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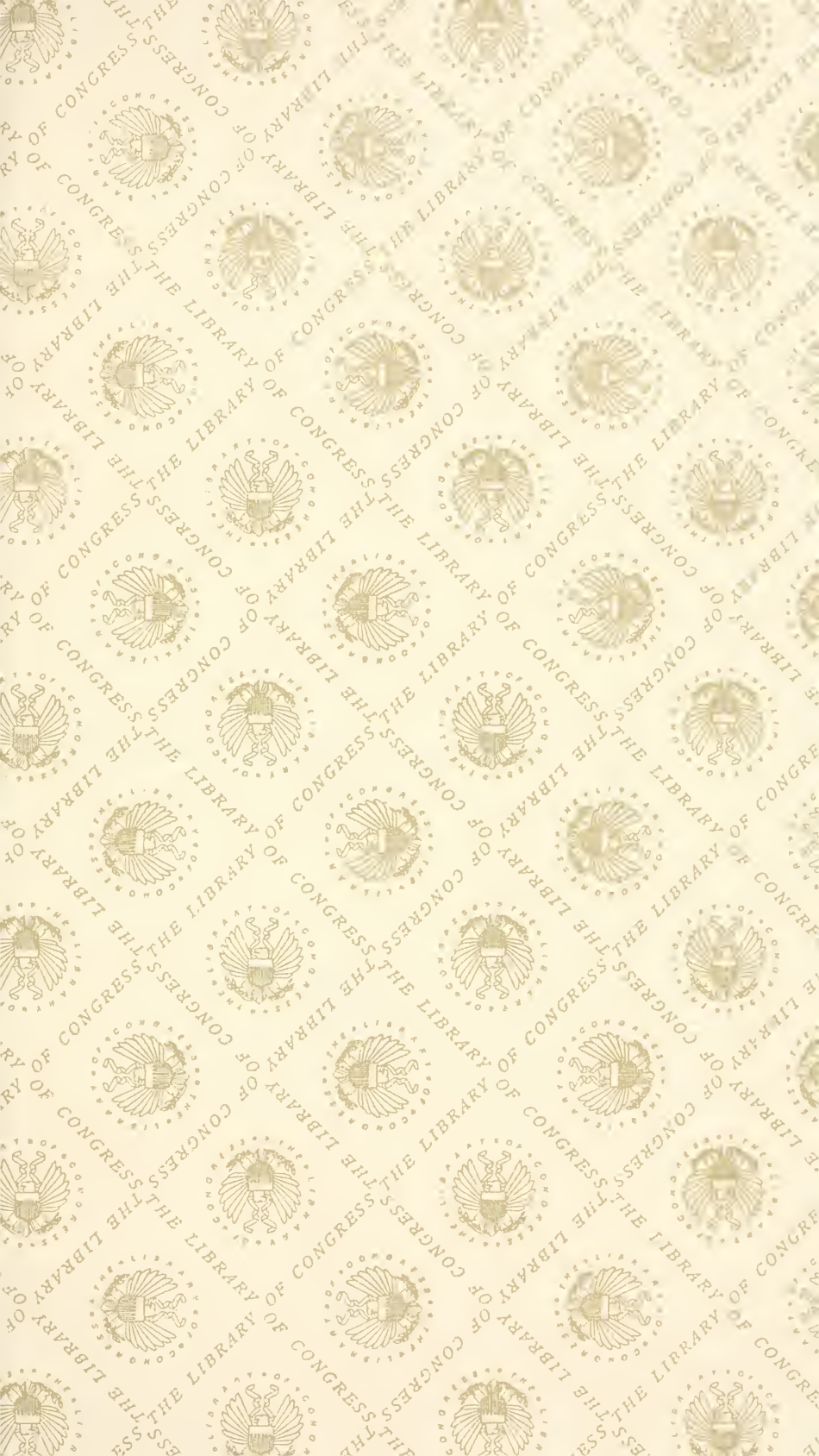


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CABINET MEETINGS  
UNDER PRESIDENT POLK

BY

HENRY BARRETT LEARNED

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XIII. CABINET MEETINGS UNDER PRESIDENT POLK.

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By HENRY BARRETT LEARNED,  
*Washington , D. C.*

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## CABINET MEETINGS UNDER PRESIDENT POLK.<sup>1</sup>

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By HENRY BARRETT LEARNED.

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The Cabinet meeting has always been to contemporaries other than Cabinet members something of a mystery. Rumors of proceedings and routine, the truth or falsity of which can not readily be tested, keep in circulation and accordingly afford an attractive theme for gossip and guessing. Regular days for Cabinet councils have long been understood to be Tuesdays and Fridays. These were taken for granted as such under the present administration until some one ventured the assertion early in the autumn of 1913 that President Wilson had departed from one more precedent by abandoning Cabinet meetings altogether. Whatever its source, this gossip-compelling statement fell upon listening ears. In the course of a few months, however, with an authentic sound as though coming from the White House, word once more got into print that the President wished it understood that meetings of the Cabinet were being held twice a week on the regular days, and that no member of the council absented himself from the meetings in Washington on Cabinet days without good reasons. This second rumor with respect to the regularity of Cabinet meetings from the opening of Mr. Wilson's term I was able accidentally to verify as correct. But as a rule the on-looker in Washington has no specially reliable sources of information about the nature of contemporary Cabinet meetings, for every administration is bound to have and to hold sacred—at least for a time—its Cabinet secrets.

On the other hand, secrets, especially such as must be shared by a group of official advisers and men active in public affairs, have a way of coming to light in the course of years.

If there's a hole in a' your coats,  
I rede ye tent it;  
A chiel's amang ye takin' notes,  
And, faith, he'll prent it.

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<sup>1</sup> For a much more extended study of cabinet meetings, the reader is referred to the author's paper entitled "Some Aspects of the Cabinet Meeting," printed in *Proceedings of the Columbia Historical Society*, Vol. XVIII, Washington, 1915.

Against the keeping of diaries there is no law even to members of the President's Cabinet. In a few instances the proceedings of Cabinet meetings have been carefully formulated by order and placed on file for future reference. One of these instances has long been known to readers of the *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams*.<sup>1</sup> Two others may be seen in the manuscript sources of President Polk's and President Andrew Johnson's respective terms.<sup>2</sup> With some effort in a variety of directions the historian to-day is able to obtain glimpses, gleaned from the accounts of Cabinet members and from the intimate writings of the Presidents themselves, of many hundreds of sessions of the Cabinet from the epoch of Washington down to comparatively recent times. There were no fewer than 65 meetings of Washington's Cabinet—rather more than 40 of these held during the momentous year 1793 alone—of which there is some record.<sup>3</sup> In his *Memoirs* John Quincy Adams left accounts, often filled with much detail, regarding discussions, of perhaps 180 sessions of the Cabinet of Monroe (1817–1825), and of about 65 sessions during his term as President, which immediately followed. There are not far from 450 Cabinet meetings noticed in Gideon Welles's extensive diary, which covers the greater portion of the period of Presidents Lincoln and Johnson. To such sorts of material must the investigator turn who would make even an approach to some understanding of the Cabinet meeting. In the following paper I shall confine my considerations of the Cabinet meeting to the four-year term of President Polk.

Polk was 49 years old when in March, 1845, he entered upon his duties as President—the youngest incumbent of the Presidency up to that time. Ten years before he had been chosen Speaker of the House of Representatives, where for the following four years (1835–1839) he became widely acquainted, revealed to his party ability and remarkable industry, was pronounced in approving many of the measures of the Van Buren administration, and maintained and ripened a friendship for Andrew Jackson, which, begun many years before when he was a very young man and strengthened by intimacy with and support of President Jackson, lasted without a break until Jackson's death in June, 1845. Though a native of North Carolina, he had lived for the better part of his life in Tennessee, and for a single term (1839–1841) filled the governorship of that State. Influenced much by Jackson's counsel during the months

<sup>1</sup> *Memoirs*, V, 5, 13, 15, March, 1820.

<sup>2</sup> Polk Papers, MSS. Division, Library of Congress, Vol. 77, February 22, 1848. Cf. Polk's Diary, III, 346–347; A. Johnson Papers, MSS. Division, L. of C., Vol. 115, under dates of June 18–19, 1867.

<sup>3</sup> Based upon an examination of manuscript materials on the subject now in possession of the Manuscripts Division of the Library of Congress and upon printed letters of the leading statesmen of the time.

of his canvass and even after his election, Polk went back to Jefferson for his ideal of a statesman. And he set himself to the task of carrying out the principles of the Republican party as it was usually referred to in the organ of the administration, the Washington Daily Union.<sup>1</sup>

Few men [said a writer in the Union of May 13, 1845] are capable of the labors which he [Polk] encounters; and few in his place would devote themselves with the same assiduity to the public service. He works from 10 to 12 hours in every 24. He holds two Cabinets a week. He sees visitors two hours every day when the Cabinet is not employed. . . . He is also in frequent communion with his secretaries.

Gossip though this was, it came from a source almost certain to be inspired by real information, for Thomas Ritchie, editor of the newly established paper, had been induced to come from Richmond to Washington for the direct purpose of giving the Administration an official organ—a mouthpiece through which even the President might occasionally address his party and the people. And in fact more than once Polk outlined an article for the Union.<sup>2</sup>

The publication of Polk's Diary in 1910, appearing about 60 years after its author's untimely death, in June, 1849, has already quickened interest in Polk and will probably tend to raise him as a man in the estimation of historians. For glimpses of nearly 400 sessions of the Cabinet, set down by the actual director of such sessions, it remains a unique record. Revealing no such range of view or literary facility as Adams's Memoirs, with little of the skill of characterization or the bitterness toward foes of Welles's Diary, it is, nevertheless, rather more directly informing than either of the foregoing works in the matter of routine practices and specific discussions of cabinet problems. There is an entry, however brief, for every day that Polk occupied the Executive Mansion from Tuesday, August 26, 1845, the day that the diary was begun, until Sunday, March 4, 1849, when Gen. Taylor succeeded him in office. Cabinet sessions were invariably noted, sometimes with careful and extended detail. It shows Polk and his counsellors at work.

Between early December, 1844, and the following March 4 members of the Cabinet were selected. There were six men in the first assembled group: James Buchanan, of Pennsylvania, Secretary of State—a shrewd and experienced politician, aged 54, taken from the leadership of his party in the Senate, ambitious of future distinctions which in the course of years he obtained, headstrong and vacillating; Robert J. Walker, of Mississippi, Secretary of the

<sup>1</sup> The first issue came out in Washington on Thursday night, May 1, 1845.

<sup>2</sup> Diary, I, 351-352. April 24, 1846. "It is the second or third time since I have been President that I have sketched an article for the paper. I do so in this instance to allay, if possible, the excitement which I learned the article in yesterday's Union had produced \* \* \*."

Treasury—youngest member, aged 44, like Buchanan a native of Pennsylvania and taken from the Senate, allied by marriage to Vice President Dallas, a man of great promise, destined to win solid claims to statesmanship as chief author of the tariff act of 1846 and largely responsible for the formulation of the act which provided in 1849 for the organization of the Department of the Interior;<sup>1</sup> William L. Marcy, of New York, Secretary of War—oldest member of the group, aged 58, a veteran of the War of 1812, former Senator, and governor of his State, later chosen Secretary of State by Franklin Pierce, whom he served ably for four years; John Y. Mason of Virginia, Attorney General—aged 46, the single member of Tyler's Cabinet retained by Polk, later (1846) transferred to the secretaryship of the Navy; Cave Johnson, of Tennessee, Postmaster General—an experienced member of the House of Representatives, from which Polk summoned him at the age of 52, watchful of the President's minor political interests and a bosom friend; and George Bancroft, of Massachusetts, Secretary of the Navy—former candidate for the governorship of his Commonwealth, aged 45, an historian already favorably known, admirer of Polk, though a so-called Van Buren man, and satisfactory as a representative of the New England section. Two others changed slightly the color of this first group: Nathan Clifford, of Maine, at the age of 43, was made Attorney General, succeeding Mason, who was transferred to the Navy headship. He added marked ability, for he was one of the very able lawyers of his time, helping in 1848 to negotiate the final treaty with Mexico, attaining in 1858 to the position of Associate Justice of the Supreme Court, and finally serving his country in 1877 as president of the Electoral Commission. He was in turn succeeded in the attorney generalship by Isaac Toucey, of Connecticut, aged 52, recently unsuccessful candidate for the governorship of his native State. Toucey reappeared in national politics in 1852 as Senator, and closed his public career as Buchanan's Secretary of the Navy from 1857. The average age of this Cabinet was 49 years.

It proved to be an able group of advisers and was reasonably harmonious. But its ability in general would certainly have been increased (just as its harmony would probably have decreased), had it contained such leaders as Silas Wright of New York, Calhoun of South Carolina, Lewis Cass of Michigan, or Thomas H. Benton of Missouri. To Wright was tendered the secretaryship of the Treasury as early as December 7,<sup>2</sup> which was refused. To the others no offers of Cabinet positions were probably made. The men whom Polk selected were picked with reference to his declared interests in tariff reduction, in a policy of expansion which favored the acquisi-

<sup>1</sup> H. B. Learned, *The President's Cabinet* (1912), 275-287.

<sup>2</sup> Polk Papers, MSS. Vol. 68.



tion of Oregon and the annexation of Texas, and in the political and economic needs of the South and Southwest. Slavery he took no decided stand upon—that issue he desired as far as possible to avoid. Although it came at times into Cabinet discussions, Polk's Diary is notably casual upon the topic. Pledged himself from his nomination to a single term in office, the President forewarned his prospective counselors on no account to take advantage of their respective positions as advisers in order to promote ambition which had for its end either the presidency or the vice-presidency. "Should any member of my Cabinet," he wrote, "become a candidate for the presidency or vice presidency of the United States, it will be expected upon the happening of such an event, that he will retire from the Cabinet."<sup>1</sup> Absences from the seat of government he pledged them to make always as brief as possible, for he disapproved of the practice of leaving the management of the departments to chief clerks or other less responsible persons.

Has there been any President since 1789 who stuck so persistently to his tasks as did President Polk? During the four-year period he was not outside Washington for more than about six weeks. How many Presidents have confined themselves to vacations averaging 10 days a year? Polk spent a day at Mount Vernon in the spring of 1845;<sup>2</sup> late in August, 1846, for about a week he was at Old Point Comfort; in May-June, 1847, he made a visit of nine days to the University of North Carolina of which he and his Cabinet associate, John Y. Mason, were graduates in 1819;<sup>3</sup> he went for a fortnight's tour to New England, primarily to attend a Masonic celebration, in June-July, 1847; and finally in the late summer (August) of 1848, wearied and restless, he spent 10 days at Bedford Springs, Pa. There is no evidence of other absences on his part from the seat of government. Moreover, there was no cessation of Cabinet meetings while he was there, from the August day on which the Diary opens. The regularity of Cabinet sessions, regular and "special," becomes positively irksome in the record. These are Polk's words:

No President who performs his duty faithfully and conscientiously can have any leisure. If he intrusts the details and smaller matters to subordinates constant errors will occur. I prefer to supervise the whole operations of the Government myself rather than intrust the public business to subordinates, and this makes my duties very great.<sup>4</sup>

This was not idle sentiment on Polk's part, for the President's theory and practice were in accord, as the record of the Administra-

<sup>1</sup> See the circular letter of Polk to prospective Cabinet associates, dated February 17, 1845, and printed in full in *The Works of James Buchanan* (ed. John Bassett Moore), VI, 110-111.

<sup>2</sup> Diary, II, 87. See also *Washington Daily Union*, Aug. 19, 1846, II, 370.

<sup>3</sup> *Washington Daily Union*, June 2, 1847, *et seq.*

<sup>4</sup> Diary, IV, 261, Dec. 29, 1848.

tion clearly proves. He was ill at times during his last year in office, and one may reasonably conclude that he was suffering from the effects of his incessant and tireless labors.

Whether Polk was the first President to introduce regularity into Cabinet sessions I do not feel certain, for as yet I have not examined with sufficient care the practices of the Cabinet during Van Buren's and Tyler's respective terms. Previous to 1837 it may be positively stated that there was no regularity in this respect. Polk's Cabinet met as a rule every week throughout the year if the President was not himself away from Washington. It made no difference to him whether Congress was or was not in session. On Tuesdays and Saturdays at 11 o'clock in the forenoon it assembled unsummoned and in accordance with a settled custom. In one year alone—1846, during which war with Mexico was begun—the council met about 114 times. In 1848, the year which witnessed the treaty settlement of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, there were approximately 120 meetings. As reckoned through the evidence of the Diary there were about 173 meetings on Tuesdays and 168 meetings on Saturdays. All others, perhaps 50, were known as "special" meetings, and were summoned on any one of the other days of the week. The following table, confined to the Diary record alone, will indicate at a glance the results of the whole enumeration:

	1845	1846	1847	1848	1849	Total
Sundays.....		4		5		9
Mondays.....		2	2	6		10
Tuesdays.....	18	50	47	49	9	173
Wednesdays.....	4	4	2	4	1	15
Thursdays.....		2	2	3	1	8
Fridays.....	1	1	2	5		9
Saturdays.....	16	51	44	48	9	168
Total.....	39	114	99	120	20	392

It was against Polk's strict sabbatarian views to summon the Cabinet to Sunday sessions, but occasionally, in 1846 and in 1848, the two most momentous years of his administration, he found it necessary to do so against his will. He was never resigned to missing attendance at church at 11 o'clock Sunday mornings. Regular sessions were seldom over before 2 p. m. Many meetings will be found, however, sitting as late as 3 and even 4 o'clock. Four and five hour meetings were regarded as long. Polk dined at 4 p. m. Only once is there record of a six-hour meeting—that convened at 9.30 a. m. on Friday, July 9, 1847.

The subject which I submitted for consideration [wrote the President] was the conduct of Gen. Scott and Mr. Trist, and the angry personal controversy into which these two functionaries had allowed themselves to be engaged. Dispatches from Gen. Scott to the Secretary of War, and from Mr.

Trist to the Secretary of State, received during my late tour to the Eastern States, were read. They exhibited a wretched state of things. So far from the harmony prevailing between these two officers, they are engaged in a violent personal correspondence.

Opinions differed as to what should be done. The President was ready with the suggestion that both men be recalled. In the discussion Marcy and Buchanan assumed the lead, and both of these advisers, followed by the other members of the Cabinet, opposed the suggestion. The Cabinet had its way, the President yielding, but not without adding his thought as to the possible desirability of sending some such capable assistant to Trist as Senator Pierre Soulé, of Louisiana.<sup>1</sup> The episode of the quarrel is well enough known to history,<sup>2</sup> though the way it touched the Cabinet is a contribution of this intimate record.

In view of the tasks of the administration, Polk's Cabinet sessions were on the whole brief as compared, for example, with the slow-gaited and occasionally very prolonged sessions of Monroe's Cabinet.<sup>3</sup> Seldom were meetings omitted on regular days, even with only two Cabinet advisers in Washington. The laying of the corner stone of the Smithsonian Institution<sup>4</sup> and the public funeral of John Quincy Adams<sup>5</sup> were among occasions when it seemed only fitting to omit meetings.

Unlike the meetings of John Quincy Adams's Cabinet, which were devoted to a few rather specific problems and were neither frequent nor at all regular, those of Polk were usually alive with a considerable variety of business and discussion. The epoch was alert. Its problems, especially those which were generated by the Oregon Question and the War with Mexico, were grave and complicated, burdened with consequences of a doubtful and very far-reaching kind. Large subjects came inevitably before the advisers—the tariff, Texas, Oregon, California, Army troubles, slavery, the treaty with Mexico—some of them demanding the enunciation of more or less definite attitudes on the part of the Executive. On the other hand, there were also numerous matters of minor, if not occasionally of petty, significance. The Cabinet heard much political gossip and discussed it pretty freely; it watched intently the proceedings of Congress and guided itself to some extent by what it observed. The President kept in close touch with party leaders in both the House and the Senate. Even the aged Calhoun was admitted early in 1846 to a session of

<sup>1</sup> Diary, III, 75-79. Cf. Jesse S. Reeves, *American Diplomacy under Tyler and Polk* (1907), 315-316.

<sup>2</sup> Schouler, *History of the United States* (rev. ed.), V, 51-53.

<sup>3</sup> See J. Q. Adams's *Memoirs*, IV, 37, 168; VI, 389 ff.

<sup>4</sup> Diary, III, 1-2. Saturday, May 1, 1847. Secretary Walker was unable to attend the ceremony. See *Washington Daily Union*, May 10, 1847.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 362-363. Saturday, Feb. 26, 1848.

the Cabinet.<sup>1</sup> Senator Benton throughout the first two years of the administration was many times in conference with Polk, as was Senator Cass in the latter years. Vice-President Dallas was often consulted informally, but there is no evidence that he ever attended a session of the council. Thomas Ritchie, of the Union, was carefully consulted on various occasions, and allowed presidential secrets to slip into his partisan publication, at times much to Polk's disgust. We get glimpses of the figure of Andrew Johnson, of Tennessee, flitting in and out of the Executive Mansion even thus early—distrusted and disliked by Polk. Johnson and his Tennessee colleagues "seem to assume to themselves the right to judge of the appointments in Tennessee," remarked the President, "and to denounce them among Members of Congress and in boarding houses as though they were responsible for them. I think it fortunate," he concluded, "that they have now learned that their course has not been unobserved by me."<sup>2</sup> Polk and his counselors, especially Buchanan, who became ambitious for the Presidency when he discovered that he could not easily obtain an appointment to the Supreme Court, scanned carefully many newspaper criticisms, and even attempted to dictate to some variety of newspapers. The subject of office-seeking politicians, haunting Polk day and night throughout his term, could not help coming at times into conciliar discussions.

The four annual messages, prepared by Polk promptly and with remarkable care, were not only submitted to the Cabinet but to men of influence and discretion outside that body—to Vice-President Dallas, Editor Ritchie, Senators Benton and Cass, and to many others. The fourth message,<sup>3</sup> which among presidential papers must always be reckoned remarkable—the President's valedictory to his Democratic followers as well as to the Nation—was given slow and long attention. The President yielded his convictions neither easily nor as a rule for petty reasons. Politics influenced him. But he seldom forgot principles even though he was obliged to sacrifice the friendship and influence of men as powerful as Senator Benton and the assistance to some extent of his Secretary of State, Buchanan. A less prudent man would probably have failed to hold through the administration three such ambitious and able advisers as Buchanan, Marcy, and Walker, for at one time or another they were all ready to abandon their places.

Votes in Cabinet sessions were infrequent.<sup>4</sup> Like most Presidents before and since his time, Polk asked now and again for written opinions on technical matters of law from his attorneys-general.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Diary*, I, 161. Jan. 10.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 41. July 21, 1846.

<sup>3</sup> Richardson, *Messages and Papers*, IV, 629-670.

<sup>4</sup> *Diary*, III, 281.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 79; IV, 202.



But he seldom, if ever, called for written opinions from the rest of his advisers. On this point his words are nearly conclusive: "I have never called for any written opinions from my Cabinet, preferring to take their opinions, after a discussion, in Cabinet, and in presence of each other. In this way harmony of opinion is more likely to exist."<sup>1</sup>

Thus a practice begun by Washington and characteristic of several of Washington's more immediate successors was voluntarily abandoned by Polk.

Polk's party was not a little aroused over the fact that two such pronounced Whigs as Generals Scott and Taylor were likely to gain most of the honors in the war. Hence an effort was made to have created a new office of lieutenant-general—an acting general-in-chief in the field. Polk commended the project. It was introduced into Congress but there failed. And Benton, who was to have had the new command, placed the blame for its failure upon Secretaries Buchanan, Walker, and Marcy.<sup>2</sup> The proof of this charge it would probably be difficult, if not impossible, to establish. While this whole matter was pending, the President's mind being disturbed over the question of Benton's possible right to precedence over the Whig generals actually in the field, Richard Rush, then an elderly man of 65 about to take up his duties as newly appointed Minister to France, spent the late evening of Tuesday, January 19, 1847, with Polk. Once Attorney General under President Madison and later serving President J. Q. Adams for four years as Secretary of the Treasury, Rush, as an experienced Cabinet officer revealed quickly his interest in the knotty problem of precedence which at the moment was disturbing Polk. He related at length the story of a Cabinet session under President Adams about 19 years before, in which a similar problem had to be disposed of. In both instances there were contentious factions in and outside the respective Cabinets. The frank statements of Rush, his clear recollections as well as the applicability of his story to the situation—all moved the President's interest. He confided the interview to his Diary in a way to indicate his ability as an accurate reporter, for the account of Adams's Cabinet session as taken down from Rush's narration of it, agrees in essential particulars with the account of the same session which President Adams himself had written in his Memoirs. Thus might a cabinet discussion of one administration be transmitted and made helpful to another many years removed.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, IV, 131. September 23, 1848.

<sup>2</sup> *Thirty Years' View*, II, 679. The subject was commented on in the *Washington Daily Union* of March 11, 1847, letters between Polk and Benton there printed.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Memoirs of J. Q. Adams*, VII, 506-507. April 14, 1828.

It was the rule of the administration to admit no one to Cabinet sessions outside the circle of regular advisers. But J. Knox Walker, the President's private secretary, was frequently present<sup>1</sup> just as Col. W. G. Moore, Johnson's secretary 20 years later, was likewise present on many occasions.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps Tobias Lear attended Washington's council, although there is no record, so far as I know, of his attendance. When in future the story of President Wilson's administration can be written from authentic records shall we learn of the attendance of Mr. Joseph Tumulty at Cabinet councils? As I have already pointed out,<sup>3</sup> Senator Calhoun took part in a Cabinet discussion over the Oregon situation on Saturday, January 10, 1846—an exception to Polk's rule. Benton declared that he was present at a Cabinet session in the autumn of the same year making objections to a particular policy.<sup>4</sup> This rests on Benton's statement alone, and without corroborative evidence is of no significance. It is true that the assembled Cabinet listened to outsiders either just before or just after their regular session for the purpose usually of obtaining special information not easy otherwise to acquire. Brig. Gen. Philip Kearny appeared before them,<sup>5</sup> likewise Maj. Gen. James Shields.<sup>6</sup> Mayor William Winston Seaton and sundry public men were received by the Cabinet in the autumn of 1848.<sup>7</sup> Thomas G. Clemson, son-in-law of Calhoun, just returned from his post as chargé d'affaires in Belgium, was introduced to the Cabinet.<sup>8</sup> And Senator Spencer Jarnagin, of Tennessee, and Representative Horace Wheaton, of New York, as members of the Committee on Enrolled Bills, performed their formal tasks in the presence of the council.<sup>9</sup> Once Nicholas P. Trist, then clerk in the Department of State, but soon to start on his special mission to Mexico as the President's private envoy, was summoned into a session for the purpose of enlightening the Cabinet as to the exact meaning of a Spanish letter.<sup>10</sup>

Attention may be called to a matter of policy extending over many sessions of the Cabinet, in which the President revealed his independence and principle. It may not be at once recalled that there was in 1847-8 a widespread and vigorous movement, fostered by many prominent and influential politicians, to force the President to the task of absorbing the whole of Mexico. Polk was an expansionist of a pronounced type, but this project appears to have been not

<sup>1</sup> Diary, II, 486. Apr. 22, 1847.

<sup>2</sup> American Historical Review (October, 1913), XIX, 98 *et seq.*

<sup>3</sup> *Supra*, p. 237.

<sup>4</sup> Thirty Years' View, II, 693.

<sup>5</sup> Diary, III, 168. Sept. 12, 1847.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 261. Dec. 28, 1847.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, IV, 125. Sept. 19.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, IV, 196. Nov. 14, 1848.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 47, 51. July 25, 1846.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 432. Mar. 20, 1847.

finally approved by him. That we escaped annexing Mexico in 1848 was due to some variety of causes. But not the least important of these was that Polk effectually controlled the policy of his advisers, for two of his ablest assistants, Buchanan and R. J. Walker, tried to prevent a settlement with Mexico on the terms of the treaty negotiated by Nicholas P. Trist, in accordance with instructions given to Trist in April, 1847, at the time when Trist had been sent on his treaty-making mission.<sup>1</sup>

In concluding this slight glimpse of the routine of Polk's conciliar sessions, I wish to quote a passage from John F. H. Claiborne's *Life and Correspondence of John A. Quitman*, for it contains, besides error, some elements of truth well worth observing. Of Polk, Claiborne writes:

He was a political martinet, a rigid disciplinarian. . . . He was a man of ability, but a man of expediency. . . . Polk was grave almost to sadness, self-restrained, and chilling. . . . [He] was indebted for his elevation to his energy, his circumspection, his capacity for labor, his fidelity to party, and, more than all, to the influence of Gen. Jackson. . . . He had a vigorous and able Cabinet—one of the ablest ever assembled around any executive . . . but he can be regarded as a man of mediocrity . . . exempt from positive vices, remarkable for his prudence, and a thorough master of the strategy of politics. . . . He, nevertheless, in four years, witnessed the decay of his popularity, and no one but himself dreamed of his reelection. . . .<sup>2</sup>

There is undoubtedly truth in the application of "martinet" to President Polk. He was a stickler for regularity in administrative practices—remarkably vigilant in keeping himself and his intimate assistants at work throughout a trying four-year term. One is safe in assuming from such evidence as we find that the Cabinet never met without the President. As the President kept his hand on a great many matters, so he was generally prepared to be the real director of discussions and the author of the administration's attitude or policy so far as the Executive Department was concerned. He had several conspicuously able assistants about him whose aid he sought and could accept. But if one may trust impressions derived largely from the *Diary*, Polk was never overpowered by any one of these able men. It was the President who at length usually dominated the situation by his ability to grasp details understandingly. In the Cabinet council he was guide and master. Principles he cher-

<sup>1</sup> See "The Proposed Absorption of Mexico in 1847-8," by the late Prof. Edward G. Bourne in his *Essays in Historical Criticism*, 1901. This paper was based upon a study of Polk's *Diary* while still in manuscript. Prof. W. E. Dodd, in a paper entitled "The West and the War with Mexico," in *Trans. of the Illinois State Historical Society* for the year 1912 (pp. 15-23), thinks that Polk was eager to annex Mexico after the treaty had been accepted on Mar. 10, 1848. Possibly. Relying on Prof. Bourne's researches, Prof. J. S. Reeves remarks (*American Diplomacy under Tyler and Polk*, p. 325): "Trist's assumption that Polk desired the absorption of all Mexico has been proven to be baseless."

<sup>2</sup> I, 228-235, *passim*.

ished and worked for. Ceremonies he disliked. But he was insistent upon such forms as aided him and his officials in getting things done. He was solemn and serious, at times much overworked. But can he be fairly termed "a man of mediocrity"? If ever a record so largely made up, as is this Diary, of observations on Cabinet sessions could prove that its author filled "the unforgiving minute with sixty seconds' worth of distance run," this has done so. At any rate, it will help to mark Polk as the most important figure in the Presidency between Andrew Jackson and Abraham Lincoln.









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