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Book Review
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Merry, Robert W. *A Country of Vast Designs: James K. Polk, the Mexican War And the Conquest of the American Continent*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2009.

Part One: Author's Credibility

Robert Merry is not a trained historian. Robert Merry was a journalist and is today the president and publisher of Congressional Quarterly, Inc. He has written other books such as *Sands of Empire: Missionary Zeal, American Foreign Policy, and the Hazards of Global Ambition*, but his current book, *A Country of Vast Designs* was a different undertaking for this publisher. In an interview with his publisher, Merry discussed that he believed the most important feature of academic writing is “narrative drive” (*Simon and Schuster*). Based on that opinion, it is clear that Merry brings his training as a journalist to his research-based writing.

As a reporter for *The Wall Street Journal*, Merry covered Washington politics and the White House. He said that he truly admires Andrew Jackson and was fascinated by the Mexican War and the “expansionist zeal” (*Simon and Schuster*) that swept national politics during that time period. His extensive career as a journalist certainly prepared him for the research he embarked upon in writing this book. His experience in the world of politics also assisted him as he was able to navigate through the layers of political drama that unfolded during this era. Overall, even though Merry is not a trained historian, his long career as a journalist and publisher qualify him to produce a historic narrative on this topic.

Part Two: Summary of Book

James K. Polk is a president many Americans have never truly investigated. He served only a promised single term and was best known at the time for being Andrew Jackson's protégé. The book begins in this very place as Merry takes great pains to demonstrate that Jackson molded Polk and in many ways treasured him like a son. Merry writes about the political relationship between Jackson and the man he originally supported, his vice president Martin Van Buren. The ascendancy of Polk had everything to do with the fact that he started his political life in Jackson's home state of Tennessee, where the art of politics differed from that of Van Buren's home state of New York.

After establishing Polk's story, without expending too much effort to describe Polk's personal history, Merry moves to the content promised by the title. He offers a limited history of the struggle in Texas and then to the political battle that earned Polk the presidency. The fact that Polk even became president seems unfathomable based on the information in this book. He was sent to Washington to get Van Buren reelected, but ended up earning the nomination and the support of Van Buren's detractors. The author points out that Polk is an unlikely hero, but he was apparently driven enough to end up in the top position. His attitude regarding Texas and annexation, which he favored, essentially made him the most popular man in the country thus ending the already tainted presidency of Martin Van Buren.

Once Polk is inaugurated, it becomes clear that he is about to embark on a very intense, stressful administration. His passion of annexation of course leads to the

Mexican American War and the author spends a great deal of time dissecting every political and military decision Polk and his team made during the war. An interesting side story that emerges details the relationship between Polk and his Secretary of State James Buchanan. Merry foreshadows the sectional crisis ahead throughout the book's second and third acts and Buchanan and his unwillingness to make challenging decisions certainly emerges at the conclusion of the war.

Merry devoted time to Polk's domestic agenda as well, especially once the war is essentially won. He also threads Polk's personal story throughout the book with a focus on his wife Sarah and the indispensable role she played as one of his top advisors. Throughout the book, the author uses multiple primary and secondary sources in an effort to piece together their relationship and to express the important role she played during her husband's presidency. She became a renowned hostess and loved playing her role as social director of the administration. Both Polk's, however, were happy to leave Washington in the end as the war had taken a serious toll of Polk's mental and physical health. He and Sarah were looking forward to retiring together in Nashville, but his health never entirely recovered and he died only three months after leaving office. The author then goes on to discuss the legacy that Polk left on this nation, and the fact that he is certainly one of the most important presidents in the history of the U.S. and is not given the credit he is due.

Part Three: The Author's Thesis

Merry argues that controversies that plagued Polk's political career (e.g. that he led the American people into a war based on lies, that he was a patsy for the slaveholders) tainted his legacy and that he has been painted as an "imperialist manipulator" (Merry 473) and that legacy is not helped by the fact that men such as Lincoln and U.S. Grant both thought of the war as unjust and unnecessary. Because the results of the Mexican War are a leading cause for the Civil War, Polk's contemporaries viewed his policies as divisive. The author argues that history has been unfair to Polk and his policies. Merry describes Mexico as a much more brutal and dictatorial regime than the United States, which is rather obvious to people today. He states that Texas earned its independence from Mexico fairly and therefore the U.S., by rule of international law, could treat the independent nation of Texas as such (475). If Texas wanted to join the United States, Merry argues, Mexico had no actual right to disturb that relationship and therefore the Mexicans were at fault entirely. Not only that, but the author maintains that the Mexican regime has been terrorizing U.S. and European citizens via their criminal action and therefore Polk made the best decision by ending Mexico's stronghold over that region.

In the end, the author makes it clear that Polk was the right man at the right time. Today, the United States treasures its vast continental empire and cannot imagine a different reality. Polk's leadership and ease under pressure gave the U.S. that land and although the Whigs and their descendents blame Polk for the financial and moral debts the war created, no one today can argue that the Mexican War did not benefit the U.S. Merry goes so far as to state that Polk is truly a hero because he essentially gave his life for the cause of American greatness. The war and the political battles surrounding his presidency took all the life from his body and Polk was left only with the belief that he

must have done what was best for the United States. He could not have known the troubles and successes ahead, but he died knowing that he had only done what the people who elected him had requested.

Part Four: Positive Criticism

Robert Merry achieves both his thesis and his promise of a strong narrative. Throughout the book, the author's focus is clear. He goes to great lengths to describe Polk's relationship with his peers, and especially his relationships with Jackson and Polk's wife Sarah. According to the author, these two relationships were the most important in regards to Polk's political career and he uses Polk's relationship with Jackson to justify his seemingly unnatural political prowess. Merry does an excellent job showing that although outsiders saw Polk's ideas as extensions of Jackson's, he was very much his own man who knew how to play the political arena rather well. Merry holds Polk responsible for his actions politically and militarily and does not absolve Polk from the fact that he did have serious expansionist desires.

Merry has clearly done extensive research and his notes indicate that he has the information needed to prove his thesis that Polk is an American hero. His journalistic style is apparent as he focuses on facts and intricate details throughout. His focus on Polk's personal relationships helps build a strong narrative and that gives the book a sense of purpose in addition to the extensive listing of factual information. Merry does an excellent job of placing Polk in the context of his time. Most of the issues Polk must tackle stem from issues that arose during the 1830s. Merry's intensive research serves

him well in this capacity as he expertly links Polk to the individuals and politics of the preceding decade for those readers who are not as well versed in the history of that often overlooked decade.

Most importantly, Merry sets out to prove that Polk did not manufacture the war for political and personal gain. He is effective at demonstrating that the Mexican regime was tyrannical and abusive and that Polk is truly an American hero because he freed the western part of today's U.S. from the clutches of Santa Anna and his vicious generals. Merry, undoubtedly due to his life working in journalism, never ignores the role of other nations in this struggle and takes a wide world view on an issue that is typically viewed as exclusively American. Overall, Merry challenges conventional historic opinion about Polk and does so using a narrative that makes enjoyable to read. He uses the narrative template perfected by more recent 'historians' but uses ample facts to justify the use of this device.

Part Five: Negative Criticism

As stated earlier, Robert Merry is not a trained historian. He is a journalist and a publisher, therefore he knows how to accumulate and deliver fact and how to sell publications. Merry's facts are extensive and well documented, but he takes liberties in some instances and relies too heavily at times on secondary sources, rather than primary sources. For example, he creates entire conversations between Polk and Sarah or Polk and Jackson, etc that are presupposed based on some secondary sources who have read Sarah's records. These exchanges certainly make the book a more interesting read, but

assuming what was said between a husband and wife behind closed doors does not serve to prove his thesis, but to scintillate.

In addition to relying perhaps too heavily on secondary sources to create “scenes”, Merry focuses a great deal on the more scandalous aspects of his presidency. Again, this device is effective in turning the book into an enjoyable read, but it is often used at the expense of story continuity. Merry, in his capacity as a Washington reporter/publisher, he understands the intrigue of politics and makes this the focus of the narrative, even though his thesis sets out to prove that all the controversy is unfounded. Merry’s efforts, while valiant, cannot definitively prove that Polk did not have ulterior motives beyond doing his best for the American people. While Merry does certainly demonstrate that Polk is less likely to have fabricated an entire reason for war due to his unfounded love of the slavery system, he also does not prove that Polk is innocent of all conspiracy. The controversies surrounding Polk point to his advisors more than Polk, but because Merry likes to focus so heavily on the scandal, the reader is left with a feeling that Polk is certainly a hero who deserves more credit than he receives, but also with the feeling that the author’s bias regarding Polk taints the overall picture of Polk’s presidency.

Overall, the book has more positive than negative qualities and does shed new light onto an era often overlooked by contemporary historians. The Mexican American War and Polk’s role as president were important and should not be under serviced. This is a quality research piece, but fits into the present-day mold of historic non-fiction in that it relies often too much on the narrative and not on solid primary research. While story is what sells books, facts are what prove points.

Works Cited

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