



The Presidency of James K. Polk (American Presidency Series)

Paul H. Bergeron

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James K. Polk was one of the strongest and most active presidents ever to occupy the office. In the nineteenth century only Jefferson, Jackson, and Lincoln matched his overall leadership and domination of national government. Bergeron's crisp, insightful narrative shows how and why Polk achieved such stature and yet failed to attract the kind of popular support or retrospective recognition granted other presidential luminaries.

A native of North Carolina, Polk prepared for the presidency by honing his leadership skills as a seven-term congressman, speaker of the house, and governor of Tennessee. Bergeron's summary and analysis of those years shed light on the foundations of the presidency that followed. He provides fresh new perspectives on Polk's relationship with his cabinet, his skirmishes with Congress over domestic economic legislation, and the curse of presidential patronage.

But perhaps the most fascinating portions of this study are devoted to Polk's role as the western expansionist. By the end of his term, the United States had acquired enormous territories in the Southwest and far West. Bergeron demonstrates that Polk adroitly used both war and diplomacy to acquire and protect these lands. When the annexation of Texas led to the outbreak of war with Mexico, Polk was forced to become commander-in-chief of the American forces. In contrast, the potentially explosive dispute with Great Britain over Oregon's borders was settled through purely diplomatic means. Norman A. Graebner, in *America's Top Ten Presidents*, declares, "Polk's achievements in diplomacy were among the most remarkable in American history."

Drawing upon a careful review of the extensive literature on our eleventh president, as well as Polk's personal diary, Bergeron has written a significant and balanced reassessment of the Polk presidency. In the process, he has also created a revealing portrait of a complex man who led the nation with imperial determination tempered with compassion, generosity, and even humor.

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