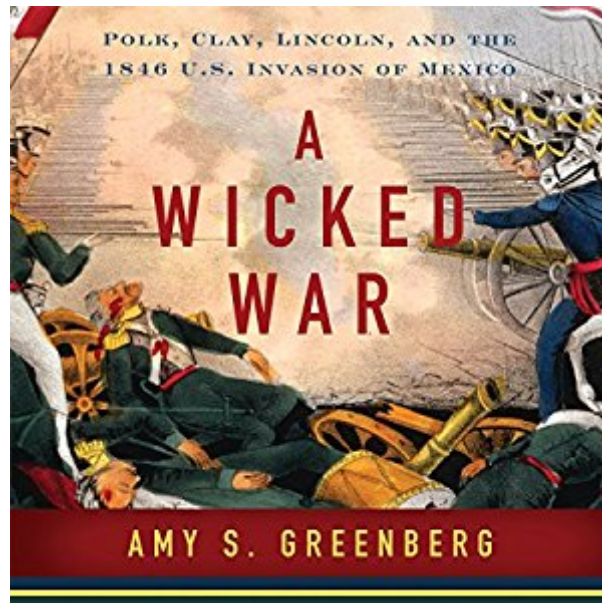


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A Wicked War: Polk, Clay, Lincoln And The 1846 U.S. Invasion Of Mexico



Synopsis

A Wicked War presents the definitive history of the 1846 war between the United States and Mexico - a conflict that turned America into a continental power. Amy Greenberg describes the battles between American and Mexican armies, but also delineates the political battles between Democrats and Whigs - the former led by the ruthless Polk, the latter by the charismatic Henry Clay and a young representative from Illinois named Abraham Lincoln. Greenberg brilliantly recounts this key chapter in the creation of the United States with authority and narrative flair.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This history has been somewhat sanctified because Americans got what they wanted: the annexation of half of Mexican territory, which enabled the United States to expand to the Pacific coast and to get, in addition Oregon and Washington. What it made it a wicked war was these ends were achieved, in the case of Mexico by a series of lies engaged in by President Polk. The book, itself is well written with much detail on the lies and the objections raised by some. Could the same ends have been achieved by other more honest means; we shall never know. The toll on the president was great and he died after a very few months out of office.

American exceptionalism, that America has always been a force for good in the world, is shown to be a narcissistic myth. Amy Greenberg tells a wonderfully rich and informative tale that is hard to put down. She reminds us that any nation, even a liberal democracy, can do very wicked things to its

sister nations and still believe they are a shining example of freedom, equality and justice. That is why this chapter in American history is not really well told in high school; it's hard to square that circle. The subtitle for this chapter could be called "How Texas Becomes a State and America Becomes a Continental Nation." After languishing as a beleaguered republic for 9 years, Polk's election suddenly makes it possible for Texas to become a state. But Polk wanted more, like about one third of Mexico. Wars of conquest are usually very messy affairs and this war was no exception. Amy Greenberg makes this depressing and truly despicable episode in American history fascinating. I had a fantastic time with this book.

Amy Greenberg's narrative history of the Mexican American War argues the war was an act of aggression against a neighboring country that not only announced the arrival of a new world power, but it would tip an "internecine struggle over slavery into civil war" and would "shape the future, and to this day affects how the United States acts in the world." (xiii) This argument differs from those put forward by Brian DeLay, who looks more at the effects of Indian raids on the war, and Paul Foner who uses the war to analyze nineteenth century labor conflicts in the United States. As Greenberg notes in the introduction this is not a comprehensive view of the war, instead it looks at the events leading up to the war (and the war itself) through the eyes of five men, their wives and children. These are President James K. Polk, Henry Clay ("The Great Compromiser"), Abraham Lincoln (over a decade before his rise to the Presidency), John J. Hardin and Nicholas Trist. The latter two are the lesser known of the five men, but no less important to the story. Furthermore, the story moves along chronologically, starting with Henry Clay's decision to come out against the possible annexation of Texas and ends with the end of the war and the nation starting down the road to the Civil War with Lincoln voting for the Wilmot proviso and the death of John Quincy Adams. As for sources, Greenberg uses unpublished documents and manuscripts from such archival collections as the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, the Huntington Library, the Library of Congress and the Wisconsin Historical Society. Greenberg also uses newspapers from all over the country to round out her primary sources. When it comes to secondary sources, the author also uses an impressive collection of new and older sources, some dating back to as early as 1851. Amongst her newer sources are some of what can be called the usual suspects, including works by Brian DeLay's *War of a Thousand Deserts*, David Donald's definitive biography on Lincoln, Eric Foner's

recent prize winning *The Fiery Trial*, and Paul Kramer's *The Blood of Government* (about the connections between racism and American Imperialism). Greenberg's work contains what might be considered a weakness in that, unlike most recent works of history, it takes a very top down approach to historical analysis, focusing on "big men" and diplomacy. While she does include the wives of Lincoln and Polk, they garner much less attention than the men (Mary Lincoln's entry in the index is significantly smaller than the one for her husband), in a way this is a weak criticism. The fact is, the United States in the 1840s and 50s had no women in Congress or in any political office for that matter. Furthermore, her purpose is not to tell a bottom up story. While there is nothing wrong with that approach, her goal is to look at the war through the eyes of the big men. The strength of the work is that, by using men we are familiar with, in conjunction with an accessible narrative style, Amy Greenberg delivers a history which is valuable not only to specialists, but can be read and enjoyed by a much larger audience. This fact is backed up by the fact that her manuscript was picked up and published by a major mass market publisher like Vintage. Furthermore she is able to give us a new take on what has suddenly become a very popular topic: the Mexican American War.

Gives historical perspective.

It does read like a novel. Kudos.

Amy Greenberg is the Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of History and Women's Studies at Penn State University in University Park, PA. Dr. Greenberg has written several manuscripts on antebellum America. The Mexican war is one that is often overlooked in US History courses and in public thought. The number of books published on the Mexican war pale in comparison to those of the US Civil War. *A Wicked War* is a tale of the Mexican War and the roles that President James Polk, Henry Clay and Congressman Abraham Lincoln played in the drama that began with Manifest Destiny and continued on to the Mexican Cession and the challenges that it caused. The book begins with Texas becoming an independent republic and moves through their application for statehood and the election of 1844. Polk was a surprise choice from the Democratic Party in the election but he had been selected by former President Andrew Jackson who still wielded quite a bit of power in his party. Polk had a strong desire to see the country stretch from the Atlantic to Pacific Oceans and made it a goal to ensure that it happened. Dr. Greenberg is convinced that Polk was

the acting aggressor and essentially baited Mexico into war when he sent Zachary Taylor to a position south of the Nueces River. Mexico had been under the impression that the Nueces was the southern border of Texas. The details of the challenges the Mexican government and the continual changes it saw were not provided in too much detail. Much if not most of America was clamoring for more territory. The south wanted more slave states and therefor more votes in the senate and the north had its sights set on more territory for free labor and a place for recent immigrants to have a chance at the American dream by owning and working small farms. At the time the United States was in a period of rapid growth and growing prosperity. Dr. Greenberg introduces James Hardin as a secondary character in the book. Hardin, who preceded Abraham Lincoln in his congressional seat, was very well thought of at the time and has sadly been lost to history. He appears to have been a very honorable and patriotic man. At the end of the book Greenberg lets the reader know that Hardin's daughter, who he had been very close to, founded the Daughters of the American Revolution. During this period Henry Clay had since passed the height of his political power but the author does a very good job of bringing to light the influence he still had with the public and especially with a young Abraham Lincoln. She tells of the visit Abraham took with his bride to visit her family in Lexington, Kentucky and of meeting Clay and being present during Clay's speech at the Lexington mass meeting in November 1847. If this were the only book you ever read on James K. Polk you would think him a lying war monger. To say that Greenberg is not a big fan of Polk is an understatement. However, the author shows Sarah Polk a bit of respect and admiration. The book is well written and flows very well. The author moves from character to character in a very logical sequence. However, it is also a very biased rendering of the presidency of Polk and the Mexican War. While reading of protests and public unrest for the war I instantly thought of the 1960's and Vietnam. Was the Mexican War the Vietnam of the 1800's? I don't know the answer to that since I wasn't there but if this were the only text you read on the subject you would think that was the case

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