the handling of the party machine.... There ought to be representatives of the territorial sections of the country.... There ought, desirably, to be representatives of the predominant religions of the United States.... A president has also to pay for his nomination and election.41

And in such a way Polk too was similarly restricted in his selections for his cabinet.

Prior to his arrival in Washington for the inauguration he had

already been considering the problem of selecting a cabinet, but with his usual caution he refused to disclose his intentions, even in a letter to his closest adviser, Cave Johnson. One of the first tasks which confronted Polk was how to bring harmony to the party, especially how to placate the feelings of New York, still bitter about his victory over Van Buren in the Democratic Convention. Polk therefore offered to Silas Wright the position of Secretary of the Treasury, which position, because of the significance of the tariff and the independent treasury issues, Polk considered the most important post. Wright declined the post, stressing his obligation as the newly elected Governor of New York. Both Wright and Van Buren did, however, press the claim of Benjamin F. Butler for one of the two top positions, either State or Treasury. In the meantime, however, Polk had filled these two places in his cabinet. Still endeavoring to satisfy the New York Democrats, he did offer Butler on the 25th of February the position of Secretary of War, which Butler promptly refused as beneath his dignity. Polk had by this time become somewhat impatient about trying to satisfy the Van Buren faction in New York and, acting on suggestions made earlier by Senators Dix and Dickson of New York, he tendered the War office to William L. Marcy, who promptly accepted. One writer has recently described the selection of Marcy over the objections of Van Buren as the final cause of

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the break between Van Buren and Polk.44

The balance of the appointments was somewhat easier to make, and Polk achieved a final composite picture of which Laski would have approved. Of the six members of Polk’s cabinet, three were ex-Congressmen: Buchanan, Secretary of State, and Walker, Secretary of the Treasury, had been Senators; Cave Johnson, Postmaster General, had been a member of the House. The latter, Cave Johnson, occupying the traditional position for the cabinet politician, was Polk’s chief political adviser both prior to and after his election. The geographical distribution was excellent: William L. Marcy, Secretary of War, represented New York; George Bancroft, Secretary of the Navy, represented New England; George Mason, Attorney General, represented Virginia; James Walker, Secretary of the Treasury, the deep South, Mississippi; and James Buchanan and Cave Johnson, Pennsylvania and Tennessee, respectively. On the political front we have seen that, although through no lack of effort on Polk’s part, he failed to satisfy the Van Buren faction in New York. He did, however, placate the two factions of Pennsylvania, by countering the selection of the leader of one, George M. Dallas, as Vice-President, by selecting the leader of the other faction, Buchanan, to be Secretary of State. He also mollified the Tylerites by the retention of John Mason in his cabinet, which also coincided with the desire of Polk, and of every President, who is after all a very lonely man, to have one close personal friend in the cabinet. Mason and Polk had attended the University of North Carolina together.

Polk's success in forming a cabinet was recognized abroad. The London Times observed,

They are highly respectable citizens and I have no doubt will generally prove efficient public officers. Nor are they distinguished as leaders of either of the great cliques. In this particular the selection, to say the least of it, is judicious.45

After Polk took over the reins of the Presidency, he made extensive use of his cabinet, particularly on matters of policy. Polk held cabinet meetings twice a week, on Tuesday and Saturday, and his diary records over 400 such meetings. During 1846, the President noted 114 cabinet meetings in his diary, for in addition to the regular meetings, he quite frequently called "special" meetings, even on Sunday, although the Sunday meetings never passed without a word of regret being recorded that the pressure of work had necessitated holding a meeting on the Sabbath. He also expected every member of the cabinet to be present at a cabinet meeting, advising them in a general notice sent to each cabinet member that:

I disapprove the practice which has sometime prevailed, of Cabinet officers absenting themselves for long periods of time from the seat of Government...46

And when Robert J. Walker absented himself from Washington without receiving prior approval of the President, Polk recorded the following evidence of his disapproval:

45. London Times, April 10, 1845, p. 6, col. 1.

46. James Buchanan, The Works of James Buchanan, ed. John Bassett Moore (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1909), VI, p. 110-111. See also draft of a letter of President Polk dated January 15, 1845 which was to be sent to each cabinet appointee, stating that he, President Polk, expected to remain in Washington the whole year around and expected his cabinet members to do the same. (Polk Papers, Library of Congress.) Polk continued the same practice in appointing Clifford Attorney General in 1847. Letter of Polk to Clifford September 30, 1847. (Polk Papers, Library of Congress.)
I cannot understand the necessity of all this secrecy and mystery in the movements of the Secretary, and still less can I understand why he should have left the City on public business of so much importance without at least advising me of it, if not consulting me before he left. I am wholly at a loss to understand the necessity of such a movement. There could have been no necessity to conceal it from me. How it happened that his note to me, without date, was not delivered until noon to-day remains to be explained.  

Polk, contrary to the accepted view of the use of the cabinet, did encourage a mutual sharing of opinion and views. That is to say, for example, that if the matter at hand were chiefly a money matter he encouraged all members of the cabinet, not only the Secretary of the Treasury, to partake in the discussion, and often gave equal weight to the contributions of the other members of the cabinet.

He also utilized the cabinet to consider about every weighty topic with which his administration was confronted. His diary shows that the cabinet discussed in great detail the conduct of the Mexican War, the Oregon Boundary Dispute, tariff legislation, and a host of other items. He did not, however, in contrast to the position assumed by Washington, feel bound to consult the cabinet:

I did not consult the Cabinet to ascertain their opinions of the subject. Having made up my mind that I could not sign the Bill under any circumstances, it was unnecessary to consult the Cabinet on the subject.

Nor did he feel bound, having consulted them, to obey or follow their judgment. He did, however, feel an obligation to inform the cabinet of his decisions:

On reflection I considered the proposed mediation of Great Britain between the U. S. & Mexico, with a view to effect an

honorable peace between them, of sufficient consequence to consult the Cabinet in reference to it. Although my own mind was made up to reject the proffered mediation, I considered it respectful to inform the Cabinet of it.51

This is not meant to imply that Polk never listened to, acted upon, or delayed acting upon the advice of his cabinet. On the contrary, although always the master, he found great value in his cabinet discussion, generally pursuing the policy of waiting for a consensus of opinion. In order to induce a consensus, Polk felt it was poor policy to request written opinions from his cabinet.

I have never called for any written opinion from my Cabinet, preferring to take their opinions, after discussion in Cabinet & in the presence of each other. In this way harmony of opinion is more likely to exist.52

Polk was able, however, to enforce harmony if the occasion called for it, and probably more than any other American President he insisted upon "joint cabinet responsibility" for measures arrived at during cabinet discussions.

The two following selections from the President's diary illustrate his insistence on cabinet responsibility:

...Mr. Walker said in an emphatic tone that he was in favor of submitting it to the Senate, but that he would be opposed to it unless it was understood that every member of the Cabinet would support the measure, but that if any member of the Cabinet should exert an influence in his intercourse with Senators to prevent his acceptance of the proposition with or without modification, he would be opposed to submitting it to the Senate. I interposed promptly and said of course if it was submitted to the Senate every member of the Cabinet would support the views presented in the message; and before the message was sent in, I remarked, there must be unanimity in the Cabinet in regard to it.55

The Cabinet having all expressed their opinions, I then observed that the Secretary of War had communicated to the Cabinet all the

51Ibid., p. 131. 52Ibid., IV, p. 131. 53Polk, Diary, I, p.455.
information which he possessed, and that we all had the same means of judging of the propriety of the proposed call that he had. I stated that I was in favour of the call, and that I did not base my opinion upon that of the Secretary of War, but upon the facts which were in the knowledge of every member of the Cabinet. I did not think that the Secretary of War should be held solely responsible for the measure because every member of the Cabinet possessed the same information which he did, and had the same means of judging which he had. I thought therefore that each member of the Cabinet should take his own full responsibility, and not escape that responsibility by saying that he yielded his assent to the call because the Secretary of War thought it necessary.... It was then unanimously agreed that nine additional Regiments to serve during the War should be called for from the States.54

Although Polk was master of his cabinet and allowed no dissent from the position of the administration, he did at the same time act with compassion toward his cabinet members. On one occasion he was successful in persuading his Attorney General, Clifford, not to resign from the cabinet.

I think Mr. Clifford an honest man and a sincere friend. He feels in his new position somewhat timid, fears that he will not be able to sustain the reputation of his predecessors, and had therefore brought himself to the conclusion that he had better resign. He finally concluded not to tender his resignation, and retired, apparently well satisfied at the interview I held with him.55

When he felt, however, that one of his cabinet members had overstepped the bounds of his authority, he could be quite firm in insisting that the member confine himself to his proper sphere of authority. For example, Polk rebuked his Secretary of the Treasury in no uncertain terms, as follows:

In drawing the paper he seemed to have acted as though it was part of his duty as Secretary of the Treasury to regulate a tariff of duties in Mexican ports.... I disapproved the paper. The members of the Cabinet were backward in expressing their opinions, though it was manifest they disapproved it also. I told the Secretary of the Treasury that I would address an order to him in the form of an order, and would request him to respond in his report simply to the enquiries I might make.... In disapproving it I endeavored & I think succeeded in avoiding to wound his feelings of self-esteem.56

And on another occasion Polk again insisted that his Secretary of the Treasury alter his report so that it would conform with the President's:

I finally said to Mr. Walker that by law he made his Report to Congress and not to the President, but, though this was so, the country would hold the President responsible for it. I told him I had in my message very fully considered the Mexican war & our future policy... that I thought if he took up the subject... it would place me in a very embarrassing condition; that I would be charged with holding one policy in the message and causing my Secretary of the Treasury to hold another in his Report... and that I had done this in order to avoid my proper responsibility. Mr. Walker said that he had merely submitted the paper for consideration, and that he would not insert it in his Report. The truth is it was wholly out of place in a financial Report.57

One of the virtues of the American President, as Hamilton pointed out so clearly, is unity in the executive. Hamilton went on to observe that unity in the executive may be destroyed if, although vested ostensibly in one man, it may be controlled or subverted by another who is supposedly acting in the capacity of an adviser.58 Polk early recognized the wisdom of that dictum and endeavored to prevent any of his cabinet rivaling himself as the leader or dominant figure in the administration. He also accurately observed that no one who was a candidate for the Presidency could give the type of objective advice that was expected from an adviser. "It is a great misfortune that a member of the Cabinet should be an aspirant for the Presidency, because I cannot rely upon his honest and disinterested advice...."59 Toward the latter part of his term in office, Polk had occasion to reiterate the views just expressed: "No candidate for the presidency ought ever to remain in the Cabinet. He is an unsafe advisor."60

Polk had attempted, albeit without complete success, to guard against

57 Polk, Diary, III, p. 241-242. 58 The Federalist, No. 70.
59 Polk, Diary, I, p. 297. 60 Ibid., III, p. 350.
the very dangers he noted above, for before he took office he drafted a
letter which was sent to every person whom he invited to join his cabinet,
the pertinent part of which reads as follows:

Should any member of my Cabinet become a candidate or an aspirant
to the Presidency, or Vice Presidency, of the United States, — it
will be expected upon the happening of such an event, that he will
retire from the Cabinet....

If sir: you concur with me in these opinions and views, I shall
be pleased to have your assistance as a member of my Cabinet: and
now tender you the office of ________ and invite you to take
charge of the Department.61

Indeed it was no accident that Polk was the dominant factor of his
administration, nor should it be surprising that loyalty to the adminis-
tration and himself should be a paramount virtue with him.

But, in spite of the precautions which Polk undertook to insure
administrative loyalty, he was continually troubled by what he felt was
disloyalty on the part of the cabinet. In particular he suspected his
Secretary of State of both leaking confidential information to the press62
and opposing administrative measures which were before the Congress,63 and
although Polk threatened upon a number of occasions to dismiss anyone from

61 Buchanan, Works, VI, p. 110-111; draft of a letter dated January
15, 1845 by Polk to be sent to all cabinet appointees. Polk Papers, Libr-
ary of Congress.

62 Polk, Diary, II, p. 482; Polk was very angry when he learned that
the secrets of the Trist mission had been published in the New York Herald.
See New York Herald, April 20, 1847; see also Polk, Diary, III, p. 354 ff;
and Polk, Diary, III, p. 396 ff, Polk learns that confidential message de-
livered to the Senate in Executive Session has appeared in the New York
Herald, see New York Herald, March 22, 1848.

63 Polk, Diary, I, p. 133-195. Polk feels that Buchanan has opposed
and worked against the confirmation of a Presidential appointment to the
Supreme Court. See also Polk, Diary, I, p. 261, Polk feels that Buchanan
has worked against the passage of the administration's tariff legislation.
the cabinet who was found to be disloyal,\textsuperscript{64} he never brought himself to carry out his threats.

During the last days of Polk's administration there occurred much discussion among the cabinet, including President Polk, over the manner in which the reins of government might be turned over to Mr. Taylor. Polk insisted that the cabinet should resign to him, although if their individual consciences required that they continue to perform the duties of their office until Taylor had named a successor, they were free to do so, but it was apparent that Polk was pleased when his Secretary of the Treasury, Mr. Walker, stated that he was unwilling to serve even for a day under Mr. Taylor.

On another matter of the transition from his Presidency to that of Taylor's Polk was quite adamant. When Buchanan inquired if the cabinet shouldn't call upon the President-Elect to pay their respects, Polk replied with vigor:

\textquote{...if my Cabinet called on Gen'l Taylor before he called on me, I should feel that I had been deserted by my own political family. I stated that it might be that Gen'l Taylor would not call at all, and in that event if my Cabinet called on him it would place me in a position which it would be unpleasant to occupy.\textsuperscript{65}}

\textsuperscript{64} Ib. p. 196. \textquote{...if I found that any member of my Cabinet gave countenance to a factious minority of the Democratic Senators to unite with the Whigs in making war on my administration by rejecting my nominations, he would find me a lion in his path, and that I would not submit to it, whatever the consequences might be.} See also Polk, Diary, I, p. 187 and 235. In the latter instance Polk clearly states his views of Buchanan and under what conditions he has kept Buchanan in office: \textquote{As long as he will carry out my policy and act faithfully I am willing he shall remain in the office of Secretary of State; when he ceases to do so, he must cease to occupy that position. His melancholy and dissatisfied manner and conversation is already embarrassing to the public interest, and is becoming exceedingly disagreeable to me. I will bear and forbear much in the hope that he may consider better of his course.}

\textsuperscript{65} Polk, Diary, IV, p. 350.
All of the cabinet gave assurances, except Mr. Buchanan, that they would not call upon Taylor until after he had called on Polk. Polk delivered in his diary what most historians would probably regard as an apt summary of Buchanan's character: "Mr. Buchanan is an able man, but is in small matters without judgment and sometimes acts like an old maid." Polk succeeded in keeping his cabinet closely allied until the very end, all of them calling upon him at his hotel after the inaugural parade; Mr. Buchanan, Mr. and Mrs. Marcy, and Mr. and Mrs. Mason accompanied the Polks to the boat, and Mr. Walker joined him on board to journey with the Polks as far as New Orleans.

The Direction of Departmental Affairs

If one of the chief reasons why the executive branch has come to dominate the other two branches of the government is that it is the branch which has the knowledge of public affairs, that is, it has the day-to-day experience with administrative detail that places it in a position to know what is needed and where the weaknesses lie; then, President Polk in a similar fashion was able to dominate the entire executive branch because of his superior knowledge of the detailed operation of each component part. Polk was able to gain complete ascendancy and domination over all of his subordinates because he knew, probably as well as his department heads, what was happening in each department and bureau of the government.

66Ibid., p. 355; however, Philip G. Auchampaugh in his biography, James Buchanan and His Cabinet (Lancaster, Pa.: Privately Printed, 1926), p. 7, contends that Buchanan was never treated fairly by either Jackson or Polk and that in spite of this treatment Buchanan always defended the Polk administration.

67Polk, Diary, IV, p. 376-377.
Although Polk utilized the cabinet primarily for policy formulating, he did take the time to inquire about administrative detail.

At each meeting of the Cabinet I learn from each member what is being done in his particular Department, and especially if any question of doubt or difficulty has arisen.68

That this supervision was more than an accident or the result of a meddlesome nature is quite apparent. To Polk it was a matter of administrative principle — the assumption of necessary responsibility. He clearly stated his views on the responsibility of the President to supervise the operations of the government upon a number of occasions.

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 myself rather than entrust the public business to subordinates, and this makes my duties very great.69

Polk also observed that he had become so familiar with the operation of the government that he preferred to manage affairs without the assistance of his cabinet officers. He expressed this opinion after a lapse of six weeks in the late summer of 1848, during which time he had never had all the cabinet members together in Washington at one time, but had personally attended to the absent members' affairs. Probably at no other time in our history has the country been governed so extensively by one man.

I have not had my full Cabinet together in council since the adjournment of Congress on the 14th of August last. I have conducted the Government without their aid. Indeed, I have become so familiar with the duties and workings of the Government, not only upon general principles, but in most of its minute details, that I find but little difficulty in doing this. I have made myself acquainted with the duties of the subordinate officers,

68 Ibid., p. 131. 69 Ibid., p. 261.
and have probably given more attention to details than any of my predecessors. It is only occasionally that a great measure or a new question arises, upon which I desire the aid and advice of my Cabinet.\(^{70}\)

It would be erroneous to conclude that this period constituted a change in Polk's habitual use of the cabinet meeting as a means of insuring conformity to administration policy. Rather it must be recalled that these six weeks occurred after Polk had accomplished all the major objectives of his administration: i.e., the Oregon boundary settlement, tariff reduction, the Mexican War concluded with the addition of California and New Mexico to the Union. Furthermore, during this period Congress was not in session and the national election of 1848 was imminent. Upon Congress reconvening in January 1849, Polk once again resumed his cabinet sessions in an effort to press Congress to settle the vexing question of establishing governments in the newly acquired territories.

Not only did Polk feel a great responsibility toward the details of government, he also insisted that the subordinate officers hold themselves responsible for the operations of their offices during their absence, and that absences should be taken only for good and proper reason. The Postmaster and Naval Officer of New York City applied to Polk for leave to attend a Constitutional Convention in New York and Polk told them:

...that they would be held responsible for the discharge of the duties of their respective offices, and that if with such responsibility resting upon them I would not object to their attendance upon the convention, provided the public business was properly done and they would see that no duty was neglected and that the public interest did not suffer by their absence.\(^{71}\)

Polk was, however, even more determined when General Shields,

\(^{70}\text{Ibid., pp. 150-151; see also p. 120.}\) \(^{71}\text{Ibid., I, p. 360.}\)
Commissioner of the General Land Office, informed him that he desired to go West to organize and aid in bringing out volunteers for the Mexican War.

I told Judge Shields that there was no propriety in his leaving his office, and that he could be of no possible use to the Government in bringing out or organizing the volunteers. I told him plainly that I thought all public officers in Washington ought to remain at their posts & do their duty... I told him that I hoped my friends in Congress and elsewhere would suffer me to conduct the War with Mexico as I thought proper, and not plan the campaign for me & without consulting me.\(^72\)

As Harold Laski among others has accurately pointed out, under the American Presidential system there is no way in which the President can avoid being involved in many issues which under a Parliamentary system would be settled further down the chain of command.\(^73\) That Polk was no exception to the judgment laid down by Laski is very apparent. Two examples of his becoming involved in minor affairs are: first, he was called on to intervene in the method of awarding contracts for street paving in the District of Columbia. Polk decided that it would be proper for the Commissioner of Public Buildings to himself employ the labor and do the necessary street construction, instead of awarding same on contract.\(^74\) The second instance occurred when some journeymen painters who were painting the Capitol called on Polk and asked him to decide whether the Commissioner of Public Buildings should pay them for wet days when they could not paint. In the absence of a Taft-Hartley law enjoining the payment of workers for work not performed, Polk advised the payment for wet days be made if that were the customary labor practice. He added the cynical note: "I have a

\(^{72}\)Ibid., pp. 427-428.


\(^{74}\)Polk, Diary, IV, p. 125.
suspicion that these workmen are Whigs....\textsuperscript{75}

An amusing incident occurred which serves to demonstrate Polk's knowledge of minute departmental affairs. A diplomatic letter had been prepared by the Department of State for Polk's signature. Polk observed that a passage in it did not conform to standard diplomatic usage and called Buchanan's attention to the error. Buchanan insisted that Polk was in error and that the form was correct. Polk offered to bet Buchanan a basket of champagne that he was right and that Buchanan was wrong. Buchanan accepted the wager and brought forth a bound letter book in which he stated there were precedents for the form used. After searching the letter book for some time, Buchanan could find no precedent and promised to deliver the champagne to Polk. Polk declined to accept it, stating that he had been only jesting. Polk states the moral of this episode to be: "I record this incident for the purpose of showing how necessary it is for me to give my vigilant attention even to the forms & details of my [subordinates'] duties." It also served another purpose, one of which Polk was aware, although preferring not to comment, because it humiliated the haughty Buchanan in front of the rest of the cabinet and reminded all that Polk was the master.\textsuperscript{76}

In the chapters which follow, it will be seen that on numerous occasions President Polk also issued orders and directed the activities of minor administrative officials.\textsuperscript{77} That this supervision of detail caused Polk to

\textsuperscript{75} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 174. \textsuperscript{76} \textit{Ibid.}, III, pp. 97-99.

\textsuperscript{77} "Several of the Heads of Bureau and other public officials also called on Business," Polk, \textit{Diary}, III, p. 51; "I saw some of the subordinate officers and transacted business with them." \textit{Ibid.}, p. 115; "I saw some of the subordinate public officials on business." \textit{Ibid.}, p. 430; "I saw also the Commissioner of Public Lands and other subordinate officers on business." Polk, \textit{Diary}, IV, p. 151.
work long hours without proper leave and rest is without doubt. He records one day in which he worked, proofreading a message for Congress, from 6 P.M. until 7 A.M. the following morning. Even when he did absent himself from the city he insisted that he be informed daily of events in the Capital: 
"I left instructions with them to keep me advised daily of the State of public business...." Polk himself observed that he had not been more than three or four miles from the Capital for thirteen consecutive months, and during his entire term of office he was absent from the Capital not more than six weeks. Not only did he drive himself hard, he feared that the work of his department heads would endanger their health as well.

The Cabinet met at the usual hour, all the members present except the Secretary of the Treasury, who was detained by indisposition. I have observed that he has been sinking for several weeks past under the immense labours of his Department. He has not been able to speak above a whisper for the last month, and there is danger that he may lose his voice entirely, and that his general health may be destroyed and his life endangered, if he continues to apply himself as he has heretofore done to the very laborious duties of his office.

Probably no historian would disagree with Polk's statement, "In truth, though I occupy a very high position, I am the hardest working man in this country." And probably every person who has occupied the position of President of the United States has had occasion to express the following sentiments:

When I retired at night I was much fatigued, having passed a week of great labour and responsibility, and of great solicitude &

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78 Ibid., III, p. 240. 79 Ibid., p. 69; see also p. 51.
80 Ibid., IV, p. 78.
81 Polk found it impossible even to visit Vice-President Dallas in Philadelphia; Letters of Polk to Dallas, Oct. 1, 10, 1846; Dec. 28, 1846; May 24, 1847; June 16, 1847. Polk Papers, Library of Congress.
82 Polk, Diary, III, p. 10. 83 Ibid., II, p. 360.
anxiety. With me it is emphatically true that the Presidency is "no bed of roses."84

Polk as Budget Officer

Prior to Polk's administration it had been firmly established that the President had no responsibility over the departmental estimates which were submitted to Congress. One of Polk's major achievements was to reverse this procedure, and for the first time in the history of our nation we had the beginnings of an executive budget. Polk insisted throughout his administration that all budget requests be first submitted to him for review; thus there was compiled a truly complete budget for the entire executive branch of the government. Not only did he review the budget requests, he advised and insisted that the department heads revise their estimates downward. Polk, himself, became what in later days has been entitled the Director of the Budget.

With the exception of his administration there is no evidence that even Bureau estimates were reviewed by Department heads; at least there was no law requiring a review, nor did they have any staff aides to assist them in any review. This was the situation that prevailed at least until Lincoln's administration in 1861. The only function of the Treasury was to gather the various estimates together and submit them to Congress under one cover. In 1859, Secretary of the Treasury Levi Woodbury expressly denied any responsibility for a composite budget or for a review of budget estimates.

84 Ibid., III, p. 162. See Plates II-V, a series of four photographs of Polk which cover a period from 1835 to 1849 and are a clear indication of how President Polk aged during that time. They include Polk as Speaker of the House of Representatives, Governor of Tennessee, President Elect, and President in 1849.
items submitted to him by the other departments. As Leonard White observes, "Congress did not receive an executive budget, but only the collected departmental estimates based upon bureau and field figures that might or might not have been reviewed." Polk was determined to change this practice, even before the pressure of war expenditures necessitated stronger control over budget estimates. In addition to pure control over fiscal matters, Polk also insisted on control over all reports from the Bureaus to their chiefs; and over anyone in the executive branch who had reason to report to Congress.

The President called the attention of the members of the Cabinet to the importance of having their annual Reports, preparatory to the meeting of Congress, prepared at the earliest practicable day, so that they might be submitted to him for his examination. He stated to them that he wished the estimates to be submitted to Congress of appropriations of the next fiscal year, to be made on the most economical scale, and to be as small as the public service would permit. He told them that they must give vigilant attention to the estimates and Reports prepared by the several Heads of Bureaus, remarking that as a general rule the Bureau officers were favourable to large expenditures....

The President reminded the Cabinet that the monthly Reports of their several Departments in reference to the manner in which their clerks had performed their duty... had not been made to him for the last two months, and requested that the reports for this month should be made.... The reports from the General Post Office have been regularly made every month, but from no other Department.

After the Mexican War had begun Polk was faced with the need for even tighter fiscal control. For although collections were good, Polk was operating under the reduced tariff rates of the Walker Tariff, which he

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86 White, op. cit., p. 78.
87 Polk, Diary, I, p. 48-49; see also I, pp. 775, 85, and 103; II, p. 213; and III, p. 178.
considered one of the major accomplishments of his administration, and he was particularly anxious that the finance of the war succeed without it being necessary to request an increase in the tariff. When his Secretary of War stated that he was having difficulty getting the bureau chiefs to reduce their estimates and suggested that Polk speak to them personally, Polk welcomed the opportunity to speak with them. Polk notes that within an hour of his interview with the Secretary of War, the Paymaster General and the Commissary General called. Polk admonished them to reduce their estimates and pointed out what he regarded as errors in their requests.

On the following day Polk spoke with the Quarter Master General.

I told him, as I had done the commissary Gen'l on yesterday, that the appropriations asked for should be ample, but not extravagant or more than would probably be needed. He submitted to me his estimates, and I found that he had reduced them near seven millions below the sum he had first proposed. I consider Gen'l Jesup a worthy man but a visionary one and unfit for the important Bureau which he fills, but I must use the officers of the army... furnished me by law. I think it probable that the estimates may now be brought down to a reasonable amount.\(^88\)

After the close of the War, Polk discovered, as have other Presidents, that it is difficult to return to the prewar level of expenditures.\(^89\) Polk observed two practices among bureau heads which tended to make them favor large appropriation estimates:

It has heretofore, I learn, been the habit of the Heads of Bureaus of the Different Departments who have been charged with the duty of preparing these estimates to make them larger than is necessary, calculating that they will be cut down and reduced by Congress.\(^90\)

\(^88\)Ibid., III, p.213-220 and pp. 125-222 passim.

\(^89\)Ibid., IV, p. 180, "On comparing them with the appropriations for similar projects for previous years, and before the Mexican war, they were found in some branches to exceed these appropriations."

\(^90\)Ibid., p. 165.
...they suppose their own consequence depends somewhat on the sums they may have to disburse in their respective branches of the service during the year.91

Perhaps this was the first statement of the desire for "empire building."

Polk warns his department heads that

The bureau officers, whose duty it is to prepare the estimates, are always in favour of large appropriations. They are not responsible to the public but to the Executive, & must be watched and controlled in this respect.92

That Polk was successful in his endeavors to control the size of the budget is evidenced by the fact that he was able to carry out his aim and repurchase a half a million in government bonds.93

Another area in the realm of fiscal affairs to which Polk was particularly alerted was the subject of the corrupt use or misuse of government funds.

Polk, who was very conscious of the need for public officials to be beyond reproach, would accept nothing of greater value than a box of cigars or a cane, which rule also applied to Mrs. Polk.94 Polk became alarmed at one time that because he had invested a small sum, $3,000.00, in United States Government bonds, he might be accused of being a war profiteer. He therefore directed that his bonds be sold and refused to accept the profit that was due him. The broker therefore informed Polk that he would donate the profit to the Orphan Asylum of Washington, and

91 Ibid., p. 175.  
92 Ibid., p. 181.  
93 Ibid., p. 195; see also pp. 162-196 passim.  
Polk replied, characteristically, that "he could, of course, do with it as he pleased."\textsuperscript{95}

Shortly after Polk began keeping a diary he was confronted by a request from a Senator from Florida to overrule his Secretary of the Treasury and to authorize the payment of Federal troops in Florida be made to an individual in Washington who, the Florida Senator claimed, had proper power of attorney from the officers and men to receive payment for them. Polk wisely upheld his Secretary of the Treasury and insisted that payment should not be made to an agent in Washington but be made to the men directly. The gross sum involved in this transaction was estimated to exceed $200,000.

Polk on another occasion refused to agree to the demands of Senator Douglass and Representative Smith that the expenses of a bearer of dispatches from Oregon to Washington be paid from the Treasury. The dispatch was a private letter from the Governor of the Territory of Oregon to Polk; and Polk felt that the law passed by Congress which authorized the payment of compensation to bearers of dispatches could not be interpreted to cover such an instance. The Congressmen thought it did. Polk finally made the following proposition to the Congressmen:

\textit{...I said to him - Senator Douglass, if Mr. Thornton - the letter bearer would state his claim on oath and he and Mr. Smith would vouch for his character and veracity and that it was the intention of Congress in the appropriation they had made to pay him that I would, upon this evidence, in connection with Gov. Abernathy's letter, direct him to be paid.}\textsuperscript{97}

Senator Douglass did not take to the suggestion very well and he and President Polk had some strong words over it; so much so that even the President

\textsuperscript{95} Polk, \textit{Diary}, III, p.15-17.  \textsuperscript{96} \textit{Ibid.}, I, p.30.  \textsuperscript{97} \textit{Ibid.}, IV, p.81-82.
acknowledged regret that the incident had occurred, stating: "I regret exceedingly the excited conversation with Mr. Douglass. There was no occasion for it, and it was his own fault that it occurred."98

When the President was confronted with actual dishonesty or evasion of the law, he could move swiftly and surely to remedy the situation. One such occurrence developed only a few weeks after the Postmaster of New York City had been appointed, a position at that time requiring Senatorial confirmation. The Postmaster had refused to comply with requests from the Postmaster General to post bond as he was required to do by law, claiming that he couldn't do so until his compensation was increased. Polk directed the Postmaster General to inform him that he must comply at once or be removed; this action brought the politically influential Postmaster of New York to Washington to see the President personally. The President informed him that he was to be immediately removed from office, but finally agreed to consent to allow him two days in which to post the required bond. Polk summed up his attitude in his diary as follows:

Mr. Morris is a leading democrat, but in the discharge of my official duties I can & will know no man or his politics, but require all public officers to conform to the law.99

In another instance Polk demonstrated that he could act with even greater speed and severity. When it was reported to him that the Receiver of Public Monies in the Land Office at Upper Sandusky in Ohio had defaulted to the amount of $7,100, Polk stated:

In less than three hours after the case was reported to me the removal was made, a commission issued for his successor, signed, and the orders issued to the U.S. Attorney for the District of Ohio to prosecute criminally the defaulting Receiver....100

The situation that most alarmed President Polk, however, occurred in the Treasury Department. The situation was brought to his attention when in the absence from Washington of the Secretary of War, Polk had appointed the Secretary of the Navy, Mr. Mason, to the post of acting Secretary of War and had requested him to determine the unencumbered balances available for prosecuting the war from the accounts of the War Department. Mason was unable to determine the facts required from the records of the War Department, but did secure information from the Treasury which indicated that most of the money in the Quartermaster account had already been drawn. This alarmed Polk greatly and he summoned both the Quartermaster General and the Secretary of the Treasury back to Washington immediately. When General Jesup, the Quartermaster General, returned, he reported a certain balance on hand; but he then returned on the next day to report that he had discovered a private memorandum of his which indicated that there was actually an unexpended balance of two million dollars more than he had reported the day before. This resulted in Polk giving the General a needed lesson in public accounting:

I told him that his books should be kept in such manner that any one familiar with accounts should be able on inspecting to see at once the amounts drawn from the Treasury, in whose hands the funds were, and the amounts remaining undrawn, and should not be left to rest upon the personal knowledge of himself and his clerks, or upon any private memorandum which he might keep. ... I told him that since I had instituted this investigation I had ascertained that the accounts of the Navy Department were so kept, and that a balance sheet was made out in that Department at the end of every month by each Head of Bureau, and laid on the Secretary's table, by which he could at a glance at any time tell the amt. available under each head of appropriation at the beginning of every month. 101

The day after this lecture the Quartermaster General returned and reported

the circumstances to be that the War Department at the request of the Treasury had paid to New York bankers a sum of two million dollars to be paid at a latter day to the Quartermaster in New Orleans; and that of this sum "Sixteen Hundred Thousand Dollars remained in the hands of Corcoran, or Corcoran & a Banker in New York named Morgan.... He stated further that these Bankers had been and were, as he understood, using the money in speculations in stocks." President Polk expressed his dismay and shock to Buchanan as follows: "I expressed to him my utter astonishment at it, and told him, as the fact was, that I had not been so much troubled since my administration began, & that it had almost made me sick." Polk undoubtedly recalled the warning given to him more than two years earlier by General Jackson regarding Robert J. Walker, his Secretary of the Treasury, and it is certain that Polk recalled the Swartwout scandal during Jackson's Presidency. When Walker was confronted with the circumstances he stated that "if such an explosion took place he would be blown higher than anyone

102 Ibid., pp. 140-141. 103 Ibid., p. 142.

104 In Jackson's last letter he wrote to James K. Polk to warn him of the possibility that Walker might be involved in some dishonest practice: "...should Mr. Walker have the folly to have any thing to do with either of these abominable projects - I say to you put your veto upon them both, or you and your Secretary will be blown sky high. - and whatever comes those corrupt speculators for yours or his character if they can get hold of the cash - I can write no more - friendship has aroused me to make this attempt - your friend, Andrew Jackson." Letter of Andrew Jackson to James K. Polk, June 6, 1845, Jackson Papers, Library of Congress. (Jackson died June 8, 1845.)

105 Polk, Diary, III, p. 145. Samuel Swartwout was a collector of the Port of New York during Jackson's Presidency. The most significant scandal of the Jackson administration was caused by Swartwout's defalcation of over a million dollars. See also Von Holst, Constitutional and Political History of the United States, II, pp.350-360, and White, op. cit., pp. 424-429.
and offered to resign his office if Polk wished, but the President reluctantly accepted his explanation that it was a necessary arrangement, i.e., the transfer of funds to bankers for payment at a later date to the Army was necessary, because the risk of transporting bullion was too great and notes could not be sold in distant places except at a large discount. Polk did, however, insist that if any future transfers of funds were made to bankers the time interval be sufficiently short so that the funds could not be used for stock speculation. ¹⁰⁷

President Polk from the very outset of his term in office insisted that he be the controlling force of his administration. It should be remembered too that he came to the office with no clear title to leadership even in his own party. The giants of his own party were still the aged Jackson, the embittered Van Buren, and the recalcitrant Calhoun. Certainly the two distinguished leaders of the Whigs, the defeated candidate Clay, and Massachusetts's Senator Webster, had a greater personal following than had the newly elected President. His reputation for party regularity had made him the first "dark horse" candidate but he remained virtually unknown in the country at large. But as chief executive, he demonstrated in true Jacksonian manner, that he alone would be the responsible agent of his government. In contrast to the Whig view that the Cabinet constituted a council whose advice was legally binding upon the President, Polk asserted his independence and personal responsibility for the conduct of every action anywhere in the executive branch. From his letter offering the

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 145.
¹⁰⁷ For a complete account of this episode see Polk, Diary, III, p.124-151.
appointment until the very day he turned the reins of government over to his successor, he insisted that his Cabinet members be loyal to only one person, himself. He demanded that there be just one voice for his administration and vigorously enforced "cabinet responsibility" towards that end. That he was able to maintain unity in the executive was no mean feat. He became President when most leaders in the party thought themselves better qualified. He wisely did not include such acknowledged party leaders as Van Buren, Calhoun, and Thomas Hart Benton in his cabinet. Yet by no means was his cabinet made up of insignificant mediocrities, but included such leaders as the renowned historian George Bancroft, the extremely able Secretary of the Treasury, Robert Walker, and a few party stalwarts such as Buchanan and Marcy. One must concur with the judgment of Henry Barrett Learned, who stated, "That Polk made no serious error in the selection of any single member of his council is likely to remain the judgment of students of the Polk epoch."108

As chief executive, Polk made a significant contribution to the power and duty of the President when he asserted his authority over the fiscal activities and reports of the subordinate officials of the executive branch of the government. He established the right of the President to know the details of the operation of the smallest segment of his administration. He was not content to rely upon his cabinet members in their capacity as department heads to carry out the executive will; instead, he established for the first time the right and duty of the President to control personally departmental activity of the executive branch. He recognized that regard-

less of the statutory requirements, the people would hold him responsible for the entire activity of the executive branch, and therefore he was determined that if he was to be held accountable he would control. While President Polk's debt to Andrew Jackson in this regard should not be overlooked, yet it should be noted that Polk maintained control not spasmodically nor on flamboyant issues only, but rather as a matter of routine and through the usual channels of government. He made no use of "kitchen cabinets" but utilized his regularly appointed cabinet to its fullest extent.

In the remaining chapters it shall be observed how he used these attributes of character and applied them relentlessly as commander-in-chief, chief of foreign affairs, chief legislator, and as party chief.
CHAPTER IV

POLK AS CHIEF OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Even John Locke, that strong advocate of legislative power, conceded that what he chose to call "federative" power must be exercised by the executive branch. The careful distinction which he drew between federative and executive powers is stated as follows in his Second Essay on Civil Government:

These two powers, executive and federative...[are] really distinct in themselves...one comprehending the execution of the municipal laws of the society within itself upon all that are parts of it, the other the management of the security and interest of the public without....

He goes on to explain why it is that the federative powers must in large measure be left undivided in the hands of the executive. Locke states that the federative power:

...is much less capable to be directed by antecedent, standing, positive laws than the executive, and so must necessarily be left to the prudence and wisdom of those whose hands it is in, to be managed for the public good. For the laws that concern subjects one amongst another, being to direct their actions, may well enough precede them. But what is to be done in reference to foreigners depending much upon their actions, and the variation of designs and interests, must be left in great part to the prudence of those

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1 This chapter does not purport to be a detailed examination of the foreign relations of the United States during this vital period of westward expansion, but merely a study of the exercise of presidential power. For a bibliography of foreign relations studies of the period see Samuel Eliot Morison and Henry Steele Commager, The Growth of the American Republic (New York: Oxford University Press, 1942), vol. I, Bibliography pp. 782-785. There is still needed, nevertheless, a complete study of the foreign relations of the United States during the decade of the 1840's.

who have this power committed to them, to be managed by the best of their skill for the advantage of the commonwealth.\(^5\)

And because Locke's observations about the nature of foreign relations are in accord with the realities of the situation, that foreign affairs are incapable of being controlled in advance by positive law, the President has been able to assume and hold the initiative in this area, notwithstanding the constitutional division of the federative powers between the executive and legislature. Perhaps Corwin best summarizes the power of the President in foreign affairs:

The President today is not only the organ of communication of the United States with foreign governments -- he is the only organ of communication therewith; and as such he is entitled to shape the foreign policies of the United States so far as he is actually able to do so within the conditions which are imposed by the acts of Congress; and more often than not Congress chooses to follow the leadership which his conspicuous advantages of position serve to confer upon him.\(^4\)

President Polk in characteristic fashion applied himself with nearly equal fervor to both the details and the major policies in the field of foreign relations. In the same fashion that he distrusted the professional judgment of the military expert, he was distrustful of the professional diplomat and felt that the use of common sense and decisive action would produce the best results. The following excerpt from the President's diary provides an excellent illustration of his suspicion that the diplomatic corps is often unrepresentative of American values.

The Secretary of State introduced Christopher Hughes late Chargé d'Affaires to the Netherlands and Dabney S. Carr, Esq., Minister Resident at Constantinople, who was on a visit to the U.S. states on Dr. bid.

\(^3\)Ibid.

leave of absence. I suppose they called to pay their respects. After the ordinary salutations, however, they engaged in conversation between themselves about the fine arts, Power’s Eve, Fisherman Boy, and Greek Slave; and about the distinguished persons they had seen abroad. They seemed to be well satisfied with themselves, and it was very clear that they had a good opinion of themselves. Their conduct was scarcely respectful to me, though I suppose they did not intend to be disrespectful. Altogether their deportment was highly impolite. They said not a word in reference to their respective Missions, or public affairs abroad, and were so busily engaged in their conversation with each other that they gave me no opportunity to make a single inquiry.

On the day following this conversation Polk informed his Secretary of State of his impression of the conversation with the two diplomats.

I gave him [Buchanan] my opinion of their vain conduct.... I remarked that they have been long enough abroad to have their heads turned, that I had been, up to the visit, a good friend of Mr. Carr, but that I thought it was almost time for him to remain at home, and let some other take his place.

Perhaps this was the beginning of the State Department’s policy of rotation to the United States so that foreign service officers can be reoriented.

On another occasion when an envoy about to sail for Brazil requested permission to stop at the Madeira Islands, Polk suspected for the intent of stocking up on wines, the President utilized the telegraph to inform the envoy that he must sail at once for Brazil with no stop-over at Madeira.

James K. Polk became President during a period of great ferment in international affairs. The Maine boundary had just been settled by the Webster-Ashburton Treaty, leaving the last remaining boundary dispute between England and the United States, the Oregon boundary, to be settled during his administration. Only days before he took office President Tyler, acting under the Congressional joint resolution, had dispatched an agent to Texas to conclude the negotiations that were to admit Texas into the Union. The

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5 Polk, Diary, I, p. 90. 6 Ibid., p. 91. 7 Ibid., III, p. 66.
Mexican War loomed on the horizons with its accompanying territorial expansion, which was to extend the boundaries of the United States from ocean to ocean. This ferment which was taking place in the United States was equaled by the unrest and change in Europe; the Irish, French, and German revolts were all to take place before the end of his administration, and the United States was to begin to exercise a world influence. The remainder of this chapter shall consider the actions of the President in each of these areas of international relations, i.e., Texas annexation, the Oregon Settlement, Mexican negotiations, and the United States in world affairs.

Texas

On March 4, 1844, when Polk became President, the annexation of Texas was a fait accompli; for three days earlier President Tyler had signed the joint resolution, by which Texas had been invited to become a State of the Union. This resolution had passed Congress by a vote of 120 to 98 in the House and 27 to 25 in the Senate. It should be noted that the Senate vote was far below the necessary two-thirds vote which would have been necessary for a treaty ratification. It was charged late in Polk's administration that he had played a significant role in achieving even this narrow measure of Senate support.

Briefly, the facts of the situation were that prior to the election of 1844, on June 3, 1844, a treaty to annex Texas was defeated by a vote of 35 to 16. Tyler, not to be stopped in his ultimate objective, laid before the House all the papers dealing with the annexation of Texas, accompanied by a message which stressed that "The power of Congress is, however, fully competent in some other form of proceeding to accomplish everything that a formal ratification of the treaty could have accomplished."

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8Richardson, op. cit., IV, p. 523.
After the election of Polk, with its clear implications of a mandate for the annexation of Texas, Congress acted. The House, acting first, passed a joint resolution on January 25, 1845, which declared that by the passing of this resolution Congress consented to the annexation of Texas.9

The Senate was reluctant to agree to such a resolution, feeling that it was an infringement upon their constitutional treaty-making powers. Finally Senator Walker proposed a compromise which provided that the House Resolution be amended to provide "That, if the President of the United States shall, in his judgment and discretion, deem it most advisable, instead of proceeding to submit the foregoing resolution to the Republic of Texas... negotiate [a treaty] with that Republic...."10 As this measure did not pass the Senate until February 27, 1845, all members presumed that the decision as to which alternative to use would be made by the incoming President, Mr. Polk. The President-elect's role in securing the Senate's acceptance of this compromise was recorded by Mr. Blair, editor of the Washington Globe, and Senator Tappan of Ohio. Senator Tappan alleged as follows:

Mr. Polk was in the city; it was understood that he was very anxious that Congress should act on the subject before he came into office; it was also understood that the proposition to amend the House resolution originated with Mr. Polk....

...I would not vote for the resolution, and it was well ascertained that, without my vote, it could not pass. Mr. Haywood, who had voted with me, and was opposed to the House resolution, undertook to converse with Mr. Polk on the subject, and did so. He afterwards told me he was authorized by Mr. Polk to say to myself and other Senators that, if we could pass the Resolution with the amend-

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ment proposed to be made, he would not use the House Resolution, but would submit the Senate amendment as the sole proposition to Texas.11

Tyler, upon receiving the joint resolution, acted immediately and only two days before Polk took office dispatched an agent under the authority of the House Resolution to Texas to conclude the arrangements. Therefore, when President Polk took office he was faced with the accomplished fact of a special agent already on his way to Texas, plus the knowledge, surely, that this method was the only practical scheme to fulfill his election promise and deep personal desire for the annexation of Texas. It was readily apparent that there was no chance that a treaty of annexation could receive the necessary two-thirds vote. Whether Polk ever gave the assurances implied in the Tappan letter is uncertain. Polk denies in his diary having done so, although acknowledging that he did have conversations with Senator Haywood and other Senators on the subject in which he had urged Congress to act positively before it adjourned.12 Most likely his statements were carefully couched to allow the listener to draw what conclusions he desired. (Recall the similar technique employed by Polk in the "Kane" letter on tariff legislation.) It should be stressed that the Tappan and the Blair letters were not written until three years had passed since the Senate action, and not until, as Polk notes in his diary, they had both split with the Democratic party and thrown their support behind the candidacy of Van Buren in 1848 on the Free Soil ticket.13

11National Intelligencer (Washington) August 1, 1848; see also letter of Francis P. Blair, ibid. See also New York Evening Post, July 28, 31, 1848.
12Letter of Polk to Buchanan, Sept. 30, 1848, requesting Buchanan's recollection of any conversation regarding Texas. See also, Polk to ex-Governor Brown of Tennessee, Sept. 6, 1848. Polk to Marcy, Sept. 30, 1848. Polk Papers, Library of Congress.
13Polk, Diary, IV, p. 58-49, p. 127.
Whatever the truth of the allegation might be, Polk did successfully utilize the only practical means of achieving his campaign promise. By December 29, 1845, less than a year after his inauguration, Polk had achieved his first objective; Texas was the twenty-eighth State of the Union.

**Oregon**

The newly-elected President found himself in an untenable position in relation to the Oregon territory. The history of the negotiation regarding Oregon is a history of President Polk's maneuvers to extricate himself from this perilous position. It will be recalled that the Democratic platform called for the "reoccupation" of the whole of Oregon. Polk, in his inaugural address, reaffirmed the campaign promise, stating:

> Nor will it become in a less degree my duty to assert and maintain by all constitutional means the right of the United States to that portion of our territory which lies beyond the Rocky Mountains. Our title to the country of the Oregon is "clear and unquestionable," and already are our people preparing to perfect that title by occupying it with their wives and children.\(^\text{14}\)

It is worthy of note that the President did not mention the boundary of "54-40," although it was generally assumed that in laying claim to the Oregon Territory he meant the territory as far north as that line.

In July 1845, in a carefully prepared note from Buchanan to the British ambassador, Pakenham, the administration presented very fully the claim of the United States to the whole of the Oregon Territory to the "54-40" boundary but very significantly ended by offering to settle on the basis of the 49th parallel because the President felt "embarrassed, if not

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\(^{14}\) Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 561. The quoted phrase is from the Democratic platform.
committed, by the acts of his predecessors." Pakenham missed the opportunity for a quick settlement, replying in detail to each of the arguments set forth by Buchanan and then presumptuously rejected the proposed settlement on the 49 degree line, without even referring that offer to his superiors in London.15

At that time President Polk became determined that the best way to secure a settlement of the Oregon Boundary was by firmness or, as he told a Congressman, "The only way to treat John Bull was to look him straight in the eye; that I considered a bold & firm course on our part the pacific one..."16 In pursuing this new course Polk was constantly opposed by his Secretary of State. Polk ordered his Secretary of State to withdraw the offer to settle on the basis of the 49th parallel; Buchanan argued for delay but the President was firm and insisted that Buchanan prepare the notice for the consideration of the cabinet at a special cabinet meeting.17 Polk maintained his firm attitude in the face of information from our ambassador in London that the British Foreign Secretary regretted Pakenham's rejection of our proposal of the 49th parallel. Polk recorded in his diary:

We had made a proposition which had been rejected, in terms not very courteous. The British [sic] had afterwards been informed, in the note of Mr. Buchanan of the 30th of August, that our proposition was withdrawn and no longer to be considered as pending.... If the British [sic] Minister made the inquiries suggested, all that could be said to him was, that if he had any further proposition to make on his part, it would be received and considered. This was all that could with propriety be said to him. No intimation

15Jesse S. Reeves, American Diplomacy under Tyler and Polk (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1907), pp. 250-254.

16Polk, Diary, I, p. 155. Polk to A. P. Nicholson of Tennessee, April 23, 1846; the exact phrase was used in a letter to General Pillow on February 4, 1846. Polk Papers, Library of Congress.

17Polk, Diary, I, pp. 2-8.
should be given to him of what our views or intentions of the administration were... 18

In October of 1845, Pakenham approached Buchanan with a proposition which attempted to ameliorate his earlier abruptness, but requested that it be considered unofficial for the time being. The cabinet held two meetings to discuss the proper reply to this latest inquiry, but when the President learned that the British note was an unofficial communication, he refused to let Buchanan read the reply until Pakenham placed his message on an official basis. The President stated:

...let him make it officially, and then we will answer it; but that I would not permit him to write a note, and after he had heard our answer to it withdraw his note & consider all that had occurred, both note and answer, to be unofficial & not to go on the record; that I would not exhibit our hand to him in any such way. 19

The President was to speak out publicly even more forcefully in his first annual message to Congress. In this message he satisfied the most violent of the "54-40 or fight" men, restating our claim to the whole territory and requesting that the Congress act to abrogate the existing treaty of joint occupancy, which by its terms provided for abrogation after a year's notice. 20 But, while brandishing the big stick before Congress the President advised his minister in London that if the British government saw fit to offer a settlement based on the 49th parallel, the President would feel bound to submit the proposal to Congress. 21

18 Ibid., p. 63. 19 Ibid., p. 80.
20 Richardson, op. cit., pp. 292-297. By this action Polk established the precedent that Congress and not the President has the authority to terminate a treaty. However, since that time court decisions have indicated that the President also shares in this right. See Edward S. Corwin, The Presidential Control of Foreign Relations (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1917), pp. 112-116.
21 Reeves, op. cit., pp. 250-251; Report of Ambassador McLane speech, National Intelligencer, Sept. 11, 1846; New York Herald, Sept. 8, 1846.
However, the President felt that before Britain would yield or make an offer that Congress must act by giving notice of the abrogation of the treaty, stating:

...if Congress faultered or hesitated in their course, John Bull would immediately become arrogant and more grasping in his demands; & that such had been the history of the British [sic] Nation in all their contests with other Powers for the last two hundred years.22

While waiting for Congressional action upon his proposal, Polk continued to look for a way out of the deadlock which had developed over the Oregon boundary. In January of 1846 he considered making a proposal to England based on tariff concessions and the payment of an indemnity which Britain could use to satisfy the claims of the Hudson's Bay Company.23

I stated that I did not know this was feasible, but it would relieve Great Britain [sic] of the point of honor in the controversy, and that possibly she might accede to it, because she esteemed her commerce with the U. S. as of infinitely more value than she did the Oregon territory.24

But eventually Congress acted and served notice on Britain that the convention of 1827 on the joint occupancy of the Oregon territory was to be abrogated. Upon receipt of that notice in England, the British Foreign Secretary Aberdeen formally instructed Pakenham to offer the line of 49 degrees as a basis for settlement.25 Upon receipt of the British offer, Polk called his cabinet together to ascertain their position. It was then that

22 Polk, Diary, I, p. 155.
23 The London Times maintained that Polk was a reasonable man and, therefore would be more interested in tariff reform than obtaining all of Oregon. April 14, 1846, p. 7, col. 4.
24 Polk, Diary, I, p. 191-192. It will be recalled that this was a period of great agitation in England for the repeal of the Corn Laws.
25 Reeves, op. cit., p. 262. The convention and protocol submitted by Britain is printed in Globe, 29 Cong., 1 Sess., App. 1168-1178.
Mr. Buchanan, who previously had constantly opposed Polk's strong stand, reversed himself. Polk records the discourse as follows:

Mr. Buchanan held back his opinion and was the last to express himself and not then until I asked his opinion. He said the 54°40' men were the true friends of the administration and he wished no backing out on the subject. I felt excited at the remark, but suppressed my feelings and was perfectly calm. Mr. Walker made an animated remark in reply....

The President decided to submit the British proposal to the Senate for their advice and requested the assistance of his Secretary of State on two occasions to aid him in drafting a message to Congress on the subject, but Buchanan in his new frame of mind refused to cooperate. This situation resulted in the strongest words which Polk ever had with a member of his cabinet. Polk recorded the exchange as follows:

He [Buchanan] then said; Well! when you have done your message I will prepare such an one as I think ought to be sent in. I felt excited at this remark, as he had on Saturday and on this morning refused to aid me in preparing my message, and I said to him, for what purpose will you prepare a message? You have twice refused, though it is a subject relating to your Department, to give me any aid in preparing my message; do you wish, after I have done, to draw up a paper of your own to make an issue with me? He became excited and said that remark struck him to the heart, and asked me if I thought him capable of doing such a thing? I replied, you have twice refused to give me any aid in preparing my message though requested to do so, and notwithstanding you see that I am overwhelmed with other important public duties and have been subjected to constant interruptions, and now you say that after I have done you will prepare a message such as you think ought to be sent in; and I asked him for what purpose will you do this, and he replied to submit it to you.

This last statement mollified the President somewhat, although still undoubtedly of the opinion that Buchanan desired to escape all responsibility for the submission of a settlement based on less than the whole of Oregon to the Senate. On the 10th of June, 1846, President Polk submitted

26 Polk, Diary, I, p. 453. 27 Ibid., pp. 459-460.
the proposal to the Senate for its advice and on the 12th of June the Senate voted to accept the British proposal by a vote of 38 to 12 — two more than the two-thirds vote which Polk had required in his message.

Polk had at last extricated himself from the perilous position in which he had been placed by the Democratic party platform of 1844 and by his election campaign. This feat was accomplished none too soon, for a month prior to the settlement of the Oregon boundary dispute the formal recognition of war between Mexico and the United States had been declared by the American Congress. Polk had demonstrated his determination to settle the Oregon dispute by first relying on the offers made by the preceding administration as an excuse to offer a compromise of the boundary issue. When that attempt was rebuffed he had taken personal leadership in opposition to his Secretary of State in pursuing a policy of firmness toward the British while still leaving the door ajar for an overture from them to compromise the issue. When the proposal which he sought finally came, he once again found himself in opposition to his Secretary of State, who fearing the opposition of western Democrats, was afraid to accept the offered compromise. How Polk managed to avoid the dilemma which frightened his Secretary of State was an even greater feat and called for all his political astuteness. This maneuver will be examined in some detail in a later chapter.

Mexico

On March 4, 1845, when Polk assumed the duties of President of the

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28 Richardson, op. cit., IV, p. 449.

29 The discussion of this almost unique reliance on the Senate for prior advice on a treaty is to be found in Chapter V, "Polk as Chief of Legislation."
United States, he was faced with a rapidly deteriorating relationship with the Republic of Mexico. Relations between the two nations had been strained for a number of years, ever since the United States had recognized the Republic of Texas as an independent nation. In addition, there existed the matter of claims of United States citizens against the Mexican Republic which Mexico, although, recognizing the validity of the claims, had been unable to pay. Mexico, furthermore, had repeatedly warned that the annexation of Texas by the United States would be regarded as a warlike act. When President Tyler, two days before his term of office ended, signed the joint resolution of annexation, Mexico broke off all diplomatic relations with the United States. Of even greater concern to Mexico than the annexation of Texas was the claim by Texas that its boundary, which as a province of Mexico had never extended beyond the river Nueces, now extended all the way to the Rio Grande. If the United States were to insist upon this boundary, then in addition to the loss of Texas, which after all had had an independent existence from Mexico for nine years, Mexico stood to lose still further territory. It is with this background that the new President took over the task of directing the nation's foreign policy toward Mexico.

Our relations with Mexico during the Polk administration can be subdivided into two distinct phases. During the first phase which lasted less than a year, Polk endeavored, by a mixture of diplomacy and force, to secure for the United States the additional territory of New Mexico and California. George Bancroft records that on his inaugural day the President informed him of the four great measures of his administration: two were domestic, the establishment of the independent treasury and the reduction of the tariff, the other two were the settlement of the Oregon boundary dispute and the
acquisition of California.²⁰ It has often been said of Polk that he was the only President who entered the White House with a well-defined program and left four years later with his entire program accomplished.

The second phase of our relations with Mexico during the Polk administration was conducted during the existence of war between the two nations. Its object was to bring about a peace without losing the ultimate goal of adding California and New Mexico to our nation. The attempts to secure peace took some unusual turns, including the negotiations with Santa Anna, while he was in exile, which certainly had the net result of prolonging rather than shortening the war, and the Gilbert-and-Sullivan-like Trist mission, which in spite of its peculiar circumstances, did produce the desired settlement in the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.

The joint resolution which provided for the annexation of Texas gave Polk the opportunity which he sought, as the resolution left to the President the task of adjusting the ultimate boundary of Texas. Using this as a wedge, the President hoped to be able to purchase the territory of California and New Mexico from Mexico. His desire to commence such negotiations was hampered by the fact that diplomatic relations had been broken off between Mexico and the United States during the last days of the Tyler administration, when Tyler had signed the joint resolution for the annexation of Texas. Polk, however, wasted no time. The same ship which bore the Mexican minister back to his country carried a secret agent of the United States with instructions to convince the Mexican officials that the United States, while determined on the reunion of Texas, was desirous of friendly relations.

The secret agent was to determine whether the Mexican government was willing to receive an envoy from the United States. Finally, on the 28th of August, Parrot, the secret agent, wrote to Buchanan that he thought Mexico ready to receive an envoy and added, "An Envoy possessing suitable qualifications for this Court might with comparative ease settle over a breakfast the most important national question..." Upon receipt of this message on the 16th of September Polk called his cabinet together and disclosed to them the objective of his planned Mexican negotiations:

One great object of the Mission, as stated by the President, would be to adjust a permanent boundary between Mexico and the U. States, and that in doing this the Minister would be instructed to purchase for a pecuniary consideration Upper California and New Mexico... The President said that for such a boundary the amount of pecuniary consideration to be paid would be of small importance. He supposed it might be had for fifteen or twenty millions, but he was ready to pay forty millions for it, if it could not be had for less.

Acting upon the advice of his secret agent, Polk prepared to send a minister to Mexico, selecting Mr. Slidell for the task. Polk's instructions to Slidell were to remain as the official position of the administration toward Mexico throughout. The same demands were included in the instructions sent with Trist a year and a half later. Slidell was to negotiate for New Mexico and California, using the claims of American citizens against Mexico, which Mexico had previously recognized as valid, as a bargaining tool. Slidell was authorized to state that the United States would assume liability for the claims and pay in addition twenty-five million dollars for California.

Polk's expectations that Mexico was willing to receive a minister

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31 Reeves, op. cit., p. 271. 32 Polk, Diary, I, pp. 34-35.
33 Text of the instruction to Slidell may be found in Senate Executive Doc. 52, 30 Cong., 1 Sess., p. 71.
from the United States were not fulfilled, because for the existing government in Mexico to do so would be tantamount to acknowledging that its threats about war if Texas were annexed were only empty gestures. Mexico's refusal to negotiate was used as justification by the President to deploy his military forces so as to occupy the country in dispute between the Nueces and the Rio Grande. Slidell remained in Mexico from November 1845 until the following spring in the hope that he might eventually be received, but in spite of a revolution and a change in administration Slidell was never received by the Mexican government. On the 8th of April 1846, the President received the final news that Slidell had asked for his passport and was returning to Washington.

From that time on Polk was determined to gain by force what he had failed to win by negotiations. On May 9, 1846 the cabinet met to consider sending a message to Congress asking for a declaration of war. The President said, "that in my opinion we had ample cause of war, and that it was impossible that we could stand in statu quo, or that I could remain silent much longer...." Four hours after the cabinet meeting adjourned the President received the long-awaited message from General Taylor that the Mexican forces had attacked, an event which Reeves characterized most aptly as "one of those strange happenings that result in the concealment of man's real motives."

On the 13th of May 1846, the day Congress declared war on Mexico, Polk held a meeting with his cabinet which he described as: "The discussion

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34 Reeves, op. cit., p. 295; Polk, Diary, I, p. 319.
36 Reeves, op. cit., p. 297.
to-night was one of the most earnest & interesting which has ever occurred
in my Cabinet."

The substance of this discussion was a proposal by Buchanan that the British and French governments be advised that the United States had no territorial designs upon Mexico. Polk countered by saying:

that though we had not gone to war for conquest, yet it was clear that in making peace we would if practicable obtain California and such other portions of the Mexican territory as would be sufficient to indemnify our claimants on Mexico, and to defray the expenses of the war which that power by her long continued wrongs and injuries had forced us to wage.

Buchanan replied that to follow such a course would surely involve us in a war against both France and England and would prevent the settlement of the Oregon boundary dispute. Polk responded with righteous indignation:

I told him that before I would make the pledge which he proposed, I would meet the war which either England or France or all the Powers of Christendom might wage, and that I would stand and fight until the last man among us fell in the conflict. I told him that neither as a citizen nor as President would I permit or tolerate any intermeddling of any European Power on this Continent.

The President eventually closed the discussion which had lasted for more than two hours by going to his writing desk and drafting a substitute which he instructed Buchanan to use in his dispatch in place of Buchanan's own message.

The subject of war aims lay dormant for about a month, but on the 30th of June, Buchanan once again returned to the subject. This time in a heated exchange with the Secretary of the Treasury, Walker, Buchanan maintained that the United States must renounce any territorial claims or win the animosity of the world. Polk, after listening to the heated exchange between his two cabinet members, stated that as a minimum "we must

37 Polk, Diary, I, p. 399. 38 Ibid., p. 397.
39 Ibid., p. 398. 40 Ibid., p. 399.
obtain Upper California and New Mexico in any Treaty of Peace we would make,"\(^{41}\)
a position which was constantly maintained throughout the war.\(^{42}\)

Polk's efforts to negotiate a peace continued throughout the war, and this desire to terminate hostilities as soon as possible led him into one of the most unusual affairs in our nation's history. As early as February 13, 1846, three months prior to the declaration of war, Polk had a conversation with Col. Atocha, a confidant of the exiled Mexican leader Santa Anna. Col. Atocha stated that Santa Anna, if he were only in control in Mexico, would be willing to settle all boundary questions between the United States and Mexico for a sum of thirty million dollars. He went on to say that only through a show of force would it be possible to persuade Mexico to settle the boundary question.\(^{43}\) That this conversation had a decided effect upon the President is indicated by the fact that he discussed the meeting with his entire cabinet on the next day and decided to adopt a firmer policy toward the Mexican government. On the day that Congress recognized that a state of war existed between Mexico and the United States, orders were issued to the American naval commander in the Gulf not to obstruct the passage of Santa Anna from his exile in Cuba back to Mexico.\(^{44}\) These instructions were followed by the dispatching of a personal representative, Alexander Slidell McKenzie, a naval officer, to confer with Santa Anna in Cuba. Santa Anna impressed McKenzie with his desires for peace and with his willingness to settle on terms agreeable to the United States, and

\(^{41}\) Ibid., p. 497.

\(^{42}\) Letter of Polk to Senator Haywood, October 10, 1846. Polk Papers, Library of Congress.

\(^{43}\) Polk, Diary, I, pp. 222-225. \(^{44}\) Ibid., III, p. 290.
in return McKenzie informed Santa Anna of the arrangements which had been made to pass the Mexican general through the American blockade. 45

Santa Anna accepted the opportunity and arrived in Vera Cruz early in August, where he received a hero's welcome; by the middle of August he was in control of the entire country. Buchanan immediately made an overture to begin the peace negotiation which General Santa Anna just as promptly refused. 46 The net result of these unusual negotiations was to provide the Mexicans with their ablest military commander and to prolong the war for an indefinite period.

In most constitutional matters President Polk was a strict constructionist. Regarding the collection of duties in Mexico, however, Polk adopted a broad constructionist view. He insisted that the Army collect import duties on all goods shipped to the ports of Mexico which were under United States control. The revenue from such duties was to be used to defray the expenses of the war. 47 In this manner the President, without authorization from Congress, established a system of duties and expended the monies collected in that manner for the prosecution of the war. He justified his action as follows:

...that such duties should be collected, as a condition upon which foreign commerce as well as commerce from our own country should be admitted at such ports as were in our military possession. The imposition of such duties results as one of the incidents of war belonging to the conqueror of a town or province. They are not to be imposed under our constitution and laws, but under the power which belongs to a belligerent over a conquered town or place. 48

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45 Reeves, op. cit., pp. 299-308. 46 Ibid., p. 308.
47 Polk to Secretary of War, Marcy, March 31, 1847. Polk Papers, Library of Congress.
48 Polk, Diary, II, pp.437-438.
This justification certainly provides the President with an ample degree of latitude in dealing with a conquered nation or territory and admits of no legal or constitutional restrictions whatever. In the area of foreign relations, Polk evidently subscribed to a doctrine of "inherent powers."

In the spring of 1847, the President began considering the desirability of having someone with the army in Mexico with the authority to negotiate a treaty should the Mexicans be willing to do so.

The President, with his usual political adroitness, felt that it would be best to appoint a commissioner who, if the mission should prove successful, would not be able to make too much political capital out of his success. He recorded in his diary:

> The embarrassment in carrying it out consisted in the selection of a suitable commissioner... who would be satisfactory to the country. This was a great difficulty. Such is the jealousy of the different factions of the Democratic party in reference to the next Presidential Election towards each other that it is impossible to appoint any prominent man.... 49

It was for this reason that Polk turned to Nicholas P. Trist, Chief Clerk in the Department of State. Trist had a long record as a reliable Democrat. He had married Jefferson's granddaughter, studied law under his tutelage, been named an executor of Jefferson's will, and much later had been a secretary to Andrew Jackson. Certainly a record to satisfy the most partisan Democrat; and in addition he brought to the task a knowledge of Spanish. 50

After being instructed with the intent of his mission and the necessity

49 Ibid., p. 466.

50 Robert Arthur Brent, Nicholas Philip Trist (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Virginia, 1950), 251 pp. A detailed account of the Trist mission is to be found in pp. 127-234.
for the utmost secrecy, Trist departed for Mexico. Within a week after his departure difficulties began to beset the mission. The press had learned of the secret mission. Polk suspected everyone and although the leak of news to the press did not directly affect the success of the mission it did serve as a basis for the breakdown of confidence between the President and his emissary.

The difficult circumstances under which the mission had begun soon grew worse. Almost immediately after Trist's arrival in Mexico there occurred a complete rift in relations between General Scott and Trist. In fact, for weeks the two men never met but carried on an acrimonious campaign of letters. Finally, in the first week of July, after a lapse of over two months, Scott and Trist met for the first time and as suddenly as the quarrel had begun they became the strongest of friends. Polk, during this period, became more and more exasperated at both men. In August Trist met with the Mexican commissioners to discuss peace terms, but it soon became apparent that Mexico was unwilling at that time to sign a treaty which would extend the boundaries of Mexico from the river Nueces to the Rio Grande. Trist's instructions had made the boundary line of the Rio Grande sine qua non on any settlement. Therefore, when Trist agreed to submit the Mexican proposal for the Texas boundary to Washington, Polk decided that he had exceeded his usefulness as well as his authority, and ordered him recalled.

Buchanan, in advising Trist of his recall, left the door ajar just a

51 Polk, Diary, II, p. 462.
52 National Intelligencer, April 22, 26, 1847; Niles National Register, April 24, 1847.
bit to further negotiations by adding in his letter that if he, Trist, had a treaty written when he received his notice of recall he might bring the treaty back with him. Buchanan followed this official letter with a personal one which assured Trist of Buchanan's kind personal regard and that the Secretary of State wanted him again in the Department. What Buchanan and Polk did not know was that while they were dismissing Trist as a negotiator, Mexico City had fallen and the fighting was all but over.

Trist, after some hesitancy, decided to ignore the order of recall and remain in Mexico City and negotiate a peace if that were at all possible. Perhaps he was encouraged by the tone of Buchanan's personal letters and by the knowledge that Polk had once expressed a willingness to accept a treaty even if it were negotiated by an American newspaper man in Mexico. This unusual event occurred at the time Buchanan was preparing the instructions for the Trist mission, and it is quite probable that Trist had knowledge of the situation. The facts were that in April 1847, Buchanan read to Polk a letter which he had received from Moses Beech of the New York Sun. The letter was written in Mexico City and indicated that the Mexicans were ready to sign a treaty and that he, the newspaper reporter, would negotiate it. The reporter had been made a secret agent of the American government but was not given any diplomatic power. Polk's reaction to this information was as follows:

It is clearly to be inferred from his letter that he will make a Treaty with them if he can. Should he do so, and it is a good one, I will waive his authority to make it, and submit it to the Senate for ratification. It will be a good joke if he should assume the

55 Brent, op. cit., p. 176. 56 Ibid., pp. 178-178.
authority and take the whole country by surprise & make a Treaty. Mr. Buchanan's strong impression is that he may do so.\footnote{Ibid., II, p. 477.}

Trist gave as his reasons for disobeying the order of recall four points which he felt justified his action: (1) a belief that his government still desired peace, (2) that time was of the utmost importance, (3) that Mexico would not surrender any more territory beyond the boundary which his original instructions had called for, and (4) that the President had ordered his recall through an unawareness of the situation.\footnote{Brent, op. cit., p. 196; paraphrase of a letter of Trist to Buchanan, 6 December 1847. \textit{Trist Papers}, Library of Congress.}

The President, quite naturally, became very indignant upon hearing of Trist's decision to remain in Mexico and negotiate a treaty in spite of his order of recall. Polk expressed his amazement and indignation in no uncertain terms.

His despatch is arrogant, impudent, and very insulting to his Government, and even personally offensive to the President. He admits he is acting without authority and in violation of the positive order recalling him.... He has acted worse than any man in the public employ whom I have ever known. His despatch proves that he is destitute of honour or principle, and that he has proved himself to be a very base man. I was deceived in him.\footnote{Polk, \textit{Diary}, III, pp. 500-501; Trist's reply was a letter 65 pp. long. Brent, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 198.}

Yet in spite of these strong terms the President less than a fortnight later stated that he would not automatically reject a treaty submitted by Mr. Trist, but would decide that question only after seeing the treaty.\footnote{Ibid., p. 511.}

This debate over whether a treaty signed by Trist could or should be accepted continued in the cabinet until the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo
was received in Washington on February 20, 1848. By that time the lines in the cabinet were clearly drawn with Buchanan and Walker opposed to the treaty, both advocated seizing more Mexican territory, while Marcy, Mason, Johnson and Clifford favored accepting the Treaty.61 Polk, in his third annual message to Congress, had expressed himself as opposed to seizing all of Mexico.

It has never been contemplated by me, as an object of the war, to make a permanent conquest of the Republic of Mexico or to annihilate her separate existence as an independent nation. On the contrary, it has ever been my desire that she should maintain her nationality, and under a good government adapted to her condition be a free, independent, and prosperous Republic.62

Polk, however, did not commit himself on the Treaty on the day it arrived, but summoned his cabinet together again on the next day. He then informed them of his decision to submit the treaty to the Senate. He stated his reasons for his decision as follows:

I assigned my reasons for my decision. They were, briefly, that the treaty conformed on the main question of limits & boundary to the instructions given to Mr. Trist in April last; and that though, if the treaty was now to be made, I should demand more territory,... yet it was doubtful whether this could ever be obtained by the consent of Mexico. I looked, too, to the consequences of its rejection. 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 [sic] the two Provinces of New Mexico & Upper California, which were ceded to the U. S. by this Treaty. Should the opponents of my administration succeed in

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62 Richardson, op. cit., IV, p. 544.
carrying the next Presidential election the great probability is that
the country would lose all the advantages secured by this
Treaty. I adverted to the immense value of Upper California; and con-
cluded by saying that if I were now to reject my own terms, as offered
in April last, I did not see how it was possible for my administration
to be sustained. 63

After the President concluded his statement, Secretary of State
Buchanan took issue with him, and remarked that the United States ought
to reject the Treaty in favor of securing a settlement which would give the
United States greater territory. Polk reminded Buchanan of his previous
stands in which he, Buchanan, had urged the necessity of the President
making a declaration to the countries of the world that the United States
had no intention of securing any territorial concessions from Mexico.
Buchanan acknowledged that he had so advised but stated that he had now
changed his opinion. Polk took accurate measure of Buchanan's motives and
recorded in his diary the following:

My conversation with Mr. Buchanan was unpleasant to me, but I thought
I ought to rebuke him, and let him understand that I understood the
motive that governed him. He wished to throw the whole responsibility
on me of sending the Treaty to the Senate. If it was well received
by the country, being a member of my administration, he would not be
injured by it in his Presidential aspirations, for these govern all
his opinions & acts lately; but if, on the other hand, it should not
be received well, he could say, "I advised against it." 64

Two days after this tempestuous cabinet meeting on February 23,
President Polk sent the treaty to the Senate for ratification. From the
25rd of February to the 10th of March Polk made comments daily in his diary
on the progress of the treaty, generally to the effect that its acceptance
by the Senate seemed very doubtful. He often recorded having spoken with
various Senators to urge them to support the treaty. When the Chairman of

63Polk, Diary, III, pp.347-348. 64ibid., p. 350.
the Committee on Foreign Relations called to inform the President that, although the Committee approved of the substance of the treaty, they were going to recommend that it be rejected because it was drafted by Mr. Trist after his recall, Polk informed the Chairman, Senator Sevier of Arkansas, that he strongly disapproved that action. Polk wisely observed that the treaty might be defeated by the union of two opposing forces; those who did not want the United States to gain any territory and those who wanted the United States to take over the whole of Mexico. He stated the axiom that "Extremes sometimes meet and act effectively for negative purposes, but never for affirmative purposes." But, as the days passed and the President continued to count the number of votes which he felt the opposition might get, he gradually became more confident that the treaty would be ratified. He felt that perhaps eight, ten, or even as many as twelve Democrats might oppose the treaty and that they might be joined by as many as six or eight Whigs. With nineteen Senators being able to defeat the measure, it is possible to understand his great concern. On the 10th of March Polk received the news that the treaty had been ratified by a vote of 38 to 14 with four Senators not voting.65

Polk capped this victory when he was able to persuade the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to resign from the Senate and take the Treaty of Mexico to secure that nation's ratification.66 It is a measure of the importance he attached to the successful conclusion of this treaty, that when Senator Sevier became ill and couldn't depart for Mexico immediately, Polk persuaded his Attorney General, Mr. Clifford, to resign his

65 Ibid., pp. 351-377, passim. 66 Ibid., pp. 378-381.
cabinet post and take the treaty to Mexico.67

The commissioners did their work well and on the 9th of June 1848, Polk learned that Mexico had ratified the treaty on May 25th.68 Peaceful relations with Mexico were once more established and the President had realized his dream of adding the territory of New Mexico and California to the domain of the United States. He had remained faithful to this end throughout the long negotiations with Mexico. First, he had seized upon the wording of the Joint Resolution annexing Texas, which had provided that the boundary difficulties between the two Republics be settled by negotiations, and had sent an emissary, Mr. Slidell, to Mexico with but one purpose in mind, the purchase of California and New Mexico. Secondly, when the Slidell mission failed and war came, Polk still attempted to find a way to achieve his goal, and the abortive scheme with Santa Anna, which brought that Mexican leader from exile in Cuba to control in Mexico was entered into with the single purpose of securing California and New Mexico. Finally, when presented with a treaty which had been negotiated by the discredited and recalled envoy, Mr. Trist, Polk accepted it and sent it to the Senate, in spite of the opposition of members of his own cabinet, including his Secretary of State. When the treaty ran into opposition in the Senate he stood firm and worked hard for its acceptance, and after it was ratified he used his persuasive powers to have both the Chairman of the Senate's Committee of Foreign Relations and his own Attorney General resign their posts to take the treaty to Mexico so that they might insure that the treaty would be accepted by the Mexican government. Adding the territory gained under this treaty to that

already gained under the Oregon settlement, Polk had added territory to the United States which was to include the states of Oregon, Washington, Idaho, California, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, Utah, and parts of Colorado, Montana, and Wyoming. "Who is James K. Polk?" He is the President who, except for Jefferson, brought more territory under our domain than any other President. When he left office, the United States was half again larger than when he became President.

A World View

Polk was President during a period of great unrest in Europe and he followed the attempts there of the people to secure a more democratic government with great interest and hope for the success of the revolutionary movements. The President, upon learning of the French Revolution which de-throned King Louis Philippe and established a republic, remarked, "It is the most remarkable, as well as the most important event of modern times." He continued to observe that the success of the French Revolution was already encouraging the people of the German States and of Italy to make more demands of their sovereigns. These demands, the President felt, must either be met by the establishment of more liberal institutions throughout Europe or there would be general war.

When a revolt occurred in Ireland the President was nevertheless determined to enforce the neutrality laws of the United States. He stated, "All my sympathies are with the oppressed and suffering people of Ireland... I sincerely wish the Irish patriots success, but though this is the case, it

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69 Ibid., p. 413. 70 Ibid., p. 414.
would be my imperative duty to see our neutrality laws faithfully executed. 71

A very short time after this Polk decided not to appoint Mr. McKeon as a District Attorney when he learned that he was a member of the Irish Directory of New York. 72 Polk observed that the District Attorney might well be called upon to prosecute some of his friends for violation of the neutrality laws. 73

Upon learning that the Irish were not successful in their revolt, he once again expressed his regret and instructed Ambassador Bancroft to do what he could to support the rebels under arrest in England. He recorded his views and instructions in his diary as follows:

I had also directed him to instruct Mr. B. [Ambassador Bancroft] to interpose in a delicate way, & intimate to the British Government that it would be very gratifying to the Government & people of the U. S. if that Government could, consistently with its own sense of duty, extend a general amnesty or pardon to English subjects in Ireland... We have no right to make such a demand, but simply to request it and to appeal to the magnanimity of Great Britain not [to] execute Mr. Smith O'Bryan and other Irish Patriots.... The whole American people with rare exceptions deeply sympathize with the oppressed and suffering people of Ireland, and if by interposing our good offices the lives of O'Bryan and other leading patriots can be saved, I am sure we will do an act of humanity, and discharge a duty which will be acceptable to our own country and indeed, to the civilized world, wherever liberal principles are cherished. 74

In other European matters of lesser significance President Polk also played a part. Polk refused, for example, to continue to pay a toll to Denmark for all American goods which moved on the Baltic, basing his refusal to pay such tolls on the laws of nations; and blamed the European powers for having submitted to the tolls for centuries past. 75 On another matter he

71Ibid., IV, p. 108.
73Polk, Diary, IV, pp. 107-114. 74Ibid., pp. 118-119.
75Ibid., pp. 152-152.
succeeded in negotiating a Postal Treaty with Great Britain which won for
the United States equal status with the other nations of the world. After
the signing of this treaty in January 1848, he was able to correctly remark
that, "My successor will be relieved of all existing questions of difficulty
with Foreign Nations.... His situation in this respect will be very differ-
ent from mine when I assumed the administration of the Government on the 4th
of March, 1845."76

Mr. Dexter Perkins, in the second volume of his distinguished three-
volume work on the Monroe Doctrine, so ably covers the "Polk Doctrine" and
the relations of the United States with Latin America that it is unnecessary
to do more than add a brief note to describe Polk’s handling of foreign rela-
tions in this area.77

President Polk reaffirmed the Monroe Doctrine in his first annual
message delivered to the Congress on December 2, 1845.78 Perkins says of
this message, that it was "...beyond all doubt, the most important single
document intended to give renewed and greater weight to Monroe’s principles
between the date of the original message and the despatch of Secretary of
State Richard Olney of June 20, 1895.79 It has generally been acknowledged
that the "Polk Doctrine," as it has often been called, went beyond the Monroe
Doctrine in that it (1) forbade not only armed intervention and colonizations
but diplomatic intervention as well, and (2) prevented even the willful

76Ibid., p. 267.
78Richardson, op. cit., IV, pp. 398-399.
79Perkins, op. cit., p. 89.
transfer with the consent of the governed of a territory in the New World to a European power. The most obvious application of these new doctrines occurred during the Yucatan episode and the attempt of the United States to purchase Cuba.

The Yucatan problem first came to Polk's attention in March of 1848. An agent of the Yucatan government applied to the American government for permission to let a ship being loaded in New York with 10,000 pounds of powder land in Yucatan so that the population of that province could defend themselves against the savage attacks of the Indians. Polk saw the difficulties of the situation to be that although Yucatan had been neutral in the war with Mexico it was, nevertheless, a Mexican province and that the powder might come into the possession of the Mexican army. Polk did, however, authorize the ship to sail with orders to report to Commodore Perry, who would be invested with discretionary authority to decide whether it was safe or not to land the cargo. This policy, which once again found Buchanan in opposition, was decided on in a cabinet meeting. Polk observed that Buchanan moved his seat to one of the windows and spent his time looking out with his back toward the President. Polk characteristically remarked, "He sometimes becomes petulant when his views are thwarted." 80

On the 25th of April another message was received from the Yucatan government. This message was an urgent plea for assistance and carried the ominous note that the government was ready to surrender their country and their sovereignty to any country that aided them, and that the same terms had been offered to both Spain and Great Britain. Polk stated, "We could

80 Polk, Diary, III, pp. 373-374.
never agree to see Yucatan pass into the hands of a foreign monarchy to be possessed and colonized by them..." He began immediately to prepare a message for Congress to secure the authority to come to the aid of Yucatan. In a special message delivered to the Congress on April 29, 1848, which is a model of combining an appeal to humanity with an appeal to nationalistic interests, Polk expressed in terms of the Monroe Doctrine of 1825 and in terms of his own message of December, 1845, an appeal for authority to aid the Yucatan. The President concluded his message as follows:

I submit to the wisdom of Congress to adopt such measures as in their judgment may be expedient to prevent Yucatan from becoming a colony of any European power, which in no event could be permitted by the United States, and at the same time to rescue the white race from extermination or expulsion from their country.

After what is probably the most significant debate ever held on the merits of the Monroe Doctrine, the Congress authorized temporary occupation of Yucatan by the United States. But, by the time Congress had acted, the Yucatan government had signed a peace treaty with the Indians and any need for intervention was over.

During a discussion of Cuba, President Polk restated the strongly held view that Cuba must not be permitted to fall into the hands of another European power. With increasing talk of a revolution in Cuba and of its desire to free itself from the Spanish ties, Polk felt it expedient to offer to purchase Cuba, and did so through our minister in Madrid, offering one hundred million dollars for the island. In June, the President was informed that prominent Cuban planters were in the United States to obtain aid for a

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81 Ibid., p. 455. 82 Richardson, op. cit., IV, p. 585.
83 Perkins, op. cit., pp. 172-192. 84 Polk, Diary, III, pp. 489, 487.
planned revolution in Cuba. He was also informed that a distinguished
General of the United States Army, who was in Mexico, intended to resign
his commission and take charge of an army to be formed by enlisting the
services of discharged American soldiers. This army would then become the
spearhead of the Cuban revolt. Polk's response, in contrast to that of Presi-
dent Pierce in 1854, was "that as President of the U. S. I could give no
countenance to such a step, and could not wink at such a movement." Polk's
attempt to secure Cuba came to naught when the Spanish government dismissed
the attempt at purchase as a contemptuous affront.

In summation then, President Polk's direction of foreign affairs
had been both energetic and fruitful. Without wishing to detract from Presi-
dent Tyler's role in the annexation of Texas, there does exist evidence
that Polk used his influence as President-Elect to secure passage of the
joint resolution of annexation. That he seized upon the method of annexa-
tion provided by the joint resolution and rejected the Senate amendment is
beyond question. President Polk was quick to realize that the avoidance of
the use of a treaty was the only practical way of accomplishing his main
campaign pledge of annexing Texas.

Polk held steadfastly to his objective of adding California and New
Mexico to the dominion of the United States. To this end he was quick to
seize upon the statement in the joint resolution of annexation which pro-
vided that the eventual settlement of boundaries between the Republic of
Mexico and the United States should be accomplished by negotiation by the
President of the United States. Polk used this as a pretext to send an

85 Ibid., pp. 476-477.
envoy to Mexico, Mr. Slidell, with the power to purchase both New Mexico and California. With the outbreak of war and the failure of the Slidell mission, Polk became involved in the abortive attempt to win a peace by negotiating with the exiled Mexican leader Santa Anna. Although a dismal failure which certainly strengthened the Mexicans, it serves as a good illustration of the lengths to which Polk was prepared to go to achieve his goal.

He confirmed his singleness of purpose when he accepted the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which had been negotiated by a discredited agent of the United States who was personally very obnoxious to the President. He furthermore stood off the opposition of those who wanted to reject the treaty in favor of obtaining all or more of Mexican territory. Professor Bourne, in his study of the proposed absorption of Mexico, credits President Polk's opposition as one of the chief factors which stopped the movement to absorb all of Mexico, stating "...there was the opposition of President Polk, who effectually controlled the policy of the Government...." 86

President Polk expertly maneuvered himself out of an awkward position regarding the Oregon boundary. He first took the opportunity to offer a compromise based on the actions of his predecessors. When that attempt failed, he took it upon himself to force the Congress to terminate the existing treaty of joint occupation and by taking a strong attitude convinced the British that the United States would back down no further. At the same time that he was taking the firm stand and brandishing the big stick in the American Congress, he let it be known through diplomatic channels that he was still receptive to an offer from England to settle the dispute on the

basis of the compromise of the 49th parallel which he had offered earlier.

He revived the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 and added two additional features to it. He broadened the Doctrine so that it forbade diplomatic interference by European nations with the internal affairs of Western Hemisphere countries and he interpreted the Doctrine so that it disallowed the transfer of territory in the Western Hemisphere to a European power even with the consent of the inhabitants.

If the dictum that nothing succeeds like success is accepted as the criterion, then Polk was an outstanding chief of foreign affairs. During his one term of office he had settled every major dispute between the United States and foreign nations, and had at the same time expanded the nation so that it spanned a continent. Perhaps the President himself best expressed his accomplishment when, speaking of the pending ratification of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, he stated: "...there will be added to the U. S. an immense empire, the value of which 20 years hence it would be difficult to calculate...." 87

87 Polk, Diary, III, p. 366.
CHAPTER V

POLK AS COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF

Article II, Section 2, Clause 1 of the Constitution of the United States provides that "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 actual Service of the United States...."

That this grant of authority was in accordance with the prerogatives of the crown in England is shown in Blackstone's Commentaries, in which it is stated:

The king has... the sole prerogative of making war and peace. For it is held by all writers on the law of nature and nations, that the right of making war, which by nature subsisted in every individual, is given by all private persons that enter into society, and is vested in the sovereign powers... The king is considered... as the generalissimo, or the first in the military command, within the kingdom... ¹

It is apparent, however, that the Constitution did not intend that the President should exercise all the above-mentioned authority of the king, for in Article I, Section 8, Clause 11 of the Constitution of the United States, it is expressly provided that the "Congress shall have the power... to declare war." It seems evident that it was the intention of the framers of the Constitution that the President's powers as Commander-in-Chief would be as Hamilton so ably expressed in The Federalist:

The President is to be commander-in-chief of the army and navy of the United States. In this respect his authority would be nominally the same with that of the king of Great Britain, but in substance much inferior to it. It would amount to nothing more than

¹ Blackstone, Commentaries, I, pp. 257-262.
the supreme command and direction of the military and naval forces, as first General and admiral of the Confederacy.\footnote{The Federalist, No. 69.}

Polk subscribed to Hamilton's view and to the view expressed in 1850 by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States who said:

His duty and his power are purely military. As commander-in-chief, he is authorized to direct the movements of the naval and military forces placed by law at his command, and to employ them in the manner he may deem most effectual to harass and conquer and subdue the enemy.\footnote{Fleming \textit{v.} Page, 9 How 603, 615 (1850).}

In contrast to President Lincoln, Polk consistently viewed his authority as commander-in-chief as only a grant of military power.\footnote{James G. Randall, \textit{Constitutional Problems Under Lincoln} (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1926), pp. 54-55. Randall specifically excludes military power from consideration, choosing to deal with "war powers" as they have a "bearing upon civilians."} However, within this interpretation of his constitutional authority, he acted with great vigor and exploited this power to its utmost limits. He so deployed the armed forces that Congress was placed in the position that its authority to declare war amounted, in fact, to no more than the right to recognize that a state of war existed.

Military Actions Precipitating the Mexican War

In order to understand the provocative nature of the military actions carried out by the United States prior to the actual commencement of hostilities, it is necessary briefly to review the relations that existed between Mexico and the United States at that time. Texas after defeating a Mexican force in 1836 had declared its independence of Mexico and had maintained its independence from Mexico from that date on. Mexico had never officially
recognized the independence of Texas and had often stated that annexation of Texas by the United States would be an act of war on the part of the United States. In the last days of the Tyler administration when Congress passed the joint resolution, Texas had enjoyed nine years of independence, and Mexico's reaction was limited to the breaking off of diplomatic relations with the United States. There was, however, one point of difficulty which was of major importance. Texas, prior to its independence, while a province of Mexico, had extended South and West only to the Nueces River; but after its independence had laid claim to the territory extending to the Rio Grande. Congress, recognizing this disagreement in boundary, had inserted in its joint resolution that the eventual boundary between the State of Texas and the Republic of Mexico should be subject to negotiation between the President of the United States and the Republic of Texas. Polk, even before Texas had ratified the annexation, had instituted plans to have the army occupy Texas, including the disputed territory which by the very resolution of annexation was to have been a matter of negotiation.

As early as June 15, 1845, 11 months prior to the actual declaration of war, General Taylor was alerted that the United States expected Texas to approve annexation on the 4th of July, and that when he was certain that they had done so, he should proceed at once to move his troops into Texas with the Rio Grande as the eventual destination. 5 This order had been preceded by two earlier orders, one on March 21, 1845, and the other on May 28, 1845, which had kept Taylor informed of developments regarding the annexation of Texas and the possibility of hostilities with Mexico. 6 On July 11,

5House Executive Document, 60, 20 Cong., 1 Sess., pp. 81-82.
6Ibid., pp. 79-80.
similar orders were sent to Commodore Commer.7

The first direct order to General Taylor to cross the Nueces River and occupy the disputed territory between the Nueces River and the Rio Grande occurred on the 30th of July. The significant section of this order reads as follows:

While avoiding, as you have been instructed to do, all aggressive measures towards Mexico, as long as the relations of peace exist between that republic and the United States, you are expected to occupy, protect and defend the territory of Texas to the extent that it has been occupied by the people of Texas. The Rio Grande is claimed to be the boundary between the two countries, and up to this boundary you are to extend your protection, only excepting any posts on the eastern side thereof, which are in the actual occupancy of Mexican forces, or Mexican settlement over which the republic of Texas did not exercise jurisdiction at the period of annexation or shortly before that event. It is expected that, in selecting the establishment for your troops, you will approach as near the boundary, the Rio Grande, as prudence will dictate. With this view, the President desires that your position, for a part of your forces at least, should be west of the river Nueces.8

Twice during the month of August 1845, Taylor was notified of the danger of war with Mexico and advised that he had authority to call upon Texas and other neighboring states to furnish troops of volunteers if he had need of them.9

On the 29th of August, Polk called a special meeting of the cabinet to discuss the deterioration of the United States' relations with Mexico. Polk records in his diary that he submitted propositions to the cabinet which were agreed to unanimously. The most significant part of these proposals was as follows:

If Mexico should declare War or actual hostilities should be commenced by that power, orders to be issued to Gen'l Taylor to attack and drive her back across the Del Norte [Polk's expression for the Rio Grande]. Gen'l Taylor shall be instructed that the crossing of the Del Norte
by a Mexican army in force shall be regarded as an act of War on her part, and in that event Gen'l Taylor to be ordered, if he shall deem it advisable, not to wait to be attacked but to attack her army first. An order to that effect was sent the following day to General Taylor.

Polk considered the situation so serious that he considered calling Congress into session, but did not do so after receiving advice from Senator Bagby of Alabama, who stated that he didn't think Congress should be called even in the event that Mexico declared war or invaded Texas.

On the 15th of January, 1846, Taylor was ordered to advance to the Rio Grande and after receipt of these orders in February, proceeded to put them into effect. On March 28 he reached his objective, establishing his camp on the bank of the Rio Grande opposite the town of Matamoros. On the 6th of April Taylor reported to Washington the following:

On our side a battery for four 18-pounders will be completed, and the guns placed in battery today. These guns bear directly upon the public square of Matamoros, and within good range for demolishing the town. Their object cannot be mistaken by the enemy...

...the Mexican authorities persist in considering our march as an act of war in itself; and I believe they would so treat it, and

10 Polk, Diary, I, p. 9.
12 Polk, Diary, I, pp. 12-13; unfortunately Polk failed to record what reasons Bagby gave for his advice. Professor Corwin makes the following observation concerning Lincoln's decision not to call Congress into session at the beginning of the Civil War: "...Lincoln's failure to bring Congress together for four full months after he took office involved inevitably a 'gigantic exaltation of the executive power,' and 'amazing assumption of responsibility,' from which our Constitutional System has never recovered." The President; Office and Powers, pp. 156-157. See also Carl Brent Swisher, American Constitutional Development (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1945), pp. 275-276. Professor Swisher concludes that Lincoln was aware that most Presidents had considered it a disaster to have to summon Congress into session at the beginning of their administration.
attempt to drive us from our position, if they felt sufficient confidence in their strength. 

After a series of conferences between Mexican and United States officers, General Ampudia, the Mexican General, on April 12 ordered Taylor to retire to the River Nueces. Taylor refused and reciprocated by blockading the Rio Grande, which act cut off supplies to the town of Matamoras. Finally on the 24th of April, 1846, the inevitable explosion occurred. Taylor reported to Washington:

I regret to report that a party of dragoons, sent out by me on the 24th inst. to watch the course of the river above on this bank, became engaged with a very large force of the enemy, and after a short affair, in which some sixteen were killed and wounded, appear to have been surrounded and compelled to surrender....

Hostilities may now be considered as commenced....

By the 6th of May, 1846, Polk was in possession of dispatches from General Taylor dated as late as April 15 and newspaper accounts covering a period as late as April 17. From these reports the President had ample reason to believe as he did that the outbreak of hostilities was near at hand. The day following his discussion with Slidell, the American minister to Mexico who had returned to the United States to report his failure even to be received by the Mexican government, Polk held a cabinet meeting to consider asking Congress for a declaration of war. He stated:

I then propounded the distinct question to the cabinet and took their opinion individually, whether I should make a message to Congress on Tuesday [sic] and whether in that message I should recommend a declaration of war against Mexico.

14 Ibid., p.141; see also Ibid., pp.116-141, and pp. 1204-1206.
15 Ibid., pp. 138-140; Polk, Diary, I, p. 380.
16 Polk, Diary, I, p. 394.
The Cabinet, with the exception of Bancroft, agreed that a Declaration of War was desirable, although Buchanan said he would prefer to have Mexico commit an act of hostility. Bancroft, too, had expressed a willingness to ask for a Declaration of War, if Mexico should commence hostilities. This Cabinet meeting adjourned at 2 p.m. with no decision except that the Secretaries of State and War should assemble their documents which would accompany a message if one were delivered on Tuesday. At 3 p.m., Polk received a dispatch from General Taylor, the one already noted, which informed the President of the attack of the Mexican forces upon the American unit. Polk immediately reassembled the cabinet at 7:30 p.m., and it was agreed that a message asking for a declaration of war should be sent to the Congress on Monday, May 11, 1846.17

Thus, while the President and his cabinet were considering recommending to Congress a declaration of war, there arrived from General Taylor the long-expected message which relieved the President and his cabinet of all doubt. Polk stated in his war message:

> In further vindication of our rights and defense of our territory, I invoke the prompt action of Congress to recognize the existence of the war, and to place at the disposition of the Executive the means of prosecuting the war with vigor, and thus hastening the restoration of peace.18

The President’s message met with quick action, and within two hours of receipt of it the House, by a vote of 174 to 14, passed a bill which authorized the President to prosecute the war.19 The Senate took a day to debate

17 Ibid., pp. 385-386.
18 James D. Richardson, Messages and Papers of the Presidents: 1789-1897, IV, p. 443. (Italicics mine)
the measure, but then supported the President by a vote of 42 to 2. 20

With the approval by the Senate, Polk had in effect succeeded, by utilizing his authority as Commander-in-Chief, to direct the military forces of the United States, in presenting Congress with a fait accompli which Congress had no choice but to accept. The Supreme Court, when called upon to pass on Lincoln's blockade, saw fit to refer to the Mexican War, stating:

The battles of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma had been fought before the passage of the Act of Congress of May 13, 1846, which recognized "a state of war as existing by the act of the Republic of Mexico." This act not only provided for the future prosecution of the war, but was itself a vindication and ratification of the Act of the President in accepting the challenge without a previous formal declaration of war by Congress. 21

Edward S. Corwin's conclusion regarding the power to declare war is:

It thus appears that the power of Congress to declare war has in actual exercise been the power to recognize an existing state of war, but that the President alone may also exercise this power, at least in the case of invasion or of insurrection. 22

Polk, who was to prove exceptionally able as a Commander-in-Chief for the duration of the war, did commit an immediate blunder when, instead of asking for an increase in the regular army, he requested the call-up of volunteer regiments of State militia. This error was to plague him throughout the war and often stall or seriously endanger pending military operation. Polk evidently decided on the policy of using volunteers as a matter of principle, for in his first annual message to Congress he stated:

20 Ibid., p. 804; see Brainerd Dyer, Zachary Taylor (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1946), pp. 154-188, for a detailed account of General Taylor's actions which precipitated the Mexican War.

21 The Prize Cases, 2 Black, pp. 635, 638.

It has never been our policy to maintain large standing armies in time of peace. They are contrary to the genius of our free institutions, would impose heavy burdens on the people and be dangerous to public liberty. Our reliance for protection and defense on the land must be mainly on our citizen soldiers who will ever be ready, as they ever have been ready in times past, to rush with alacrity, at the call of their country, to her defense.23

However, there were supporting reasons which re-enforced Polk's principles, namely, Polk knew that a policy of using volunteers would be more favorably received by Congress because it (1) surrendered patronage, as the use of the State militia left the power to appoint the officers for these regiments in the hands of local political leaders; (2) the use of volunteers was considered cheaper than regular troops, as the volunteer was required to furnish his clothes and his horse if mounted24; and finally it was felt that volunteers could be more quickly assembled. Polk recognized his error and in December of 1846 requested an increase in the regular army, the "ten regiment bill"25; but his previous reliance on volunteers encouraged Congress to delay in acting upon this recommendation. On the 11th of February, 1847, however, the Congress passed the ten regiments bill approximately as it had been requested.

Polk Directs Grand Strategy

The general outlines of the Mexican War as it was to develop are

23 Richardson, op. cit., p. 413.
24 The Secretary of War in 1838 had advised Polk, Speaker of the House, that "difference of expense between militia or volunteers and regulars is at least four to one." House Executive Document, 271, 25 Cong., 1 Sess., p. 1.
26 Statutes at Large, p. 123.
suggested by geography. The northern provinces of Mexico were to be taken and held; New Mexico was to be taken and held by the army which had as its ultimate destination California, which territory would also be seized by naval forces; and finally Mexico City itself was to be taken by a landing at Vera Cruz and an invasion inward from that point. Polk was active in making each of these decisions.

**War for the Northern Provinces**

On the 14th of May, just two days after the declaration of war, Polk summoned his Secretary of War and his commanding general, General Scott, into conference; Polk states the result of that conference as follows:

I gave it as my opinion that the first movement should be to march a competent force into the Northern Provinces and seize and hold them until peace was made. In this they concurred. Polk followed this conference up by advising the cabinet of his decision:

"My plan was to march an army of 2000 on Santa Fe & near 4000 men on Chihuahua and at once conquer the Northern Provinces, leaving Gen'l Scott to occupy the country on the lower Del Norte and in the interior." For reasons which will be discussed later, General Scott never did take command of the armies in the Northern Provinces, and General Taylor was permitted to remain in command. General Taylor, "Old Rough and Ready," soon captured Matamoras and proceeded to advance on Monterrey. Polk indicates that Taylor's failure to provide the War Department needed information made it difficult to direct his forces properly. In reporting a cabinet meeting devoted to a discussion of the manner of prosecuting the war, Polk states:

Great embarrassments exist in directing the movements of our forces, for want of reliable information of the topography of the country,

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27 Polk, Diary, I, p. 400. 28 Ibid., p. 405.
the character of the roads, the supplies which can probably be drawn from the country, and the facilities or obstructions which may exist in prosecuting the campaign into the interior of the country. Gen'l Taylor though in the country gives but little information on these points. He seems to act as a Regular Soldier, whose only duty is to obey orders. He does not seem to possess the resources & grasp of mind suited to the responsibilities of his position. He seems disposed to avoid all responsibility of making any suggestions or giving any opinions.²⁹

By the 25th of September, General Taylor's forces were in possession of Monterrey, and the first large-scale victory for the United States had been achieved. However, when Polk learned on the 12th of October, that Taylor had granted the Mexican forces an armistice he was disheartened. From a military standpoint, it is very difficult to understand why General Taylor granted an armistice when it appeared that he could have captured the Mexican army intact. Taylor's biographer believes that Taylor was not motivated by military necessity, but by the desire to avoid further bloodshed and that Taylor believed that leniency would induce the Mexicans to agree to peace terms.³⁰ Needless to say, these non-military reasons, praiseworthy as they are, place Taylor in the position of making policy and political decisions which rightfully belong with the Commander-in-Chief. Polk felt that the quick victory upon which he had counted had been permitted to slip through his hands, and he immediately had an order sent to General Taylor to cancel the truce and continue the fighting.³¹ One week later Polk reversed himself and decided that it would be best to have General Taylor's forces hold

²⁹Polk, Diary, II, pp.139-140. Dyer, Taylor's biographer, agrees with Polk's opinion of Taylor's executive ability, stating, "Taylor had proven himself a practical leader of men and a courageous fighter, but he had not demonstrated such strategic or tactical ability or such executive efficiency as to make him an indispensable general." Dyer, op. cit., p. 225.

and fortify his position at Monterrey and not attempt any further advance. Polk's decision was based on information that Santa Anna intended to reinforce the Mexican army facing Taylor and that it would then be four or five times larger than the U.S. forces. An additional reason for halting Taylor's advance was that it would then be possible to draw troops from his forces to be used in the pending attack on Vera Cruz and Mexico City.³² Taylor had other plans, however. Perhaps he suspected that part of the reason that Polk had forbidden him to advance was that Polk was alarmed about the fame which Taylor, a Whig, had received in the press after his victory at Monterrey. He decided to continue his advance southward toward Buena Vista. Taylor's reply to the order to halt his forward advance destroyed any remaining confidence which Polk had in him.³³

Gen'l Taylor's answer is in very bad taste and in worse temper.... I was very indignant at Gen'l Taylor's letter & directed the Secretary of War to prepare a proper answer.... He is evidently a weak man and has been made giddy with the idea of the Presidency. He is most ungrateful, for I have promoted him, as I now think beyond his deserts, and without reference to his politics. I am now satisfied that he is a narrow minded, bigotted partisan, without resources and wholly unqualified for the command he holds.³⁴

³²Ibid., pp. 198-200.

³³"...I feel that I have lost the confidence of the government, or it would not have suffered me to remain, up to this time, ignorant of its intentions, with so vitally affecting interests committed to my charge. But, however much I may feel personally mortified and outraged by the course pursued, unprecedented, at least, in our own history, I will carry out in good faith, while I remain in Mexico, the views of the government, though I may be sacrificed in the effort." Taylor to Winfield Scott, January 15, 1847, Executive Document No. 60, House of Representatives: Mexican War Correspondence (Washington: Wendell and Van Benthuyan Printers, 1848), p. 865.

³⁴Ibid., pp. 249-250. Taylor was equally strong in his dislike of President Polk and on one occasion wrote "would as soon have heard of his [Polk's] death if true, as that of any other individual in the whole Union." Dyer, op. cit., p. 252.
On March 21, 1847, Polk learned that General Taylor had advanced beyond Monterrey and that his forces were in grave danger by the overwhelming Mexican army. While Polk was planning to send troops to Taylor's rescue, Taylor had a month previously, on the 22nd and 25th of February, extricated himself from his precarious position by soundly defeating the Mexican forces at Buena Vista. News of this victory was not received in Washington until the first of April, an excellent example of the communication problem which made planning the war in Washington so difficult and which resulted in so many misunderstandings both in terms of military orders and diplomatic directives.55 Polk received the good news from Taylor with mixed emotions, recording in his diary:

It was great rashness to take the position he did in advance of Saltillo. Having done so he [is] indebted not to his own good generalship, but to the indomitable & intrepid bravery of the officers and men under his command for his success.56

When, shortly after this, the Adjutant General of the army presented to the President a general order requiring all corps of the army to fire a salute in honor of General Taylor's victory at Buena Vista, Polk declined to sanction the order, stating that there was no precedent for such an order and recorded the following appraisal of General Taylor's victory:

The truth is the indomitable bravery of our army saved Gen'l Taylor, and not his good Generalship, at the battle of Buena Vista. Had that battle been lost, he would have been condemned by the whole country for his rashness in violation of his orders in taking the advanced position he did.57

55 In the light of these communication problems one might well question the wisdom of Polk's insistence on making the major strategic decisions of the war himself. From the viewpoint of the dissertation, however, we are concerned with the fact that the President as Commander-in-Chief did assert just such constitutional prerogatives.

56 Polk, Diary, II, p. 452. 57 Ibid., p. 462.
The Battle of Buena Vista was the last opportunity that General Taylor had to win fame during the Mexican War, but it was enough. He was established as the national hero, which claim was to lead him to the White House in the next election. Justin H. Smith, an objective critic of General Taylor, maintained that Taylor's campaigns revealed no plan of strategy, no careful tactics, and little understanding of the art of war.38

The Campaign for Mexico City

Polk, even prior to the capture of Monterrey by General Taylor, began making plans for the capture of Mexico City, which plans he proposed should go into operation if Mexico had not agreed to a peace by November 1846. The following extract from Polk's diary of his plans, as outlined at a cabinet meeting, for the new offensive is very revealing in that it shows the civilian President without the aid of military advisors describing in some detail how a military campaign is to be carried out. The campaign as it developed closely followed Polk's plan.

I next brought up the plan of conducting the War, in the event peace should not be made before the setting in of the healthy season (say in November next) and suggested the importance of taking Vera Cruz by a land force to be landed out of reach of the fortress, who could invest the town of Vera Cruz in the rear and by cooperating with the blockading squadron by sea, and submitted whether by these means the Fortress of San Juan de Ulloa would not be compelled to surrender for want of supplies in a very few days. I suggested further that if this could be done the fortress after surrendering could be dismantled and blown up, and that our troop on land might then march on the City of Mexico. These suggestions met with favorable consideration in the Cabinet. The propriety of taking Tampico was also considered, and the impression of all was that it should be done if peace was not made before the healthy season set in.39

On September 21, less than a month after Polk had outlined the

39 Polk, Diary, II, p. 104.
general plans for an attack on Mexico City, he initiated the first step in those plans, namely, the drafting of orders for an advance on Tampico. On the following October 10, 1846, Polk recorded "The expedition to Tampico having been heretofore resolved upon, the question of extending that expedition to Vera Cruz was discussed." A week later a meeting was held at the White House attended by the Secretary of War, Secretary of State, and an ex-consul at Vera Cruz who had been summoned from Rhode Island to Washington. At the President's request, the ex-consul drew up a detailed diagram of Vera Cruz and the surrounding country and from this diagram the detailed plans for the landing and capture of the port city of Vera Cruz were drawn.

After the planning stage had been completed and the actual campaign was in operation the President continued to express and press his views on how the operations should be conducted. Often he became impatient at the painstaking methods of his commander, General Scott, stating:

I expressed the opinion that if I had a proper commander of the army, who would lay aside the technical rules of war to be found in books, which required a long train of baggage wagons; one who would go light & move rapidly, I had no doubt Santa Anna & his whole army could be destroyed or captured in a short time.

Polk did, however, take personal charge of seeing that General Scott had sufficient troops under his command to continue his march to Mexico City after Vera Cruz had been taken; the following will indicate his close supervision of these activities:

Between the hours of 12 and 1 O'Clock the Secretary of War & the adj't Gen'l of the army called in pursuance of a previous appointment. The adj't Gen'l reported the forces and their distribution now in the

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40 Ibid., p. 148.  41 Ibid., p. 179.  42 Ibid., p. 196.

43 Ibid., p. 432. Once again it is not a question of the wisdom of Polk's attitude, but rather his willingness to make and act upon such judgments which is our primary concern.
field in Mexico, and also those which are either en route to the seat of War, or are expected shortly to be so.... Some additional forces were ordered to Vera Cruz to join Gen'l Scott's column. A Detachment of Marines which can be spared from the Navy, as I am informed by the Secretary of the Navy, I will also order to join the land forces at Vera Cruz.44

The initial landing was made at Vera Cruz on March 9, 1847 and six months later on September 15, 1847, Polk's initial plans for the capture of Mexico City were completed.

**New Mexico and California Campaign**

The conquest of New Mexico and California were insignificant contributions to the winning of the Mexican War, but they were by no means insignificant in settling the terms of the peace. As has already been noted, even before hostilities had begun both military and naval commanders had been notified of the possibility of war between the two powers. The naval forces in the Pacific were under the command of John D. Sloat, who was operating under instruction to take possession of San Francisco as soon as he heard that Mexico had declared war on the United States.45 Immediately after the declaration of war, Sloat received additional instruction for himself and for his successor, Commodore R. F. Stockton.46 On the 7th of July, 1846, Commodore Stockton took the port of Monterey in California and two days later, a captain under his command occupied San Francisco. Shortly before the capture of San Francisco, there occurred a revolt of American residents in California against Mexican rule; this group soon came under the leadership of the pathfinder, Fremont. Later, Fremont joined forces

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with Commodore Stockton and in fact, was appointed by Stockton as Military Governor of California. But, about this time, General Kearney, who had been acting under directives originating in the White House, arrived in California. As early as May 30, 1846, approximately two weeks after the declaration of war, Polk had stated:

...that if the war should be protracted for any considerable time, it would in my judgment be very important that the U. S. should hold military possession of California at the time peace was made.... I finally submitted a distinct proposition to the cabinet.... Immediately after the act declaring war against Mexico was passed (May 13th, 1846) orders had been given to Col. Kearney with his Regiment to move to Santa Fe to protect our traders.... The proposition which I submitted was, that Col. Kearney should be ordered as soon as he took Santa Fe, if he thought safe to do so & practicable for him to reach California before winter, to leave Santa Fe with a sufficient force to hold it, and proceed towards California with the balance of his command....

General Kearney had acted under orders issued shortly after the May 30th Cabinet meeting and captured Santa Fe on the 18th of August, 1846 without a struggle. He then continued to California, only to find that most of it was already in American hands. In spite of difficulties of command, California was under American possession many months before Scott had subdued Santa Anna on the plains before Mexico City.

47 Letter from Polk to Secretary of War Marcy with draft of instructions to be given General Kearney, June 2, 1846. Polk Papers, Library of Congress.
48 Polk, Diary, I, pp. 437-439.
50 General Kearney asserted his authority over both Col. Fremont and Commodore Stockton. The Commodore after some hesitation accepted his subordinate position, but Col. Fremont remained defiant, and eventually was taken back to Washington under arrest for insubordination and mutiny. He was found guilty of insubordination and ordered dismissed from the service. President Polk revoked his sentence of dismissal from the service, but, nevertheless, Col. Fremont resigned his commission. See Allen Nevins, Fremont, The West's Greatest Adventurer, for a sympathetic treatment of Fremont's court-martial.
President Polk Controls Military Operations 51

Probably of greater lasting significance for the institutionalization of the Commander-in-Chief's functions of the Presidency than Polk's direction of grand strategy was the fact that he insisted on being the controlling and decisive authority in all matters military. He demonstrated that a civilian without previous military experience, supported by a cabinet of which only one member had had any previous military experience, 52 could personally attend to the many military details and could constantly and successfully assert his own absolute authority.

One of our central democratic tenets is that the civilian authorities should be superior to the military — that military command must be subservient to civilian-determined policy. President Polk was the first Commander-in-Chief without previous military experience to clearly demonstrate that the President could, in fact, be the Commander-in-Chief. 55

Simultaneously with his message to Congress asking for a declaration of war, Polk, with some misgivings, tendered General Scott as the senior officer in the army, the command of the army. 54 Scott and Polk had difficulties almost from the beginning. On the 21st of May, 1846, only two weeks after giving him command of the army, Polk received a copy of a personal letter which Scott had written, the offensive part of which read:


52 Secretary of War Marcy had had limited service in the state militia.

55 For a brief account of Madison's failure as Commander-in-Chief, see supra Chapter I, p. 26, especially footnote no. 27. White, Jeffersonians, pp. 219-220.

54 Polk, Diary, I, p. 396.
With the officering of a new corps I am sure I should not be allowed the least possible agency except in favour of a democrat, and the proposed Riflemen are intended by western men to give Commissions or rather pay to western democrats. Not an eastern man, not a graduate of the Military Academy and certainly not a whig would obtain a place under such proscriptive circumstances or prospects. You may be certain I shall not dishonor myself by recommending any individual whatever, and so I have already replied to hundreds of applicants, most of them democrats.

This offensive letter was followed on the same day, May 21, by a letter written by Scott to Marcy, the Secretary of War. In this letter Scott made the rather well-known comment, "that he did not desire to place himself in the most perilous of all positions: a fire upon my rear, from Washington, and the fire, in the front, from the Mexicans." This was the final straw.

Polk was already disturbed since he had learned that Scott did not intend to go to the front until September 1846, and had directed his Secretary of War to "take the matter into his own hands; to issue his orders and cause them to be obeyed." On the 25th of May, after having called a special meeting of the cabinet to consider Scott's letter, the President issued orders which excused Scott from command of the army against Mexico and ordered him to remain in Washington, D. C.

Polk was faced with a dilemma, however, when he decided it was necessary to open a new attack at Vera Cruz with Mexico City as its ultimate goal. Who could command such a force? By this time the President had lost all

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55 Ibid., p. 414, footnote.
57 Charles Winslow Elliott, Winfield Scott (New York: Macmillan Co., 1937), pp. 417-422. Major Elliott, a most sympathetic biographer of Scott, discusses this episode in a chapter entitled "General Scott Comes Near to Committing Suicide with a Goose Quill."
58 Polk, Diary, I, p. 408. 59 Ibid., p. 424.
confidence in General Taylor.

Eventually, Polk felt that he was forced to offer the command to General Scott, but before doing so he began to consider a plan to appoint Thomas Hart Benton to the position of Lieutenant General. A rank which had not existed in the army since George Washington had held it, this new rank would be higher than all existing ranks, and thus the holder would be the military commander. On the 10th of November, Benton suggested to Polk that a new commander with the rank of Lieutenant General should be created by Congress, and if such a rank were created he would be willing to accept the command himself. Colonel Benton stated that he would not accept a lesser rank.

By the 19th of November, Polk felt that he must accept General Scott as commander of the new expedition, and called Scott to the White House to advise him of his new command, and for the short time of this conversation there appeared to be harmony between General Scott and the President.

I then intimated to him that if I was satisfied that he had the proper confidence in the administration & would cordially cooperate with it, that I was disposed to assign him to the command. He appeared to be much affected and said at once that he had the utmost confidence in the administration & in myself, and that he would cordially cooperate with me in carrying out my views in the prosecution of the war. He said that he surrendered his whole confidence to me.... He left, apparently the most delighted man I have seen for a long time, and as he retired expressed his deep gratitude to me.

By the 3rd of December, however, Polk was again considering asking Congress to create the new position of Lieutenant General with the intention of appointing Colonel Benton to that post and as such to command the army in the field. Before Congress met Polk was active in lining up support for

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60 Ibid., II, pp. 227, 231. 61 Ibid., pp. 244-245.

his new measure, the creation of the Lieutenant General position. By the 22nd of December, Polk was of the opinion that Congress would not grant his request and advised Benton of that fact. It appears that Polk would have liked to drop the entire project, but could not do so without losing the support of the influential Benton. The plans came to nothing when the bill, although having passed the House, was defeated in the Senate by a vote of 29 to 28.

Polk's relations with Scott continued to deteriorate. Polk records his dissatisfaction with General Scott, both because of his lack of vigor in prosecuting the war and for his inability to keep a military secret, in his diary:

Gen'l Scott has acted with so little discretion since he assumed the command that the confidential plans of the Government which were confided only to himself have been made so public that every Mexican may know them. I have no doubt the Mexican Government and Military commander are as well apprised of the secret instructions which were given to Gen'l Scott when he left Washington as he is himself. His vanity is such that he could not keep the most important secrets of the Government which were given to him. He is, moreover, wasting himself in most extravagant preparations, and is making such a parade before the public in all he does that there is danger that the objects of the campaign may be entirely defeated.... My situation is most embarrassing. I am held responsible for the War, and yet I am required to entrust the chief command of the army to a Gen'l in whom I have no confidence.

After the dispute between General Scott and Mr. Trist, the government agent sent to Mexico to negotiate a settlement, the President became exceptionally disturbed by the General's conduct, saying:

The truth is that I have been compelled from the beginning to conduct the war against Mexico through the agency of two Gen'l's highest in rank

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63 Ibid., pp. 273, 276, 277. 64 Ibid., p. 288.
66 Polk, Diary, II, pp.333-394.
who have not only no sympathies with the Government, but are hostile to my administration. Both of them have assumed to control the Government. To this I will not submit & will as certainly remove Gen'l Scott from the chief command, as she[he] shall refuse or delay to obey the order borne to him by Mr. Trist. My doubt is whether I shall delay to remove him until I can hear further from him.67

From then on it was merely a matter of time until General Scott was to be removed from command of the army. The President maintained a constant confidential correspondence with General Pillow, upon whom the President relied for unbiased information from the various theatres of war. The President describes the unusual situation as follows:

This letter is not written in the official character assigned by the constitution of "Commander-in-Chief of the Army." It is unofficial and you will regard it, as from a personal friend.68

The President then continues to relate battle plans and general strategy to his confidant, concluding his remarks with the following instructions:

I request that you will write to me fully — Giving much information as you [can] in relation to the topography... characteristics of the population, difficulties to be encountered & any other information or suggestions you may think proper to be made.69

Polk's receipt of information delivered in confidential letters from the ubiquitous General Pillow did much further to undermine General Scott's position with the President.70 Polk was, however, reluctant to permit General Pillow to assume command of the armies if "any accident should happen to

67 Polk, Diary, III, pp.58-59.
68 Polk to General Pillow, Sept. 27, 1846. Polk Papers, Library of Congress.
69 Ibid., other correspondence between Polk and Pillow on the conduct of the war occurred on July 2, 1846 - Pillow appointed Brig. General July 7, October 27, 1846; April 14, 15, May 18, 23, 25, 1847; examples of the extended communications of the President with General Pillow. Polk Papers, Library of Congress.
70 This is the same ex-law partner of Polk, who was so influential in securing the President's nomination in Baltimore at the Democratic Convention
General Scott, or he should leave the army or be recalled." Therefore, Polk arranged that General Butler should be sent to General Scott's command so that he would be second in command.

The final break came when General Scott preferred court-martial charges against three officers on his staff, General Pillow, General Worth, and Colonel Duncan. Reports had appeared in papers in the United States greatly stressing the courageous roles played in the assault upon Mexico City by General Pillow and playing down General Scott's contribution. These articles signed "Leodies" were obviously written by someone on General Scott's staff. Scott charged the accused officers of betraying confidential military information. President Polk had attempted to caution Pillow by advising him to "keep quiet and be not too anxious to put down your prosecutors and to do justice to yourself, let your military achievements speak for themselves." Scott's charges were too much for the President, and he decided to remove Scott from command; this decision was facilitated by General Worth's preferring counter-charges against General Scott. Polk records in cabinet of 1844. Polk secured for him a General's Commission and used him as his personal confidant, first with General Taylor and then, after the fighting shifted, with General Scott, both assignments being the direct result of the President's intervention. There are many letters in the Polk Papers from General Pillow advising Polk of the ineptitude of the commanding officers.

Had General Butler not been incapacitated due to wounds, it seems probable that Polk would have replaced Scott as the commanding officer much earlier than he did. See correspondence of Polk to Butler, March 11, May 12, August 7, and August 30, 1847. Polk Papers, Library of Congress.

For an account of this episode from the viewpoint of General Worth, see Edgar S. Wallace, General William Jenkins Worth (Dallas: Southern Methodist Univ. Press, 1955), pp.172-194.

Rather than instituting court-martial proceedings against the distinguished officers, Polk authorized a Court of Inquiry consisting of Generals
meeting his determination to replace Scott with General Butler.

I repeated that the Cabinet had been unanimous in the opinion that General Scott should be superseded in the command, that the Atto. Gen'l at the last meeting had concurred with me that Gen'l Butler & not Gen'l Taylor should succeed him; that the other members of the Cabinet had inclined to the opinion that Gen'l Taylor should succeed him; that I had decided against their opinion and now repeated that decision, and directed that the command should be devolved on Gen'l Butler. I said to the Secretary of War that I would take the whole responsibility of this decision. He responded that of course the Cabinet would support me in whatever decision I made in the matter.76

It was not only with his chief commanding officers that Polk had difficulty. He was equally vigorous in his contempt for the professional soldier, who he felt had been made soft and lazy by garrison life. After directing the Secretary of War to take immediate steps to locate the reason for a delay in a certain ship sailing from New York, including the immediate arrest and court-martial of any negligent officer, the President observed:

...that the country had been so long at peace, and that many of the officers of the Navy and Army had, he apprehended, become so fond of their ease & personal comfort that it was necessary that they should be taught their duty by enforcing the most rigid discipline.77

Almost exactly a year later, the President reiterated those views:

I told him that many of the officers of the regular army had, I apprehended, been serving so long in peace that they had become gentlemen of entirely too much leisure for a period of war, and that some of them required to have a coal of fire put on their backs to make them move promptly.78

On another occasion Polk, upon learning that the United States had just

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Nathan Townsend, Caleb Cushing, and Lieut. Colonel W. G. Belknap. All charges except those against General Pillow were dropped and General Pillow was exonerated by the Court of Inquiry on all major counts. A finding which Scott's biographer, Charles W. Elliott, regards as a white-wash. For an account sympathetic to General Scott, see Charles W. Elliott, Winfield Scott, pp. 564-590.

78 Ibid., II, p. 117; once again Polk threatened court-martial, Ibid., p. 147.
achieved another victory in Mexico, stated:

The truth is our troops, regulars & volunteers, will obtain victories wherever they meet the enemy. This would do if they were without officers to command them higher in rank than Lieutenants. It is injustice, therefore, to award to the Generals all the credit.79

The problems of supply were constantly receiving the President’s personal attention. One month after the war began he spoke to both the Commissary General and the Quartermaster General warning them that he would hold them personally responsible for any failure to keep the army in the field properly supplied and equipped.80 This was merely the first of many contacts between Polk and his top two supply officers. In July of 1847 Polk heard through his usual confidant, General Pillow, of alleged abuses in the Quartermaster and Commissary branches of the army at Vera Cruz. Upon the suggestion of the Secretary of War the President summoned the two officers to his office. General Jesup, the Quartermaster General, had the courage to ask who the complainant was. Polk replied with great feeling:

I opened one of the letters & was about to read, premising doing so by stating that they were from officers in whom I had confidence, and that it was unnecessary to give their names. Gen’l Jesup seemed to be excited and spoke very petulantly, and required the names, and seemed to be averse to hearing the letters without the names. I promptly replied in an emphatic and spirited tone that I was the judge of that, and that it was his duty, if the President of the U. S. gave him information of alleged abuses by the subordinate officers of his department, to take prompt steps to correct them. I told him that the names of my informants were not necessary to enable him to do this; that if false information had been given to me and I ascertained the fact to be so, I would judge of the propriety of arresting and trying officers who gave the information.81

Polk at one time resorted to the expedient of sending the Quartermaster General to the front in his "staff character" in an effort to iron out

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and advise the President on problems of supply. Yet the supply problems continued. One problem that proved exceptionally vexing to the President over a long period of time was the purchase of mules, horses, and wagons for use in the field. Polk favored the use of mules without wagons and the seizure or purchase of such animals as was necessary in Mexico, where they could be obtained cheaper than in the United States.

I expressed the opinion strongly that this was great folly, as well as involving the country in a vast expense. I asked them why horses & mules in Mexico, which were to be had in great numbers & which were accustomed to the climate & which could be had at one-fourth the price which must be paid in the U. S., were not procured. To this he could give no satisfactory answer, except that he thought the horses & mules in the U. S. larger & better than those in Mexico. I was much vexed at the extravagance & stupidity of purchasing these animals in the U. S. and transporting them at vast expense to Mexico.... The truth is that the old army officers have become so in the habit of enjoying their ease, sitting in parlours and on carpeted floors, that most of them have no energy, and are content to jog along in a regular routine without knowing whether they are taking care of the public interest or not. I shall find it to be necessary to give more of my attention to these matters of detail than I have heretofore had it in my power to do.

The problem of coordination and control on the army in war time required the President to use almost all his energies seeing that the details of administration were carried out, as the following excerpts will indicate:

I am devoting all my time & energies to these matters, & am examining all the details of everything that is done, as far as it is possible for me to do so.

Several matters of public business were considered & disposed of, most of them relating to our military operations. I find it to be necessary to give my personal attention to the minute details of these operations, as far as the other indispensable duties of my office will permit me to do so.

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While Polk was not himself seeing to the details of military operations, he was urging and assisting his department heads to keep after their subordinates. One week after war was declared, Polk conferred with his Secretaries of Navy and War, stating:

I had however a long and full conversation with the Secretaries of War and of the Navy in relation to the prosecution of the war with Mexico, and urged upon both the necessity of giving their personal attention to all matters, even of detail, and not confiding in their subordinates to act without their supervision. I required of them, too, to keep me constantly advised of every important step that was taken.

Polk's lack of confidence in his officer corps and his feeling that most of them were motivated by political partisan feelings were the usual reasons given by him for his need to pay such close attention to detail. While it is to be doubted that the fact that most of the officer corps was composed of Whigs would cause these men deliberately to undermine the war effort, it was true that the army was greatly handicapped by many officers being too old to carry out their function properly. There was no retirement system and thus no way of relieving the aged officers of command, short of court-martial. However, it must be remembered that it was part of Polk's nature to control even the smallest details of his administration.

...I advised the purchase of two additional Steam Ships for the Gulf. I find that I am compelled to give some attention to these details or the movements of the army will be delayed and embarrassed. The Secretary of War is overwhelmed with his labours and responsibilities, and is compelled to rely for the execution of many details of his Department to [on] his subordinate officers some of whom I fear do not feel that they have any responsibility, and others seem to act as though they were indifferent about the success of our military operations. Several of these officers are politically opposed to the administration

86 Polk to Marcy, April 19, 1847, inquires why volunteers haven't been assigned to regiments and divisions, demands a report on action taken. Polk Papers, Library of Congress.

87 Polk, Diary, I, p. 407.
and there is reason to apprehend that they would be willing to see the Government embarrassed. With these apprehensions I shall for the future give more attention than I have done to their conduct. Gen'l Scott is of no aid to the Department, but his presence at Washington is constantly embarrassing to the Secretary of War. I will observe his course, and if necessary will order him to some other post.88

A year to the day after war had been declared, Polk made the same complaint of the necessity of supervising the subordinates closely, stating:

Indeed I find it indispensable to give my attention to these details. The Secretary of War is greatly oppressed with the duties of his office, and some of his subordinates, I fear, are indifferent and are fully satisfied if they go through the ordinary routine of their offices, and seem to think that they have earned their salaries & done their duties if they appear in their offices the usual number of hours each day. They do not conceive that any responsibility rests upon them. On this account I aid the Secretary of War in giving all the attention to details that my time will permit.89

In case of a conflict of will between the President and his Secretary of War, or between the President and the military, Polk did not hesitate to insist that his own view prevail. On one occasion the Secretary of War reported to the President a conflict between three surgeons serving with the army in Vera Cruz. Polk quickly settled the dispute by directing that one of the surgeons be ordered to serve elsewhere, and Polk records that "The Secretary of War did not seem to concur in this opinion, but I had no doubt on the subject & issued the order accordingly."90 A more serious conflict occurred, which found the President opposed not only by his Secretary of War but by almost his entire cabinet. The reason for this conflict was that Polk had been informed that General Scott had placed Col. Harney, a Democrat and friend of General Jackson, under arrest and Polk had requested the

88 Ibid., II, p.150-151.
89 Ibid., II, p. 24; repeated on the following day with the additional complaint that subordinates are almost all Federalists. Ibid., p. 26. 
90 Ibid., p. 181.
Secretary of War to direct an order reassigning Col. Harney to his command. Marcy, instead of writing the order, brought the matter to the attention of the entire cabinet at a cabinet meeting. The cabinet lined up with the Secretary of War in opposition to the President. Polk soon settled this conflict, stating:

I told the Cabinet that I had great respect for their opinions, but that in this case I was sure I was right, & would take the whole responsibility. I told the Secretary of War that if he was unwilling to write the letter which I had directed to be written I would do it myself. He said he would write the letter. I told him to state in it that it was written by my order.91

Another occasion which found the President in opposition to his cabinet occurred when the newly formed German Confederation requested the use of a high-ranking American naval officer to serve as commander of the German Navy. Polk replied to this unusual request as follows:

In the first place an officer of the U. S. Navy would be in an anomalous condition if he held also a commission as commander (Admiral was the title which it was stated he was to hold) in the German Navy. In the second place he would continue to receive his pay as an officer of the U. S. whilst he was in a foreign service & was performing no service for the U. S.92

When it was urged upon Polk that he could as Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy order an officer to perform any duty he pleased, Polk continued his reply:

To this I replied that he might give an order to perform any duty in the service of the U. S., but not in that of a Foreign country. I then stated that the extent to which I could consent to go would be to say that the Secretary of the Navy might give leave of absence for six months to any officer of the Navy if there were no services for such officer to perform at home; but that if such officer should take a command in the German service he must either resign or Congress must pass a law authorizing the President to permit him to perform such Foreign service. I stated that I was unwilling, without the previous authority of Congress, to give the order or permission proposed.93

Colonel Benton advised Polk that General Scott's order which had given command to brevet over lineal rank was opposed to the orders which President Jackson had issued in 1829. Polk, without hesitation, promptly replied that he would issue a countermanding order stating that all orders or opinions issued or expressed by General Scott or by others in conflict with President Jackson's order of 1829 were null and void. Polk also directed regiments to combat in Mexico over the opposition of regular army officers who were insisting that they be retained in the United States until further trained. After much opposition, the President overruled the army's practice of appointing only West Pointers to commissions.

I will now carry out my intention & appoint to 2nd Lieutencies [sic] such meritorious privates in the army as have distinguished themselves. This is not only just to the gallant privates who have distinguished themselves, but is sound public policy.

President Polk's contributions to the presidential role as Commander-in-Chief were numerous and significant, although not without partisan motivation. His distrust and dislike of all Whigs, whom he considered to be incompetent merely because they were Whigs, extended beyond the political arena into the military. His distrust of General Taylor increased with every victory which Taylor achieved in the field. Polk was quick to realize that the war was making a hero candidate out of General Taylor, who would be a formidable foe for the Democrats to defeat in 1848. Polk's partisan zeal often led him to act from mean and petty motives. For example, he refused to sign an order requiring the troops to fire a salute in honor of Taylor's victory at Buena Vista. The President's relations with General Scott were often characterized by the same partisan outlook. His attempt to have

Congress create a post of Lieutenant General so that Senator Benton could supersede General Scott as the commanding general represents the extreme folly toward which his political motives drove him. Fortunately for Polk and the country, the Senate by only one vote failed to support the President in this absurd plot.

Undoubtedly the President's distrust of his leading generals' politics was a factor which influenced him in his determination to direct the war activities from his desk in Washington hundreds of miles from the scene of battle. Because of the primitive nature of communications he was often weeks behind in his knowledge of field conditions. It would have been bad enough had the President insisted upon directing overall strategy but often he was so unwise as to attempt to direct even local matters of tactics. It would be an error, however, to place all the responsibility for this on Polk's distrust of his commanders. His insistence upon directing the minutest details of the military was, in part, just a further manifestation of his total approach to administration, i.e., his insistence upon being the directing force behind each and every move of his subordinates.

Nevertheless, when the meanness of some of his motives has been acknowledged and the doubtful wisdom of his attempts to command without adequate communications recognized, the precedent was nevertheless established that a President without previous military experience could control and dominate the military commanders.

He also asserted, and in final analysis demonstrated, that the President as Commander-in-Chief could direct the overall military strategy of a large-scale operation.

The Congressional power to declare war, which was designed to be a
substantial check upon the executive, was to prove to be no check at all to a President who was determined to use his authority as Commander-in-Chief to direct the movements of the Army and Navy in such a manner as to present Congress with no other alternative than to exercise this power.

Polk asserted the President's prerogative to know and decide even the minute details of military operations; establishing for all succeeding Presidents the right and responsibility of the President to oversee the details of military administration. He brought the Departments of War and Navy under his direct control, placing them in the same relationship to the President which the Department of State had had since Washington's administration. The fact that today no President could exercise the direct control of military administration, because of the scale and complexity of modern military organizations, merely increases the significance of Polk's achieving this control at a time when it was still physically possible and thereby effectively asserting the principle of Presidential responsibility.

Polk was able to prove that the Presidency had the capacity to conduct a war. As Polk had earlier indicated that he intended himself to be President; in a like manner he insisted that he would himself be Commander-in-Chief. The clearest expression of this determination occurred when Polk was confronted by the Adjutant General, who attempted to withhold from the President some desired information.

His presumption in withholding the information which I had requested from me, and in attempting to control my action, vexed me, & finally I spoke shortly to him. Among other things I remarked that as I was constituted by the Constitution commander in chief of the Army, I chose to order him to furnish the list of vacancies from the records of his office which I had desired. I repeated to him that he must regard what I said as a military order & that I would expect it to be promptly obeyed.97

97 Ibid., p. 31.
CHAPTER VI
POLK AS CHIEF OF LEGISLATION

As has been noted, the Constitution provides the President with a firm and broad base for his roles as "Chief Executive," "Chief of Foreign Affairs," and "Commander-in-Chief." It is much less precise, however, in defining the President's role as "Chief of Legislation." The Constitution empowers the President to call special sessions of Congress, recommend legislation, and withhold his approval of Congressional measures. As will be seen, Polk used, or threatened to use, all of these powers with the aim of dominating the Congress.

In actual practice Presidents have followed various courses in their relationship with Congress. There have been those who have followed what Professor Holcombe has called "the ideal constitutional relation."¹ Under this arrangement the President deals with Congressmen as individuals, attempting to secure their support on the basis of the merits of the issues and without consideration of party or partisan support. He makes no attempt to organize a united administrative faction or party within the legislature. Two Presidents, John Adams and his son John Quincy Adams, attempted to conduct the affairs of state on this basis as a matter of principle. Other Presidents have attempted to apply this ideal constitutional relation as a matter of necessity; e.g., Taylor, Hayes, Cleveland, Johnson, and Tyler.

All other Presidents, including Washington, depended on organized

partisan support for the success of their administrations. Some of these Presidents were able to dominate the partisan leaders in Congress while others were dominated by the Congressional leaders. Following Jefferson's successful domination of his Congressional supporters, the Presidency fell into a subservient position to "King Caucus" of the Congress until the Presidency of Andrew Jackson. Jackson was able to reassert the dominance of the President over the Congressional leaders by becoming the master of local and state politics. From that time on it was necessary for the President to cultivate public opinion if he were to completely insure the success of his administration. Jackson's reassertion of the position of the President in relation to Congress was instrumental in the creation of the Whig party, which, as its name implies, asserted the principle of Congressional domination. The Whigs, due to exceptional misfortune, failed for any considerable period of time to control the Presidency. The philosophy which they espoused did, however, become the dominant view of Presidential-Congressional relationship from the time of Andrew Jackson to that of Abraham Lincoln. Fortunately this period of Congressional leadership was interrupted by the four years of the Polk administration.

President Polk, as it shall be noted in the following chapter, did not succeed in making himself the leader of popular opinion nor was he able to control completely or win the support of local party leaders; yet, despite these difficulties he was a successful party President in his relations with Congress. Professor Holcombe states that "Polk was the most

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2While undoubtedly the slavery controversy contributed greatly to the dominance of Whig concepts of executive-legislative relationships, during the two decades from 1840 to 1860, yet the Polk Presidency illustrates that a strong and vigorous man in the Presidency could successfully resist the tendency.
successful" of those Presidents who tried party government without becoming masters of their party in the Congress.\footnote{Holcombe, op. cit., p. 250.} As early as March, 1846, Polk had warned the Congress that it had been in session for four months without acting on the administration's measures and "that the Democratic party were in a decided majority in both Houses of Congress... and that the Democratic party would be held responsible to the country for the delay...."\footnote{Polk, Diary, I, p. 295.} A few weeks later he again remarked,

that the Democratic party were in a majority in Congress and would be held responsible for whatever was done, and that they should never adjourn until they had acted definitely on all the measures, Foreign and Domestic, which I had brought before them in my annual message.\footnote{Ibid., p. 373.}

Although functioning as a party President,\footnote{The London Times, in commenting on the election of Davis as Speaker of the House of Representatives, observed, "Mr. Davis, it seems, is a thorough going Polk man." The Times concluded its report as follows: "On the whole, it may be said, that Mr. Polk has rode over all the counter currents in his own party, as well as the aggregate force of his opposition." Dec. 23, 1845, p. 6, col. 6.} Polk was determined not to become subservient to the party leaders in Congress and he was very zealous in protecting the independence and integrity of the Executive branch. For example, on an occasion when Senator Calhoun implied that he would support an administration measure if the President would give a pledge or some assurance that he would appoint "reliable" men to the positions which would be created, Polk was quick to sense what was being asked of him and replied that "I would do my duty... my friends... must have a 'generous confidence' that I would do so."\footnote{Polk, Diary, IV, p. 21.} Polk remarked on another occasion when he had been besieged by a Congressman demanding a certain appointment, "It is not the first time that members of Congress have forgotten that they were sent to Washington...
by their constituents to legislate, & not to usurp the functions of the Executive or to dictate to him in matters of appointment to office."

President Polk went to great pains in his fourth annual message to Congress, which was delivered after the election of 1848, to write a detailed defense of his administration. It is clear from the discussion in the cabinet over the message that this was to be his last word for posterity, and therefore the President devoted much time and care to its preparation, beginning the first draft months before the message was due. President Polk, in this message, became the first President to express clearly the view that the President rather than Congress was representative of the will of the people. It is true that Jackson had implied such a concept of the Presidency in his bank veto message, but it was more thoroughly based upon a constitutional argument of the equal and independent existence of each branch of the government under the separation of powers doctrine.

Although his fourth annual message treated all phases of his administration, it was in a section which defended the right of Presidential veto that Polk discussed the constitutional relations between the President and Congress. To the Whigs, who had just won the Presidential election of 1848, this view of Presidential independence and the view that the President was as much a representative of the people as was the Congress, must have seemed a strange doctrine indeed. The Whigs, steeped in the tradition of legislative predominance, could not conceive that the people could look elsewhere

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8Ibid., pp. 29-30.
than to Congress for an expression of their will. Yet already the Whig philosophy was losing strength to an increasingly popular and democratic view of the office of the President. "King Caucus" was dead. The people were determined to rule directly and the only person who was nationally elected was the President. The Whigs could win an election with a popular military general as their candidate, but that is not the same as saying that the people had given a mandate for a return to Congressional leadership. President Polk was expressing the will of the future; the Whigs were not.

Polk in his message three times alluded to the fact that he was directly responsible to the people:

The people, by the Constitution, have commanded the President, as much as they have commanded the legislative branch of the Government, to execute their will. If it be said that the Representatives in the popular branch of Congress are chosen directly by the people, it is answered, the people elect the President. If both Houses represent the States and the people, so does the President. The President represents in the executive department the whole people of the United States, as each member of the legislative department represents portions of them.

In the exercise of the power of the veto the President is responsible not only to an enlightened public opinion, but to the people of the whole Union, who elected him, as the representatives in the legislative branches who differ with him in opinion are responsible to the people of particular States or districts, who compose their respective constituencies.

He continued, much in the manner of a contemporary political scientist, to instruct Congress of the fact that Congress cannot claim to be representative...
of the popular will. He pointed out that the vote of a Senator from Delaware had just as much weight as the vote of a Senator from New York; that the Senators from sixteen of the least populated states with only fifty members in the House constituted a majority in the Senate.\textsuperscript{14} He then went on to add that it was quite conceivable that even the House of Representatives could pass a bill without representing the will of the nation:

It might happen that a quorum of the House of Representatives, consisting of a single member more than half of the whole number elected to that House, might pass a bill by a majority of a single vote, and in that case a fraction more than one-fourth of the people of the United States would be represented by those who voted for it.\textsuperscript{15}

To clinch his argument he reminded the Congress that in most states the members of the House were chosen by pluralities.\textsuperscript{16}

He concluded his discussion of the veto with a clear statement of the independence of each branch of the government:

The executive, legislative, and judicial each constitutes a separate coordinate department of the Government, and each is independent of the others. In the performance of their respective duties under the Constitution neither can in its legitimate action control the others. They each act upon their several responsibilities in their respective spheres... during the short period which remains in which it will be my duty to administer the executive department it will be my aim to maintain its independence and discharge its duties without infringing upon the powers or duties of either of the other departments of the Government.\textsuperscript{17}

It is interesting and significant that the Polk views of executive responsibility to the whole people so permeated his administration that Vice-President Dallas, in casting the deciding vote on the tariff bill, utilized it in defending his actions.

To my mind, ample proof has been furnished that a majority of the people, and of the States desire to change... the system... in

\textsuperscript{14}Ibid., p. 666. \textsuperscript{15}Ibid., pp. 666-667.
\textsuperscript{16}Ibid., p. 667. \textsuperscript{17}Ibid., p. 669.
assessing the duties on foreign imports.... In a case free from constitutional objection, I could not justifiably counteract, by a sort of official veto, the general will.

Dallas continues by speaking of his obligations to the "national constituency."  

The remainder of this chapter will be an examination of how President Polk did, in fact, conduct his relations with the Congress. In the first five sections will be discussed Polk's efforts to persuade Congress to enact his legislative program. To illustrate his role as sponsor of legislation, this section will concentrate on three separate legislative goals of the President: the Walker tariff of 1846, war measures, and Polk's attempt to resolve the question of territorial governments and thereby resolve the slavery issue which was dividing the country. A second section will examine Polk's relations with the Senate over the confirmation of appointments, while the third will deal with his relations with the Senate on treaty ratification, using the Oregon Treaty as a case study. A fourth section will describe President Polk's response to Congressional investigation of the executive branch of the government. A final section will describe in more general terms his techniques of persuasion and his reaction to the efforts of lobbyists to influence legislation.

Polk Fights for His Legislative Program

The President's legislative role in the nineteenth century was largely unresolved. Should the President merely propose legislative alternatives, while leaving the Congress unguided to choose between the various alternatives, or does the President recommend certain definite legislative

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programs to the Congress for its consideration, to accept or reject as it wishes? Or does the President not only recommend a definite program, but use every means at his disposal to insure the enactment of these proposals into the law of the land? The answer in the twentieth century seems to be assuredly the latter. But in Polk's day it was by no means as certain. His predecessor, President Tyler, had stopped the erosion of executive power by the use of his veto. Partly because of the manner of his becoming President and partly because of his view of Constitutional propriety, he had not attempted to go beyond the point of recommending and then resigning himself to either accepting or vetoing the legislative enactments as they were presented to him. President Polk, however, accepted the responsibility of not only recommending but of placing his entire energy and power behind his legislative proposals. He used every means at his disposal, including cajolery and threats to appeal to the people to have his measures enacted by the Congress. He kept up his relentless efforts on behalf of the administration's measures whether the Democratic party had control of both Houses of Congress or not.

The Walker Tariff

Of his domestic measures, none was of greater importance to the President than the passage of a low tariff act. It has been observed that because of the significance he attached to tariff legislation he considered the post of Secretary of the Treasury to be of even greater importance than that of Secretary of State. Polk had long been an advocate of low tariffs and as Chairman of the Finance Committee and later as Speaker of the House he had supported both Presidents Jackson and Van Buren in their attempts to lower the tariff. In his "Address to the People," which opened his campaign
In 1859 for the Governorship of Tennessee, he said that a result of a protective tariff:

was to take the property of one man and give it to another, without right or consideration. It was to depreciate the value of the productive industry of one section of the Union and transfer it to another — it was to make the rich richer and the poor poorer.\footnote{James K. Polk, "Address to the People of Tennessee" in pamphlet form, Polk Papers, Library of Congress.}

In his first annual message to Congress Polk devoted four pages to recommendations for a new tariff law, which certainly ended any doubts that might have existed regarding his views on tariff legislation. It was a well-reasoned proposal advocating a general lowering of tariff rates and the placing of the rates on an \textit{ad valorem} basis.\footnote{Richardson, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 403-406.} To the charge that Polk's views on the tariff were really the views of the Secretary of the Treasury, Robert J. Walker, Polk replied that he alone was responsible.\footnote{Polk, Diary, I, p.43; see also Claude G. Bowers, \textit{Making Democracy a Reality}, p. 89.}

The President's task in pushing through a general tariff revision was not as easy as it might seem, for although the Democratic Party enjoyed a majority of 66 over the Whigs in the House, in the Senate they only had a majority of 6;\footnote{Historical Statistics of the United States: 1789-1945 (Washington: Gov't. Print. Off., 1949), p.293 — 29th Congress: House - 145 Democrats, 77 Whigs, 6 others; Senate - 31 Democrats, 25 Whigs.} and it was generally known that some of the northern, especially the Pennsylvanian, Democrats were not too favorably disposed toward a tariff for revenue only. Therefore, Polk was quite interested in hearing that his Secretary of State, Buchanan, who was a leader of one faction of the Pennsylvania Democrats, "was opposed to the modification of..."
the tariff... and was using his secret influence to prevent a modification.\(^\text{23}\)

Although the consideration of the tariff measure was long delayed in both houses, due to the pressure of foreign policy questions,\(^\text{24}\) its passage in the House did not seem to be in doubt. The President, nevertheless, took the precaution of speaking to Senators Dickinson of New York and Chalmers of Mississippi and urged them to contact members of the House who might be doubtful supporters of the measure. Senator Dickinson assured the President that he would do what he could to see that the New York delegation stayed in line and supported the tariff bill, and Senator Chalmers said he would speak with Col. Tibbats of Kentucky, whose vote was in doubt. In a short time they returned with the good news that the measure had passed the House with a majority of nineteen votes.\(^\text{25}\) Polk received the news with much pleasure, recording in his diary:

> I was much gratified to hear the result, as this was one of the leading and vital measures of my administration. It was in truth vastly the most important domestic measure of my administration, and the vote of the popular branch of Congress, which had fully endorsed my opinions and recommendations on the subject of the tariff, could not be otherwise than highly gratifying.\(^\text{26}\)

With Polk's usual thoroughness he had observed from the published account of the Senate's proceedings that Senator Lewis, Chairman of the Finance Committee, planned to postpone action on the tariff bill until two

\(^\text{23}\)Polk, *Diary*, I, p. 281.

\(^\text{24}\)Tariff legislation was forced to wait for a settlement of the Oregon boundary dispute, which was closely associated with the repeal of the Corn Laws in England. See Charles M. Wiltse, *John C. Calhoun, Sectionalist, 1840-1850* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1951), pp. 247-272; esp. pp. 262-265. "Both Secretary of the Treasury Walker and President Polk deliberately had the Tariff Bill held in committee until the fate of the Corn Laws were known."

\(^\text{25}\)Polk, *Diary*, II, pp. 10-11.  
\(^\text{26}\)*Ibid.*, p. 11.
other minor matters had been acted on. The President summoned Senator Lewis and informed him of the necessity for immediate action on the tariff legislation, stating:

I then told him that I had great anxiety for the passage of the Constitutional Treasury Bill and the reduction of the Tariff, which I had recommended in my annual message. I told him that I considered them as administration measures and that I intended to urge them upon Congress as such, and that I considered the public good, as well as my own power and the glory of my administration, depended in a great degree upon my success in carrying them through Congress.27

With this urging on the part of the President, the Senate soon brought the tariff measure before them for consideration. While the subject was before the Senate, the President was busily engaged in seeing Senators about whose vote he was doubtful. He kept in constant touch with Senator Lewis, who led the Senate fight for the measure. He recorded in his diary, "I considered the passage of the bill before the Senate the most important domestic measure of my administration, and therefore, I take so great an interest in it."28 The Washington Union engaged in a major campaign in support of the measure.29

After following the progress of the bill closely, Polk became convinced that its passage depended upon the vote of Senator Haywood of North Carolina. Polk was aware that although Haywood was a Democrat and his personal friend, he was, nevertheless, personally opposed to a tariff reduction and was a man of strong character. Polk requested Col. Benton, a close

27 Ibid., I, pp. 368-369.
28 Ibid., II, p. 28; for contacts with individual Senators see ibid., pp. 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30.
29 Washington Union, April 14, 1846 et seq., esp. April 25, May 6, May 28, June 15.
friend of Senator Haywood, to persuade Haywood to support the tariff measure. Polk stressed the importance of Haywood's vote, stating, "Upon Mr. Haywood's vote, I am satisfied, depends the fate of the tariff-bill or rather the Bill to reduce the tariff, and therefore the great solicitude I feel on the subject." When the President was informed that it seemed certain that Senator Haywood would vote against the measure, the President requested him to call. After a long afternoon conversation during which he tried to persuade Haywood to support the tariff measure, Polk, being still doubtful of his vote, asked him to return again in the evening. Polk then appealed to his party loyalty, saying,

I told him that if he voted against it, he would be the only Democratic member of either House from the South who would do so, that the 3 Democratic members from his own State had voted for it. I told him that if he voted against it he would strike a severe blow upon my administration, inflict great injury on the country, and as a friend I must say to him that I thought he would ruin himself. I begged him for his own sake, for the sake of the country, and for the success of my administration to consider well before he voted against it.

Two days later, Senator Haywood resigned his seat in the Senate. Polk was greatly concerned over the effect that this act would have on the passage of the bill. He did not, however, give any credence to rumors that Senator Haywood had been bought off by the powerful lobbyists. Polk, with what was for him an unusual degree of charitableness, recorded:

I give not the slightest heed to the painful insinuations which I learn this evening are made by illiberal persons as to the motives & causes which have induced his course. I differ with him in opinion and think he has erred in resigning, but that he has done so from good motives and from the causes stated above I have as little doubt.

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30 Polk, Diary, II, pp.32-33. 31 Ibid., p. 23.
32 Ibid., pp. 44-45. 33 Washington Union, July 25, 1846.
34 Polk, Diary, II, pp.48-49. Polk did not, however, prevent the Washington Union from printing an editorial attacking Haywood's motives. Polk
Polk had quite genuine cause for concern, as the fate of the bill now rested in the hands of Senator Jarnagin of Tennessee, who not only was a Whig and an advocate of protective tariff but was also a bitter political and personal enemy of Polk in the State of Tennessee. There was still reason for hope, however, for the legislature of Tennessee had instructed Senator Jarnagin to vote for the tariff measure. Polk considered it a point of honor that a Senator must vote as instructed by his state legislature, but considered Jarnagin to be so unreliable that he might violate his instructions. Senator Jarnagin, after frightening the Democrats by not voting on various amendments and thereby causing a tie and forcing the President of the Senate, Mr. Dallas, to rescue the bill, finally followed his instructions and voted for the measure. Thus the tariff bill passed the Senate by a vote of 28 to 27. On the following day the House approved the amendments which had been added by the Senate and the Walker Tariff had passed the Congress.

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did, in 1849, express regret to Haywood that this editorial had been printed. See Washington Union, July 25, 1846. Letter of Polk to Haywood, January 17, 1849; Haywood to Polk, December 18, 1848. Polk Papers, Library of Congress.

35 Polk, Diary, II, pp. 51-52. Upon Jarnagin’s voting for the bill, Polk changes his opinion of him and writes to Governor Brown of Tennessee a year later praising Jarnagin and noting that not many men would have been so honourable. Polk to Brown, Aug. 23, 1847. Polk Papers, Library of Congress.

36 Vice-President Dallas did not hesitate to break the tie in favor of the administration measure, in spite of the fact that he was from Pennsylvania, which was strongly opposed to a revenue-only tariff. See Charles M. Wiltse, op. cit., pp. 270-272.


38 William R. Riker in his text Democracy in the United States (New York: Macmillan Co., 1955), makes an interesting observation on the practice of naming acts after their chief legislative sponsor. He emphasizes that it has been quite common to name treaties after members of the administration, but quite rare for domestic legislation to be so named, citing only two examples of such evidence of executive control and responsibility, the Walker Tariff and the Marshall Plan Act, pp. 166-169.
War Measures

Congress, in the first flush of excitement following receipt of the President's message asking Congress to recognize the existence of a state of war between Mexico and the United States, enacted four military laws within ten days. The first of these measures provided for the use of the state militia in what surely must have been understood to have been a foreign war. This was done in spite of the Constitutional provision which states, "The Congress shall have Power... to provide for calling forth the Militia to execute the Laws of the Union, suppress Insurrections and repel Invasions." Quincy Wright has characterized this act as unconstitutional and it is certainly contrary to the generally accepted view that the service of the militia is of a domestic character.

Polk did not always find Congress so cooperative. As has been previously noted, the President ran into considerable opposition when he decided to ask for an increase of ten regiments in the regular army, rather than to continue to rely upon volunteers. Early in January 1847 Polk remarked that his ten regiment bill was about to be defeated by the vote of dissident

39Richardson, op. cit., pp. 427-445. For a discussion of the power to declare war, see supra, Chapter V, pp. 234-335.
40Statutes at Large 9, 11, 12, 13.
41U.S. Constitution, Article I, sec. 8, clause 15.
Democrats. He stated in his diary:

The causes of their disaffection are petty griefs at not having their wishes gratified in appointments to office for themselves, or not getting petty offices for their constituents and friends.... I consider their course at the present session more hostile to my administration and calculated to do more harm than if they were open political opponents.44

The President continued to record the desertions of certain members of the Democratic party in his diary. He expressed his bitter disappointment at the lack of party loyalty. Of one such Democrat he said:

He therefore showed his patriotism by voting against his country, and the furnishing the means to enable the Government to fight its battles against a foreign enemy. It is sickening to the heart of the patriot to witness as I have done during my term, the numerous instances which have occurred in which members of Congress elected as Democrats have voted against the measures of the Government.... Many of them are Governed by no fixed principles, but are sordid & selfish, if not worse, in all they do. Fortunately the combination in the House to-day failed by one vote to effect the defeat of this indispensable war measure of the Government.45

President Polk was once more sorely troubled when after the ten regiment bill had passed both houses, the Senate rejected the report of the Conference Committee. Polk placed the entire blame upon Senator Calhoun, who had with his supporters united with the entire Whig membership of the Senate to defeat the Conference Report. Polk expressed a view of Calhoun from which he never retreated during the remainder of his life.

I now regard Mr. Calhoun to be in opposition to my administration... I now consider him the most mischievous man in the Senate to my administration. The people must be made to understand this state of things. With a nominal majority in each House, I am in truth in a minority in both.46

The ten regiment bill was saved when the Senate voted to reconsider and the subject was again referred to a conference committee. This time both houses

46 Ibid., pp. 371-372.
accepted the conference report and passed the bill.

During the 50th Congress, with the House of Representatives now under the control of the Whig party, the President came in for some severe reprimands. Abraham Lincoln in his maiden address before Congress delivered on the 22nd of December, 1847, challenged the President to indicate the exact "spot" on which the war had begun, and for proof of ownership of that spot. On January 3rd the House, disregarding their vote of 174 to 14 a year earlier, which had authorized the war, passed a formal declaration by a vote of 85 to 81, that the war had been "unnecessarily and unconstitutionally begun by the President of the United States."*

**Territorial Government and Slavery**

The President's policy of territorial expansion brought along with it the problem of governing the added territory. This problem became inseparably entwined with the issue of slavery. Polk has often been accused of favoring the acquisition of territory for the sole purpose of acquiring a renewed basis for slavery. In this view he is generally cast as either the cohort or dupe of his Secretary of the Treasury, Robert J. Walker. That both were expansionists, even imperialists, cannot be denied, but to claim that they were advocates of a slavocracy is to ignore most of the salient facts. It is a fact that Polk was a slave holder and a plantation owner in Mississippi and that his sympathies were with the South, yet he was first and fore-

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48 *Cong. Globe*, 50 Cong., 1 Sess., p. 64.

49 Ibid., 29 Cong., 1 Sess., p. 795.

50 Ibid., 50 Cong., 1 sess., p. 95.
most a Union man. It is to his credit that he saw the danger to the Union of the approaching division over slavery and his whole policy was to find and enact a compromise which would avoid the establishment of geographical parties, which he felt would destroy the Union. It is even more difficult to understand how Robert J. Walker can be accused of being a party to the slavery conspiracy. He was an advocate of expansion, even opposing the President in that he favored acquiring all of Mexico. He was also a Mississippi politician, but it must not be forgotten that as a Mississippi politician he was constantly in opposition to that other Mississippian, Jefferson Davis, and that when the final decision had to be made, Walker chose the Union and served the Lincoln administration in Europe, where he was instrumental in preventing the European nations from granting credit to the Confederacy. In the examination of Polk's attempt to have Congress provide for territorial governments, Polk's strong attachment to the Union will be clearly demonstrated.

In August 1846 there was introduced by Representative Wilmot of Pennsylvania an amendment to an appropriation bill which would prohibit slavery in any territory to be acquired from Mexico. The Senate adjourned without acting upon the measure. Shortly after Congress reconvened in December, the President summoned Wilmot for a conversation on his proviso. Polk informed him that:

...[he] did not desire to extend slavery, that... [he] would be satisfied to acquire by treaty from Mexico the Provinces of New Mexico & the Californias, and that in these Provinces slavery could probably never exist... 51

51 Polk, Diary, II, p. 289.
In addition the President pointed out that the question of slavery was a domestic one and ought not to enter into our relations with foreign nations. For the time being, Wilmot seemed to be satisfied that it would be inappropriate to introduce his proviso. However, shortly after the first of the year, Congress was again considering legislation which encompassed the Wilmot proviso. At that time Polk clearly saw the danger of the slavery question to the very existence of the nation, remarking:

The movement... will be attended with terrible consequences to the country, and cannot fail to destroy the Democratic party, if it does not ultimately threaten the Union itself.\textsuperscript{52}

The President persuaded his Attorney General, Mr. Clifford, who was from Maine, to see if his friends from the North in Congress could be persuaded to modify their position. Polk concluded by recording in his diary: "I deplore the state of things; I will do all I can to correct it; I will do my duty and leave the rest to God and my country."\textsuperscript{55}

Although discussion of slavery continued in Congress throughout the Mexican War, Polk was not called upon to take a definite stand until the problem was presented in the form of providing territorial governments for the newly added territories. During the Spring and early Summer the Congress was considering a bill introduced in January, 1848 by Senator Douglas for a territorial government of Oregon. In the President's eyes the need for a compromise and settlement had immeasurably increased as already the Barnburners of New York had broken with the regular Democratic party and had held their own convention in Utica. The President therefore decided to support the Missouri compromise, recording in his diary:

\textsuperscript{52}Ibid., p. 305. \textsuperscript{55}Ibid., p. 306.
If the question can be thus settled harmony will be restored to the Union and the danger of forming geographical parties will be avoided. For these reasons I am using my influence with members of Congress to have it effected.54

By the end of July the Congress had still failed to provide for government in the Territories of Oregon, California, and New Mexico. A bill providing for a government had passed the Senate, after what Polk stated was an unprecedented all-night session, only to be defeated in the House by 15 votes.55 On this occasion Polk wrote:

The result of leaving the slavery question an open one, to be agitated by ambitious political aspirants & gamblers and their friends, [will be] to produce an organization of parties upon geographical lines, which must prove dangerous to the harmony if not the existence of the Union itself.56

By August the subject of a territorial government for Oregon was separated from that of California and New Mexico and the President thought that its chances of passage were greatly improved. Having accepted the Missouri Compromise line as a basis for settlement, the President felt that he ought to sign the Oregon bill even though it contained a provision prohibiting slavery, but felt that he must indicate in a message that he did so only because all of Oregon lay above the Missouri Compromise line. In taking this position the President was confronted with the opposition of many southern Senators, the most notable of whom was Senator Calhoun. But the President remained firm, stating once more his concern for the welfare of the nation.

I expressed the opinion, in which the Cabinet all concurred, that if the Oregon Territorial Bill with the slavery restriction in it passed

54 Ibid., III, pp. 502-503.
55 Senator Calhoun in his last attempt at compromise had played a leading role in getting this version through the Senate. See Charles M. Wiltse, op. cit., pp. 349-353.
56 Polk, Diary, IV, pp. 35-34.
and was presented to me for my approval and signature, I ought not to withhold my signature, and that I could not do so without arraying the country into geographical parties on the slavery question and greatly increasing the excitement, already great, which existed in and out of Congress upon that question.57

As debate on the bill continued and the Congress had set a time for adjournment, it became doubtful if the Oregon bill as well as other important measures, including an army appropriation bill, would get through the Congress. The President informed several Senators that if the Congress adjourned without acting that he would "feel it my duty forthwith to issue my Proclamation convening an extra Session of Congress to meet on to-morrow."58

At about 10:45 p.m. the log jam was broken and the Oregon Bill, along with the other measures, was given to the President, who, as was the custom in those days, was waiting in the Vice-President's room.59 The President signed the measures, including the Oregon Bill, which contained the slavery restriction. Polk wrote to the Democratic Presidential nominee, Lewis Cass, his views on the Session of Congress which had just ended, stating that he:

"deeply regretted that the delicate and agitating question concerning slavery, could not have been settled by Congress, upon principles of conciliation and compromise, and territorial governments have been established also over New Mexico and California. In view of the excitement which existed threatening to array the country into geographical parties which could not fail to destroy the harmony and might prove dangerous to the existence of the Union [a settlement of this vexing question is the most urgent one before the country].60

57 Ibid., p. 67. 58 Ibid., p. 76.

59 Until the Wilson administration it was believed necessary that the President must sign all bills prior to Congressional adjournment, if they were to become law. So for that reason the President on the last day of Congress waited to receive the bills in the Capitol. The President was human enough to enjoy the excitement of the closing hours of Congress. Letter of Polk to Lewis Cass, August 24, 1848. Polk Papers, Library of Congress.

60 Letter of Polk to Lewis Cass, August 24, 1848. Polk Papers, Library of Congress.
On the last day of September the cabinet assembled, it being the first cabinet meeting since the 14th of August at which all members were present. The President immediately launched a discussion of the problem of territorial governments for New Mexico and California. He was especially disturbed by a public letter which Senator Benton had sent to the people of California and which was to be delivered by his son-in-law, Col. Fremont. This letter appeared to be an invitation to the residents of California to form their own commonwealth with Col. Fremont as their Governor. Polk was alarmed. Was he to lose California now after all this difficulty? Polk was determined that it was necessary to address a letter to the people of California counteracting the Benton letter. The President was in doubt concerning the contents of such a letter. By what right did the President govern over the territory now? Did the military government established during the war still exist, legally, now that the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo had been signed? Mr. Polk's Attorney General was no help, stating that the sovereignty of the territory rested in the people, and that in the absence of Congressional action they could govern themselves as they chose. After five hours of debate in the cabinet the President outlined the substance of the message to be sent. 61

That the inhabitants should be informed that California was now a part of the U. S., that the constitution of the U. S. extended over them & was in force, that Congress had failed to establish a Territorial Government over them, that the President would strongly recommend the establishment of such a Government at the next Session, and that there was every reason to believe that it would be done, and that in the meantime they were advised to consent to the existing Government de facto, so far at least as the rights of person & property were concerned.... I proposed further that he should inform them that they had no right, under the Constitution, to meet in Convention and abrogate the present

61 Polk, Diary, IV, pp. 135-145.
Government de facto and form a new one, that if this was done it would not be by virtue of any authority derived from the constitution, and could only be justified by the extreme necessity of their condition.62

After the Presidential election in November, which assured that the control of the Executive would next March pass into the hands of the Whigs, Polk became very anxious that the problems of slavery and territorial government be settled by the next session of Congress before he left office. Therefore, in his fourth annual message to Congress delivered on December 5, 1848, the President delivered an impassioned plea for tolerance and compromise to settle this disturbing question:

With the opening prospects of increased prosperity and national greatness which the acquisition of these rich and extensive territorial possessions affords, how irrational it would be to forego or to reject these advantages by the agitation of a domestic question which is coeval with the existence of our government itself, and to endanger, by internal strifes, geographical divisions, and heated contests for political power, or for any other cause, the harmony of the glorious Union of our confederated States — that Union which binds us together as one people, and which for sixty years has been our shield and protection against every danger. In the eyes of the world and of posterity how trivial and insignificant will be all our internal divisions and struggles compared with the preservation of this Union of the States in all its vigor and with all its countless blessings! No patriot would foment and excite geographical and sectional divisions. No lover of his country would deliberately calculate the value of the Union. Future generations would look in amazement upon the folly of such a course.... Ours is the great example of a prosperous and free self-governed republic, commanding the admiration and the imitation of all the lovers of freedom throughout the world. How solemn, therefore, is the duty, how impressive the call upon us and upon all parts of our country, to cultivate a patriotic spirit of harmony, of good-fellowship, of compromise and mutual concession, in the administration of the incomparable system of government formed by our fathers in the midst of almost insuperable difficulties, and transmitted to us with the injunction that we should enjoy its blessings and hand it down unimpaired to those who may come after us.

In view of the high and responsible duties which we owe to ourselves and to mankind, I trust you may be able at your present session to approach the adjustment of the only domestic question which seriously threatens, or probably can ever threaten, to disturb the harmony and successful operations of our system.65

The President followed this plea for reason by outlining three modes of settlement which would be acceptable to him. These were (1) pass no legislation on the slavery question, leaving the problem to be settled by the territories when they applied for admission as states, (2) extend the Missouri Compromise line to the Pacific, or (3) provide for the settlement of the issue by a judicial tribunal. He also advised the Congress that if none of these modes was adopted then Congress should find a solution in some other manner. He concluded his remarks on the new territories by pointing out that evidence of an abundance of gold and silver had been found in these territories.64

Not being content to leave the matter in the hands of Congress, the President continued to seek a means of settling this vexing question. A week after the President had delivered his message to Congress he addressed his cabinet on the seriousness of the situation. He remarked that he was afraid that if the situation were not settled before his term expired that when the Whigs took office they would allow California to separate from the nation. He continued:

I then stated that I thought [it] indispensable that we should agree upon a plan of settlement (for Congress seemed to have no plan) and exercise what influence we might possess to carry it through at the present Session. All present agreed that this would be proper and, indeed, our duty. It is a question rising above ordinary party considerations. We have a country as well as a party to obey.65

Having come to the conclusion that none of the proposals previously considered by Congress could be adopted, the President recommended that all throw their support behind Senator Douglas's bill to admit California into the Union as a State. This would have the advantage of permitting the residents

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64 Ibid., pp. 642-645. 65 Polk, Diary, IV, p. 232.
of California to decide the slavery issue for themselves. As further evidence of Polk's not being a part of the slavocracy, is his support of the admission of California directly as a State, for it is certain that he was aware that the California State Constitution would never be pro-slavery.

In response to Calhoun's plans to organize the congressmen from slave-holding states regardless of party affiliation, Polk's position toward the extremists of his party became unmistakably clear. Polk's first advice was to a congressman who was considering attending a meeting of all southern congressmen.

He asked me what I would advise him to do. This it was natural he should do as he represents the District in Tennessee in which I reside, and is a citizen of the same village.... I told him that as President of the U. S. it would be my duty to allay any sectional excitement which might arise, and to do all in my power to prevent any violent proceedings which might endanger the harmony of the Union....

The agitation of the slavery question is mischievous & wicked and proceeds from no patriotic motive by its authors.... And this they seem willing to do even at the hazard of disturbing the harmony if not dissolving the Union itself.66

On the following day the President recorded in his diary a statement from which it might be implied that he felt the danger to the Union was near at hand, and if the situation took that turn he would act to preserve the Union.

My opinions as [to] the wickedness of agitating the subject in Congress are well settled, & events may occur which will make it my duty to incur high and vast responsibilities. I will meet them, but am resolved to give no favour to violent or disunion movements, but on the contrary to do everything, consistently with my sense of constitutional duty, to preserve the Union & its harmony.67

Polk continued to express his opposition to the proposed plan to have the southern congressmen make an "Address of Southern Congressmen to

66 ibid., pp. 250-251. 67 ibid., p. 255.
On the fourteenth of January he told a delegation of southern Congressional leaders, "...to attend the meeting to-morrow night & endeavor to prevent anything from being done; but not themselves sign any address." During the day of the meeting, Polk continued to give the same advice to the large number of congressmen who called.

The meeting voted to send back to committee Senator Calhoun's address to the people by the very narrow vote of 41 to 40. On the following day Calhoun presented himself to the President. Polk recorded, "I anticipated his business from the moment he entered my office, & I was not mistaken." He was there to argue the slavery question. Polk met his arguments by stressing his fondness for the Union and the desirability of a compromise to settle the issue. Specifically, the President urged upon him the necessity of supporting Douglas's plan for admitting California to the Union as a State. Calhoun characterized this plan as a betrayal of the South. Polk's impression of Calhoun was now at a new low.

I became perfectly satisfied that he did not desire that Congress should settle the question at the present Session, and that he desired to influence the South upon the subject, whether from personal or patriotic views it is not difficult to determine. I was firm and decided in my conversation with him, intending to let him understand distinctly that I gave no countenance to any movement which tended to violence or the disunion of the States.

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68 Ibid., pp. 279-282. 69 Ibid., pp. 282-284

70 Washington Union, January 23, 1849. This issue carried a very complete report of the entire series of meetings of southern congressmen. The meetings were as follows: first assembly of southern congressmen, Dec. 25, 1848 — committee of 15 appointed; committee met on Dec. 30, 1848, and January 10 and 13, 1849. On the 13th the committee by a vote of 8 to 7 came out in favor of an address. Address read to entire assembly on January 15; recommitted to committee by a vote of 41-40. New address was accepted on January 20, after a motion not to deliver an address was rejected 59-18. For a detailed account of Calhoun's role in this affair, see Charles M. Wiltse, op. cit., pp. 374-392.

71 Polk, Diary, IV, p. 288.
The President continued to urge the members of Congress to "exert their energies in Congress, [rather] than to agitate the slavery question in caucus out of Congress." When it was suggested to the President that he might throw the entire slavery question upon the shoulders of the incoming President, Mr. Taylor, Polk replied that there was "...a country to save as well as a party to obey," and that it was "...the solemn duty of the present Congress to settle the question." The President considered addressing a special message to Congress to urge their action, but decided instead to publish in the Union the disturbing reports from California describing a state of anarchy. On the 20th of January, Polk addressed himself to his cabinet on the slavery issue, stating:

I expressed my disapprobation of any further proceedings of the southern members of Congress on the slave question in caucus. I thought they had much better direct their energies in Congress instead of in caucus.... I stated that a proposition was now made by a Northern Senator (Mr. Douglas) to admit California as a state... and that no Southern man ought to object to it. I thought it was wholly unjustifiable for Southern members of Congress, when a fair prospect was represented of settling the whole question, to withhold their co-operation.... I added that I feared there were a few Southern men who had become so excited that they were indifferent to the preservation of the Union. I stated that I put my face alike against southern agitators and Northern fanatics, & should do everything in my power to allay excitement by adjusting the question of slavery & preserving the Union... it was agreed that each member of the Cabinet would be active in seeing members of Congress & urging them to support the Bill to admit California at once as a State. Each member of the Cabinet agreed to do this. At my suggestion each member of the Cabinet agreed to visit and converse with the members of the Congress from particular states, and was to report at the next meeting of the Cabinet.

Polk continued his efforts to line up support for the Douglas bill, including the support of Whig congressmen, stating "I regarded the subject
above mere party considerations, and wished it settled, I cared not by whose votes.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 308-309.} But in spite of his urgings Congress failed to act. On the 3rd of March the President went as usual to the Capitol still hopeful that Congress might enact a statehood bill for California. About 4 a.m. on the 4th of March the President returned to his hotel, where he had taken up residence in anticipation of Taylor's taking over the White House. Without undressing, the President waited there until 6 a.m. at which time the final bills of Congress were presented to him for his signature. There was not among them a bill to admit California as a State.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 249-266, passim; throughout these pages is an account of Polk's attempt to find a solution to the slavery question.}

In spite of his inability to prod Congress to act on the admission of California as a State, he did succeed in presenting the southern congressmen with a stern reminder of their duty and responsibility to the Union. Had he failed in this duty, or had he encouraged Calhoun and his supporters, it is quite likely that the secession which was to come eleven years later would have been upon the nation then. If that had happened, it is more than likely that the North would have permitted the South to leave the nation and the Union might have been permanently destroyed.

\textbf{Senatorial Confirmation of Appointments}

The general discussion of President Polk's use of the appointing power will be considered in the next chapter. As Polk inherited and followed the Jacksonian tradition toward patronage, it seems more appropriate to consider the appointing power in connection with an evaluation of the President as a political leader. A consideration at this time, however, of
Senatorial confirmation of appointments during the Polk administration will be helpful in an understanding of his relations with the Congress and the degree to which he expected party support of his appointments. Polk exhibits an attitude, unusual for the times although evidenced earlier by Andrew Jackson, of expecting Whig opposition as normal, but regarding any Democratic defection as tantamount to treason.

During the first session of Congress, Senator Cass, a strong Democrat, advised the President that he was considering voting against a Presidential nominee. The President, after assuring Cass of the qualifications of the man in question, said:

...that the rejection of my prominent nominations by the Senate at the opening of my administration was calculated to weaken my administration before the country, and destroy my power to carry out any of my recommendations of measures before Congress. I told [him] the Senate of course had a right to reject any of my nominations, and I would not complain; but if they were good men & qualified, and were rejected by a few democrats uniting with the whole Whig party, he could well see the embarrassment to all the measures of my administration which it would produce.77

Mr. Polk's reaction to the rejection by the Senate of the President's appointment of Henry Horn as collector of the Port of Philadelphia provides an excellent example of the President's tenacity. As has been noted, the Democratic Party in the State of Pennsylvania was divided into two factions. Secretary of State Buchanan was the leader of one and Vice-President Dallas the leader of the other. The President's nominee Mr. Horn came to him well recommended. He had been a member of Congress at the same time as the President and had the unqualified support of General Jackson. But, in spite of these recommendations Polk delayed nominating him out of deference to the opposition of Secretary of State Buchanan. Eventually, Buchanan withdrew

77Ibid., I, p. 207.
his objection and the President sent Horn's appointment to the Senate. 78

His nomination was immediately opposed by Senator Cameron of Pennsylvania. Senator Cameron, seizing an opportunity which presented itself when a number of Democratic Senators were absent attending a funeral of a son of one of the members, moved to take up the nomination. Senators Calhoun, Cameron, and Wescott voted with the solid Whig membership to defeat the nomination. Polk was bitter and remarked in his diary:

Cameron of Penn. was elected by the Whigs to the Senate, is a managing, tricky man in whom no reliance is to be placed. He professes to be a Democrat, but he has his own personal and sinister purposes to effect, & I consider him little better than a Whig. Wescott, though elected as a Democrat, I consider a Whig. Of Mr. Calhoun I forbear to express an opinion, further than to say that his ambition is destroying him. 79

The President, after seeing Senators who had been absent when the vote was taken and after securing numerous promises of support, decided to renominate Mr. Horn. Prior to his doing so, Senator Cameron, having heard of his intention to renominate Mr. Horn, called on the President to protest the renomination. He promised the President that he would vote for Mr. Horn for any other post. To this acknowledgment the President replied:

...that if he would vote for him for any other office, it was conclusive evidence that there was no public ground upon which as a Senator he had voted against him, and proved that he ought not to have been rejected. I told Mr. Cameron that himself & two other Senators elected as Democrats (Wescott & Calhoun) but neither of whom had by their course given any evidence of their Democracy lately, had left the balance of the Democratic party, joined the United Whig party, and taking advantage of a thin Senate when six or eight Democratic Senators were absent had voted against Mr. Horn and rejected him. He said he was a Democrat & a supporter of my administration. I replied that this vote did not look much like it. Mr. C. left me apparently dissatisfied with the results of this interview. 80

But once again the President was to be disappointed when the Senate
for the second time rejected the appointment of Mr. Horn. The President noted in some detail why each Democrat who voted against the nomination did so. He stated in his diary:

The selfishness of some members of Congress who make their public duties bend to their personal interests, proves at least that they are not better or purer than the mass of other men.... The sooner such party men go into the ranks of the Whig party the better.81

Polk remained determined, however, that no one who opposed the appointment would receive any benefit from his opposition. To that end he nominated Col. James Page to the post. This nomination brought from Buchanan the comment that the President could not have appointed but one man in the State of Pennsylvania more opposed to him; he continued by stating to the President that he should have consulted the Pennsylvania Congressional delegation. To this advice the President replied:

...that this was a peculiar case, and that my consideration and independence as President of the U. S. required that I should show to Mr. Cameron and other... that by their rejection neither they nor their friends should be profited by it.82

On another occasion the President found himself placed in an embarrassing position by the withdrawal of a nomination. The President had nominated a Mr. Tate of Mississippi to be consul at Buenos Aires. Secretary of the Treasury Walker, also of Mississippi, approached the President with a letter signed by the two Senators from Mississippi which advised him to withdraw the nomination. The reasoning given in the letter and by Mr. Walker was that Tate's nomination was being opposed and was subject to charges to which only Mr. Tate could reply. Polk therefore agreed to the request and withdrew the nomination. The following day the President was informed that the Senate, in executive session, had considered a resolution which proposed

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81 Ibid., pp.486-487. 82 Ibid., p. 488.
to call Mr. Walker to testify before the Senate regarding the charges against Mr. Tate. Polk had not seen the Executive Journal of the Senate, but quickly appreciated that it placed him in the position of appearing to shield his Secretary of the Treasury from questioning. The President's first action was to send for Mr. Dickins, Secretary of the Senate. Polk explained that his failure to see a copy of the Executive Journal of the Senate, which according to the Senate rules should be furnished the President, had greatly embarrassed him. When the Secretary of the Senate appeared to be indifferent and failed to assure the President that he would in the future receive his copy, Polk became annoyed.

So great was his apparent indifference that I felt indignant, and became a little excited. I then told him in an earnest manner that I had no authority over him, and pretended to exercise none; but that if I was entitled to a copy of the Executive Journal of the Senate, I demanded that it should be furnished to me, and that if he did not furnish it I would communicate that fact to the Senate and request that he should be required to do his duty.85

After a conversation with Mr. Walker, who, although professing all innocence of the charges to be made in the Senate, offered to resign his cabinet post if the President felt his presence there embarrassed the administration, Polk decided to renominate Mr. Tate. Mr. Tate unexpectedly returned to Washington and when he did so the charges in the Senate against him were withdrawn and his nomination was approved by the Senate. Previous to this action, Mr. Walker had replied in writing to the Senate's charges and in Polk's eyes had vindicated himself.84

Treaty Ratification - Oregon

In Polk's first annual message to Congress, delivered on the 2nd of

84, ibid., pp. 186-182; 239-240; 329; a full account of the Tate nomination.
December 1845, he devoted considerable space to the question of the Oregon boundary. After reviewing the history of the negotiations that had taken place in 1818, 1824, 1826, 1844, and his own offer to compromise on the basis of the 49th parallel, he proceeded to advise the Congress that they should act to terminate the Convention of Joint Occupancy of 1827. He stated:

The faith of treaties, in their letter and spirit, has ever been, and, I trust, will ever be, scrupulously observed by the United States. Under that convention a year's notice is required to be given by either party to the other before the joint occupancy shall terminate and before either can rightfully assert or exercise exclusive jurisdiction over any portion of the territory. This notice it would, in my judgment, be proper to give, and I recommend that provision be made by law for giving it accordingly, and terminating in this manner the convention of the 6th of August, 1827.85

The following passages in his message gave even greater encouragement to the 54°40' men in his party:

At the end of the year's notice, ... we shall have reached a period when the national rights in Oregon must either be abandoned or firmly maintained. That they can not be abandoned without a sacrifice of both national honor and interest is too clear to admit of doubt.

...[A compromise on British terms] can never for a moment be entertained by the United States without an abandonment of their just and clear territorial rights, their own self-respect, and the national honor.86

In spite of the strong language in his message, the President, within the month of December, had informed his Secretary of State that, should England offer a compromise, he "...would consult confidentially three or four Senators from different parts of the Union, and might submit it to the Senate for their previous advice."87 On the 24th of December the President held a long conversation with Senator Allen of Ohio, Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, on the Oregon question. Senator Allen was the leader and

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85 Richardson, op. cit., p. 395. 86 Ibid., pp. 397-398.
87 Polk, Diary, I, p. 135.
the most vociferous of the 54°40' men. Polk took him into his entire confidence, showing him the dispatches which had been sent and received from England up until that time. Allen was advised that the President expected that Britain would make a compromise offer based on the 49th parallel. Allen, confident that such a proposal could never muster a two-thirds vote in the Senate, advised the President to submit such a proposal to the Senate for their previous advice.88 The course which the United States should follow regarding the Oregon question had split the Democratic party wide open, with the men from the South favoring any concession to avoid a conflict while those from the North counseled that it meant certain defeat for their party if the administration ever accepted a compromise. To all inquiries the President maintained that his views were as he had stated in his annual message.

Mr. Calhoun led a fight on the floor of the Senate to force the President to reopen negotiations. Mr. Haywood called on the President on a number of occasions to inform him of the developments taking place in the Senate, and to advise him that, although he favored compromise, he did not favor the movement being led by Calhoun to force the President's hand. The President maintained the most friendly relations with Haywood and failed to express any opposition to the position which he took. Polk gradually let it be known, however, that if a compromise were offered he would submit it to the Senate for its prior advice; he even went so far as to inform Whig Senator Archer of his intention to do so.89

The debate which had been going on for some time in the Senate on the

88 Ibid., p. 139; Ibid., IV, p. 326.
89 Ibid., pp. 244-261, et passim.
President's proposal to give notice to Britain, severing the joint occupancy of Oregon, reached its peak in a speech delivered by Senator Haywood. The Senator argued that the notice was really peaceful and that it invited a compromise offer from the British. He made the point that when Polk had used the expression "reoccupy the Oregon Territory" that he must have meant to claim only the territory extending as far as the 49th parallel for that was as far as American citizens had ever occupied the territory. Senator Hannegan of Indiana and Senator Allen were incensed at the speech and demanded of Senator Haywood whether he spoke for the President or not. Haywood refused to answer this question and turned the question back on Senator Allen, remarking in doing so "...that had he occupied the station of chairman of a very important committee, placing him in confidential intercourse with the President, and had attributed opinions to the President, which he could not establish, when interrogated, he would quit."\(^90\)

This Senate debate brought the interested parties to the White House immediately to inquire if the President had authorized Haywood to speak in his behalf. The President's reply to this inquiry when addressed to him by Mr. Hannegan was that "...no one spoke ex cathedra for me...."\(^91\) However, when other Senators spoke in favor of Haywood's speech and in opposition to the stand taken by Mr. Allen, the President answered them by saying, in addition to denying that anyone spoke for the President, that he "...did not regard the notice as war measure... [and] it would prove to be pacific."\(^92\) A few days later Senator Hannegan returned to the White House and demanded of the

\(^{90}\)Congressional Globe, 29th Cong., 1 Sess. 453-460; for an interesting account of this Senate debate which states that Haywood was speaking at Polk's urging, see Thomas Hart Benton, Thirty Years View, II, pp. 662-667.

\(^{91}\)Polk, Diary, I, p. 262.  
\(^{92}\)Ibid., p. 263.
President whether he stood for the whole of Oregon up to 54°40' or whether
he would compromise at 49°. Polk recorded his response as follows:

I answered him that I would answer no man what I would do in the future;
that for what I might do I would be responsible to God and my country
and if I should hereafter do anything which should be disapproved by
himself or others, it would be time enough to condemn me. I am charged
with the Foreign relations of the country, and it was unheard of that
the President should declare in advance to any one out of his Cabinet
his intentions in reference to them.95

Mr. Hannegan had no sooner left the President than Senator Allen arrived in
a very excited state. Polk was unable to calm the Chairman of the Foreign
Relations Committee, and he left still disturbed, only to return on the next
night. At that time Senator Allen presented a statement to the President for
his approval, which contained the remarks he proposed to make in the Senate.
The substance of the paper was that he (Allen) was authorized to say by the
President that he still stood for the entire territory of Oregon up to the
54°40' line, and that he had not authorized Haywood to express any other
opinion. The President refused to authorize Senator Allen to make such a
statement on his behalf; he informed the Senator that he could say what he
chose but must take the whole responsibility himself.94

The debate over the form of notice to be given continued in the
Senate. The debate rapidly drew to a close, however, after the Senate had
accepted an amendment to the notice which added a preamble which stressed
that the government of the United States was still anxious to find a peace-
ful solution to the difficulty. Senator Allen rose to oppose the whole
notice now that it contained the preamble, but Senator Crittendon contemp-
uously asked of Senator Allen, "By what authority does he speak so? Is it
the little petty office of Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Relations

95 Ibid., p. 273. 94 Ibid., p. 279.
which warrants him, in his own opinion, to put on these airs of authority?"  

Shortly thereafter the Senate voted, by a vote of 40 to 14, to pass the notice, including the preamble.  

A week was needed to adjust the differences between the two houses. During this time Polk had occasion to advise Calhoun of the significance he attached to the passage of notice.

I told him that as long as Congress hesitated and refused to give the notice he need not expect a settlement of the Oregon question; that until Congress authorized the notice of Great Britain [sic.] would calculate largely on our divisions & would make no proposition. I expressed the opinion also that if Congress had given the notice in the early part of the Session & shown that we were united & firm, I thought it probable the question would have been settled before this time.

The day before the notice was passed by both Houses, by the comfortable majorities of 142-46 in the House and 40-10 in the Senate, the President summarized his reaction to the strenuous debate which had divided the Democratic Party in the Senate.

The truth is that in all this Oregon discussion in the Senate, too many Democratic Senators have been more concerned about the Presidential election in '48, than they have been about settling Oregon either at 49° or 54°40'. "Forty-eight" has been with them the Great question, and hence the divisions in the Democratic party. I cannot but observe the fact, and for the sake of the country I deeply deplore it. I will however do my duty whatever may happen. I will rise above the interested factions in Congress, and appeal confidently to the people for support.

As the President had expected, the passage of the notice was soon followed by a compromise offer from the British offering a settlement based on the 49th parallel. As has been previously noted, Polk had decided to submit the proposal to the Senate for their prior approval. Before doing so,

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97 Polk, Diary, I, p. 238.
he advised Senators Cass and Allen of his intention. Senator Allen urged him to reject the proposition and not submit it to the Senate at all. Evidently the vote of notice, which had passed the Senate by more than two-thirds majority, had caused him to doubt the certainty of his earlier belief that the Senate was bound to reject such a compromise. Senator Cass, who had also been a "54-0" or fight" man, informed the President that he felt that the President was bound to submit such a proposal to the Senate. Furthermore, Senator Cass informed the President that although compelled to vote against the British proposition that "...if it was accepted by the Senate he would never be heard to utter a word afterwards on the subject." 100

On the 10th of June Polk delivered his message containing the British compromise proposal to the Senate. The message was a short one but one which showed careful planning. The first part of the message traced the early history, especially alluding to Washington, of asking the Senate for prior advice on a treaty. He said of this practice that:

...though rarely resorted to in later times, [it] was, in my judgment, eminently wise, and may on occasions of great importance be properly revived. The Senate are a branch of the treaty-making power, and by consulting them in advance of his own action upon important measures of foreign policy which may ultimately come before them for their consideration the President secures harmony of action between that body and himself. [He then significantly continued by stressing the war-making power lodged in the Senate:] The Senate are, moreover, a branch of the war-making power, and it may be eminently proper for the Executive to take the opinion and advice of that body in advance upon any great question which may involve in its decision the issue of peace or war. 101

In his message the President did not reiterate his own views but merely referred the Senate back to his position as expressed in his annual message to Congress the previous December. Although he added that his views were unchanged, it was a known fact that he had signed and favored the

100 Ibid., pp. 462-465. 101 Richardson, op. cit., p. 449.
notice of termination even though it contained a preamble which invited the British to make a compromise offer. This phase of his message was followed by a paragraph which masterfully shifted the responsibility from his shoulders on to the Senate's.

Should the Senate, by the constitutional majority required for the ratification of treaties, advise the acceptance of this proposition, or advise it with such modifications as they may upon full deliberation deem proper, I shall conform my action to their advice. Should the Senate, however, decline by such constitutional majority to give such advice or to express an opinion on the subject, I shall consider it my duty to reject the offer.102

The Senate went into executive session almost immediately and two days later on Friday the 12th of June the President was advised that the Senate by a vote of 33 to 12 had voted to accept the British proposal.103 When the Senate reconvened on Monday, Chairman Allen of the Senate's Foreign Relations Committee, tendered his resignation from the Committee. Senator Cass then informed the Senate that he would retain his seat on the Committee but although he had seniority that he would not accept the chairmanship.104 Earlier in the day Senator Cass informed the President that Senator Allen had requested that Senators Lewis, Atherton, and he (Cass) resign their seats also, but that they had refused to do so.105

There is evidence that President Polk did not let himself become bound by any precedent which might have been established by his willingness to submit to the prior advice of the Senate. In 1848 the Senate advised the President to negotiate a treaty of extradition with Prussia, and Polk refused to follow their advice.106 A second occasion arose when the President was

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102 Ibid., p. 450. 105 Polk, Diary, I, p. 467.
104 Congressional Globe, 29th Cong., 1 Sess., p. 972.
discussing with his cabinet a proposal to purchase the rights of the Hudson’s Bay Company on the Columbia River. Polk had stated that he was unwilling to make such a purchase without a good deal more information on the value of what he was purchasing. Buchanan informed the President that he didn’t think it would be a good thing to do unless the "Senate previously advised it." Polk replied "...that [he] would not do so if they did advise it, without more knowledge of what we were purchasing than we possessed."\[107\]

**Congressional Investigations**

President Polk was particularly alert to the danger of Congressional domination of the executive branch of the government through the use of the Congressional investigative powers. Although it wasn’t until after the midterm election which placed the House in the control of the Whig party that his own administration was faced with serious attempts to investigate its action, Polk had previously expressed himself in defense of the rights of the executive branch against Congressional prying. In April of 1846 the House of Representatives requested information regarding expenditures from a contingency fund for foreign affairs which had been expended, upon Presidential certification, during the Presidency of John Tyler, with the concurrence of Daniel Webster, who had then been Secretary of State. Here was an opportunity for the Democrats to utilize their investigating power to make political gains against their opponents. Polk had such serious doubts about his right to surrender the requested information that he called a special cabinet meeting for 7 p.m. to discuss the matter. The cabinet agreed with the President that it would be unwise to furnish the required information to the House. The President concluded that it "...would be a most dangerous precedent to

\[107\]Ibid., pp. 301-302.
answer the call... The House of Representatives, finding themselves checked by the President's action, called on Ex-President Tyler to appear before them and testify regarding the use of the secret fund. Polk informed Tyler, when he called on him, of his opposition to the Congressional summons. Polk records that he had expressed his strong disapproval to Congressional leaders regarding the matter and indicated his approval of Mr. Tyler by requesting him to lunch at the White House on Saturday next.

Prior to the mid-term election the only occasion which arose for the President to refuse a request for information from the Congress came about because of a request by the Senate upon the Secretary of War for information on the intentions of the Administration toward California. Mr. Marcy, the Secretary of War, thought he had no discretion in the matter and must furnish the requested information. Marcy had, therefore, compiled the information and presented it to the President. Polk called Senator Johnson, the author of the resolution, to the White House, and confidentially informed him of the contents. Johnson, after learning that disclosure of the information would reveal the United States' plans for the capture of California, agreed with the President that the request of the Senate should not be honored. Polk therefore directed his Secretary of War not to reply to the request and Senator Johnson stated that if anything was said about it on the Senate floor, he would reply that he had seen the papers and was satisfied that the request should not be answered.

It was suggested to President Polk on one occasion that he deliver a confidential message to the House of Representatives. Polk replied that no

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confidential message had been delivered to the House for at least a dozen years and that to "...expect my message to be kept a secret, would be as I thought a perfect farce."\textsuperscript{111}

The President was always careful to edit any copies of correspondence or records being sent to Congress to eliminate any items which were really inessential to an understanding of the topic. For example, in complying with a request by the House for correspondence between the Secretary of State and Mr. Bancroft over the Irish question, the President authorized sending, "All the correspondence deemed important, omitting such portions of it as consisted in speculations and opinions of the Secretary of State and Mr. Bancroft...."\textsuperscript{112}

In January 1848 the President replied quite strongly to a request of the House of Representatives for information which the President did not feel was wise to reveal. In his message to the House in which he refused to honor the request he clearly states his views on the independent position of the executive branch of the government.

The customary and usual reservation contained in calls of either House of Congress upon the Executive for information relating to our intercourse with foreign nations has been omitted in the resolution before me. The call of the House is unconditional. It is that the information requested be communicated, and thereby be made public, whether in the opinion of the Executive (who is charged by the Constitution with the duty of conducting negotiations with foreign powers) such information, when disclosed, would be prejudicial to the public interest or not. It has been a subject of serious deliberation with me whether I could, consistently with my Constitutional duty and my sense of the public interests involved and to be affected by it, violate an important principle, always heretofore held sacred by my predecessors, as I should do by a compliance with the request of the house.\textsuperscript{113}

\textsuperscript{111}\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 70-71.  \textsuperscript{112}\textit{Ibid.}, IV, p. 251.
\textsuperscript{113}Richardson, \textit{op. cit.}, IV, pp. 566-567.
After citing at some length the action of President Washington regarding a request for information on the Jay Treaty negotiations, Polk concludes as follows:

Entertaining this conviction, and with a sincere desire to furnish any information which may be in possession of the executive department, and which either House of Congress may at any time request, I regard it to be my constitutional right and my solemn duty under the circumstances of this case to decline a compliance with the request of the House contained in their resolution. 114

One month before the close of his term of office Polk had occasion to refer again to his message refusing to comply with an unconditional request. A number of Congressmen, Houston of Alabama, Boyd of Kentucky, McKay of Alabama, Judge Catron of the Supreme Court, and Postmaster General Johnson were discussing with Mr. Polk an expected request of the House for information regarding negotiations on the ratification of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. The President records his comments as follows:

...jocosely and in a pleasant mood remarked to him, you will, of course, embrace in the call the usual reservation "if not incompatible with the public interests," for, I said, you know if the House shall make an absolute call, that involves a principle, and I may refuse to send you the information you ask, when you command it, though I would voluntarily do it the next day; alluding to my refusal at the last session of Congress to respond to an unqualified call of the House.... 115

Mr. McKay was very upset by the President's remarks and replied in a tone which Polk took to be offensive, stating: "I will vote for an unqualified call on you, Sir...." With those remarks the congressman left, in spite of the President's request that he remain and permit him (Polk) to explain the temper of his remarks. Polk vowed never to speak to the man again and requested Houston to inform McKay of that fact. 116 The President responded

to the request of the House and on the following day made the same information available to the Senate in "open" rather than in "executive" session.118

Informal Leadership and Lobbies

The lack of strong responsible political parties has always forced the President to rely on personal persuasion and informal arrangements to put across his administrative program. Pendleton Herring in his book Presidential Leadership quotes Justice Story on the informal aspects of Presidential leadership.

The Executive is compelled to resort to secret and unseen influences, to private interviews, and private arrangements, to accomplish its own appropriate purposes, instead of proposing and sustaining in its own duties and measures by a bold and manly appeal to the nation in the face of its representatives.119

Professor Herring does not view these "private arrangements" with such misgiving. Rather he states:

...private interviews and private arrangements may be much more important and indeed more worthy of respect than spectacular and heroic public stands for principle. Were it not for the constant resort to "private arrangements" our system would burst from sheer bombast.120

It has already been seen that President Polk was constantly at work for his administrative measures through individual contacts, not only with the Congressional leaders but with the rank and file members as well. On occasion, Polk would inform a Senator of an occurrence in which the Senator had a personal interest. For example, the President took the trouble of informing Senator Benton of his son-in-law's exploits in California and inviting the

120 Herring, op. cit., pp. 46-47.
Senator to call at the War Department and learn the particulars from confidential reports.\textsuperscript{121} It was his practice, before submitting a message to Congress, to advise individual members of its content and his reasoning so "...that they might be prepared to vindicate my course, if I should be assailed on the floor of the House."\textsuperscript{122} Indicative of the executive leadership is Polk's advice to the congressmen who brought to him a copy of a bill which they planned to introduce, "...consult with the Secretary and officers connected with the War Department."\textsuperscript{123}

Also under the heading of "private arrangements" might be considered the tactics of President Polk in keeping track of the activities and personal habits of members of Congress. In this category might be included such items found in his diary as:

Great confusion, I learned, prevailed in both houses during this night's Session and what is deeply to be regretted several members as I was informed were much excited by drink. Among others I was informed that Senators Webster & Barrow were quite drunk...\textsuperscript{124}

Also recorded is evidence that Senator Calhoun had done the research for a speech by a Whig Senator who was speaking in opposition to the administration.\textsuperscript{125} Andrew Johnson, in complaining to the President, discloses quite clearly how closely the President, through his trusty political adviser, Cave Johnson, kept track of Congressional opinion and actions.

He [Andrew Johnson] said he had held a conversation with Mr. Cave Johnson (the P.M.Gen’l) a few days ago, and was surprised to learn from him that his course in opposition to the administration, as he said Mr. C. Johnson informed him, was understood and marked by the administration.\textsuperscript{126}

\textsuperscript{121} Letter of Polk to Benton, Sept. 1, 1846. Polk Papers, Library of Congress.
\textsuperscript{122} Polk, Diary, II, p. 83. \textsuperscript{123} Ibid., I, p. 389.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., II, p. 74. \textsuperscript{125} Ibid., I, pp. 204-205. \textsuperscript{126} Ibid., II, p. 38.
Polk did not attempt to deny the charge, but instead substantiated it by citing to Johnson his poor voting record and adverse comments he had made about the administration. Polk sums up the results of his interview with Andrew Johnson as follows:

I think it fortunate that they have now learned that their course has not been unobserved by me. Perhaps their course may hereafter be better, but I am satisfied if it is so it will only be from the fear of their constituents.127

In contrast to his relations with Andrew Johnson, Polk's relations with Senator Douglas were most cordial. The warmest feelings expressed in his Diary about anyone occur when he and Senator Douglas re-establish their friendship after a quarrel.128 It is interesting to note that Polk never referred in his Diary to a personal friend without adding the phrase "personal and political friend." Polk very seldom makes any reference to a friendly conversation with Whig leaders. A rare exception was a lengthy conversation with Senator Crittendon. On this occasion he acknowledged that:

Mr. Crittendon through differing with me in politics is an honorable gentleman, and in the confidence that ought to exist between a Senator & the President I was unreserved in my conversation.129

Polk's conclusions, however, about the results of the conversation expressed his usual doubt about the practicality of working closely with opposition members.

He [Crittendon] seemed to be well satisfied with it, but how far parties may induce [him] to act in opposition to my views, in which he concurred in our conversation, remains to be seen.130

In urging support for his measures the President did not shrink from

127Ibid., p. 41.
128Ibid., IV, pp. 192-193; see also supra, p.92.
129Polk, Diary, II, p. 349. 130Ibid., p. 350.
suggesting to the Congress that if necessary he would take the matter to the people. For example, he records the following conclusion of a conversation held with Senator Calhoun:

I... stated to him plainly that if this great measure was resisted by a majority of the Senate I would make an issue with that body before the country. 131

Polk found the influence of the lobbies a new and revolting experience. His remarks descriptive of the lobbyists' activities are quite modern in their context and could well be taken from a recent text dealing with pressure groups.

I then stated that this bill was but one of many measures proposing enormous expenditures of public money, which I understood was pressed on Congress by a lobby influence, consisting of leading men out of Congress whose special business it was to induce members of Congress to vote for and support them. It is said that there are persons now in Washington, ex-members of Congress and others, who make this their special business. Some member of the Cabinet intimated, indeed expressed, the conviction that some members of Congress were fee [fee] attorneys to get some of these large claims through Congress. It is hoped for the honour of the country that this may not be so. Such a thing as an organized lobby influence, such as there is every reason to believe now exists, was wholly unknown while I was in Congress. 132

The President's attention was first directed to the activities of the lobbyists during his attempt to secure passage of his tariff legislation. He regarded the manufactures fair which was held in Washington as an attempt on the part of the capitalists to influence Congress against his tariff. He accused them of pricing their items on display at lower than the actual market price. 133 He was particularly upset when a Senator reported to him that a manufacturer had advised the Senator that if the Tariff Bill were defeated the Senator could have a loan for any amount he might wish. 134 Polk records the intensive drive put on to block the tariff bill.

The most tremendous efforts I understand are being made by the Capitalists who are engaged in manufactures to defeat the Bill.... Scores of them I understand are flocking to Washington for that purpose.  

Before concluding this chapter it is necessary to remark on the passage of the Bill which created the Department of the Interior. The bill was passed on the 3rd of March 1849, just a day before the President left office, and although the author of the Bill was Polk's Secretary of the Treasury, Robert Walker, the measure was not supported by the President. Polk was afraid that the measure would have a "consolidating tendency," and in its practical operation would "draw power from the States." Polk states that had he been a member of Congress he would have voted against it, but as he had lacked the time to examine the measure carefully and did not find it to be constitutionally objectionable, he had signed it, reluctantly.

It should now be apparent that President Polk placed his support on the side of those who felt that it was the responsibility of the President to lead and not be led by the Congress; that he regarded it as his duty not merely to recommend legislation to the Congress but to advocate by every means at his disposal the enactment of the administration's program; that he regarded himself and acted as though he were the representative of all the people, while Congress too often was only representative of the narrow or special interests. In this latter respect he might well be called the first of the modern Presidents.

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CHAPTER VII

POLK AS PARTY CHIEF

The President has become the chief spokesman for his political party. Elected in a constituency of the whole nation, he alone can claim to be the authentic voice of his party. He is the only factor upon which all party factions must agree every four years. As issues between the two parties become more and more blurred during the campaign, the Presidential candidate remains the one clear thing which differentiates the two political parties. Yet, in spite of these factors which place the President at the helm of his party, his hold upon that leadership is tenuous.

It is acknowledged that one of the results of federalism in the United States has been the lack of cohesive national political parties. Every textbook on the American party system is quick to point out the lack of party discipline, ideological unity, and central control. Political parties in the United States have been described as forty-eight parties bound together for the brief span of the Presidential campaign every four years.

If the President's task as leader of his party is difficult, it was almost immeasurably more difficult during the Presidency of James K. Polk. It will be remembered that Washington in his Farewell Address stated: "...common and continual mischiefs of the Party... sufficient to make it the interest and the duty of a wise people to discourage and restrain it." From the period of President Madison to that of Andrew Jackson, "King Caucus" reigned, and parties all but disappeared, so much so that historians have euphemistically labeled the times as "the era of good feeling." With the
Presidency of Andrew Jackson, however, the political parties began a transformation which is still taking place.

As Presidential electors ceased to be chosen by state legislatures, as nominations for President were made in convention rather than in Congressional caucus, and popular votes determined the results of elections, the significance of political parties grew. No longer could the destiny of the nation be decided either in the Congressional corridors, or in the parlors and drawing-rooms of the aristocratic elite of the Eastern seaboard. For the first time party regularity became a real political concept.

Jackson and Polk both understood the necessity of shaping the Democratic party into the instrument of the new governing class in America, the working-man in the cities, the pioneer on the prairies, and the dirt farmer. Jackson knew better than did "Young Hickory" how to dramatize the issues, how to personify the conflict between the East and the West. Polk understood the necessity but not the method. From his previous life of service to the Democratic party he appreciated the need for party discipline. He failed to understand the need of the people for a hero; the role that personal magnetism must play in political life. He understood but two political motives, loyalty to a rational program and greed for office. He attempted to utilize both of these to gain support for his party. He was never able to become a popular leader of public opinion, in spite of the fact that in many ways he personified the spirit of "manifest destiny."

Polk used two main devices to achieve political unity and party leadership. He insisted, over strenuous opposition which even included General Jackson, on having a party press loyal to his personal administration. Secondly, he attempted to utilize patronage in the manner of his chief mentor,
Andrew Jackson. He is not to be too severely blamed if his successes were limited; greater and more personable Presidents than he have foundered upon the rock of localism. It should also be remembered that he was attempting to exercise political leadership over the Democratic Party at a time when in the near future the issue of slavery was to bring not only the Party but the Nation into conflict.

Polk and the Press

President Polk would have remained almost completely unknown even to his own contemporaries if it had not been for the Washington Union. Even at the close of his administration the President was hardly known in the country. His careful attention to administrative detail left little time for him to become a national figure. Even on those occasions when he desired to address the public at large, his efforts met largely with failure. He was handicapped by his complete inability to sloganize or to mobilize the public in behalf of his administration by an appeal to emotion. It was not without reason that he was called "Polk the Plodder." He could reason closely and develop his arguments at great lengths, as he did, for example, against protective tariffs, but he could not attract a large personal following. Try as he might to appeal to the masses, as was his wish in his fourth annual message, which he regarded as a valedictory address, he could not compress his views into a form suitable for mass consumption. The President recognized his own weakness, remarking about his fourth annual message that:

...the danger is that it will be so long that it will not be read by the mass of people, and by none but the politicians.1

In spite of his efforts to shorten the address, it remained forty-one pages long.2

1Polk, Diary, IV, p. 205.
2Richardson, op. cit., IV, pp. 629-670. His other three annual messages had been 31, 35, and 32 pages long respectively.
It has been remarked that "Had it not been for the press, James K. Polk might as well have retired to a monastery instead of occupying the White House as far as his Presidential contacts with the public were concerned." Yet in the area of political journalism the President was quite experienced and astute.

Polk had constantly paid close attention to the management of the Nashville Union, which was the leading Democratic paper of Tennessee. In 1843, when the Nashville Union was in dire need of rejuvenated leadership, James K. Polk was instrumental in securing his close personal friend, S. H. Laughlin, to take the editorship and pledge the paper so that it would secure party financial assistance. He also was instrumental in having the paper endorse Van Buren prior to the Democratic convention of 1844.

The newly elected President faced a serious problem regarding an administration press. There already existed in Washington a Democratic paper, the Washington Globe, which, under the editorship of Francis P. Blair, had served both the administrations of Andrew Jackson and Martin Van Buren. The new President was determined, however, to have an editor more to his own liking. Polk was able to give specific examples, dating from 1834 when he had been engaged in a contest with John Bell for Speaker of the House, through the campaign of 1844, of coolness if not outright opposition by Blair towards his political advancement. Polk began to cast about for an editor whom he could

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4McCormac, op. cit., pp. 210-211.
be sure was loyal to his administration. When Jackson heard of the plans
to remove Blair he wrote to the President that an attempt to secure "Father"
Ritchie as the new editor

...would be an insult to the Editor of the Globe & separate him from
you, whose administration he is determined to support - Keep Blair's
Globe the administration paper.... - Ritchie is a good editor but a
very unsafe one - He goes off at half bent & does great injury before
he can be set right.6

But on this matter as on most others Polk was determined to make his
own decisions and he told Jackson:

There is at present no paper here which sustains my administration for
its own sake. The Globe it is manifest does not look to the glory or
success of my administration so much as it does to the interests, and
wishes of certain prominent men of the party who are looking to suc-
ceed me in 1848.7

In the meantime negotiation had continued to obtain the services of "Father"
Ritchie, editor of the Richmond Enquirer.8 Thomas Hart Benton believed that
the removal of Blair by Polk was the fulfillment of campaign promises which
Polk had made to Calhoun and Tyler. Benton claimed that Calhoun had prom-
ised to deliver the electoral votes of South Carolina, where the electors were
selected by the state legislature rather than by popular vote, if Polk would
remove his personal enemy Blair; and that Tyler had made the removal of Blair
a condition for his own withdrawal from the Presidential race of 1844.9 The
true cause of the failure of the Globe was Polk's personal dislike of Blair,

6Letter of Jackson to Polk, December 15, 1844. Polk Papers, Library
of Congress.
7Letter of Polk to Jackson, March 17, 1845, as quoted in Pollard,
op. cit., pp. 255-256.
8Charles Henry Ambler, Thomas Ritchie (Richmond: Bell Book &
Stationery Co., 1913), pp. 246-258.
Blair's strong advocacy of Van Buren and of Van Buren's stand on Texas, and Polk's desire to unite the Democratic party and alter the dominant position of the Van Buren faction in party affairs.\textsuperscript{10} Benton also made the more serious charge that Senator Cameron of Pennsylvania had made arrangements with the assistance of Secretary of the Treasury Walker to make available from the public treasury a sum of $50,000 which would not be recalled for three years. This money was to be utilized by Ritchie and Heiss, publisher of the Nashville \textit{Union}, to purchase the Washington \textit{Globe}.\textsuperscript{11} Once owned, the administration organ seemed assured of financial success because of the certainty of receiving the government printing contracts. Testimony included in a House Report of 1860 described the relationship which had existed for a number of years between public printing contracts and the administration press.\textsuperscript{12}

The first issue of the newly formed administration newspaper appeared

\textsuperscript{10}Wm. E. Smith, \textit{op. cit.}, I, p. 181. \textsuperscript{11}\textit{Ibid.} \textsuperscript{12}House Report 249, 56th Congress, 1 Sess., p. 28 (March 26, 1860), as quoted in Leonard D. White, \textit{The Jacksonians}, pp. 297-298.

...the editor of the organ is generally supposed to command the patronage of the President. There is a good deal of this work at the disposal of the President -- say an aggregate of one hundred thousand dollars per year, more or less.

Q. At the disposal of the President?

A. Yes, sir. That patronage the organ has commanded for years, it being impossible to keep a paper up here without government support.

Q. Was there ever any understanding with you while you had that printing that a portion of the profits should be used towards sustaining the organ?

A. Yes, sir; it was given for the purpose of sustaining the organ.
on May 1, 1845, under the new masthead of the Washington Union.\textsuperscript{15} The editor, Thomas Ritchie, better known as "Father" Ritchie, took on this new task at the advanced age of seventy after forty-one years as editor of the Richmond Enquirer.\textsuperscript{14} Ritchie stood by the President faithfully as did the President stand by him, but in spite of his loyalty and strength of spirit, he was not well suited at this advanced age to manage the policy of a new administration's newspaper.

The President worked closely with Ritchie, giving him advance copies of messages the President planned to send to Congress;\textsuperscript{15} he also saw to it that Ritchie was the first to see messages from the front during the Mexican War;\textsuperscript{16} and often utilized the press to answer a critic or to reply to debate which was taking place on the floor of Congress.\textsuperscript{17}

Ritchie's weaknesses as editor of the Washington Union were printing confidential information in the press before it should have been released and writing in a style which offended certain Democratic members of Congress. Although Polk recognized these weaknesses, he had a strong affection for the old man and in spite of his annoyance always rose in his defense. On one occasion when Senator Allen came to the President demanding that Ritchie be replaced by another editor, remarking, "...that Mr. Ritchie could not now get five votes for public printer out of the Calhoun faction in either House of Congress,"\textsuperscript{18} Polk replied:

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p. 271. \textsuperscript{15} Polk, Diary, I, pp. 108-109.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., II, pp. 468-469. \textsuperscript{17} Ibid., I, pp. 351-352.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., p. 358.
...that Mr. Ritchie was honest in his efforts to sustain our doctrines and our party, & that he had not identified himself either with the Calhoun or any other faction of the party, but that he had been labouring to keep the whole party united and harmonious; that doubtless he had committed errors as all other men in his situation would, but that he readily corrected them when he discovered them.19

One outstanding virtue of Ritchie's in Polk's view was that he would "...not answer the purpose of aspiring politicians because he will not lend himself to any of the factions who look more to their own advancement than to the public good."20

The President on a number of occasions did take Ritchie to task for his mishandling of articles in the Union. Sometimes Polk felt it was prudent to withhold information from Ritchie until the very last moment because:

The truth is that the old gentleman's passion to put everything he learns into his newspaper is so great that I did not think it prudent to entrust its contents to him at an earlier period.21

When Ritchie had printed advanced information which outlined the substance of the President's fourth annual message to Congress, Polk became very upset. He remarked in his diary:

The Union of this morning contains an article undertaking to state what my message will contain. I was much vexed when I saw it. It is an infirmity of Mr. Ritchie that he cannot keep a secret.... Without meaning to do wrong, such is his propensity to give news to the public, and to appear to the public to be the Executive organ, that in this morning's paper he shadow forth what I may say in it.22

Polk informed the assistant editor of his displeasure and ordered Ritchie to report to him; but upon Ritchie's arrival the President's wrath melted away and he recorded the following results of the conversation:

Mr. Ritchie called this morning and appeared to be very much mortified at the indiscreet publication of the article in his paper yesterday.

19 Ibid. 20 Ibid., p. 359.
He means no harm I am satisfied. It is a constitutional infirmity with him, I believe, that he cannot keep a secret; all he knows, though given him in confidence, he is almost certain to put into his newspaper. My sympathies were excited at seeing his mortification, and I relieved him by telling him to let it all pass.  

The President then sent for the assistant editor and instructed him not to tell Ritchie what had been said on the previous day.

The most serious difficulty in which Ritchie found himself occurred when he printed an article critical of the Senate. The circumstances were that a small group of dissident Democrats led by Calhoun joined with the united Whig party to defeat, at least temporarily, the ten regiment bill, which the President had been so actively backing. The President expressed his indignation most strongly. And on the 9th of February 1847, the Union ran an article signed the "Vindicator" which had as its theme that the Mexicans had achieved another victory. On February 15 there were introduced in the Senate two resolutions; one for expulsion of the editor of the Union from the privilege of the floor for a libel upon the Senate, the second for the expulsion of the Union reporters from the reporters' gallery of the Senate.

These resolutions started an extended debate, which touched on a variety of subjects including freedom of the press, the rights of the Senate, the function of political parties, and the presidential aspirations of various Senators. Senator Turney of Tennessee raised the issue of party responsibility, stating:

There was a party in that body [the Senate] that might properly be termed the Balance of Power party.... Such a state of things renders it somewhat difficult for the public in general... to form a correct judgment of the actions of the body. It is due to the public that such a state of

parties in this body should be known in order that the public may place the responsibility exactly in the proper quarter.25

Senator Turney continued by claiming that Ritchie had merely done his duty by informing the public of the existence of such cliques. Eventually the second resolution, which would have denied the reporters of the Union their place in the press gallery, was dropped. This established the right of the press from that time on to their reporting privilege in the Capitol.26 The resolution barring Ritchie from the floor of Congress was approved by a vote of 27 to 21, but met with considerable opposition from the general public. The President expressed his anger stating that it was "...a second Duane case, and strikes a blow at the liberty of the press."27 President Polk expresses his own views of his relationship to the administrative paper in a letter to Senator Haywood denying that he, Polk, had been responsible for an article in the Union attacking Haywood (see pp. 176-177).

If by that designation [administrative organ] it be meant to carry the idea, that the "Union" has followed the general policy of my administration, it is in that sense true, but this has been done upon the sole judgment and responsibility of the editor. If because that paper happens to be published at the seat of government and supports my administration... It can hardly be — that the President shall be required to be the virtual editor of a newspaper.28

President Polk in his desire to preserve his lifelong friendship with Senator Haywood denies too much.

25 Ibid., p. 395.
27 Polk, Diary, II, p. 378.
Other papers than the Union met with the President's distrust and he went so far as to accuse them of being traitors to their country. Polk was the last President to utilize effectively an administration press, and even his success was limited as the significance and importance of the personal journalism of such editors as James Gordon Bennet and Horace Greeley was already beginning to replace the partisan press.

Polk and Patronage

It has been stated that "To the victor belongs the spoils" was the keynote of President Polk's administration. The inclusion of three persons closely identified with political party organization in his Cabinet was an early indication of the partisan nature of the new administration. The author of the spoils slogan was Polk's Secretary of War, William L. Marcy, who had spoken approvingly of political patronage thirteen years prior to his joining Polk's cabinet. At that time Marcy said:

It may be, sir, that the politicians of the United States are not as fastidious as some gentlemen are, as to disclosing the principles on which they act. They boldly preach what they practice. When they are contending for victory, they avow their intention of enjoying the fruits of it. If they are defeated, they expect to retire from office. If they are successful, they claim, as a matter of right, the advantage of success. They see nothing wrong in the rule, that to the victor belong the spoils of the enemy.

The chairman of the national committee of the Democratic party, Mr.

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29 Polk, Diary, II, p. 479.
30 Dorothy Ganfield Fowler, The Cabinet Politician (New York: Columbia University Press, 1945), p. 54. President Polk expressed a more moderate view of patronage, stating: "I removed a Whig when I appointed him, and in that I acted upon the general principle - that the principal chief administrative officers of the Federal government should agree in opinion with the Chief Magistrate and be ready to cooperate with him in carrying out the policies of his administration." Letter of Polk to Lewis Cass, Sept. 18, 1848. Polk Papers, Library of Congress.
31 Register of Debates, 22 Cong., 1 Sess., p. 1325.
Walker, became President Polk's Secretary of the Treasury. But it was not to either of these men that the President looked for assistance in handling the patronage function of his office. For that task the President selected his personal campaign manager and long-time political mentor, Cave Johnson, whom he brought to the capital and installed in the cabinet as Postmaster General, the position which as become traditional for the President's chief political adviser to occupy. The *Niles Register* characterized Cave Johnson as follows:

Cave Johnson, one of the most malignant, narrow-minded, vindictive political partisans alive, and therefore just suited to the post office department, with thirty thousand subjects for the knife of party proscription, and the strengthening of the administration thereby.

Johnson, coming from the same state as the President and having served seven terms in Congress, 1829-1837, 1839-1845, was well equipped to become the President's confidant on political matters. It will also be recalled from Chapter II the role which he played in securing the President's nomination at the Baltimore convention of 1844. The President's diary records that Johnson kept Polk constantly informed on administrative measures in Congress, made

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32 The election of 1844 was the first time a national committee existed. All that is known of its existence is from a letter of Robert J. Walker, in which he states, "The National Democratic Convention of Baltimore appointed a central committee at this city with a view to promote the election of Polk and Dallas. Of this committee I was chose chairman and I consented to remain here and discharge the duties of the office." See James Farley, *History and Functions of the National Committee*, (Washington, Govt. Print.Off., 1954), p. 7.

33 Evidence of general recognition of Johnson's role of patronage dispenser is Polk's letter to Vice-President Dallas assuring Dallas that he will see the Postmaster and prevent a removal distasteful to Dallas, if Johnson hasn't already acted, October 30, 1846. *Polk Papers*, Library of Congress.

34 *Niles Register*, March 15, 1845.
appointments with congressmen to see the President, and in general acted as liaison officer between the executive and the Congress. This is not to be construed that Polk surrendered the patronage power to Johnson, but rather that Johnson merely acted as the Presidential agent. For example, when Polk learned that a loyal Democrat had been mistakenly removed as Postmaster at Mcklenberg, Tenn., he wrote Johnson to give him a written report on the matter which was to include the name of the secretary responsible for this blunder. Polk stressed that he wanted to personally "judge" this affair. On the same day, Polk informed the Postmaster that he was still Postmaster. Johnson was influential even over Supreme Court appointments, persuading both the President and Buchanan that Buchanan ought to stay in the cabinet rather than go on the Court.

Throughout the four years of Polk's administration the demand for office never ceased, and the President was never able to find enough vacancies to satisfy the hunger for office. With less than a month still to serve, Polk quoted Jefferson to the effect that "few die and none resign. He had already discovered much to his dismay that should an office-holder die or even become ill, there were many clamoring for the vacancy. Polk records receiving a telegram informing him that Paymaster Dix of the U. S. Army had died of cholera and that in less than an hour he had received applications for the position. Upon another occasion Polk states, "The Marshall of this

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55 Polk to Cave Johnson, May 21, 1847; Polk to Postmaster Ramsey, May 20, and May 21, 1847. Polk Papers, Library of Congress.

56 Polk, Diary, I, pp. 356, 351, 482; II, pp. 27, 36-40, 50, 60, 67-68; III, pp. 231, 351; IV, pp. 282-283.

57 See Plate VII, Cartoon of the period, entitled "Patriots Getting Their Beans."

58 Polk, Diary, IV, p. 354. 59 Ibid., p. 274.
District is reported to be confined to his house by sickness, & I have had a half a dozen applications for his place, if he should die.... I am often disgusted with such scenes." The story of the demand for office during the Polk administration is so well known that it is unnecessary to document it in detail. The President did his best to meet the demands of loyal party supporters for office, but with limited success. Even Chief Justice Taney requested an appointment for his son-in-law and other relatives.

The President was confronted with a divided party which was split into numerous factions, including Barnburners and the Hunkers in New York State, the recalcitrant faction led by Calhoun in the South, and the division in Pennsylvania between the forces led by Vice-President Dallas and those led by Secretary of State Buchanan. Polk was determined, therefore, to control personally the patronage of the administration. Criticism of the President's decision in this matter fails to reckon with Polk's first need, which was to establish himself as the center of the Democratic party in the nation; it would have been impossible for him to remain in control had he surrendered patronage to the local party leaders in the various states. Had he surrendered patronage it would have strengthened local party control at the expense of the national party, which has been the constant threat to Presidential leadership throughout our history.

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40Ibid., III, p. 331.
41Carl Brist Swisher, Roger B. Taney (New York: Macmillan Co., 1935), pp.439-440. Professor Swisher believes that Taney's requests were not granted by Polk because as Chief Justice he had destroyed his political influence.
42The Washington Union, July 14, 1845, proclaimed that the President would not permit any member of his administration to build political strength through Federal appointments.
43For a critical appraisal of Polk's handling of patronage see Norman A. Graebner, James K. Polk, a Study in Federal Patronage," The Mississippi Valley Historical Review, XXXVIII, No.1, June 1,1951, pp. 615-632.
Polk had never made any public statement which could prevent him from turning Whigs out of office, and shortly after he took office the new broom began to sweep clean. Marcy wrote, "The President has ordered a thorough investigation in regard to the clerks in all the Departments and there is to be quite a sweep." Beyond this general proscription the President intervened personally to push his rotation policy. The President called his Secretary of the Treasury to task for his failure to eliminate Whig clerks from their position in the Treasury department. Polk stated that:

My purpose was to show him [Secretary Walker] a list of very obnoxious Whig clerks which had been furnished to me, who are now employed in his department. I informed him that members of Congress were daily complaining to me that so many bitter Whigs were retained in the offices here, whilst worthy and competent Democrats who desired the places were excluded. I gave him the list and charges attached to it & requested him to investigate the matter and make such removals as were proper.

Polk continued his conversation with Mr. Walker and informed him that Walker's brother-in-law was a violent and bitter Whig and that he ought to be removed from the office he held. Polk acknowledged that it was unpleasant to make such a communication but that he must speak frankly and relationship ought not to stand in the way of making removal. The President on still another occasion wrote to Walker that he had observed from reading a New York paper that a Democratic customs official had been dismissed. Polk said: "It appears enemies of the administration are kept in and friends turned out." Walker investigated and answered Polk that this was not the case.

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45 Polk, Diary, I, pp. 345-346. 46 Ibid., p. 346.
Polk also personally removed the Commissioner of Public Buildings for Washington, D.C., who had served in that capacity for the last twelve years. William Noland, the Commissioner, protested his dismissal, avowing that although he had once been a Whig he was now a good Democrat and stated that he had kept only those Whigs in office who had been there when he was first hired. Noland's protests were to no avail. Polk records the conclusion of his interview as follows:

"I have no doubt he is a Whig in all his feelings, and that his patronage is bestowed exclusively on the members of that party, as far as he thinks he can do so with safety to himself. I told him finally that I had made up my mind that it was my duty to make the change, and repeated to him what I said on yesterday, that he could resign if he chose to do so. He then presented to me his resignation, which he had previously written to take effect on the ___ day of ___. I told him... that he could fill the blank with the 1st day of Nov.... I told him I had no unkind feelings towards him personally, and that if it had been otherwise I should not have held this conversation with him, but would have made the removal without seeing him. I told him it was a painful duty, but one which I felt bound to perform."

The record of the Post Office department might well serve as a measure of the success of the President's policy of proscription. During Polk's first year in office there were more than seven hundred removals, and during his four-year term more than 15,500 postmasters were appointed at a time when the total number of postmasters was only 16,000. There were 1,600 removals and over 10,000 resignations. It is impossible to determine with any exactness how many of the resignations were for political reasons; certainly low pay and the loss of the franking privilege in 1845 contributed

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48 Polk, Diary, II, pp. 114-115; for other examples of Polk's personal action in removing office-holders, see Polk, Diary, I, pp. 40, 57, 60.
greatly to the resignations.49

Polk refused to remove Democrats so that they could be replaced with other Democrats, 50 but in spite of this policy the President was accused of favoring one faction of the party over others. The Barnburners, which was the Van Buren faction of the Democratic party in New York State, accused the President of favoring the Hunkers, the faction led by the Secretary of War, Marcy. The President's attempt to remain neutral in his appointments failed to please either Marcy and the Hunkers or Wright and the Barnburners.51 When Wright lost his bid for re-election as Governor of New York in 1846, the Barnburners were convinced that Polk had used his patronage against him, and the break with the Van Buren faction in New York greatly widened.52

As early as November 1845, Polk was informed of the displeasure of the Van Buren supporters regarding the patronage policy of his administration in New York State. Polk rightly felt that the only patronage policy which would satisfy them would be one that proscribed all other Democrats from any appointment. This he refused to do.55 His determination to remain neutral

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49 Fowler, op. cit., p. 63. The following table is extracted from information contained in the appendix of Fowler's work, p. 305.

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<tr>
<th>Administration</th>
<th>Removals</th>
<th>Resignations</th>
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<td>Van Buren</td>
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<td>Polk</td>
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50 Polk, Diary, II, pp. 201-202.

51 President Polk attempted to explain his failure to make an appointment on the basis that the office-holder did not resign as expected. He also expressed concern for Governor Wright's re-election. Polk to Senator Dix, Oct. 27, 1846. Polk Papers, Library of Congress.

52 Fowler, op. cit., pp. 64-65; Graebner, op. cit., pp. 624-625.

55 Polk, Diary, I, pp. 103-104.
caused a severe disturbance in his relations with Secretary of War Marcy, when the President refused to appoint Marcy's candidate to a position of Brigadier General. The feelings between the two became so violent that it was reported to the President that Marcy and Senator Dickinson from New York might both resign their offices. The President replied that he didn't care whether they resigned or not, but added sagely that he knew they wouldn't dare to resign. By July of 1847 Polk's relations with Van Buren had deteriorated to the point where the President during his trip into New York State refused to visit Van Buren, feeling that the late verbal invitation extended to the President to pay a visit was not genuine.

After the Barnburners had walked out of the Democratic Convention of 1848, the President was faced with the task of deciding whether the Barnburners who held Federal office should be removed. Polk decided that it would be best to delay their removal, stating:

If removed they would probably represent themselves as victims; and would appeal to the people by representing that they were removed by a President from a slave-state because they were opposed to permitting slavery in the territories recently acquired in which it did not now exist. This... would not be the reason of my action if I removed them, but their secession from the Democratic party & their efforts to defeat the regular nominations of the Democratic party.

The proper action to take regarding the Barnburners continued to disturb the President until the 9th of August. At that time a convention was held in Buffalo, New York, which nominated Van Buren as a Presidential candidate on the Free Soilers ticket. As the Barnburners, joined by Whigs and Abolitionists, were the chief supporters of the Buffalo convention, the President felt he must act to remove them from Federal office. Mr. B. F. Butler

54 Ibid., II, pp. 399-405. 55 Ibid., III, p. 74.
56 Ibid., IV, p. 10. (Italics mine)
was the leading Barnburner holding national office and his removal was symbolic of the President's disapproval of the entire movement. On the 1st of September the President acted and on that day recorded at some length his views on patronage and party loyalty.

Today I appointed Charles McVean of New York to be attorney of the U. S., vice Benjamin F. Butler removed. Shortly after I became President I removed a Whig from this office & appointed Mr. Butler. I did so upon the general principle that the important subordinate public offices should be filled by persons who agreed in opinion with the President as to the policy to be pursued by the Government, and who would co-operate with the President in carrying out that policy. Mr. Butler at the time he was appointed was a democrat. He has since abandoned the Democratic party; has tolerated and does not support the regularly nominated candidates of the Democratic party for President & Vice-President of the U. S. I should not have removed Mr. Butler for his mere opinions upon any abstract question, nor for his free expression of them, but when he becomes a leading champion of a faction in assailing me personally and politically, in throwing every obstacle in his power in the way of the successful administration of the Government upon the publicly declared principles upon which I conduct it, I do not hesitate to remove him from the honorable and profitable office which he has heretofore held under my administration. 57

Polk did take, however, a nonpartisan position on one class of appointments. Polk insisted that it was essential that army commissions be given to Whigs as well as Democrats; 58 he did retain the appointing power in his own hands, nevertheless. 59 This policy of nonpartisan appointment of officers met with some criticism and Polk records a conversation he held with Representative Douglas of Illinois, who complained that a Whig had been appointed Second Lieutenant in an Illinois rifle regiment.

57 Ibid., pp. 114-115; see also pp. 36-37, 57-58, 85, 107-115. It was the same B. F. Butler who withdrew Van Buren's name from the Convention of 1844 and cast the total vote of New York's delegation for James K. Polk. See supra, Chapter II, p. 51.
58 Polk, Diary, I, pp. 412-413.
59 Secretary of War Marcy in response to a request for a commission stated: "...it is proper to say what I presume you are not ignorant of, that the selections are not made by the War Department, but by the President himself." Wm. L. Marcy, Private Letter Book, 1845-1849, pp. 20-21 (Sept. 2, 1845). Library of Congress.
I told him that we were at war with a Foreign country and that I thought it improper to make politics a test in appointments in the army, and that I had resolved therefore to appoint some Whigs to office in the army. I told him that all the political friends with whom I had conversed had agreed with me in this, but when I came to make the selections none of my friends in Congress wished any Whig appointed from his State, but all said they were willing that I might select Whigs from any other State than their own. 60

Polk's greatest difficulty in connection with patronage matters was with members of Congress. The President was determined to maintain the constitutional separation of powers between those two powers. Polk learned that a provision of a bill before Congress had designated by description the three persons who were to be appointed commissioners to serve on a commission which the bill would create. Polk considered this measure clearly unconstitutional, citing that "the Constitution confers upon the President the power to make all appointments to office..." and advised his cabinet that he would certainly veto the measure. 61

The President was confronted with great pressure exerted by congressmen in behalf of their own appointment to office. To this practice the President was most assuredly opposed. The question most commonly arose when members of Congress desired the President to appoint them officers in the army. On a number of occasions he clearly stated the principle involved in his denial of their request for appointment. Perhaps the best and most determined statement is as follows:

The passion for office among members of Congress is very great, if not absolutely disreputable, and greatly embarrasses the operations of the Government. They create offices by their own votes and then seek to fill them themselves. I shall refuse to appoint them, though it be at the almost certain hazard of incurring their displeasure. I shall do so because their appointment would be most corrupting in its tendency. I am aware that by refusing their applications I may reduce my administration to a minority in both Houses of Congress, but if such be the result I shall have

60 Polk, Diary, I, p. 478. 61 Ibid., IV, p. 65.
the high satisfaction of having discharged my duty in resisting the selfishness of members of Congress, who are willing to abandon their duty to their constituents and provide places for themselves. I will not countenance such selfishness, but will do my duty, and rely on the country for an honest support of my administration.62

Five days later Polk had developed a general rule on the subject which was:

As a general rule...members of Congress should not be appointed to office by the Executive. The exceptions to this rule may be, Cabinet officers, Foreign Ministers of the higher grade, Judges of the Supreme Court, and in time of war perhaps the higher military officers. But even in these cases it is desirable to avoid appointing members of Congress, if men equally qualified and with sufficient character before the country can be procured.65

Yet the thirst of congressmen for position, if not for themselves, for their constituents continued. Just such a request, by a Representative who wished to be appointed a purser in the Navy, caused Polk to remark that "...at least 20 members of the present Congress have been disappointed in the same way, and in all the cases... they have afterwards voted against the measures which I have recommended."64 Polk continues to point out that they have not the courage to break openly with the President but utilized every opportunity to oppose him when their course could not be made clear to their constituents.65 The President expressed his determination to expose this evil practice, stating:

If God grants me length of days and health, I will, after the expiration of my term, give a history of the selfish and corrupt considerations which influence the course of public men, as a legacy to posterity.66

Senatorial courtesy was not in Polk's administration a recognized

62 Ibid., I, p. 483.  
65 Ibid., p. 491; see also pp. 466, 497.  
64 Ibid., II, p. 329.  
65 Polk expressed the determination to "appeal from the judgment of those of our party who only want office to the people." Polk to G. Pillow, November 6, 1845, Polk Papers, Library of Congress.  
practice; 67 neither in its formal sense, which permits a Senator to rise on
the floor of the Senate and object to a nominee upon the grounds that he finds
him personally obnoxious, nor in the more general sense which implies that a
Senator or Congressman ought to be consulted about an appointment to be made
in his district or State. 68 This idea, which had already begun to gain
ground, was not an acceptable principle to President Polk, who stated: "...indeed
many members of Congress assume that they have the right to make appoint­
ments, particularly in their own states, and... fly into a passion when their
wishes are not gratified." 69 President Polk did, nevertheless, while always
reserving final judgment to himself, consult Congressmen regarding appoint­
ments in their districts. 70 Rather it might better be stated that he was
unable to avoid completely the constant stream of Congressmen at his door
requesting appointments for constituents. Polk stated to a close political
friend that there were at least a half dozen applicants from each of the
twenty-eight states to fill each vacancy. 71

67 Polk did indicate that it was necessary that a judge must be a
resident of the circuit to which he is appointed, or he would be rejected
by the Senate. Polk to G. Pillow, Feb. 4, 1846. Polk Papers, Library of
Congress.

68 See Joseph P. Harris, "The Courtesy of the Senate," Political
Science Quarterly, LVI (1952), pp. 56-63. The first instance of a Senator
declaring a nominee "personally obnoxious" did not occur until 1859, and it was
1954), pp. 120-121.

69 Polk, Diary, IV, pp. 28-29.

70 Speaking of three Democratic Senators, Polk stated, "I have
treated them with great civility and have yielded to their wishes about ap­
pointments in their respective States until they seem to have come to the
conclusion that I must administer the Government precisely as they may direct.
In this they will find themselves mistaken." Polk, Diary, I, pp. 486-487.

71 Polk to A. P. Nicholson, April 23, 1846. Polk Papers, Library of
Congress.
The President often felt that he and the reputation of his administration had been damaged by the false recommendations which he had received from Congressmen. One situation had its humorous aspects when a nomination was rejected by the Senate because of the opposition of the same Senator who had made the recommendation. To add insult to injury, the Senator then came to Polk to recommend another for the same office. Polk questioned the Senator about this odd request as follows:

...well, you rejected the man I nominated; 0 yes, he replied, he was without character & wholly unqualified. I then asked him if he knew upon whose recommendation I had appointed him, to which he replied that he did not. I then handed to him his own letter & told him that that was the recommendation upon which I had appointed him. He appeared confused and replied, Well, we are obliged to recommend our constituents when they apply to us.

In most instances of such unreliable recommendations, of which there were many, the President was not amused in the least. The clearest indictment of Congressmen for their failure to make reliable recommendations and for their reluctance to assume any responsibility for the bad appointments which result, Polk records as follows:

Every day that I remain in the Presidential office satisfies me more and more of the selfishness and want of patriotism of men high in office. To accomplish their own selfish ends members of Congress constantly deceive me in their recommendations for office, and the consequence is that many bad appointments are made; and when they are made, the whole responsibility devolves on me, & those who have importuned me to make them never assume any portion of the responsibility, but on the contrary in some instances carefully conceal the fact that the obnoxious appointments have been made at their instance. I am disgusted with the trickery and treachery practised upon me by some members of Congress in their recommendations for office.

72 Polk records embarrassment that an appointment he had made of a Paymaster in the Army proved to be incapacitated by reason of insanity. Polk to Senator Haywood, June 29, 1846, Polk Papers, Library of Congress.

73 Polk, Diary, II, p. 515. 74 Ibid., p. 296.
It has become quite fashionable recently, out of a commendable zeal
to make our political parties more responsible, i.e., stronger and more
disciplined, to recommend the return to a system where patronage had a greater role to play. The Polk administration should serve as a grim reminder not only that patronage is an inefficient way to provide the manpower to operate our government, but also of greater significance, that patronage does not build stronger, more disciplined political parties. Instead, it weakens and divides them; rather than strengthening Presidential control, it subverts it. President Polk was merely speaking what every practicing politician has learned when he stated:

In every appointment which the President makes he disappoints half a dozen or more applicants and their friends, who, actuated by selfish and sordid motives, will prefer any other candidate in the next election, while the person appointed attributes the appointment to his own superior merit and does not even feel obligated by it. The number of office seekers has become so large that they probably hold the balance of power between the two great parties in the country, and if disappointed in getting place under one administration they will readily unite themselves with the party and candidate of opposite politics, so as to increase their chances for place. Another great difficulty in making appointments which the President encounters is that he cannot tell upon what recommendations to rely. Members of Congress and men of high station in the country sign papers of recommendation, either from interested personal motives or without meaning what they say, and thus the President is often imposed on, and induced to make bad appointments. When he does so the whole responsibility falls on himself, while those who have signed papers of recommendation and misled him, take special care never to avow the agency they have had in the matter, or to assume any part of the responsibility.75

75 Polk, Diary, II, pp. 314-315; see also, "It is one year to-day since I entered on the duties of my office, and still the pressure for office has not abated. I most sincerely wish that I had no offices to bestow. If I had not it would add much to the happiness and comfort of my position. As it is, I have no offices to bestow without turning out better men than a large majority of those who seek their place." Polk, Diary, I, p. 261; "I sincerely wish I had no offices to bestow. I cannot gratify all who apply and it is certain from my experience that the dispensation of the public patronage is a weakening operation." Polk, Diary, II, p. 20; "I am thoroughly satisfied that the patronage of the Government greatly weakens any President of the U. States,
President Polk's Personal Relationship with Leading Politicians

Polk maintained a strong interest in State politics throughout his Presidency. In particular he maintained his interest in Tennessee politics, but, even there, he observed the principle that the President should not interfere in intraparty struggles. An example of Polk’s observing this principle occurred when the legislature of Tennessee elected Senator Turney to the United States Senate. Mr. Turney had been in a contest with Mr. Nicholson for the Senate seat. It seems certain that Polk preferred Nicholson for the position, and all the legislators from East Tennessee, Polk’s stronghold, supported Nicholson; nevertheless, Turney was elected by winning support from the Whigs. Turney had charged that the President was interfering in the choice and favoring Nicholson, a charge the President refused to repudiate in public but did disavow to Turney. Polk felt that Turney had made the charges as a clever political maneuver to win Whig votes, or as the President himself wrote:

The truth, I have no doubt, is that Mr. Turney resolved to come to the Senate if he could, and finding that a majority of his own party preferred Mr. Nicholson, made the charge that I had interfered in the election and expressed a preference for Mr. Nicholson knowing it himself to be false, for the sole purpose of securing Whig votes, and in this he succeeded.76

Whether true or false, charges of interference by the President in behalf of a state candidate were, in those days as now, likely to work against the

so much so, indeed, I doubt whether any President will ever again be re-elected. 76 Ibid., p. 278; "The party in power will always be weakened by the votes of this class of persons. I am confirmed in the truth of the remark which I have long since made, that the patronage of the Government will, from the day any President enters upon his duties, weaken his administration." Polk, Diary, IV, p. 194.

76 Ibid., I, p. 115.
candidate that the President favored.

In 1847 Polk commented upon the expected defeat of Governor Brown for re-election and his comments indicate very well his feel for local politics, his astute appraisal of election issues, and failures of the Democratic party. Because this is one of the clearest analyses by a President of the United States of an election defeat, it is worthy of quoting at some length:

1st, the Taylor feeling, which the Democratic party have been afraid to meet boldly by taking the ground that they would oppose him or any other man, who refused to avow his principles, and who was not the regularly nominated candidate of his party. This was the mistake committed in the canvass in Tennessee.

2nd, The dispensation of the patronage of the Federal Government, and especially in appointments to military offices, has given offense to many leading men in the State, who have been lukewarm & inactive. All the leading men in Tennessee know me personally, and many of them aspire to high commands in the army who could not be gratified. It illustrates beyond doubt the truth of the opinion which I have long since formed that the Patronage must necessarily [weaken] any President. Many of the leading [men] of the Democratic party whose political principles hang loosely about them, and who have sought office from me and have been disappointed, not [only] in Tennessee but throughout the Union, have taken ground & led off in favour of Gen'l Taylor. They have no higher object than to have another chance for getting an office if he should be elected.

3rd, Another cause of the result in Tennessee, [is] the overconfidence of the Democratic party in their strength, and the consequent failure to make the proper exertion in the late contest.

Polk was capable of making bitter personal enemies politically. His dislike often went to the extent that he was not on speaking terms with them. Yet it is interesting that he reserved his strongest feelings not for the

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77 Letter to Governor Brown of Tennessee, October 24, 1845. Polk Papers, Library of Congress. Polk denied the charge that he had "dictated" the political decision in Tennessee.

78 Polk, Diary, III, pp. 119-120; Letters from Polk to Governor Brown of Tennessee, Sept. 8 and Nov. 1, 1847. Polk Papers, Library of Congress. Polk comforts Brown with the observation that he (Polk) had twice been defeated as gubernatorial candidate in Tennessee, but that standing on principle has its own reward.
Whigs, possibly because he expected so little from them, but for those Demo-
crats whom he considered disloyal to their party or to their country. Among
these, the two whom he disliked the most were Senator Calhoun and Representa-
tive Andrew Johnson of Tennessee. Polk had kept a record of Johnson's oppo-
sition and had denied to Johnson any voice in appointments in Tennessee. Yet
in spite of his dislike, Polk did not attempt to exert any influence to
defeat him in Tennessee. The President wrote:

There are no two districts in Tennessee more democratic or in which I
have more devoted friends than those represented by Johnson and Jones,
and though I have it in my power, as I believe, by communicating the
truth to their constituents to destroy them politically, I have not
done so.79

Polk's feelings toward Andrew Johnson did not abate during his term
in office. On New Year's Day 1849, he professed this view of Johnson's con-
duct and character, a viewpoint which has been generally shared by historians
of the Johnson Presidential administration.

Professing to be a Democrat, he has been politically if not personally
hostile to me during my whole term. He is very vindictive and perverse
in his temper and conduct. If he had the manliness or independence to
manifest his opposition openly, he knows he could not be again elected
by his constituents.80

Polk's regard for Senator Calhoun has already been indicated, and as
in the case of Andrew Johnson, Polk's ability to size up political leaders
indicates his unusual shrewdness and insight into American politics. It is
for these reasons, therefore, that the following appraisal of Senator Cal-
houn is included. The occasion for Polk's remarks was his learning of Cal-
houn's intention to support General Taylor for the Presidency.

If the rumor be true then all Mr. Calhoun's loud profession in favour of
a strict construction of the Constitution & State rights are false. It

79 Polk, Diary, II, pp. 40-41. 80 Ibid., IV, p. 265.
was but a few years ago that Mr. Calhoun was ready to nullify & dissolve the Union about the tariff. Now that the tariff has been reduced under my administration & all has been effected on that subject which he desired, he is obliged to mount some other political hobby to keep himself before the public, and for that purpose some weeks ago selected the slavery question. Finding now that he cannot gratify his ambition by the agitation of that question, he now abandons every leading political principle he has ever professed and, if the rumour be true, avows himself for Gen'l Taylor for the Presidency.... I cannot express the contempt I feel for Mr. Calhoun for such profligate political inconsistency. If I had retained him in my Cabinet & consented to yield myself up to his control, I might have secured his support, but not by the support of principle.81

Polk was capable, however, of making friends with old political rivals, and his reconciliation with Senator Bell, with whom he had not been on speaking terms ever since their bitter contests for the Speakership of the House in the 1830's, is particularly touching.82

Polk's "No Second Term" Pledge and the Election of 184883

It will be recalled that Polk disavowed any intention to run for a second term in his letter of acceptance addressed to the Baltimore Convention of 1844.84 Polk maintained this position throughout his term of office. As early as Christmas 1845, Polk informed Senator Turney that Van Buren and Calhoun had nothing to fear from him as he was not a candidate for re-election.85

Polk often expressed the view that not being a candidate for re-election gave

81 Ibid., II, pp. 470-471.
82 Ibid., III, pp. 258-285, passim. An amusing part of the reconciliation was the difficulty of getting the wives together. Polk records that: "Before he left I told him Mrs. Polk would be glad to see Mrs. Bell. He intimated that there had been some difficulty on that point, but that Mrs. Bell would call soon. I suppose the difficulty consisted in the pride which ladies sometimes feel, which makes them reluctant to yield to each other, and the fact that the established etiquette of the Presidential office required the first call from Mrs. Bell." Ibid., p. 285.
83 See Plate VIII, Political cartoon on the election of 1848, entitled "Progressive Democracy."
84 Supra, Chapter II, p. 52. 85 Polk, Diary, I, pp. 141-142.
him greater freedom of action. He felt that every political leader of any stature was an avowed candidate for the Presidency, and that as such he was always being forced to trim his sails to appeal to this group or that. Polk, however, believed that by not being a candidate he enjoyed the rare advantage of being above the partisan strife and could pursue an independent course. He also refused to align himself with any faction of the party. It becomes apparent that Polk felt that any political disadvantage which he acquired by not being a candidate for re-election was more than offset by his position as a balance between leading candidates. 86

That his tactics of playing one faction of the party against another kept control of the situation in his own hands is evidenced by the attempts which were made beginning in January of 1848 (the Democratic Convention was to be held in Baltimore on May 22nd) to induce him to run for a second term, the constant theme of his adherents being that only he could reunite the Party and provide the harmony necessary for victory. Those advocating his renomination even informed the President that it might be necessary to renominate him against his personal wishes. Undoubtedly the President was flattered by these overtures and probably would have been tempted had not his health been declining so rapidly. In each instance he maintained without wavering his intention to retire at the end of one term. 87 Eventually Polk faced the necessity of preparing a letter which would remove him from the contest and prevent his nomination in case his name should be introduced into the Convention. Polk decided to draft a letter to a Tennessee delegate to the Convention which could be read to the Convention and thus eliminate the President once and for all.

86 Ibid., pp. 201, 248-249, 265-266, 280, 402.
87 Ibid., III, p. 298, 320-321, 420-422.
from consideration. A measure of the significance the President gave to
the drafting of this letter is the fact that he consulted with almost all
members of his cabinet and with numerous other political leaders.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 448, 452, 454-458, 463.}

The letter, which was read to the Democratic National Convention
of 1848, follows:

\begin{flushright}
Washington, May 1848
\end{flushright}

Dear Sir:

From speculations which have appeared in some of the public journals,
and from frequent inquiries which have been made of me by many political
friends some of them delegates to the Democratic National Convention
which will assemble at Baltimore on the 22 inst, I am induced to suppose
that it may be the desires of some of my friends to propose my renomina-
tion as the candidate of the democratic party for the office of President
of the United States. Should you ascertain that such is the intention
of any of the delegates, I desire, through you, to communicate to the
convention that I am not a candidate for the nomination, and that any
use of my name with that view, which may be contemplated, is without any
agency or desire on my part.

The purpose declared in my letter of the 12th June 1844 in accept-
ing the nomination tendered to me by the Democratic National Convention
of that year, remains unchanged: and to relieve the convention from any
possible embarrassment which the suggestion of my name might produce in
"making a freer selection of a successor, who may be best calculated to
give effect to their will, and guard all the interests of our beloved
country," I deem it proper to reiterate the sentiments contained in that
letter. Since my election I have often expressed the sincerest desire,
which I still feel, to retire to private life at the close of my present
term.

I entertain the confident hope and belief that my democratic friends
at the convention will unite in the harmonious nomination of some citizen
to succeed me, who, if elected, will firmly maintain and carry out the
great political principles embodied in the resolutions adopted by the
Democratic National Convention in 1844. Principles which it has been the
earnest endeavor and the constant aim of my administration to preserve
and pursue, and upon the observation of which, in my opinion, mainly
depend the prosperity and permanent welfare of our country.

If, on reviewing the history of my administration, and the remarkable
events, foreign and domestic, which have attended it, it shall be the
judgment of my countrymen that I have adhered to these principles, and
faithfully performed my duty, the measure of my ambition is full, and I
am amply compensated for all the labors, cares, and anxieties which are
inseparable from the high station which I have been called to fill. I
shall ever cherish sentiments of deep gratitude to my fellow-citizens
for the confidence they reposed in me, in electing me to the most distin-
guished and responsible public trust on earth.

It is scarcely necessary that I should add, that it will be no less
my duty, than it will be my sincere pleasure as a citizen to unite with
my democratic friends in the support of the nominees of the convention
for the offices of President and Vice-President of the United States.

With great respect, I am your obedient servant,

James K. Polk

On the fourth ballot the Democratic Convention nominated Lewis Cass
as its standard-bearer. The real struggle in the Convention, however, oc-
curred in the committee on credentials. New York State came to the Conven-
tion with two sets of delegates, one group of 36 delegates representing the
Hunkers and another group of 36 delegates representing the Barnburners. A
compromise was adopted which would admit both groups of delegates but give
them only the vote to which New York was entitled. The Barnburners, however,
refused to accept the compromise and bolted the Convention. President Polk
took great satisfaction that the Convention readopted the platform of 1844
and included a resolution giving a vote of confidence to the administration
of James K. Polk. 90

Cass called on the President shortly after the Convention and asked
for Polk's comments on a draft of a reply which Cass had prepared for a com-
mittee of the Convention. 91 The President was obviously pleased with the

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90 Letter of James K. Polk to J. G. M. Ramsey of Tennessee as printed
in the Washington Union, May 26, 1848. (There is not a copy of this rather
significant Presidential letter in print.) See Plate IX for photostatic
copy of this letter, taken from letter in Polk Papers, Library of Congress.

91 Edward Stanwood, A History of the Presidency from 1788 to 1837

92 Polk, Diary, III, pp. 470-472.
respect paid to him and favored Cass' candidacy above all others as he had done for some time. For as early as February 10th, after informing Cass that as President he must remain neutral between all the candidates for the Democratic nomination, Polk wrote:

The truth is that Gen'l C. has given to my administration an honest and hearty support, and if he is the nominee I will support him with great pleasure. There is no other whom I would support with more pleasure.

Polk's optimism about the chances for Democratic victory was very short-lived, indeed. The President was a realist in politics and was aware that the withdrawal of the Barnburners from the Convention was a dangerous sign. Whenever the occasion presented itself he informed members of the Barnburners that "...if they did not support the nomination of Cass & Butler they could not continue to be members of the Democratic party...." In June when the Barnburners met in separate convention in Utica, New York and nominated Van Buren as their candidate for the Presidency, Polk remarked:

It is more threatening to the Union than anything which has occurred since the meeting of the Hartford convention in 1814. Mr. Van Buren's course is selfish, unpatriotic, and wholly inexcusable.

The President did not take the stump in behalf of Lewis Cass, for in those days it would have been considered ill-mannered for the President to do so. It will be remembered that even the candidates themselves did not deliver public addresses but were limited to expressing their views in print. In a letter on October 17, 1848 to his good friend, J. G. M. Ramsey of Tennessee,

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92 Polk continued to correspond with Cass throughout the campaign. See especially letter of November 4, 1848 in which Polk listed the various states and indicated the possible combinations which might lead to Cass's election. He also passed on what information he had been receiving from politicians in the several states. Polk Papers, Library of Congress.

93 Polk, Diary, III, p.335. 94 Ibid., p. 481. 95 Ibid., p. 502.
the President complained of the fact that his position as President prevented him from taking an active role in the Presidential election. But he expressed his views on the possible outcome of the contest, which the President regarded as very much in doubt. He suggested that Ramsey might prevail upon Joseph S. Williams, a Whig, whom Polk felt to be "a person who controls more votes in his state than any other person" to make a speech for Cass instead of Taylor. Polk observed that the old issues such as the Bank and tariff which had divided Williams and himself were no longer significant. In a second letter to Ramsey written on the same day, Polk instructed Ramsey to show Williams the other letter, with the comments that if he (Williams) should support Cass, the "whole Democracy in the state would be under his obligation." In the Polk Papers there are numerous letters of the President to influential politicians urging them to work harder for Cass's election.

Polk felt that Cass's election would enable Polk's administration to resolve the question of territorial government for California which was such a threat to the Union itself. Polk, in the previously cited letter, informed Ramsey, "If Cass is elected then great confidence -- that it will gain my administration such strength and enable me to settle this only remaining question of difficulty before I retire."

Upon learning that the Free Soilers had nominated Van Buren at their Buffalo Convention, Polk stated, "Mr. Van Buren is the most fallen man I have ever known." On election day, Polk noted that this was the first time

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97 One such example is Polk's letter to Vice-President Dallas, Oct. 14, 1848, urging Dallas and Democrats in Pennsylvania to work harder or Pennsylvania will be lost to the "Democracy." Polk Papers, Library of Congress.
98 Polk, Diary, IV, p. 67.
that all the states voted for President on the same day, in accordance with an act of Congress passed in January 1845. He went on to estimate that the popular vote would be 3,000,000. The actual vote was 2,875,000.\(^9^9\) The election was, as Polk had feared, a victory for General Taylor,\(^1^0^0\) the outcome being decided by the loss of New York State by a plurality.\(^1^0^1\) Van Buren's candidacy on the Free Soilers ticket had drawn sufficient votes away from the Democratic nominee to insure Taylor's success.\(^1^0^2\) The President greeted the news of Taylor's election with great misgivings for the welfare of the country and for the continuation of the policies of his administration. He recorded his reaction as follows:

Without political information and without experience in civil life, he \([\text{Taylor}]\) is wholly unqualified for the station, and being elected by the Federal party and the various factions of dissatisfied persons who have from time to time broken off from the Democratic party, he must be in their hands, and be under their absolute control.\(^1^0^3\) Having no opinions or judgment of his own upon any public subject, foreign or domestic, he will be compelled to rely upon the designing men of the Federal party who will cluster around him, and will be made to reverse the whole policy

\(^9^9\) Ibid., pp. 181-182.
\(^1^0^0\) As early as August 1847, Polk had written Governor Brown of Tennessee, "Clay may be a candidate, but make no mistake, Taylor is a Whig." Aug. 25, 1847, Letter of Polk to Governor Brown of Tennessee, Polk Papers, Library of Congress.

\(^1^0^1\) Polk's high regard for Cass continued. The President urged Cass to return to the Senate and he appointed Cass's son Charge of Affairs to the Papal states. Letters of Polk to Cass, November 14, 1848 and January 9, 1849. Polk Papers, Library of Congress.


\(^1^0^3\) Prior to the election, Polk had written "Should our opponent -- by any [illegible] come into power, this President must from his total want of civil qualification, be in the hands and wholly under the control of such political leaders as [illegible]... Can the country desire this? I hope not." Polk to Remsey, October 17, 1848. Polk Papers, Library of Congress.
of my administration, and to substitute the Federal policy in its stead. The country will be the loose loser by his election, and on this account it is an event which I should deeply regret.104

President Polk's record as leader of his party is a mixed one. He was able to dominate Congress and insure the successful passage of most of his legislation, but in his relations with the general public his record was rather weak. In spite of the fact that he led the nation in its desire for territorial expansion, he was unable to assume the mantle "Manifest Destiny." It was his misfortune to become President at a time when the need for the Chief Executive to be the spokesman of public opinion was just being realized. He was a master of the political maneuvers which had dominated his life as a legislator and Governor, but was unable to become a public figure on a national scale, as the rising democratic interest in politics demanded. His handling of the administration press met the earlier standards, but this technique of political leadership was on the wane during his administration. He was one of the first Presidents to recognize that patronage as a means of party control had more disadvantages than advantages for the party in power. In the last years of his administration the split in the Democratic party over the slavery issue was so deep that it is doubtful that any leader could have harmonized the differences. Certainly Polk could not, lacking as he did the magnetic personality and the means of making an appeal over the heads of political leaders to the people. Polk was a man whose whole life was centered in politics. It was the one topic of conversation which he enjoyed; the only thing in which he displayed a sense of humor, yet in spite

104 Polk, Diary, IV, p. 184. Dyer records that victory brought to Taylor "...sixteen months of tiresome struggle with the burdens and cares of an office he had not sought and for which he had no liking. It brought him discouragement, disillusionment, and death." Dyer, op. cit., p. 501.
of this total preoccupation with politics, he never completely mastered this most subtle role of the American Presidency. He was unable to supply the charismatic leadership which is essential to real success in this field.
The Democratic victory in 1844 brought to the office of President of the United States a man who was determined to establish for that position the prerogatives of an independent, equal branch of the government which his political mentor Andrew Jackson had successfully asserted during his term of office. President Polk was to fix the Jacksonian concept of the Presidency by his continued willingness and insistence upon being the nucleus about which his entire administration revolved. He accepted without question or doubt all the vast responsibility which the office placed upon his shoulders; he was never willing to say that a Presidential responsibility for a given task rested with Congress, with a member of his cabinet, or with the military. Rather by all his words and deeds he said the responsibility rested with the President.

If Jackson in his fight over the Bank asserted the principle that the President was as representative of the people as was the Congress, Polk was even more explicit in his challenge to the Whig claims that only Congress, certainly not the President, was the true spokesman for the people. By contrasting Jackson's two statements on Presidential responsibility with that of Polk, it becomes obvious that Polk understood more clearly than Jackson the changed role of the President. Jackson in his first message to Congress, with obvious reference to the election of 1825, recommended the direct election of the President so that "as few impediments as possible
should exist to the free operation of the public will,"\(^1\) and in 1834 Jackson in asserting his right to control his cabinet members stated, "The President is the direct representative of the American people, but the Secretaries are not."\(^2\) Neither of these statements by Jackson, the one being concerned with defects of the electoral college and the other with Presidential authority over his subordinates, confronted clearly the question whether Congress or the President was the true representative of the people. Certainly President Polk's views are a more direct refutation of the Whig position, which President Harrison stated as follows:

...it is preposterous to suppose that a thought could for a moment be entertained that the President, placed at the capital, in the center of the country, could better understand the wants and wishes of the people than their own immediate representatives...\(^3\)

Polk chose his fourth and last annual message to Congress to deliver his considered view on this most significant question — a view that reflected his continued application of the Presidential responsibility.

The people, by the Constitution, have commanded the President, as much as they have commanded the legislative branch of the Government, to execute their will. If it be said that the Representatives in the popular branch of Congress are chosen directly by the people, it is answered, the people elect the President. If both Houses represent the States and the people, so does the President. The President represents in the executive department the whole people of the United States, as each member of the legislative department represents portions of them.\(^4\)

He implemented this belief by leading Congress to enact a legislative program of his own choosing; he was not content merely to recommend and let Congress dispose. It mattered not whether the issue be domestic tariff legislation or an important war measure, the President was in the fore-

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\(^1\) Richardson, Messages, II, p. 448.  
\(^2\) Ibid., III, p. 90.  
\(^3\) Ibid., IV, pp. 7-10.  
\(^4\) Ibid., IV, pp. 664-665.
ground leading the administrative forces to victory. Even his handling of
the Oregon Boundary dispute was consistent, although paradoxical, for, while
seemingly surrendering leadership to the Senate by asking for its prior
approval, he was able to achieve what by any other means might have proven
impossible.

By his refusal to answer a request from Congress which omitted the
usual reservation, "...if not incompatible with the public interests," he
protected the integrity of the executive from a possible misuse of the Con­
gressional investigative power. Even in his unsuccessful attempt to resolve
the conflict over the extension of slavery in the newly acquired territories,
he recognized that Presidential responsibility required him to be the spokes­
man for the whole Union, rather than a sectional leader. By refusing to
give countenance to the extremists, he made all aware of their responsibility
to the nation and gained the time so essential for national survival. Had
President Polk in 1848 elected to cast his lot with Calhoun and his followers,
the geographical parties would have been born eight years earlier, at a time
when the North might well have consented without a struggle to the South's
leaving the Union. President Polk, without embarrassment or apology, might
well have repeated Jackson's famous words, "The Federal Union -- it must be
preserved."

A Jacksonian-type President must do more than meet emergencies and
defend his prerogatives, for at the core of our concept of the Jacksonian
strong executive is the expectation that the President will have a program,
a definite set of objectives and goals to be accomplished, and that in addi­
tion to having a program he will have the ability to get it implemented.
Bernard De Voto in describing President Polk expressed this view most forcefully:
But if his mind was narrow it was also powerful and he had guts. If he was orthodox, his integrity was absolute, and he could not be scared, manipulated, or brought to heel. No one bluffed him, no one moved him with direct or oblique pressure. Furthermore, he knew how to get things done, which is the first necessity of government, and he knew what he wanted done, which is the second.  

The record is clear that Polk came to office with his goals clearly in mind, for during the inaugural parade he informed George Bancroft, historian and Polk’s Secretary of the Navy and Ambassador to England, of the four great measures of his administration. In foreign affairs they were the acquisition of California and the settlement of the Oregon Boundary dispute with Great Britain. The domestic program consisted of a lowering of the tariff to almost a free-trade standard and the establishment of the independent treasury.  

President Polk as chief of foreign affairs adhered relentlessly to his prime objectives. Although his methods often varied, encompassing such diversity as the sub rosa negotiations with Santa Anna, and the display of a harsh attitude before Congress, while at the same time offering, through diplomatic channels, to compromise the Oregon dispute, he never wavered from his ultimate goals. When the final decision had to be made, he remained firm, even if that meant accepting a treaty negotiated by a disliked and discredited commissioner and opposing the leading members of his own cabinet in their desire for still greater territorial expansion, and even if it necessitated getting the prior approval of Congress to the Oregon settlement. Throughout his administration he adhered to his ultimate

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objectives with stubborn determination, never permitting obstacles or emotional involvement to deflect him from his course.

During his entire administration, which is noted for its activity in the field of foreign relations, his leadership was constantly being challenged. More often than not, his own Secretary of State was to be found in opposition to his views, yet President Polk was able and willing to keep Buchanan in his cabinet, for he could never dominate the President. Nor was Polk's opposition limited to his Secretary of State; he was constantly opposed by the Whigs in Congress, who after 1846 were in a majority in the lower house; also in opposition during different periods in his administration were sizable elements of the Democratic Congressional delegation. Yet, in spite of this constant opposition, he was able to accomplish every major objective of his foreign policy, so that he could in truth state in 1848 that:

My successor will be relieved of all existing questions of difficulty with Foreign Nations.... His situation in this respect will be very different from mine when I assumed the administration of the Government on the 4th of March 1845.7

Since the time of Andrew Jackson we have looked to the President to embody the national sentiment. For example, we use the phrase, "age of Jackson," as the symbol of the break from autocratic rule and the beginning of popular democracy. In a similar fashion, Woodrow Wilson has become identified with the term, "New Freedom," Franklin D. Roosevelt with the "New Deal," and James K. Polk with "Manifest Destiny." To those who insist, from a restricted view of history, that western expansion should be explained solely in terms of economic determinism and a slave economy, the following

7Polk, Diary, IV, p. 267.
passage from Bernard De Voto is quoted:

...that expansionism contained such other unanalyzable elements as romance, Utopianism, and the dream that men might yet be free. It also contained another category of ingredients — such as the logic of geography, which the map of January 1, 1846, made quite as clear to the Americans then as it is to anyone today. You yourself, looking at a map in which Oregon was jointly occupied by a foreign power and all the rest of the continent west of Texas and the continental divide was foreign territory would experience a feeling made up of incompleteness and insecurity. Both incompleteness and insecurity were a good deal more alive in the 1840's than anything short of invasion could make them now. And finally, expansionism had acquired an emotion that was new — or at least signified a new combination. The Americans had always devoutly believed that the superiority of their institutions, government, and mode of life would eventually spread, by inspiration and imitation to less fortunate, less happy peoples. That devout belief now took a new phase: it was perhaps the American destiny to spread our free admirable institutions by action as well as by example, by occupying territory as well as by practising virtue.... For the sum of these feelings, a Democratic editor found, in the summer of '45, one of the most dynamic phrases ever minted, Manifest Destiny.

James K. Polk was able to give concrete meaning to that phrase; to him it meant Texas to the Rio Grande, certainly; Oregon, at least including the Columbia River; but more than that it meant California. His objectives clear, he organized his authority to achieve them, peacefully if possible, but by war if that was necessary. And even those who deplore his methods would be most reluctant to abandon the territory which he added to the nation.

Yet it is paradoxical that it was on this issue that President Polk fell short of fulfilling that Presidential requirement significant since Jackson's time of being the leader of public opinion. For ordinary times or for any President prior to Andrew Jackson, Polk's record as the champion of manifest destiny would have marked him as a successful leader, but the years from 1845 to 1849 were not ordinary; momentous decisions had been

made, the West had been won, the slavery issue could no longer be over-
looked, and most important of all there was a new vitality in the polit-
ical affairs of the nation, a new democratic fervor was in the air, the
voices of the multitude had to be heard and provided with leadership.
President Polk, although a man of great humanitarian and democratic feel-
ing, was unable to provide the necessary leadership; the people would have
to wait for a man named Lincoln.

Polk was no people's hero; he understood partisan politics well;
he appreciated the significance of party discipline, which he thought could
be obtained only through loyalty to a rational legislative program or by
an appeal to the base motive of the desire for jobs. In this latter regard
he was probably the first President to recognize, much to his own surprise,
that patronage had disadvantages which outnumbered its advantages; yet he
was unable to perceive any method, such as a merit system, for eliminating
the problem. In a day when the partisan press was rapidly losing its sig-
nificance as a political organ, it remained the only way he knew to appeal
to the people. He could muster the votes for his program, but not the
support of public opinion necessary for great leadership.

President Polk's control over the executive branch of the govern-
ment greatly exceeded that of President Jackson. While it is true that when
the necessity arose Jackson was willing to dismiss members of his cabinet
who endangered his supremacy, he failed to exercise anything like the con-
stant control over his subordinates that Polk insisted upon exercising.
Jackson often disregarded the day-by-day operations of government and was
prone to ignore or by-pass his cabinet in favor of relying upon the unoffic-
ial advisers who constituted the well-known "kitchen cabinet." Polk, in
contrast both to this Jacksonian technique and to the Whig view that the cabinet constituted a council whose advice was legally binding upon the President, asserted his independence and personal responsibility for the conduct of every action anywhere in the executive branch, while at the same time making constant use of his cabinet as the chief coordinating body of the government and as a sounding board for discussion of administration policy. Furthermore, Polk expected and insisted that his cabinet members be loyal to the program of his administration and use their political influence to advance that program through the halls of Congress.

It mattered not whether Polk was dealing with his cabinet as a whole or with an individual member -- the Secretary of State or of the Treasury -- Polk insisted that there be but one voice for his administration. He clearly understood that unity in the executive was a prime requisite for responsible government. Undoubtedly it would be impossible for a present-day executive to supervise the details of administration to the extent that Polk was able to do, but his right to do so and his responsibility for the actions of the subordinate officials President Polk clearly established. He exemplified the virtues of hard work and diligent application of energy to the task to be accomplished. It never occurred to him to answer an inquiry with evasion or a denial of responsibility. To a greater extent than any previous President, he asserted the right of the President to control every aspect of administration. His control over the Treasury and the budgetary process was unique, in that for the first time he brought that function, which had been beyond Presidential control from the time of Alexander Hamilton, under the day-by-day control of the President. This was done without fanfare or dismissal but as a matter of routine administrative supervision. His control over the Treasury
was so thorough-going that for the first time there was presented to the Congress and to the people a truly executive budget, which accurately reflected the intent of the government. In dominating affairs both large and small of the subordinate officers and agencies of the administration, Polk contributed to Presidential aggrandizement to an extent unchallenged by the acts of any of his predecessors, even Andrew Jackson.

Polk established that a President without previous military service could serve in fact as well as in name as the Commander-in-Chief, and do so successfully. He was able to accomplish this by his constant attention to every phase of military matter from planning grand strategy to such incidental problems as supplying army mules. By knowing more than any other person in his administration about the many facets of military operation, he was able to maintain control. He brought the Department of War and Navy into the same constitutional relationship with the President as the other departments of the government. This was done in the same manner in which he brought the Treasury Department under his control; that is, by knowing the details of administration and by insisting that he was responsible for every decision anywhere in the chain of command. Whether civilians or military men, no army officials were too high or too strong to escape his surveillance, nor were any too insignificant to avoid his supervision.

His record of success as Commander-in-Chief was achieved in spite of opposition to the war on the part of a large segment of the Congress and of the public generally. Probably not until the Korean War has there existed such an organized opposition by the people of the country to a military action being carried on by the government. Furthermore, President Polk was faced with the open hostility of his leading military commanders, who
resented his interference in what seemed to them purely military affairs. The President, always suspicious of Whig motives and intentions, was hardly reassured when, before the war had ended, his most popular and successful field commander became an avowed Whig Presidential candidate. This was not the last time that an opposition party which strongly opposed the conduct of a war considered selecting, nevertheless, one of the leading generals as the party's standard-bearer in the next election. Polk continued, however, to assert his own pre-eminent position, which the Constitution had given him.

It is rather unfortunate that James K. Polk, who probably more than any of his contemporaries had been schooled in the traditions of party politics, was not a greater success as party chief. It was an even greater misfortune for the nation that he was unable completely to master this most difficult of Presidential roles; for, had his leadership been greater, he might have mended the rift in the party and the nation over the slavery issue. In 1860 it was too late for Senator Douglas's compromise doctrine of "squatter sovereignty" to be acceptable to either side; but had President Polk in 1848, who clearly saw the danger to the union, been able to provide a more dynamic leadership along with his support of the doctrine, it might have been possible to secure the necessary consent for the compromise.

A President, however, who was able to secure the passage by Congress of every leading measure of his administration can hardly be called a failure as a party chief. This was President Polk's record, and it included the passage of a lower tariff, the enactment of the independent treasury bill, which was to continue as the principal banking act of the country until the Federal Reserve System was enacted during the Wilson administration, the settlement of the Oregon boundary dispute and its acceptance by a hostile
Senate, Congressional recognition of a state of war with Mexico, and the passage of the necessary legislation to bring the war to a successful conclusion. A conclusion which was to add vast new territory to the Union.

This dissertation has as its thesis a twofold proposition: first, that the Polk administration institutionalized those changes in the American Presidency which have become associated with the Jacksonian-type executive; and, second, as a coordinate thesis, that President Polk in his own right made some significant contributions to Presidential aggrandizement.

In reference to the first proposition it has been demonstrated that Polk, in a more direct manner even than Jackson, advocated and acted upon a theory that the executive is directly responsible to the people. Furthermore, Polk controlled the subordinate executive officers of the government with a degree of consistency never equalled by Jackson. Polk as the driving power behind "Manifest Destiny" represented the great force of his time, as Jackson had been in a similar way the symbol of the growing demands for popular democracy during his administration. Finally, as a political leader Polk attempted to follow closely in Jackson's path, but already the times were demanding a new type of leadership, a dynamic personal leadership of the people, a role which Polk was unable to fill.

In reference to the second proposition, it is necessary to refer again to Polk's control over the subordinate officials of the executive branch of the government, for in this regard Polk's supervision was so much more pervasive than Jackson's that it really represents a difference in kind rather than in degree. Polk established beyond challenge and as a matter of institutionalized routine the right and the responsibility of the President to control and supervise all actions of the executive branch
of the government. This was carried to the extent of instituting for the first time a truly executive budget, which reflected the President's choice of goals and administrative objectives. Polk's other major contribution to Presidential development was his domination in a similar fashion of the military. He resolved the constitutional doubt which Madison's inept exercise of the Commander-in-Chief role had raised regarding that important Presidential function by demonstrating conclusively in time of war that a civilian without previous military experience could effectively exercise the powers of military command which the Constitution had placed in his hands.

George Bancroft's judgment of the Polk presidency, delivered forty years after the fact, still represents what is perhaps the most appropriate concluding note for this dissertation.

His [Polk's] administration viewed from the standpoint of results, was perhaps the greatest in our national history, certainly one of the greatest. He succeeded because he insisted on being its center and in overruling and guiding all his secretaries to act so as to produce unity and harmony.9

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It seems to me there’s the devil to pay with the president, yet, behold his great toe, greater than any Pope’s.” Read firmly on the line 58° 40’. Patriotic, even in dreams!

Thou dost certainly strike a strong blow of a blow on the table! Perhaps his excellency has been practicing his vote taking previous to commencing his campaign.

I guess there’s a screw loose here! I wonder what Polk’s going to do!

Child of my adoption, on whom my mantle hath fallen, swear never to take your toe off that line should you deluge your country with seas of blood, produce a servile insurrection and dislocate every joint of this happy and prosperous union!!!

I do, by the eternal!

[Image of a political cartoon with various figures and text boxes, illustrating a satirical scene involving political figures and a “dream” scenario.]
GOVERNOR OF THE STATE OF TENNESSEE.
The Patriots Getting Their Beans.
PROGRESSIVE DEMOCRACY.

Manifest Destiny:
New Mexico,
California,
Chihuahua,
Zacatecas,
MEXICO,
Pern,
Yucatan,
Cuba.

A WAR PRESIDENT.
Washington, D.C.
May 20, 1848.

Sir,

From speculations which appear in some of the public journals to come fragment, requiring a full and
made of me, by many political friends, some of them delegating to the Democratic National
whether will assemble at Baltimore as the
will consider, I am induced to infer that it may be the desire of some of my friends to
propose my renomination as the candidate
of the Democratic party for the office of
President of the United States. And you
assure me that such is the intention of any
of the friends, I desire through your
Communications to the Convention that I am not a candidate for the nomination, and
that any use of my name until such time
which may be contemplated is without my
agreement or desire on my part.

The purpose declared in my message to the
of some Philip de Rothschild. The Constitution attempted to meet by the Democratic National Convention of that year, naming candidates, and to revise the Constitution, from my political preferences and the suggestions of my numerous friends and advisers, in making a fair exhibition of a better and more just combination to serve effort to their duty in and for the interest of our beloved country. I have to offer it to the voting community contained in this letter. Some of these ideas I have often expressed to the writers therein which I still wish to retire to private life at the close of my present term.

I must confess the sentiments here expressed alike the Democratic principles of the Constitution and into the harmonious revision of some things to succeed men who of others, will firmly maintain and carry out the great political principles, embodied in the building adopted by the Democratic National Convention in 1870, a principle, which it has been the utmost endeavours, and to constant care of the annoyance to preserve and perfect, some of the directions of which in my
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The Democratic victory in 1844 brought to the office of President of the United States a man who was determined to establish for that position the prerogatives of an independent, equal branch of the government. He accepted without question or doubt all the vast responsibility which the office placed upon his shoulders; he was never willing to say that a Presidential responsibility for a given task rested with Congress, with a member of his cabinet, or with the military. Rather by all his words and deeds he said the responsibility rested with the President.

This dissertation has as its thesis a twofold proposition: first, that the Polk administration institutionalized those changes in the American Presidency which have become associated with the Jacksonian-type executive; and, second, as a coordinate thesis, that President Polk in his own right made some significant contributions to the presidency.

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the times were demanding a new type of leadership, a dynamic personal leadership of the people, a role which Polk was unable to fill.

To demonstrate the second proposition, it is necessary to refer again to Polk's control over the subordinate officials of the executive branch of the government, for in this regard Polk's supervision was so much more pervasive than Jackson's that it really represents a difference in kind rather than degree. Polk established the precedent that as a matter of institutionalized routine it was the right and the responsibility of the President to control and supervise all actions of the executive branch of the government. This was carried to the extent of instituting for the first time a truly executive budget, which reflected the President's choice of goals and administrative objectives. Polk's other major contribution to Presidential development was his domination in a similar fashion of the military. He resolved the constitutional doubt which Madison's in­ept exercise of the role of commander-in-chief had raised regarding that important Presidential function by demonstrating conclusively in time of war that a civilian without previous military experience could effectively exercise the powers of military command which the Constitution had placed in his hands.

The material in this dissertation is presented in terms of the traditional analysis of Presidential authority and operations. As Louis Brownlow reminds us, no cataloging of the various roles that the President plays would satisfy all students of the Presidency. Nevertheless, for purposes of analysis, it seems essential to make such a classification so that the tools of the political scientist can best be brought to bear on the subject. Therefore, chronological order has been sacrificed for analytical clarity, and the dissertation is organized around such themes as Polk's
concept of the Presidency and the President as commander-in-chief, chief of foreign affairs, chief legislator, and party chief.

In addition to the contemporary works on the Presidency and historical studies of the period the dissertation makes extensive use of Polk's diaries and his personal papers which have been collected at the Library of Congress.
Autobiographical Sketch

I was born in Chicago on the 19th of May, 1920. My father, Charles Richard McCoy and my mother, Mrs. Marie Peterson McCoy, are both deceased. I attended the public schools of Oak Park, Illinois, receiving my high school diploma in 1938 from the Oak Park and River Forest Township High School.

By 1940, I was financially able to enter college, and enrolled at Illinois State Normal University, Normal, Illinois. In March of 1941, however, I entered the military service and remained in service until April, 1946. Upon my release from the army, I re-entered Illinois State Normal University and received the B.S. in Ed. degree in June of 1948.

In September of 1940, I began my graduate work at Colgate University, majoring in political science. In 1950, I received the M.A. with distinction. While at Colgate, I also served as a Graduate Preceptor.

From September, 1950 until February, 1954, I taught economics and government at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, Worcester, Massachusetts where I attained the rank of Assistant Professor. During that period I continued my graduate studies, enrolling as a candidate for the Ph.D. in Government at Boston University.

In February, 1954, I left Worcester Polytechnic Institute to accept a position as a Research Assistant in the Bureau of Public Administration, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia. I remained there until September of 1956, at which time I accepted a teaching position at Temple University, where I am presently employed. In addition to teaching American National Government, I also teach courses in Political Theory and Comparative Government.