

Book Review: *A Country of Vast Designs*

John Vanderkeyl

Teaching American History Grant

September 2nd, 2011

In studying American history, as in any particular subject, there seems to be segments that go largely untouched by historians, especially work that is accessible to non-intellectual historians. For America that segment tends to run from 1815 through 1861, and one of the many overlooked figures from that period is James Knox Polk, the eleventh President of the United States of America. In his book, *A Country of Vast Designs*, author Robert W. Merry gives an in-depth look at the Polk presidency, particularly the territorial acquisitions that marked his time in office. Merry also gives great insight to the politics of the time particularly surrounding Polk's election, the Mexican War, and officially acquiring the Oregon territory. Merry started his writing career working for numerous American newspapers, but has more recently taken to writing books on American history. Thus, his book reads more like a novel compared to a book written by an intellectual historian, which makes *A Country of Vast Designs* accessible to a wider audience. Merry does a great job presenting facts in a simple manner, but later going into greater depth to satisfy the desires of a more curious reader. One fault of Merry is that his book uses an obscure version of endnotes so it is difficult to look up facts and inquire to where he gathered his information. In fact, Merry doesn't even use endnote numerical citations, so it is close to impossible to actually follow the endnotes and look up any particular fact. With that being said his book is immensely revealing on Polk and the politics that ruled him and America during his presidency while shedding light on many new details. It is easy to read and enjoyable for even a casual history reader.

Merry gives great detail on many subjects in his book so this review will aim to break down some of the larger themes that reoccur throughout the book. First, Merry

does an impressive job of providing background for the political theories and parties of the time and their leaders, particularly Henry Clay and Andrew Jackson. This ultimately leads the reader to better insight into the politics that were the background to Polk's presidency.¹ Merry devotes a chapter to both Jackson and Clay and also gives background on the Mexican, Texas, and Oregon territories that become major parts of his book. He details these territories before and up to American interest in them, going all the way back to the 16th and 17th centuries to explain different countries and their claims on each territory.² The first major theme that runs throughout the entire book is obviously Polk's presidency and, in particular, how Polk claimed from the start he would only govern for one term, and that he *did not* want to include any presidential hopefuls in his cabinet. Merry provides in-depth explanations into Polk's campaign, and how it was a surprise to most of America that he was even nominated, never mind elected, president. Polk's aim was to keep those with presidential ambitions out of his cabinet so that they would not interfere with his politics and goals, or take a stance against him to make way for a future campaign. He was successful with all but his Secretary of States, James Buchanan, "It soon became clear that, in naming Buchanan to his cabinet, Polk failed in his resolve to keep presidential ambitions away from his inner circle. Buchanan's presidential aspirations were so raw that he seldom managed to keep them hidden."³ Buchanan's ambitions arise throughout the book on almost every major decision that Polk makes, often hindering the President in his resolve.⁴ Buchanan didn't only call Polk

¹ Robert Merry, *Country of Vast Designs: James K. Polk, The Mexican War, and the Conquest of the American Continent*, Simon and Schuster Paperbacks: New York, 2009, 14-30. The chapter is "Young Hickory: the making of a Jackson Protégé."

² Ibid, 65-80, 131-144, 176-237. Particular attention to 165-171.

³ Ibid, 135-136.

⁴ For specific instances look up in Merry- 190, 202, 232, 266, 338, 427, 440.)

out in cabinet meetings and expose documents to the press, he exposed one of Polk's major weaknesses. That weakness being that Polk, while a mastermind of getting what he wanted through written word and long political processes, could easily be taken advantage in face to face verbal confrontation. According to Merry, Polk had "a lack of natural leadership ability... he inspired neither loyalty nor fear."⁵ These traits were exposed by Buchanan and Polk was subsequently taken advantage of by others in Washington, even those in his own Democratic party. Merry does a comprehensive job exposing Polk's strengths and, in uncovering some of his weaknesses, gives the reader better insight into many of his decisions such as not firing Buchanan after he leaked documents pertaining to the then un-ratified Mexican treaty.⁶ Polk was too apprehensive to fire Buchanan in person, but would have been embarrassed to do it in a letter. Merry adeptly translates these cabinet squabbles and parallels how they played out inside of numerous battles within Congress. As one of the aims of Merry's book is to expose the politics of the time period, he gives many examples of arguments large and small within Congress in his book, which are too numerous to list but help him achieve his goal nonetheless. Yet, after reading *A Country of Vast Designs* there is no doubt the reader gains a better view of both Polk's rise to power, and his actions in power as well as the politics that affected his decisions.

The next major theme throughout *A Country of Vast Designs* is the use of newspapers and newspaper articles by Merry to bolster his arguments. First, Merry explains the importance of newspapers at the time as a tool of the Whig and Democrat parties, and the essential need for a loyal paper. This is reiterated through Polk's

⁵ Ibid, 337.

⁶ Ibid, 438-440.

replacement of the head of the major Democrat newspaper, the *Union*, at the start of his presidency against the wishes of his mentor, Andrew Jackson.⁷ With this introduction, Merry does an expert job of using the Democrat paper (*Union*) and the Whig paper (*Intelligencer*) to expose the politics and positions of each party in accordance with many events of the time. Merry often portrays an event, and then quotes parts of the newspapers responses to such events in the next day's edition. This tactic effectively explained the politics of the time, and simply underscored how important the newspaper was becoming in everyday life in America.⁸ Never before did I fully realize the importance of newspapers and their being a tool of the party before reading Merry. Newspapers were used to spread party propaganda, support candidates, make anonymous attacks of the other party, and prepare readers for changes in policy. It is clear Merry did an exorbitant amount of research for this book, and the use of so many newspapers and newspaper stories make that even more obvious. However, I wish he had used footnotes to make it easier to look up some of the articles that he references and uses in this book.

Finally, the most remembered and perhaps important thing about the Polk presidency is his vast expansion of the American country across the continent and allowing the American nation to touch both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. It is natural then that Merry focuses on the expansion of both Oregon and the Mexican-American War. He provides an overview of the war and treaties, while highlighting some of the better known facts about the acquisition of both territories. As already mentioned, he gives extensive background to both territories and the land claims of many nations to these territories (Britain, France, Spain, Mexico, and Russia). I will focus in on just a few

⁷ Ibid, 138-142.

⁸ Newspaper comparisons are numerous but for specific examples look to pages 207, 310, 315-317, 405, 471.

of the facts I found most interesting. First, most students and teachers alike know that Britain and America were arguing over the Oregon territory. However, less often discussed, is Britain's attempt to get Mexico to recognize Texas independence and renounce American annexation. Britain would, in turn, offer support to Mexico and promise to involve France in that support as well. Merry explains Anson Jones, the Texan President, and his aims at giving his constituents the choice of Independence (recognized by Britain and Mexico), or annexation, although it was well known that Jones favored independence.⁹ This British plan fell apart however, when it became clear "Jones had not taken sufficient account of his constituency's overwhelming enthusiasm for annexation."¹⁰ This is just a small part of the history of Texas and the Mexican-American War, but it is one that is often left out of books, and it exposes the possibility of another British-American War if things were not worked out peaceably in Texas.

Another part of the war that Merry pays particular attention to is the problems between President Polk and his Whig Army commanders. It is often published in books simply that Polk replaces Zachary Taylor with Winfield Scott, because he fears Taylor's Presidential ambitions, which is true but grossly understated and somewhat misinformed. Merry gives much greater insight here. He exposes first that Scott was meant to head the army, but he was too busy feuding with Polk in Washington D.C., and thus Polk decided to hand over military leadership to Taylor after he won decisive battles early in the War.¹¹ So it was, in fact, Taylor that really replaced Scott as the head of the army initially. Merry also exposes that the fiery Senator Thomas Hart Benton and Polk were working to give Benton supreme control of all forces in Mexico, but because Benton was unable to garner

⁹ Ibid, 149-152.

¹⁰ Ibid, 157.

¹¹ Ibid, 257-260.

the support needed in the Senate to create such a position Polk was forced to look elsewhere when he need to replace Taylor.¹² So, as Polk began to see Taylor as a Whig Presidential threat and unnecessary risk taker, and claimed that Taylor “lacked the ‘grasp of mind’ for major command”¹³ he was unable to replace Taylor with a Democrat specifically Benton. So Polk was forced to replace him with Winfield Scott, who by all accounts ran the war brilliantly, though Scott and Polk continue to disagree and argue through letters. Thus, Scott remained in command throughout the war annoyed constantly by the glory hungry and Polk friend Gideon Pillow.¹⁴

Merry then wraps up the last ninety or so pages of his book explaining in-depth the treaty negotiations, and giving great insight to the problems between Polk and Nicholas Trist.¹⁵ The treaty negotiations are presented in a fascinating manner and I recommend ready the last ninety pages to gain greater insight into the treaty negotiations that ended this war. Merry also gives an overview of the 1848 election, which resulted in the Presidency of Zachary Taylor, and ends with a brief historiographical overview of Polk and his politics. *A Country of Vast Designs* devotes almost five hundred pages to Polk, his politics, and his goal to extend the American continent across a vast amount of lands. Polk is responsible, directly and indirectly, for adding over 500,000 square miles to American land, yet his Presidency is overshadowed by events that were yet to come in America. Who would want to focus on America taking advantage of the weak Mexican Nation, when the debate of slavery is heating up and taking over politics and the American nation as a whole? With the coming of the great American Civil War many

¹² Ibid, 415, 424.

¹³ Ibid. 309. Explained further on 310-318.

¹⁴ Ibid, 389-392.

¹⁵ For treaty negotiations and main points see: 383-387, 409-411, 418-434.

historians choose to focus on that war and its preceding events, instead of the Mexican War, which Merry points out is a war that many look down upon as a cause of American imperialist shame. Either way it is a war that without James Knox Polk and his politics may have never come to fruition, or much more likely a war that would have occurred many years later than it did. Merry's book proves to be a must read for the casual and even more interested reader hoping to learn more about American politics and conquests in the 1840's.

Works Cited

Merry, Robert. *Country of Vast Designs: James K. Polk, The Mexican War, and the Conquest of the American Continent*, Simon and Schuster Paperbacks: New York, 2009.