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A Review of Polk: The Diary of a President, 1845-1849, Covering the Mexican War, the Acquisition of Oregon, and the Conquest of California and the Southwest, Longmans, Green and Co., New York by James Knox Polk, edited by Allan Nevins. 412 pgs.

Professor Nevins condenses the diary of President Polk down to a single manageable book of 404 pages. President Polk's diary was first published in 1910 as, The Diary of James K. Polk During his Presidency, 1845 to 1849, and edited by Milo Quaife, A.C. McClurg & Co. Chicago. It was published in four volumes and was roughly four times the length of the Nevins book. The original diaries were hand written in 25 volumes of 200 to 250 pages each.

In his introduction Professor Nevins describes Polk's political career as *"from first to last that of an honest, conscientious, and limited man, who was incapable perhaps of the highest moral elevation, but was certainly also capable of deceit and double dealing. He rose from step to step by a combination of plodding, careful industry, and strict integrity."*(xiv) There is little question that the reader of this diary will agree with Professor Nevins about Polk being incapable of moral elevation. Nor is there any doubt about "plodding careful industry." On the question of integrity there may be some cause for disagreement.

Polk was a slave owner his whole life. The owner of five slaves in Tennessee he also owned and administered several cotton plantations, one in northern Mississippi which he ran from the Whitehouse. The territory he acquired in the Mexican war provided supporters of slavery with vast new lands in which to grow cotton. Consequently, the harshest criticism of Polk by historians has been that he administered the war in Mexico as a way of extending the areas open to Slavery. If this was his motive for the Mexican war, there is certainly little evidence of it in these diaries. Professor Nevins dismisses such criticism by reminding the reader *"that he refused firmly to support the extreme Southern program, that he angrily denounced John C. Calhoun for his use of the slavery question, and that he wished to extend the Missouri Compromise line to the Pacific."* (xviii) Of this there is ample evidence in these diaries.

The footnotes in the book follow a pattern of identifying people and events without much criticism of the President. The only consistently negative criticisms made by Professor Nevins are of Polk for mistrusting his generals in the prosecution of the War with Mexico and for giving them and his civilian representative's ambiguous instructions. Polk rails against Winfield Scott and Zachery Taylor and Professor Nevins explains in his footnotes that he mistrusted them because of their Whig politics and their popularity with the American public. Polk writes that they are using their successes to personal political advantage in future presidential elections, and their failures to embarrass his administration.

Professor Nevins edits this book around a statement that President Polk made to his Navy Secretary George Bancroft *"There are four great measures which are to be the measures of my administration: one, a reduction of the tariff; another, the independent treasury; a third, the settlement of the Oregon boundary question; and, lastly the acquisition of California."* (xix) The passages of the Polk diaries chosen by Nevins to include in his book were chosen to tell the complete story of these four goals. Both the Nevins and Quaife books are available on-line, so comparisons between the two are easy to make.

On the issue of the Whig Tariff of 1842 or the so-called “Black Tariff”, President Polk had the votes in the Democratic congress to overturn it, a campaign promise. Professor Nevins does not devote much space to the vote gathering done by President Polk except as regards requests for jobs in government.

Without question Polk’s biggest headache is the “Spoils system”. The president attributes most of the problems of his job to the plague of office seekers. Passages such as this on July, the 11<sup>th</sup> 1846 are frequent in his diary.

*“Great doubt at this moment exists of the passage ...of the tariff Bill, or rather the Bill to reduce the tariff. Upon the latter Bill Senator Semple of Illinois, I learn, expresses opinions which render it doubtful how he will vote. Mr. Semple, I learn, has been for some time dissatisfied with the administration. I know of no cause, unless it be that I did not appoint him a Brigadier or Major-General of volunteers, which he sought to obtain of me. I learned, too, to day that Senator Dickinson of NY is in a bad humour with the administration, and that his complaint is that his friends in NY have in his opinion been overlooked in appointments to office. Several other members have similar grieves. They have either been disappointed themselves or have not obtained offices for their favourites and friends, and at this moment the great Domestic measures of the Session are endangered from these causes. I sincerely wish that I had no offices to bestow. (122)*

Polk also tends to vilify his opponents and refer to their greed and wealth if they oppose his administration. In this passage of July 29<sup>th</sup> 1846 he celebrates the victory of his Tariff reduction in the congress.

*“This great measure of reform has been thus successful. It has given rise to an immense struggle between the two great political parties of the country. The capitalists and monopolists have not surrendered the immense advantages which they possessed and the enormous profits which they derived under the tariff of 1842, until after a fierce and mighty struggle. This City has swarmed with them for weeks. They have spared no effort within their power to sway and controll Congress, but all has proved to be unavailing and they have been at length vanquished. Their effort will probably now be to raise a panic (such as they have already attempted) by means of their combined wealth so as to induce a repeal of the act. (134)*

On the Oregon boundary dispute Polk takes the advice of his hero and mentor Andrew Jackson. Professor Nevins makes reference to a letter Jackson had written to Polk in May of 1845 in which he says of the British pretensions to Oregon “*is intended to try your energy – dash from your lips the council of the times on this question, base your acts upon the firm basis of asking for nothing but what is right and permitting nothing that is wrong – war is a blessing compared with national degradation. .. To prevent war with England a bold and undaunted front must be exposed.*” (4) President Polk acted on this advice with exacting rigor.

The diary begins on August 26<sup>th</sup> 1845 with the President angrily responding to the rejection of his offer to the British to set the boundary of Oregon at the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel. Professor Nevins suggests in the first footnote of the book that “*A withdrawal of the American offer would bring war within the range of possibility*” (1) Polk is angry because the British withdrawal robs him of his chance to quickly fix the border south of the 54° 40’ line his campaign had promised because the previous administration had proposed that boundary.

Polk writes, in August of 1845, "*he (Sec. of State Buchanan) should distinctly state that the proposition which had been made to compromise on the 49th parallel of North Latitude had been made first in deference to what had been done by our predecessors and second with an anxious desire to preserve peace between the two countries.*" (2) Polk is writing his diary as a reminder of the arguments he made within and outside of his cabinet. He does not use his diary as a way of fixing or analyzing his situation.

It is obvious to any reader that he has already thought his options and chosen his path. Polk seems to be writing as a way of documenting the arguments he and others make in his cabinet meetings, and the conversations he has with people he speaks with, sort of a breadcrumb trail back through his conversations and meetings. He frequently makes references about other pages in his diary about where he can find in his own diary a prior piece of important information. Polk is reading and rereading his diary in preparation for conversations he will have in the future. These parenthetical references are taken out of the Nevins book but can be seen in the Quaipe books.

The diary reveals President Polk as a humorless man. He writes in his diary on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of April, 1846, in a very rare attempt at humor, on the subject of sacrificing his standing with the power brokers in the Congress, "*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 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.*" (Nevins 73) According to Daniel Walker Howe in What God Hath Wrought (719) these factions required a president who could walk a very narrow path through competing interests to deliver Oregon. It also had to be done quickly in time to devote the full attention of the nation to Mexico and take her land by either bluster or bombast.

The diary entries about the Oregon dispute provides the reader insights into the evolving relationship between Polk and Buchanan. Throughout the book President Polk makes critical comments about Buchanan in a way he does of no other member of his cabinet. Secretary Buchanan changes his views on the Oregon Boundary dispute initially agreeing that the 49° boundary was a good deal and then siding with the 54 40 men in the congress when it might be advantageous to him politically. For this Polk judges him harshly and undoubtedly used the records of his cabinet meetings recorded in his diary to prove his case.

The Oregon boundary dispute began to heat up while war with Mexico was becoming a distinct and immediate possibility. There was strong support in the Congress from members in President Polk's own Democratic party for a border at 54° 40' latitude. There were also Whigs and Southern Democrats eager to avoid war with England. This had of course been an important party platform plank in the 1844 election. There were arguments about navigation rights on the Columbia river, forts and Hudson Bay Company improvements on Frasier's river, and property rights of British citizens and the Hudson's Bay company. Once the British had rejected the initial 49 offer he had to be concerned over fighting two wars. Yet he made no war preparations. President Polk demonstrates a resolve to go to war over Oregon even if it means a war with Mexico and Britain simultaneously. In his diary on May 13<sup>th</sup> 1846, he records his thoughts when confronted with the opinion of his Secretary of State James Buchanan. Buchanan argued that the U.S. should declare its lack of interest in acquiring the Californias to avoid such an eventuality. "*Then, said Mr. Buchanan, you will have war with*

*England as well as Mexico, and probably with France also, for neither of these powers will ever stand by and see California annexed to the U.S. 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.* (91) President Polk was not a military man but he certainly could not have thought the U.S. could win in such a situation. He was undoubtedly following ex-president Jackson's advice.

Despite his public "saber rattling", his diary shows a man willing to negotiate, but only with regard to the practicality of the situation. Polk never appears to rethink the morality of the positions he takes. He appears to be without the capacity to consider the right or wrong of his actions. There is no evidence of self doubt or introspection. He does not write about the evolution of his positions or where his ideas come from. The diary does allow the reader to see the evolution of his personal relationships. President Polk begins his term having a great deal of trust in the honesty and patriotism of Secretary Buchanan, Senator Benton and Senator Calhoun. He ends his term regarding Buchanan and as Calhoun as politicians first and public servants second and Benton as a bitter enemy of the Polk administration for his (Polk's) failure to prevent the prosecution of Benton's son-in-law Col. Fremont. In Polk's settling of the Oregon dispute the timing was exquisite. Within two weeks of the British government sending off the partition proposal to Washington they received news of war breaking out between the U.S. and Mexico.

Prosecuting the war with Mexico is the issue around which President Polk spends most of his time and energy and to which Professor Nevins chooses to devote most of his passages from Polk's diaries. The War with Mexico more than any other event in American history is the story of "Manifest Destiny". The term although coined by editor John L. O'Sullivan around the issues of the Texas annexation and acquisition of Oregon is most closely associated with the acquisition of the land ceded by Mexico.

Professor Nevins writes about the recalling of General Scott from Mexico at the conclusion of the Mexico City campaign "*The Administration would have done well to treat Scott with generosity. Though he had often clashed with it, he had performed great services to the country.*" Nevins then quotes Historian Justin H. Smith on Polk's administration "*the confines of mediocrity hemmed it in...He had performed his task, said Robert E. Lee, and now was "turned out as an old horse to die". April 22, 1848, amidst the lamentations, cheers, and blessings of the army as a whole – trembling himself with emotion – he took his leave, and Major General Butler, who was a Democrat and looked well on a horse, bore sway at headquarters.*"(Nevins 290,291)

One of the most interesting aspects of Polk's prosecution of the war is the Nicholas Trist affair. President Polk mistrusts General Winfield Scott and so he sends Nicholas Trist, a private citizen as his representative to Mexico with the power to negotiate an agreement to end the war and acquire territory in the settlement. As the war moves on Trist and Scott, because they mistrust each other do not meet and discuss their instructions from Washington. As the situation of the U.S. military improves Polk changes his mind about what he wants from Mexico. He wants more territory. Therefore, the concessions that he has asked Trist to negotiate for, from Mexico change. Polk recalls and reprimands Trist. Because Trist has a better understanding of the political situation in Mexico than Polk does from Washington, Trist ignores the recall and makes a treaty he

feels is the best the U.S. can hope for with the Mexican government in chaos. *“He knew from Buchanans’ dispatches that the United States wanted peace, and that Polk totally misapprehended the situation.”* ( 294) Trist gambles that Polk will be happy with the settlement when he understands the situation better. Polk is outraged. Nevins writes *“Polk could do no less than accept the treaty, however grudgingly. In his December message to Congress, he had said that the American Government might find it necessary to take “the full measure of indemnity into its hands,” a phrase which was generally interpreted as meaning the annexation of the whole of Mexico.”* (305) But for better communications between Washington and Mexico the entire country could be part of the U.S. of A. today.

Another insight the reader of this diary gains into the war with Mexico is the degree to which the President Polk has a completely pragmatic view of acquiring Mexican territory. The president discusses the practicality of acquiring the Gulf port city of Tampico, the entire state (Department) of Tamaulipas, and passage rights through the Isthmus of Tehuantepec without any suggestion that such a move might be unjust. As these matters are being discussed by the cabinet, nothing except the practicality of expenses makes it into President Polk’s diary. Polk writes as he is making his proposals to the cabinet *“No formal expression of opinion was made by the cabinet but these seemed to be an acquiescence in these views.”* (260) Acquiescence is an interesting term for the president to use. The expression suggests dissent that was successfully put down. But, with the exception of Secretary Buchanan, dissent in the cabinet is rarely mentioned in this diary. Polk repeatedly uses the expense of the war as a rationale for taking more territory. President Polk had written in his diary of September 4<sup>th</sup> 1847 *“as our expenses had been greatly enlarged by the obstinacy of Mexico in refusing to negotiate, since Mr. Trist’s instructions were prepared in April last, if a treaty had not been made when we next heard from Mexico that his instructions should be modified. I remarked that if we were compelled to continue the war at so great expense I would be unwilling to pay the sum which Mr. Trist had been authorized to pay, in the settlement of a boundary by which it was contemplated the US would acquire New Mexico & the Californias; and that if Mexico continued obstinately to refuse to Treat, I was decidedly in favour of insisting on the acquisition of more territory.”* (260) On 15<sup>th</sup> November, 1847 Polk writes about another option for defraying the cost of the war. *“I directed also that an order should be issued directing all the internal revenues and as well as the import and export duties collected under the Mexican laws to be also seized and appropriated to the use of our own army.* (279-80)

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the Polk presidential diary is the degree to which the president develops a dread of the patronage system his mentor President Jackson had started with the election of 1828. It is reasonable to consider the possibility that the “spoils system” actually killed James K. Polk. There is no topic that Polk writes about more frequently in his diary. Throughout the four years he keeps his diary the reader gets a sense of the disillusionment with the lack of patriotism, the greed and sloth of the thousands of petitioners he meets. Polk grows more and more disgusted with these hoards of office seekers. Passages such as this one are typical. *Friday, 27th February, 1846. — Saw an unusually large number of visitors to-day. Many called to pay their respects, and many to annoy me about office. The pressure upon me for office has not in any degree abated. It is one of the most painful of my duties to hear these applications, and especially when I have no*

*offices to bestow. ..There is at present an unusual number of office seekers in the City, who are so patriotic as to desire to serve their country by getting into fat offices. “(57,58)*

The presidency was a much more open and available office in the 1840's. Presidents felt that they were obligated to see any and all petitioners who showed up. Polk saw it as an obligation that came with the job. Polk felt that any attempt to avoid seeing people would be viewed as pomposity and would damage his administration. Polk, like the men who preceded him was without the staff needed to filter the reputable from the undeserving. Polk had only one private secretary working for him, his nephew J. Knox Walker and Walker was paid out of Polk's own salary. People often begged for money from the president's own pocket. Polk writes of a \$100 loan he made to Alabama representative Felix McConnell who pays off some debts with Polk's cash and then commits suicide two days later. (146) People asked for jobs, promotions and favors of every kind imaginable. Very early on in his term the president finds it necessary to close his office to the public at noon in order to give himself time to complete his daily work.

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of September, 1847 Polk writes “*When I retired at night, I was much fatigued, having passed a week of great labour and responsibility and of great solicitude & anxiety. With me it is emphatically true that the Presidency is no bed of roses.*” (260) On Thursday, the 6<sup>th</sup> of April, 1848 Polk wrote, “*My office was crowded up to the hour of 12 O Clock with visitors and I was greatly annoyed by the importunities of office seekers. It is most disgusting to be compelled to spend hour after hour almost every day in hearing the applications for office made by loafers who congregate at Washington and by members of Congress in their behalf and yet I am compelled to submit to it or offend or insult the applicants and their friends.*” (318)

On Thursday, April 6<sup>th</sup>, 1848 Polk writes “*The people of the US have no idea of the extent to which the President's time which ought to be devoted to more important matters is occupied by the voracious and often unprincipled persons who seek office. If a kind Providence permits me length of days and health, I will, after I retire from the Presidential office, write the secret and hitherto unknown history of the workings of the Government in this respect. It requires great patience & self command to repress the loathing I feel towards a hungry crowd of unworthy office hunters who often crowd my office.* (318)

TUESDAY 27<sup>th</sup> February 1849 *I saw visitors this morning as usual Members of Congress and others called On reaching my office immediately after breakfast my porter informed me that a man was in waiting who had called on yesterday and was unable to see me who said he had important business with me I directed him to be shown in His important business was to importune me for an office before I retired. He was willing to accept a chaplaincy in the Navy or any other office I had to give before I retired. I gave him a very short answer by telling him that I had but four days more of my Presidential term remaining and that all the places under the Government were filled. I am thoroughly disgusted with the herd of hunters after places who infest the seat of Government.* (379) “President Polk left office on March 5<sup>th</sup> 1849 and died on June 5<sup>th</sup> 1849.