

# Example of critical of robert w. merry's book: a country of vast designs, james b...

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Robert W. Merry's "A Country of Vast Designs: James K. Polk, The Mexican War, and the Conquest of the American Continent."

Robert Merry's book is a firm but fair appraisal of James Polk's much maligned Presidency where the Mexican American war occurred and where the United States managed to expand its territory quite vastly. The overarching theme of the book is the misinterpretation of James Polk as a President who perhaps was heavy handed in his tactics but managed to secure considerable expansion for the United States.

In the book, Merry describes Polk as a one term President who lacked political acumen and was singularly devoid of any charm. However, the author also argues that when he desired it, Polk could turn on the charm but unfortunately he could also be corrupt and this had a singularly negative effect on his reputation.

However it is amazing to note, according to Merry that Polk managed to achieve a considerable political programme which was remarkable considering his handicaps and considerable shortcomings. Merry also emphasises the fact that Polk inherited a Presidency which had considerable problems including the never ending issue of slavery which was obviously the main issue and which increased considerably when the US annexed Texas and New Mexico. In fact there is a considerable part of the narrative which is dedicated to Polk and the Mexican American War which was the highlight of his Presidency.

The United States was a young nation in 1820 and had its eyes on the vast territory which was named Texas and which was the property of the Mexican government. After some aggression and arbitrary land grabbing by the US,

Mexico which was alarmed by the neighbouring countries' attitude decided to act and declared war on the United States. This armed conflict led to the cessation of several Mexican territories to the United States including the area now known as New Mexico and California. The immigration of several Americans into the state of Texas created a situation where the whites were in absolute majority in a land which appeared to be very rich in resources and this led to the war which practically handed the United States a considerable amount of territory. Here Polk saw considerable advantage and would skilfully play on the patriotic emotions of the United States who saw the Mexican attitude as an affront. Merry argues that this demonstrated Polk's considerable political acumen, of course when he wanted to use it. However, Merry argues that President James Polk was an ignorant, narrow minded individual who however who capitalized on pro American sentiment amongst the settlers of Texas. The combat operations lasted from 1846 to 1848 where after the US occupied New Mexico and parts of California, they invaded Mexico itself. Polk knew that he had a trump card in his hand and was very aggressive in the way he went about dealings with the Mexicans. However all this came from the Texas rebellion of 1835 where the American settlers rebelled against the Mexican government since they were in a majority and hoped to move forward with their way of life in a foreign territory. They asked for the assistance of the United States and eventually President John Tyler annexed the state of Texas in late 1835 as one of the last acts of his Presidency. Thus what was crucial to Tyler became a reality with the Polk Presidency which achieved the acquisition of Texas and the admission of another slave state into the union.

The worst part of the book is that it has an opinionated and very biased conclusion which ruins the balanced narrative which makes up the other parts of the book. This is a great pity as it appears to be one of the best views on the Polk presidency which has admittedly been underrated in the past.

The differences between Mexicans and Americans were considerable. White settlers were much more aggressive and hoped to leave their mark regarding land speculation as they began building arbitrarily in the territory without the permission of the Mexican government. Mexico had only recently managed to garner independence from Spain in 1821 and was full of internal conflicts which were very close to civil war. The settlers from the United States thus capitalized on these decisions and decided to introduce their own living standards and measures.

The situation in the Northern half of the country was also very difficult for the Mexicans who could not really police such a large part of territory and this left them vulnerable to invasions from Indian tribes such as the Apacahe and Comanche who wreaked havoc taking cattle and other livestock. The Mexicans felt that the Americans were actually organizing these raids to benefit from the trouble they caused to create an additional sphere of influence. These raids caused significant problems for the Mexicans and thus led to certain measures against the US settlers which caused them to ask for help from the central government and this led to the intervention by President Tyler who annexed Texas. Thus Merry confirms the importance of Polk in the historical Presidential canon since he implemented what Tyler did not achieve .

Stephen Austin and Sam Houston were important figures in the Texas war for independence. In fact they singlehandedly led the revolt against the Mexican government in 1836 and with their heroic stand at The Alamo they managed to confirm Texas' status as one of the most important possible states in the Union. However Presidents van Buren and Andrew Jackson shelved the question and this only came to the fore again in 1844 with the election of James Polk. Thus Merry continues to confirm Polk's importance in the historical canon and we are made to observe Polk's relationship with Congress which was fraught with difficulties yet his political gamesmanship managed to achieve what he set out to do in the long run.

Merry argues that President Polk attempted to use his power and a form of strategic diplomacy to force Mexico to cede Texas and other parts of the Southwest to the United States. He attempted to capitalize on the disjointed disorganization which prevailed amongst Mexican governments who were already full of problems due to the Indian invasions. This is perhaps a window on Polk's abilities on the strategic front although Merry is sceptical on how political acumen played a part in the final conclusion.

Merry also argues that Polk was far more aggressive than initially appears. He made several veiled threats to the Mexicans obviously emboldened by the fact that the United States was far more powerful in its military prowess and setup than the disorganized Mexicans. However the Mexicans did possess a very strong general in the form at Santa Ana who although rather conservative, did have an understanding of the importance of military pre-emption. The prize for the United States was however considerable and huge since after the Mexican American War, the size of the United States

increased by over a third with large parts of California, New Mexico and Texas ceded to the country.

Merry seems to offer different viewpoints on the way Polk conducted his strategy regarding the Mexican question. He still seems to believe that aggression was an important factor in Polk's makeup, but at the same time insists that Polk did not have much strategic vision but played his trump card very well and managed to acquire a substantial part of Mexican territory without too much loss. However he still had to go to war to do so and this meant losing some men and acting aggressively although the United States eventually won and annexed the territory.

However the political implications of the Mexican American war were quite substantial. The fact that slavery was a question which was not resolved continued to dog the American nation for a further twelve years until the Civil War effectively resolved that question. Still most expansionists in the United States believed that it was destiny for the nation to continue expanding westwards and this eventually led to the Mexican American War and all the land that it brought with it.

One may argue that the US got what it wanted by waging war on a nation and grabbed the land by violent means although war is never a solution. Both authors in 'Was the war an exercise in American Imperialism' argue that President James Polk was heavy handed in his attitude towards the Mexican question although the moral implications remain and are very strong and troubling if one had to analyse it from a neutral standpoint. The fact is that less than 100 hundred years after the American War of Independence where the colonialists shackled off the yoke of the

imperialists, the United States actually went to war on the issue of land expansion and actual colonialism. It is slightly hypocritical to claim liberty when you are actually exercising the contrary but that was the actual outcome of the war although Texas was undoubtedly of considerable benefit to the American expansion and dominion in today's world.

It is difficult to rank Polk with other Presidents although one could compare him with Jefferson since they both acquired large swathes of territory at one go, although the latter had to go to war to do so. Merry does seem to think that Polk is underrated although it does seem that the war's success was more by luck than by strategic acumen. The presidency was quite a strong one and he managed to keep in check the radical elements in Congress who were perhaps out to get far more of the Mexican question than initially desired. Merry does seem to think that Polk's Presidency was a strong one although in his conclusion he is somewhat non-committal and moves towards the opinion that he was a constitutional president with a smattering of modernism in his makeup.

### **Works Cited:**

Robert W. Merry: "A Country of Vast Designs: James K. Polk, The Mexican War, and the Conquest of the American Continent." Simon and Schuster, 2010 Print