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Source: *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Fall, 1985, Vol. 15, No. 4, Perspectives on the Presidency (Fall, 1985), pp. 782-795

Published by: Wiley on behalf of the Center for the Study of the Presidency and Congress

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27550277>

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President Polk and Economic Legislation

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Abstract

In this essay, I examine domestic economic legislation during the Polk administration, a topic usually given short shrift because of the attention lavished upon the monumental questions of Texas annexation, Oregon negotiations, and the acquisition of California and New Mexico through the Mexican War.

President Polk was strongly committed to two pieces of economic legislation: downward revision of the tariff; and the creation of a Constitutional or Independent Treasury. This essay discusses and examines how the President worked to achieve acceptance of both. The third major focus is upon the internal improvements legislation, bills vigorously opposed by the President. Although from time to time Congress mustered enough support to pass rivers and harbors bills, Polk fought back with threats and vetoes and eventually won this battle also.

While there is no doubt that political power plays were a part of the story of how the President and the Congress interacted on matters such as the tariff, the Independent Treasury, and the internal improvements bills, there is likewise sufficient evidence to demonstrate that, from the President's vantage point, these matters also involved ideology and convictions about the federal government. The essay attempts to make the latter a genuine part of the considerations at stake between the President and at least some members of Congress.

Polk rightfully deserves credit for molding and shaping domestic economic legislation. Whether agreeing or disagreeing with his position, one must concede that Polk was very effective — much as he was in the area of foreign relations. Apart from waging war, Polk wanted a very limited central government; his economic legislation clearly reflected his views.

About a month after he learned that he had been elected President, Polk declared to his personal confidant and political ally Cave Johnson, “that in any event I intend to be *myself* President of the U.S.”¹ Much of the struggle of his four years in the White House revolved around Polk's determination to be in control of events and people. Certainly in his dealings with Congress he generally appeared to be confident of what he wanted and reasonably sure of how to obtain results. He utilized several strategies for “managing” Congress, including editorials and articles in the *Washington Union* to exert the pressure of public opinion, the deployment of Cabinet members on occasion to cajole Congressmen from their respective states into supporting administration measures, and finally the denial of federal patronage to members of Congress guilty of failing to vote for bills that the President wanted enacted.

Whatever manner he chose, Polk intended to compel the Congress to deal with

his recommended program. Moreover, he did not keep the Congressmen in the dark about the legislative enactments he desired or opposed. He frequently staked out his positions, for example, in his annual messages and in private consultations with both Congressional leaders and rank and file as well. What was abundantly clear is that Polk did not intend to wait obediently or even quietly upon Congress to shape a legislative program; instead he preferred to guide and direct the implementation of a planned program of legislation. And in so doing, "Polk was," in the words of Charles Sellers, "to display a brand of presidential legislative leadership that the country would not see again until the time of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson."²

Not all agree, of course. Certainly dissident Democrats and unhappy Whigs in the Congress thought of Polk as lacking in leadership or else as a President who meddled in the affairs of the legislative branch of the national government. They chafed and protested against the determined and resolute occupier of the presidential chair, but to little avail. Much more recently a student of the Polk administration, Brian Walton, has argued that the President cared only slightly about his relationship with Congress and believed himself to be severely limited in the pressures that he could bring to bear upon that august body. Furthermore, alleges Walton, Polk did virtually nothing to maintain contacts with members of Congress, both during sessions and during recesses.³ But Walton appears to overstate Polk's ineffective and inefficient ways, for a close examination of the President's diary as well as other materials builds a convincing case of a chief executive superintending an impressive array of domestic legislation, as well as vitally important treaties and wars with foreign powers. None of this, of course, is intended to deny that Congress had a life of its own, proving resistant to Polk at times. A helpful way to assess the President and his administration in relationship to Congress is to scrutinize the economic legislation that demanded the attention of the executive and legislative branches during this four-year period.

The linchpin, the *pièce de résistance* of Polk's domestic measures and policies, was tariff reform. This had been an issue, and a particularly difficult one in Pennsylvania, during the presidential campaign, but one that Polk seemed to deal with in a masterful way. Following that the new President embraced a non-protective, revenue only tariff in his inaugural address. During the summer months of 1845 Treasury Secretary Walker commenced the task of accumulating information and statistics about tariffs, by sending out questionnaires to importers and customs officials designed to determine the level at which duties become high enough so as to reduce the volume of imports and, correspondingly, the revenue. Walker's investigations were followed by the President's reiteration of his support of tariff reform in his first annual report to Congress, through which Polk hoped to stimulate action on the part of that deliberative body.⁴ Before his goal could be achieved, however, several stark realities crowded in to postpone and to complicate the question of a new tariff. In the early months of 1846, for example, consideration of the Oregon notice resolution, the outbreak of hostilities with Mexico, and political protests within the Democratic family all combined to make the charting of a revenue tariff through the Congressional seas very tricky business indeed.

Nevertheless, tariff reform continued to be pushed by the administration, first

in the House and then in the Senate. Representative James J. McKay, chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, turned to Secretary Walker for guidance in fashioning a lower tariff, one more or less “scientifically” based on the massive data collected by the Treasury Department and provided to Congress. Walker summoned to the nation’s capital a group of appraisers and deputy collectors from the major customs houses to work out a schedule of duties that would establish ad valorem rates structured so as to produce maximum revenues. Although by mid-February a bill had been devised and was ready for the House committee, McKay kept the bill bottled up in committee for nearly two months, awaiting somewhat more favorable conditions. Meanwhile much tampering with Walker’s scheduled ad valorem rates took place as political pressures impinged upon the “scientific” tariff.⁵

The tariff bill with alterations was reported out of committee in mid-April, but it would be two-and-a-half months later before the House finally voted on the proposed revenue tariff. Meanwhile opposing sides schemed to build support, with the low-tariff crowd taking over a committee room to display British manufactured goods that would be available at low prices if the tariff were revised downward and American protectionists bringing their manufactured goods to exhibit at the Capitol also. From this exposition came plans for a National Fair of American manufactures to be held in Washington in late May and early June, to which Polk was escorted on a visit to a large temporary building, erected at a cost of over \$6,000, housing an impressive display of American manufactured goods. The President commented that “the specimens of manufacture exhibited are highly creditable to the genius and skill of our countrymen,” but he resented this overt attempt by manufacturers to pressure Congressmen to support protective duties. Indeed, Polk was certain that various items on display had been marked with lower than usual prices, no doubt with the intention of convincing the public that “high duties make low goods,” an “absurd doctrine,” declared the President.⁶

Manufacturers’ fair or not, the House continued to stall, mainly because it awaited news from Britain concerning the repeal of its Corn Laws. That information arrived in mid-June and the House immediately agreed to consider and vote on the tariff. During the debates one of the contested features of the proposed tariff was the duty on tea and coffee. Ohio Democrats, chagrined over the Oregon boundary agreement, mounted an attack upon the tariff, led by Representative Jacob Brinkerhoff, who had been disappointed in his quest for an appointment as a paymaster. Eventually this relatively minor provision was removed from the tariff schedule, so that it would not block passage. The President, fearful that the vote might go against his revenue tariff, sent Cabinet members as well as Senators to lobby with particular Representatives. At long-last, on July 3, the House voted favorably on the Walker tariff, an action that “much gratified” Polk, who viewed the bill as “the most important domestic measure of my administration. . . .” The measure cleared the House by nineteen votes. Altogether there had been seven separate roll-calls on the tariff bill, on the basis of which one is able to identify low, moderate, and high tariff positions. Just under 70 percent (67.4%) of the Democrats occupied the low-tariff position, whereas no Whigs

did; 15.6 percent of the Democrats were in the moderate category, joined by only one Whig (or 1.4% of the Whig delegation); an important 17 percent of Democrats showed themselves to be high-tariff people, while an astounding 98.6 percent of the Whigs were found there.⁷ There is no doubt that the Walker tariff was a Democratic party measure in the House.

The Senate proved to be a veritable battleground of opposing views and pressures. Throughout the month of July, Polk kept his finger on the pulse of the Senate, while marshalling support wherever he could. Again Cabinet members, as well as fellow Senators, were admonished and sent by the President to confer with wavering colleagues. Three men in the Senate offered the most trouble: James Semple of Illinois, William Haywood of North Carolina, and Spencer Jarnagin of Tennessee. On July 15, Polk's private secretary notified the President that Semple was about to leave town, an action that might spell eventual defeat of the tariff in the Senate. Reminiscent of some modern-day "situation room" scene, Polk dispatched persons, among whom were several members of the Illinois House delegation and Postmaster General Johnson, to find Semple and to persuade him to stay in town. Eventually that evening Semple showed up at Polk's office where the President persuaded him to remain in town and to vote in favor of the proposed tariff. Semple had wanted to leave Washington, so he told Polk, because of some legal problems back in Illinois; but the skeptical President surmised that Semple's hasty departure was related to unhappiness over a possible military appointment that Polk had denied him. In any event, Semple stayed and voted affirmatively later in the month.⁸

Haywood, a long-time personal friend of Polk's, presented special difficulties. Beginning on the 15th and continuing for a week thereafter, Polk was in almost constant contact with Haywood, who early on announced his opposition to the Walker tariff, apparently because, however strangely, he perceived it to be some kind of non-nullification tariff reduction. In persistent order the President had Mason, and Senators Bagby and Benton, lobby with Haywood to induce support, but to no avail. Other Senators likewise reported to an eager but disappointed Polk that Haywood was simply not going to vote for the tariff. The President and the North Carolina Senator had two intense conversations on July 23, both requested by Polk. Earnestly and fervently the President pleaded with his obstinate friend, telling him that a negative vote "would strike a severe blow upon my administration, inflict great injury on the country, and as a friend I must say to him that I thought he would ruin himself." Haywood meekly suggested that he could vote in favor of the tariff, if the duties would not go into effect until the following March, a position the President rejected for a variety of reasons. Before Haywood left Polk's office the President issued a final warning against any rash action, such as a rumored resignation on Haywood's part. The next day the Senator escaped the President's tough talk by going out to Francis Blair's Maryland home, whence he returned to Washington, escorted by Blair, to tender his resignation on July 25. When Polk learned of this astonishing development, he labelled it "a great error," expressed his personal regret, and then offered a possible explanation of Haywood's quixotic actions. The President thought that perhaps the

Senator had wanted to be an author of a tariff bill and because he was not, he took a negative position on the Walker bill and subsequently was too proud to alter his entrenched stance.⁹

At any rate, with Haywood's unanticipated departure from the Senate, the focus shifted to Jarnagin of Tennessee, a Whig who enjoyed fairly close connections with the President. Jarnagin had been instructed by his home state legislature to vote for the bill, but there was concern in the President's office that he might not accede to those instructions and might thereby kill the tariff. The day of Haywood's resignation, Jarnagin went to Polk's office on official business, but while there he announced to those present that he fully intended to vote in favor of the tariff. Later that evening, however, word came to Polk from Treasury Secretary Walker that Jarnagin was contemplating resigning, the prospect of which caused the President to dispatch Senator Turney of Tennessee immediately to call on Jarnagin. No wonder that the following day Polk reported that he was "unwell." Although Turney received assurances from his colleague that he would not resign and that he intended to remain to vote for the tariff, Polk could never quite bring himself to trust Jarnagin, fearing that he would not honor his repeated pledges. The President felt extremely uncomfortable that the fate of the bill seemed at this juncture to be in Jarnagin's unreliable hands. The Tennessee Senator was also subjected to immense pressure from fellow Whigs, chief of whom was Daniel Webster. These two men actually concocted an elaborate scheme of how each would vote to effect the eventual failure of the revenue tariff bill. Their conspirings went awry, however, thanks mainly to Senator John M. Clayton who unknowingly disturbed their plans. In any event, Jarnagin took a stand in favor of the tariff as it finally cleared the Senate on July 28.¹⁰

In the midst of the clashes and drama offered by personalities in the tariff controversy, Polk repeatedly worried about the impact of manufacturing or high-tariff lobbyists. In his view, perhaps a fairly accurate one, these advocates of protection were swarming all over Washington, seeking to exert influence upon members of Congress. Senator Turney's report that a manufacturer attempted to give him money for a vote against the tariff bill stirred dismay and astonishment on the part of the President. Given the lobbying efforts of capitalists and the emerging Whig determination to fight against the bill, Polk seemed to have little choice but to work diligently to secure its passage. After the House had concurred with the Senate's version of the bill, on July 29, the President depicted the months of labor in behalf of the new tariff as "an immense struggle between the two great political parties of the country," and also a "a fierce and mighty struggle" engaged in by capitalists and manufacturers. He rejoiced that the battle had been won by the low-tariff forces.¹¹ In the Senate, the party stayed remarkably cohesive, despite defections from Pennsylvania, Connecticut, and Mississippi. On the various roll-call votes taken in the Senate, a very impressive 80 percent of the Democrats emerged as low-tariff backers; only one Senator (or 4 percent of the delegation) occupied the moderate tariff rung; and four Senators (or 16 percent of the delegation) were high-tariff advocates. The Whigs were equally cohesive, but on the opposite side, for 96 percent of them were high-tariff supporters, only one Whig (or 4 percent of the delegation) was a moderate, and no Whig Senators

occupied a low-tariff position. In addition to pride in Democratic party solidarity in the Senate, Polk also could afford to be immensely pleased with Vice President Dallas' support of the Walker tariff, a stance politically dangerous for this aspiring Pennsylvania luminary.¹² All in all, the President justifiably took pleasure that the all-important tariff reform, reminiscent of his mentor Andrew Jackson, had been accomplished.

The second of the twin pillars of Polk's domestic economic program was the Independent or Constitutional Treasury, a bill eventually enacted a day or two after final approval of the Walker Tariff. From the time of his inaugural address, at which the new President denounced national banks, until his first annual message to Congress (December 1845), there was little doubt that Polk wanted to divorce the federal government from the banking business. Anyone gainsaying the President's position could do so no longer after the appearance of the annual message which decried the late Bank of the United States, as well as state banks, and expressed the view that the people and their government were fully competent to manage their money. With proper Jacksonian snarls, Polk excoriated banks that used federal deposits to make profits for themselves and to stir the embers of inflation. Demonstrating that he was a better Jacksonian than Jackson himself, Polk denounced the deposit of federal monies in various state banks (known derisively as "pet banks" in the 1830s) and instead embraced the Van Burenite idea of the safe-keeping of governmental deposits in the Treasury itself. As President, Van Buren had first advocated this "radical" approach in 1837, in response to the economic crisis of that year. For three long years, however, debate, obfuscation, and procrastination conspired to keep Van Buren's measure from passing both houses of Congress, until finally in the summer of 1840 it succeeded.¹³ But not for long, for the Whig-controlled Congress in 1841 repealed the Independent Treasury and in the process ironically returned to Jackson's earlier despised "pet bank" scheme.

That is where the situation stood when Polk became President, a new national bank proposal having been vetoed twice by President John Tyler. In utter simplicity the newly-proposed Independent or Constitutional Treasury bill provided the the government should build fireproof vaults into which its monies would be deposited until needed for dispersal to various persons and agencies. This legislation, perhaps crafted by Secretary Walker, finally emerged from the Ways and Means Committee at the end of March, a delay that Polk was not happy about. George C. Dromgoole of Virginia presented the bill to the whole House at which time Whig opponents began their somewhat half-hearted attacks upon it. Caleb Smith of Indiana, Henry Grider of Kentucky, and J.R. Ingersoll of Pennsylvania all spoke in opposition to the measure, but without much effect. Democrats responded mainly by arguing that banks had no right to the federal monies in the first place; therefore no great harm or discrimination was being proposed by the administration. After about two days of seemingly unimportant debates, the House was ready to vote, but not before tacking on an amendment requiring that payments to the government be in gold or silver. On April 2 with no Whigs voting for it and no Democrats against it, the Independent Treasury bill cleared the House by a wide margin of 122 to 66.¹⁴

The Senate was notoriously slow about dealing with the House bill, partly because it had so many pressing matters on its agenda in the spring and early summer

of 1846. But even at that a four-month delay seemed inexcusable; certainly the President thought so. The Senate Finance Committee, chaired by Dixon H. Lewis, felt no urgency about the Independent Treasury, for as Lewis publicly admitted he wanted the warehouse and branch mint bills to precede the Polk proposal. Near the end of April, a somewhat anxious Daniel Webster attempted to smoke out Lewis on his intentions concerning the Independent Treasury legislation, with the hope of signalling reassurances to the financial circles. In response, Lewis made his public declaration about dragging his feet on the matter, a statement that caused the President to summon Lewis to his office. Polk chided both the Finance Committee chairman and the Senate for the intended stall, reminding Lewis of the importance he attached to this particular legislation. Adding a very candid analysis of patronage concerns, the President stressed the necessity of having Lewis and like-minded colleagues play ball with the administration. Three days later Polk pressed upon Senator Benton the importance of moving forward on domestic legislation such as the Constitutional Treasury. But for a variety of reasons such pleadings fell on deaf ears, as Lewis continued to sit on the bill until June 8, when he finally reported it out of his committee to the Senate. The measure that emerged had a number of amendments attached, the most significant one being the postponement until January 1 of the requirement of specie payment to the government. For nearly two more months the bill languished in the dustbins of legislative delays, before being voted on, as amended, by the entire Senate. By a strict party vote, as in the House, the Senate approved the Constitutional Treasury 28 to 25.¹⁵

Remarkably during the prolonged saga of this bill's fate in both houses, it attracted little controversy or attention. Congressional debates were uninspiring but mercifully brief, quite dissimilar from the deliberations during the Van Buren administration. Moreover, Polk was unusually taciturn as the months dragged by without any final action from Congress. Without question his time and energies were being pulled in several important directions (the Mexican War and the Oregon treaty, for example); yet at the same time that the Independent Treasury bill was pending, he was able to devote concern to the tariff question that troubled the Congress. In the spring and summer of 1846, Polk made only two references in his diary to discussing the bill with members of Congress; and when it passed the House and later the Senate, he made no mention of these developments in his diary. Apparently although he earnestly wanted the legislation, he did not permit himself to become caught up in its success or failure, as he did with the tariff. Avowedly one of the four major goals of his administration, the Constitutional Treasury nevertheless failed to stir within the President or within the Congress the excitement and commitment that other matters did.

One measure that generated strong reaction, either favorable or unfavorable, was the recommendation of internal improvements backed by appropriations of the federal government. Whereas the tariff and the Constitutional Treasury proposals had emanated from the President's office, internal improvements bills had their genesis in the halls of Congress and were anathema to Polk, politically and constitutionally. In the 29th Congress, both in the first and the second sessions, legislators forced the President's hand by enacting improvements measures, generally labelled "harbors and rivers"

bills, and threatened to do so again in the 30th Congress. In fact bills actually passed by Congress in 1846 and in 1847 brought forth two of Polk's three veto messages issued during his four-year term.

To an ardent Jacksonian like Polk, federally-funded internal improvements were so much out of the question that he saw no reason to make any comments about them in his inaugural address or in his first annual message. The President evidently did not reckon, however, with western interests even within his own party that pushed for harbors and rivers legislation. For example, John Wentworth, Democrat from Illinois, was one of the prime ringleaders of such a proposal in the House chamber in 1846. As passed by that body on March 20, the bill, in a grandiose manner, designated approximately \$1,400,000 for a long list of river and harbor projects. A week before its successful passage, Representative James A. Seddon of Virginia visited Polk's office in an effort to ascertain the President's views on the pending legislation and specifically on any provision for improvement of the James River below Richmond. Polk refused to reveal his position on the proposed harbors and rivers bill, except to concede that while a member of Congress himself, he had always voted against such legislation. In any event, the House approved the somewhat reckless internal improvements plan by a 109 to 90 vote.¹⁶ An analysis of the roll-call votes in the House discloses that 27.1 percent of the Democrats were in favor of the bill, while an overwhelming 87.1 percent of the Whigs approved of it. A bare 10 percent of Whig Representatives opposed the legislation, in contrast to an imposing 65.7 percent of Democrats. Western Democrats tended to break with Polk and the traditional party position on internal improvements, but they were by no means united in their support of such legislation.¹⁷ Basically then, internal improvements was a partisan question rather than a sectional one.

Meanwhile over in the Senate chamber some strange things were happening, chief of which was Calhoun's leadership of internal improvements legislation. His position was more narrowly focused, however, for he advocated a program of Mississippi River system improvements, not the more elaborate scheme endorsed by the House. Under Calhoun's tutelage the Senate approved his plan in a bill passed on July 13, but not surprisingly the House wanted no part of it. Therefore the House forced the Senate to either accept or reject its harbors and rivers bill and the Senate soon approved it by an impressive 34 to 16 vote. On the various roll-calls taken in that chamber, only 10.1 percent of the Democratic Senators showed themselves to be for federally-supported improvements, whereas a thumping 89.5 percent of the Whigs did. Interestingly, only 51.9 percent of the Democrats were in the opposition category, but 37.0 percent of the Democrats occupied some sort of moderate stance. In the Senate, as in the House, the notable Democratic dissenters were from the western states; but like the House, western Democratic Senators were not unified on the internal improvements question. But on the other hand clearly Senate Whigs, regardless of geographical location, were united in support of a federal government harbors and rivers program.¹⁸

Upset by the legislative enactment, Polk immediately began working on his veto message, shortly after he received the bill from delegates of both houses on July 25. Four days later he called in Secretary Mason to assist him with the document and

by August 1 he was ready to present it to the Cabinet. When he did so, he announced in advance that he had already determined to veto the bill and therefore was not consulting the Cabinet but merely informing it. Although all liked the message that Polk read to them that day, he confided to his diary that probably as many as four of the Cabinet members—Buchanan, Marcy, Bancroft, and Walker—would have advised him to sign the bill, had he consulted them. Polk was certain, however, that Johnson and Mason strongly supported his opposition to the legislation. That evening Representative Dromgoole of Virginia called at Polk's office, as requested, whereupon the President read the veto message to him and received his approval. On Sunday night, August 2, Polk summoned James McKay, John A. McClernand, Linn Boyd, and Barclay Martin to the White House in order to read his veto message to them, so "that they might be prepared to vindicate my course if I should be assailed on the floor of the House." These congressional leaders gave Polk receptive ears and promised to sustain his veto, if it were challenged.¹⁹ This constitutes another typical example of the President's strategic use of congressional figures to assist his cause in the national legislative body.

As the Cabinet members had professed, the veto message was a very able one that cogently set forth traditional Jacksonian arguments against federally backed internal improvements projects. Not unexpectedly, Polk boldly proclaimed the concept of a limited federal government, circumscribed by the provisions of the Constitution itself. Moreover, the President protested against the local nature of many of the projects provided for in the bill, saying that "to call the mouth of a creek or a shallow inlet on our coast a harbor can not confer the authority to expend the public money in its improvement." Polk referred to the fact that some twenty projects to be funded by the bill as harbor improvements were "at places which have never been declared by law either ports of entry or delivery, and at which, as appears from the records of the Treasury, there has never been an arrival of foreign merchandise, and from which there has never been a vessel cleared for a foreign country." Among the evils found by Polk in the harbors and rivers bill was the likelihood that the funding would produce sectional feelings that would disturb the harmony of the Union and would "produce a disreputable scramble for the public money. . . ." The President also reasoned that the bill would be unfair to those states already actively promoting their own locally-funded projects. Finally, Polk depicted the serious drain on the federal treasury that such legislation would cause; or as he eloquently declared: "the treasure of the world would hardly be equal to the improvement of every bay, inlet, creek, and river in our country which might be supposed to promote the agricultural, manufacturing, or commercial interests of a neighborhood."²⁰

Almost immediately after Polk's private secretary arrived at the House chamber with a copy of the veto message, members of that body began a debate on the President's action. While those deliberations were in progress, Representative David S. Kaufman of Texas appeared at Polk's office to inquire about the provision in the bill for improvements to the Red River which traversed his Congressional district. Although professing support of the President's veto, Kaufman also indicated his desire for appropriations for the Red River project—a perhaps not uncommon dilemma for

a number of members of Congress. In any event, the following day the House voted to override Polk's veto by a tight 95 to 91 vote, one that fell short of the required two-thirds majority. Polk's secretary arrived immediately thereafter with news of the vote and with the information that Whig Congressmen from Tennessee had declined to vote on the veto override. Polk was puzzled by this tactic, since all but one of them had voted originally against the harbors and rivers bill. Once again, it is palpable that the President, assisted by his staff, his Cabinet, and certain Congressional leaders, kept a close scrutiny on the Congress. Congress adjourned a few days after the abortive attempt to repudiate Polk's veto and nothing more was heard on the topic in the presidential quarters until October. At that date the President notified his Cabinet that he had been studying the question of internal improvements and was contemplating taking "strong grounds in my [annual] message against the whole system." A lengthy discussion followed among members of the Cabinet, with the surprising result that Buchanan strongly endorsed Polk's position.²¹ But despite the President's expressed intentions at that meeting, he did not incorporate any section on internal improvements in his 1846 annual message, perhaps having decided to let sleeping dogs lie.

But they did not remain asleep or still for long, because improvements ardor stirred again, this time in the second session of the 29th Congress. The push for federally-supported projects resulted in a bill passed at the end of the session, March 1847. Much of the impetus for this legislation came from the internal improvements convention, held in Chicago in early 1847, which sanctioned resolutions demanding federal appropriations for such projects. As passed by both houses, the improvements bill of 1847 was called a bill to continue certain works in the Wisconsin Territory, but the fine print revealed an appropriation of only some \$6,000 for Wisconsin projects, while more than \$500,000 was stipulated for harbor and river improvements throughout the country. The day before Congress adjourned the measure was presented to Polk, who decided to pocket veto it and, for want of sufficient time, to postpone a veto message until later months when the new Congress convened.²²

Accordingly, beginning in August and continuing for the next four months the President worked sporadically on his veto message. He actually began writing in mid-August and about a month later optimistically voiced his intention to complete this document before he had to commence work on his annual message. Nothing more is heard, however, until early December when he indicated that he had resumed writing the veto message, the annual message having been completed and sent to Congress. Finally on December 14, Polk read his veto message to the Cabinet members, all of whom agreed that it should be sent to the House. The President recorded in his diary that Mason, Johnson, and Clifford concurred in the views contained in the document, Marcy expressed no distinct opinion on the subject, and Buchanan strongly endorsed Polk's position, vowing that if he were President he would veto any such bills. (Walker was ill and therefore unable to attend the Cabinet session or have his ideas reported.) Evidently inspired by the Cabinet discussion, Polk wrote some additional paragraphs for the message later in the day. That evening he summoned James H. Thomas of Tennessee, James Thompson of Pennsylvania, and Robert McLane of Maryland to the White House to hear the veto message that they "might be advised in advance of

what it contained.” Still later that night Buchanan, Clifford, and Mason huddled with Polk to assist in revising certain paragraphs in the message; they worked until one o’clock in the morning before finally departing. The dawn of a new day, December 15, found Polk busily, almost frantically, polishing and revising the document still further, aided by Buchanan, Mason, and Ransom H. Gillet, Solicitor of the Treasury. Eventually at about one o’clock in the afternoon the President completed his labors and sent his private secretary over to the House with the message.²³

Thus eight months after passage and pocket veto the President at long last delineated for Congress his objections to the harbors and rivers bill of 1847. Unlike his 1846 improvements veto message, this one was replete with much historical discussion, obviously the result of wise research on the part of the President in preparation for the message. Polk provided a succinct and fairly accurate summary of the relationship between internal improvements and the federal government. Not unexpectedly, he made repeated references to President Jackson’s Maysville Road veto and similar stands taken in opposition to internal improvements. By so doing, Polk evidently attempted to portray himself as a guardian of the Treasury and of the Constitution (as Jackson had been). The ever-spiraling costs of improvements projects must be stopped, insisted Polk, lest great harm befall the financial security of the nation. In a creative and even eloquent paragraph the President challenged his readers to grasp the long-range consequences of a harbors and rivers bill, such as the one passed in March 1847:

Let the imagination run along our coast from the river St. Croix to the Rio Grande and trace every river emptying into the Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico to its source; let it coast along our lakes and ascend all their tributaries; let it pass to Oregon and explore all its bays, inlets, and streams; and then let it raise the curtain of the future and contemplate the extent of this Republic and the objects of improvement it will embrace as it advances to its high destiny, and the mind will be startled at the immensity and danger of the power which the principle of this bill involves.

Having said that, Polk offered a remedy to the advocates of government-sponsored improvements projects: let the states, with the consent of Congress, levy tonnage duties, the revenue from which would be applied to such programs in the individual states. To make his case persuasive, the President introduced historical examples of states utilizing this particular mechanism for obtaining monies for improvements projects. Polk concluded his message with the customary constitutional stance, namely that the federal government possesses no powers to embrace activities such as those recommended by the 1847 bill. In a gracefully-written concluding sentence, the President summarized his fundamental views: “. . . the investigation of this subject has impressed me more strongly than ever with the solemn conviction that the usefulness and permanency of this Government and the happiness of the millions over whom it spreads its protection will best be promoted by carefully abstaining from the exercise of all powers not clearly granted by the Constitution.”²⁴ Jackson did not say it any better.

Although the Whigs in the House “violently assailed” the veto message upon its receipt, this new 30th Congress did not seem greatly disposed to deal with a mea-

sure enacted by the second session of the 29th. Representative Frederick P. Stanton, Democrat from Tennessee who had supported the bill in March, visited Polk two days after the veto message had been sent. Informing the President that he would not now, in view of the federal Treasury and war with Mexico, support such legislation, the Congressman confessed, however, that he differed with Polk on the essential issues involved.²⁵ Perhaps Stanton was typical of Congressional attitude at the outset of the new Congress; in any event, there was no attempt to override the President's veto. But before the session ended, Congress threatened to confront Polk with yet another internal improvements bill.

This time the President hoped to be ready in advance. Accordingly in late July, anticipating some sort of improvements legislation, Polk began writing his veto message. He had already been alarmed at the House action attaching a Savannah River improvements rider to the civil and diplomatic bill and warned that he would veto the entire bill and call a special session of Congress to obtain the necessary civil and diplomatic bill. A few days later, the Senate struck the House rider from the general bill, thereby averting a very unpleasant showdown with the President. Nevertheless, Polk continued to prepare his internal improvements veto message. In fact, on August 8, he informed the Cabinet of his resolute intention to veto any such legislation that might emerge from the Congress; and since his mind had already been made up, he did not seek the Cabinet's advice. Two days later he devoted three to four hours to writing the message and after dinner read it aloud to his private secretary, who counseled him to save the message for the next session of the 30th Congress. Apparently that advice caused Polk the next day to abandon work on the veto message, pleading that he was simply too fatigued to continue preparing it; if Congress passed a bill, he would veto it and send a message at the forthcoming session. Although the House had a harbors and rivers bill under consideration near the end, no such bill cleared Congress to be forwarded to the President's desk.²⁶ An extremely exhausted Polk was relieved that he did not have to deal with that problem, the Oregon territorial bill having been difficult enough.

The President could not relax for long, however, for a month after the adjournment of Congress he decided that he must begin preparing a veto message in anticipation of what the second session might enact. Therefore in September and October Polk devoted time to writing such a message, one so strong that even if his veto were overridden (a distinct possibility conceded by him) "I may leave my full views on record to be judged of by my countrymen & by posterity." Thoroughly "convinced that I am right upon the subject, . . . I have bestowed much labour in preparing a paper which may contribute to convince others that I am so." Whatever he had actually written by the end of October was apparently set aside while Polk was compelled to direct his energies and attention to the preparation of the all-important fourth annual message to Congress. There are no further references in his diary to his proposed veto message until March 1849, when Congress and the President were at the conclusion of their terms. Knowing that a number of improvements bills had been before the Congress, Polk went to the Capitol on March 3, armed with a veto message in the event that one of the bills finally cleared both houses. He had already warned

the Cabinet and many members of Congress that he fully intended to veto any such legislation, a threat evidently heeded by the chambers, for no bills passed. It is somewhat difficult to ascertain, however, whether Polk was more disappointed than relieved, disappointed because he had been denied the opportunity to make public his veto message, "one of the ablest papers I have ever prepared." He determined nevertheless that the document would be preserved "with my other valuable papers."²⁷ With that the curtain descended on a long three-year struggle over internal improvements, a battle won by the President, acting in the mold of Andrew Jackson himself, but at the cost of some administration support in the Congress.

There seems to be little room for doubt that Polk was highly effective on domestic economic legislation during his tenure at the helm of the executive branch of government. Indeed he triumphed with positive victories on the tariff and the Constitutional Treasury and a negative victory on the matter of internal improvements. Friends and enemies alike in Congress conceded that Polk was a force to be reckoned with and to be respected, albeit with some hesitation on the part of certain members. True Jacksonian on constitutional matters and vigorous President in the Jackson image, Polk deserves more credit and attention than is usually accorded him by historians of the presidency.

Notes

1. Polk to Johnson, Dec. 21, 1844, as quoted in Eugene I. McCormac, *James K. Polk: A Political Biography* (Berkeley, 1922), p. 287.
2. Charles G. Sellers, *James K. Polk: Continentalist, 1843-1846* (Princeton, 1966), pp. 446-48, 310.
3. Brian G. J. Walton, "James K. Polk and the Democratic Party in the Aftermath of the Wilmot Proviso" (Ph.D. dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 1968), pp. 211-13.
4. Sellers, *Polk: Continentalist*, p. 451; McCormac, *Polk*, pp. 666-67; James D. Richardson, ed., *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 1789-1902* (10 vols.; [Washington], 1903), IV, 378-79, 403-06.
5. Sellers, *Polk: Continentalist*, pp. 451-52.
6. Milo M. Quaife, ed., *The Diary of James K. Polk During His Presidency, 1845 to 1849* (4 vols.; Chicago, 1910), I, 421-22; Sellers, *Polk: Continentalist*, pp. 453-54; Charles A. McCoy, *Polk and the Presidency* (Austin, 1960), pp. 181-82.
7. Sellers, *Polk: Continentalist*, pp. 452-57; *Polk Diary*, II, 10-11; Joel H. Silbey, *The Shrine of Party: Congressional Voting Behavior, 1841-1852* (Pittsburgh, 1967), p. 71.
8. Sellers, *Polk: Continentalist*, p. 458; *Polk Diary*, II, 25-27.
9. Sellers, *Polk: Continentalist*, pp. 460, 462-63, 464; McCoy, *Presidency*, pp. 151-52; *Polk Diary*, II, 26, 29-30, 32-33, 35, 43-45, 48-49.
10. Sellers, *Polk: Continentalist*, pp. 464-67; McCoy, *Presidency*, p. 152; *Polk Diary*, II, 25, 47-49, 50, 51-52.
11. *Polk Diary*, II, 27-28, 49, 53-54, 55.
12. Silbey, *Shrine of Party*, pp. 72-73; John M. Belohlavek, *George Mifflin Dallas: Jacksonian Patrician* (University Park, 1977), pp. 113-15, 117.
13. Richardson, ed., *Messages*, IV, 406-08; Sellers, *Polk: Continentalist*, pp. 209, 344-45; McCormac, *Polk*, pp. 667, 668. For a very able discussion of Van Buren's efforts to establish an Independent Treasury, see James C. Curtis, *The Fox at Bay: Martin Van Buren and the Presidency, 1837-1841* (Lexington, 1970), pp. 75-151.
14. McCormac, *Polk*, pp. 669-70; Sellers, *Polk: Continentalist*, p. 469.
15. *Polk Diary*, I, 368-71, 377; McCormac, *Polk*, pp. 671-72; Sellers, *Polk: Continentalist*, pp. 469-70.
16. Sellers, *Polk: Continentalist*, pp. 346, 452-53; *Polk Diary*, I, 288-89; Silbey, *Shrine of Party*, pp. 68-70.

17. Silbey, *Shrine of Party*, pp. 75–76. The figures given by Silbey apply to *both* sessions of the 29th Congress.
18. Sellers, *Polk: Continentalist*, pp. 472–73; Silbey, *Shrine of Party*, pp. 75–76. Again Silbey's data are drawn from both sessions of the 29th Congress, not just the first session (1845–46).
19. Polk *Diary*, II, 47, 51, 54, 56, 58–59, 61, 62–63.
20. Richardson, ed., *Messages*, IV, 461, 462, 463, 464, 465; Sellers, *Polk: Continentalist*, p. 473.
21. Polk, *Diary*, II, 64–66, 171–72.
22. Silbey, *Shrine of Party*, p. 84; Richardson, ed., *Messages*, IV, 610–11; Polk *Diary*, II, 398.
23. Polk *Diary*, III, 116, 166, 169, 179, 244, 247–49.
24. Richardson, ed., *Messages*, IV, 612, 613, 615–17, 618–21, 623–25, 626.
25. Polk *Diary*, III, 250.
26. *Ibid.*, IV, 35–36, 50, 52–53, 60–61, 64, 65, 66.
27. *Ibid.* 128–29, 140, 144–45, 157–58, 167–68, 363–64.