

James K. Polk
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James K. Polk

Standards: 4.63, 8.61

Essential Question: As president, how did James K. Polk change the United States?

James K. Polk was born in Pineville N.C., on November 2, 1795. Polk's father Samuel was a successful farmer and surveyor. Seeking new opportunities, he moved his family to Tennessee in 1806. The family settled in the town of Columbia along the Duck River. Samuel was a successful land speculator and judge. Polk was a serious and sickly child. At the age of 16, he underwent a painful operation for urinary stones. After that his health improved somewhat and he was able to enter the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Polk excelled there and graduated first in his class in 1818.

Polk returned to Tennessee and began to study law under Felix Grundy. When Grundy was elected to the legislature, Polk took the post of clerk of the state senate. There he learned parliamentary procedure while also finishing his legal education. Polk was admitted to the Tennessee Bar in 1820 and began to practice law.

During this time, Polk met both his future wife Sarah Childress and his mentor Andrew Jackson. Sarah Childress, a wealthy and intelligent young woman, would prove to be a great asset to Polk's political career. Quiet and serious, Polk lacked the social skills of his contemporaries, Crockett and Houston. Sarah helped to make up for the deficit. With the advice and support of Jackson, Polk was elected to Congress in 1825.

Polk used his position in Congress to defend Jackson and to help Jackson win the election in 1828. With Jackson's support, Polk was elected Speaker of the House in 1835. In 1839, Polk was elected governor of Tennessee. He was very disappointed when he lost his bid for reelection in 1841. He lost again in 1843 leading most people to believe his political career was over. The issue of Texas annexation was the most important issue in 1844 and Jackson wanted to make sure that Texas joined the United States. Jackson backed Polk as the Democratic candidate for president in 1844. When the early favorite Martin Van Buren did not earn the nomination, supporters were able to sway opinion towards Polk. As a "dark horse" candidate Polk faced a difficult campaign against the well-known Henry Clay, but won in a very close election. A "dark horse" candidate is one who unexpectedly wins his party's nomination.

Polk believed that the nation's future lay in farming and continued success in farming meant gaining new lands in the west. His victory in the election was due in large part to his promise to annex Texas and control the Oregon country. As president, Polk intended to make good on those promises. In December 1845, he signed the resolution admitting Texas into the union. Polk entered into negotiations with Britain concerning the Oregon country. Polk pushed

the British to give up their claims and in 1846 his aggressive position was rewarded when the British agreed to set the boundary at the 49th parallel.

With the Oregon question settled, Polk could turn his attention to relations with Mexico. Though Mexico had accepted Texas independence, the border was still under dispute. Polk was also interested in bringing California into the United States. Polk ordered General Zachary Taylor to cross into territory between the Nueces River and Rio Grande claimed by Mexico. When shots were fired on April 25, 1846 it gave Polk the opening he needed to ask Congress to declare war.

The Mexican War was controversial in the United States because many people viewed it as a war to expand slavery. Public opposition did not concern Taylor who won a number of key battles. Polk became concerned that Taylor's success in battle would lead to a nomination for President in 1848, so he replaced him with Winfield Scott. Scott's victory at Mexico City brought an end to the war. In the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Mexico ceded California, and 800,000 square miles of land that makes up the current states of Arizona, New Mexico, Utah and Nevada as well as parts of Colorado and Wyoming. The United States paid Mexico \$15 million for the land and promised full citizenship to Mexican citizens who choose to stay. Polk had achieved his goal of a United States that stretched to the Pacific. Polk left office after a single term and returned to Tennessee in March 1849. Suffering from overwork and poor health, Polk died just three months later on June 15, 1849.

Sources: Morgan, Robert. *Lions of the West*. Chapel Hill NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2011. Print.

"James K. Polk ." *New Perspectives on THE WEST*. PBS, 2001. Web. 28 June, 2014. <http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/people/i_r/polk.htm>

"History." *President James K. Polk Home and Museum*. James K. Polk Home and Museum. 2014. Web 28 June, 2014.

James K. Polk

Summarize the key events in James K. Polk's life using the graphic organizer below. Then complete the question at the bottom of the page.

1844 "Dark Horse" nomination

Oregon Country

Texas Annexation

Mexican War/ California

Overall, I think that James K. Polk's impact on the United States was mostly **positive/negative because _____**

_____ ,

_____ , and

_____ .

James K. Polk Key

Summarize the key events in James K. Polk's life using the graphic organizer below. Then complete the question at the bottom of the page. *Answers will vary.*

1844 "Dark Horse" nomination

Jackson backed Polk, but he was not expected to defeat Van Buren for the Democratic nomination for president.

Oregon Country

Polk campaigned on the promise to annex the Oregon country at the 54th parallel. (54'40' or Fight!). He negotiated with the British and the boundary was set the 49th parallel.

Texas Annexation

Polk also campaigned on a promise to annex Texas even though it would possibly mean war with Mexico and expanded slavery which many Americans opposed.

Mexican War/ California

Polk pushed Mexico into war, which angered many Americans. Polk was jealous of Taylor's success and replaced him with Scott. Once the war was over, the U.S. gained a huge territory including California. (Gold was discovered 1 year later)

Overall, I think that James K. Polk's impact on the United States was mostly **positive/negative** because

Answers will vary

James K. Polk

Excerpts from Inaugural Address

Standards: 4.63, 8.61

James K. Polk campaigned for the presidency on a platform of national expansion. His goals were undisputed claim to the Oregon country and the annexation of Texas.

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.

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 do not seem to appreciate the true character of our Government. Our Union is a confederation of independent States, whose policy is peace with each other and all the world. To enlarge its limits is to extend the dominions of peace over additional territories and increasing millions. The world has nothing to fear from military ambition in our Government. While the Chief Magistrate and the popular branch of Congress are elected for short terms by the suffrages of those millions who must in their own persons bear all the burdens and miseries of war, our Government can not be otherwise than pacific. 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 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.

In the earlier stages of our national existence the opinion prevailed with some that our system of confederated States could not operate successfully over an extended territory, and serious objections have at different times been made to the enlargement of our boundaries. These objections were earnestly urged when we acquired Louisiana. Experience has shown that they were not well founded. The title of numerous Indian tribes to vast tracts of country has been extinguished; new States have been admitted into the Union; new Territories have been created and our jurisdiction and laws extended over them. As our population has expanded, the Union

has been cemented and strengthened. As our boundaries have been enlarged and our agricultural population has been spread over a large surface, our federative system has acquired additional strength and security. It may well be doubted whether it would not be in greater danger of overthrow if our present population were confined to the comparatively narrow limits of the original thirteen States than it is now that they are sparsely settled over a more expanded territory. It is confidently believed that our system may be safely extended to the utmost bounds of our territorial limits, and that as it shall be extended the bonds of our Union, so far from being weakened, will become stronger.

None can 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? Is there one who would not prefer free intercourse with her to high duties on all our products and manufactures which enter her ports or cross her frontiers? Is there one who would not prefer an unrestricted communication with her citizens to the frontier obstructions which must occur if she remains out of the Union? Whatever is good or evil in the local institutions of Texas will remain her own whether annexed to the United States or not. None of the present States will be responsible for them any more than they are for the local institutions of each other. They have confederated together for certain specified objects. Upon the same principle that they would refuse to form a perpetual union with Texas because of her local institutions our forefathers would have been prevented from forming our present Union. Perceiving no valid objection to the measure and many reasons for its adoption vitally affecting the peace, the safety, and the prosperity of both countries, 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 reannexation of Texas to our Union at the earliest practicable period.

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. But eighty years ago our population was confined on the west by the ridge of the Alleghanies. Within that period--within the lifetime, I might say, of some of my hearers--our people, increasing to many millions, have filled the eastern valley of the Mississippi, adventurously ascended the Missouri to its headsprings, and are already engaged in establishing the blessings of self-government in valleys of which the rivers flow to the Pacific. The world beholds the peaceful triumphs of the industry of our emigrants. To us belongs the duty of protecting them adequately wherever they may be upon our soil. The jurisdiction of our laws and the benefits of our republican institutions should be extended over them in the distant regions which they have selected for their homes. The increasing facilities of intercourse will easily bring the States, of which the formation in that part of our territory can not be long delayed, within the sphere of our federative Union. In the meantime every obligation imposed by treaty or conventional stipulations should be sacredly respected.

Source: Polk, James K. "Inaugural Address, March 4, 1845." *The American Presidency Project*.
Gerhard Peters, 1999. Web. 28 June 2014.
<<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=25814>>