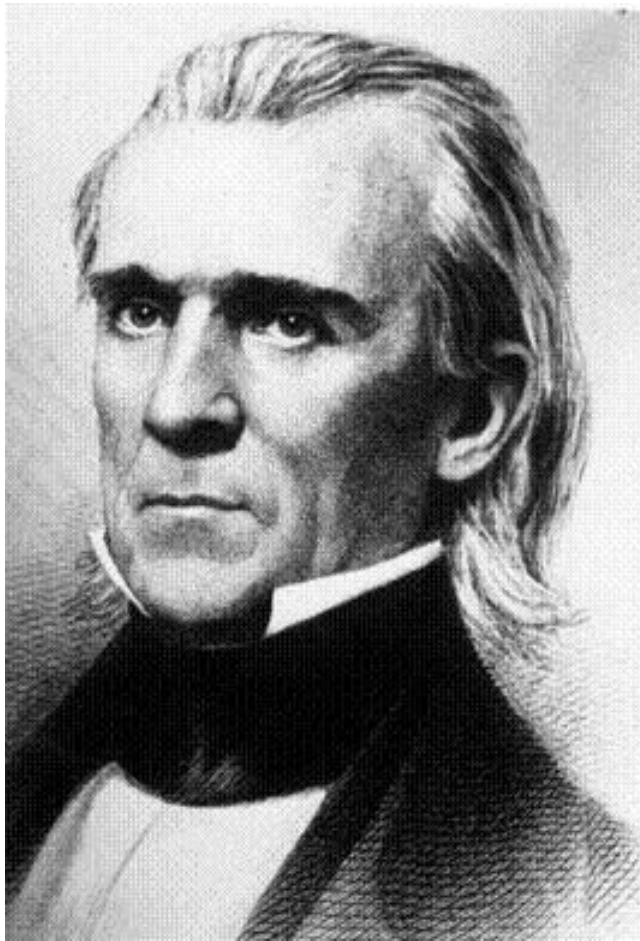


James Polk

Dull Boy

Eleventh, 1845-1849



Nicknames: "Young Hickory", "Napoleon of the Stump", "Polk the Plodder"

Birth: November 2nd, 1795, near Pineville in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina

Death: June 15th, 1849, Nashville, Tennessee

Significant Events During Polk's Term: Bear Flag Rebellion / Mexican War ... Donner Party ... First Baseball Game ... Gold Discovered in California ... John Muir moves to Wisconsin ... Texas (#28), Iowa (#29) and Wisconsin (#30) become States

Quotes: *"I have said from the first that the United States are the aggressors...We have not one particle of right to be here...It looks as if the government sent a small force on purpose to bring on a war, so as to have a pretext for taking California and as much of this country as it chooses, for, whatever becomes of this army, there is no doubt of a war between the United States and Mexico...My heart is not in this business...but, as a military man, I am bound to execute orders."*

-- Colonel Ethan Allen Hitchcock, speaking of the border dispute between the U.S. and Mexico which escalated, apparently by Polk's design, into the Mexican War

"Within less than four years the annexation of Texas to the Union has been consummated; all conflicting title to the Oregon Territory south of the forty-ninth degree of north latitude, being all that was insisted on by any of my predecessors, has been adjusted, and New Mexico and Upper California have been acquired by treaty...the territories recently acquired, and over which our exclusive jurisdiction and dominion have been extended, constitute a country more than half as large as all that which was held by the United States before their acquisition, and, including Oregon, nearly as great an extent of Territory as the whole of Europe, Russia only excepted. The Mississippi, so lately the frontier of our country, is now only its center."

-- James Polk, speaking of his accomplishments as President

"The marching an army into the midst of a peaceful Mexican settlement, frightening the inhabitants away, leaving their growing crops and other property to destruction, to you may appear a perfectly amiable, peaceful, unprovoking procedure; but it does not appear so to us...But if, when the war had begun, and had become the cause of the country, the giving of our money and our blood, in common with yours, was support of the war, then it is not true that we have always opposed the war. With few individual exceptions, you have constantly had our votes here for all the necessary supplies...I more than suspect that he is deeply conscious of being in the wrong, that he feels the blood of this [the Mexican] war, like the blood of Abel, is crying to Heaven against him...He is a bewildered, confounded, and miserably perplexed man." -- Abraham Lincoln (#16), 1848, speaking of Polk

"I have never altogether forgiven myself for going into that. I do not think there was ever a more wicked war than that waged by the United States on Mexico. I thought so at the time, when I was a youngster, only I had not moral courage enough to resign." -- U.S. Grant

"I am sure I shall be a happier man in my retirement than I have been during the four years I have filled the highest office in the gift of my countrymen."

-- James Polk, who only lived for three months after leaving office

"He was the most laborious man I have ever known; and in a brief period of four years had assumed the appearance of an old man."

-- James Buchanan (#12), Polk's Secretary of State and successor as President

How his term ended: Polk chose not to run for a second term. He was worn out; in fact, he only survived another few months after leaving office.

Other Professions: Lawyer, Soldier, Planter

Worst Mistakes: Polk stole the liberty from all of those whom he enslaved.

Not content to harass just the souls of black folks, Polk also incited a border rivalry with Mexico, and then lied about it, as many of the quotes above make clear. He claimed Mexican soldiers had infiltrated onto American soil, but the territory in question was actually disputed, and had been historically controlled and inhabited by Mexico. Abraham Lincoln (#16), a member of the U.S. House of Representatives at the time, spoke out against this, demanding of Polk that he divulge precisely where it was that the Mexicans had played the aggressor on American soil. This “badgering” of Polk by Lincoln became known as the “Spot Resolutions.”

Once he realized Zachary Taylor's (#12) increasing popularity (in his role as General in the Mexican War), Polk schemed against Taylor, fearing him as a potential political rival who might usurp his power. See Taylor's chapter (next) for the details of Polk's dirty trick that backfired.

Saving Grace: Polk was a hard worker and sported a stylish “do.”

Notes: Polk's nickname “Napoleon of the Stump” was bequeathed to him due to his short stature – he was 5' 8”.

Polk and his wife were strict religionists, and prohibited drinking, dancing, and card-playing at the White House. As they say, politics makes for strange bedfellows. Andrew Jackson, who supported Polk, did not look askance at any of those diversions.

The Polks had no children.

Polk was the first President to govern a United States that stretched “from sea to shining sea.”

The first official use of the telegraph was a message from Baltimore to Washington, relaying the information that Polk had been nominated as the candidate at the 1844 Democratic National Convention. So surprising was this that people thought surely the newfangled contraption had malfunctioned (up to this time, the candidacy had been deadlocked between Martin Van Buren (#8) and Lewis Cass).

Long an island desired by the U.S., Polk offered Spain \$100 million for Cuba. They turned it down, but see the McKinley (#25) chapter for “the rest of the story.”

Similar to John Quincy Adams' son John Adams II and his experience at Harvard, one of Polk's sons was expelled from Yale for participating in a student riot there.

Polk's wife, who survived him by more than forty years, living until 1891, supported the Confederacy during the Civil War.

During the Mexican War, Henry David Thoreau was jailed in Massachusetts for refusing to pay a certain tax. Thoreau refused to pay due to his objection to that war, and to slavery. In addition to the quote above, Abraham Lincoln had more to say about the pretext for war that

Polk sought and attained: "Let him answer, fully, fairly, and candidly. Let him answer with facts, and not with arguments. Let him remember he sits where Washington sat, and so remembering, let him answer, as Washington would answer. As a nation should not, and the Almighty will not, be evaded, so let him attempt no evasion – no equivocation. If the President cannot or will not give the desired answers...then I shall be fully convinced, of what I more than suspect already, that he is deeply conscious of being in the wrong – that he feels the blood of this war, like the blood of Abel, is crying to Heaven against him."

Lincoln continued to castigate Polk in this way: "...by fixing the public gaze upon the exceeding brightness of military glory – that attractive rainbow, that rises in showers of blood – that serpent's eye, that charms to destroy – he [Polk] plunged into it, and has swept, on and on, till, disappointed in his calculation of the ease with which Mexico might be subdued, he now finds himself, he knows not where."

It is amazing how history does indeed seem to repeat itself sometimes. But if George W. Bush (#43) is Polk, and Iraq is Mexico, where is today's Lincoln? More sobering yet are Lincoln's further words: "The act of sending an armed force among the Mexicans was unnecessary inasmuch as Mexico was in no way molesting, or menacing the US or the people thereof, and...it was unconstitutional, because the power of levying war is vested in the Congress, and not in the President."

During the Mexican War, approximately 1,700 Americans were killed in battle, and more than eleven thousand died from dysentery.

Polk, who observers claimed "aged" tremendously during his term, was the first President to have served a full term and then chose not to seek re-election.