Walter Nugent, forty-fifth president of the Western History Association. Photo by Phil Goldman.
The American Habit of Empire, and the Cases of Polk and Bush

Walter Nugent

Americans’ historic experience with western expansion habituated them to empire-building, underpinned by the axiom of exceptionalism and the goal of extending liberty. This essay compares two examples of empire-building involving war: Polk in Mexico and George W. Bush in Iraq.

We are now observing the return of Lewis and Clark to Saint Louis from their voyage of discovery. They reappeared just two-hundred years ago on 23 September. As we know, President Jefferson found the money for the expedition six months before he learned that Robert Livingston and James Monroe had seized the opportunity to buy Louisiana. By the time the captains started up the Missouri from here in 1804, the Purchase was done, known, and acclaimed. Less acclaimed was the fact that, as Henry Adams later pointed out in his History of the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison, Napoleon lacked clear title to it, and so therefore did the Americans who bought it from him.

But cloudy title did not stop Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, and later on, Andrew Jackson, James K. Polk, and lesser lights from asserting the United States’ perfect right to Louisiana—and to a very extensive Louisiana at that. Exactly what did it include? Certainly, the watersheds of the Mississippi and its tributaries, most notably the Missouri. But did it stop there? In 1810, Jeffersonians (including President Madison) maintained that it encompassed West Florida. Accordingly, the United States invaded and annexed that Spanish province. Was Texas also part of the Purchase? Jefferson liked to think so, and Polk claimed so in the 1844 campaign, though no river in Texas flows into the Mississippi. One could hear that Louisiana even stretched into the Oregon Country. All of these claims completely ignored or suppressed water flows, precedents, and any other indications that the Purchase had anything at all to do with Florida, Texas, or

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Oregon. Truth had no rights that assertion was bound to respect—if the assertion served American empire-building.

Americans' phenomenal and unparalleled success in acquiring large pieces of North America, and what is more, occupying them and settling them with young, lusty, nubile, and fertile frontier folk, inculcated in us Americans a habit of empire-building that is with us still, around the world and in Iraq.1 We gave up some decades ago the actual acquisition of new real estate, but we vigorously assert the habit of exercising control, hegemony, rule—call it what you will—over substantial portions not just of North America any more, but the globe. Such is the habit of empire, and it has been going on since the earliest days of the Republic. We fortuitously gained title to Trans-Appalachia, then Louisiana, then Texas, Oregon, and the Southwest, all within the first seventy years of our independent national existence—during which time, not incidentally, the nation's population exploded sixfold from under four million to almost twenty-five million. Acquisition would probably not have lasted but for the occupation that followed; possessions that were not populated by their conquerors usually became independent, as did most of the French, British, Portuguese, and other empires' outposts of a hundred years ago.2 In the United States, however, from Trans-Appalachia to the Pacific, demography either followed diplomacy and conquest, or accompanied it as in Texas, and ratified it, so far permanently.

Several years ago I taught seminars on the U. S. territorial acquisitions and began a book on them, soon to be finished. It ties together the acquisitions with the demographic occupation, better known to us here under the old W.H.A. rubric of "the westward movement." The book has expanded into a broader history of American imperialism since 1782. There have been three phases. The first was the acquiring of the continental landmass from Atlantic to Pacific, including unsuccessful raids on Canada and a highly successful one on Mexico. A second then followed: the offshore acquisitions including Alaska, Hawai'i, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, and the protectorates around the Caribbean and Pacific. Finally, a third has taken shape, the "virtual" (non-territorial but real) empire of the Cold War and post-Cold War periods, the more than seven-hundred military and naval bases the U. S. maintains around the world, including the new embassy, the world's largest, that the U. S. is building in Baghdad.

Only the first phase involved settlement in a truly major way. But all are of a piece, a continuous record of empire-building. And it was the West, as we have traditionally thought of it and studied it, where Americans learned the imperialist habit, because it was so successful, so quick, and frankly (despite the constant conflicts with neighbors and with Native peoples), so easy. Those other peoples were overwhelmed by disease,

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1 My apologies to non-U.S. inhabitants of North and South America for the linguistic imperialism of the term "Americans" as so used. Unfortunately, our language does not include equivalents to (Spanish) norteamericanos or (Italian) statunitensi.

by technology, by money, by resources, by ideology, by warfare, but also and definitively by the hugely high American rate of natural increase. Americans out-procreated everybody—not only the Native Americans, but also the French and the Spanish, who claimed vast American empires but were never able to fill them with their own people. Americans did, and displaced them.

Besides demography, imperialism has also been a habit easily learned and continued because of a particular ideology. It has rested on a persistent set of beliefs, most fundamentally the exceptionalist conviction: that this nation has been divinely or providentially favored and stands for a morally good polity, worthy of export; that its territorial and imperial successes demonstrate that; and that therefore the nation may countenance or even demand further imperial enterprises. Very often, the preferred method for implementing this ideology has been military force. Americans extended liberty for themselves in the nineteenth century, and have exported their notions of it since then, frequently by using their armies and navies.

When this exceptionalism becomes securely embedded in certain minds, such as a president's, it can underwrite imperialistic, unilateralist, aggressive, and tunnel-visioned behavior. To describe that kind of mind, it is useful to recall the philosopher-historian Isaiah Berlin's contrast between the hedgehog and the fox. Berlin drew this comparison from the Greek philosopher-poet of the seventh century BCE, Archilochus. Archilochus remarked: "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one great thing." 4 Berlin explained that "there exists a great chasm between those, on one side, who relate everything to a single central vision . . . and, on the other side, those who pursue many ends . . . connected, if at all, only in some de facto way . . . centrifugal rather than centripetal . . . seizing upon the essence of a vast variety of experiences and objects," and so on. Hedgehogs are by no means stupid, in this view; Berlin put Dante, Plato, Hegel (and probably Marx had he chosen to) among the hedgehogs. He put Shakespeare, Aristotle, and James Joyce among the foxes. Berlin readily admitted that "like all oversimple classifications of this type, the dichotomy becomes, if pressed, artificial, scholastic, and ultimately absurd." Nevertheless, "it offers a point of view from which to look and compare, a starting-point for genuine investigation." 5

In a recent essay in the New Yorker, Louis Menand takes the hedgehog-fox dichotomy a little further, into the conduct and criticism of world politics. Hedgehogs, in this arena, see everything as "ultimately determined by a single bottom-line force:

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2 Emily Morison Beck, ed., Familiar Quotations... by John Bartlett, 14th ed. (Boston, 1968), 68.

balance-of-power considerations, or the clash of civilizations, or globalization and the spread of free markets. A hedgehog is the kind of person who holds a great-man theory of history. . . . [He may even think of himself as that great man.] Whatever it is, the big idea, and that idea alone, dictates the probable outcome of events. . . . Foxes, on the other hand, don't see a single determining explanation in history," but rather "a shifting mixture of self-fulfilling and self-negating prophecies." The two do not correspond to realist versus idealist, or conservative versus liberal. They can be either, though hedgehogs are "more likely to be extreme politically, whether rightist or leftist." Hedgehogs, therefore, are highly self-confident, over-predictive, less absorptive of evidence contrary to their big idea, less flexible. There are further refinements, but that is the gist.6

Pushing this yet another step, from international affairs in general to American presidents as foreign-policy actors, some have been foxes. Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, FDR, and Bill Clinton come to mind. Others were hedgehogs. This group includes James K. Polk and George W. Bush. (Lincoln was probably a fox who was forced by extreme crisis to act like a hedgehog, but might not have later, had he lived.) I would like to explore here some similarities (and a few differences) that I have found in Polk and Bush, despite their separation in the White House by a hundred and sixty years, in the hope that we might better understand both of them, as well as the American habit of empire.

Both presidents, to begin with, came from the Wests of their time, or more specifically the Southwesterns. Both employed frontier rhetoric. Both expanded the range of American military and presidential action. Being hedgehogs, both were single-mindedly expansionist. Both had no doubts about American exceptionalism. Both were, in their tactics, secretive, given to employing secret agents and agencies. Both could be unforgiving, even vindictive, if crossed. Both were very sure of themselves and their central ideas. Both, contrary to their detractors who called them stupid, were cunningly smart—though, as those detractors might better have said, they willfully disdained evidence. Both were bellicose. Recall Bush's since-abjured "bring 'em on" and Osama "dead or alive" statements, among others. Similarly, Polk told one congressman that he knew how to deal with Britain: "the only way to treat John Bull was to look him straight in the eye." When Secretary of State Buchanan fretted in early May 1846, that the president could be sliding toward a double war with both Britain and Mexico, Polk roared back, "I would meet the war which either England or France or all the powers of Christendom might wage, and . . . I would stand and fight until the last man among us fell in the conflict." Polk added, " . . . I told him [Buchanan] there was no connection between the Oregon & Mexican question[s]. . . ."7 Except that American forces might

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7 Milo Milton Quaife, ed., The Diary of James K. Polk during His Presidency, 1845 to 1849 (Chicago, 1910), 1:398, (13 May 1846).
have been stretched rather thinly, as they would be in our day in the simultaneous Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns.

I find both personalities antipático. That should not stop me or you from taking a look at them, nor should it imply a partisan brief for or against either one. Instead, comparing the two men helps us explore the roots and continuities of American imperialism, both as to ends and to means. Arthur Schlesinger recently wrote of Bush: “The President is secure in himself, disciplined, decisive and crafty, and capable of concentrating on a few priorities . . . [he] radiates a serene but scary certitude when confronted with complicated problems or disagreements.” To the journalist Bob Woodward, Bush said, “There is no doubt in my mind we’re doing the right thing. Not one doubt.” Woodward commented, “The President was casting his mission and that of the country in the grand vision of God’s master plan. . . . ‘I’m here for a reason,’ Mr. Bush told Karl Rove . . . ‘and this is going to be how we’re going to be judged.”’

As far as our national history goes, of course, the outstandingly important similarity is not their personalities, but that each of these presidents took the country into a war, the stated reasons for which turned out to be untrue. They were not unique in this. One could apply that statement to Lyndon Johnson and the Tonkin Gulf resolution, or possibly to Madison in 1812. But however that may be, it is clearly true of Polk and Bush.

Before we discuss their war-making, let us note some less far-reaching similarities. First, both were elected by wafer-thin margins but behaved as if they had won by landslides. In 1844, Polk won 170 electoral votes to Henry Clay’s 105, but the popular vote was 1.34 million for Polk, 1.30 for Clay—only a 40,000 plurality—50.7 percent Polk, 49.3 percent Clay—of the major-party vote. The Liberty Party candidate, James G. Birney, won more than 62,000. Thus, of the total popular vote, Polk got only 49.6 percent. We all know about Bush: Gore won about 545,000 more popular votes in 2000. Bush won in the Supreme Court, 5–4, and in the electoral college, by 271 to 266, joining only Rutherford Hayes and Benjamin Harrison as winners of the electoral, but not the popular, vote totals. In 2004 Bush did better, winning 286 electoral votes to John Kerry’s 252 and 51.2 percent of the popular vote—a clean victory, though Bush won at the wire in Ohio. Again, no landslide. Nonetheless, Polk insisted that the people demanded Oregon and Texas, while Bush claimed that the people wanted more tax cuts, privatized social security, and a “war on terror.”

Their electoral situations differed in two ways. First, Polk made clear from the start that he would be a one-term president, though he made his cabinet appointees sign an agreement that they would not politick for the 1848 nomination. Secondly, Polk lost his supportive Democratic majority in the House of Representatives in the off-year

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election of 1846, so that he faced a Whig-run House from December 1847. Bush probably hoped for two terms from the outset, and he has been greatly favored with Republican majorities in both houses of Congress, except in the Senate during the year and a half between James Jeffords's defection in 2001 and when the Senate elected in November 2002 took office in January 2003. Both began facing serious objection to their foreign initiatives late in their first terms—against the Mexican-American war in Polk's case, against the Iraq war in Bush's. Lack of congressional support forced Polk to accept less of Mexico than he probably wanted in early 1848; Bush by 2005 was expected to reduce troop levels as support for him and the Iraq war dwindled, but continuing insurgency stalled serious reductions.

These seizures of more glory than the vote warranted and a single-mindedness in adhering to plan are common practices among elected officials. But they seem especially pronounced in the cases of Polk and Bush. They typify hedgehogs. The personalities of the two men are alike in other respects. Both were unilateralists, in person and in policy, not spending any time or concern on the situations of their opponents. Polk never adverted to the shaky majorities in the British House of Commons of the Peel-Aberdeen government he was dealing with over Oregon, and he cared nothing about the complex political factions in Mexico. Bush "knew" who his friends and enemies were in the Middle East, and his officials denigrated the major powers of the European Union, what Secretary Rumsfeld called "the Old Europe," from which only Tony Blair supported his Iraq intervention. If you're not with us, he said, you're against us.

Both men were publicly and deeply religious. Polk was more conventional, a main-line Presbyterian; Bush, with his born-againness, less so. But the commitment level is similar, as is the faith-based mindset. Polk never held cabinet meetings on the Sabbath except once, when he and the cabinet were abruptly terrified at British Foreign Secretary Lord Aberdeen's casual remark about building and sending "thirty ships of the line" if the Americans made Oregon a question of national honor, and therefore of war. Instead, Polk's Diary consistently noted his Sabbath church attendance, where, and with whom. Bush's born-again faith has been restated many times and the "religious right" has been a key part of his base. Both exhibit a powerful sense of mission: that they were sent by Providence or the Deity to spread liberty or freedom. For Polk, "liberty" did not include slaves, Indians, or Mexicans, and for Bush, "freedom" has not extended to Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo, or suspected terrorists swept up for CIA rendition. The end, whether called "liberty" or "freedom," justified the means. In both cases, whether "liberty" or "freedom," the underlying idea was that our nation and our society possessed both—exceptionally—and that it was the leader's job to bestow it on the less fortunate.

Polk and Bush also shared, as presidents, the broadest assertion of executive power that their historical contexts permitted. Polk deployed army and navy forces on the edges of Mexico without consulting Congress, yet forcing it to acquiesce. Living in an era of strong states' rights and a not-yet worn-down tradition of congressional
participation in foreign affairs, he could not push the powers of the president as far as Bush has. Many have asked, is there anything that Bush and his vice president think they can't do? The thrust is similar.

Both Polk and Bush have been vindictive to those they felt disloyal or insubordinate. Polk fired Nicholas Trist and then General Winfield Scott; Bush has fired Richard Clark and Paul O'Neill. Neither president has seemed close or open to his cabinet members, except possibly Polk to Navy Secretary George Bancroft (certainly not to Secretary of State James Buchanan), and Bush to Secretary Rumsfeld and now to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice (in marked contrast to her marginalized predecessor, Colin Powell), and of course Vice President Dick Cheney. But even Rice was not told of Bush's "goal of ending tyranny around the world" before he announced it in his second inaugural.  

Polk, to judge by his Diary, was candid at times with Senator Thomas Hart Benton and a few members of Congress he had known in Tennessee, but with almost no one else (and even Benton later felt duped). Bush has appeared candid with Cheney and a few advisers, including Rice, Harriet Miers, and Karen Hughes, but not many others. Polk and Bush, in short, have been loners—i.e., hedgehogs.

Both used secret emissaries and agents. Polk employed John Slidell and his brother Alexander Slidell Mackenzie, the newspaperman Moses Beach, and the shadowy Alexander Atchana before and during the Mexican conflict; John C. Frémont, Thomas O. Larkin, and Archibald Gillespie in California; and finally Trist to negotiate a treaty. In Polk's day there were no wires yet available to tap, but secrecy ruled. It did not always work well. The mission of Alexander Slidell Mackenzie to Havana to persuade the exiled Santa Anna to return to Mexico under American safe-conduct and disarrange its high command concluded instead with Santa Anna leading another army against the Americans. The Bush-Cheney-Rumsfeld reliance on the unreliable agent "Curve Ball," and forged documents about the uranium from Niger, despite CIA warnings, helped lead them to war.

Both presidents disdained reading newspapers. Polk gave few interviews, but in one with a New York Herald reporter, the president said he "had but little opportunity to read newspapers, and could at no time do more than glance hastily over them." Bush has been quoted as saying that he did not need to read newspapers, as his staff did it for him and then told him what he needed to know. Polk was an assiduous writer and precise recorder, as his four-volume Diary attests. As far as we know, Bush does not write; but we know he could, as evidenced by his two Ivy-League degrees.

Hedgehog-like unilateralism and self-justifying exceptionalism show up in both personalities. Each ignored what stood in his way—for Polk in Oregon, it was Britain; for Bush in Iraq, it was the EU and the UN. Both demonized their enemy—Polk, Mexico;

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Bush, Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein. Neither had the slightest interest in the cultural complexity of the opponent. Polk had only contempt for Mexico, and Bush and his staff paid no attention to the looting and burning of Iraq's museums, antiquities, and libraries. Both had hidden agendas, particularly unpublicized foreign-policy aims. Polk in his 1844 campaign and his inaugural address stressed the reannexation of Texas and the reoccupation of Oregon (stretching both terms far beyond the historical truth). He said nothing about California, his true target as he admitted privately and very early in his presidency to Benton and Bancroft. Bush and his advisers were planning war on Iraq at the first plausible opportunity. Clarke, and Secretary O'Neill, as he appears in Ron Suskind's The Price of Loyalty, maintain that Iraq was on "the administration's agenda long before 9/11."  

Nine-eleven provided the plausible opportunity. We learn from Clarke and Paul Pillar that every scrap of intelligence was taken from context to justify the Iraq intervention, linking it to Al Qaeda and 9/11—even though, as Clarke remarked, it's as if, after the Pearl Harbor attack, the U. S. had declared war on Mexico. Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor, in Cobra II, state that "advanced planning" for an Iraq invasion was under way by late 2001.  

The hidden agenda, either of capturing California (Polk) or toppling Saddam Hussein (Bush), had been planned long before events permitted its disclosure. 

Both Polk and Bush ran into criticism. They began their terms and their foreign interventions with strong support from their own parties and with very little complaint from the opposition. The Whigs in 1846 and many Democrats in 2003 were emasculated by the fear that if they opposed the wars in Mexico or Iraq openly, they would be damned for not supporting the troops, which would translate into a lack of patriotism, or even (Ann Coulter) "treason." When Polk sent his war message to the House in May 1846, he stated that he was asking for money and troops because American blood had been shed on American soil. The appropriation bill before the House began with a "preamble" stating exactly that. Amendments were not permitted. Polk's justification was wedded to the bill. Garrett Davis, a Kentucky Whig, protested vigorously against that preamble, insisting that the Nueces and not the Rio Grande was the true border, and that therefore the soil in question was not American at all. He voted for the money and the troops because he dared not do otherwise. The distinction between support for the American forces but opposition to putting them in harm's way was no more easy to draw with the public in 1846 than in 2003. 

In both cases, however, opposition to the military intervention gathered steam in due course, as troubling reports trickled in from the field. Polk's Democrats lost the 1846 election in considerable part because of disgruntlement with the Mexican war


effort, and the Bush administration fell well below 50 percent support in polls by 2006 as bad news kept arriving from Iraq. As for the military, Polk faced a melt-down of volunteer enlistments in late 1846 and early 1847, as news (and casualties) returned from Mexico. Similarly, National Guard enlistments dropped precipitously in 2005 and enlistments in regular forces fell below quotas, sustained only by recruiters' hard sells and sweeteners. Polk needed supplemental appropriations and more troops by 1847 and early 1848 if Mexico were to be occupied effectively. He pulled back and accepted Trist's treaty in the face of certain Whig opposition. The initial estimate of Bush's budget director, Mitch Daniels, that the Iraq venture would cost $60 billion, soared to $1 trillion (Scott Walsten of the friendly American Enterprise Institute) or even $2 trillion (Nobel Laureate Joseph E. Stiglitz) by early 2006.¹⁴

In certain ways, Polk and Bush have been different. Polk kept his four-volume Diary, and Bush most likely has not kept any such record. Polk met office-seekers, casual visitors, and just about anybody, almost every day, whereas Bush has been accused of living and working in a bubble. Polk never took a vacation and, when he died three months after leaving the job, it was in part, perhaps a large part, from exhaustion. Bush has spent a record number of vacation days at his Crawford ranch.

As for their vice presidents, Mr. Cheney has been identified or accused of being the real brains of Bush. Surely he has had extraordinary influence. Polk, on the other hand, mentions George M. Dallas so seldom in the Diary that he appears as a casual visitor, dropping by every few weeks, like a diplomat from a small foreign principality.

Polk, still a traditional Jeffersonian, opposed a large standing army.¹⁵ Bush's military budgets evidence no fear of that at all, increasing 48 percent between 2001 to 2006 to over $500-billion a year, by far the world's largest. Both presidents cut taxes just as they were going to war, and the national debt shot up both times.¹⁶ Polk openly admitted this and struggled to get military appropriations through Congress. Bush's requests for funds to fight in Iraq and Afghanistan have simply been left off-budget.

As for treaty obligations, Polk insisted in his inaugural that "Texas was once part of our country—was unwisely ceded away to a foreign power—is now independent, and possesses an undoubted right . . . to merge her sovereignty as a separate and independent state with ours." He continued:


¹⁵ Quaife, ed., The Diary of James K. Polk, 3:495 (18 June 1847). . . .In a discussion with Senators Sam Houston and Jefferson Davis, Polk declared "the old army of 15 regiments [15,000 men]. . . altogether sufficient," and objected "to the creation of a large standing army in time of peace."

Our Union is a confederation of independent States, whose policy is peace with each other and all the world. To enlarge its limits [by including Texas] is to extend the dominions of peace over additional territories and increasing millions. The world has nothing to fear from military ambition in our Government. . . . our Government can not be otherwise than pacific. Foreign powers should therefore look on the annexation of Texas to the United States not as the conquest of a nation seeking to extend her dominions by arms and violence, but as the peaceful acquisition of a territory once her own.17

In other words (familiar words): trust us; we're not aggressive. Polk reminded his audience, however, that the 1819 treaty was an unwise giveaway, and that events (Texas’s independence) had overtaken it. In the view of Polk’s supporters, and his mentor, Andrew Jackson, the 1819 treaty had “faded away.” Lately, Bush counselors Alberto Gonzalez, John Yoo, and Jay Bybee argued that the Geneva Conventions were quaint and inapplicable, and that the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 1978 (FISA) had become technologically outmoded and could consequently be bypassed.18

Both Polk and Bush have been, and will be, defined by their foreign activities. Domestically, Polk did almost nothing, except veto a rivers-and-harbors bill, supervise passage of a lower tariff, and create an independent treasury, all traditional Jacksonian-Democratic positions. Most of these measures he left to his treasury secretary, Robert Walker of Mississippi. Bush, on the domestic front, lowered taxes on upper brackets and non-earned income, promoted changes in Social Security (unsuccessfully) and a Medicare prescription-drug law (problematically), and reduced educational, social, veterans’, and non-military research programs. Thus, the main achievements of Polk were in foreign policy, and if Bush is ultimately deemed to have had achievements, they will likely be in that area. So let us look more closely at the two major activities of these hedgehogs: Polk in Mexico and Bush in Iraq.

As stated above, the outstanding similarity of the two presidencies is their foreign wars and the fact that the reasons Polk and Bush gave for their wars were either false from the start, or turned out to be false. Both wars had unintended consequences that were enormous, or may become so. To quote from a powerful United States senator, “The war had disappointed the calculation on which it began. Instead of brief, cheap, and bloodless, it had become long, costly, and sanguinary.” The words could obviously apply to Iraq, but they were written by Thomas Hart Benton after the Mexican War.19

17 Polk, Inaugural Address, 4 March 1845, in House Executive Documents 540, 82nd Cong., 2d Sess., 87–8.


19 T.H. Benton, Thirty Years' View; or, A History of the Working of the American Government... from 1820 to 1850... (New York, 1856), vol. 2, 710.
Polk did add to U. S. territory the present Southwest, the Mexican states of Nuevo Mexico and Alta California. Whatever else can be said, he “got something” for his aggression. But he also thereby re-opened the slavery extension question in an almost irreparable way. Bush toppled Saddam Hussein in Iraq and the Taliban in Afghanistan, as intended, but also disrupted civil life in Iraq, provoked long-term civil strife and a pro-Iranian Shiite theocracy, and strengthened the much more dangerous Iran, rather than (so far) create the viable democracy and “freedom” in the Middle East that was promised. World-wide sympathy and support for the United States immediately after 9/11 quickly turned to negative opinions and increased jihadism.

Polk entered into war with Mexico claiming in his war message of 11 May 1846, that “American blood has been shed on the American soil,” and that therefore a state of war existed. The “American soil” that Polk claimed had been violated was the land between the Nueces and Rio Grande rivers, now and since 1848 part of south Texas. But was it American soil? Texas unarguably became the twenty-eighth state as of 29 December 1845, when Congress ratified its annexation.

But was the land in question part of Texas? It might have been if Texas was part of the Louisiana Purchase, and it might have been if the Mexican state, and previously Spanish province, of Tejas had included it. But neither “might have been” was true. To say so was to maintain what might be called the “limitless Louisiana” theory of early American foreign policy. Jefferson and Madison, between 1803 and 1810, were immediately concerned with defining West Florida as within Louisiana, but they also cast covetous eyes on the more distant Texas.

After Robert Livingston and James Monroe bought Louisiana, they asked Talleyrand, Napoleon’s foreign minister, just what it included. He famously replied, “I can give you no direction; you have made a noble bargain for yourselves, & I suppose you will make the most of it.”

The 1803 treaty conveyed to the United States exactly what Spain had conveyed to France in 1800—the “retrocession”—which in turn was exactly what France had conveyed to Spain in 1762, as part of the settlement of the Seven Years’ War. (These “conveyances” were riddled with flaws in legal title, by the way, but that’s another story.)

But what was conveyed? The watershed of the Mississippi, no doubt, which included its tributaries and its tributaries’ tributaries, all the way to the crest of the Rockies, as Lewis and Clark pursued them. However, no river south of the Red flows into the Mississippi, not even the Sabine, the present Texas-Louisiana boundary. Texas lies entirely outside the Mississippi watershed no matter how broadly either is construed.

Texas, however, was part of the Jeffersonians’ “limitless Louisiana.” Only in 1819 did the United States renounce claims to Texas, when John Quincy Adams and Luis de Onís y Gonzales drew the boundary from the Gulf of Mexico up the Sabine, west along the Red, north along the 100th meridian, and west along the 42nd parallel to

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the Pacific—the familiar zigzag line of the Transcontinental Treaty. It was said, often, that John Quincy gave up Texas in order to gain that linear foothold on the Pacific (and also the Florida peninsula). What he gave up was a groundless but repeated claim that Texas was part of the Louisiana Purchase. Even General Jackson went along with the treaty in 1819, in order to secure Florida. But soon after, Jackson and others started claiming once again that Texas was part of Louisiana and that John Quincy had bargained it away. Such was the drumbeat, and the 1844 campaign resounded with the cry of “reannexation.” Polk said so in his inaugural address, 4 March 1845, where he spoke of Texas “not as . . . conquest” but as the United States “peaceful acquisition of territory once her own.” Three years later, in a speech in the Senate on 1 February 1848, the Illinois Democrat Stephen A. Douglas insisted not only that Texas was part of the Louisiana Purchase, but also that the 1819 treaty included everything southward to the Rio Grande. This was revisionist imperialist history on an outrageous scale. Douglas also defended Polk against critics who were saying that his war aims had changed: from a “war of self-defence” (Douglas’s words) to a “war of conquest.” No such thing, said Douglas—although he was leading the movement to annex most, even all, of Mexico. That effort might well have succeeded had not the treaty negotiated by Nicholas Trist arrived at just that moment in Washington. Polk went along with it, fearing he could not get any more troops and war money out of Congress; and after all, it gave him his long-time object, Upper California.

“Limitless Louisiana” went even beyond West Florida and Texas. The widely-read publicist Hall Jackson Kelley, in his book on Oregon published in 1830, asserted that it included the Oregon Country too. Senators Benton and John C. Calhoun echoed that claim, suggested earlier by Jefferson and Monroe. But since Oregon lay west of the Rocky Mountain continental divide, and thus by definition could not be part of the Mississippi-Missouri watershed, the claim did not stand up to scrutiny. Its only basis

21 Polk, Inaugural Address, 4 March 1845. In the pamphlet published by the Congressional Globe in 1848 titled “Speech of Hon. S. A. Douglas, of Illinois, on The War with Mexico, and the Boundary of the Rio Grande, delivered in the Senate of the United States, Tuesday, February 1, 1848,” Douglas said, “I repeat, that this line of the Nueces was manufactured in this country, for the purpose of erecting a platform from which to assail the President of the United States, and through him the Democratic party” p. 13. Denying any change in war aims Douglas said, “I do not understand that it is, or at any time has been, a war of conquest.... It is a war of self-defence [sic], forced upon us by our enemy, and prosecuted on our part in vindication of our honor, and the integrity of our territory. The enemy invaded our territory, and we repelled the invasion, and demanded satisfaction for all our grievances. In order to compel Mexico to do us justice, it was necessary to follow her retreating armies into her territory, to take possession of State after State, and hold them until she would yield to our reasonable demands; and insomuch as...she was unable to make indemnity in money, we must necessarily take it in land. Conquest was not the motive for the prosecution of the war; satisfaction, indemnity, security, was the motive – conquest and territory the means,” p. 5.

22 Hall Jackson Kelley, A Geographical Sketch of That Part of North America Called Oregon... (Boston, 1830).
lay on an erroneous interpretation of the Treaty of Utrecht of 1713, which proposed a commission—no more than that, and not even the commission was ever created—to establish a boundary between French and British lands west of the Great Lakes, suggesting the 49th parallel as a line. Again, imperial revisionist history.

So much for the “limitless Louisiana” argument, that Texas was ever part of Louisiana. As for the other claim, that Spanish and Mexican Tejas extended to the Rio Grande, there is as much real history behind that as there is real science behind creationism and intelligent design. It rested on nothing firmer than spurious and spurious repetition.

If France had any claim to the Texas Gulf Coast, it had to rest on La Salle’s ill-fated voyage of 1682. Such a claim would have passed to the United States along with the Purchase. But the contrary evidence was mountainous. The Mexican general Manuel Mier y Terán, in his 1829 report on Texas conditions, properly called the La Salle voyage an “absurd fiasco”; Spanish claims long preceded it anyway. When the missions around San Antonio were founded in 1716–1718, the Medina and San Antonio rivers—not the Rio Grande—separated Tejas from Coahuila. By 1767, the Nueces was the southern boundary of Tejas. In 1805 Tejas’s southern boundary was demarcated as running from the Gulf up the Nueces for over a hundred miles, then north and northwest for hundreds more—none of it anywhere near the Rio Grande. The Spanish government in 1808 commissioned an historical investigation by Don José Antonio Pichardo of the borders of Louisiana and the provinces to the west. Completed four years and one million words later, Pichardo refuted any claims that Texas was part of Louisiana. (And in 1931, a University of Texas historian, Charles W. Hackett, translating and editing Pichardo, wrote that his “conclusions are sane and correct.”)23 In 1824, as part of its new constitution, Mexico created the joint province of Coahuila y Tejas, with the Texas segment entirely north of the Nueces. Stephen F. Austin’s empresario maps of 1829, 1833, and 1836 show the Nueces as the line between Tejas and Coahuila.24 The coastal strip was always part of Tamaulipas, and the land west of that was in Nuevo Leon and Coahuila. No empresario grants were made there; no Anglos lived there; no Texas counties had been carved from it as of 1845.

There was never any basis for considering the Rio Grande the southern border of Texas until Texans defeated Santa Anna at San Jacinto in April 1836 and then forced him, his life in the balance, to sign the Treaties of Velasco. Even those gunpoint-secured treaties did not explicitly put the boundary at the Rio Grande. They said only that Mexican troops would retreat south of it and that Texas troops would not advance south of it. The Texas Congress claimed the Rio Grande boundary in December 1836, but that was not recognized anywhere else in law or treaty. In the American Congress’s

23 Charles Wilson Hackett, ed., Pichardo’s Treatise on the Limits of Louisiana and Texas…
vol. 1 (Austin, 1931–46), xix.

joint resolution of 1 March 1845, annexing Texas, the language was that the new state would be "formed, subject to the adjustment by this government of all questions of boundary that may arise with other governments." At that point, despite what Texas said, neither the U. S. Congress, nor the outgoing Tyler administration, nor the incoming Polk administration, insisted on the Rio Grande boundary, because to do so would have created a casus belli between the United States and Mexico.

At that point, March 1845, Polk still hoped to gain California and Oregon by negotiation, without war. That fall, he sent John Slidell to Mexico City to try to buy California, while simultaneously ordering General Zachary Taylor and his troops to proceed to Corpus Christi (just south of the Nueces, by the way) and a naval squadron to the Gulf, in case diplomacy failed. Since Polk refused to realize that even the mere presence of an American envoy would destabilize the Mexican government, diplomacy did fail. Polk then sent Taylor to the Rio Grande, and the inevitable skirmishes ensued in late April 1846. Mexico fired the first shots; Polk asked Congress to authorize an army to redress this shedding of American blood on what he claimed was American soil; and the war was on. Not until the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was the Texas (and therefore U. S.) boundary with Mexico placed at the Rio Grande. The Texas Republic claimed the north and east bank of the Rio Grande all the way to its source, thus giving itself what became the eastern half of New Mexico and large pieces of Colorado, Oklahoma, Kansas, and Wyoming. The United States willingly absorbed all of that in 1848, but in the Compromise of 1850, Texas's western boundaries became the present ones of the State, not including eastern New Mexico and the rest. The Rio Grande, however, not the Nueces, became the permanent southern boundary of the state and the nation.

It was therefore at the end, not the beginning, of the Mexican-American War that soil north of the Rio Grande and south of the Nueces became American soil, upon which American blood had been shed. At the time it was shed in 1846, it was Mexican, though Texas claimed it—and American forces had invaded it. But Polk believed, and proclaimed, otherwise. Did he lie? He certainly told an untruth. Whether he knowingly did so—which I take to be essential if we are to call it a lie—I cannot answer for lack of both evidence and insight. Polk took the United States into war under false pretenses; that much is certain. His supporters, like Senator Douglas, never backed down on claiming the Rio Grande boundary, and thus that Mexico had invaded United States territory.²⁶


²⁶ This is basically also the position of Andrew Bacevich: "I tend not to buy into the charge that Bush and others blatantly lied us into this war. I think they believed most of what they claimed. You should probably put believe in quotes, because it amounts to talking yourself into it. They believed that American omnipotence, as well as know-how and determination, could imprint democracy on Iraq. They really believed that, once they succeed in Iraq, a whole host of
New Mexico and Alta California were captured by American forces by January 1847. In February, General Taylor’s campaign in northern Mexico essentially bogged down, and it was deemed too costly in men, money, and time to push the several hundred miles southward to Mexico City. The assumption was that the endgame was to take the capital, and Mexico would sue for peace. So Polk sent another army, under Winfield Scott, which landed at Veracruz, fought its way up to the capital, and took it by mid-September 1847. Mexico’s organized armies had been defeated. Mission accomplished!

But an interminable, bloody, and expensive guerrilla war faced Polk. The sizeable puro party in Mexico insisted that national honor demanded that the struggle continue, by whatever means, indefinitely—which we might term “an insurgency.” Polk, ignorant of this danger, fired his negotiator, Nicholas Trist, in November 1847, and instructed the American army to take harsh measures against Mexico and Mexicans. Polk replaced General Scott to assure that would be done. In late 1847 and early 1848, a clamor arose in Congress and the American press to annex most or all of Mexico, and Polk was tempted. But Trist refused to be fired. Instead he negotiated a treaty in line with his original instructions from Polk, which were to get Alta California and the Rio Grande boundary in Texas. For once, the hedgehog relented (though not with Trist, whose pay and expenses Polk cut off from the day of firing). Polk sent the treaty to the Senate, which quickly ratified it.

Polk achieved his main, early, and hidden agenda: acquiring California. Along with it went the re-opening of the question of extending slavery into the West. Publicly and privately, Polk refused to see any connection. In his inaugural address, he said, “Whatever is good or evil in the local institutions of Texas will remain her own whether annexed to the United States or not.”27 In his diary entry for 10 August 1846, he remarked that Congressman David Wilmot had just introduced “a mischievous & foolish amendment” to the military appropriation bill, “to the effect that no territory which might be acquired by treaty from Mexico should ever be a slave-holding country. What connection slavery had with making peace with Mexico it is difficult to conceive.” Polk even met with Wilmot on 23 December (1846) but continued to insist that slavery was “a domestic matter.”28 He never understood that a great many people, north and south, did see the connection. None of his successors—not the Whig general Zachary Taylor, the Democratic general Franklin Pierce, nor Polk’s former Secretary of State James Buchanan, all of whom (with Millard Fillmore) occupied the presidency from 1849 to 1861—was able to stave off the cataclysm.

ancillary benefits were going to ensue, transforming the political landscape of the Middle East. All of those expectations were bizarre delusions....” Interview with Tom Engelhardt, originally on <tomdispatch.com>, “a weblog of The Nation Institute, reproduced on History News Network, hnn.us/articles/25707.html (accessed 19 June 2006, 5).

27 House Exec. Doc. 540, 82nd Cong., 2d sess., 89.

28 Polk, Diary, vol. 2, 75 (10 August 1846) and vol. 2, 289–90 (23 December 1846).
The parallels of all this with the Iraq engagement in 2003 do not require elaborate setting-forth. But evidence mounts to support several important similarities. President Bush asked Congress in October 2002 to authorize use of military force against Iraq. The resolution cited Iraq’s “continuing weapons of mass destruction programs” (chemical, biological, and nuclear) and called them “a continuing threat to the national security of the United States” and the Persian Gulf region. It declared a “risk that the Iraqi regime will either employ those weapons to launch a surprise attack against the United States or its Forces or provide them to international terrorists who would do so.” It stated further that “members of Al Qaida, an organization bearing responsibility for attacks on the United States, its citizens, and interests, including the attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, are known to be in Iraq.” The resolution connected Iraq with “terrorist organizations” no fewer than ten times. It therefore authorized the president “to use the Armed Forces of the United States as he determine[d] to be necessary and appropriate. . .”29 Congress passed the resolution handily on 11 October, thirteen months after 9/11 and less than one month before the 2002 election, and President Bush signed it on 16 October.

In his State of the Union speech of 28 January 2003, Bush uttered the “sixteen words” claiming that British intelligence “has learned” that Saddam Hussein had been trying to buy uranium in Africa. That statement, since proved false, amplified the notion that Iraq was a direct threat. On 5 February 2003, Secretary of State Colin Powell presented the U. N. General Assembly with evidence that the Saddam Hussein regime had WMDs—a nuclear weapons program, nerve gas, aluminum tubes for uranium enrichment, biological weapons mobile factories, anthrax, chemical warheads, and middle-range Scud missiles.30 In late March 2003, the United States invaded Iraq. The casus belli, in brief, was Iraq’s possession of WMDs, the presence of Al Qaida in Iraq, and the likelihood that those weapons would become available to it.

No WMDs were ever found, despite diligent efforts by two Bush-appointed investigation teams under David Kay and Charles A. Duelfer, which cost several hundred million dollars. No connection with Al Qaida was ever proved, bearing out the views of scholarly experts before the war that cooperation between the militantly secular Baathist regime and the jihadi fanatics was quite improbable. Each of Secretary Powell’s pieces of “evidence” was proven false, and Powell forthrightly admitted in September 2005 that the speech was “a blot” that “will always be part of my record.”31 President


Bush in his State of the Union Address in January 2004 no longer talked of WMDs, but rather of “mass-destruction-related program activities.” He also said, at one later point, that there was no connection between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaida.

Thus the original justifications for the war in Iraq evaporated. The reasons for maintaining the American presence shifted to the assertion that those already killed should not have died in vain (i.e., future casualties would validate past ones). Later, making somewhat more sense, the justification became the need to help Iraq establish a stable, democratic regime: in other words, to help realize there the ideals of democracy and freedom. These, however, were not the stated reasons for the war at its outset. Did Bush and Powell, Cheney and Rumsfeld, lie in September 2002 and February 2003? Again—as with Polk—I cannot accuse them of that, for lack of evidence and insight. What they said clearly proved to be false, just like Polk’s assertion that the north bank of the Rio Grande was American territory and that armed “defense” was required.

Evidence mounts, however, that intelligence was slanted or “cherry-picked” to support the war against Iraq and that contrary or cautionary evidence was ignored. The brief but devastating statement by Paul R. Pillar, the national intelligence officer (CIA) for the Near East and South Asia from 2000 to 2005, which appears in the March-April 2006 issue of Foreign Affairs, describes the “disturbing” disuse or misuse of intelligence in “even the most significant national security decisions” regarding Iraq. Pillar also cites the report of the Silberman-Robb Commission in March 2005 on intelligence errors, which were real. The Bush administration replied that nearly everyone, not just themselves, believed Iraq had WMDs. Not so. Many around the world hoped that inspections under Hans Blix and Mohamed El-Baradei would be allowed to find out, and that “deterrence…through an aggressive inspections program” was working. To Pillar, this defense “inadvertently pointed out the real problem: intelligence on Iraqi weapons programs did not drive its decision to go to war.” The real drive behind the Iraq war was “the desire to shake up the sclerotic power structures of the Middle East and hasten the spread of more liberal politics and economics in the region.”

Faulty intelligence about Santa Anna helped shape Polk’s actions in 1846. The false though regionally popular assertion about the extent of Texan and American territory underlay them. Both Polk and Bush made factually erroneous statements to justify, to Congress and the public, actions that would achieve their own agendas.

The real reason for the Iraq intervention was not WMDs or an Iran connection with Al Qaida. The motivator was a much broader policy position, indeed an ideology, which was set forth in “The National Security Strategy of the United States of America” issued

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32 Paul R. Pillar, “Intelligence, Policy, and the War in Iraq,” Foreign Affairs, March/April 2006, pre-published on www.foreignaffairs.org/20060301faessay85202/paul-r-pillar/intelligence-policy-and-... See also, The New York Times and Chicago Tribune, 11 February 2006. Pillar called the use of intelligence to justify the already-made decision an “upside-down relationship between intelligence and policy…a radical departure from the textbook model…in which an intelligence service responds to policymaker interest in certain subjects…and explores them in whatever direction the evidence leads.”
on 17 September 2002, and is called more succinctly the “Bush Doctrine.” It argues for preventive military actions (as distinct from simply pre-emptive), done cooperatively if possible, but unilaterally if necessary; and at the United States' own discretion. (With Congress's willing authorizations, this means, in effect, presidential discretion. Polk would have envied such latitude.) The “Security Strategy” is envisioned as much more than just defensive: it will “ignite a new era of global economic growth through free markets and free trade,” and will “expand the circle of development by opening societies [like Iraq and others in the Middle East] and building the infrastructure of democracy.” To do all this requires reaffirming “the essential role of American military strength.” “Freedom is the non-negotiable demand of human dignity,” the preamble concludes, and “[t]he United States welcomes our responsibility to lead in this great mission.”

This rhetoric does not ring hollow with considerable elements of the American public because it is so traditional. Exchange “liberty” for “freedom,” retain words like “mission” and “democracy,” and the language could as well be Polk's as Bush's. Or Woodrow Wilson's, or, at the onset and in the midst of World War II, even Franklin Roosevelt's.

The ideals are hardly unprecedented, nor is the unilateralism. It is not quite correct, as Todd Gitlin wrote in early 2003, that “it makes a long-building imperial tendency explicit and permanent.” The declaration of preventive rather than preemptive military action was never so explicit, but otherwise the ideas in the Bush Doctrine do have precedent. Its immediate roots were think-pieces of the 1990s by Paul Wolfowitz and others, the band of neoconservatives around Vice President Cheney and Secretary Rumsfeld. But the neocons' rhetoric echoes a very long way, past Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt, even beyond Polk, to Jefferson and Madison.

Oceans of ink have already been spilled on explaining neoconservative ideology as a backdrop to the Bush doctrine and the Iraq war. One effort to tie the ideology to historical precedents may, I hope, suffice. Thomas Donnelly of the American Enterprise Institute has observed that

[The rhetoric of Theodore Roosevelt and the Founders [Jefferson, Hamilton, Madison] is not so different from that of President Bush . . . the habits of mind are consistent. Indeed, the balance of history suggests that there is an enduring American 'strategic culture,' that is, a set of predilections, tendencies, visions, myths, fallacies, traditions, and experiences that has led Americans to make choices in international politics that others]


Donnelly speaks much truth, it seems to me, and he nearly preempts my argument. Except for three points, I could add little but detail to it. The three points, however, are crucial. First: not even Polk, McKinley, or Lyndon Johnson argued explicitly for, or defended, preventive wars. Jefferson possibly came close when he wrote of our country’s utter need for New Orleans in his 1802 letter to Robert Livingston, calling it the “one single spot [on the globe], the possessor of which is our natural and habitual enemy.”

His solution, however, was not war but purchase from France. There is no real precedent for the blatant claim that the U. S. president may decide when, where, and on whom he may wage preventive war.

Second: the rhetoric has not been supported by the reality in Iraq. The hope that it still does, and that democracy and freedom (as we define them) will still succeed there as a result of our intervention, is clung to ferociously by the Bush administration, understandably so. But it may be, as a Washington Post writer suggested as early as June 2004, that the Iraq occupation “has increasingly undermined, and in some cases discredited, the core tenets of President Bush’s foreign policy, according to a wide range of Republican and Democratic analysts and U. S. officials.” The resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan underscores the point.

The third point at which I would revise Donnelly’s statement should be near to our hearts, because it situates all this squarely within western history, which Donnelly does not consider. It was the urge, the conviction, and the process of westward expansion across the continent that initiated and inured us into the imperial habit. Based on the axiom of exceptionalism, fortified by triumph after triumph over Indians, Mexicans, and everyone else in the way (except Canadians and British, where the U. S. was forced to back off), we taught ourselves to think of expansion and empire as normal and natural. After reaching the Pacific in 1848, we moved beyond into the Pacific and the Caribbean and, in recent times, have created not a territorial, but nonetheless a very real, empire around the world, both militarily and economically. The empire for liberty has become empires for enforced liberty. The rhetoric of liberty, freedom, and the mission to export them, however sincere, has often masked some very gritty realities. The gap between the rhetoric and the reality is the measure of our hypocrisy, which negates whatever good we may hope to accomplish. We saw it with Polk and Mexico, and now we see it with Bush and Iraq.

The significance of the frontier in American history may well be that it instilled in us the bad habit of building empires.

It would be worthwhile if we historians would explore why other frontier-settler societies behaved differently—why, for example, Canada, Brazil, Argentina, or Australia have not been as aggressive, verbally and militarily, as we have. Is it simply that they lacked our great size and economic clout, our demographic fecundity, or our imperial ideology? Were those the crucial differences? Let us compare.

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