

1845 – 1849

Polk and Manifest Destiny

Major Themes:

*Manifest Destiny/Expansion
Mexican-American War
Westward Movement/Gold Rush
Pacific Northwest*

Presidencies:

James K. Polk – 1845 - 1849

Overview:

When Thomas Jefferson first bought the Louisiana Territory, neither he nor anyone else was thinking about expanding the nation to the Pacific Ocean. We wouldn't have even known what to do with that kind of space, and the Louisiana Territory was so vast it seemed like we would never fill that with settlers. So the idea of Manifest Destiny gained traction over time, later on, once the move west was under way, Natives were putting up increased resistance (starting in about the 1830's), the Trail of Tears took place, and we needed a social justification for the actions we were taking as a nation.

Things were quite different when Polk took office. He put almost a singular focus on finishing the drive to the Pacific Ocean, using what ever means possible, up to and including war.

Mexico had declared independence from Spain in 1821, and therefore controlled California and everything else in the southwestern part of the present-day United States. So if California was Polk's goal, he knew he would have to go through Mexico to get it. Texas had by the skin of their teeth battled free of Mexico with American settlers forming their own republic – the Lone Star Republic – for nine years, but they were in need of protection, and Polk needed an excuse for war, so he convinced Congress to annex (take over) Texas with the consent of most of the settlers there. Since this would not be enough to provoke Mexico into a fight, Polk decided to annex extra territory, and claimed South all the way to the Rio Grande River, a good 600 miles south of the Texas border. Mexico was an independent state and to them this was crazy. They still did not want to fight but had to protect their borders, so they compromised, and said they would give us land to the Nueces River, but not the Rio Grande. That was all Polk needed. He sent an army to defend our "border" at the Rio Grande, the Mexican Army was sent to defend the Nueces, and as soon as they clashed, Polk would have his excuse.

There was a clash, and we're not entirely sure who fired the first shot, and it was so far out in the middle of nowhere, the historical details are sketchy. It didn't matter, as now Polk could wage war anyway and get his goal of California. First he had to convince Congress, and that wouldn't be a cakewalk.

There were plenty of people in Congress who supported Polk's move and believed in Manifest Destiny, but the upstart Free Soil Party – abolitionists who wanted to keep slavery legal where it

already existed and simply prevent its expansion into new territory – saw the land grab for what it was and decided to call Polk out on it. Lincoln was a Free Soil Congressman at the time, and although he was not their leader, spoke out loudly against the war. He called for a Spot Resolution to force Polk to show them “the spot where American blood was spilled”. His party put forth the Wilmot Proviso, declaring that none of the territory we may gain from Mexico could have legal slavery. It failed to pass. Almost out of spite, southern Congressmen put forth the Ostend Manifesto, calling on all new territory taken from Mexico to be slave territory, and while we’re at it, take Cuba too and make it a slave state. (??!!) It also failed to pass, but this shows the tension in Congress at the time over slavery, expansion and the Mexican War.

Polk won out, and we went to war in 1846. It went relatively quickly. We invaded overland through Texas under General Winfield Scott, and landed an Army at Veracruz under Zachary Taylor, old “rough and ready”, who would later himself become President.

It was over by 1848, when the Mexican government was forced to sign the Treaty of Guadalupe HIDALGO!!!! (insert waving hand) It’s also called the Mexican Cession, and the US received all of present day Texas and the Southwestern United States and California. It was over 40% of Mexico at the time.

At the same time the war was starting, Polk was also shaking his fist at Great Britain over the Pacific Northwest. He claimed it as having been explored first by Lewis and Clark, while Britain claimed settlers in the Puget Sound and coastal explorers. Polk threatened war by saying 54 40” or fight!, essentially claiming land all the way to the southern border of present day Alaska.. After the British giggled that one off, they spitefully claimed to the 42nd parallel, the northern border of present day California. In reality, neither side wanted a fight, nor they settled by treaty in 1846 at the 49th parallel, which is the northern border today.

Amazingly and ironically, the year after we took over California, we discovered mountains of gold in the northern part of the state – something the Spanish and Mexicans hadn’t found in over 300 years of settlement. It was a lot of gold, and once stories got out to the east coast, gold fever kicked in and the rush was on. This wasn’t simply immigrants, though there were those, especially from China, this was mostly migrants from the east coast who dropped everything to go west and “strike it rich”. 180,000 Americans moved to California in 1849 – 1850 to make their fortune. Almost all of them went broke, but two things happened as a result. 1) California was now firmly in American hands, ready for statehood, and 2) it forced the issue of slavery and whether Texas and California would be slave or free back to the forefront of the debate. Since Congress had made no decision on that issue before the Mexican War, it had to be settled after the fact, and this would force the Compromise of 1850 that ultimately failed, and led us closer to Civil War.

Footnote: Turns out when we took Mexico’s land in the treaty, we should have taken a little more, including a cool set of mountain passes in southern Arizona that would be perfect for future railroads and that had generous amounts of silver and copper. So we just went back and forced them to sell us a little more. It’s called the Gadsden Purchase, and happened in the early 1850’s.