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James K. Polk: Tennessee Politician

BY POWELL MOORE

James K. Polk was a dominant figure in Tennessee politics from the time of his election to Congress in 1825 to the beginning of his presidential term in 1845. Much has been written of Polk as President of the United States but too little of the role he played in the political affairs of his state. The latter, to a large degree, provides the key to his whole career. It also refutes the popular view that Polk was an "unknown" when nominated for the presidency.

The Tennessean was first and last a good party man. While he did not possess a magnetic personality, he more than compensated for this lack by hard work and intense devotion to his party. Party loyalty, to Polk, often transcended all other considerations. Throughout much of his career he was the real leader of his party in Tennessee. Polk was more aggressive than Felix Grundy, and he devoted more time and attention to the affairs of his party in the state than did William B. Lewis, John H. Eaton, and other prominent Tennesseans.

Polk's relations with Andrew Jackson were always cordial and friendly. To the "Old Hero" he gave his loyal, devoted support. Polk took great pride in the part he played in elevating Jackson to the presidency and later defended his administration with great zeal. There is little doubt that he profited from Jackson's friendship and that his fortunes were not diminished by the fact that he enjoyed Jackson's favor. But the "Old Hero" was a stormy petrel in Tennessee politics, and his dictatorial tactics made it extremely difficult for Polk and other leaders to maintain the ascendancy of the party in the state. The Jacksonian attitude and policies were often a heavy burden for Polk to carry in local political campaigns. Nevertheless, he remained faithful to Jackson, and it is significant that while Grundy, Eaton, William Carroll, and other leaders of the party at one time or another incurred the Jacksonian wrath, it never descended upon Polk. He was not, however, a pliant

tool of the "great man" of the Hermitage. His principles and attitudes in regard to the great issues of the day were formed before Jackson entered the White House, and there is no evidence that he deviated from them at any time in later years. In fact, Polk demonstrated a remarkable independence of thought and action while governor of his state and while President.

Polk represented his Columbia district in Congress from 1825 to 1839. From the very beginning he was one of the outstanding members of the Tennessee delegation, and in later years was regarded as the leader of the Democratic party in Congress. Important committee assignments came to him. He served on the Foreign Affairs Committee and was chairman of the important Committee on Ways and Means during the bitter session of 1833-1834. In this latter capacity the responsibility of defending Jackson's bank policies fell on his shoulders. Although defeated by John Bell for the speakership of the House in 1834, he was elected to that position the next year and served until his retirement in 1839. Polk's prominence in Congress enhanced his prestige in Tennessee political circles. Although the Columbia district was in one of the rich plantation and slaveowning regions of the state, generally Whig in later years, Polk was never beaten in a congressional election.

While Jackson took no particular interest at the time in the speakership contest of 1834, it was evident that Polk was the administration candidate and that Bell was elected by the votes of the opposition.¹ This contest caused violent repercussions in Tennessee political circles. It marked the beginning of that uncompromising hatred of Polk and Bell for each other which lasted until after Polk became President. It was a personal feud at first, but later, when Bell identified himself with the Whig party, its fury was transferred to the political arena. This quarrel and the candidacy of Hugh L. White for the presidency in 1836 were the rocks upon which the Jackson party split in Tennessee. Polk was bitter about his defeat and assumed the role of a martyr who had suffered for his loyalty to the President and the party.² A perusal of Polk's

¹ James Love to John J. Crittenden, May 27, 1834, in John J. Crittenden Papers (Division of Manuscripts, Library of Congress); Cave Johnson to James K. Polk, September 12, 1834, in James K. Polk Papers (Division of Manuscripts, Library of Congress).

² Eugene I. McCormac, *James K. Polk: A Political Biography* (Berkeley, 1922), 64; W. C. Dunlap to Polk, July 26, 1834, in Polk Papers.

correspondence during the months that followed the House election indicates that he was determined to ruin Bell in Tennessee, and if possible, to drive him from the Jackson party. Eventually Polk was able to convince the "Old Hero" that Bell had been guilty of treachery to the party.³ It does seem that Bell's loyalty to the administration was questionable. He had a strong following in the state, and most of the newspapers rallied to his defense. There is some evidence that the friends of the Bank of the United States influenced the press to support Bell; many of the pro-Bank newspapers later followed Bell into the Whig party.⁴ So it seems that those elements in the state that had been alienated by the Jacksonian policies welcomed this opportunity to make Polk the whipping boy of the Jackson administration.

White's candidacy for the presidency, which was brought forward late in 1834, and the determination of Jackson that Martin Van Buren should be his successor precipitated a real crisis in the Democratic party in Tennessee. It also placed Polk in a quandary. While he had no objection to Judge White personally, he could not fail to observe that Bell and other local enemies were supporting the candidacy of White.⁵ He therefore associated the movement for White with that against himself in Tennessee. Then, too, Polk was a firm believer in party loyalty, and although he had little enthusiasm for Van Buren, he could not oppose the wishes of his chief and the national party in the matter.

Polk worked hard to discourage White's candidacy, which he realized would play havoc with the Tennessee Democracy. Jackson gave the responsibility for stopping the White movement to Polk and Grundy.⁶ They refused to attend the meeting of the Tennessee delegation in Con-

³ Andrew Jackson to Martin Van Buren, August 16, 1834, in John S. Bassett (ed.), *Correspondence of Andrew Jackson* (6 vols., Washington, 1926-1935), V, 282.

⁴ It seems that John Bell favored a United States Bank with certain modifications and consequently did not support Jackson's program against the Bank as vigorously as did Polk and Felix Grundy. In 1834 he spoke of Jackson's financial policy as an "experiment." This angered the President. See Thomas Cadwalader to Nicholas Biddle, December 25, 1831, in Reginald C. McGrane (ed.), *The Correspondence of Nicholas Biddle Dealing with National Affairs, 1807-1844* (New York, 1919), 156; speech of Bell on the Clayton Resolutions, in *Congressional Debates*, 22 Cong., 1 Sess., 2078 (March 8, 1832); James Walker to Polk, June 24, 1834, in Polk Papers; *Nashville Republican*, November 18, 1834.

⁵ Polk to Johnson, March 31, 1835, in St. George L. Sioussat (ed.), "Letters of James K. Polk to Cave Johnson, 1833-1848," in *Tennessee Historical Magazine* (Nashville, 1915-1937), I (1915), 220.

⁶ Jackson to Polk, May 3, 1835, in Polk Papers.

gress in December, 1834, to nominate White. He should submit his claims, they declared, to the Baltimore convention and abide by its decision.⁷ This White refused to do. Polk found himself in a difficult position. He was up for re-election in 1835, and he preferred to play a cautious game in regard to White's prospects until after the state elections. Jackson noticed Polk's lack of aggressiveness and sought to prod him into greater activity. William Carroll, the Jackson candidate for governor in the same election, who was defeated by Newton Cannon, the White-Bell candidate, declared that he was forced to wage the campaign practically alone. It was charged that Polk "suffered Governor Carroll to fight the Van Buren battle in Tennessee alone, rendering him little or no assistance."⁸ This was unfortunate for the Jackson cause as Polk was probably the ablest campaigner in the state at that time.

The results of the state elections indicated that the Jackson party had lost the first round in the approaching presidential campaign. Polk, once his election was assured, threw himself into the fight along with Grundy and Cave Johnson. Jackson urged them to "stir the people" against White.⁹ Their efforts, however, were of no avail as the legislature, despite tremendous pressure brought to bear on it, re-elected White to the Senate, nominated him for the presidency, and refused to adopt a resolution instructing him to vote for the Expunging Resolution.¹⁰ Polk, Johnson, and Grundy traversed the state as if they were canvassing for office. The Van Buren banner, however, proved too heavy a burden for them to carry.

Polk's victory over Bell in the speakership contest of December, 1835, was hailed with great joy by the Jackson men in Tennessee. It was considered as the beginning of the overthrow of "Bellism," the foundation of White "Whiggery" in the state, and as a great victory for the Van

⁷ Polk to Walker, December 24, 1834, *ibid.*

⁸ Jackson to Polk, May 12, 1835, *ibid.*; William Carroll to Van Buren, January 23, 1840, in Martin Van Buren Papers (Division of Manuscripts, Library of Congress). Polk to Samuel H. Laughlin, April 28, 1835, in Joseph H. Parks (ed.), "Letters from James K. Polk to Samuel H. Laughlin, 1835-1844," in East Tennessee Historical Society, *Publications* (Knoxville, 1929-), No. 18 (1946), 148-49. In this letter Polk advised Laughlin, who was editor of the Nashville *Union*, to "say nothing of any particular candidate for the Presidency."

⁹ Jackson to Polk, August 3, 1835, in Bassett (ed.), *Correspondence of Andrew Jackson*, V, 358.

¹⁰ Tennessee General Assembly, *House Journal*, 1835-1836, pp. 66, 645.

Buren cause.¹¹ The entire period of Polk's speakership was one of political unrest and personal animosity. This was particularly true of the first session when the presidential question found its way into the discussions of Congress. In their eagerness to injure Jackson and Van Buren, the opposition turned on Polk. The attacks were led by Henry A. Wise of Virginia and Balie Peyton of Tennessee. Bell also did not let an opportunity pass to embarrass his foe. He repeatedly criticized Polk's rulings in the House and accused him of abusing his power to favor the administration. Peyton was particularly bitter in his assaults on the Speaker, and it was feared by friends of Polk that Peyton was trying to bring about a duel. Polk interpreted these attacks as "intended chiefly for the Tennessee market."¹² As Polk was one of the main cogs in the Jackson machine in Tennessee, the White cause would be benefited by discrediting the Speaker of the House. Bell, no doubt, took personal interest in embarrassing him. This situation had some influence on Tennessee voters. It became more difficult for friends of Polk and Bell to unite on the same presidential candidate. Consequently Polk's supporters drifted over into the Van Buren camp, while the friends of Bell and Peyton became more confirmed in their support of Judge White.

Polk threw himself into the campaign of 1836 with his customary energy. Party loyalty and devotion to Jackson, rather than a desire to aid Van Buren, moved him to make a great effort for the "Little Magician." To Polk it was a fight for Jackson against Bell and White; Van Buren was merely incidental to the campaign. The campaign for Van Buren, however, failed and the state voted for White. The result was all the more galling to Polk as his Columbia district cast its vote against the Democrats.

With the defeat of 1836 fresh in their minds, Polk and other Democratic leaders took stock of the political situation and made plans for the state elections in 1837. It was Grundy's belief that the principal cause of defection had been removed, as White would probably not seek the presidency again. He advocated a conciliatory attitude toward White's friends in the hope of bringing them back into the party. The

¹¹ Nashville *Union*, December 26, 1835; A. O. P. Nicholson to Polk, December 22, 1835, in Polk Papers.

¹² Polk to W. R. Rucker, February 22, 1836, in Polk Papers.

Nashville *Union* supported him in this plan.¹³ Polk, on the other hand, confident that a reconciliation was impossible, believed that a vigorous campaign should be launched. He was in no mood to forgive his enemies. Grundy's career in the Senate, he warned, depended upon the success of the Democrats in the state elections. He also insisted that Bell be given some real opposition in the congressional contest.¹⁴ Polk was fully aware of the seriousness of the situation and was eager for his party to fight the enemy with all its energy.

It appears that Grundy's plan for an attempted reconciliation prevailed. General Robert Armstrong, a local military hero, was the Democratic candidate for governor. The general proved to be an easy-going opponent for the shrewd Governor Cannon. He alarmed Polk by agreeing with Cannon to remain at home and not canvass the state. Polk urged him at least to make personal appearances even if he made no speeches.¹⁵ The Democrats placed no one in the field against Bell. The election resulted in an overwhelming victory for the Whigs, not only in the state contests but in the congressional elections as well. Johnson, seeking re-election to Congress, was defeated. The political future seemed so dark to Johnson that he seriously considered moving to Mississippi.¹⁶

The outcome of the election caused a tempest at the Hermitage, where Jackson denounced the temporizing policy of Grundy and the Nashville *Union*. He predicted that Grundy would feel the effect of his "supineness and want of courage."¹⁷ Many of the Democratic leaders regarded the future with pessimism. It was clear to them that Democrats could no longer ride to victory on the prestige of Jackson. A thorough reorganization of the party machine was necessary. A new vigor and enthusiasm must be instilled in its members if the state was ever to be redeemed.

¹³ John Catron to Polk, July 7, 1837, *ibid.*

¹⁴ Polk to Andrew Jackson Donelson, June 21, 1837, in Andrew Jackson Donelson Papers (Division of Manuscripts, Library of Congress).

¹⁵ *Id.* to *id.*, July 12, 1837, *ibid.*

¹⁶ Johnson to Polk, August 7, 1837, in Polk Papers.

¹⁷ Jackson to Polk, August 6, 1837, *ibid.* The general was right, for the legislature sought to drive Grundy from the Senate by instructing him to vote against the Sub-Treasury Bill. Grundy disappointed his enemies by obeying instructions. He later resigned, however, to become Attorney General in Van Buren's cabinet. A Whig, Ephraim H. Foster, took his place in the Senate.

It was generally conceded that Polk alone could restore the state to the Democratic party and that he was the logical man to run for governor in 1839. It is true that Polk was easily the most active man in the party at that time. In a sense he was approaching the crisis of his career. He had been in Congress fourteen years, and he probably realized that the time had come to make a change. It appears that he had his eye on the vice-presidency with the presidency as a more remote possibility.¹⁸ He no doubt regarded the governor's chair as a stepping-stone to higher honors. If he could bring Tennessee back into the ranks of the Democracy, his claims on the party in the nation would be strengthened. So he retired from Congress and took the field as his party's leader in the state. His decision had a stimulating effect, and Jackson wrote Francis P. Blair that "there never was a greater change than has taken place in Tennessee."¹⁹

Polk made his preparations for the campaign with his customary thoroughness. Lack of adequate newspaper support had been the great weakness of the Democrats since 1835. The only important Democratic organ in the state was the Nashville *Union*, which Polk had helped establish in 1835 to combat Bell and Judge White. The paper had its ups and downs in the years that followed, and the problem of able editors constantly worried Polk and his associates. After a search of several months Polk persuaded Jeremiah G. Harris, editor of the New Bedford, Massachusetts, *Bay State Democrat* to become the pilot of the *Union*.²⁰ Polk's selection proved to be a wise one, as no Whig editor in the state, with the possible exception of the inimitable William G. "Parson" Brownlow, could cope with Harris. Polk also demanded that the party select its ablest men as candidates for Congress. Cave Johnson was persuaded to seek vindication for his defeat in 1837.

Polk's announcement of his candidacy for governor elicited the charge from the Whig press that he cared little for that office and that his real purpose was to canvass the state in preparation for the presidential campaign of 1840. To "Parson" Brownlow the "game which Colonel Polk is playing is a deep one. The Governor's office is but the

¹⁸ Polk to Nicholson, January 13, 1838, *ibid.*

¹⁹ Jackson to Francis P. Blair, September 27, 1838, in Andrew Jackson Papers (Division of Manuscripts, Library of Congress).

²⁰ Polk to Jeremiah G. Harris, December 27, 1838, in Polk Papers.

die, the Presidency is the stake." Polk was denounced as a missionary of Van Buren delegated to redeem Tennessee for the Democrats.²¹

The Democratic candidate welcomed the opportunity to stress national issues and to emphasize the approaching presidential contest. The state banking system and the program of internal improvements established by the Whigs were still popular in the state. Consequently Polk touched lightly on local issues. If he could restore the state to the Democrats in an election that hinged on national issues, his prestige with the party would be enhanced. It would do him no harm if his campaign was regarded as the first skirmish of the presidential battle of 1840. Polk, knowing that Henry Clay had never been popular in Tennessee, warned the people that the Whigs were trying to convert them to the principles of the Kentuckian and transfer them into the camp of "federalism."²² Clay would be the presidential candidate of the Whigs in 1840, he declared, and the state must be on the alert against him. Amos Kendall visited the Hermitage and was impressed with the shrewdness of Polk in bringing Clay into the contest.²³

On the other hand, while conceding that Van Buren would probably be the Democratic candidate in the next election, Polk made every effort to keep the President in the background. He was alarmed to hear that Van Buren planned to visit Jackson at the Hermitage in April or May while on a tour of the West. He immediately called on Van Buren and informed him of the disastrous effect his trip to Tennessee would have on the state elections. The President graciously agreed to postpone his visit. Polk knew that Jackson would hear of the affair, and wishing to avoid complications, he wrote him about it. His enemies, he declared, must not be given the opportunity to accuse Van Buren of trying to interfere in the state elections.²⁴ Blair also wrote to Jackson concerning Polk's objections and expressed the opinion that Van Buren's proposed visit would not have the effect described by Polk. This was one of the many instances in this period that the editor of the *Globe* and Polk disagreed. Jackson, while not agreeing with Polk, defended

²¹ Nashville *Republican Banner*, September 11, 1838; Columbia *Observer*, September 21, 1838; Elizabethton *Whig*, June 3, 1839.

²² Nashville *Union*, April 10, 11, 15, 1839.

²³ Amos Kendall to Van Buren, November 6, 1838, in Van Buren Papers.

²⁴ Polk to Jackson, February 7, 1838, in Jackson Papers.

him by stressing the importance of the Tennessee campaign.²⁵ Polk knew what he was doing and he did not want Van Buren in the state. He was willing to support the President, if the latter should become the candidate of his party; but having felt the burden of Van Buren's unpopularity in Tennessee before, he preferred to conduct the campaign in his own way. Early in the campaign he reiterated his faith in the "original" Jacksonian principles. He stood where he did in 1829, opposed to the Bank of the United States, a high tariff, and a federal system of internal improvements.²⁶ His views epitomized the old program of the Democrats.

Governor Cannon, the Whig candidate, and Polk stumped the state together. Polk had all the advantage in this type of campaign. Cannon was a poor speaker; his delivery was slow and ponderous. Polk was the best stump speaker in the party. He was skilled in the use of sarcasm and ridicule, and a master of the art of debate. Moreover, he was a younger man than Cannon and better able to endure the hardships of a strenuous campaign. Cannon faltered in the middle of the campaign, and Bell took his place on the stump. In his old enemy Polk found a bitter adversary who combated him with great ability.²⁷ Even Bell could not stem the tide, however, and Polk was elected by a majority of 2,566 votes. The Democrats gained control of both houses of the legislature and deprived the Whigs of three seats in Congress. Johnson carried his district. Nevertheless, the Democratic victory was not complete as Bell retained his seat in the lower house.

The recovery of the state for his party was a great personal triumph for Polk. A comparison of the vote of 1839 with that of 1837 reveals some startling figures. The Whig total in 1839 was only 1,365 less than that of the previous election, while the Democratic gain over the vote of 1837 was 20,994.²⁸ Polk was able to bring out the Democratic vote and prove that, with great exertion, the state could be redeemed

²⁵ Blair to Jackson, February 8, 1839, *ibid.*; Jackson to Van Buren, March 4, 1839, in Van Buren Papers.

²⁶ Nashville *Union*, April 10, 11, 15, 1839.

²⁷ Polk to Mrs. Polk, April 14, 1839, in Polk Papers.

²⁸ Horace Greeley (ed.), *The Politician's Register for 1841* (New York, 1841), 26. This was included in Horace Greeley (ed.), *The Tribune Almanac for the Years 1838 to 1868, Inclusive; Comprehending the Politician's Register and the Whig Almanac* (30 vols. in 2, New York, 1868). Future references will be to *Tribune Almanac*, I.

by the Democrats. In giving up his seat in Congress to do battle for his party at home, Polk had risked much, and his party was indebted to him for his loyalty.

Polk and the Democrats were not content with their victory in the state elections. As the Whigs still had a majority of the Tennessee delegation in the lower house of Congress, it was decided that their two senators, White and Ephraim H. Foster, must be removed; otherwise, the Democratic victory would be only a local one. Jackson was enthusiastic about the plan.²⁹ Johnson, on the other hand, feared such a move would do the party more harm than good.³⁰ Foster, who had taken Grundy's seat in 1837, had pledged himself to resign if the Democrats gained control of the legislature. He kept his promise and vacated his seat early in November. Although Carroll and A. O. P. Nicholson were eager to take his place, Polk preferred Grundy, whom the Whigs had tried to drive from the Senate in 1837. His return would be popular with the people.³¹ Polk feared a split in the party if the office went to either Carroll or Nicholson. Grundy, however, wanted to remain in Van Buren's cabinet and go to the Senate in 1841, if conditions were favorable.³² Polk appealed to Van Buren to give up his Attorney General for the sake of the cause.³³ Grundy finally yielded to pressure and was back in the Senate when Congress met in December.

Polk then turned his attention to Judge White, whose belief in the power of the legislature to instruct its senators provided a course of action. The legislature adopted a series of resolutions instructing White to vote for the Sub-Treasury bill. Polk wrote Thomas H. Benton urging him to have the bill brought forward at once.³⁴ This was done, and White resigned his seat. His forced resignation brought forth a storm of indignation from the Whig press in Tennessee. The Democrats had blundered: White's death a short time later enhanced the effect of their error, for the Whigs regarded him as a martyr. This treatment of

²⁹ Jackson to Van Buren, August 12, 1839, in Van Buren Papers; Jackson to Kendall, August 18, 1839, in Jackson Papers.

³⁰ Johnson to Polk, September 28, 1839, in Polk Papers. Because of an error by the editor this letter was found in a volume for 1838.

³¹ Polk to Jackson, August 12, 1839, *ibid.*

³² Grundy to Polk, n. d., *ibid.*

³³ Polk to Van Buren, November 11, 1839, in Van Buren Papers.

³⁴ Thomas H. Benton to Polk, December 5, 1839, in Polk Papers.

White, who was popular throughout the state, helped turn the tide against the Democrats in later elections. It is difficult to understand how Polk, with all his ability and foresight as a politician, could have been so blind to the consequences of the course that he followed.³⁵

Polk's record as governor was not outstanding. His first message to the legislature clearly indicated that no broad or vigorous policies were contemplated. He was warned before his inauguration that the success of his administration depended on his management of the state banking system and the program of internal improvements established by the Whigs.³⁶ Therefore, he was content to modify and correct abuses in the existing institutions.³⁷ His political ambitions appear to have been the determining influence in his course. A great deal depended on the continuation of the Democratic control of the state, and it seems that he was afraid to risk what had been gained. His interests were obviously more national than local.

It was generally known throughout Tennessee in 1838 and 1839 that Polk had his eyes on the vice-presidency in 1840. He was eager for the honor, and the legislature on November 4, 1839, formally nominated him as Van Buren's running mate in the approaching contest. The party leaders in Tennessee, knowing that it would be difficult to obtain the nomination for Polk over Richard M. Johnson, made a great effort in Polk's behalf. Jackson urged Blair to support him, declaring that Polk would carry Tennessee, Alabama, and Mississippi, while Johnson would lose those states for the Democracy.³⁸ The Democratic press threw out the warning that the fate of the party in the state depended on the choice of Polk by the convention.³⁹

Polk made it clear that he would abide by the decision of the party.

³⁵ Alexander Anderson, a lawyer of fair ability but with little political experience, took Hugh L. White's place in the Senate. It is possible that his "obscureness" appealed to Polk.

³⁶ Alfred Balch to Polk, September 3, 1839, in Polk Papers.

³⁷ Polk's first message to the legislature indicated this policy. See the *Nashville Union*, October 23, 1839, for complete message.

³⁸ Jackson to Blair, February 15, 1840, in Jackson Papers. Polk was formally nominated by the Tennessee state convention, February 11, 1840. See *Proceedings of Democratic State Convention* (pamphlet in Tennessee State Library, Nashville). Benton wrote Jackson, April 24, 1840, (in Jackson Papers), that he was for Polk, and left the impression that he would support him if the Senate made the choice.

³⁹ *Nashville Union*, March 30, 1840.

He would, in no event, run as a sectional candidate. Should Johnson be nominated he would earnestly support him. Should no nomination be made at Baltimore, and within a reasonable length of time a sufficient number of states had not come to his support, he would take the field in favor of any candidate who might bring success to the party.⁴⁰

The Tennessee delegation to the Baltimore convention, led by Grundy, Carroll, Cave Johnson, and Samuel H. Laughlin, doubted the wisdom of presenting to that body the claims of Polk. They did not trust Blair and Benton and thought that Polk's prospects would have been better had no convention been held.⁴¹ Instead they preferred to risk his fortunes in the Senate, which would have the duty of selecting a vice-president if the electors made no choice.⁴² As Carroll was permanent chairman of the convention, it is possible that the Tennessee delegation was partly responsible for the decision to refrain from nominating a running mate for Van Buren. The Tennesseans expected that the responsibility for selecting a vice-president would devolve upon the Senate, but the convention adopted a resolution expressing the hope that opinion would become so crystallized before the election "as to secure the choice of a Vice-President by the electoral colleges."

The decision of the convention no doubt disappointed Polk. He bowed to the will of his party, however, and prepared to wage his campaign along the lines thus set down. Grundy advised him to stay in the race, but expressed the opinion that it would probably be better if he simply did nothing.⁴³ Governor Polk did not take an active part in the campaign and gave as the reason the pressing duties of his office. It appears that by the middle of the summer he was convinced that he could not obtain the vice-presidency that year. On July 4 he publicly declined to run for that office and announced his candidacy for re-election as governor the next year.⁴⁴

Did Polk "sulk in his tent" in this campaign? In view of his great

⁴⁰ St. George L. Sioussat (ed.), "Diaries of S. H. Laughlin, of Tennessee, 1840, 1843," in *Tennessee Historical Magazine*, II (1916), 46-47. Laughlin was an intimate friend of Polk and one of the leading editors and politicians in Tennessee.

⁴¹ Grundy, McClellan, Harvey M. Watterson, Hopkins L. Turney, Johnson, and Aaron V. Brown to Polk, February 3, 1840, in Polk Papers.

⁴² Sioussat (ed.), "Diaries of S. H. Laughlin," 47.

⁴³ Grundy to Polk, June 1, 1840, in Polk Papers.

⁴⁴ *Niles' Weekly Register* (Baltimore, 1811-1849), LVIII (1840), 346. This announcement was made in a speech at Knoxville.

efforts in behalf of the party in the past, it is possible that his enthusiasm was dampened for the moment. Then, too, he had expected the Whigs to nominate Clay, and their selection of William Henry Harrison probably upset his calculations. It would be more difficult to carry the state for Van Buren against "Old Tip," and if Tennessee was lost, he would stand little chance of being chosen in the event the Democrats captured the electoral college. The attitude of Blair and Benton was unfavorable to him. These considerations no doubt appealed to Polk's mind and subsequently influenced his course. A short time before the campaign closed he did take the stump with Jackson in West Tennessee in an effort to stem the tide against the Democrats.⁴⁵ Their efforts were of no avail, and the Whigs carried the state by a substantial majority.

Encouraged by their victory, the Whigs turned their attention to driving Polk from the governor's chair in 1841. The riotous campaign that had won the state for Harrison convinced them that the same tactics could be used successfully against Polk. Cannon's great weakness in 1839 was his inability to cope with Polk on the stump. A candidate must be found who could meet the governor on his own grounds. With this necessity in mind the Whigs nominated James C. Jones, better known as "Lean Jimmy," to challenge Polk.

Polk made every effort to keep the campaign on a serious plane and the discussion confined to national issues. Had he been successful in this he might have beaten Jones. His opponent, although a man of considerable ability, was no match for the governor in debate. Instead, he resorted to heckling tactics and relied more on amusing than on convincing his audience. Polk had great powers of mimicry and ridicule, but against Jones these were not effective. The Whig candidate fought the governor with his own weapons. He misquoted and distorted Polk's statements during their joint debates and amused the crowds by poking fun at his opponent. Jones was the perfect exponent of the log cabin and hard cider school of politics. As the contest neared its close it was apparent that no man of Polk's training and temperament could cope with such political bushwhacking.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Samuel C. Williams, *Beginnings of West Tennessee, in the Land of the Chickasaws, 1541-1841* (Johnson City, Tenn., 1930), 276.

⁴⁶ Oliver P. Temple, *Notable Men of Tennessee, from 1833 to 1875: Their Times and Their Contemporaries* (New York, 1912), 270-71; James Phelan, *History of Tennessee:*

The election in August resulted in a Whig victory, although the margin was not as great as in 1840. The Democrats made much of the fact that Polk cut down the Whig majority of 12,102 in 1840 to 3,222 in 1841. Polk mustered 2,416 more votes than Van Buren did in 1840, while Jones's total was 6,464 less than Harrison's in the presidential contest.⁴⁷ Moreover, the Democrats retained a majority of the state Senate and would therefore be in a position to block any measure of the Whigs that should not meet with their approval.

The future must have seemed dark indeed to Polk at this time. This was his first political defeat, and he found himself in private life for the first time in sixteen years. He had no choice but to retire to his home at Columbia, and this could mean political oblivion. There was a possibility, however, that he might escape this fate and return to public life. The legislature would elect both United States senators, and as the Democrats controlled the state Senate, there was a chance that fortune might shine on the defeated leader. Jackson, appreciating fully the recent efforts of Polk in behalf of his party, thought he should be rewarded with a place in the Senate.⁴⁸ Polk, himself, was eager to return to Washington.

Polk, Nicholson, and Hopkins L. Turney were the principal Democratic candidates. The Democrats expected to get but one seat, and the rivalry between Polk and Nicholson threatened to split the party. The more influential men in the party were sympathetic with Polk.⁴⁹ Nicholson, however, had a peculiar advantage. Polk, afraid that two defeats in a row might have a disastrous effect on his ambitions, remained under cover and did not work openly in his own behalf.

The prospect of Polk going to the Senate was extremely distasteful to the Whigs, who charged that this was his real objective in the recent campaign. It had taken herculean efforts to defeat him in the guber-

The Making of a State (Boston, 1888), 398-406. According to Phelan, James C. Jones was nominated to "get after" Polk. Jones was 6 feet, 2 inches tall and weighed only 125 pounds.

⁴⁷ The vote in 1840 was William Henry Harrison 60,391 and Van Buren 48,229. Jones polled 53,927 and Polk 50,705 in 1841. For the Harrison-Van Buren contest, see Greeley (ed.), *The Politician's Register for 1841*, p. 26, in *Tribune Almanac*, I. The Polk-Jones contest results are in Horace Greeley (ed.), *The Whig Almanac and United States Register* (New York, 1843), 42, *ibid.*

⁴⁸ Jackson to Blair, August 12, 1841, in Jackson Papers.

⁴⁹ Laughlin to Polk, September 12, 1841, in Polk Papers.

natorial contest, and Whigs were determined that their recent victory should not be marred by his elevation to the Senate. They argued that the people had repudiated Polk and that he should not be permitted to represent them in any capacity.⁵⁰ This view probably kept the Democrats from publicly advocating Polk's candidacy. He remained in the background, and although still hoping that he might be chosen, contented himself with directing his Democratic supporters in the legislature from his home in Columbia.

The state Senate included twelve Whigs and the "Immortal Thirteen" Democrats, as they were called during the long and bitter controversy that followed. The customary method of electing senators in Tennessee was, as in other states, by a joint resolution of both houses of the legislature. As the Whigs would have a majority in such a body, the Democrats made the "discovery" that the usual method was unconstitutional. For their own purpose it was an important one, as by no other method could they hope to force the Whigs to compromise by agreeing that one senator should be chosen from each party. They demanded that each house vote separately.⁵¹

Bell and Foster were the principal Whig candidates. The Whigs finally offered to compromise by electing Bell and Turney. Polk immediately vetoed this proposal with the declaration that it would never do to elect Bell by Democratic votes.⁵² It appears that any compromise which did not include himself as one of the senators was unacceptable to Polk. John Catron and Aaron V. Brown warned him that failure to elect senators would react violently against the party in the future.⁵³ This impressed Polk, and he declared that he would favor the election of Foster and some "good and true Democrat."⁵⁴ As Turney's loyalty to the party was questionable, it was evident that Polk regarded himself as that "good and true Democrat."

Polk was urged to come to Nashville and take personal charge of the Democratic forces.⁵⁵ He refused to risk his political future by coming

⁵⁰ Nashville *Republican Banner*, October 4, 1841.

⁵¹ Carroll to John C. Calhoun, November 18, 1841, in American Historical Association, *Annual Report*, 1929 (Washington, 1930), 167.

⁵² Polk to Sackfield Maclin, January 17, 1842, in Andrew Johnson Papers (Division of Manuscripts, Library of Congress).

⁵³ Catron to Polk, January 2, 1842, in Polk Papers.

⁵⁴ Polk to Maclin, January 17, 1842, in Johnson Papers.

⁵⁵ J. P. Hardwicke to Polk, December 13, 1841, in Polk Papers. Hardwicke told Polk

out publicly as a candidate. Had he done so, it is entirely possible that an election would have taken place and Tennessee would not have been without representation in the United States Senate for the next two years. There is little doubt that Polk was responsible for the failure to elect senators, and the blame was placed on his shoulders in his campaign against Jones in 1843.⁵⁶

Polk still had hopes of reaching the vice-presidency, if his state could be redeemed before 1844. The campaign against Jones in 1843 was a furious one. Polk's influence with the Democratic members of the legislature during Jones's administration diverted the attention of the people from national issues, where the Democrats had the advantage, to local questions, where public opinion was clearly behind the Whigs. The latter associated Polk with the "Immortal Thirteen" throughout the campaign and blamed him for all their "sins and blunders."⁵⁷

Polk tried hard to emphasize national issues.⁵⁸ As it appeared certain that Clay would be the Whig candidate in the next presidential election, he spent much of his time denouncing the Kentuckian and his policies. The old "corrupt bargain" charge, which had done yeoman service in 1839, was revived and paraded before the people. Clay was incensed by these attacks and challenged Polk to a discussion of this question at a time and place acceptable to him. He did not desire, he declared, to interfere in the Tennessee election, but wanted only to defend himself.⁵⁹ Although Polk did not accept the challenge, there is little doubt that he sought the publicity these attacks on Clay might gain him outside the state.

He was again defeated by "Lean Jimmy" Jones, whose majority was that "We want your counsel, we want your presence. The voice of the Chief at this moment will throw dismay into the opposition ranks."

⁵⁶ The Memphis Whigs drew up resolutions requesting Henry Clay and W. C. Preston of South Carolina to "watch over, protect and defend the peculiar interests of the State of Tennessee . . . and hereby adopt them as our Senators as fully and completely as it is in our power to do." "Resolution Adopted by the Memphis Whigs," in *Washington National Intelligencer*, February 13, 1842.

⁵⁷ Memphis *American Eagle*, July 1, 1843. The legislative session of 1841-1842, owing to the obstructive tactics of the thirteen Democratic senators, was almost completely devoid of constructive legislation. See Nashville *Republican Banner*, January 2, 1842; Jonesborough *Whig*, March 8, 1843.

⁵⁸ "Answers of Ex-Governor Polk, to a series of interrogatories propounded to him and Governor Jones, through the presses of Memphis, May 15, 1843," in Polk Papers.

⁵⁹ Clay to Polk, May 20, 1843, *ibid.*

slightly larger than in the previous election. The Whigs also won both houses of the legislature, and the power of the "Immortal Thirteen" was broken. In the congressional elections, however, the Democrats gained two seats. Andrew Johnson, one of the "Immortal Thirteen," made his debut in Congress the next December. Undoubtedly local issues brought about Polk's defeat.⁶⁰

Undaunted by two successive defeats in state elections, Polk now turned his attention to national politics and the 1844 contest. The hope of the vice-presidency still lingered in his mind. Immediately after the state elections the Democratic press in Tennessee began to boom him for the second place on the ticket with Van Buren. It was argued that the New Yorker could not carry the state without Polk's help.⁶¹ The state convention met on November 23, 1843, and nominated him for the vice-presidency. The convention agreed to support whatever candidate the Baltimore convention might see fit to nominate for the presidency.⁶²

Although the party leaders in Tennessee favored Van Buren, the rank and file of the voters lacked enthusiasm for his candidacy. Only with great effort did Polk persuade the owners of the Nashville *Union* to place the "Little Magician" at the head of their editorial column.⁶³

There is no evidence that Polk had his eye on the presidential nomination, or that an anti-Van Buren plot existed in Tennessee prior to the appearance of Van Buren's letter in April, 1844, opposing the annexation of Texas. Instead, the evidence is strong that Polk was making

⁶⁰ Nashville *Union*, August 8, 1843; Nashville *Republican Banner*, August 11, 1843. Jones's majority over Polk in this election was 3,833 votes. See Horace Greeley (ed.), *The Whig Almanac and United States Register, 1844* (New York, 1844), 57, in *Tribune Almanac*, I.

⁶¹ Memphis *Appeal*, November 3, 1843.

⁶² Niles' *Weekly Register*, LXV (1843), 231. Benton, writing several years later, professed to see in this action a scheme to leave the road open for Polk's nomination as President if Van Buren was rejected. The Tennessee delegates to the Baltimore convention, he asserted, understood this and voted against Van Buren. See Thomas H. Benton, *Thirty Years' View, or, A History of the Working of the American Government for Thirty Years, from 1820 to 1850* (2 vols., New York, 1854-1856), II, 594. There is no evidence, however, to substantiate Benton's assertions, and it is doubtful that Polk, or his friends, had any idea that he had a chance for the presidential nomination as early as December, 1843.

⁶³ Polk to John A. Hogan and John P. Heiss, January 21, 1844, in St. George L. Sious-sat (ed.), "The Papers of Major John P. Heiss of Nashville," in *Tennessee Historical Magazine*, II (1916), 141.

every effort to obtain the nomination for the former President. He vigorously opposed a movement in the state to nominate Lewis Cass,⁶⁴ and at the same time he refused a seat, tentatively placed before him for consideration, in John Tyler's cabinet. As Tyler was hostile to Van Buren, Polk thought that the acceptance of such a post would be interpreted as opposition to Van Buren and thereby weaken the latter's prospects for the nomination.⁶⁵ He wrote Cave Johnson, as late as May 4, 1844, that since Clay had taken a position against the annexation of Texas, he hoped Van Buren could come out for it.⁶⁶

It appears that Polk, when Van Buren's position in regard to Texas was made known, did begin to consider the possibility of obtaining the presidential nomination himself. He expressed himself publicly in favor of annexation about the time Van Buren wrote his fateful letter, and he no doubt reasoned that his nomination was not an impossibility.⁶⁷ Cave Johnson was one of the delegates to the Baltimore convention, and Polk proceeded to implant the idea of his candidacy for the presidency in his friend's mind. He wrote Johnson on May 13 that while he aspired to the second place only, his friends might use his name as they saw fit.⁶⁸ The next day he came out more clearly and wrote that General Jackson

⁶⁴ Polk to Johnson, March 18, 1844, in Sioussat (ed.), "Letters from James K. Polk to Cave Johnson," 234. Also see Polk to Laughlin, January 20, 1844, in Parks (ed.), "Letters from James K. Polk to Samuel H. Laughlin," 165.

⁶⁵ Polk to Johnson, March 21, 1844, in Sioussat (ed.), "Letters from James K. Polk to Cave Johnson," 237. Polk wrote that "I took this course because my acceptance might have left the impression on the minds of some that I was among the discontents of the party and towards Mr. Van Buren especially who might possibly have been thereby weakened." He also added that acceptance might have been interpreted as a withdrawal of his candidacy for the vice-presidency. This he wished to avoid.

⁶⁶ *Id.* to *id.*, May 4, 1844, *ibid.*, 239.

⁶⁷ Polk to Salmon P. Chase, Thomas Heaton, and Committee at Cincinnati, April 23, 1844, in *Niles' Weekly Register*, LXVI (1844), 228-29. Polk wrote Laughlin on May 9 urging him and others of the Tennessee delegation to hurry on to Washington. He wrote that "Your remaining a few days at Nashville—was not only necessary—but perhaps indispensable. The appearance of Mr. Van-Buren's letter required it. . . . I am very anxious that you should all leave as early as practicable.—From what Cave Johnson writes—I think the recent occurrence [*sic*] on the chess-board—have decidedly improved my prospects. The presence of my friends from Tennessee, at Washington for a few days before the Convention meets is not only vastly important,—but may decide the action of the Convention." See Parks (ed.), "Letters from James K. Polk to Samuel H. Laughlin," 166.

⁶⁸ Polk to Johnson, May 13, 1844, in Sioussat (ed.), "Letters of James K. Polk to Cave Johnson," 240.

thought that he was the "most available man."⁶⁹ Later he informed Johnson of Jackson's opinion that if Van Buren was set aside, Polk was the only man the northern Democrats would support. He went on to say that in view of the obvious split in the party at the convention "there is no telling what may happen."⁷⁰

While Gideon J. Pillow, Johnson, and Laughlin, the leaders of the Tennessee delegation, may have thought of the possibility of Polk's obtaining the presidential nomination prior to the opening of the convention, it seems that they were so absorbed in trying to get him the second place on the ticket that they had no time to advance his claims to the first. Jackson was urging his nomination for the vice-presidency and seems to have influenced Polk's eventual success only indirectly. The letters of Pillow on May 22 and 24 reveal that the leaders of the Tennessee delegation had their hands full holding their own delegates in line for Polk as a candidate for vice-president and at the same time winning the support of the Van Buren followers for their candidate.⁷¹

By the time the convention met on May 27 it was evident that the party was so confused relative to Van Buren, Cass, and John C. Calhoun that anything might happen. Pillow wrote Polk on May 25 that if the North would bring his name forward the chances of his selection as the presidential nominee were bright.⁷² On the first day of the balloting the Tennessee delegation voted solidly for Cass on the seven ballots taken. It was apparent that none of the candidates voted for on that day could be nominated under the two-thirds rule. That evening a current set in toward Polk. The first outside proposal to push Polk forward apparently came from George Bancroft of Massachusetts, who had influence with northern delegates.⁷³ He and Pillow, leader of the move-

⁶⁹ *Id.* to *id.*, May 14, 1844, *ibid.*, 241. In this letter Polk outlined the method by which Johnson could bring about a concerted movement among the delegates of each state for him, either for President or Vice-President.

⁷⁰ *Id.* to *id.*, May 17, 1844, *ibid.*, 242-43.

⁷¹ Gideon J. Pillow to Polk, May 22, 24, 1844, in Jesse S. Reeves (ed.), "Letters of Gideon J. Pillow to James K. Polk, 1844," in *American Historical Review* (New York, 1895-), XI (1905-1906), 835-37. It appears that at least half of the Tennessee delegation was determined not to support Van Buren, and Pillow thought that if a split occurred Polk's chances for a place on the ticket were gone. See McCormac, *James K. Polk*, 240.

⁷² Pillow to Polk, May 25, 1844, in Reeves (ed.), "Letters of Gideon J. Pillow to James K. Polk, 1844," 839.

⁷³ George Bancroft to Harris, August 30, 1877, *ibid.* 841 n. See also Bancroft to Polk,

ment, worked nearly all night in an effort to induce other delegates to accept Polk as the logical man.

Polk's nomination the next day was a result of a combination of influences. Bancroft and Pillow's efforts in his behalf would probably have failed had it not been for the decision of the New York delegation to vote for him on the ninth ballot.⁷⁴ The New Yorkers were incensed over the refusal of the convention to abolish the two-thirds rule. As Van Buren had a majority on the first ballot, they knew that if all delegates who were pledged to Van Buren had voted against the two-thirds rule he would have been nominated. Instead, many who were pledged to Van Buren, but who were really anxious to see Cass or James Buchanan nominated, voted to retain that rule. New York delegates therefore decided to prevent a Cass or Buchanan nomination. Van Buren's name was withdrawn, and the New York vote was given to Polk.⁷⁵ Bancroft, a Van Buren man, was confident that Polk could defeat Cass. Jackson's friendship for Polk made him more acceptable to the Van Buren supporters. The vote of the New York delegation appears to have assured the Tennessean's nomination. The intense desire of the friends of Calhoun and Tyler to see Van Buren and Cass defeated, coupled with Polk's favorable attitude toward the annexation of Texas, won him their votes.⁷⁶

Polk was hardly a compromise candidate, but he was one upon whom all the warring factions of the party could unite. He was a "dark horse" only in the sense that prior to the convention he was not expected to be the presidential nominee. A man who had been so prominent in the public life of his state and nation for twenty years could not be regarded as an "unknown."

The news from Baltimore fell with the force of a bombshell upon the Tennessee Whigs. They were disappointed that Van Buren was not chosen. The combination of their old enemy and the popularity of the

July 6, 1844, in Mark A. De Wolfe Howe, *The Life and Letters of George Bancroft* (2 vols., New York, 1908), I, 251-53.

⁷⁴ Washington *National Intelligencer*, May 30, 1844.

⁷⁵ For a complete account of this aspect of the convention as well as the attitude and course of the New York delegation, see Benjamin F. Butler to Van Buren, May 27, 1844; I. L. Sullivan to Van Buren, May 27, 28, 29, 1844; Butler to Van Buren, May 31, 1844; Henry Simpson to Van Buren, May 31, June 10, 1844; Samuel Hart to Van Buren, June 11, 1844, in Van Buren Papers.

⁷⁶ McCormac, *James K. Polk*, 240.

proposal to annex Texas indicated a hard fight ahead. Although they knew little of the matter, they greeted the news of Polk's success with the charge that the Democratic party had again succumbed to the will of Jackson.⁷⁷

The Democrats were again handicapped in their campaign in Tennessee by inadequate newspaper support. The Nashville *Union* was their chief worry. Since the resignation of Harris in 1842, that paper had been of little value to the party. Polk, who knew from past experience the value of the *Union*, persuaded Laughlin in December, 1843, to take charge of it until after the campaign of 1844. In the middle of the presidential campaign, Polk prevailed on Harris to return as coeditor. The *Union* did valiant service for the party in the last weeks of the contest, and to a degree fulfilled Polk's desire to make that organ what it was back in 1839.⁷⁸

The Tennessee Democrats entered the campaign with a noticeable lack of harmony. Andrew Johnson, according to Polk, opposed his nomination and termed it a "humbug."⁷⁹ Polk's biographer believes that Johnson was ready to sacrifice Polk in order to get rid of Van Buren at the convention. Johnson's opposition at that time might have been justified as he thought Polk had no chance for the nomination, but the later coolness between the two men conveys the notion that Johnson did not support Polk as loyally as he could have done. Polk had also been warned some months before that Nicholson could not be trusted. In the heat of the campaign Turney and Nicholson had a bitter quarrel over speaking dates.⁸⁰ These dissensions may have cost Polk the state, which went to Clay by a very small margin.

While it is true that the Texas question occupied an important place in the campaign, it appears that the contest in Tennessee turned more on other issues. A close check of the Tennessee newspapers discloses

⁷⁷ Nashville *Republican Banner*, June 7, 1844.

⁷⁸ Polk to Heiss, August 21, 1844, in Sioussat (ed.), "Papers of John P. Heiss," 143.

⁷⁹ Milo M. Quaife (ed.), *The Diary of James K. Polk During His Presidency, 1845 to 1849* (4 vols., Chicago, 1910), II, 40-41. Polk wrote: "I doubt whether any two members were at heart more dissatisfied with my nomination for the presidency than they [Andrew Johnson and George Jones, the latter also a member of Congress from Tennessee] were. This I learned from members of the Convention from Tennessee." He went on to say, "I would almost prefer to have two Whigs here in their place, unless they act better than they have done at the present session of Congress."

⁸⁰ Turney to Polk, August 27, 1844, in Polk Papers.

little agitation of the Texas problem. The great body of Tennessee Whigs favored annexation, and Clay's Raleigh letter placed them on the defensive for the time being. His second Alabama letter, however, written July 27, in which he took a more favorable attitude toward Texas, was more satisfactory to the Whig party in the state. It was said that "the efforts of the opposite party to use the question for their own political advantage would merely delay a consummation which the Whigs intended—in the proper way and at the proper time—to bring about."⁸¹ The Tennessee Whigs made much of the fact, as they alleged, that Clay and Benton stood on the same ground in regard to annexation, and on several occasions recent speeches of Benton were read by Whig orators to clinch their point.⁸² The Texas question, however, was not stressed in Tennessee as in other sections of the country.

The Bank and the tariff were the two principal national issues that came in for discussion. "Parson" Brownlow declared that the Bank was the only issue between the parties in Tennessee, a view supported by the other Whig editors in the state.⁸³ Jackson wrote Kendall that the Whigs were using the Bank of Tennessee to influence the election and also to bring about as much distress upon the country as possible so as to "induce the people that the great panacea of relief is a United States Bank."⁸⁴

The tariff was also heatedly debated. The Whigs strongly defended the act of 1842, while the Democrats accused them of inconsistency in regard to the issue. They pointed out that only one Tennessee Whig had voted for that tariff.⁸⁵ Andrew Jackson Donelson wrote Polk that he could not go wrong on the tariff subject if he made revenue the object and protection incidental.⁸⁶

The Whigs revived the story that Polk's grandfather, Ezekiel Polk, was a Tory during the American Revolution. Polk took personal charge of this accusation. Under his direction Laughlin published in pamphlet

⁸¹ Memphis *American Eagle*, June 19, 1844.

⁸² Jackson to Kendall, November 28, 1844, in Jackson Papers. Jackson expressed the opinion that Benton's speeches cost Polk at least three thousand votes in Tennessee.

⁸³ William G. Brownlow, *A Political Register, Setting Forth the Principles of the Whig and Locofoco Parties in the United States* (Jonesborough, Tenn., 1844).

⁸⁴ Jackson to Kendall, March 18, 1844, in Jackson Papers.

⁸⁵ Nashville *Star Spangled Banner*, August 3, 1844.

⁸⁶ Donelson to Polk, June 14, 1844, in Polk Papers.

form "A Vindication of Colonel Ezekiel Polk." Ten thousand copies were distributed, as Polk directed, throughout the state.⁸⁷

General Jackson entered the campaign and the "bargain" charge was resurrected against Clay. Local questions were prominent in the discussions. The activities of the "Immortal Thirteen" and the Democratic management of the state bank were paraded before the people.

The principal event of the campaign was the "Great Whig Convention" which met in Nashville in August. As in the campaign of 1840, the chief features were a spectacular parade and stirring addresses by prominent Whig orators. The great speech of the rally was made by Sergeant S. Prentiss of Mississippi, who was regarded by many as the peer of Clay or Daniel Webster.⁸⁸ Albert Pike, famous in the history of the Southwest, also delivered an address.

Clay carried the state by the narrow majority of 113 votes, the totals being Clay, 60,030, and Polk, 59,917.⁸⁹ Even Columbia voted against its own son. The Democratic press regarded the contest as a draw instead of a Whig victory. The principal reason for the defeat, it declared, was the personal opposition to Polk. No other man, it contended, could have been nominated against whom the opposition would have been so bitter and reckless.⁹⁰ There was a great deal of truth in this view, especially since Polk had been deeply involved in state politics for many years. His defeats by Jones in 1841 and 1843 had diminished his prestige in the state. His association with the "Immortal Thirteen" embittered many voters. The local situation and local issues lost him his state.

Polk's victory was a source of great satisfaction to General Jackson, although he was much disappointed over the failure of Tennessee to support her own son. In a field adjoining the Hermitage the "Old Hero" entertained two hundred guests in honor of his friend, the next President of the United States.⁹¹ He wrote Kendall of Polk's success: "I thank God that the Republic is safe, and that he has permitted me to

⁸⁷ See correspondence of Polk with Major Heiss and General Robert Armstrong, September 13, 16, 20, 25, 1844, in Sioussat (ed.), "Papers of John P. Heiss," 144-46.

⁸⁸ Phelan, *History of Tennessee*, 417-42.

⁸⁹ Horace Greeley (ed.), *The Whig Almanac and United States Register, 1845* (New York, 1845), 52, in *Tribune Almanac*, I.

⁹⁰ Nashville *Union*, November 19, 1844.

⁹¹ James Parton, *Life of Andrew Jackson* (3 vols., Boston, 1866), III, 665.

see it, and rejoice, and I can say in the language of Simeon of old, 'now let thy servant depart in peace.'"⁹² The loss of Tennessee to the Whigs in the elections of 1836 and 1840 had been a source of great bitterness to "Old Hickory," and though the state persisted in her Whiggism in 1844, the election of one of her sons brightened the last moments of his life.

To Polk it was a vindication of past defeats and a generous reward for twenty years of service to his country. He had fought many bitter campaigns for his party and had suffered much at the hands of its enemies. That the Democrats should finally turn to him for leadership and place him in the White House was ample compensation for all his labors.

⁹² Jackson to Kendall, November 23, 1844, in Jackson Papers.