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POLK, POLITICS, AND OREGON

By Norman A. Graebner

Seldom has a President of the United States been more thoroughly embarrassed by his adherence to a defunct political issue than was James K. Polk by the Oregon question. Although Polk had identified himself completely at Baltimore with the "whole of Oregon" platform, the lack of enthusiasm for that issue in the campaign of 1844 might have raised some doubt in his mind as to its wide acceptance even within the Democratic party. In his inaugural on March 4, 1845, however, he reaffirmed his conviction that the American title to Oregon was "clear and unquestionable."¹ It seems apparent, therefore, that Polk entered the White House without any inclination to test the soundness of his party by abandoning his campaign pledge. Nor did he vary that purpose in his subsequent negotiations with Great Britain during the summer of 1845.

Polk's offer of a compromise at the 49th parallel in July presents no enigma, for he entered those negotiations without either hope or expectation of success. He possibly feared war with England if he brought the negotiations of the previous administration to an abrupt termination, especially since his inaugural aroused public sentiment on the Oregon issue in Britain. To insist on 54°40' meant war; to recede from it was to abandon the platform.² Polk met the first danger with a half-hearted effort at negotiation which eased the international crisis. In deference to domestic political considerations he admittedly offered less to Britain than she had demanded in preceding negotiations. James Buchanan, secretary of state, revealed that the administration really had little interest in a British acceptance of its proposal. "Should it be rejected," he wrote, "the president will be relieved from the embarrassment in which he has been involved by the acts, offers, and declarations of his predecessors."³

¹*Congressional Globe*, 28 Cong., 2 Sess., 400. Even the inaugural provoked little enthusiasm for Oregon. The *Washington Semi-Weekly Union* (June 12, 1845) explained this silence with an observation that the President's position was accepted as sound and unchallenged. "Men who feel perfectly sure that they are right, are not easily moved," declared the writer. But this statement indicates that the lack of enthusiasm for the Oregon issue required some rationalization. Although many historians have criticised Polk for pursuing such pretensions in his inaugural, Eugene Irving McCormac, Polk's biographer, placed the responsibility on the party which created the platform, and not on the President who was nudged to execute it. See Eugene Irving McCormac, *James K. Polk: A Political Biography* (Berkeley, 1922), 563.

²For a discussion of Polk's dilemma see Thomas Hart Benton, *Thirty Years' View*, 2 vols. (New York, 1856), II, 661; Robert L. Schuyler, "Polk and the Oregon Compromise," *Political Science Quarterly* (Boston, New York), XXVI (Sept., 1911), 446-47.

³James Buchanan to Louis McLane, July 12, 1845, John Bassett Moore (ed.), *The Works of James Buchanan*, 12 vols. (Philadelphia, 1909), VI, 193-94.

Throughout the autumn months following the British rejection, the administration was determined to prevent a recurrence of the dilemma. Polk placed the burden of future negotiation squarely on the British with the veiled threat that only the whole of Oregon would now be acceptable to the United States. He instructed Buchanan that if the British minister should call, "No intimation should be given to him of what the views or intentions of the administration were, & [but] leave him to take his own course."⁴ When late in October T. W. Ward, the Boston agent of Baring Brothers, called on the President to seek his views, Polk noted the result in his diary: "He learned nothing, and after apologizing for making the inquiry he retired."⁵

Only Buchanan of the cabinet questioned Polk's decision to adhere further to the extreme position of the Democratic platform. He warned the President repeatedly that the country would not justify a war for any territory north of 49 and that if he took such a position in his December message he would be attacked for maintaining a warlike tone.⁶ Polk's reading of party opinion, however, convinced him that his success as party leader was still contingent upon his insistence on the whole of Oregon. He assured Buchanan instead that his gravest danger lay in an attack on the administration for having yielded to the tradition of his predecessors. "I told him," Polk recorded, "that if that proposition had been accepted by the British Minister my course would have met with great opposition, and in my opinion would have gone far to overthrow the administration; that, had it been accepted, as we came in on Texas the probability was we would have gone out on Oregon."⁷

Polk's message to Congress in December, 1845, again assured the Democracy that he was still thoroughly attuned to the declarations of the Baltimore Convention. He declared: "The extraordinary and wholly inadmissible demands of the British Government, and the rejection of the proposition made in deference alone to what had been done by my predecessors, and the implied obligation which their acts seemed to impose, afforded satisfactory evidence that no compromise which the United States ought to accept, can be effected."⁸ Our title to Oregon, he repeated, was maintained "by irrefragable facts and arguments." The President appeared to promise that he would not weaken again, but he carefully avoided any phraseology that would deny him the right to submit a compromise treaty to the Senate in the future.

Compromise looked extremely doubtful as the 29th Congress began its

⁴James K. Polk, *The Diary of James K. Polk*, ed. by Milo Milton Quaife, 4 vols. (Chicago, 1910), I, 63.

⁵*Ibid.*, 75.

⁶*Ibid.*, 4-5, 106-07.

⁷*Ibid.*, 107.

⁸*Cong. Globe*, 29 Cong., 1 Sess., Appendix, 3.

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deliberations in December. Polk's message had followed his personal conviction that the "only way to treat John Bull was to look him straight in the eye."⁹ The President, moreover, was convinced that his position enjoyed the support of nine-tenths of the members of Congress.¹⁰ The response to his manifesto proved that the issue of 54-40 was not dead, especially in the agrarian Northwest. What was soon to prove disconcerting to the administration, however, was the realization that much of this enthusiasm was synthetic, and that the advocates of 54-40 in the press and Congress were a relatively small, if vociferous, minority. This group, however, showed remarkable energy and purpose and relinquished its hold grudgingly.

Perhaps the most uncompromising of the ultras were the representatives in Congress from Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. Senator Edward Hannegan of Indiana, for example, proposed a toast for a meeting in Philadelphia: "Oregon—every foot or not an inch; 54 degrees and forty minutes or *delenda est Britannia*."¹¹ Similarly George Fries of Ohio roared in the House of Representatives: "We pitched our tents, and, if God willing, they shall never be struck till the stars and stripes wave over Oregon, every inch of Oregon."¹² Appeals for the whole of Oregon flooded the office of Senator William Allen of Ohio. The declaration of one that "our title is clear and indisputable to 54°40' and no less" spoke the convictions of all.¹³

Cries for the whole of Oregon were not limited entirely to the Old Northwest. One Virginian lauded Allen for his stand: "Der Sir I have noted your cors in United States Senit Ever since you have been there and pleas to receive my sincir thanks."¹⁴ From Charleston wrote one observer: "I have met with more 54°40' men here, amongst prominent merchants, than I had any idea existed in the whole state."¹⁵ George D. Phillips reported late in December from Georgia: "I heard a crowd on Christmas, not one of whom knew on which side of the Rocky Mountains Oregon was, swear that they would support and fight for Polk *all over the world*, that he was right, and we would have Oregon and thrash the British into the bargain."¹⁶ Cullen

⁹Polk, *Diary*, I, 155.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 107.

¹¹Daniel W. Howe, "The Mississippi Valley in the Movement for Fifty-Four Forty or Fight," *Proceedings of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association* (1911-1912), 104.

¹²*Cong. Globe*, 29 Cong., 1 Sess., Appendix, 289.

¹³Chas. B. Stickney to William Allen, January 2, 1846, John N. Barger to Allen, December 12, 1845, G. James *et al.* to Allen, December 22, 1845, J. M. Clark to Allen, January 19, 1846, Saml G. Mickles to Allen, January 9, 1846, William Allen Papers (Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress). Letters in the James Buchanan Papers for the same period reveal the same spirit.

¹⁴Thos. H. H. Coeke to Allen, April 10, 1846, Allen Papers.

¹⁵George Plitt to Nicholas P. Trist, March 19, 1846, Nicholas P. Trist Papers (Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress).

¹⁶George D. Phillips to Howell Cobb, December 30, 1845, Ulrich B. Phillips (ed.), *The Correspondence of Robert Toombs, Alexander H. Stephens, and Howell Cobb*, American Historical Association, *Annual Report*, 1911 (Washington, 1913), II, 70.

Sawtelle of Maine lauded the President for his firmness and rebuked Webster, "We want no more half-English half-American secretaries to barter away any other portion of our territory."¹⁷ Even John C. Calhoun admitted later that when he arrived at Washington in December it was dangerous to whisper 49.¹⁸

Despite the vehemence of these demands, by January, 1846, the movement for compromise in the United States had effectively challenged the hold of the extremists on American thought. Quite significantly that month the *North American Review* demanded a settlement of the Oregon question on considerations other than those of shopworn titles which neither side intended to concede. "We have been arguing the question for thirty years," charged the writer, "and stand precisely where we did when the discussion commenced." The debate, he declared, sounded like a "solemn mummerly" in which too many ambitious politicians were preventing the vast majority from regarding the issue with perfect indifference. Continued the writer: "Not one in ten thousand" of them "would be immediately affected by the successful assertion of our claim to the whole of Oregon."¹⁹

Soon even the metropolitan expansionist press was fostering compromise vigorously. The New York *Journal of Commerce* succumbed to the desire for a settlement early. By January both the New York *Herald* and the New York *Sun* had joined the march, as had the administration's Washington *Union* and the important St. Louis and New Orleans press. The leading compromise editors denounced members of Congress who still demanded the whole of Oregon even at the cost of war. They stressed the worth of Oregon's magnificent harbors which would accrue to the United States with a settlement at 49, while they minimized the value of her soil. The *North American Review*, quite characteristically, after showing from the writings of several noted travelers that Oregon was an arid and rugged waste, concluded that "it is hardly too much to say, that what Siberia is to Russia, Oregon is to the United States."²⁰

Polk was submerged in a plethora of argumentation for compromise from the press, personal correspondents, and from members of both parties in Congress. These pressures soon drove him far from the position he had assumed in his message.²¹ Before the end of December Polk revealed in his diary a willingness to compromise the Oregon question if the British offered

¹⁷*Cong. Globe*, 29 Cong., 1 Sess., 249.

¹⁸John C. Calhoun to Thomas G. Clemson, June 11, 1846, J. Franklin Jameson (ed.), *The Correspondence of John C. Calhoun*, American Historical Association, *Annual Report*, 1899 (Washington, 1900), II, 697.

¹⁹"The Oregon Question," *North American Review* (Boston), LXII (January, 1846), 229-30, 234-35.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 218-28.

²¹Historians have adopted several analyses of the administration's shift in policy.

the Straits of Fuca and some free ports to the north of it.²² But the unequivocal tone of his message prevented him from either opening negotiations with Britain or supporting openly the forces of compromise in Congress. Until the end of 1845 Polk's maintenance of the party platform had presented no problem to his administration. Thereafter his unwillingness to reject that stand caused him constant embarrassment.

Trouble for the administration began early in January when Congress opened debate on a joint resolution, recommended by the December message, that the President be empowered to extend notice to England that the convention of joint occupancy of 1827 be abrogated at the end of the required twelve months.²³ Since the notice would force a prompt and final settlement of the Oregon question, it made considerable difference to members of Congress what the administration would do with the authority granted it. Would the President negotiate a settlement at the 49th parallel, or would he maintain American rights to all of Oregon and perhaps provoke a war? This vital question soon dominated the debates in Congress and threw both houses into confusion.

Western Democrats led by William Allen, chairman of foreign relations in the Senate, rushed to the defense of the notice, for Polk's message assured them that he would accept nothing less than the whole of Oregon. Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois was one of the westerners who was so completely convinced that Polk had now resumed the correct course on Oregon after his momentary lapse that he declared: "Sir, when I saw the declaration of the President's message, I was willing to forgive him from the bottom of my heart for the offer of the 49th parallel in August last."²⁴ Douglas assured the House that Polk would not break his pledge, and therefore no treaty could possibly be concluded that would not convey all of Oregon to the United States.²⁵ Hannegan reminded the Democrats that the platform of

Julius Pratt has developed the thesis that Polk was convinced by Minister Louis McLane early in 1846 that the British would fight and that thereafter the President was less inclined to look John Bull in the eye. See Julius W. Pratt, "James K. Polk and John Bull," *The Canadian Historical Review* (Toronto), XXIV (December, 1943), 341-49. Albert K. Weinberg represents the view that Polk's desire to compromise can be attributed to the growing threat of war with Mexico. See Albert K. Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny: A Study of Nationalist Expansionism in American History* (Baltimore, 1935), 153. Recently this writer has developed the thesis that Polk's views toward Oregon, like those of many American expansionists, were fashioned by the Pacific. Since a settlement at 49 secured the Straits of Fuca, Polk was willing to compromise in the hope of securing the fine ports of California as well. Norman A. Graebner, "Maritime Factors in the Oregon Compromise," *The Pacific Historical Review* (Berkeley, Cal.), XX (November, 1951), 331-45.

²²Polk, *Diary*, I, 135.

²³*Cong. Globe*, 29 Cong., 1 Sess., 138.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 259.

²⁵Said Douglas: "Sir, he who knows the character of the man—he who knows the stern integrity of his political character—he who knows his fidelity to his principles, must know that, during his four years, this 'settled policy' will not be unsettled by him." *Ibid.*, 260.

1844 bound the party to every foot of Oregon. Who would deny that the names of Texas and Oregon had flown together on the Democratic banners? "Everywhere they were twins," he shouted, "everywhere they were united."²⁶ To the ultras the Democratic platform still committed the party in Congress to the whole of Oregon, and tied the President to that same objective.

Polk soon discovered that his message was not written so that everyone could understand it, for the Democrats who favored some concessions argued that it actually cleared the way for a settlement at the 49th parallel. Walter T. Colquitt of Georgia saw clearly that the message nowhere prevented a future negotiation with Britain. Nor did he believe that the administration would disgrace itself if it accepted its own offer when returned. Nothing, he declared, could be "clear and unquestionable" that had been in dispute for thirty years. Such phrases, therefore, were no guarantee against all future negotiation and adjustment.²⁷ William H. Haywood of North Carolina reasoned that Polk had accepted compromise once and could accept it again. He denied that the message placed the President unequivocally on the line of 54-40. "This kind office has been performed for him by his 'friends,' who seem determined to have his company," he charged.²⁸ Haywood demanded bluntly of the ultras if any had been authorized to speak for the administration. No one answered. The silence proved, he taunted them, that the President had not accepted their position. But he warned: "Had he done it, or if he should do it, I for one do not hesitate to declare that it would compel me to turn my back upon him and his administration."²⁹

The group of Democrats favoring a compromise enjoyed the leadership of two powerful party factions. One comprised the old Van Buren group then led in the Senate by Thomas Hart Benton and John A. Dix. The other was under the leadership of John C. Calhoun of South Carolina. Calhoun with George McDuffie and several other southern members of Congress planned as early as February to introduce a resolution to advise the President to reopen negotiations with England for a settlement at 49.³⁰ Calhoun regarded himself as the Senate's spokesman for a peaceful compromise, and so the press regarded him also. His role was well defined by a Washington correspondent of the *New York Journal of Commerce*: "Mr. Calhoun, from the moment of his arrival here, has exerted himself to calm the agitated waters. He has counselled admirably, and is still engaged in promoting a good understanding between the British Minister and our Government. . . .

²⁶*Ibid.*, 459-60.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 433.

²⁸*Ibid.*, Appendix, 372.

²⁹*Ibid.*

³⁰Polk, *Diary*, I, 246.

who would deny that the Democratic banners? Where they were united."²⁹ and the party in Congress that same objective.

written so that everyone favored some concessions at the 49th parallel. The message nowhere persuaded anyone to believe that the administration's offer when returnable" that had been made, were no guarantee. William H. Haywood of Oregon had compromised once and placed the President's promise as having been performed. "I have his company," he said, "if any had been authorized to answer. The silence of the Whigs accepted their position. I do it, I for one do not turn my back upon him and

enjoyed the leadership of the old Van Buren group in South Carolina. The other members of Congress were called on to advise the President at 49.³⁰ Calhoun favored a peaceful compromise, and was defined by a Washington message: "Mr. Calhoun, from the effort to calm the agitated Whigs engaged in promoting a compromise of our Government. . . .

To do this, he has used his efforts both with Whigs and Democrats, in both Houses, and has succeeded."³¹

Whig support assured the eventual triumph of Calhoun's views in Congress. In fact, by late February it had become obvious to the administration that a compromise on the 49th parallel would probably receive a two-thirds vote in the Senate.³² In April it was increasingly clear that the strengthening voice of the Senate called for 49, no more and no less. Said the New York *Herald* of congressional opinion:

This is the line that we define,
The line for Oregon;
And if this basis you decline,
We go the "whole or none,"
We go the "whole or none," Lord John,
Up to the Russian line;
Then, if you're wise, you'll "compromise"
On number forty nine.³³

Quite contentedly the Whigs followed the leadership of Calhoun. Wrote Daniel Webster in January: "Most of the Whigs in the Senate incline to remain rather quiet, and to follow the lead of Mr. Calhoun. He is at the head of a party of six or seven, and as he professes still to be an administration man, it is best to leave the work in his hands, at least for the present."³⁴ The New York *Herald* described the strange political alignment on the Oregon issue well: "The chivalry of the West goes hot and strong for 54-40, while the ardent South, and the calculating East, coalesce, for once, on this point, and quietly and temperately call for 49."³⁵

Whig leaders could rely upon Congress, but they noted that little light had been thrown on the question of Polk's future action. Both interpretations of the message could not be correct. Senator Jacob W. Miller of New Jersey noted that the President's stand seemed "like the mercury in the barometer, to go up and down according as gentlemen placed their fingers on the bulb. When touched by the warm hands of the Senators from Indiana, from Illinois, and from Ohio, it immediately went up to 54°40'; but when the cool and distinguished Senator from North Carolina put his finger upon it, it fell as quickly to 49°."³⁶

The Whigs attacked and ridiculed administration policy for causing

²⁹Quoted in the St. Louis *Missouri Reporter*, January 9, 1846.

³⁰James Buchanan to Louis McLane, February 26, 1846, Hunter Miller (ed.), *Treaties and Other International Acts of the United States of America*, 8 vols. (Washington, 1937—), V, 60; Schuyler, "Polk and the Oregon Compromise," *loc. cit.*, 453.

³¹New York *Herald*, April 6, 1846.

³²Daniel Webster to Sears, January 17, 1846, Fletcher Webster (ed.), *The Private Correspondence of Daniel Webster*, 2 vols. (Boston, 1857), II, 215.

³³New York *Herald*, January 4, 1846.

³⁴*Cong. Globe*, 29 Cong., 1 Sess., 555. The North Carolina senator was William Henry Haywood, Jr.

confusion in Congress. Alexander Barrow of Louisiana, for example, denounced the *Union* for demanding unity so that the President could carry his point. Observed the Senator: "What that point is none of us know, and about which scarcely two of his friends on this floor agree." The Senator agreed that the friends of the administration wanted to support its measures, but could not because of their inability to settle among themselves the President's true intentions. Barrow declared with considerable truth: "There never was, before, a period when some one in the Senate was not authorized to speak for the Executive, made regularly acquainted with his views, and ready to put right those who misconstrue his plans or language."³⁷ Similarly Willie P. Mangum of North Carolina questioned the administration: "Was there ever such a case known as an Executive without an organ of his views and opinion in either House of Congress?"³⁸ The Whigs soon determined to resist the notice until they had secured from the President a distinct assurance as to how he proposed to dispose of the Oregon question. "I want light," shouted George Evans of Maine, "I want further assurance how the notice is to be used if we pass it."³⁹ He spoke the views of a party.

Whig spokesmen insisted that administration policy was as inconsistent as it was secretive. They observed repeatedly that the executive throughout the crisis had made little provision for defense, and that little to gratify the "Hotspurs" within the Democratic party.⁴⁰ Polk himself had admitted as early as August, 1845, that if war came it would not be the fault of the United States; and Webster, from his observance of Polk's policy, concluded shortly after the message that he had not the slightest apprehension of war.⁴¹ As early as February he predicted that the administration would agree substantially to the 49th parallel. Webster reasoned correctly: "In my opinion our government now waits only for the other to make the offer."⁴² Yet he was baffled by the contradiction in Polk's policy. Since there was nothing in the executive policy that indicated that the President expected war, was he forced to assume that the administration expected a settlement by negotiation? But, he demanded, "What terms of negotiation? What basis of negotiation? What grounds of negotiation? Every thing that we

³⁷*Ibid.*, Appendix, 589-91.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 29 Cong., 1 Sess., 635.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 468.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 635.

⁴¹Polk, *Diary*, I, 4; Daniel Webster to D. Fletcher Webster, January 14, 1846, C. H. Van Tyne (ed.), *The Letters of Daniel Webster* (New York, 1902), 306.

⁴²Webster to Edward Everett, February 5, 1846, Webster (ed.), *Private Correspondence*, II, 217. Late in January Webster wrote: "We grow daily more pacific. Mr. Spaight has, today, followed up Mr. Benton, & Mr. Bagley in a decided anti-war speech . . . The altered tone of the Union is remarkable; or would be, if it did [not] so frequently vibrate from side to side. Two equally pacific speeches in the H. of R. today, Mr. Hohnes & Mr. Ewing, the new member from Tennessee. I wish I felt no more alarm about the *Tariff*, than I do at the present moment about *war*." Webster to Nathan Appleton, January 29, 1846, Van Tyne (ed.), *Letters of Webster*, 308.

hear from the Executive department is 'the whole or none;' and yet negotiation! Sir, it is vain to conceal from ourselves, from the country, or from the world, the gross inconsistency of this course of conduct."⁴³ Robert Toombs of Georgia laid the confused policy to the President's propensity to play politics: "I do not think a war in the least probable. Mr. Polk never dreamed of any other war than a war upon the Whigs. He is playing a low grogshop politician's trick, nothing more. He would be as much surprised and astonished and frightened at getting into war with England as if the Devil were to rise up before him at his bidding."⁴⁴

These Whig queries sent a constant stream of Democratic spokesmen to the White House to seek some precise commitment without which the Whigs would not act. Polk believed that his opinions were clearly expressed, and therefore thought the debate had "taken a strange direction; that instead of examining and discussing my views as communicated in these documents, Senators had been guessing or conjecturing what I might do hereafter, and were approving or condemning what they supposed I might or might not do."⁴⁵ John J. Crittenden revealed how thoroughly Polk's policy had confused the Democratic party:

They quarrel about what the President's sentiments and purposes are in relation to Oregon,—each interprets the "oracle" to suit himself, and each pretends to speak for him, while all are suspicious and jealous of him and of each other. They know that one side or the other is cheated and to be cheated, but they can't yet exactly tell which. In the mean time they curse Polk hypothetically. If he don't settle and make peace at forty-nine or some other parallel of compromise, the one side curses him; and if he yields an inch or stops a hair's breadth short of fifty-four degrees forty [minutes], the other side damns him without redemption. Was ever a gentleman in such a fix?"⁴⁶

It was apparent to the President that Calhoun and Benton would break with the administration completely if it refused to settle at 49. On the other hand, Colonel Tod of Ohio informed the President that the acceptance by the administration of any compromise would defeat the Democratic party in his state. Allen warned Polk that any settlement for less than 54-40 would actually encounter the opposition of men in ten western states.⁴⁷ Late in December Senator Hopkins L. Turney of Tennessee impressed upon the President that he was caught between two fires and whatever he might do would dissatisfy one or more sections of the party.⁴⁸ William R. King,

⁴³*Cong. Globe*, 29 Cong., 1 Sess., 431-32.

⁴⁴Robert Toombs to G. W. Crawford, February 6, 1846, Phillips (ed.), *Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb*, 73-74.

⁴⁵Polk, *Diary*, I, 285-86.

⁴⁶Quoted in McCormac, *Polk*, 598 n.

⁴⁷Polk, *Diary*, I, 242, 248-49.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 140-41.

writing to Buchanan late in November, had predicted such trouble in the 29th Congress: "My letters have led me to believe that the Democratic Party will not be very harmonious in the coming session of Congress. The Van Buren men are dissatisfied—so are those of Calhoun, and the prospect is fair that we shall again be split into factions which will endanger the success of the Party in 1848."⁶⁰ Even before the session began the Van Buren and Calhoun factions had revealed a certain coolness toward the administration. Polk therefore hesitated to antagonize that group within the party which had secured his nomination and still promised him its loyal support—the expansionist wing, now demanding the whole of Oregon, led by Lewis Cass of Michigan. Polk feared, further, that through the Oregon debates the party would be so divided that his recommendations for the reduction of the tariff and the re-establishment of the Independent Treasury would be lost also.⁶¹

Before the end of December Polk decided upon a device to extract himself from the politically dangerous position. He informed the cabinet that he would, if the British made a suitable offer, "consult confidentially three or four Senators from different parts of the Union, and might submit it to the Senate for their previous advice."⁶² The entire cabinet agreed to this procedure. Buchanan informed Louis McLane, the United States minister to England, that any British proposal for compromise at 49 would be thus handled. Such a rejection of executive primacy in foreign policy, however, demanded a rationalization. To McLane Polk explained the powers of the Senate:

Without their advice and consent, no treaty can be concluded. Besides, in their legislative character, they constitute a portion of the war-making, as in their Executive capacity they compose a part of the treaty making power. . . . A rejection of the British ultimatum might probably lead to war, and as a branch of the legislative power, it would be incumbent upon them to authorize the necessary preparations to render this war successful.⁶³

With this strange technique of seeking the advice of the Senate Polk hoped to place the responsibility for any compromise on the British government and the Senate, thus eliminating for himself the necessity of assuming a positive role in policy formulation.

To those who called at the White House, therefore, the President was noncommittal. When early in January James A. Black of South Carolina

⁶⁰William R. King to James Buchanan, November 28, 1845, James Buchanan Papers (Pennsylvania Historical Society).

⁶¹Polk, *Diary*, I, 263.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 133-35, 139, 147.

⁶³James Buchanan to Louis McLane, February 26, 1846, Miller (ed.), *Treaties*, V, 60.

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⁶⁴Polk, *D*

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⁶⁹Polk, *D*

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 26

sought the President's views, Polk recorded: "I told him that my opinions were contained in my message, that they had been well considered, and that I had not changed them; that I had recommended the Notice and thought it ought to be given."⁵³ Such an answer was hardly satisfactory when Congress could not agree on the meaning of the message, but it served Polk's purposes and was repeated. When Turney sought to ascertain the intentions of the administration to better govern his own conduct in Congress, Polk discreetly referred him to the message.⁵⁴ Still the views of such powerful leaders as Calhoun and Benton could not be ignored. Polk assured them privately that he would submit any British proposal of a fair compromise to the Senate for its previous advice before rejecting it.⁵⁵

It was Haywood who stimulated the ultras into action early in March when he professed to speak the views of the administration.⁵⁶ The exasperated Hannegan prophesied that if this were true, the President "would sink so deep that the Trumpet of the Angel of Resurrection would not reach him!"⁵⁷ The Indianan stormed into the executive office and demanded a clear-cut decision. "I answered him that I would answer no man what I would do in the future," hedged the President, "that for what I might do I would be responsible to God and my country and if I should hereafter do anything which should be disapproved by himself and others, it would be time enough to condemn me."⁵⁸ Similarly he informed the inquisitive Cass that his views on Oregon were contained in his message. Allen argued logically with Polk that he required the authority to speak for the administration if he were to regain his position as the spokesman for foreign affairs in the Senate. He presented to Polk a prepared statement for his endorsement, but the President would not be trapped. "I told him I could give no authority to him or any one else to say anything in the Senate," replied the President, "that I had given no such authority to Mr. Haywood and I would give none such to him; that I did not wish to be involved in the matter & that what he said he must say on his own responsibility."⁵⁹

Polk perhaps felt during these conversations as one of those harrassed politicians to whom Lord Bryce refers: "They must sometimes wish that it was possible for them to address their own followers in one tongue and their opponents in another, each uncomprehended by the other, as shep-

⁵³Polk, *Diary*, I, 154-55.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 140-41. Polk informed Turney that since a British proposal of 49 would involve the questions of peace and war, he would take the advice of the Senate before acting on it.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 286-87, 324, 349, 376.

⁵⁶*Cong. Globe*, 29 Cong., 1 Sess., 459.

⁵⁷Quoted in *New York Tribune*, June 8, 1847.

⁵⁸Polk, *Diary*, I, 273.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 268, 279.

herds in the Scottish Highlands are said to shout their orders to one dog in English and to another in Gaelic."⁶⁰

The President gradually became embittered over his repeated embarrassments and turned his abuse on the Democratic leadership in Congress. He recalled that his party had a decided majority in both houses and yet in four months they had not passed the notice. The nation, he feared, would hold the Democratic party responsible for the failure of Congress to act on the recommendations of the executive.⁶¹ He was completely unable to comprehend his own role in the confusion, and attributed the party divisions rather to personal ambitions. "The truth is," he wrote in April, "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'."⁶²

In April Congress passed the resolution for notice, but with one important modification. When the Whigs received no satisfaction from the White House, Reverdy Johnson of Maryland successfully introduced an amendment which encouraged both governments to adopt "all proper measures for a speedy and amicable adjustment of the differences and disputes in regard to the said territory."⁶³ Only the ultras, who now saw the collapse of their position, opposed this declaration of congressional opinion. John A. McClernand of Illinois attacked it logically from the viewpoint of the Democratic pledge: "By the adoption of the report, you place the President in the dilemma of disregarding the instructions of Congress to compromise by concession, or of violating his plighted faith to the people to maintain the whole."⁶⁴ McClernand's charges against Congress illustrate the effectiveness of Polk's guarded policy. By forcing the legislators to assume the leadership in the movement toward compromise, the President to that moment had avoided the focus of agrarian criticism.

Although Polk privately professed certain preference for a naked notice, the amended version actually went far in extracting him from the difficult situation which he had tried so hard to avoid. As the administration had anticipated, Britain responded to the notice with an acceptable proposal which the President without hesitation forwarded to the Senate. On the basis of its approval the final treaty was negotiated and ratified in June. With this final action the executive completed the disillusionment of the 54-40 Democrats, for until then some still had hope that the President, in whose hand lay the destiny of the Oregon settlement, would select his alternate choice and disregard the instructions of Congress.

⁶⁰Quoted in Charles Edward Merriam, *Four American Party Leaders* (New York, 1926), 11.

⁶¹Polk, *Diary*, I, 295-96.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 345.

⁶³*Cong. Globe*, 29 Cong., 1 Sess., 716.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 720.

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Undoubtedly Polk merits much of the approbation given him for pushing the Oregon question to an acceptable conclusion in 1846. Richard Rush spoke for many friends of the administration and for historians since his time when he wrote: "For one, I am unshaken in the belief that it was the President's opening message to the first Congress he met . . . that produced the settlement of the Oregon difficulty. It was like a great bomb-shell thrown into the British cabinet. It took them by surprise, and first roused them to the unavoidable necessity of a settlement."⁶⁵ Webster, however, argued that Polk could not have produced a settlement, because, clinging as he did to the party platform, he denied himself the right to negotiate further after August, 1845. Webster placed the credit elsewhere: "The discussions in Congress; the discussions on the other side of the water, the general sense of the community, all protested against the iniquity of two of the greatest nations of modern times rushing into war . . . All enforced the conviction, that it was a question to be settled by an equitable and fair consideration, and it was thus settled."⁶⁶ Pakenham, the British minister at Washington, agreed. To him Polk had remained attuned to 54-40 too long to exert any influence in bringing a final settlement. He attributed the treaty either to the "wisdom and integrity of the Senate, or the intelligence and good sense of the American people."⁶⁷

Unfortunately the Oregon treaty aggravated the tensions within the Democratic party. The enraged senators of Ohio and Indiana were not mollified by the general popularity of the Oregon settlement, and bore deadly grudges against those members of the party who had made compromise possible. They turned particularly against the southern wing led by Calhoun. "We had inscribed our Banners Polk, Dallas, Texas & Oregon . . . We got Polk, Dallas, & Texas, & gave away the balance."⁶⁸ Thus one Allen correspondent passed judgment on the South. "Texas and Oregon were born the same instant, nursed and cradled in the same cradle — the Baltimore Convention — and they were at the same instant adopted by the Democracy throughout the land," recalled Hannegan. "There was not a moment's hesitation, until Texas was admitted; but the moment she was admitted, the peculiar friends of Texas turned and were doing all they could to strangle Oregon."⁶⁹ Joshua Giddings of Ohio assumed that the South, now enhanced by the addition of Texas, could operate from only one motive, the defense of slavery. It was for this reason, he explained, that the South feared a war with England: "They see before them the black

⁶⁵Richard Rush to Nicholas P. Trist, September 21, 1846, Trist Papers, as quoted in McCormac, *Polk*, 610 n.

⁶⁶Quoted in Miller (ed.), *Treaties*, V, 89.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 90.

⁶⁸John D. White to William Allen, July 19, 1846, Allen Papers.

⁶⁹*Cong. Globe*, 29 Cong., 1 Sess., 110.

regiments of the West India Islands landed upon their shores. They now call to mind the declarations of British statesmen, that 'a war with the United States will be a war of emancipation.'"⁷⁰ The cry that the friends of slavery had broken the contract of 1844 had logic and effect.

Neither could the administration avoid a full measure of abuse. The proponents of 54-40 admitted early that they had lost support in the South and East. "But we do expect," observed one Ohioan, "that our president whose pledges on this subject are too recent to be forgotten, and on the faith of which we gave him our votes, will not now forsake us."⁷¹ Giddings in predicting that Polk would compromise to save the institution of slavery, proved to his adherents that the Oregon treaty was a case of southern dictation. Allen leveled his attack at Thomas Ritchie of the *Washington Union* for fostering compromise, and suggested to Cass that they recall Francis P. Blair to establish another Democratic sheet. Polk was astounded. He recorded: "I told Gen'l Cass that the only effect of establishing a [another] Democratic paper at Washington would be still more to distract and divide the Democratic party."⁷² When the Senate accepted the Oregon compromise, Allen resigned his post as chairman of foreign relations.⁷³ Many in the Northwest were humiliated by what they believed to be a loss of national honor. "I cannot but think," declared John W. Tibbatts of Kentucky, "that the proud American

Eagle, towering in her pride of place
Has been hawked at by a mousing owl,
And killed.⁷⁴

Strangely Polk's action did not even placate the Democrats who favored compromise. Whereas the President's eventual acceptance of a compromise treaty alienated the Northwest, his refusal to openly admit his willingness to settle the issue peacefully antagonized those leaders that he supported. Calhoun, for example, believed that the final settlement was achieved against the influence of the executive.⁷⁵ The Van Burenites supported the treaty, but abhorred Polk's conduct of the issue. Churchill C. Cambreleng expressed the sentiments of many when he wrote:

Heaven forgive me for having had any hand in laying the foundation of this blundering administration. Tyler was bad enough but he had this advantage—there was no mock-mystery nor genuine duplicity in his conduct—if he betrayed his friends he was an honest knave, without any hypocritical cant about the sabbath &c &c. But apart from what I am utterly astonished at the little judge-

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 140.

⁷¹W. Newton to Allen, January 9, 1846, Allen Papers.

⁷²Polk, *Diary*, I, 361.

⁷³*Ibid.*, 471.

⁷⁴*Cong. Globe*, 29 Cong., 1 Sess., Appendix, 1018-19.

⁷⁵John C. Calhoun to Thomas G. Clemson, April 25, 1846, Jameson (ed), *Calhoun*

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ment and less integrity which has distinguished the course of this administration. . . . How uncandid and dishonorable must the conduct of the President and his prime minister appear in the eyes of all honest men.⁷⁰

Only a compromise settlement was possible in 1846. Polk could scarcely have demanded the whole of Oregon after it became plain that Congress, the press, and even his own party would not tolerate a rejection of the British offer. The treaty, therefore, was politically proper and rightfully regarded as an administration triumph. Its benefits to the American pioneer and the business community outweighed the harm rendered the party. A settlement so propitious, however, should not have seriously injured either the party or the administration. It is true that in 1846 Polk could not have prodded Congress into action without alienating at least one faction of his party. But Polk's apparent insistence on 54-40 misled his friends on both sides of the question. His secrecy antagonized all groups within the party who sought to know his views, and permitted his enemies in the North to involve him in the slavery issue. At the same time, his caution denied him the opportunity of explaining the wisdom of his final decision. Yet this was essential, for as President and initiator of foreign policy he might have withheld the British proposal. Since he never appeared publicly to approve the majority view of Congress, he was unable to associate himself in the minds of his contemporaries with the final triumph. That belonged to Congress and the people, not to the administration.

Correspondence, 689. Wrote Calhoun: "This great change has been effected by the Senate against the entire influence of the Executive. . . ."

⁷⁰Churchill C. Cambreleng to Martin Van Buren, May 16, 1846, Martin Van Buren Papers (Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress), as quoted in McCormac, *Polk*, I, 600 n.