

Polk: The Man Who Transformed the Presidency and America

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Recommended Citation

Bergeron, Paul H. (2008) "Polk: The Man Who Transformed the Presidency and America," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 10 : Iss. 4 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol10/iss4/20>

Review

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Fall 2008

Borneman, Walter R. *Polk: The Man Who Transformed the Presidency and America*. Random House, \$30.00 hardcover ISBN 9781400065608

The Life of Young Hickory

Is there room for another biography of James K. Polk? Apparently so, as evidenced by the publication of Walter Borneman's readable study of the nation's eleventh president. Based largely and effectively upon Polk's published diary (which covers only the presidency) and his published correspondence, this book presents a familiar and conventional narrative of Polk, including both his political career and personal life. Among the smattering of secondary works cited in Borneman's endnotes, it is clear that he has relied heavily on Charles Sellers's two volumes on Polk (which do not go beyond 1846) and on Eugene McCormac's 1922 biography. Borneman never refers to my own study of the Polk presidency, however.

Curiously, Polk is barely visible in several of the author's chapters. For example, the second chapter discusses briefly four presidential elections (none of which directly involved Polk) and Jackson's administration; whereas Chapter Five sketches the background and fortunes or misfortunes of the Texas question prior to Polk's presidency. Moreover, in Chapter 17, the author focuses upon California, John C. Fremont, Thomas Hart Benton, and Stephen W. Kearny, but not Polk.

Borneman's first eight chapters hurriedly advance Polk's biography from birth through the 1844 election, directing attention to the highs and lows of Polk's public career in Tennessee and Washington and to his indispensable alliance with Andrew Jackson. These developments surprisingly culminated, as Borneman contends, in Polk's nomination by the national Democratic Party and his victory in the presidential election.

The book's following fourteen chapters examine, to one degree or another, the presidency of Young Hickory—with emphasis upon territorial expansion as the hallmark of Polk's administration. However, "A Presidential Assessment," is a disappointment as the author seeks, without success, to place Polk within the context of other 19th century figures, including presidents.

In his treatment of the outbreak of war with Mexico and the declaration of war by Congress, Borneman asserts that Polk "changed the character of the American presidency" (210). Here the author's argument rests upon his exaggerated claim that Polk forced Congress to declare war against Mexico and thereby undermined or reversed Congress's traditional and constitutional role. Two pages earlier Borneman alleges that in terms of presidential power "it is difficult to overstate the transition that occurred on May 13, 1846" (208). Yet he has done exactly that.

The author offers two chapters on Polk's handling of the Oregon controversy and treaty with Great Britain. But strange to say, the second one shortchanges that topic by cluttering the account with discussions of the tariff, the independent treasury, internal improvements, the two-million-dollar proposal and also the Wilmot Proviso.

The subtitle of Borneman's book declares that Polk transformed both the presidency and America. Regarding the latter claim, the author apparently means that Polk's decisions and actions altered the map of America. Insofar as Polk transformed the presidency, Borneman does not convince—unless one subscribes uncritically to the Whigs' view, namely that the executive branch upset the preferred tradition of legislative domination.

Although Borneman's biography provides very little new information or analysis, the good news is that its appearance demonstrates that commercial presses and the general reading public are still intrigued by "dead white men." Meanwhile, on the other hand, most professional historians have unfortunately attempted to distance themselves from such fascination.

Paul H. Bergeron is Professor of History, Emeritus at the University of Tennessee. His major publications include Antebellum Politics in Tennessee, The Presidency of James K. Polk, and Paths of the Past: Tennessee, 1770-1970. He also was editor of Volumes 8 -16 of The Papers of Andrew Johnson.