

James Knox Polk

We all have our crosses to bear. One of mine, when I was young, was my name – Polk, or Pokey, as the family called me. It could be mortifying. Once, I was summoned via loudspeaker to a telephone call at the Arlington municipal swimming pool in Columbus. As I rose to respond, it felt like every head in the place had turned around to see who could be the bearer of such a moniker.

Still today, people ask frequently enough: Where does the name come from? The answer: It derives from James Knox Polk, the eleventh president of the United States. I am no blood relation, but my great-grandfather, born the year Polk was elected – 1844 – was named for the new president. His son, who dropped the James Knox, was my grandfather, and so the name passed down. The succession instilled in me a nagging, albeit scarcely acted upon, curiosity concerning President Polk.

To that end, and indulging a habit that has only worsened with age, about fifty years ago I bought a book that I intended to read some day, “The Slender Reed,” a biographical novel of James Knox Polk. Then, maybe eighteen years ago, I received from John Seigenthaler, a colleague in the newspaper business a legitimate biography of Polk – one that he had just written -- and I intended to read that as well. Three years ago, I saw in both the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal reviews of a book called “Lady First,” a biography of Sarah Childress Polk – Polk’s wife – who was, by all accounts, a real pistol, a first lady who was ahead of her time in both her individual accomplishments and the help she gave her husband in achieving what he did.

I never read any of the books until, this spring, faced with identifying a couple of people, no longer living, that I might like to talk with, I thought of the two Polks. This may or may not have been a good idea. Historians, according to Seigenthaler, have roundly criticized Polk for a “lack of creativity, a gray imagination, intellectual rigidity, and an inability to think outside the box.” He was perceived to be prudish, a quintessential micromanager and a workaholic. In his run for he governorship of Tennessee in 1839, one of the state’s newspapers labeled him “artful, cunning and intriguing,” but also, it warned readers, “a snake in the grass.”

Sarah Polk, by contrast, was outgoing, vivacious and witty. Unusually well educated for a woman of that era; she was bright, and

ambitious for the public role she would be called upon to play. James Polk liked to joke – and he didn't joke often – that “had he remained the clerk of the legislature,” Sarah “never would have consented to marry him.”

Her consent to marry reflected her esteem for his “unswerving rectitude,” his quiet reserve, his powerful work ethic, and his keen, logical, absorbent mind.” These qualities, along with a passionate vision for the Manifest Destiny of the still-young United States, ultimately outweighed any blandness of personality. With Sarah's support, they allowed him to accomplish a very great deal as president.

Under James Knox Polk, the United States completed the annexation of Texas and fought the Mexican War, concluding with the addition of our entire Southwest – California, Arizona, New Mexico and West Texas. He negotiated the treaty with Great Britain that gave us the Oregon territory to the 49th parallel, essentially the states of present day Oregon and Washington. He signed into law the Independent Treasury Act, establishing a financial system that endured until the launch of the Federal Reserve in 1913. He passed the Walker Tariff in 1846, very significant in its time.

So what, if I were to converse with the Polks today, would I want to talk about?

My first topic would be slavery. Both James and Sarah Polk owned slaves throughout their lives together; as a widow, Sarah owned them until the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. They inherited them, they bought them, they bartered them; sometimes they separated families, and sometimes they overlooked harsh overseers whose methods of enforcing discipline were anything but gentle. In 1830, when Polk was in the House of Representatives, he voted against a bill to ban the lash as a means of punishment. “A slave,” he said, “dreads the punishment of stripes more than he does imprisonment.”

At the same time, he understood that the system was no good. In his first speech to Congress, he called slavery “a common evil,” a “peculiar delicacy and an “unfortunate subject.” But it was a conundrum. If he came down on slavery too hard, he would almost certainly lose his support in the South. As House Speaker, which he became in 1835, and later as president, he walked a fine line. Says Seigenthaler, “He stayed as far away as possible from the issue.”

I would ask the Polks if, in retrospect, their actions with regard to slaves weren't at least hypocritical and, worse case, cruelly self-

aggrandizing. In response, I imagine that they would fall back on the context and culture of their circumstances . . . but I think they'd be uncomfortable with it.

The second thing I would ask about would be Texas and the war with Mexico. Specifically, did James Knox Polk ever doubt that he would annex the Southwest, with cash if possible, through war if necessary, and if so, why did he think it was his right to do so? The background, in brief:

In 1836, following the slaughter at the Alamo, Sam Houston's forces defeated the Mexicans under Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna, and the Republic of Texas was established. For ten years, Mexico refused to recognize the self-declared independent territory; at the same time, most U.S. citizens saw it as an inevitable state-in-waiting. In 1845, on his final day in office, President John Tyler offered Texas the opportunity to be annexed; under Polk, annexation was accepted, and nine months later, Texas became the 28th state.

Mexico, which never had recognized an independent Texas, was not happy. Further, it identified the southern border of Texas at the Nueces River, considerably north of the Rio Grande, where the U.S. saw it. Ignoring all this, Polk – after the annexation, but before actual statehood – sent an emissary to Mexico to establish the border where he wanted it and to offer \$30 million in cash for what is now California, Arizona and New Mexico. Things went downhill from there, resulting in a two-year war that cost the U.S. some 17,000 casualties.

Nonetheless, a series of American military victories ultimately forced the Mexicans to come to terms, and by the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, ratified by Mexico in June of 1848, Polk got both the territory and the Texas border he wanted. Mexico received \$15 million in payment. In so doing, he fulfilled one of four stated goals for his presidency. But again, what inspired him to think it was his – or America's – right to expand so boldly? In response, I suspect he'd say that he had always seen it as our destiny to be a coast-to-coast world player, and that he couldn't imagine it any other way. Accordingly, he would do what had to be done to secure it.

My third inquiry would pertain to the Oregon territory. While a lot of Americans at that time were crying "54,40 or fight, signaling their belief that we should own most of present-day British Columbia, Polk's goal was more modest. He sought about half of the disputed lands, which would place the border at the 49th parallel, where it is today.

Nevertheless, the British were disinclined to cede anything. Recognizing that we were on the brink of a conflict with Mexico, and strongly persuaded that we would not fight wars on two fronts, Lord Richard Pakenham, the smugly confident British ambassador to the United States, felt he held the winning hand. In "The Slender Reed," the biographical novel that I referred to moments ago, author Noel Gerson makes a riveting case for Polk's forensic one-upmanship in outmaneuvering Pakenham. The negotiation makes for a great read. I would like to know how close to the truth it was.

And finally, a couple of personal issues: James K. Polk was plagued from birth by fierce intermittent stomach pains; when he was 17, his father hired a surgeon to relieve the problem. The only anesthesia was brandy – so you can imagine how difficult the excision was. Doctors today who are familiar with the condition think he had urinary track stones, and that while the operation did relieve the pains, they also rendered him impotent. James and Sarah had no children.

I might ask Sarah about that; Noel Gerson attributes their childlessness to an early miscarriage. And I would ask her how she perceived the role of her social skills in lubricating the political wheels of the Polk presidency. Certainly her biographer, Amy Greenberg, feels they were essential.

My last question relates to names again. Turns out Polk's grandfather was named Ezekiel. Was there ever any possibility that James Knox could have been named for him instead? Just wondering.