

FOUR LEGENDS ABOUT
PRESIDENT POLK

BY STEWART MITCHELL

JUST twenty-six years ago this autumn, Worthington C. Ford read before this Society an interesting paper on the presidential election of 1844, a contest which, he concluded, was little more than a fight for the "loaves and fishes" of office. One year before, Mr. M. A. DeWolfe Howe had published "The Life and Letters of George Bancroft," and a year later Mr. Ford himself printed selections from the Van Buren-Bancroft correspondence in the *Proceedings* of the Massachusetts Historical Society. From those days to this, there has been a constant addition to the means of arriving at a better understanding of the character and conduct of James Knox Polk. In 1910 Mr. Quaife brought out his edition of the four volumes of the diary Polk kept while he was in the White House; and only two years ago Dr. Jameson finished the sixth and last volume of the late Professor Bassett's edition of the "Correspondence of Andrew Jackson."¹

¹The following books, listed in order of publication, might have been expected to alter popular opinion as to the character and career of James Knox Polk: Ransom H. Gillet, *The Life and Times of Silas Wright* (Albany, 1874); M. A. DeWolfe Howe, *The Life and Letters of George Bancroft* (New York, 1908); "Van Buren-Bancroft Correspondence, 1830-1845," *Proceedings*, Massachusetts Historical Society, XLII (1909), 381-442; *The Diary of James K. Polk*, Milo M. Quaife, Editor, (Chicago, 1910); J. H. Smith, *The War with Mexico* (New York, 1919); Eugene Irving McCormac, *James K. Polk: A Political Biography* (Berkeley, California, 1922); the sixth and last volume of *The Correspondence of Andrew Jackson*, John Spencer Bassett, Editor, (Washington, 1933), containing letters received and written by Jackson from 1839 to his death in 1845; and Frederick Jackson Turner, *The United States, 1830-1850: The Nation and Its Sections* (New York, 1935), especially chapters X, XI, and XII, on the administrations of Van Buren, Tyler, and Polk, 453-573. *The Autobiography of Martin Van Buren*, J. H. Fitzpatrick, Editor, was published by the American Historical Association in 1920. Although this book was begun in Italy in 1854, it contains no consecutive account of anything which happened after 1836. In one respect, however, it is important for the purpose of this paper, for it shows that as late as 1854 Van Buren still believed that his defeat for a third nomination at Baltimore in 1844 was owing to "intrigue": *Autobiography*, 227 and 393-395.

No reasonable person who cares to learn the facts can hold any longer to the old opinions about Polk—angry judgments which grew up from the fierce fight for Free Soil and the culminating calamity of the Civil War. If it may seem odd to turn back to political gossip almost a century old, the excuse must be this: that this gossip, strange to relate, is still very much alive. Perhaps it is not unfitting to try to verify a great historian's estimate of President Polk here in the birthplace of George Bancroft.

Ninety years ago last March, James Knox Polk was inaugurated as eleventh President of the United States. A thorough examination of the widely divergent opinions as to the character of this remarkable man would make an interesting essay on American politics and history both before and after the Civil War. The puzzling aspect of the problem is not that mere partisans disagreed in their estimate of Polk, but that good judges of men did, also. Today, almost a century after he occupied the centre of the stage, not only statesmen but scholars speak and write of this man in irreconcilable terms. Two teachers of history within our own time are interesting examples of this conflict of opinion. In 1919 Justin H. Smith published his "War With Mexico," and three years later Eugene Irving McCormac brought out his "James K. Polk: A Political Biography." Any one who feels discouraged as to the possibility of getting at the knowledge of things "as they actually happened" had better not try to accommodate the obvious distaste of Smith to the sincere sympathy of McCormac.

We all know that a man named James Knox Polk was born in North Carolina in November 1795, and died in Tennessee in June 1849; we know that he was graduated from the University of North Carolina, having devoted himself to mathematics and the classics in order, so it is said, to "train his mind"; we know that he was President of the United States, and sometimes it seems as if that were all we do know beyond the

limits of debate. One thing more, perhaps—that a very remarkable American, Andrew Jackson, liked, admired, and trusted Polk through years of comradeship and common service. If Martin Van Buren was Jackson's first lieutenant, Polk was certainly his second.

People who are alarmed at the enormous output of historians are expected to console themselves with the theory that history has to be written all over again for each and every generation. There is something to be said for this re-writing of history in accordance with the various points of view of the readers of it, for both beautiful and ugly legends are likely to perish in the process, and the acquired industry and academic ambition of scholars find a fruitful field of expression. The national fiction about Polk offers an interesting example of this dire need for revision. Strange though it may seem to men of our day, the man who became President in 1845 had first thought of himself as nothing more than an eager and earnest candidate for the office of Vice-President. He pictured himself as serving his party in presiding over the Senate very much as he had served both Jackson and Van Buren in the House. He was nominated for first place at Baltimore in the spring of 1844, as the vigorous first choice of Jackson, after Van Buren had dazed the Democrats with his Hammett letter opposing the immediate annexation of Texas. We all know that he received that nomination on the basis of the two-thirds rule, not only because Jackson wished him to have it, but also because neither Martin Van Buren, of New York, nor Lewis Cass, of Michigan, wished the other to have it. Van Buren entered the convention with a majority of delegates who had been pledged to him before the fatal Texas letter, and the moment Cass forged ahead of him the New York men threw the prize to Polk.

People still play with the notion that Polk was unknown in 1844. "Who is James K. Polk?" jeered

the jubilant Whigs, when for the first time the telegraph carried the news of this nomination of a "dark horse" from Baltimore to Washington. Their own candidate, Clay, answered the question for them with the alarm he showed at hearing the name of the man who had been chosen to run against him. The sneer was a good campaign cry, but it was nothing more than a sneer. Polk had served fourteen years in the House of Representatives and, as chairman of the committee of ways and means, had led the fight in Jackson's war on the United States Bank. His more than three years as Speaker had been so stormy that partisan zeal had gone to the sensational extreme of denying him the customary compliment of a vote of thanks when he retired. In 1839 he left the Congress to capture the governorship of Jackson's state from the Whigs. "Who is Abraham Lincoln?" might have sounded more sincere in 1860 when a man who had served just one term in the House of Representatives and lost a campaign to Douglas, beat the great Senator Seward at Chicago. It took Polk and Lincoln each just four years in the White House to supply adequate information as to "who" they were.

Nor was Polk properly the first "dark horse" to be put up for President, in the sense that Garfield, for instance, "popped in between the election" and the hopes of John Sherman, of Ohio, in 1880. Polk, as we have seen, was an active candidate for Vice-President on a ticket with Van Buren. His two defeats for governor in 1841 and 1843 seem to have reconciled him to the notion of serving his party at second best. Years afterward the northerners persuaded themselves that Polk's nomination and election were the result of a southern conspiracy. Now that time has cooled bad temper, it is plain that both Clay and Van Buren defeated themselves in 1844, the one in the election, and the other in the convention of his party. The occasion, if not the cause, of their common misfortune was the fact that John Tyler and his secretary

of state, Calhoun, broke up a feast of reason with an apple of discord called Texas. Clay, for the moment, was in undisputed command of the Whigs. In 1840 he had been pushed aside for the first elderly general which his party foisted on this nation, and in 1848 he was to be shelved again for the second. In 1844, however, no rival challenged his chance to run for President. His backing and filling on the question of Texas probably cost him the decisive electoral vote of New York, but his disruptive effort to dictate to President Tyler also told heavily against him in the country.

Nor was Martin Van Buren so shrewd as he is commonly believed to have been in 1844. The story that these two charming aspirants for office agreed to eliminate Texas from what they hoped would be their private contest for the presidency has never been verified. It probably sprang from the fact that Clay's Raleigh letter and Van Buren's Hammett letter appeared almost simultaneously (April 27 and April 28, 1844) in opposition to immediate annexation of Texas.¹ After his visit to Ashland in the spring of 1842 Van Buren invited Clay to "Lindenwald," where the two men spent a second week together. At that time, Daniel Webster was still secretary of state, and the question of Texas, although always present in American politics for a generation, was not urgent. The defeat of the Whigs at the mid-term congressional elections had not yet occurred. Most important of all, however, Van Buren called on Clay after, and not before, he had stayed with Jackson at "The Hermitage." In view of the latter's persistent opinions on the subject of Texas, it would have been suicide for Van Buren to agree to take the issue out of the next presidential campaign.

In writing his rash letter to Hammett, Van Buren not only overlooked southern opinion but disregarded northern advice. The old notion that the North was

¹McCormac, *Polk*, 224-226. Clay's letter appeared in the *National Intelligencer* for April 27, 1844; Van Buren's in the *Washington Globe* for April 28, 1844.

overwhelmingly opposed to the acquisition of Texas is false. Lewis Cass, the predecessor of Douglas as the leader of the Democratic party in the Northwest, was an ardent advocate of national expansion to the Pacific, both North and South.¹ In coming out against the immediate annexation of Texas, Van Buren cast aside the counsel of two loyal friends, both of whom did their best to warn him to beware. On March 28, 1844, George Bancroft wrote him from Boston:

As to Texas! Shall a word be said about it! The question of annexation is revived. Long ago a plan was laid to extort letters from you and from Mr. Clay on that subject. My judgment would be, not to notice the topic at all, or to do it boldly. The current of democratic opinion is rather in favor of annexation. . . . A word from you is as safe with me, as if I were in the grave.

Bancroft had one of the best reasons in the world for hoping to see Van Buren nominated a third time, for he was preparing a biography of the ex-President to be used in the approaching campaign, a book he was so affectionate as to publish, with no great credit to himself, as late as 1889. Bancroft was a Van Buren delegate, moreover, to the national convention at Baltimore. Less than a month before it met, his comment on the Texas letter shows that he feared his favorite was playing with fire.

I have read carefully your very able letter on Texas. It is admirably written. I lean a little more in favor of the rights of Texas, and against the claims of Mexico: I think by the law of nations a recognition of independence and the establishment of permanent relations with an insurgent state mean rather more than you allow. But I recognize fully the moderation of its tone. In my epic in six books, nothing is said on the subject, unless by very very remote inference.²

Churchill C. Cambreleng, of New York City, was a seasoned politician who had served President Van Buren bravely and well in the House of Representatives. If Samuel J. Tilden is to be believed, Cambreleng

¹Cass wrote from Detroit on May 10, 1844; see *Niles' Register*, May 25, 1844.

²*Proceedings*, Massachusetts Historical Society, XLII, 422 and 426.

urged Van Buren to come out for annexation. Tilden was an old man when he told the story, but his memory for facts was uncanny. Even his devoted biographer, John Bigelow, acknowledged that his hero was all brain in making a long, absurd apology for his having remained a bachelor. Tilden, if we are to believe the dotting Bigelow, had married his country and had adopted the Democratic party as his step-child.¹

On November 29, 1880, Tilden wrote to Montgomery Blair:

Mr. Cambreleng wrote Mr. Van Buren a long and argumentative letter in favor of the annexation of Texas while the latter was preparing his letter upon that subject. It was written in an ink which stuck the pages together, and Van Buren was foiled or gave up in the attempt to decipher it. I have a vague impression that he afterwards thought that letter might have modified his own view. Possibly it might have changed the course of events.²

Cambreleng, by the way, was so loyal to Van Buren that he not only joined but helped lead the Democratic revolt in New York State against the presidential nomination of Cass in 1848. So far as Van Buren is concerned, it is plain that his letter against the immediate annexation of Texas was a political blunder. It is strange, indeed, for a man to profess to show courage and then explain the cost of it by complaining of conspiracy. If there was a plot to nominate Polk for President in 1844, that plot had spread to every section of the country and the party.

So much for the two national legends which poisoned public opinion against Polk: first, that he was "unknown," and second, that he sneaked into the nomination at the expense of Martin Van Buren. To understand the gossip in New York against his good name we must take a glance at what is often called the maze of the politics of the Empire State. From the autumn

¹John Bigelow, *The Life of Samuel J. Tilden* (New York, 1895), II, 372-375.

²*Letters and Literary Memorials of Samuel J. Tilden*, John Bigelow, Editor, (New York, 1908), II, 608.

of 1837 to the outbreak of the Civil War there were never less than two, and there were sometimes three, Democratic parties, or factions, in New York. The business Democrats, the men who promoted canals and banks and speculated in land, were generally called Hunkers. Those who stood by Van Buren's plan for an Independent Treasury were first called Loco-focos and, later on, Barnburners, from the old story of the Dutchman who burned down his barn to get rid of the rats. These radical Democrats declared for a "free field and favors for none." They were opposed to the piling up of the state debt, which was the basis of the state banks, and insisted that internal improvements like canals must pay their own way. As the Whigs came on the scene they, too, divided on this very issue, the majority of them led by Governor Seward, supporting the sale of state stock for the benefit of canals and railroads even more vigorously than the Hunker Democrats.

For about ten years it so happened that these Hunkers, or conservative Democrats, had the advantage of the middle course between the radical Democrats, who wished to spend too little, and the Whigs, who tried to spend too much. Although Van Buren lost his own state when he was defeated for re-election in 1840, he never knew why—or at least he never acknowledged that he knew. His stubborn belief that it was the campaign tactics of the Whigs and not the great panic of 1837 which defeated him for a second term is one of the prettiest examples of political blindness in all American history. He was unable to live long enough to learn that Americans do not like unlucky Presidents.

The abolition of Van Buren's Independent Treasury by the Whigs pleased the Hunker Democrats of New York, and Polk's restoration of it correspondingly annoyed them. At the same time, the annexation of Texas and the conquest of the Southwest forced the issue of Free Soil to the front. The system of the

Independent Treasury would stay for seventy years, but the question of the extension of slavery now became the burning issue. David Wilmot's desire to mend his fences in Pennsylvania worked havoc with his party in New York. He had voted for the tariff of 1846; he would make amends by coming out for Free Soil. Once again both Democrats and Whigs split into rival factions. The Hunkers tried to soft-pedal the subject, but the Barnburners, having got their way financially, took up with Wilmot. Because they believed that Van Buren had been robbed of a second term in 1844, they turned on Cass, the official Democratic nominee in 1848, and their desire for revenge cost him the election. In that year, the Barnburners swallowed the Free Soil party and threw away control of the state in order to defeat Cass.

The moment the Whigs came into power, however, they, too, split into halves on the issue of the spread of slavery—"Conscience" Whigs for Free Soil and "Cotton" Whigs for "business as usual." Fillmore's succession, at the death of Taylor, only added fuel to the flames, for he signed the Fugitive Slave Law as a part of the great Compromise. By 1850 there were four parties in New York: of the Democrats, the Van Buren men headed the Barnburners; while the Hunkers were in the hands of men like Marcy and Seymour. Of the Whigs, Senator Seward, of Auburn, led the "Conscience" men against the "Cotton" followers of Millard Fillmore.

High principles are never so attractive to men as when they offer them a chance to get even with their enemies. Van Buren and his rebels of 1848 openly supported Franklin Pierce in 1852, James Buchanan in 1856, and the fusion electoral ticket against Lincoln in 1860. Thus, once the Van Buren Barnburners had taken their revenge on Lewis Cass, they began to look about them for a likely way of putting the Democrats back in control of the state.

Now for the two most malignant and long-lived

legends in regard to Polk's relations with the Democratic party in the state of New York: first, that he tricked the radical Democrats in making up his Cabinet in 1845, and second, that he was secretly hostile to Governor Silas Wright and allowed members of his Cabinet to conspire against the re-election of the latter. To judge properly of Polk's policy, it is only fair to examine it in perspective. Perhaps the best way to get a bird's-eye view of the Democratic party at the time Polk was nominated and elected is to turn to the sixth volume of Bassett's "Correspondence of Andrew Jackson."

A glance at Bassett's volume shows that letters poured into "The Hermitage" from all over the Union, and it is surprising to see how many the "illiterate" old general managed to write in reply. So long as he lived, Jackson was the hub of that party, and when he died in June 1845, the spokes which "Old Hickory" had held together began to fall apart. There were at least five spokes to the Democratic wheel. To the East there was Tyler, renegade to both Democrats and Whigs, with Calhoun, his secretary of state—Tyler determined to force the issue of Texas on the party and the country in the hope that he might become President in his own right. The Whigs, he knew, would have no more of him, but he might yet capture the Democrats. In the long run, he took a third-party nomination and finally withdrew in favor of Polk. Down in the deep South was Senator Robert J. Walker—"Sir" Robert Walker, as he came to be called in Pennsylvania, which hated the tariff of 1846. The Walker men were enthusiastic expansionists, and their pressure finally brought about the appointment of their leader as secretary of the treasury. Jackson, however, was suspicious of this group of Democrats up to the last moment of his life.

Directly West was the faction of the perpetual senator from Missouri, Thomas Hart Benton, whose firm friend, Francis Preston Blair, the famous editor

of the *Washington Globe*, always had the better ear of Jackson. Benton and Calhoun were at daggers drawn. Up in what was then the Northwest of the United States, lived Lewis Cass of Michigan, who had first gone into the Cabinet of Jackson at the time Van Buren staged the shake-up of 1831. Cass was strongly anti-British, and his prestige in such states as Ohio and Illinois was enormous. And, finally, there was the Democratic party in the Northeast. In the foreground stood the ambitious and busy Buchanan from the coal and iron state of Pennsylvania and, away beyond, the faithful Levi Woodbury of New Hampshire. In between these lay New York, torn with the dissensions of Barnburners and Hunkers.

Polk had two great advantages. His position was central—he was at the hub—and the approval of Jackson was a power in itself. The last letter Jackson ever wrote he addressed to Polk from his death-bed two days before the end. The dangers he faced after his nomination and election were no less obvious to him than to us. In the first place, the two ex-Presidents from his own party both planned to manage him. In the second place, Calhoun hoped to be continued as secretary of state. Polk had only six Cabinet seats to dispose of, and eventually he distributed those with what looks like even-handed justice among Pennsylvania, Mississippi, New York, Virginia, Massachusetts, and Tennessee. The passing over of the Northwest is not surprising, for not only had Polk resolved to be President of the United States in fact, but he had made up his mind to admit to his official family no possible aspirant to the succession. He was shrewd enough to see that Cass would probably be nominated in 1848, and if Cass were not taken into the Cabinet, no man from the Northwest could be.

Polk's vow to be his own master had surprising results. By the time he had completed his Cabinet he had displeased three of the great factions of his party and was pretty generally accused of ingratitude by all

of them. As chief executive he was deliberate, determined, and direct, and because he kept his own counsel the powerful men with whom he dared to differ called him a liar. A weaker man might have deferred to Andrew Jackson, who obviously could not live much longer, but Polk immediately disregarded the advice of his old leader in two important respects: he refused to accept Blair as the editorial mouthpiece of his administration, and Silas Wright, the first man he asked to enter his Cabinet, was not the choice of Jackson.

Wright had refused to run for Vice-President on the ticket with Polk because, in the first place, he thought that the Van Buren Democrats would misunderstand the manoeuvre of his nomination, and in the second place, because he honestly preferred to remain in the Senate. During the summer of 1844, the Barnburner faction finally forced him to accept the Democratic nomination for governor by appealing to his loyalty to the party. Wright was on cordial terms with Polk all during the campaign of 1844, and a few weeks after his inauguration as governor the President-elect asked him to take the treasury. The post appealed to him, for he knew that the new President planned to restore the Independent Treasury and reduce the tariff. Van Buren had resigned to oblige Jackson in similar circumstances. The correspondence which Gillet published in his "Life and Times of Silas Wright" all of sixty years ago proves that the offer was refused quite as honestly as it was made.¹ Wright had been elected governor and he felt it was his duty to hold the office for which he had campaigned. At the request of Polk, who was "inclined" to take one secretary from New York, Governor Wright suggested Azariah Cutting Flagg for the post he felt he could not honestly accept and Benjamin F. Butler for secretary of state. When Polk asked Van Buren for advice as to the composition of

¹For the correspondence which passed between Polk and Wright, see Gillet, *Wright*, II, 1631-1668.

his Cabinet, the ex-President joined in Wright's recommendation of Butler for secretary of state, and declared that either Flagg or Cambreleng would manage the treasury to the heart's desire of all good Jeffersonian Democrats.¹

If Wright had accepted the treasury, there is no question but that New York would have got the second place in Polk's Cabinet. Polk's next plan was to give this office to Bancroft, but a howl from New England—New Hampshire and Maine—turned his course awry. His third and final choice for the post was Senator Walker of Mississippi. The first place was still open. As between Butler, of New York, and Buchanan, of Pennsylvania, Polk finally decided that the claims of the latter were more important, and Buchanan was appointed. For one thing, he was not distinctly identified with any faction of the party. He loved intrigue, but he loved peace even better. Polk found him an "old maid" and came to believe that he was scheming to succeed him.² The first and second places were now filled, but the third was still empty, and Polk offered it to Butler. Butler refused the war office with the amazing intimation that he thought he ought to have been asked to be secretary of state.³ It is obvious that either Van Buren or Wright had broken the seal of Polk's confidence. Finally, Polk approached New York for the third time and offered the war office to William Learned Marcy, who had served three terms as governor and had sat in the Senate of the United States. Marcy snapped at the chance and made a name for himself in the Mexican War. Marcy, however, was a Hunker.

Yet, from Polk's point of view, what cause for complaint had New York? The Barnburners lost a place in the Cabinet because Governor Wright would not resign and Butler was tendered an office Marcy did not

¹McCormac, *Polk*, 292.

²Polk, *Diary*, III, 256, and IV, 355.

³McCormac, *Polk*, 295 and note 35.

disdain. Their plausible explanation of what actually happened gave rise to one of the most persistent legends in the history of the state of New York. The villain of the plot, according to their story, was Edwin Croswell, who is most easily described as the Democratic predecessor of Thurlow Weed. Croswell owned and edited the *Argus* at Albany and was for many years state printer; his office was the council-chamber of the famous Regency. It was Croswell who was said to have been so cunning as to suggest to Polk that he should ask Van Buren for advice, then offer the treasury to Wright, and afterward tender the secretaryship of war to Butler—Croswell having assured the President-elect that both men would refuse. Then Polk would be free to turn to Marcy, for whose appointment the Hunker members of the legislature would sign an appeal.

For thirty years this story circulated in New York and it hurt Polk. By 1874, Gillet's publication of the correspondence between Wright and Polk left the story open to suspicion. When Milo Quaife brought out "The Diary of James K. Polk" in 1910, it became improbable. Two years ago, the appearance of the last volume of the "Correspondence of Andrew Jackson" put the tale beyond the limits of belief. If Polk was guilty of such duplicity as the Van Buren Democrats came to believe of him, he would be entitled to replace Aaron Burr as the pet scapegoat of American historians.

Yet the ugly legend still lives. Last year the sixth volume of the new "History of the State of New York" came from the Columbia University Press. Any one who looks into the books which have already appeared can not fail to appreciate the pains and the skill of the general editor of the series and the good names and the fine work of some of the scholars who have shared in the writing of them. To this sixth volume, however, Denis Tilden Lynch contributed two chapters, the second entitled "Party Struggles, 1828-1850." Mr.

Lynch occupies a distinguished place on the editorial staff of the New York *Herald-Tribune*. In 1929 he published a biography of Martin Van Buren, a book which some people may blink at because it lacks footnotes, but every page of which shows a more than respectable knowledge of the history and literature of the politics of New York.¹ Yet as late as 1934 Mr. Lynch's story of Polk's appointment of Marcy ran as follows:

Aware that Wright would not resign the governorship, Polk offered him a place in the cabinet. Subsequently, he asked Van Buren to suggest a New York man for the cabinet. This was also a gesture. Ignorant of Polk's plot, Van Buren named Azariah C. Flagg, Churchill C. Cambreleng, and his former law partner, Benjamin F. Butler, who had served ably in the cabinets of Jackson and Van Buren. Polk then invited Butler to be Secretary of War, knowing he was entitled to the State or Treasury portfolio. When the expected declination came, Polk consummated his treachery by appointing Marcy Secretary of War.²

This is re-writing history with a vengeance.

It is only fair to add as an excuse for the astonishing statements of Mr. Lynch that his "Select Bibliography" of thirty-five books and collections of manuscripts contains no mention of Gillet's "Silas Wright" (1874), Polk's "Diary" (1910), or Professor McCormac's biography of the President—the last published thirteen years ago. Mr. Lynch learned his legend directly from the pages of authors like Hammond and Jenkins, neither of whom had any sure means of knowing better.³

The death of Jackson, although it relieved Polk of the embarrassment of his vigorous advice, was a blow to the new President, for with his death the Democratic

¹See Denis Tilden Lynch, *An Epoch and a Man: Martin Van Buren and His Times* (New York, 1929), Chapter XL.

²*History of the State of New York*, Alexander C. Flick, Editor: VI, *The Age of Reform* (New York, 1934): Denis Tilden Lynch, "Party Struggles, 1828-1850," 75.

³See Jabez D. Hammond, *Political History of the State of New York*, III (Syracuse, 1852), for his biography of Silas Wright, especially pages 530-534; and the appendix to John S. Jenkins, *History of Political Parties in the State of New York* (Second Edition, Auburn, 1849), 539-540.

party began to fall asunder. Moreover, Polk's program of action could not have been put through without offense. Every one knows the story which James Schouler got from Bancroft—how the President-elect slapped his thigh and declared:

There are four great measures which are to be the measures of my administration: one, a reduction of the tariff; another, the independent treasury; a third, the settlement of the Oregon boundary question; and lastly, the acquisition of California.¹

Whether or not Bancroft made a definite plan of Polk's achievements is not important here. The fact remains that the restoration of the Independent Treasury hurt the interests of the Hunkers in New York, and "Sir" Robert Walker's tariff angered Pennsylvania. The followers of Cass were vexed by what they called the "surrender" of Oregon, and the acquisition of California was as fiercely resented in New England as was Jefferson's purchase of Louisiana. As if he had not been brave enough already, Polk stepped on the toes of his partisans all around the country by his veto of the pork-barrel bill for appropriations for rivers and harbors, a veto in the best tradition of Jeffersonians, and stemming directly from Madison's veto of March 3, 1817.² In the face of all he achieved it was odd, to say the least, to suppose that Polk was hoping for a second term. He did not mention the subject in his inaugural, but the evidence of his diary is convincing as to his state of mind.

This charge leads to the second of the malignant legends about Polk—that he was disloyal to Silas Wright and connived at a conspiracy to defeat the governor for a second term. Wright was an eminently honorable man, who made an excellent senator and had never at any time desired to be governor of New York. His judgment of his own abilities was wiser than the plans of his friends to make use of him. At

¹James Schouler, *History of the United States of America under the Constitution, 1783-1877* (New York, 1880-1913), IV, 498.

²See James D. Richardson, *Messages and Papers of the Presidents* (New York, 1897), V, 2460-2476, for the text of Polk's pocket veto of December 15, 1847.

Albany he showed himself to be one of those thoroughly upright men who somehow manage to combine all the elements of opposition against themselves. He vetoed the canal appropriations which the Hunkers desired and signed a bill for a constitutional convention which neither they nor he wished to see assemble.

The strictly legal but harsh measures he took against the anti-rent revolt in central New York, moreover, were rather rigid for a radical. The anti-renters called a convention of their own in 1846 and endorsed the Whig candidate for governor and the Democratic candidate for lieutenant-governor, both of whom were elected. They repeated their success precisely the same way when the Hunker, Horatio Seymour, first ran for governor in 1850. The figures show that thousands of Hunkers must have voted to give Silas Wright a second term as governor.¹ Although the radicals accused the conservatives of treachery, it is probable that the unpopularity of the Mexican War, the anger of the state bankers at the restoration of the Independent Treasury, the holding up of work on the canals, and the resentment of the farmers of central New York against quarter-sales were four good reasons in themselves sufficient to account for the defeat of Silas Wright. His sudden death, however, in August 1847, added a martyr to the cause of the Barnburners—Polk and Marcy had “murdered” him.

Quite contrary to this second charge of double-dealing, it was the Hunkers, and not the Barnburners, whom President Polk came to distrust. The Democratic politicians of New York State were enough to try the patience of a saint, years ago, and James Knox Polk was not a saint, but one of the best Presidents the American people have had the good luck to elect. His diary is full of references to his trials and tribulations in connection with the war between Hunkers and Barnburners of New York. As early as the twenty-seventh of November 1845, he wrote on the occasion

¹Edgar A. Werner, *Civil List . . . of New York* (Albany, 1889), 166.

of a visit of "Prince John" Van Buren to Washington:

I will do, as I have done, Mr. Martin Van Buren's friends full justice in the bestowal of public patronage, but I cannot proscribe all others of the Democratic party in order to gain their good will. I will adhere sternly to my principles without identifying myself with any faction or clique of the Democratic party.¹

In March 1847, the President put on record his contempt for both Barnburners and Hunkers in their squabbles over the military patronage in New York State—Dix, the Barnburner senator, was pitted against Dickinson, the Hunker senator, and Marcy, the secretary of war. Polk's comment is hardly that of a hypocrite:

I expressed my indignation at the scene which had been enacted in my presence. I had become perfectly indifferent whether Mr. Dickinson and Mr. Marcy resigned or not. I knew that neither of them could be sustained in such a course for such a cause . . . I am perfectly disgusted with the petty local strife between these factions. There is no patriotism in it on either side. I have in many instances refused to lend myself to either and have alternately given offense to both.²

Now, lastly, as to Polk's feelings in regard first to the defeat and then the death of Silas Wright. On the night of Thursday, the fifth of November 1846, Buchanan called on him for a long talk on public affairs. The congressional elections had gone against the Democrats, and the secretary of state explained that it was the tariff of 1846 which had made mischief in Pennsylvania. Then the talk turned to New York, and Polk's candid record is significant.

The causes of the defeat of the Democratic party in the New York election, which had just taken place, were spoken of. I expressed the opinion that it was attributable to the bad faith of that portion of the Democratic party in New York opposed personally to Governor Wright, called Old Hunkers. I expressed my deep regret at Governor Wright's defeat, and my strong condemnation of that portion of the Democratic party who had suffered their State factions to control them, and had voted against him. I told him I could not regard any man as a

¹Polk, *Diary*, I, 104.

²Polk, *Diary*, II, 405.

true democrat who had taken that course. It is true that other causes existed in New York, such as anti-rentism, to produce the result, but the main cause I have no doubt was the lukewarmness and secret opposition to Governor Wright of that portion of the Democratic party calling themselves Old Hunkers. This faction shall hereafter receive no favours at my hands if I know it.¹

The loss of the House of Representatives at the mid-term elections of 1846 does not seem to have disturbed Polk greatly. The change from Democratic to Whig control did not make much difference, because disgruntled place-seekers had already shaken his party's hold. He went on quietly to have his own way, and his great offence in the eyes of his enemies was that he had it. As far as Silas Wright was concerned, Polk could have consoled himself for that defeat by reflecting that he had himself twice lost the governorship of Tennessee on the eve of moving into the White House. Then suddenly, on Sunday, August 29, 1847, the bad news of the death of Wright reached Washington. To suppose that what Polk wrote down in regard to it, for his own eye, was dishonest would be nothing more than idle.

Intelligence reached the City to-day of the sudden death by apoplexy of the Honorable Silas Wright, late Governor of New York. He was a great and a good man. At the commencement of my administration I tendered to him the office of Secretary of the Treasury, which he declined to accept. I was intimate with him when he was in Congress. He was my personal and personal [political] friend, and I deeply regret his death.²

The trifling accident of President Polk's repetition of that word "personal" might be taken as unconscious evidence of what was uppermost in his mind. So runs the private record of the man who is charged with having offered Wright an office which he knew he would refuse. Edwin Crosswell went to his grave with a good many sly deals on his soul, but of this piece of trickery he must stand guiltless.

¹Polk, *Diary*, II, 218.

²Polk, *Diary*, III, 153.

Polk's great failing was his lack of magnetism—if Clay and he could only have been put together, the two of them would have made as great an American as has ever lived. Charming men are often as slippery as eels, and no one who lives in New England needs to be reminded how tiresome and tyrannical mere integrity can be. Polk drove his party hard, showing no mercy for the members of the House and Senate—who had to face their districts and their legislatures sooner or later. He acted for all the world like a President who is walking on the stilts of his second term. His conduct is proof positive of his unwillingness to stand for re-election.

The greatest of Polk's achievements as a statesman is safe for all time, for the map of the United States is a memorial to the vision and the courage of three men—George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and himself. People who complain of what he did must be willing to wipe out the American advance to the Pacific Ocean. The bad reputation which he suffered for a long time in the North was largely due to the Civil War—Polk was put up as one of the chief actors in the great Southern “conspiracy” against the Union. Readers of the volume published after the death of the late Frederick Jackson Turner will find that the most politically aseptic of historians could not lay his hand on one bit of evidence to support that charge of a conspiracy by the slavocracy.¹ By the time the North and the South had reached the 1850's no story was too ridiculous to justify their suspicion of each other.

George Bancroft had a very long life and a very full one. People who stop sneering at his history long enough to read a little of it are almost always surprised with his unassuming knowledge of his sources. Bancroft not only knew books and manuscripts, he knew men—and a great variety of them—and was quite at home in more than one part of the world. Yet long before the Civil War, the fact that he was a Jackson

¹Turner, *The United States, 1830-1850*, 512 and 530.

Democrat had made him something of an outcast in New England. His democracy survived not only ostracism but secession. As late as 1887 he probably retained more good judgment than most people ever acquire. In the days when Grover Cleveland was in the White House, Bancroft set down this considered opinion of one of the greatest of that President's predecessors:

I safely received and have worked away very industriously and thoroughly on Polk's papers. His character shines out in them just exactly as the man he was, prudent, far-sighted, bold, excelling any democrat of his day in undeviatingly correct exposition of the democratic principles; and, in short, as I think, judging of him as I knew him, and judging of him by the results of his administration, one of the very foremost of our public men and one of the very best and most honest and most successful Presidents the country ever had.¹

If any comment is called for, it is the obvious statement that time is evidently on the side of Polk and Bancroft.

¹Howe, *Life and Letters of George Bancroft*, I, 294.

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