President James K. Polk, United States President 1845-1849
Collin Schnakenberg

Entering his junior year at Oklahoma Christian University, Collin Schnakenberg has been a member of the Tau Sigma Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta and has been an active member of OC’s Honors Program. Originally from Aurora, Missouri, Collin is a history major with plans to pursue graduate study to eventually become a history professor. He has presented at both the Regional and the National Phi Alpha Theta Conferences.

The Mexican-American War today stands out as one of the least known wars in American history, but it was also one of the most successful wars in which the United States fought. Professor Glenn W. Price of Sonoma State College (later Sonoma State University) in California wrote about the events that brought the onset of this war in his 1967 book *Origins of the War with Mexico: the Polk-Stockton Intrigue*. In his book, Price attempts to convey the story of the Mexican-American War honestly, but from a revisionist standpoint. To do so, Price tries to rid himself of the nationalistic sentiment that influenced traditional interpretation. The goal of his book is to show that the United States government was not innocent, suffering an unprovoked attack by Mexico. Rather, President James K. Polk tried to provoke the war with the assistance of Commodore Robert F. Stockton of the *USS Princeton* by trying to convince the Texans to attack the Mexicans within the disputed territory between the Nueces and the Rio Grande. This is an unusual view for Price to take; his own college is in California, a state that the United
States fought for in the war, and his publisher is the University of Texas, a state the United States annexed, which brought about the struggle in the first place.

Price’s bias is due, in part, to his own revisionist view of the Mexican War. This is seen most acutely in the preface, where Price states his arguments and refutes the earlier view, held by non-revisionists such as Samuel F. Bemis and Richard W. Van Alstyne, that Polk himself was not involved. Price says that these historians (as well as other quasi-revisionists such as Frederick Merk and Charles G. Sellers) “[accept] the face value the official statement of the [Polk] Administration in Washington.” It is entirely possible that Price’s viewpoints were influenced by a war that the United States was fighting in 1967, the Vietnam War. In fact, he mentions the then current Presidency: “these distortions of the American war record…should issue from the office of the President in 1965.” Though Price does not mention the Vietnam War specifically, he would have often seen liberal protesters, as he worked on a college campus a few miles from San Francisco, one of the capitals of the Vietnam protest movement. The Polk-Stockton Incident also bears a similarity to the Gulf of Tonkin Incident, which many people of the time considered to be premeditated by the US government. To support his arguments, Price draws upon a wide range of sources, including manuscripts, letters, diaries, published documents, newspaper articles, history books, and articles. His greatest asset, however, is his ability to use his material within his book efficiently, often quoting the letters and documents that portray his message effectively.

1 Price, ix.
2 Ibid., 9.
Price, ever the revisionist, chose an unorthodox structure for his book. Rather than present the story chronologically, he instead decided to present his argument by subject. In the first chapter, he introduces President Polk and Commodore Stockton as they were 1845-1846, and inserts his negative view of the US government under Polk’s administration: “During the Presidency of James K. Polk the United States did intervene in a neighboring country; it promoted its own interests.”\(^3\) In the second chapter, Price goes back to 1825 to examine earlier negotiations between Mexico and the United States, as well as the Texas Revolution that had transpired in the 1830s. Chapter three deals with a man named Duff Green, a Democrat sent to Mexico City in 1844 to see how the Mexican government would respond to Texas annexation, as well as the acquisition of New Mexico and Alta California.\(^4\) In chapter four, Price presents the figure of Robert Stockton, who, in Price’s opinion, embodied the idea of American nationalism. Stockton represented American expansionism because his views on the Divine sanction of America and the nation’s expansionist nature explain his actions in Texas and Mexico.\(^5\) Price’s next chapter, one about President Polk, is more of a historiography than a continuation of his argument. Beginning in Polk’s own time, this chapter traces the approval and criticism of Polk throughout history. In his term, Polk was mostly criticized about the Mexican War by such Washingtonians as Henry Clay, Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Corwin, and Thomas Hart Benton. After his Presidency, however, Polk received a favorable report by historians such as Arthur M. Schlesinger, James Schouler, George

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3 Ibid., 13.
4 Ibid., 39.
5 Ibid., 66.
Lockhart Rives, Justin Harvey Smith, and Eugene I. McCormac. This is an interesting chapter with an unusual location, because the middle of the book does not seem the most apt place for a historiographic essay, but Price makes use of it to further his claim about the inadequacies of James K. Polk. Price follows this chapter by discussing the actual Texas annexation and the negotiation between Robert Stockton, who had been sent to Galveston by Polk to offer annexation to Texas, and Texan President Anson Jones, who claimed Polk was trying to “annex a war.” By this stage, the United States and Texas were bent on annexation, and nothing short of war would stop this.

By this point in the book Price is ready to talk about the actual Polk-Stockton Incident. The issue with Mexico following the Texas annexation was the border between the nations. Mexico claimed it was the Nueces River, while the United States claimed it was the Rio Grande. Stockton himself (with backing from Polk) claimed that the border should be the Rio Grande. This dispute threatened to grow out of control after both governments did not approve the borders when Texas annexation passed. Polk, in a confidential letter to the US Ambassador to Texas, Andrew Jackson Donelson, stated that he was determined to “stand by Texas-and defend her in this crisis to the utmost of my constitutional power…Of course I would maintain the Texan title to the extent she claims it to be, and not permit an invading army to occupy a foot of soil East of the Rio Grande.” Throughout the book, Price claims that Polk was purposeful not only in his goal to protect Texans between the Nueces and the Rio Grande, but also in his goal to cover the paper trail of the whole event. Price argues that Polk was intent on settling the

6 Ibid., 115.
7 Ibid., 140.
border in favor of the United States, even if that should mean war: “There are many reasons why it is preferable that Texans should drive the intruders from her territory until after the convention shall have accepted the terms of our Joint Resolutions. Of her ability and her will to perform this service, no man acquainted with her history can doubt.”

Secretary of the Navy George Bancroft wrote to Stockton telling him: “should any foreign power invade Texas, the Texans themselves should be encouraged to repel the invasion.” In the end, however, the Polk-Stockton Incident failed, as the Texans did not march against the Mexican settlements north of the Rio Grande. Polk instead sent US troops, led by General Zachary Taylor, to march on the Mexican settlements, provoking an attack from the Mexican army. Price claims that Polk instigated the war in order to acquire California, which was one of his campaign goals. To conclude his book, Price has more criticism for Polk, who was “a determined, clumsy amateur whose every maneuver failed,” for America, which suffered from a terrible “hubris,” and for previous historians, who allowed “most American students of our War with Mexico [to] remain largely uninstructed.”

Overall, Price presents a confusing, yet effective book that makes the reader question the United States’ honesty in the Mexican-American War. As a revisionist, he rejects most of his historian predecessors, having nothing but contempt for those who praised American Manifest Destiny. Whether this was due to Price’s own ideas on the

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8 Ibid., 141. Quote from James Buchanan.
9 Ibid., 142.
10 Ibid., 161.
11 Ibid., 163.
12 Ibid., 171-172.
Vietnam War, or some other external factor is unknown, but Price gives another example why nationalism is not necessarily good. This is a lesson that America often fails to teach its citizens, but it is one that is very important.