

Chapter 6 WHO IS JAMES K. POLK?

The mission on which Kearny led the Army of the West had no precedent in American history. For the first time the U.S. Army was setting out to invade, and permanently occupy, vast portions of a sovereign nation. It was a bald landgrab of gargantuan proportions. President James K. Polk expected Kearny to march nearly one thousand miles and promptly conquer a territory nearly half as large as the existing United States. After reaching Santa Fe and taking New Mexico, he was then to keep moving west, taking all of what is now Arizona and parts of present-day Colorado, Utah, and Nevada, and finally, the greatest prize, California, until the American flag smiled over the blue Pacific. All of the lands in this vast, tattered kingdom were to fall in a single dash.

The war with Mexico was a complex affair with many tentacles of grievance, real and imagined, reaching back many years. Most immediately, the war had to do with Texas. Late the previous year, 1845, the United States had officially annexed the Lone Star Republic, which, a decade earlier, had declared its independence from Mexico after the bloody battles at the Alamo and San Jacinto. But Mexico had never recognized Texas's claim of independence and certainly was not prepared to see it pass into United States possession. President Polk had sent an emissary named John Slidell to Mexico City to negotiate the purchase of Texas, with borders set to the Rio Grande, for some \$10 million. While he was at it, Polk instructed Slidell to offer to purchase California and New Mexico, for another \$20 million, but this bold overture came to nothing. Realizing that neither diplomacy nor outright bartering would achieve his expansionist ends, Polk was determined to provoke a war. He dispatched Gen. Zachary Taylor to disputed territory between the Nueces and the Rio Grande, in southern Texas. It was an unobvious attempt to create the first sparks. In April 1846, Taylor's soldiers were fired upon, and Polk was thus given the pretext he needed to declare war.

"American blood has been spilled on American soil," Polk spluttered with righteous indignation, neglecting to mention that Taylor had done everything within his power to invite attack, and that anyway, it wasn't really American soil—at least not yet. Mexico had "insulted the nation," the

president charged, and now must be punished for its treachery, beaten back, relieved of vast tracts of real estate it was not fit to govern.

The simple truth was, Polk wanted more territory. No president in American history had ever been so frank in his aims for seizing real estate; it was a curious time in the history of the settlement of North America, a time when the European powers, though fast losing their purchase on the New World, still held dreams of securing the last great unmapped chunks of a wild continent. Britain had designs on the Oregon Territory, and the Russian trappers and sea otter barons, from their bases in Alaska, still maintained a feeble influence along the Northern California coast. Even warring France and Spain nursed various intrigues.

In this competitive environment, President Polk took the position that the United States should aggressively pursue its territorial interests now or else risk forfeiting them forever. Polk especially had his eyes on the ports of California, but he found it hard to resist any of the lands that lay between the existing United States and the Pacific. Nearly from the moment he took office in 1845, Polk had seemed perfectly willing to fight two simultaneous wars—one with Mexico over Texas and California, and another with Great Britain over Oregon—in order to gain the lands he so brazenly coveted.

The eleventh president of the United States was a sly, misanthropic man with long gray hair swept back from his blocky forehead. His jaw was clenched, his countenance grimly determined. He wore a long black coat that was frumpish and out of style, its pockets stuffed with letters. It was impossible to know what the president was thinking. He kept his prim mouth shut, and his gray eyes, hard and jewel-like, gave up nothing.

Perhaps Polk's dour nature had something to do with the excruciating medical condition that he long suffered from as a teenager growing up in Columbia, Tennessee. At seventeen, after years of anguish that seemed to imprint a permanent grimace on his adolescent face, Polk was diagnosed with urinary stones. He was taken by horse-drawn ambulance to a famous Kentucky physician, Dr. Ephraim McDowell, and there underwent what was then a state-of-the-art surgery. With nothing more than brandy for an anesthetic, the future president was strapped naked to the operating table with his legs hoisted high in the air. Dr. McDowell bored through the prostate and into the bladder with a medieval-looking tool called a "gorget." The stones were successfully removed, but the operation is thought to have left Polk sterile and impotent. Polk biographer John Seigenthaler thought that Polk "became a man on Dr. McDowell's operating table. Here, for the first time, were evidences of the courage, grit, and unyielding iron

will that Whigs, the British Crown, and the Mexican Army would encounter once he became president."

Polk had been elected in one of the closest contests in American history, one from which many claims of election fraud arose. After the dust of the 1844 campaign settled, no one seemed entirely sure how this small, stern political operative had risen from obscurity to defeat the great Whig candidate Henry Clay. As a speaker Polk was plodding and colorless, a master of the single-entendre. John Quincy Adams said that Polk "has no wit, no literature, no gracefulness of delivery, no elegance of language, no philosophy, no pathos, no felicitous impromptus." Considered the first "dark horse" candidate in presidential history, Polk was nominated on the ninth ballot at the Democratic Party convention in Baltimore. The news of his nomination was shot to Washington by brand-new telegraph lines, the first occasion Samuel Morse's startling invention had been used for a public purpose.

The debonair Clay, sure of his national stature, had underestimated Polk's determination and dismissed the upstart with the mocking campaign slogan "Who is James K. Polk?" But in the end, Polk was elected by a margin of forty thousand votes and became, at age forty-nine, what was then the youngest president in the country's history.

There was about Polk's presidency an acute sense of deadline: As a candidate he vowed that he would seek only one term of office and he would keep his campaign promise. He had four years to accomplish everything and that was it—he would exit the stage. And so everything in Polk's administration was compressed, intensified, accelerated. Extraordinarily, Polk succeeded in achieving nearly all of his goals. Despite his insufferable personality, he was possibly the most effective president in American history—and likely the least corrupt. He outmaneuvered his critics. He established an independent treasury. He confronted the British and conquered Mexico. He seized the western third of the North American continent. By the time he left office, the American land mass would increase by 522 million acres.

Four years was all he needed. Polk would limp home to Tennessee exhausted and seriously ill, suffering from what he called a "derangement of the bowels." In three months he would be dead.

Who was James K. Polk? A stranger, a telegram, a joyless, childless man fueled by an expansionist agenda. A political masochist who gritted his teeth and endured the national growing pains. The populace had picked him to do bold things in a short amount of time. He seemed to spring from nowhere, and there he returned.

Perhaps to dignify the nakedness of Polk's land lust, the American citizenry had got itself whipped into an idealistic frenzy, believing with an almost religious assurance that its republican form of government and its constitutional freedoms should extend to the benighted reaches of the continent then held by Mexico, which, with its feudal customs and Popish superstitions, stood squarely in the way of Progress. To conquer Mexico, in other words, would be to do it a favor.

Mexico's hold on its sparsely populated northern provinces was tenuous at best. Having won independence from Spain in 1821, the young country was poor, disorganized, politically unstable, and hopelessly corrupt. Its army was weak, its people demoralized. The remote territory of New Mexico, nearly two thousand miles from a largely indifferent government in Mexico City, lay withering on the vine. What's more, the Santa Fe Trail had opened up many New Mexican eyes, and pocketbooks, to the benefits of a flourishing commerce with the United States. The Santa Fe trade had convinced many of the superiority of American goods—shoes, textiles, cutlery, tools, rifles—and the burgeoning relationship had bettered their lives in practical ways; for all intents and purposes, much of northern Mexico had already begun to fall within the sphere of American influence.

Whether U.S. expansionism was morally right or wrong, most Americans seemed to believe that it was inevitable—and that there was little point in resisting the tide of history. America and its ideals and institutions were spreading outward, westward, onward. The country could scarcely contain itself. The spirit of expansionism was everywhere in the air, like some beneficent germ. As the volunteers of Missouri marched, they marched with a kind of national giddiness. John Hughes rhapsodized that every soldier in the Army of the West "felt that he was a citizen of the model republic." Possessed of "a high moral sense and a conscious superiority over the Mexican people," Hughes wrote, they were embarked on a mission of high romance—west to the Pacific, south to the Halls of Montezuma.

A few years earlier a young New York editor named John O'Sullivan had coined the self-justifying phrase that captured the righteous new tilt of the country. Writing in the *New York Morning News*, O'Sullivan argued that it was the fate of the United States, necessary and quite inexorable, to sweep westward and settle North America from sea to sea, "to overspread and possess the whole continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions." In order to advance "the great experiment of liberty," the American republic must absorb new lands. It was, O'Sullivan suggested, her "manifest destiny."

At universities across the country, the youth had become smitten with the notion of American exceptionalism, and students began to show their patriotic fervor in a fashionable campus craze called the Young America Movement, which, among other things, unequivocally advocated westward expansion. Even the country's literary elite seemed to buy into Manifest Destiny. Herman Melville declared that "America can hardly be said to have any western bound but the ocean that washes Asia." Walt Whitman thought that Mexico must be taught a "vigorous lesson." Too long had Washington "listened with deaf ears to the insolent gasconade of [Mexico's] government," Whitman argued; now it was time for "Democracy, with its manly heart and its lion strength to spurn the ligatures wherewith drivellers would bind it." Lake Polk, Whitman had his eyes on New Mexico and California, asking, "How long a time will elapse before they shine as two new stars in our mighty firmament?"

At the same time, many critics warned that the war was an enormous mistake. Polk's enemies in the Whig Party opposed the war for all sorts of reasons—some genuine, some cynically political. Other critics, moved by religious or racial concerns, saw great peril in absorbing a Catholic, Hispanic country. Still others brooded over an even more nettlesome question—namely, would the new lands that would likely be gained by the war ultimately become slaveholding or free? Much of the early dissent came out of Massachusetts from a group of abolitionists who called themselves the Conscience Whigs. Led by Charles Francis Adams, son of John Quincy Adams, these critics bemoaned not only "the iniquity of aggression but the iniquity of its purpose—the spread of slavery." Perhaps the most eloquent among the war's opponents was the great Transcendentalist essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson. "The United States will conquer Mexico," he predicted, "but it will be as the man who swallows the arsenic which brings him down in turn. Mexico will poison us."

Still other opponents of the war were critical of the land itself: What was the point, they asked, of conquering a godforsaken desert? Apart from the established value of the Santa Fe trade, New Mexico was not thought to be much of an asset. Kearny had people traveling with him from the Corps of Topographical Engineers, trained scientists like Lt. William Emory, who, in addition to mapping the terrain with state-of-the-art geodetic and astronomical equipment, would be homing in on all sorts of nitry-gritty economic questions, like: Was there coal in New Mexico? Was there good hardwood timber? Was the grazing decent? What were the possibilities for industry, trade, and agriculture—and with agriculture, slavery? How good was the soil in the river bottoms?

Yet most officials back in Washington seriously doubted whether the poor desert province was, in and of itself, worth taking. Expansionists like President Polk, however, believed that the main value of this tract was its contiguity to other, more valuable places: For how could America meaningfully own California without all the country that lay between it and the existing United States? What was the point of having Pacific ports, and the hoped-for trade with China and the rest of the Orient, without also having the intervening lands? Manifest Destiny did not countenance geographical gaps and untidy voids—it was an all-or-nothing concept tied to the free flow of an envisioned commerce.

The tantalizing dream already dancing in the heads of tycoons and politicians back east was a transcontinental railway that would connect New York and Washington to Southern California, quite possibly following the same route the Army of the West had just taken, through Missouri and Kansas, cutting south-by-southwest along the Santa Fe Trail. In his extensive notes, Lieutenant Emory, a perspicacious West Pointer, deemed the route promising thus far. "The road from Leavenworth presents few obstacles for a railway," he wrote, "and, if it continues as good to the Pacific, will be one of the routes to be considered." Emory saw a day when "immense quantities of merchandise will pass into what may become the rich and populous States of Sonora, Durango, and Southern California."

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Missouri had long been the portal of American expansion, the pad where great expeditions were outfitted and adventures launched, the place where the westerling fever burned at its highest pitch. It was the flash point, the port of embarkation. The state's own senator, the famed Thomas Hart Benton, was perhaps the greatest exponent of westward expansion, and his unapologetic vision of a continental United States animated the Missourians as they pressed toward New Mexico.

The great-uncle of the famous American painter of the same name, Tom Benton was an enormous man with an even more enormous influence. The sixty-five-year-old senator had a long nose and an imposing head nimbused with white hair. In the Senate, as in every other sphere of his life, he was a tenacious fighter. He'd been involved in several duels over the years—one against Andrew Jackson that ended with the future president lying badly wounded, his shoulder shattered, in a pool of his own blood.

Benton was one of the lions of the Senate at a time when the Senate was full of lions—roaring egos like Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, and John C. Calhoun. An ultrahawk, Benton served as chairman of the Senate Military Affairs Committee. He had been in the Senate for more than twenty years,

ever since Missouri became a state following passage of the Missouri Compromise of 1820. He was a thoroughly self-made, self-educated man who had cured his boyhood tuberculosis through a regimen of cold showers and vigorous outdoor activity. His daughter Jessie wrote that through his illness he had found an "ally within himself on which he could surely rely—his own will."

He was deaf in one ear from his proximity to a national tragedy that had occurred three years earlier. In February 1844, Benton and a number of other Washington dignitaries had boarded the USS *Princeton* for a Sunday cruise down the Potomac. The ship was captained by Robert Stockton, a flamboyant commodore who would play a prominent role in the American conquest of California. At some point during the excursion, Stockton had ordered his naval gunners to fire a few exhibition rounds from a new cannon that had been placed on board. But something went wrong and the cannon fired directly into the assembled crowd of politicians and military officers. A number of dignitaries were killed by shrapnel, including Secretary of State Abel Upshur and Navy Secretary Thomas Gilmer. Benton survived only by sheer luck—moments before the blast, he had moved a few feet away in search of a better vantage point from which to study the gunner's marksmanship. Still, the blast ruptured his eardrum and left him in such severe shock that it took him several months to recover.

He found his peace in books. An obsessed bibliophile, Senator Benton was said to have the best library west of the Mississippi, and quite possibly, in his third-floor Washington study, the best library east of the Mississippi as well. He was especially fond of his rare editions of Plutarch, Herodotus, and the ponderous *British State Trials*, from which he quoted freely and obnoxiously. He was known around Washington as a breathing encyclopedia. Daniel Webster said that Benton "knows more political facts than any other man I have met, even more than John Quincy Adams."

Benton would deliver stem-winding filibusters that might last for twelve hours, full of abstruse facts dressed up in purple layers of grandiloquence. One biographer said Benton "literally smothered listeners with the columns of his research." He would sprinkle not only his formal speeches but even ordinary conversations with lofty allusions from Greek and Roman literature. Another Benton biographer, Teddy Roosevelt, said that the senator, though he had "much erudition," was "grievously afflicted with the rage for cheap pseudo-classicism." Roosevelt went on to capture Benton in a series of pungent fragmentary descriptions: The senator had, he said, a "magnificent physique." He "waxed hot and wrathful" and was "fond of

windy orations" in which he "fairly foamed at the mouth." He had an "aggressive patriotism" and an "immense capacity for work," but was "unfortunately deficient in the sense of humor."

Well before the war with Mexico, Benton had kept the long fingers of American settlement steadily curling toward the Pacific. During his first term as senator, in the 1820s, Benton proposed a public works bill that created a true national commerce road from Missouri to New Mexico—the road that became known as the Santa Fe Trail. It was Benton who had pushed for the opening of the Oregon Trail, along which thousands of emigrants were now traveling each year to settle the fertile Willamette Valley. Early on Benton had recognized the necessity of topographical expeditions to map and explore the West, and through his impeccable connections he'd seen to it that his son-in-law John C. Fremont got the choice assignments. More than anyone else in Washington—more than President Polk, even—Tom Benton was the face and voice of Manifest Destiny.

Yet he had arrived at his position by an oblique and unpredictable path, and it was this that made him one of the most interesting men in the Senate. A Southerner by birth, Benton represented a slave state and owned slaves himself. But he did not follow his Southern colleagues in Washington, most of whom favored western expansion primarily as a way to extend slavery into Texas, California, and elsewhere to tip the delicate national balance between slave and free states. Refreshingly, slavery had nothing to do with Benton's designs on the frontier. He regarded the Peculiar Institution as an "incurable evil," one that would cause infinite trouble if Western states attempted to adopt it. "I am Southern in my affections," he once declared, "but I will not engage in schemes for slavery's extension into regions where a slave's face was never seen."

Tom Benton favored westward expansion for altogether different reasons. He was a Unionist, first and foremost, a kind of superpatriot with no patience for men like John C. Calhoun who talked of nullification and secession. Benton believed in the ruddy rightness of American power and American ideals and, especially, American commerce. A staunch advocate of low tariffs and free trade, he was particularly interested in the Orient. He looked forward to the cornucopia of Asian goods that would one day flow through the American ports of San Francisco and Puget Sound. He spoke unabashedly of "the American Empire," and from his wide reading he concocted a theory that all empires in world history had become great by achieving a direct access to Asian trade. He insisted that the nation do everything in its power to blaze a clear path to the Pacific in the interest of

establishing what he called "the American road to India." Throughout Benton's long, blustering career, this was his main theme—his "hobby," as Roosevelt put it, a leitmotif he hammered on constantly.

The most significant obstacle to a vigorous Oriental trade, Benton thought, was Great Britain. Having fought in the War of 1812, the senator especially hated the British, who were always sniffing along the coast of California, pushing various intrigues and colonization schemes. With its mighty navy, Britain could thwart America's geopolitical aims in myriad ways. Benton thought President Polk should be more confrontational with London. Although the Polk administration had amicably resolved the Oregon boundary dispute at the 49th parallel, the British still seemed suspiciously interested in California's magnificent ports. Americans, Benton had long thought, should boldly take what was rightly theirs before the British beat them to it.

As a practical matter, of course, Mexico stood in the way—but Stephen Kearny's Army of the West was on the march to remove this annoying impediment.

BLOOD AND THUNDER

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