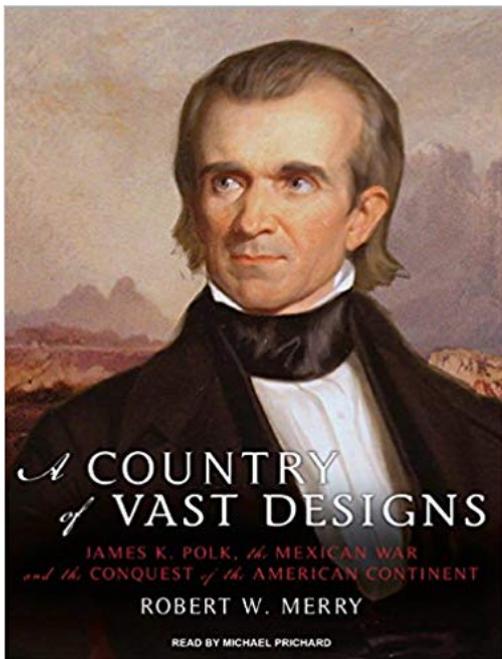


A Country of Vast Designs: James K. Polk, the Mexican War and the Conquest of the American Continent *by* Michael Prichard, Robert W. Merry



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When James K. Polk was elected president in 1844, the United States was locked in a bitter diplomatic struggle with Britain over the rich lands of the Oregon Territory, which included what is now Washington, Oregon, and Idaho. Texas, not yet part of the Union, was threatened by a more powerful Mexico. And the territories north and west of Texas-what would become California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, and part of Colorado-belonged to Mexico. When Polk relinquished office four years later, the country had grown by more than a third as all these lands were added. The continental United States as we know it today was established-facing two oceans and positioned to dominate both. In a one-term presidency, Polk completed the story of America's Manifest Destiny-extending its territory across the continent, from sea to sea, by threatening England and manufacturing a controversial and unpopular two-year war with Mexico that Abraham Lincoln, in Congress at the time, opposed as preemptive. Robert W. Merry tells this story through powerful debates and towering figures-the outgoing President John Tyler and Polk's great mentor, Andrew Jackson; his defeated Whig opponent, Henry Clay; two famous generals, Zachary Taylor and Winfield Scott; Secretary of State James Buchanan (who would precede Lincoln as president); Senate giants Thomas Hart Benton and Lewis Cass; Daniel Webster and John C. Calhoun; and ex-president Martin Van Buren, like Polk a Jackson protege but now a Polk rival. This was a time of tremendous clashing forces. A surging antislavery sentiment was at the center of the territorial fight. The struggle between a slave-owning South and an opposing North was leading inexorably to Civil War. In a gripping narrative, Merry illuminates a crucial epoch in U.S. history.



Reviews of the [A Country of Vast Designs: James K. Polk, the Mexican War and the Conquest of the American Continent](#) by Michael Prichard, Robert W. Merry

Tall

Presidential ratings of greatness by historians normally rank James K. Polk pretty high. This book answers the question: "Why?" Polk was a flawed president, in that his personality was not exactly fit for the office. Nonetheless, he left an estimable record (whatever one thinks of the means to the ends) and he epitomized the spirit of "Manifest Destiny."

He, with votes from a fractious Congress, changed the structure of the tariff, in the end leading to greater revenue for the treasury. He desired to change how the government handled its money, after the death of the National Bank. Both of these accomplishments were hard fought, against multiple factions within both parties in Congress. He also wanted to expand the geographical scope of the United States, with designs on Oregon, California, and Texas (at that point an "independent" country).

This book explores his laborious political efforts to bend Congress his way. In the process of his discussion of such matters, the author also introduces to the reader many of the key figures in the politics of the day--Andrew Jackson, Martin van Buren, John C. Calhoun, Henry Clay, and on and on. Understanding the lineup of key actors allows one to get a better sense of the political dynamics of the time.

The greater part of discussion is on the Mexican War. Here, Polk was essentially trying to coax the Mexican army to strike the first blow, which would justify an American military response. There is a nice description of the war and the ultimate American victory over Mexican forces. The end result--with Oregon and California and Texas and other bits of the southwest added to the United States of America--was a major extension of the country.

Polk had stated that he would serve only one term when he became the first "Dark Horse" to win the presidency. In that term, he achieved a great deal. His efforts also increased regional tensions as there was heated debate about admission of new territories/states as either slave or free.

At any rate, this is a fine biography of a President with personal limitations but one who had a major effect on the country's history. . . .

Tto

I couldn't put this book down. The first half especially was a real page-turner. It lost a little steam later on, but by then I was so invested in the narrative I was anxious to keep reading. Although biased to the Polk/Jacksonian political cabal, and a little light on the military and foreign policy

events, it was a nice introduction to the Polk Presidency and the politics of the Mexican-American War. Although he does use primary source quotations with some frequency, it appears as if most of the analysis of these sources is drawn from the secondary sources cited. This is not necessarily a big problem, however, because those sources are well-chosen and authoritative. This is really just a well-written, sufficiently researched graduate paper (albeit in book length). I found it an excellent window into the American past, and will recommend it to all my non-historian friends and historical enthusiasts. In terms of more academic research, since it contains a slight bias, it is useful more as a "source-finder" than a quotable work. Still, very happy to have added it to my shelf, and not at all disappointed with the time spent reading it. Overall, a delightful surprise.

Boyn

A Country of Vast Designs: James K. Polk, the Mexican War and the Conquest of the American Continent by Robert W. Merry is a fascinating look at the four years of James K. Polk's presidency (1845-1849). Often overlooked by both historians and non-historians alike, Polk accomplished more in four years than most presidents do in eight.

By far his greatest accomplishment was making the United States a continental power. After years of dissatisfying and often contentious joint rule with Great Britain in the Oregon Territory, Polk negotiated the current border between the US and Canada. Although his predecessor, John Taylor, laid the ground work for the annexation of the Republic of Texas into the Union, it was Polk who sealed the deal.

This led directly into the Mexican-American War, where the US seized much of the American southwest and California. Polk gave America geographical depth, and access to both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. He laid the groundwork for some of the issues that would cause the Civil War (should slavery be permitted in the new territories) and America's rise as a world power in the twentieth century.

A detailed and exacting book, A Country of Vast Designs can only further a reader's understanding of our unique history.

Hbr

A little too much about Polk and the drama he endured with his cabinet and congress (nothing changes) and not enough about the events of the day. (the war with Mexico, manifest destiny, and the great American land grab). Also, not a single mention of the 1848 residents of north Texas, west Texas, New Mexico and Arizona. (the Comanche and Apache). These aggressive native American tribes kept the Spanish and Mexican populations sparse in these regions, thus making conquest of New Mexico possible by not firing a single shot. Also no mention of the subsequent Indian wars with these tribes that consumed the American west until 1886. If you want to know everything about Polk, great book.

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