



“the great nation of futurity”

Introduction

President James K. Polk (1845-1849) added more territory to the United States than any other president. Through negotiations with the British he was able to gain the southern portion of the Oregon Country establishing the U.S. border at the 49th parallel. Polk also oversaw the invasion of Mexico that forced the Mexican government to sell California and large portions of the American southwest.

When Polk became president in 1845 much of the nation was looking westward in the spirit of manifest destiny, the belief that the United States territory was divinely ordained to become a continental power. Polk campaigned on the “re-annexation of Texas and the reoccupation of Oregon.” This use of the prefix “re” was dubious at best. Texas was its own republic that had split from Mexico and the Oregon Country was a territory shared primarily between citizens of the United States and Great Britain as well as Indian tribes native to the region. In this lesson students will explore the major impacts of President Polk’s single term through primary and secondary source analysis and apply their research to create a [character map](#) of President James K. Polk.

Objectives

- A. Analyze primary source documents to define “manifest destiny” and identify positive and negative consequences of Western Expansion.
- B. Examine primary and secondary sources to determine the attitudes of James Polk and other Americans about both the Oregon and Texas territories.
- C. Use primary and secondary sources to examine the causes of the US-Mexican War and determine the key points in arguments both for and against the war.

TN State Standards

4.23 Examine the Impact of President James K. Polk’s view of Manifest Destiny on westward expansion.

5.4 Identify the impact of important Tennesseans prior to the Civil War, including: President James K. Polk (Manifest Destiny)

8.53 Identify the major events and impact of James K. Polk’s presidency, including the annexation of Texas and the settlement of the Oregon boundary.

TN.22 Describe the contributions of President James K. Polk to Tennessee and American history.

SSP.01-SSP.04

Vocabulary



Annexation	the act of one nation taking territory from another nation through force or agreement.
Border Dispute	A territorial dispute or boundary dispute is a disagreement over the possession or control of land between two or more territorial entities.
Expansionist	a follower or advocate of a policy of territorial or economic expansion
Manifest Destiny	the 19th-century doctrine or belief that the expansion of the US throughout the American continents was both justified and inevitable.
Mexican-American War	A war waged from 1846-1848 between the United States and Mexico in which the US invaded Mexico and occupied the Mexican Capital.
Oregon Territory	A disputed region of the Pacific Northwest occupied by Native Americans and British, French, and American settlers. The vast territory included modern day Oregon, Washington, and Idaho as well as parts of British Columbia (Canada), Montana, and Wyoming.
Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo	Treaty signed on February 2 nd 1848 ended the Mexican-American War from which the United States gained land that would become the states of California, Nevada, Utah, and New Mexico, as most of Arizona and Colorado.
Projet	a draft of a proposed measure or treaty
Western Expansion	the 19th-century movement of settlers into the American West, began with the Louisiana Purchase and was fueled by the Gold Rush, the Oregon Trail and a belief in "manifest destiny

Section 1 - Manifest Destiny

The first half of the 19th century was a time of change. The 2nd Great Awakening saw the birth of new faiths and the growth of others. European immigrants flocked to the US in search of opportunity. The rise of the abolition movement furthered the contentious debate over slavery. The Louisiana Purchase had expanded the nation and Americans were looking west. Many Americans believed that expanding the United States territory to the Pacific Ocean was inevitable and natural.

Newspaper editor John O’ Sullivan is credited with coining the term “Manifest Destiny” in 1845 and considered the United States “destined to be the great nation of futurity.” He first introduced the concept in 1839 writing:

...The far-reaching, the boundless future will be the era of American greatness. In its magnificent domain of space and time, the nation of many nations is **destined** to **manifest** to mankind the excellence of divine principles; to establish on earth the noblest temple ever dedicated to the worship of the Most High—the Sacred and the True.

Deeply rooted in the idea of Manifest Destiny was a feeling of cultural, spiritual, and governmental superiority.

Suggested Activity 1:

Share the painting “[American Progress](#)” with the class. Guide the students through the first three steps of this [Close Looking Exercise](#). Facilitate a class discussion on what is depicted in the painting. Ask the students about the perspective of the artist John Galt. Example Questions: *How does the artist feel about western expansion? What does the artist’s use of light and darkness show? How do you think the artist felt about American Indians?*



During the campaign for president in 1844 the annexation of Texas became a major political issue. Texas, originally a Mexican province, had recently become independent after a war with Mexico. However, the government in Mexico still considered Texas part of its territory. Critics believed Annexation would lead to war with Mexico, but proponents like John O’Sullivan felt annexation was fulfilling the United States “manifest destiny to overspread the continent.” In his famous editorial, “Annexation,” O’Sullivan argues; (1) Texas was a wholly independent country at the time of



annexation, thus Mexico had no say in the matter; (2) Mexico was unable to govern California and soon that would fall to the United States as well; (3) All of this was inevitable.

Primary Source: [John O’Sullivan: Annexation \(1845\)](#)

Texas is now ours... Her star and her stripe may already be said to have taken their place in the glorious blazon of our common nationality; and the sweep of our eagle’s wing already includes within its circuit the wide extent of her fair and fertile land. She is no longer to us a mere geographical space—a certain combination of coast, plain, mountain, valley, forest and stream. She is no longer to us a mere country on the map. She comes within the dear and sacred designation of Our Country... other nations have undertaken to intrude themselves ... in a spirit of hostile interference against us, for the avowed object of thwarting our policy and hampering our power, limiting our greatness and checking the fulfillment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions. This we have seen done by England, our old rival and enemy; and by France, strangely coupled with her against us....

The independence of Texas was complete and absolute. It was an independence, not only in fact, but of right. No obligation of duty towards Mexico tended in the least degree to restrain our right to effect the desired recovery of the fair province once our own—whatever motives of policy might have prompted a more deferential consideration of her feelings and her pride, as involved in the question.

California will, probably, next fall away from the loose adhesion which, in such a country as Mexico, holds a remote province in a slight equivocal kind of dependence on the metropolis. Imbecile and distracted, Mexico never can exert any real governmental authority over such a country. The impotence of the one and the distance of the other, must make the relation one of virtual independence; unless, by stunting the province of all natural growth, and forbidding that immigration which can alone develop its capabilities and fulfil the purposes of its creation, tyranny may retain a military dominion, which is no government in the, legitimate sense of the term. In the case of California this is now impossible. The Anglo-Saxon foot is already on its borders. Already the advance guard of the irresistible army of Anglo-Saxon emigration has begun to pour down upon it, armed with the plough and the rifle, and marking its trail with schools and colleges, courts and representative halls, mills and meeting-houses. A population will soon be in actual occupation of California, over which it will be idle for Mexico to dream of dominion. They will necessarily become independent. All this without agency of our government, without responsibility of our people—in the natural flow of events, the spontaneous working of principles, and the adaptation of the tendencies and wants of the human race to the elemental circumstances in the midst of which they find themselves placed.

Suggested Activity 2: Lead the class through a [listen-read-discuss](#) exercise using excerpts from “Annexation.” Afterwards ask the students to compare the ideas represented in the painting “American Progress” with those presented in “Annexation” to define the meaning of Manifest Destiny. This can be done through discussion or in writing. For younger students, using a [framed comparison paragraph](#) could be helpful.



President James K. Polk Home and Museum
501 W. 7th Street
Columbia, TN 38401

Section 2 – The Oregon Question

Prior to the Polk presidency, the [Oregon Territory](#) had been jointly occupied by England and the United States. A series of treaties and negotiations had maintained peaceful relations, but the question of how the territory ultimately would be divided lingered. Some lawmakers advocated that the US claim extended north to the 54th parallel laying claim to the entirety of the territory. Negotiations between the United States and England were tense, but a treaty was signed in 1846 halving the territory between the two nations.



Primary Source: [Inaugural Address of James K. Polk](#)

...Nor will it become in a less degree my duty to assert and maintain by all Constitutional means the right of the United States to that portion of our territory which lies beyond the Rocky Mountains. Our title to the country of Oregon is "clear and unquestionable," and already are our people preparing to perfect that title by occupying it with their wives and children. But eighty years ago our population was confined on the west by the ridge of the Alleghanies. Within that period--within the lifetime, I might say, of some of my hearers--our people, increasing to many millions, have filled the eastern valley of the Mississippi, adventurously ascended the Missouri to its headsprings, and are already engaged in establishing the blessings of self-government in valleys of which the rivers flow to the Pacific. The world beholds the peaceful triumphs of the industry of our emigrants. To us belongs the duty of protecting them adequately wherever they may be upon our soil. The jurisdiction of our laws and the benefits of our republican institutions should be extended over them in the distant regions which they have selected for their homes. The increasing facilities of intercourse will easily bring the States, of which the formation in that part of our territory can not be long delayed, within the sphere of our federative Union. In the meantime every obligation imposed by treaty or conventional stipulations should be sacredly respected.

Suggested Activity 1: Divide the class into small groups. Assign excerpts from Polk’s Inaugural Address. Model a [reciprocal teaching](#) exercise to help your students analyze the main ideas of their excerpts. Have each group nominate a strong reader to read their excerpt and present their findings to the class. Then ask the class to explain how James Polk felt about territorial expansion using evidence from the text.

In President Polk’s First Annual Message to Congress he took a bellicose tone and asserted the United States claim to the whole of the Oregon Territory. The vocal minority calling for “54’40 or fight” provided Polk with the political ammunition to force the British to bargain with the United States. However, behind the scenes James Polk and his cabinet planned to submit a version of the treaty to the



senate settling the boundary at the 49th parallel. Polk was bluffing. He had never really intended to extend the US border to 54'40.

Primary Source: [First Annual Message \(State of the Union\) of James K Polk](#)

Dec. 2, 1845

The extraordinary and wholly inadmissible demands of the British Government and the rejection of the proposition made in deference alone to what had been done by my predecessors and the implied obligation which their acts seemed to impose afford satisfactory evidence that no compromise which the United States ought to accept can be effected. With this conviction the proposition of compromise which had been made and rejected was by my direction subsequently withdrawn and our title to the whole Oregon Territory asserted, and, as is believed, maintained by irrefragable facts and arguments.

The civilized world will see in these proceedings a spirit of liberal concession on the part of the United States, and this Government will be relieved from all responsibility which may follow the failure to settle the controversy.

All attempts at compromise having failed, it becomes the duty of Congress to consider what measures it may be proper to adopt for the security and protection of our citizens now inhabiting or who may hereafter inhabit Oregon, and for the maintenance of our just title to that Territory...

Primary Source: [Letter from James Buchanan to Ambassador McClane](#)

Washington 6 June 1846

My dear Sir I have but little time to scribble you a private letter before the closing of the Mail to go by the Great Britain...

...The President's message will re-iterate the opinions expressed in his annual message in favor of our title to 54° 40'; but in consideration of & in deference to the contrary opinions expressed by the Senate, his Constitutional advisers, he submits the projet to them for their previous advice. He may probably suggest some modifications.

What the Senate may do in the premises is uncertain. There undoubtedly is in that Body a Constitutional majority in favor of settling the question on the parallel of 49 to the Straits of Fuca. The question of the perpetual navigation of the Columbia is & ought to be the point of difficulty. Should the Senate modify this article so as to limit the right to the termination of the existing charter of the Hudson's Bay Company, I can scarcely suppose that this modification would be rejected by the British Government.

I sincerely hope that you may not think of leaving London until this question shall be finally settled: & I am happy to learn from Robert that your continuance in London will not be prejudicial to your private interest at home. With my kindest respects to Mrs. M'Lane, I remain sincerely & respectfully your friend,

James Buchanan.

Primary Source: [Message of President Polk on a Treaty as to Oregon](#)

MESSAGE OF PRESIDENT POLK
ON A TREATY AS TO OREGON.



[June 10, 1846.]

To the Senate of the United States:

I lay before the Senate a proposal, in the form of a convention, presented to the Secretary of State on the sixth instant, by the envoy extra ordinary and minister plenipotentiary of her Britannic Majesty, for the adjustment of the Oregon question, together with a protocol of this proceeding. I submit this proposal to the consideration of the Senate, and request their advice as to the action which, in their judgment, it may be proper to take in reference to it.

In the early periods of the government, the opinion and advice of the Senate were often taken in advance upon important questions of our foreign policy. General Washington repeatedly consulted the Senate, and asked their previous advice upon pending negotiations with foreign powers; and the Senate in every instance responded to his call by giving their advice, to which he always conformed his action. This practice, though rarely resorted to in latter times, was, in my judgment, eminently wise, and may, on occasions of great importance, be properly revived...

My opinions and my action on the Oregon question were fully made known to Congress in my annual message of the second of December last; and the opinions therein expressed remain unchanged.

Should the Senate, by the constitutional majority required for the ratification of treaties, advise the acceptance of this proposition, or advise it with such modifications as they may, upon full deliberation, deem proper, I shall conform my action to their advice. Should the Senate, however, decline by such constitutional majority to give such advice, or to express an opinion on the subject, I shall consider it my duty to reject the offer...

James K. Polk.

Secretary of State James Buchanan was responsible for negotiating a treaty with England to settle the Oregon question. His letters to London provide insight into President Polk's negotiation strategy. James Polk's official position was that the United States had a right to the entirety of the Oregon Country. However, the president decided to consult the Congress for advice on settling the question. In Buchanan's letter he assures McClane that the congressional majority would vote to compromise and settle at the 49th parallel suggesting Polk and his administration expected the territory to be halved despite Polk's tough tone.

Suggested Activity 2: Read to the class the excerpt from Polk's First Annual Address. Consider using a [Directed Reading Thinking Activity](#) to help students understand Polk's use of language. Then distribute copies of Buchanan's letter and Polk's message to congress to small groups of students. Ask them to summarize Buchanan's letter and Polk's message and then answer the question: *Do you think President Polk was bluffing when he claimed to be willing to fight for the whole Oregon Territory?*

Section 3 – The Annexation of Texas and Conflict at the Border

The election of 1844 was a contentious contest between James Polk and Henry Clay, the Whig candidate for president. Throughout the campaign the annexation of Texas was a chief concern. Many Whigs believed that bringing Texas into the union would lead to war with Mexico while Democrats argued that, like Oregon, the United States already had a territorial claim to Texas and that annexation was inevitable.

The Republic of Texas won its independence from Mexico in 1836 and immediately began vying for statehood. By 1844, negotiations for annexation were in full swing under the administration of President John Tyler, but a promise of US military protection angered the Mexican government who still viewed Texas as a rebel province, not a sovereign nation. With the election of James K. Polk these tensions escalated.

On December 29, 1845 Texas was admitted as the 28th state in the union. By spring the following year, the United States was at war with Mexico.



Primary Source Excerpt: [Letter from James K. Polk to Cave Johnson May 13th, 1844](#)

...The truth is and should no longer be disguised from yourself and other friends, -that it will be utterly hopeless to carry the vote of this State for any man who is opposed to immediate annexation. The body of the Whigs will support Clay regardless of his opinions, but hundreds, indeed thousands of them will abandon him, and vote for any annexation man who may be nominated by the Baltimore Convention. If such a man shall be nominated, we will carry the State with triumph and with ease. If an anti-annexation man is nominated, thousands of Democrats and among them many leading men will not vote at all and Clay will carry the State. The Texas question is the all-absorbing one here and swallows up all others at present. It is impossible to arrest the current of the popular opinion and any man who attempts it will be crushed by it.

Primary Source Excerpt: [George Ellis, Letters upon the Annexation of Texas](#)

...I proceed to a second very solemn consideration, namely, that by this act our country will enter on a career of encroachment, war, and crime, and will merit and incur the punishment and woe of aggravated wrongdoing. The seizure of Texas will not stand alone. It will darken our future history... We are a restless people, prone to encroachment, impatient of ordinary laws of progress... We boast of our rapid growth, forgetting that, throughout nature, noble growths are slow. Our people throw themselves beyond the bounds of civilization, and expose themselves to relapses into semi-barbarous state, under the impulse of wild imagination, and for the name of great possessions.

Primary Source Excerpt: [John O' Sullivan, Annexation](#)



The independence of Texas was complete and absolute. It was an independence, not only in fact, but of right. No obligation of duty towards Mexico tended in the least degree to restrain our right to effect the desired recovery of the fair province once our own—whatever motives of policy might have prompted a more deferential consideration of her feelings and her pride, as involved in the question.

Suggested Activity 1: Share the three primary source excerpts with the class. Divide the class into two groups, one representing pro-annexation Americans and one representing anti-annexation Americans. Give the students a small amount of time to conduct internet research on the annexation of Texas. Instruct the students to be able defend their assigned positions using textual evidence. Lead the students in a [Fishbowl](#) discussion activity. Example questions: *Did Americans agree on Manifest Destiny and the annexation of Texas? Why was annexation a good or bad idea? If annexation led to war with Mexico, was it justified?* **Tip:** It might help students to direct their research by giving them questions before the activity. Additionally, providing curated secondary sources will help speed the research portion.

The annexation of Texas led to a border dispute between the United States and the Mexican Government. Mexico claimed the Southern border of Texas stopped at the Nueces River while the US claimed it extended all the way to the Rio Grande.

In March of 1846, troops led by General Zachary Taylor crossed into the disputed territory and established a makeshift fort on the banks of Rio Grande across from the town of Matamoros. Mexico saw Taylor's movement as an act of war. On April 25, 1846 Mexican forces attacked an American patrol killing 11 and capturing 52. Some speculated that President Polk sent Taylor to the border to provoke a Mexican attack that would justify a war for territory.

Primary Source Excerpt: [Memoirs of U. S. Grant, Complete. Ulysses S. Grant \(1885\).](#)

We were sent to provoke a fight, but it was essential that Mexico should commence it. It was very doubtful whether Congress would declare war; but if Mexico should attack our troops, the Executive could announce, "Whereas, war exists by the acts of, etc.," and prosecute the contest with vigor. Once initiated there were but few public men who would have the courage to oppose it...

Mexico showing no willingness to come to the Nueces to drive the invaders from her soil, it became necessary for the "invaders" to approach to within a convenient distance to be struck. Accordingly, preparations were begun for moving the army to the Rio Grande, to a point near Matamoros...

Primary Source Excerpt: [May 11, 1846: War Message to Congress, James K. Polk](#)

...Instead of this, however, we have been exerting our best efforts to propitiate her good will. Upon the pretext that Texas, a nation as independent as herself, thought proper to unite its destinies with our own [Mexico] has affected to believe that we have severed [Mexico's] rightful territory, and in official proclamations and manifestoes has repeatedly threatened to make war upon us for the purpose of reconquering Texas. In the meantime we have tried every effort at reconciliation. The cup of forbearance had been exhausted even before the recent information from the frontier of the Del Norte. But now, after reiterated menaces, Mexico has passed the boundary of the United

States, has invaded our territory and shed American blood upon the American soil. She has proclaimed that hostilities have commenced, and that the two nations are now at war.

As war exists, and, notwithstanding all our efforts to avoid it, exists by the act of Mexico herself, we are called upon by every consideration of duty and patriotism to vindicate with decision the honor, the rights, and the interests of our country.

Primary Source: [Map of the United States \(1845\)](#)



Primary Source: [Map of United States including Territories \(1848\)](#)

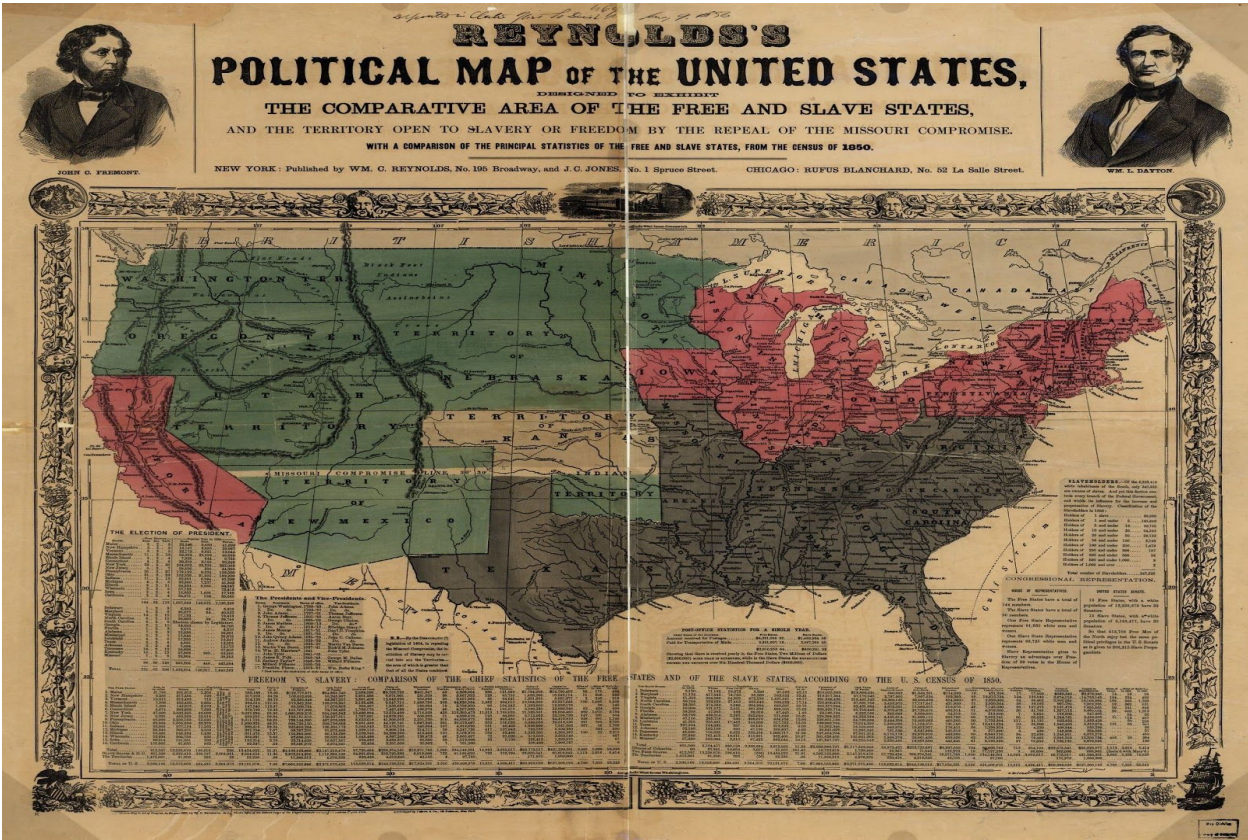


Suggested Activity 2: In a short lecture, introduce the students to concepts and conflicts that led to the Mexican War (including the Texas Revolution, slavery, etc...) Share the excerpts and maps with your students. Lead the class through a modified [Directed Reading Thinking Activity](#). *Example Questions: Do you think U. S. Grant supported the actions in Mexico? Do you think that James Polk was being honest? Do you think the Mexican War was about the Texas boundary or about gaining large amounts of territory?*

Section 4 - Creating a Character Map

The Mexican American War was a relatively short war that had huge consequences. The United States eventually occupied the Mexican Capitol which forced Mexico to sell huge tracts of territory. Prior to his presidency James Polk had envisioned a continental United States. After one term he had accomplished this goal. However, this rapid expansion of territory exacerbated sectional tensions over issues like slavery. 13 years after the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, the United States fractured into Civil War.

Primary Source: [Reynold's Political Map of the United States \(1856\)](#)



Primary Source: [James Polk - Fourth Annual Address to Congress \(1848\)](#)

...During the period I have administered the executive department of the Government great and important questions of public policy, foreign and domestic, have arisen, upon which it was my duty to act. It may, indeed, be truly said that my Administration has fallen upon eventful times. I have felt most sensibly the weight of the high responsibilities devolved upon me. With no other object than the public good, the enduring fame, and permanent prosperity of my country, I have pursued the convictions of my own best judgment. The impartial arbitrament of enlightened public opinion, present and future, will determine how far the public policy I have maintained and the



measures I have from time to time recommended may have tended to advance or retard the public prosperity at home and to elevate or depress the estimate of our national character abroad...

Suggested Activity 3: Share the final two primary sources with your students. Facilitate a class discussion on the repercussions of western expansion, manifest destiny, and James K. Polk. Challenge the students to work together to create a [character map](#) of James Polk using evidence from primary sources from throughout this lesson and their own research.