

A Country of Vast Designs: James K. Polk, the Mexican War and the Conquest of the American Continent.

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Review

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Merry Robert W. *A Country of Vast Designs: James K. Polk, The Mexican War and the Conquest of the American Continent..* Simon & Schuster, \$30.00 ISBN 9780743297431

Manifest Destiny in Retrospect

In this sympathetic yet not uncritical biography, Robert W. Merry brings James K. Polk out of the shadows of history by casting light on his conflicted and conflict-ridden presidency. Merry addresses and redresses—up to a point—the paradox of Polk’s many accomplishments and the lack of recognition of them—or him. Assailed mercilessly by his Whig opponents for their own selfish political advantage; betrayed by Democrats ranging from the imperious Thomas Hart Benton to the duplicitous James Buchanan; indicted by historians who charge him as a plotter in the Slave Power conspiracy to extend slavery; and most recently denounced by former vice president Al Gore for waging a war “condemned by history,” contemporaries and scholars “have found him an easy mark, a natural target for criticism and repudiation” (474, 472). Merry revises what he believes is their wrong-headed assessment by detailing and highlighting the many important accomplishments of Polk’s presidency, not the least of which was waging a war that transformed the United States into an ocean-bound Republic and an international power. Although the vision of a continental nation both structured and gave emotive power to the amorphous ideal of Manifest Destiny, Merry insists that “it was left to Polk, with all his limitations of temperament and leadership, to bring the vision to a reality, and he did so with a fire of purpose that transcended anything that had been articulated with any seriousness up to that time” (476).

Central to Merry’s rehabilitation of Polk’s reputation, (or lack thereof) is his scorn for “foreign policy liberalism” and, by extension, “the humanitarian critique of Polk’s war” (474). Turning points in history, he contends, do not pivot on moral niceties but on larger, more impersonal questions of power,

national interest, cultural and political conflicts between nations, and the inexorable forces of national character. Merry insists that the United States was fully in the right under international law to treat with the Republic of Texas. Thus Mexico's subsequent decision to break off diplomatic relations with the United States and to provoke a conflict with Zachary Taylor's forces at the Rio Grande was both futile and ultimately suicidal. But according to Merry those were simply the proximate causes of the war. History and national character made the conflict inevitable. Mexico, he contends, "was a place of social and economic rigidities, governmental despotism, massive illiteracy, and high mortality" (180). It was "a dysfunctional, unstable, weak nation whose population wasn't sufficient to control all the lands within its domain" (476). Who better than the United States to annex and bring to those western territories "its vibrant, expanding, exuberant experiment in democracy" and to populate them with a "burgeoning population thrilled to the notion that it was engaging in something big and historically momentous" (476)?

Although Merry is determined to solve the paradox of Polk's accomplishments (which also included settling the Oregon imbroglio with Britain, tariff reduction, and creating an independent treasury) and his historical obscurity, he introduces paradoxes or ambiguities of his own. On the one hand Polk was the instrument who embraced and promoted these vast impersonal and impervious forces. But what is striking about Merry's narrative and analysis of the origins, operation, and resolution of the war with Mexico is the absence of the very impersonal forces he claims made it inevitable. The motives of all concerned—the president, his domestic opponents in and out of government, and the Mexican leadership (which in this book seems to be an oxymoron)—are of a personal and political nature. A case in point is Merry's assessment of Wilmot's proviso and his opinion that the antislavery critique of the war was a "mischievous" initiative (which is precisely as Polk saw it) supported by Democrats "to strike a blow at the president" (286). The president scorned free soilers in his own party who, so he believed, abandoned party principle for "preoccupations with slavery, or passions centered on the coming contest for the Democratic presidential nomination" (336). Polk and other party leaders dismissed the possibility that support for slavery restriction was principled, believing instead that Democrats were responding to political pressures that were emerging from "a growing threat in waves of abolitionist sentiment emerging among northeastern Whigs" (315).

The great strengths of Merry's biography—the inward-looking, Polk-oriented thrust of the narrative which is largely based on a close reading of the president's diary and correspondence—constitute its central weakness and I think helps explain the central paradox noted above. Merry has so absorbed Polk's mindset, that he uses it to assess the actions and motives of the other historical actors in the book. Put in different terms, he uses Polk's views of others as the standard to judge all who invoke alternate views or opposing causes. The result is the tendency throughout to dismiss or even to acknowledge the fundamental axioms upon which other groups (antiwar Whigs, free soil Democrats) and actors (Benton, Calhoun, Buchanan) operated. Given Polk's suspicious character, his self-righteousness, and his unending commitment to self-interested calculation as the sum of all politics, Merry divests Polk's opponents' actions of the internal logic they possess. The consequence is that, save for Sarah Polk, there isn't a single likeable character in this sprawling, often fascinating, and well-written biography.

Merry succeeds in bringing Polk out of the shadows and shedding light on a presidency that was pivotal in the development of the nation and the transformation of antebellum politics. But whether he has resuscitated or rehabilitated Polk's reputation remains problematic. Merry argues forcefully that Polk was given to impatience, intrigue, and political calculation to enhance his own and the nation's geopolitical goals. He was by turns stolid, sober minded, disciplined, politically willful, and possessed of an iron willed perseverance. Yet Merry argues that the president also reveled in the martyrdom of duty, lacked natural leadership ability, and shied away from personal confrontations with insubordinate subordinates such as Buchanan. As Merry astutely observes, the president was "a smaller-than-life figure [who] harbored larger-than-life ambitions" (131).

The war that grew out of and made real Polk's ambitions dramatically reshaped the nation's geographic boundaries. But it also transformed political culture and made salient sectional fault lines. Quick to embrace and promote the expansionist impulse that both grew out of and shaped the national consciousness, Polk remained oblivious to the threat that the slavery extension issue posed to his party and the nation. Merry argues that Polk's presidency "suggested he didn't always have the keenest awareness of where events were taking him" (407). More is the pity.

Michael Morrison is author of Slavery and the American West: The Eclipse of Manifest Destiny and the Coming of the Civil War (1997). He is currently writing a comprehensive study of how the Mexican American War and the Mexican Cession began the transformation of the two-party Jacksonian system into the sectional politics of the 1850s.