James K. Polk was a shrewd and decisive commander in chief, the youngest president elected to guide the still-young nation, who served as Speaker of the House and governor of Tennessee before taking office in 1845. Considered a natural successor to Andrew Jackson, Young Hickory miraculously revived his floundering political career by riding a wave of public sentiment in favor of annexing the Republic of Texas to the Union. Shortly after his inauguration, he settled the disputed Oregon boundary and by 1846 had declared war on Mexico in hopes of annexing California. The considerably smaller American army never lost a battle. At home, however, Polk suffered a political firestorm of antiwar attacks from many fronts. Despite his tremendous accomplishments, he left office an

How does one properly define greatness in a leader? This is the overwhelming question that emerges when reading John Seigenthaler's gracefully written and thorough book on Polk. For almost 60 years now, presidential scholars have consistently ranked Polk as great or near-great. The assessment seems to be based primarily on the fact that Polk accomplished all four aims on which he campaigned lowering internal tariffs, establishing a national treasury, securing Oregon from Britain, and wresting California from Mexico. But is success in achieving political goals itself enough to establish presidential greatness? What if the goals themselves aren't particularly praiseworthy?

Styled "young Hickory" because he was the heir apparent to Andrew Jackson, Polk was a curious political mix of populism and imperialism. Like his mentor Jackson, he seems genuinely concerned to protect the laborer and yeoman from big money industrialists and private bankers. But he also bullied one nation (Britain) and provoked a war with another (Mexico) to extend the nation's borders to the Pacific coast. No other US president has been as open and successful a proponent of Manifest Destiny.

Like most wartime presidents, Polk discovered that his own war consumed an inordinate amount of his time and energy and generated a great deal of criticism. It's not clear if the cause of the war was legally justified. Depending on how one interpreted disputes over the border separating Mexico and the US, the event that sparked the war--a Mexican assault on a US patrol--might or might not have been justified. But Polk seized the opportunity to send in the cavalry.

Whigs and others were horrified by what they saw as Polk's crass warmongering for land. Newly-minted congressman Abraham Lincoln spoke against it (and this probably cost him re-election). So did literary luminaries such as Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. (Others, such as Walt Whitman, agitated for annexing the whole of Mexico.) Many of the officers who served in the war, including Robert E. Lee and Winfield Scott, thought it an unjust one. Moreover, the war had a huge price tag in lives: 13,000 casualties, the vast majority of them caused by illness. But when it was over, Polk had extended the borders of the country north and west, making the nation truly continental. The spoils from the war were larger than even the Louisiana Purchase.

Does this make Polk a great president? Viewed from a purely pragmatic perspective, perhaps. Viewed from the viewpoint of empire, undoubtedly.
But viewed from a humanitarian or democratic perspective? The question is an open one, and it's to Seigenthaler's credit that he raises it in his excellent little book.

In addition, Seigenthaler provides enlightening glimpses into Polk the man and the president. Polk underwent a horrific operation when he was a teenager that probably left him sterile and may have contributed to his early death just three months after leaving office. Polk pledged himself to serving but one term, and could have taken a strong and no-risk stand against slavery. But he consistently side-stepped the issue during his term. His wartime territorial gains, however, only heated up the national debate about the extension of slavery. Apparently, Polk was one of the hardest-working presidents we've ever had, rarely leaving the White House. He was also the first president to keep a detailed daily journal. All in all, the portrait that comes through is of a dedicated, driven man. But a great president?

For More 5 Star Customer Reviews and Lowest Price: