

Antebellum State Building: War Making and the Polk Administration

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This paper represents a first cut at a project that braids two topics in American political history. First, it examines antebellum presidential power and its effect on American political development (APD) by questioning the “modern” versus “traditional” dichotomy that much of the presidency scholarship assumes. Second, the project challenges the prevailing view in APD literature that the antebellum American state was exceptionally weak.¹ The larger project clearly is an ambitious endeavor. In this preliminary essay, however, we deal only with the question of presidential power during the administration of James K. Polk (1845–1849). Our goal is to establish that the antebellum American state under Polk’s regime was more robust than much of the current APD literature claims.²

American Political Development and the Two Presidencies Thesis

Almost thirty years ago political scientist Nelson Polsby noted that there is no modern

¹For an analysis of the institutional weakness of the nineteenth-century American state, see Stephen Skowronek, Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities 1877-1920 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), esp. pp. 1-36. See also Richard Franklin Bensel, Sectionalism and American Political Development 1880-1980 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), pp. 3-59. For the two classic formulations of the inherent weakness of the American state, both of which are underpinned by a theory of American exceptionalism, see Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, ed. J.P. Mayer (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969); and Samuel P. Huntington, Political Order in Changing Societies (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), pp. 93-139.

²An important exception to this norm, and an example of new research to which we are indebted, is the work of Ira Katznelson and John Lapinski. See for example Ira Katznelson, “Flexible Capacity: The Military and Early American Statebuilding,” Paper prepared for the Conference in American Politics, MIT, May 6, 2000; and Ira Katznelson and John Lapinski, “The Paradoxical State: Congress, the Military, and Statebuilding in Antebellum America,” paper presented a the 93rd Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, August 28-31, 1997.

presidency, for all presidencies are modern.³ To the extent that a president functions within his political and historical time, this is as true a statement as one can find in the voluminous literature on the American presidency. Polsby should have stopped while he was ahead; instead, he moved on to edit a book on the “modern presidency” which underpinned the broadly held view that twentieth-century presidents were “modern” presidents and nineteenth-century presidents were “traditional” presidents.

Briefly, the notion of categorizing the American presidency as either “modern” or “traditional” is a post-World War II development in presidency scholarship. The thesis rests on the claim that the enhanced centralization of power in the executive branch in the twentieth century and the enormous increase of discretionary power of the president and his office in order to carry out domestic and foreign policy fundamentally reconfigured—institutionally and administratively—the executive branch. Proponents of this paradigm tie the development of a modern American presidency and the enhanced power of the chief executive to the role of the United States in the international system: its integration into an increasingly complex international political economy; the geopolitical replacement of Great Britain as the leading maritime trading power; and its pivotal role in the two major world wars and the Cold War. In this interpretation of the executive branch, it is *historical periodization* that defines the modern presidency. Likewise, enthusiasts of the two-presidencies model argue that the “traditional presidency”(with the exception of the Civil War) is tied to nineteenth-century American political

³ See Nelson W. Polsby, ed., The Modern Presidency (New York: Random House, 1973), p. vii. See also Richard E. Neustadt, Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents: The Politics of Leadership from Roosevelt to Reagan (New York: The Free Press, 1990); Clinton Rossiter, The American Presidency (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1960), pp.109-141.

development where an asymmetrical balance favoring the Congress, the courts, strong political parties, a patronage system marked by a “spoils system,” and a relatively weak central-state apparatus limited the power of the president and the executive branch.⁴ This method for understanding the American presidency, to a large degree, is subjective and hence too arbitrary for our tastes. We do not disagree with the broadly accepted notion that the executive branch has garnered much power in the twentieth century. For instance, by the end of World War II President Truman ordered the use of nuclear weapons twice; all future presidents had the capability to use an even more sophisticated arsenal. Obviously, this fact is not unimportant when we consider the institutional power of the presidency. However, the broadly accepted periodization which divides the American presidency between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is a methodologically inadequate tool for establishing and *defining* the terms “modern” and “traditional,” for even a brief examination of the powers exercised by certain antebellum presidents will show important similarities between supposedly “traditional” and “modern” presidencies.”⁵

One may ask why we chose Polk. His is not a name that immediately springs to mind

⁴ Skowronek, Building a New American State.

⁵ For an excellent overview of the ways in which the American presidency can be evaluated see Michael Nelson, “Evaluating the Presidency,” in The Presidency and the Political System, 6th ed., ed. Michael Nelson (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2000), pp. 3-28. For a treatment that views the “modern” president as a creature of the twentieth century, see Neustadt, Presidential Power. For a more sophisticated version of the “modern” presidency thesis, see Peri E. Arnold, “The Institutionalized Presidency and the American Regime,” in The Presidency Reconsidered, ed. Richard W. Waterman (Itasca, Il.: F. E. Peacock, 1993), pp. 215-245, esp. pp. 230-36. For a classic interpretation that conceives the president and presidential power as a product of nineteenth-century politics and, more important, as a constitutionally constrained

when one thinks of presidential history. However, Polk was an expansionist executive in the Jacksonian mold who, as Stephen Skowronek argues, “articulated” the Jacksonian presidency and conveyed the principles of Jacksonian democracy in his policy initiatives.⁶ A brief perusal of his term in office provides at least five reasons to consider him as an important antebellum chief executive whose leadership changed the American state. President Polk:

- 1) took the country to war against Mexico under Jacksonian principles of manifest destiny;
- 2) directed and presided over a massive geographic expansion of the United States;
- 3) proved himself astute in the ways of bureaucratic politics and a master of the “spoils system”;
- 4) promised he would preside for one term only, and did; and finally,
- 5) systematically groomed one future president (Franklin Pierce) and set the stage for two others (James Buchanan and, much to Polk’s chagrin, the Whig general Zachary Taylor) through his political manipulation of the United States Army’s officer corps.⁷

Polk’s administration fits well within the “modern” presidency framework, thus undermining *twentieth-century* periodization, the key premise on which the modern/traditional dichotomy is predicated. Polk implemented a very “modern” set of executive operations: the micro-management of a successful war, the executive direction of covert military and diplomatic

office, see Edward S. Corwin, The President: Office and Powers, 1787-1984, rev. 5th ed. (New York: New York University Press, 1984).

⁶For the historical and political model that Skowronek uses for his consideration of presidential politics and the conceptual apparatus’ connection to American political development, see Stephen Skowronek, The Politics Presidents Make: Leadership from John Adams to Bill Clinton (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 33-60; specifically on Polk, see pp. 155-176.

⁷See for example, Richard Bruce Winders, Mr. Polk’s Army: The American Military Experience in the Mexican War (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1997), pp. 3-32; John S. D. Eisenhower, “Polk and his Generals” in Essays on the Mexican War, ed. Douglas W. Richmond (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1986), pp. 34-65; George Winston Smith and Charles Judah, Chronicles of the Gringos: The U.S. Army in the Mexican War, 1846-1848 (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1968), pp. 1-55. On the Mexican War in general, see K. Jack Bauer, The Mexican War 1846-1848 (New York: Macmillan, 1974).

action, the growth of the American state, the growth of the U.S. military establishment, and the development of a leadership style marked by an astute “inside” political canniness.⁸ In fact, one is struck that James Polk was much like Lyndon B. Johnson, except Polk won his war; and even though he presided over the victory against Mexico, the House of Representatives censored him in 1848 (the vote was 85-81). One of the members voting to censor Polk was Abraham Lincoln, who described Polk’s use of his presidential prerogative and his willingness to “unconstitutionally and unnecessarily” go to war with Mexico:

Allow the President to invade a neighboring nation, whenever he shall deem it necessary to repel an invasion, and you allow him to do so, whenever he may choose to say he deems it necessary for such purpose—and you allow him to make war at pleasure... This, our Convention understood to be the most oppressive of Kingly oppressions; and they resolved to so frame the Constitution that no one man should hold the power of bringing the oppression upon us.⁹

⁸Polk employed covert activity so systematically that the ultimate question as to who or what actually caused the Mexican war is still a contentious issue. On dissent and covert activity, see John H. Schroeder, Mr. Polk's War: American Opposition and Dissent, 1846-1848 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1973); John J. Carter, Covert Operations as a Tool of Presidential Foreign Policy in American History From 1800 to 1920 (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2000), pp. 79-90. In general, see also Frederick Merk, Manifest Destiny and Mission In American History A Reinterpretation (New York: Knopf, 1963), pp. 61-106; Richard Griswold del Castillo, The Treaty of Guadalupe Hildago: A Legacy of Conflict (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), pp. 3-42, 108-178; Francis Paul Prucha, The Sword of the Republic: The United States Army on the Frontier 1783-1846 (London: Macmillan, 1969), pp. 365-95.

⁹See Louis Fisher, Presidential War Power (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1995), pp. 24-34; Lincoln quote p. 34. We draw the historically patterned similarity between Polk’s articulation of Jacksonian democracy and Johnson’s articulation of the New Deal democratic party regime from Stephen Skowronek, The Politics Presidents Make, pp. 130-177, 288-361. For a short, interesting “give and take” on Skowronek’s way of conceptualizing the presidency in American history, see Mark E. Neely, “The Presidents Politics Make,” 227-38; Stephen Skowronek, “Professor Neely Goes Fishing,” 239-47; and Jeffery K. Tulis, “On the Politics Skowronek Makes,” 248-252, all in Journal of Policy History 8:2 (1996).

Clearly, there is nothing benignly “traditional” about the political, legal, and theoretical debate

that surrounded James Polk's administration and his expansion of executive power during the Mexican War.

A War-Prone and Weak Antebellum State?

There is no gainsaying the relationship between war and state formation.¹⁰ The literature on this subject tends to focus on European state formation. With the exception of the Civil War era, even the American political development literature looks mostly at the twentieth century when considering war and state expansion. But the United States *was* a war-prone nation during the antebellum period. Thus, it is not obvious to us why the war-making and state formation model should not hold for the antebellum period in American political development, *unless* one accepts an overarching theory of American exceptionalism. Without a doubt, there is a difference between American and European political development; we are not attempting to dismiss, *in toto*, American exceptionalism as one possible way of understanding American political history. Nevertheless, we should not forget that in 1812 the White House was burnt to the ground as British forces marched on Washington D.C. Thirty-four years later the United States was at war with Mexico, on the verge of annexing the second largest piece of territory in its history. In the years between the War of 1812 and the Mexican War, the United States engaged in numerous battles directly related to territorial expansion.¹¹ Without putting too fine a point on the it, all the conflict and subsequent territorial expansion during the antebellum period was not taking place

¹⁰See for example Charles Tilly, Coercion, Capital and European States, AD 990-1990 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990); Tilly, "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime," in Bringing the State Back In, ed. Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp.169-191.

in a “Jeffersonian Arcadia” in which weak central-state institutions and weak presidents were the norm. To the contrary, there were antebellum central-state institutions: by the time James Polk assumed the presidency, these institutions and structures were more centralized and more vigorous than current literature claims.

Richard Bensel argues that there are seven dimensions to the expansion of the American state in American political history:

- 1) centralization of authority;
- 2) development of administrative capacity;
- 3) granting of citizenship rights as well as dealing with immigration, conscription, and, perhaps most important, the *denial* of citizenship rights,
- 4) control of property;
- 5) creation of client groups;
- 6) ability to engage in human, financial, and natural resource extraction;
- 7) positioning of central state in the world system.

Bensel’s study of the Civil War and reconstruction illustrates how war making accelerates these changes in central-state power. However, some of these measures (perhaps all of them) are applicable to the antebellum period as well.¹² Polk’s administration helped to expand the American state by each of these measures. His use of presidential discretion and covert action leading up to the Mexican war set a pattern for the centralization of executive power, a pattern that continues to the present. The following section matches Polk’s policy initiatives during the Mexican War with some of Richard Bensel’s criteria for what constitutes “stateness.”

¹¹ See Prucha, Sword of the Republic, pp. 119-306.

¹² See Richard Franklin Bensel, Yankee Leviathan: The Origins of Central State Authority in America, 1859-1877 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 113-237. For a classic statement of how the state and “stateness” can be used as variable for social science research, see J. P. Nettle, “The State as a Conceptual Variable,” World Politics 20 (July 1968): 559-592.

In our investigation of the Polk presidency, we use five of the measures that Bensel claims are important for understanding the American state in both political and historical perspective. Given the preliminary nature of our findings and the need for brevity, we offer only a thumbnail sketch of how each of these measures can be applied to the antebellum period. We also suggest that each measure can be viewed as a way to interpret the Polk presidency as thoroughly modern, at least in the sense that current presidential scholarship uses the term “modern.”¹³

Centralization of Authority

Traditional accounts of antebellum politics characterize the president as primarily beholden to Congress and the political parties. However, President Polk’s diplomatic and military policies show that he functioned quite independently of Congress, at times not notifying it of key policies and developments and requesting *post-hoc* authorization for war-related operations. Polk was a politician by profession, not a soldier; however, even though Polk lacked military experience, he purposely involved himself in both the grand strategy and minutiae of war planning. In this sense, one can consider James Polk a modern Commander in Chief, an executive whose wartime behavior, in twelve years time as the country disintegrated into civil war, would be emulated by Abraham Lincoln. Polk’s use of presidential discretion and covert action leading up to the Mexican war set a pattern for the centralization of executive power, a pattern that continues to the present. More important, Polk employed the “spoils system” under the close advice of his

¹³ As the project develops into a book, each of these categories will be expanded into chapters. As it now stands, we hope only to stimulate discussion with these very brief outlines.

Secretary of War, William Learned Marcy, to protect Democratic bureaucrats and to systematically, even ruthlessly, displace Whig supporters wherever possible. Polk's implementation of a hardnosed patronage system helped to centralize not only the executive branch, but also in the Department of War and the United States Army where Whig generals were sometimes transferred from the theater of battle or summarily replaced.¹⁴

Polk initially attempted to acquire disputed territory from Mexico through diplomatic channels. When it became evident that the Mexicans would reject Polk's personal envoy, James Slidell, he directed General Zachary Taylor to station his 4,000 troops in hotly contested territory just north of the Rio Grande River.¹⁵ On April 23, Mariano Paredes, the president of the new Mexican government, declared a "defensive war" against the United States, claiming that General Zachary Taylor's forces had invaded Mexican territory. On April 25, a detachment of the Mexican army crossed the Rio Grande and attacked an American reconnaissance party. General Taylor sent a dispatch to Washington the next day, declaring, "'Hostilities may now be

¹⁴William Marcy was a Supreme Court justice and Senator from New York state before he joined the Polk administration. It was Marcy who, in the context of the patronage system in the United States, coined the phrase "to the victor belong the spoils." See Ivor D. Spencer, The Victor and the Spoils: A Life of William L. Marcy (Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 1959); Winders, Mr. Polk's Army, p.16. On Marcy's distrust of Whig generals such as Winfred Scott and Zachary Taylor, see Dean B. Mahin, Olive Branch and Sword: The United States and Mexico, 1845-1848 (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1997), p. 44. See also Norman A. Graebner, "James K. Polk: A Study in Federal Patronage," Mississippi Historical Review 38 (March 1952): 613-632. On the link between patronage and party politics as they related to American political development, see Theda Skocpol, Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 72-83.

¹⁵ Charles A. Lofgren, "Force and Diplomacy, 1846-1848: The View from Washington," Military Affairs 31 (Summer 1967): 58. See also T. Harry Williams, The History of American Wars from 1745 to 1918 (New York: Knopf, 1981), p. 54.

considered as commenced.”¹⁶ This attack provided Polk with the justification to go to war with Mexico.¹⁷

Congress passed a declaration war against Mexico on May 13, 1846.¹⁸ However, it was not until May 9th that Polk received the message of April 25th, coincidentally the day of the battle of Resaca de la Palma, one of the major battles of the Mexican war. Given that hostilities had already begun, Polk drafted a *post-hoc* declaration of war and took it to Congress. From a political development perspective, it is important to note that he was not going to the Congress with “hat in hand” to plead for a declaration of war with Mexico. To the contrary, James Polk, like the “modern” presidents that would follow, had already committed his troops to combat operations and was simply demanding that Congress take the final step to legitimizing what was already a very “hot” war. Polk “asked Congress to meet a requirement of the Constitution by a formal declaration of a war that was in progress. Furthermore, Polk’s message to Congress did not state specific objectives other than prosecuting the war to a “speedy and successful conclusion.”¹⁹ In contemporary terms, the exact “exit strategy” and what constituted an acceptable final treaty with Mexico were left to Polk’s discretion.²⁰ Although Congress voted to go to war against Mexico, a familiar “modern” rationale lay behind the vote: the need to support

¹⁶ See Williams, History of American Wars, p.55.

¹⁷ See Skowronek, The Politics Presidents Make, p. 71.

¹⁸ See Lida Mayo, “The Mexican War and After,” in American Military Army Historical Series (Washington: United States Army, 1989), p. 166

¹⁹ See Williams, p. 155.

²⁰ Williams, History of American Wars, p. 155.

troops *already* engaged in hostilities on the Rio Grande. There was not, on the other hand, a consensus in the Congress to go to war for purposes of territorial expansion. Furthermore, there was serious concern on the part of many in Congress that Polk had usurped Congress's constitutional role in war-making, as the United States Army had already fought the Battles of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma.²¹

Samuel Huntington, in his The Soldier and the State, considered the concentration of presidential power in the United States by using the examples of *how* both Abraham Lincoln and James Polk micro-managed military policy.

During the Mexican War, President Polk, although he did not command the army in the field, nonetheless personally formulated the military strategy of the war and participated in a wide range of exclusively military matters. The last instance of a President directly exercising military functions was Lincoln's participation in the direction of the Union armies in the spring of 1862.²²

By keeping himself involved in military planning, Polk ensured that he would meet his civilian political goals—territorial expansion and a strong client group (in part the Army officer corps) to exercise party maintenance. Otherwise put, James Polk used his discretionary power and executive prerogatives, in part, to ensure that grand military policy was congruent with his and his party's political goals. Ultimately, James Polk prosecuted the Mexican War in such a way

²¹ Ibid., p. 155

²² See Samuel P. Huntington, The Soldier and the State; the Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), P. 148. Written in the early 1950s, Huntington's remarks predate Lyndon Johnson's and subsequent administrations. Still, one can clearly see how Polk mirrored late twentieth-century executives in his management of the Mexican War.

that he substantially strengthened the institutional power of the executive branch at the expense of Congressional power.²³

Client Groups and Citizenship Rights

The war with Mexico had important consequences for both citizenship and client-group formation. When the war ended, the administration solidified citizenship for Texans, reinforced that state's slave-holding status, exchanged citizenship rights for military service, and excluded Mexicans who had lived in areas that were acquired after the war ended from holding full citizenship rights within the United States. Additionally, the U.S. Army and the whole of the U.S. bureaucracy was subjected to a patronage system that Polk used with formidable canniness. Polk and his Secretary of War were able to build a bureaucratic base to underpin the administration's expansionist territorial operation. Additionally, Polk's appointment of civilians to the rank of general (of which there were ten) and his selection and appointment of generals out of the volunteer services (of which there were four) *without* evidence that they were qualified to soldier were tied to civilian political considerations; namely, the replacement of members of the Whig party with Democrats (see Table One). The end result was to blanket-in a political client base both in the armed services and within the civilian sector that supported the Polk administration's policy initiatives. The use of patronage as a contrivance to appoint untrained individuals to the army (mostly at the rank of general) proved, almost to person, a disaster for the average soldier. While Polk was successful at creating an important client base in support of his policies his military patronage appointees proved themselves to be incompetent and wholly

²³ See Norman A Graebner, "The President as Commander in Chief: A Study in Power," Journal of Military History 57 (January 1993):111-132, esp. p. 119.

responsible for many regular army deaths, almost all of them from disease, hunger, and exposure, *not* combat operations.²⁴

Extraction Processes

Although he did not preside over a Hobbesian leviathan, Polk had considerably more resources at hand than his predecessors. For example, in Madison's time, there were few trained officers to utilize and the War Department was comprised of only a handful of clerks. There is evidence of a shortage of qualified commanding officers for Madison as well—he had to draw on veterans of the Revolution, who had been living as civilians for nearly thirty years. Polk, on the other hand, enjoyed a better-trained and much more experienced Army, at all levels of command.²⁵ Polk's army benefited from the presence of new specialty schools, such as the artillery school at Fortress Monroe, Virginia, and the infantry school at Jefferson Barracks near St. Louis. Moreover, the Military Academy at West Point had graduated about one thousand men by 1846.²⁶

After declaring war on Mexico, Congress appropriated \$10 million and authorized an increase from 8,500 to 15,540 regulars and an increase to 50,000 for a term of one year or the

²⁴See Winders, Polk's Army, pp. 32-50.

²⁵ For example, West Point graduates Ulysses Grant and George Meade both served under Zachary Taylor as second lieutenants, and Robert E. Lee served under General Wool as an engineer. See Mayo, "The Mexican War and After," pp. 164, 170.

²⁶ About half of these men were civilians after completing their tours of duty by 1846. However, according to Williams, many of these men returned to the service at the outbreak of the war. See, for example, Williams, History of American Wars, p. 39.

duration of the war.²⁷ In a change from the past, Congress supported John Calhoun's plan for an "expandable army" that was not constantly being demobilized or understaffed. The result was a framework for achieving an efficient, stable core for a standing mobile armed force. By adopting Calhoun's notion of what the United States army should look like, the Army retained its professionally trained leadership core and was able to mobilize and demobilize experienced troops when necessary. Approximately 104,000 troops enlisted during the war, 60,000 of them volunteers, 32,000 of them regulars, and 12,000 of them militiamen.²⁸ These numbers were never stable because men's tours of duty were quite short and transportation times quite long.²⁹

Because turnover in the Army was high as a consequence of varied tours of duty and the sheer logistics of distance, the Polk administration moved to systematically rationalize transportation systems and resources. Given the placement of their infrastructure, railroads were of limited use for transporting supplies. The most important transportation system used by the Polk administration was the newly developed steamboat. During the Mexican War, steamboats traveling down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers transported materiel to New Orleans, Texas, and some parts of Mexico for purposes of war-fighting.³⁰ The quartermaster's department had a fleet

²⁷ See Lofgren, "Force and Diplomacy, 1846-1849," p. 61.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 163.

²⁹ Both technical expertise and latent manpower made the U.S. an unstoppable juggernaut in comparison to Mexico: "Although the Mexican regular army of 43,000 men outnumbered the American army of 8,000, the United States had a greater manpower reservoir and could put larger forces into the field." Ibid., p.161. See also Robert E. May , "Young American Males and Filibustering in the Age of Manifest Destiny: The United States Army as a Cultural Mirror," The Journal of American History 78: 3 (December 1991): pp. 857-886.

of seventy steam and sailing vessels for the express purpose of transporting supplies.³¹ The US was no longer dependent on other nations and foreign firms for its armaments and arsenal. It drew primarily from domestic producers, most of them private firms.³²

In terms of legislative appropriations Polk received substantial funding, especially for peace negotiations. When Secretary of State Buchanan began peace treaty negotiations, Polk requested two million dollars for the settlement; Congress gave him three million dollars instead.³³ If one views the war as a means to “purchase” land by military means, it got a bargain. The war went longer than he expected; the U.S. lost 13,000 lives and spent \$97 million in military expenditures. Polk spent another \$15 million to purchase Mexico’s territories. Instead of raising taxes, he had the government borrow the excess of the expenditures, resulting in a 15-fold increase in the national debt (see Table Two).³⁴

The State in the International System

Finally, Polk sought not only to increase the size of the United States, but also to forestall British designs on the West coast. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hildago not only dispossessed Mexico of much of the territory it held before the war, but it also blocked British strategic objectives on the West coast. In our view, the Mexican War should be understood from D.W. Meinig’s

³⁰ On the importance of steam shipping and transportation during this period, see D.W. Meinig, The Shaping of America: A Geographical Perspective on 500 Years of History, vol. 2 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 311-334.

³¹ See Lofgren, “Force and Diplomacy, 1846-1849,” p. 167.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., p. 161

conception of an “American system of regional development.” Meinig argues that territorial expansion in the United States unfolded in a fashion that, from a modern world system viewpoint, *is comparable to the European developmental processes.* Thus Meinig devalues Frederick Jackson Turner’s thesis on the frontier and American political development and shifts our attention away from American exceptionalism to a comparative political geography perspective. Using Meinig’s perspective, we can conceptualize the termination of the Mexican War as shifting American territorial development from an “imperial frontier” to a “mercantile frontier.”³⁵ The shift from a imperial frontier system of territorial defense to a mercantile frontier system of integration into a national political economy was a key stage in the economic and political consolidation of the United States.³⁶ After the treaty with Mexico was signed, the United States was a continent-sized nation-state free from the possibility of being conquered by an outside power. With the exception of the Civil War, where both France and England sat on the sidelines waiting to see whether the United States or the Confederate States would win, James K. Polk *guaranteed* that no nation would ever have direct influence on the geostrategic internal affairs of the United States.³⁷ Thus, with regard to Bensel’s last measure—the role of the United States in the international system—we can argue that James Polk’s end-game for the Mexican War set the United States on a course that would result, within seventy years, in its

³⁴ See Williams, History of American Wars, pp.166-67.

³⁵ On Turner’s thesis, see Frederick Jackson Turner, Frontier and Section: Selected Essays (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1961).

³⁶ On territorial expansion and political and strategic geography as it relates specifically to the Polk administration, see Meinig, Shaping of America, pp. 255-64.

³⁷Ibid., pp. 128-154.

replacement of Great Britain as the leading democratic maritime trading power, a geopolitical status still possessed by the United States today.

Conclusion

In sum, this essay has sketched out two claims: interpreting presidential power within a framework that rests on a simple historical periodization between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is flawed; and the war and state formation model for understanding American political development is valuable for understanding antebellum state building.

Regarding both claims, we suggest that James K Polk used an enormous amount of discretionary power in his presidency, which became a pattern of institutional executive leadership that all future presidents would emulate. In the area of war-making in particular, Polk's administration clearly was not beholden to the interests of Congress, thus establishing at least one area where the political development literature is incorrect about executive leadership during the antebellum period . Polk's presidency does not fall into the static model of the modern or traditional presidency schema; a case in point was his very "modern" commitment to state building. This antebellum state-building imperative had a number of important consequences for the American state: the expansion of the territory of the United States to a continent size nation-state, the rationalization of transportation systems, the reconfiguration of citizenship rights for various groups (for good or ill), and the creation of a larger and more adaptable U.S. army that was larger and underpinned by a professional officer corps. In the end, these institutional and administrative changes created what Katzenbach and Lapinski have termed a

“flexible” antebellum state capacity. This capacity allowed the American state to adapt to two sets of challenges: the consolidation of territory and the construction of a rational political economy that was already part of an increasingly sophisticated international system.³⁸

³⁸ See Katzenbach, “Flexible Capacity: The Military and Early American Statebuilding.”

Table One³⁹

Polk Military Appointees (Generals) out of Civilian or Volunteer Service

Name and Political Party*	Date of Commission	Civilian or Volunteer Service: Rank
J. P. Henderson (Dem)	May 11, 1846	Volunteers: Major General
William O. Butler (Dem)	June 29, 1846	Volunteers: Major General
Robert Patterson (Dem)	July 7, 1846	Volunteers: Major General
Persifor F. Smith (Dem)	May 15, 1846	Volunteers: Brigadier General
Thomas Marshall (Dem)	July 1, 1846	Civilian: Brigadier General
Gideon J. Pillow (Dem)	July 1, 1846	Civilian: Brigadier General
Thomas L. Hamer (Dem)	July 1, 1846	Civilian: Brigadier General
Joseph Lane (Dem)	July 1, 1846	Civilian: Brigadier General
John A. Quitman (Dem)	July 1, 1846	Civilian: Brigadier General
James Shields (Dem)	July 1, 1846	Civilian: Brigadier General
Franklin Pierce (Dem)	March 3, 1847	Civilian: Brigadier General
Enos D. Hopping (Dem)	March 3, 1846	Civilian: Brigadier General
Caleb Cushing (Dem)	April 14, 1847	Civilian: Brigadier General
Sterling Price (Dem)	July 20, 1847	Civilian: Brigadier General

*The two leading generals: Winfred Scott and Zachary Taylor, both with the rank of Major General, were members of the Whig party. They were not replaced, but both came under extreme political pressure from Polk.

Table 2. War Making, the Federal Budget, and Federal Debt⁴⁰

Year	Gross National Product (in millions)	Federal Budget (in millions)	Federal Debt (in millions)
1790	NA	4	76
1800	NA	11	83
1810	NA	8	53
1820	NA	18	91
1830	NA	15	49
1840	NA	24	4
1850	NA	40	64
1860	NA	63	65
1880	7,400	310	240
1890	11,200	268	210

³⁹ Compiled from Winders, Polk's Army, pp. 37-38.

⁴⁰ Compiled from U.S. Office of Management and Budget, Budget of the United States Government, annual (A-19) by Faragher et. al., Out of Many, p. 424.

