

Chapter 139 - James Knox Polk's Consequential Presidency

Dates: March 4, 1845 – March 5, 1849

Polk Achieves The Goals He Set For Himself

As time runs out on Polk's presidency, his stamina is dwindling and, despite pleas from supporters, he is not about to try for a second term.

Few will miss his temperament which lacks the charisma, spontaneity and the out-going nature of his sponsor, Andrew Jackson. Instead his manner is typically described as guarded-to-aloof, and his work-style as nothing short of compulsive. What the two Tennessee men share, however, is the capacity to accomplish their agendas – to match talk with decisive action.

Polk actually completes many of the former President's top priorities, especially territorial expansion.

While Jackson longed to acquire the western land owned by Mexico and possessed the warrior credentials to follow through, he backed off for fear of the disruption to national unity that might follow a war. Polk sees some risks here, but charges forward anyway, backed by the popular cry of "manifest destiny."

In the end, his efforts in Texas, Oregon and the Mexican Cession tack on 41% of the nation's total land, and even in the last months of office he is still trying to pry Cuba loose from the Spanish. Many criticize his "war of aggression," but America reaches from sea to shining sea as he leaves office.

Expansion Of America's Land Mass

Year	Land Gained	From	Via	Square Miles	% US
1784	13 colonies to Miss R	Britain	War	888,811	29%
1803	Louisiana Territory	France	Buy	827,192	27
1819	Florida	Spain	Buy	72,003	2
1845	Texas Territories	Mexico	Annex	390,144	13
1846	Oregon Territories	Britain	Buy	285,580	10
1848	Mexico Cession	Mexico	War	529,017	18
1853	Gadsden Purchase	Mexico	Buy	29,640	1
	Total (48 states)			3,022,387	100%

Polk's impact on the economy and the financial system is also sizable.

His move to a lower tariff not only enhances free trade and exports, but also signals the manufacturing sector's ability to now hold its own without "protection." The Independent Treasury ends Jackson's war on the Federal Banks and stabilizes the currency. Annual growth in GDP averages in double-digits, and the lucky strike discovery of gold in California will help propel future gains.

Despite all these advances, the downside of Polk's term is that the aftermath of the war intensifies the North-South impasse over the future of slavery.

As a plantation owner himself, Polk is well aware that the Southern economy rests on expanding slavery, and that the firebrands will demand it be allowed in the new Mexican territories. But he also remains confident that, if resistance occurs, his Democratic Party coalition will again work out whatever accommodations are needed.

In this, he is proven wrong.

The curse on his administration is the Wilmot Proviso, proposed by a fellow House Democrat, and calling for a flat ban on the spread of slavery into all new land acquired in the west. Polk is able to rely on the Senate to temporarily palliate this damage, but the unity which has driven his party to dominate federal politics begins to slip away on his watch – and it will not return.

The result is a another dramatic restructuring of America’s political parties that splits the Democrats, sees the advent of the Free Soil movement, and leads on to the dissolution of the Whigs and the eventual creation of the Republican Party and its victory in 1860.

Another defining characteristic of Polk’s term is the blossoming of various social reform movements associated with the Second Great Awakening. Chief among them are much more organized resistance in the North to slavery and the early efforts by American women to achieve gender equality.

Taken together, events during Polk’s single term are extremely consequential and will have profound effects on shaping the future course of American history.

As with many presidents, the challenges presented have been all-consuming, and he claims to be “exceedingly relieved” to leave office.

Time: June 15, 1849

An Early Death Follows

His departure begins with a farewell tour across the south where he is welcomed throughout by large and approving crowds. In New Orleans, however, he begins to suffer fatigue and diarrhea, and is forced to retire to his estate in Nashville, for the final three weeks of his life.

There he is gripped by cholera and his condition steadily deteriorates. On his deathbed he is given the Methodist baptism delayed during his childhood, before succumbing on June 15, 1849. He is only fifty-three years old at the time.



Sarah Childress Polk (1803-1891)

Polk's wife, Sarah, will survive her husband by 42 years, living at *Polk Place*, faithfully attending her Presbyterian church, and dressing daily in black clothes to mourn his memory. While childless, she inherits his 53 slaves, with the stipulation they be freed upon her death.

When the Civil War breaks out, Sarah declares herself a "neutral."