

A Wicked War: Polk, Clay, Lincoln, and the 1846 U.S. Invasion of Mexico

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Review

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Greenberg, Amy S. *A Wicked War: Polk, Clay, Lincoln, and the 1846 U.S. Invasion of Mexico*. Alfred A. Knopf, \$30.00 ISBN 978-0-307-59269-9

A New Approach to the Mexican-American War

Amy S. Greenberg's *A Wicked War* provides an unusual synthesis of the U.S. - Mexican War by interweaving five biographies, with some "six degrees of separation" interconnections among them, through a narrative, beginning with the U.S. annexation of Texas and ending with the treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. Presumably, the book's title omits two of these key protagonists—John J. Hardin, the former U.S. congressman from Illinois who served as colonel of the First Illinois and died at the battle of Buena Vista, and Nicholas P. Trist, the Department of State chief clerk who negotiated the war-ending treaty—because they are unknown to the general reading public compared to Clay, Lincoln and Polk and because naming all five would have made the title unwieldy.

Greenberg's title, from Mexican War lieutenant U.S. Grant's 1879 regret that he had not had resigned his commission rather than serve in as "wicked" a war as ever waged, sets Greenberg's revisionist thesis and tone—that the Mexican War, for all its U.S. triumphs and vast land acquisitions, was more unpopular than conventional historiography would have it. Arguing that the fighting generated "America's first national antiwar movement," Greenberg references the war's famous dissenters like abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison and transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau but mostly makes her case experientially by chronologically tracing her principal characters through the war (xvi).

Henry Clay, who lost his presidential race in 1844 by miscalculating the Texas issue and sacrificed his son, a colonel, in the wartime battle of Buena Vista, laid low with his simmering antiwar instincts during the early going, when the conflict was most popular, but went public in dissent with a speech before

thousands in his hometown of Lexington, Kentucky on November 13, 1847. The speech killed his remaining chances of being president but ignited antiwar rallies “from Indiana to New Jersey, Kentucky to Maine” (236). Congressman-elect Lincoln, visiting his wife’s family in Lexington at the time of Clay’s oration, was profoundly affected by Clay’s message, and soon afterwards took his famous antiwar stance in the U.S. House of Representatives, appropriating words and ideas “directly from Henry Clay’s Lexington address” (249). Lincoln’s attack on Polk, Greenberg discovers from her exhaustive newspaper research, got far more national attention than scholars acknowledge.

President Polk never would have given Trist his diplomatic mission had he comprehended that Trist, despite superficial expansionist credentials, harbored an “innate distrust of war” and was unsuited for an assignment designed to swallow up all or most of Mexico (93). Eventually, Trist concluded that Americans should be ashamed of what he considered a war of aggression and he pursued a peace treaty with as minimal a land cession by Mexico that his superiors in Washington might tolerate. Hardin was a martial spirit expansionist when he took command of the First Illinois volunteer regiment in 1846, but became convinced by his war service that Mexicans were a “miserable race” no more deserving of U.S. citizenship than American Indians (151). Though Hardin never renounced the war, he turned against annexing Mexico and antiwar critics manipulated the news of his death to their own ends. Antiwar resistance, in turn, helped convince President James K. Polk, whose health disintegrated from wartime overwork, that he had better accept Trist’s treaty, even though it gained far less of Mexico than he wanted. The antiwar movement even drives the conflict’s secondary placement in historical memory. Greenberg’s epilogue suggests that Americans by the late nineteenth century had become collectively so ashamed by what their nation had done to Mexico that they mostly wanted to forget it.

Greenberg’s important though challengeable secondary argument is that Polk’s abolitionist critics had it right, that the president provoked the war *primarily* to expand slavery. Polk never explicitly said this to his cabinet or in his diary, and some scholars, notably Norman A. Graebner in his classic *Empire on the Pacific* (1955), have argued the president mostly went to war because he coveted California ports for the China trade. Following the interpretation of William Dusinberre’s *Slavemaster President* (2003), however, Greenberg presents Polk as “desperate for new slave states” to shore up the South’s labor system and captive to attitudes originating in his personal slaveholdings (37).

One of her most provocative related arguments is that Illinois's distinctive enthusiasm for the war (it contributed more volunteers for the army than any state but Missouri) had less to do with its frontier-like western identity than with its quasi-slavery indentured labor system and how close it came to being a slave state itself.

A third theme darting here and there through the narrative, foreshadowed in such works as Richard Slotkin's *Fatal Environment* (1985) and Reginald Horsman's *Race and Manifest Destiny* (1985), is that comprehending American aggression against Mexico demands an understanding of aggressive instincts fostered by the entire past history of how white Americans related to and battled with Native Americans. Would John Hardin have been less expansionist had his namesake grandfather not been an "Indian killer" "involved in almost every action against Indians" between 1786 and 1791 in the Ohio Territory? Would U.S. volunteer soldiers have committed so many atrocities against Mexican civilians had they not instinctively conflated Mexicans with blacks and Indians (52)? Sometimes Greenberg's musings about Indians, though, beg amplification. She mentions, for example, that Sam Houston believed "Mexicans are no better than Indians," without exploring how those feelings might have related to Houston's earlier personal experiences after he resigned his governorship of Tennessee and took up an extended residence among Cherokees in the Indian Territory (57).

As might be expected given the thrust of Greenberg's previous scholarship, *Wicked War* gives more play to gender than do other syntheses of the U.S.-Mexican War. She argues *both* that women played a more important role in the war than is commonly realized and that wartime politics, soldiering, and discourse were framed by gendered perspectives about manliness and honor. Greenberg provocatively suggests that the Mexican War merits labeling as "Mr. and Mrs. Polk's War" because of the president's wife, Sarah (xv). A genuine political partner to James K. Polk, Sarah Polk was expected to read and interpret newspapers and political debates for him and even to write his political correspondence. Greenberg also has much to say about Mary Todd Lincoln, John J. Hardin's female relations, women who turned antiwar such as the youthful Jane Swisshelm of Pittsburg (who broke gender conventions by publishing antiwar editorials under her own name), and the sexual fantasies of pro-annexation politicians and soldiers who believed that Americans could prepare their invaded neighbor for annexation by Anglo-Saxonizing it through marriages. Such fantasies, she emphasizes, played out in cheap pot-boiling

novelettes like Charles Averill's *The Mexican Ranchero*.

A master historian/writer who enriches her narrative with compelling quotations, clever turns-of-phase, and arresting word portraits, Greenberg begins her account by introducing Henry Clay and the Texas question in the context of how Valentine's Day was celebrated in the 1840s and sustains her narrative throughout with fascinating descriptions and anecdotes. Her accounts of politics in Washington and soldiering in the field are equally deft, and she nicely recreates reactions to the war on the home front, especially after reports of casualties arrived or veterans returned. A product of exhaustive research in primary and secondary sources, including many manuscript collections, *Wicked War* benefits from an unusually wise selection of maps and illustrations, superior image captions, and a first-class index with very helpful sub-headings.

Wicked War falls just short of its book jacket hype of being the "definitive history of the 1846 conflict." Greenberg, as she notes in her introduction, prioritizes some aspects of the war more than others. Readers searching for in-depth analyses of tactics, weaponry, the U.S. naval blockade and riverine operations, and minor operations removed from Hardin's and Trist's personal experiences, for instance, should look elsewhere. Thus Greenberg provides thorough accounts of the Buena Vista and Mexico City campaigns, but only passing attention to the U.S. conquest of New Mexico and California and nothing at all about the spring 1847 march of a segment of Scott's army to Alvarado. The secret peace mission of *New York Sun* editor Moses Beach and the journalist/adventurer Jane McManus Storm, based on formal State Department instructions, is absent, though one of the book's strengths is its attention to wartime journalism. Because none of her five protagonists hail from the Deep South, Greenberg never convincingly explores how the war played out in that part of the country. Still, *Wicked War* is an excellent selection for anyone wanting a thoughtful, compelling, and challenging account of the war that gained the nation much of its western empire and helped set the stage for the Civil War. Instructors of college offerings in U.S. military history, antebellum sectionalism, and American expansionism would be well advised to consider requiring this book once it appears in its inevitable paper edition. Even today's reading-averse students will keep turning its pages.

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