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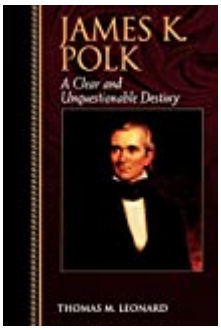

Thomas M. Leonard. *James K. Polk: A Clear and Unquestionable Destiny (Biographies in American Foreign Policy).* Wilmington, Del.: S.R. Books, 2001. xxiv + 218 pp. $84.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8420-2646-8; $27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8420-2647-5.

Reviewed by John M. Belohlavek (Department of History, University of South Florida)

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Several years ago, a rock group with the intriguing moniker of They Might Be Giants recorded a song informing us that in spite of meeting every goal set forth in his platform, "precious few have mourned the passing of Mr. James K. Polk, our eleventh president, Young Hickory, Napoleon of the South."[1] While the comparison of Polk to the French general is questionable, the lyrics correctly relate the Tennesseean's achievements and reaffirm his historically low profile. The celebration of Polk on a popular CD then is quite surprising. Although U.S. historians have not dismissed this one-term president, recent scholarship is sharply critical of his seemingly callous imperialism and pursuit of Manifest Destiny. Even so, academics grudgingly place him in the top dozen of chief executives, ranking him generally as a "near great" or "most successful" president for his achievements. In fact, the rock song is a fascinating part of a modest Polk revival that has produced a stamp commemorating the 200th anniversary of his birth in 1795 and a number of books about him and the Mexican War. Thomas Leonard's study, the sixth volume in a biographical foreign policy series, is the most recent effort.[2]

The series intends to offer brief studies (ca. 200 pages) focusing on the diplomatic efforts of prominent individuals. Leonard wisely dedicates a quarter of the work to an examination of PolkÂs background in Tennessee Democratic politics through the early 1840s. The remainder of his study deals topically with the major issues of the period: Texas, Oregon, California, and the War with Mexico. "Young Hickory" emerges as a loner, a rather humorless, tough-minded Presbyterian with sympathy for the lower classes of the frontier. A classic Jacksonian, Polk shared his mentor's fondness for small government and low tariffs, as well as his opposition to banks and expansive readings of the Constitution. He also embraced Jackson's reverence for executive power and the Union, as well as his anglophobia. Polk moved quickly from the state legislature to Congress where, by 1835, he became Speaker of the House. After fourteen years in Washington, he returned to Nashville and re-entered state politics. Hoping to position himself for national office (perhaps the vice presidency), Polk won the governorship in 1839, only to lose bids for re-election in 1841 and 1843. His "dark horse" nomination for the presidency in 1844 produced a narrow victory, but, Leonard argues, no public mandate for expansion.

Polk entered the White House with both domestic and diplomatic agendas. His proposals for an independent treasury and tariff reductions were accomplished in 1846. Simultaneously, he registered his opposition to an aggressive policy of federal funding for internal improvements with several key vetoes. Although Polk

had demonstrated little interest in foreign affairs prior to 1844, the "reannexation" of Texas and "reoccupation" of Oregon had been critical components of his recent campaign.

Both were sensitive issues: Texas as a hotbed of controversy over slavery and Oregon as a flashpoint over national honor. Fortunately, John Tyler, shortly before his departure from the White House, engineered a joint resolution of Congress to authorize the absorption of Texas into the Union. Under the aegis of Manifest Destiny, Polk skillfully guided the measure through a maze of intrigue to a successful conclusion in late 1845. Leonard rightly sees Polk as a secondary player in the nine-year battle for annexation of the "Lone Star Republic," but recognizes that he played a vital role insuring the security of the Texas border and facilitating the final political maneuvers.

Polk was similarly successful on the Oregon question. Leonard views him as a political manipulator who formulated his own principles and policies, while encouraging Congress (at the same time) to determine its own agendas. He accordingly led–and misled–Congress, his cabinet, and the British to believe that his position on the Northwest boundary ranged anywhere from the 49Â° to 54Â° 40'. While committed to compromise at 49Â°, the president provided time for U.S. extremists to flaunt their demands. Simultaneously, the Peel-Aberdeen ministry was given the leeway to realize their best domestic interests rested in compromise and the avoidance of a war that would only damage Anglo-American commerce. Leonard praises Polk for his patient handling of the Oregon situation and understanding British limitations. As the author states, "to his credit, he adroitly manipulated the political dynamics to his advantage" (p. 121). But he also notes that Polk was hard pressed to provide clear guidance on the subject and was to be damned either way by American moderates or extremists.

Polk arrived late to the campaign for California; it appeared in his line of sight sometime in 1844. The ports on the West coast and the lure of Asian trade had long fascinated northeastern merchants, but had only recently caught the Tennesseean's attention. When he entered the White House, an "Empire on the Pacific" clearly had become a priority, although the strategy to achieve it was unclear. Throughout 1845, the president moved from purchase to provocation in an effort to obtain California from Mexico. Leonard does a fine job of exploring the confusion of military and diplomatic activities carried out by a host of American agents in 1845-46 in an effort to seize the area if it declared independence or should a war erupt with Mexico. After the loss of Texas, nationalism prohibited the cession of additional territory and Mexico refused to sell California. An undaunted Polk continued to hope for a diplomatic solution, even as he dispatched American troops into a disputed border area between the Nueces and Rio Grande Rivers. His policy with the Mexicans appeared "arrogant and brazen" and seemingly designed to provoke a conflict. The president had, in fact, decided on war even before he received confirmation of hostilities on 9 May 1846.

Leonard sees the Mexicans manipulated into a conflict over the Texas border, but recognizes that imperial ambitions for California and the Southwest lay at the heart of the matter. Polk, of course, worked mightily to promote the notion of defensive war that was also patriotically expansionist. He succeeded for a time before a variety of problems in the U.S. and Mexico prompted increased disillusionment and opposition. Leonard criticizes Polk for both misjudging the strong nationalistic intent of the Mexicans and for his conspiratorial nature which created a list of political problems complicating a diplomatic resolution.

Polk, the author ultimately contends, was a man out of step with his time. Ostensibly the torchbearer for a self righteous policy of expansion that preached an idealistic moral crusade, Polk really fronted a movement based on politics, economics, and security. While seeking to advance American empire in an era of increasing sectional controversy over slavery, his policies were destined to splinter the nation. Unwilling to accept or recognize the divisiveness of the issue, he ignored it. Polk's attitudes towards American intervention in the Yucatan or the purchase of Cuba in 1848 reflect his unrelenting support for Manifest Destiny and his disregard of the slavery issue. The proud president departed office delighted with his accomplishments, but unprepared to acknowledge a new and intensely sectional union in which his principles were out of touch. The divisions that existed prior to 1844 were simply exacerbated by the events of the 1840s and the policies of a leader insensitive to the era. The author expresses grudging admiration for Polk's political skills (especially regarding Texas and Oregon), noting "it is doubtful whether another chief executive could have been more successful" (p. 191). On the other hand, Leonard condemns Polk's handling of Mexico and has little affection for the Tennesseean or his domestic policies.

The tepid enthusiasm for his subject does not preclude Leonard from writing a solid book that explores

both motive and method. The organization of the material by topic is effective and enables the reader to create a parallel view of the progression of events. Leonard, who has published extensively in Latin American history, also makes a contribution, usually absent in such studies, in his insightful discussions of Mexican politics. The author makes good use of primary sources, especially Polk's diary, and official government documents, but also shows an awareness of the key secondary works. The lengthy and thorough bibliographical essay (thirteen pages) reveals a solid grounding in the foreign policy of the period. This worthy effort deserves the attention of both students and scholars. It provides a brief, but detailed and analytical look at Polk's goals, strategies, and accomplishments.

Scholars may, however, question some of Leonard's interpretations: (1) That "the 1840 presidential election was devoid of issues" (p. 66) may come as a surprise to those who believe that the Panic of 1837 and economic policies were considerations; (2) Leonard contends there was no national mandate for expansion in the 1840s. While perhaps true in terms of a unified goal, it seems arguable that each section of the country had some area targeted for acquisition. Polk's strong stand for expansion in 1844 and Clay's backpedaling on the issue appear to reflect that sentiment; (3) The author devotes considerable effort to demonstrating declining patriotism during and increasing opposition to the Mexican War. However, the war remained generally popular in the Northwest and Southwest and the opposition seems to have had little impact on the president; (4) Leonard suggests that Congress was slow to act on Polk's domestic agenda (p. 190). But since his major items were addressed within a year of his inauguration, one might argue that Congress acted with atypical dispatch.

Minor errors also appear in the work, especially in the area of domestic politics. For example, George M. Dallas was not a U.S. Senator from Pennsylvania when he was nominated for vice president in 1844 (p. 38); John Y., not John M., Mason became Attorney-General in 1845 (p. 43); John Quincy Adams was in the U.S. House, not the Senate in 1843 (p. 69); a joint resolution passed Congress in 1845, not 1848 (p. 74); Oregon was admitted as a state in 1859, not 1848 (p. 180); Henry Foote was born in Virginia, but was a Senator from Mississippi, not the Old Dominion (p. 182); Senator Arthur Bagby was an Alabama Democrat in the 1840s, while John Bagby was a Representative from Illinois in the 1870s (p. 182); the Whigs did not control the Senate in 1848, but they did control the House (p. 194); Polk departed office in March 1849, not 1848 (p. 196).

Notes:

[1]. They Might Be Giants, "Istanbul (Not Constantinople)," *Flood*, Elektra compact disk 9 60907-2.

[2]. Among the most recent works in the literature on Polk are Paul Bergeron's fine study *The Presidency of James K. Polk* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1987); Wayne Cutler, ed., *Essays on the Mexican War* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1986); John S.D. Eisenhower, *So Far From God: The U.S. War with Mexico, 1846-1848* (New York: Random House, 1989); Iris Engstrand, ed., *Culture Y Cultura: Consequences of the U.S-Mexican War, 1846-1848* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1998); Richard V. Francaviglia, ed., *Dueling Eagles: Reinterpreting the U.S.-Mexican War, 1846-1848* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 2000); Sam Haynes, *James K. Polk and the Expansionist Impulse* (New York: Longman, 1997); Robert W. Johannsen, *To The Halls of the Montezumas: The Mexican War in the American Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Timothy D. Johnson, *Winfield Scott: The Quest for Military Glory* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1998); James McCaffrey, *Army of Manifest Destiny: The American Soldier in the Mexican War, 1846-1848* (New York: New York University Press, 1992); and Richard Bruce Winders, *Mr. PolkÃs Army: The American Military Experience in the Mexican War* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1997).

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