

Chapter 116 - James Knox Polk Term

Time: 1844

The 1844 Presidential Campaign Turns Nasty



Theodore Frelinghuysen (1787-1862)

The Democrats are energized by the thought of James Polk -- “another Jackson” -- leading the party back to its historical dominance in Washington.

To insure this outcome, they go on the offensive, first to discredit Henry Clay’s character, with attacks on his well-known reputation for drinking, gambling, blasphemy, womanizing and dueling.

They then turn to undermining him across the South, focusing on three issues.

They claim his “American System” prioritizes federal authority over states’ rights, and results in high tariffs on cotton goods and increases in the national debt. Next comes the assertion that he opposes slavery, has referred to it as a “moral stain,” and may even be in league with the abolitionists. Finally, they zero in on his public statements opposing the annexation of Texas.

Failure to expand into Texas would represent a critical blow to the Southern economy, which by 1844 depends on opening more cotton plantations and selling more bred slaves into the west. Clay’s stance also draws fire from his old nemesis, Andrew Jackson, who says that it demonstrates his military naiveté and threatens the national defense.

In an 1844 letter to John Mason, Secretary of the Navy, the old General raises the specter of an alliance between the Republic of Texas and Great Britain to conquer the entire western half of the continent.

Texas ought to have been & now must be (added), or the safety of the south & west is jeopardized, New Orleans insecure, and our revenue destroyed, by smuggling, & in a war with England, her & Texas united, a British force might in ten days from the Sabine make a lodgment on the Mississippi...possess herself of the command of the navigation of Red River, raise a servile war, capture New Orleans, excite our Indians placed on our western borders to hostilities against us - with these [ancillaries], and her armies from Canada uniting on our west, how much blood & treasure would it take to regain New Orleans, put down the servile & Indian War thus created and supported by Great Britain. There is not an American heart & eye, that should not now be opened to the great

security Texas will give to the United States & it ought to be seized with the greatest promptitude.

Discrediting Clay in the North is more challenging, but it too eventually succeeds.

The “Texas question” again plays the leading role in the strategy, with Clay being painted as “unpatriotic” for standing against America’s aspiration to control the entire continent. Those who oppose slavery or its spread to the west are also reminded that Clay, like Polk, is a slave owner. This fact cuts into his support among the “Conscience Whigs.”

For good measure, the Democrats decide to smear Clay’s running mate, Theodore Frelinghuysen. While in the Senate, he earns the nickname of “the Christian statesman,” based on his intense Bible study and support for various Dutch Reformed missions. But he earns Jackson’s wrath for a six-hour speech on the floor in 1830 in opposition to the Indian Removal Act. For this transgression, he is tarred during the campaign as an anti-Catholic bigot, and opponent of the separation of church and state.

The Whigs respond in kind.

They characterize Polk as a weak puppet of Jackson, and one who would involve America in an illegitimate and costly war to steal land from Mexico for the purpose of extending slavery into the west.

They also engage in character assassination through political pamphlets which accuse Polk of branding his initials onto the shoulders of forty of his slaves, a total fabrication, and resurrect a rumor that his grandfather, Ezekiel, was a British sympathizer during the Revolutionary War.

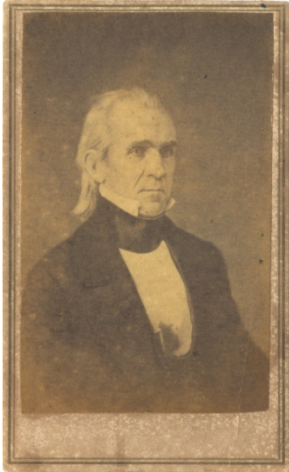
As the race plays out, both candidates are actively engaged.

To the surprise of many, Polk proves to be a crafty politician. He reassures Pennsylvania leaders that his tariff will protect their industries, while downplaying the duties in the South. He convinces Jackson to nudge Tyler out of running as an independent. He announces that he will serve only one term, encouraging future contenders like Cass, Buchanan and Calhoun to get out the Democratic vote.

Clay meanwhile senses the easy victory he anticipated slipping away. He finally realizes that his position on Texas is on the wrong side of emerging public sentiment, but several attempts to walk back his prior opposition fall flat. For many the “Great Compromiser” looks like he is abandoning his principles to win the White House.

Time: November-December 1844

James K. Polk And The Democrats Emerge Victorious



James Knox Polk (1795-1849)

Ballots are cast in the 15th quadrennial election for president between November 1 and December 4, 1844. The total popular vote count exceeds the hotly contested 1840 race and reaches 2.7 million, with just under 80% of all age-eligible citizens participating

Popular Votes Cast For President

Year	Number	% Vs Y-A
1832	1,286,700	+12.1%
1836	1,502,300	+16.8
1840	2,411,808	+60.5
1844	2,701,552	+12.0

When the results are in, the “dark horse” James Polk has won a razor thin victory, with 49.6% of the popular vote to 48.1% for Henry Clay.

1844 Presidential Election Results

1844	Party	Pop Vote	Elect Tot	South	Border	North	West
Polk	Democrat	1,339,494	170	60	7	77	26
Clay	Whig	1,300,004	105	24	23	35	33
Birney	Liberty	62,054	0				
		2,701,552	275	84	30	112	59

Polk loses in both his birth state of North Carolina and his home state of Tennessee, but carries most of the South, along with the Northern states of New York, Pennsylvania, New Hampshire and Maine.

Party Power By State

South	1840	1844	Pick-Up
Virginia	Democrat	Democrat	
North Carolina	Whig	Whig	
South Carolina	Democrat	Democrat	
Georgia	Whig	Democrat	Democrat
Alabama	Democrat	Democrat	
Mississippi	Whig	Democrat	Democrat
Louisiana	Whig	Democrat	Democrat
Tennessee	Whig	Whig	
Arkansas	Democrat	Democrat	
Border			
Delaware	Whig	Whig	
Maryland	Whig	Democrat	Democrat
Kentucky	Whig	Whig	
North			
New Hampshire	Democrat	Whig	Whig
Vermont	Whig	Whig	
Massachusetts	Whig	Whig	
Rhode Island	Whig	Whig	
Connecticut	Whig	Whig	
New York	Whig	Democrat	Democrat
New Jersey	Whig	Whig	
Pennsylvania	Whig	Democrat	Democrat
Ohio	Whig	Democrat	Democrat
Maine	Whig	Democrat	Democrat
Indiana	Whig	Whig	
Illinois	Democrat	Democrat	
Iowa	Democrat	Democrat	
Michigan	Whig	Democrat	Democrat

Clay's hopes are shattered when he loses New York State by only 5,106 votes. The difference here may have traced to the 15,812 ballots won by James Birney of the abolitionist Liberty Party, a former supporter of Clay. Had the state's 36 electoral votes shifted to Clay, he would have won the presidency in the Electoral College by a margin of 141-134, rather than losing 105-170.

1844 Results In New York State

1844	Party	Pop Vote	Elect Tot
Polk	Democrat	237,588	36
Clay	Whig	232,482	0
Birney	Liberty	15,812	0

The Democrats retain the firm control over the House they've held since the Whig collapse in 1842.

U.S. House Elections

Party	1840	1842	1844
Democrats	98	148	142
Whigs	144	73	79
Native American			6
Other		2	2

They also regain control in the Senate.

U.S. Senate Elections

Party	1840	1842	1844
Democrats	22	23	27
Whigs	29	29	24
Other			1

Time: 1795-1845

President James Knox Polk: Personal Profile

James Polk is born in 1795 in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, named after Charlotte, wife of King George III, and famous for being first to publicly declare independence from Great Britain in 1775. His mother descends from the Scottish Presbyterian minister, John Knox, and his father is a lifelong Deist, who refuses to “affirm his faith” at a planned christening event, leaving James unbaptized until his deathbed 53 years later.

Both father and grandfather are outspoken Jefferson men who inculcate states’ rights and anti-Federalist principles early on. Sam Polk is also a savvy businessman, a successful farmer and slave owner, who decides in 1806 to move his family from the eastern piedmont range in NC across the Appalachians and into Tennessee.

Son James is a sickly youth, suffering from stomach ailments and, at age seventeen, a severe case of urinary stones, leading to life-threatening and primitive surgery and leaving him impotent for life. He is home schooled at first, until enrolling at the University of North Carolina in 1816, where he shines as a student and commencement speaker.

After graduation his future is shaped by studying law in Nashville with Felix Grundy, the top criminal lawyer in the state and future US Senator and Attorney General from 1838-40 in Van Buren’s cabinet. Grundy prepares him to pass the bar in 1820 and introduces him to the inner workings of the state legislature and the political arena that quickly captures his imagination.

His law practice flourishes and his income soars. He rounds out his credentials by joining the state militia and becoming a freemason. He wins a seat in the US House in 1825 as a strong supporter of Andrew Jackson, a friend of his father and grandfather alike, and his future political mentor.

Polk remains in the US House for seven consecutive terms, fighting for Jacksonian principles and for his legislative agenda as President, including his controversial war with the U.S. Bank. In his last four years he is elected Speaker of the House, and at age forty-three is widely regarded as a future presidential candidate.

In 1838 he decides to run for Governor of Tennessee against Newton Cannon, a Whig and fierce opponent of Jackson, seeking his third consecutive term in the office. Polk wins a very narrow 51-49% victory and is sitting in the Governor's chair when the fall-out from the Bank Panic of 1837 rocks the nation and his home state.

After a frustrating first term, Polk runs again in 1840, at the same time the electorate decides to oust his party leader, Martin Van Buren, in favor of the first Whig President, Harrison. Polk loses 53-47%. In 1842, he tries again, and loses again by the same margin.

What appeared to Polk in 1840 to have been a soaring political future has fallen flat in 1844 as he heads off to the Democratic Party nominating convention in Baltimore.

There, after eight stalemated ballots, lightning strikes him as “the dark-horse nominee.”

Time: March 5, 1845

Polk Supports The Texas Annexation In His Inaugural Speech

Polk is sworn in as President by Chief Justice Roger Taney on March 5, 1845, a rain-filled day in DC. At 49 years of age, he is the youngest man yet to hold the office. His inaugural address to a crowd gathered on the east side of the Capitol opens with obligatory appreciation for his election victory.

Fellow-Citizens: Without solicitation on my part, I have been chosen by the free and voluntary suffrages of my countrymen to the most honorable and most responsible office on earth...I am deeply impressed with gratitude for the confidence reposed in me. Honored with this distinguished consideration at an earlier period of life than any of my predecessors.

It segues to the principles Polk intends to follow in office, beginning with a classical restatement of Jefferson's Tenth Amendment call for limitations on the power of the Federal government over the States, to avoid “unfortunate collisions” which could threaten the Union.

It will be my first care to administer the Government in the true spirit of (the Constitution), and to assume no powers not expressly granted or clearly implied in its terms... (to avoid) those unfortunate collisions between the Federal and State authorities which have occasionally so much disturbed the harmony of our system and even threatened the perpetuity of our glorious Union... "To the States, respectively, or to the people" have been reserved "the powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution nor prohibited by it to the States." Each State is a complete sovereignty within the sphere of its reserved powers.

While the Constitution calls for “majority rules,” it also protects the rights of the minorities against acts of oppression.

By the theory of our Government majorities rule, but this right is not an arbitrary or unlimited one It is a right to be exercised in subordination to the Constitution and in conformity to it. One great object of the Constitution was to restrain majorities from oppressing minorities or encroaching upon their just rights. Minorities have a right to appeal to the Constitution as a shield against such oppression. The inestimable value of our Federal Union is felt and acknowledged by all.

An example he cites is the Tariff, where he will oppose high “protective” rates benefiting some businesses or regions at the expense of others.

One of the difficulties which we have had to encounter in the practical administration of the Government consists in the adjustment of our revenue laws and the levy of the taxes necessary for the support of Government. In the general proposition that no more money shall be collected than the necessities of an economical administration shall require all parties seem to acquiesce. Nor does there seem to be any material difference of opinion as to the absence of right in the Government to tax one section of country, or one class of citizens, or one occupation, for the mere profit of another.

I have also declared... that I was "opposed to a tariff for protection merely, and not for revenue." ... To reverse this principle and make protection the object and revenue the incident would be to inflict manifest injustice upon all other than the protected interests.

Polk promises to run a frugal administration and avoid federal debt.

A national debt has become almost an institution of European monarchies.... Such a system is incompatible with the ends for which our republican Government was instituted... Ours was intended to be a plain and frugal government, and I shall regard it to be my duty to recommend to Congress and, as far as the Executive is concerned, to enforce by all the means within my power the strictest economy in the expenditure of the public money which may be compatible with the public interests.

True to Democratic Party doctrine, he will oppose a private national bank.

We need no national banks or other extraneous institutions planted around the Government to control or strengthen it in opposition to the will of its authors. Experience has taught us how unnecessary they are as auxiliaries of the public authorities--how impotent for good and how powerful for mischief.

He addresses growing “agitation” over slavery, never overtly mentioning the word as had Van Buren in 1836, but instead citing calls by one section for “the destruction of domestic institutions existing in other sections...which were recognized and protected in the Constitution.”

It is a source of deep regret that in some sections of our country misguided persons have occasionally indulged in schemes and agitations whose object is the destruction of domestic institutions existing in other sections--institutions which existed at the adoption of the Constitution and were recognized and protected by it. All must see that if it were possible for them to be successful in attaining their object the dissolution of the Union and the consequent destruction of our happy form of government must speedily follow.

His policy will be to tamp down such “sectional jealousies and heartburnings” which could lead to disunion. The “patriotic sentiment” he quotes is from Andrew Jackson’s famous toast vs. John Calhoun in 1832.

...Sectional jealousies and heartburnings must be discountenanced, and all should remember that they are members of the same political family, having a common destiny... Every lover of his country must shudder at the thought of the possibility of its dissolution, and will be ready to adopt the patriotic sentiment, "Our Federal Union--it must be preserved."

When it comes to foreign affairs, they are the province of the national government.

To the Government of the United States has been intrusted the exclusive management of our foreign affairs...In the management of our foreign relations it will be my aim to observe a careful respect for the rights of other nations, while our own will be the subject of constant watchfulness

And here he focuses on the annexation of Texas, which will lead to the war with Mexico and become the overarching focus of his administration. He begins by asserting that Texas was a part of the Louisiana Purchase, then “unwisely ceded” in the 1819 Adams-Onis Treaty to Spain, and now is simply wishing to rejoin the United States.

The Republic of Texas has made known her desire to come into our Union, to form a part of our Confederacy and enjoy with us the blessings of liberty secured and guaranteed by our Constitution. Texas was once a part of our country--was unwisely ceded away to a foreign power--is now independent, and possesses an undoubted right to dispose of a part

or the whole of her territory and to merge her sovereignty as a separate and independent state in ours. I congratulate my country that by an act of the late Congress of the United States the assent of this Government has been given to the reunion, and it only remains for the two countries to agree upon the terms to consummate an object so important to both.

As an independent Republic, it also has the perfect right to take this action. The annexation is not a conquest, simply a matter of free choice by the residents.

I regard the question of annexation as belonging exclusively to the United States and Texas. They are independent powers competent to contract, and foreign nations have no right to interfere with them or to take exceptions to their reunion.... Foreign powers should therefore look on the annexation of Texas to the United States not as the conquest of a nation seeking to extend her dominions by arms and violence, but as the peaceful acquisition of a territory once her own, by adding another member to our confederation, with the consent of that member, thereby diminishing the chances of war and opening to them new and ever-increasing markets for their products.

To cement his argument, he raises Jackson's specter of a "foreign nation more powerful than Texas" taking control of the Republic and of the entire Southwest.

None can one fail to see the danger to our safety and future peace if Texas remains an independent state or becomes an ally or dependency of some foreign nation more powerful than herself. Is there one among our citizens who would not prefer perpetual peace with Texas to occasional wars, which so often occur between bordering independent nations?

Bringing Texas into the Union will be an immediate priority.

To Texas the reunion is important, because the strong protecting arm of our Government would be extended over her, and the vast resources of her fertile soil and genial climate would be speedily developed, while the safety of New Orleans and of our whole southwestern frontier against hostile aggression, as well as the interests of the whole Union, would be promoted by it....I shall on the broad principle which formed the basis and produced the adoption of our Constitution, and not in any narrow spirit of sectional policy, endeavor by all Constitutional, honorable, and appropriate means to consummate the expressed will of the people and Government of the United States by the re-annexation of Texas to our Union at the earliest practicable period.

With regard to contested territory further west, he asserts that America has "clear and unquestionable" rights to the entire Oregon country land, already occupied by our settlers.

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.

In neither the case of Texas nor of Oregon does he threaten warfare against Mexico or Britain – but both nations are implicitly put on notice by his contentions.

Polk ends his speech with the standard invocation of the Divine Being to watch over the United States.

Confidently relying upon the aid and assistance of the coordinate departments of the Government in conducting our public affairs, I enter upon the discharge of the high duties which have been assigned me by the people, again humbly supplicating that Divine Being who has watched over and protected our beloved country from its infancy to the present hour to continue His gracious benedictions upon us, that we may continue to be a prosperous and happy people.

What comes next is one of the most consequential presidential terms in American history.

Time: March 1845

Polk Names His Cabinet

Shortly after his election victory, Polk meets with Andrew Jackson. Among the topics discussed is the formation of his cabinet, where he hopes to avoid the many pitfalls the old General experienced with connivers like John C. Calhoun, the sitting Secretary of State under Tyler. Polk eventually offers Calhoun the job of Ambassador to Britain, but he turns it down to return to the Senate, as self-styled “defender of the South.”

In the end Polk names six men, all lawyers, save for Bancroft, his choice for the Navy post.

While he fully intends to oversee foreign affairs on his own, he chooses the Senator from Pennsylvania, James Buchanan, a twenty year veteran of Congress, as his Secretary of State. Buchanan soon proves troublesome, and Polk offers to appoint him to the Supreme Court when Justice Henry Baldwin dies, but Buchanan declines, wanting to stay put and try to succeed Polk after his promised single term is up.

For Treasury he picks Senator Robert J. Walker of Mississippi, whose early adulthood is in Pennsylvania, before moving South to build a successful business career speculating in land, cotton and slaves. Walker is a passionate defender of slavery and a straight Jacksonian, including aversion to any talk of dissolving the Union.

Secretary of War, William Marcy, at age fifty-eight, is the oldest member of the cabinet. His military credentials trace to combat experience in Canada as a militia captain early in the War of 1812. He then becomes the consummate New York politician, a member of the Albany Regency, Van Buren’s patronage machine, and coiner of the phrase, “to the victors belong the spoils.” He wins three elections at New York Governor before losing in 1838 to Henry Seward and falling out with Van Buren, who warns Polk not to name him, and is offended when his advice is ignored.

Tyler’s Secretary of the Navy, John Mason of Virginia, is retained by Polk, but in the position of Attorney General. His legal training traces to the famed Tapping Reed School, and his public service includes three years as a district court judge. His political history includes three terms in the U.S House. He is a Southern planter and a life-long backer of Jackson and Van Buren.

The only non-lawyer in the cabinet is George Bancroft, a Massachusetts’ man who earns a PhD in history from the University of Gottingen, and teaches Greek at Harvard College. He ventures into the political realm in 1837 when Van Buren appoints him Customs Collector for the port of Boston. He loses a run for Massachusetts’ Governor in 1844, collecting only 41% of the vote, and is an opponent of slavery. But he favors the Texas Annexation and is a Northern Democrat who eventually comes out for Polk at the critical moment in the 1844 nominating convention.

Lastly Polk names his long-term Tennessee friend and advisor, Cave Johnson, as the new Postmaster General. He is a four-time member of the U.S House, Polk’s campaign manager during his run for the White House, and the “fixer” of problems throughout the term.

James Knox Polk’s Cabinet

Position	Name	Home State
Secretary of State	James Buchanan	Pennsylvania
Secretary of Treasury	Robert Walker	Mississippi
Secretary of War	William Marcy	New York
Attorney General	John Mason	Virginia
Secretary of Navy	George Bancroft	Massachusetts
Postmaster General	Cave Johnson	Tennessee

Four of his six appointees will serve all four years. Mason will switch back to his old position as Secretary of the Navy when Bancroft departs. His Attorney General post will go to Nathan Clifford and then Isaac Toucey.