

What President Trump Has in Common With President Polk

The game of presidential parallels can be endlessly fascinating. Sometimes it can also be instructive and thought-provoking, even when considering the unparalleled presidency of one Donald J. Trump. That would be the same President Donald Trump who sees himself as the second coming of President Andrew Jackson. Of course, that would be Andy Jackson minus the battle wounds, the multiple duels, and a lone, if deceased, wife. Both Mr. Trump's admirers and detractors might actually agree with him, albeit for different reasons. Therefore, his admirers are hoping for a two term Jackson, while his detractors are doing everything possible to hold him to a single term – or less.

Whatever one thinks of President Trump, the Trump-Jackson parallel is plausible. Each challenged the Washington establishment. Each relished wielding executive power. Each exhibited a notoriously thin skin, even while plowing ahead with his agenda. And each made enemies with ease.

But a more telling parallel might be President Trump and another Jacksonian president. That would be the other Scots-Irish Tennessee president, the nearly forgotten, but highly consequential, one-term “dark horse” president, James Knox Polk. That would be the James K. Polk of Mexican War fame and infamy, a war that more than a few reputable historians have labeled a land grab, even a crime.

As the Democratic presidential candidate in 1844, Polk spelled out precisely what he hoped to accomplish, if elected. Then, after narrowly defeating Henry Clay (making him our first three-time loser), President Polk proceeded to do exactly what he said he was going to do. Sound familiar?

Well, almost exactly. Polk campaigned for the “re-annexation of Texas and the re-occupation of Oregon.” But the republic of Texas actually came into the union on the eve of Polk’s inauguration by way of a congressional joint resolution. And the Oregon question was settled without a war with England, as “fifty-four forty or fight” gave way to compromise at the 49th parallel. Polk also sought to add California to the national trophy case, by purchase if possible, by war if necessary.

We all know what happened, even if we try to pretend otherwise. That would be the Mexican War, the 150th anniversary of which passed uncelebrated and unmentioned during the middle of the Clinton presidency. After all, this war was supported and fought mainly by those who were determined to spread slavery westward and perhaps even southward as well.

Polk himself was not terribly interested in slavery one way or the other. The issue was simply in the way of his larger agenda. He wanted the territory, but he especially had his eyes on the ports of San Diego, San Francisco and Seattle. Before Polk was finished he had obtained all three, thereby setting the stage for America as a Pacific power. Having achieved his campaign goals, Polk rejected a run for a second term.

In his magisterial, *The Year of Decision 1846*, the great liberal historian Bernard De Voto tells us that Polk’s mind was “rigid, narrow, obstinate, far from first rate.” More than that, the man himself was “pompous, suspicious, secretive; he had no humor; he could be vindictive; and he saw spooks and villains.”

Does any of this remind anyone of another president we think we know?

Lest there be any lingering doubts, De Voto remains on hand to

complete his word portrait of our eleventh president: "But if his mind was narrow, it was also powerful, and he had guts... his integrity was absolute, and he could not be scared, manipulated, or brought to heel. No one bluffed him, no one moved him with direct or oblique pressure. Furthermore, he knew how to get things done, which is the first necessity of government, and he knew what he wanted done, which is the second."

Does *this* capture a subsequent president we think we know? OK, that integrity thing might be questioned, but not if we focus on Trumpian policy goals, as well as how and why he is pursuing them. There have been no promises about being able to keep your favorite undocumented laborer, if you like him.

All of this points not simply to a presidential parallel, but to historical ironies and philosophical questions. Mr. Polk's war led to the creation of a "free soil" movement, which in turn produced the Republican party, whose first platform called for the containment of slavery and condemned the "twin relics of barbarism," slavery and polygamy. Four years later its standard-bearer, Abraham Lincoln, pledged to put slavery on the road to "ultimate extinction," thereby provoking a secessionist movement that led to the Civil War and the end of slavery.

There is much talk today of a second civil war. Is a Trump presidency, like the Polk presidency, a prelude to such a terrible conflict? If so, might it be triggered by a secessionist movement in the American southwest? Californians on the left are already hinting at such.

Such thoughts lead to a second irony and more questions. If James K. Polk can be credited with adding a huge swath of territory to the American empire, might Donald Trump one day be credited with preserving that long ago victory by reversing the gradual makeover of the southwestern United States? Will President Trump secure his wall, and will that wall secure

this American border? If so, will the result fuel or calm secessionist waters? Will Polk's criminal war be matched by President Trump's "immoral" (to borrow from Speaker Pelosi) wall? If so, will a beneficent empire benefit in the end?

A beneficent American empire? Yes. Historian/geographer Robert Kaplan correctly regards the United States as at once a nation, an empire, and a continent, thanks in no small measure to the "rigid, narrow and obstinate" Mr. Polk. Mr. Kaplan also argues that America became a great power in the 20th century in part because of the actions of a certain mid-19th century president who could not be bluffed, manipulated or brought to heel.

Whether or not the United States remains a great power in the 21st century may well depend on the actions of another president who cannot be bluffed, manipulated, or brought to heel. All of which brings us to a moral question, even a moral dilemma. Can bad deeds lead to good and great deeds? Are bad deeds sometimes a necessary prelude to good and great deeds? Is a border wall a bad deed or a good deed? Can good and great deeds be justified if the country that carried them out has a history that contains a few significant bad deeds?

Mr. Kaplan, for example, isn't reluctant to call the Mexican War a "crime." He also doesn't hesitate to declare that the fruits of that war helped make America a great power *and* a great force for good in the 20th century. That surely was the case when it came time for the United States to fight World War II and prosecute the Cold War.

Will the United States remain united *and* a force for great good in the 21st century? If so, will it be because President Trump has taken steps to secure President Polk's victory – and in a way that will make a Lincoln unnecessary? Or will Mr. Trump, like Mr. Polk, set in motion forces that will one day tear the country apart? Only time will tell.

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