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Richard Bruce Winders. *Mr. Polk's Army: The American Military Experience in the Mexican War.* College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1997. xvi + 288 pp. $34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-89096-754-6.

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The 1997 publication of Richard Bruce Winder's *Mr. Polk's Army: The American Military Experience in the Mexican War* is timely. One-hundred-and-fifty years ago, United States troops defeated several numerically superior but poorly led, trained, and armed Mexican armies. By 1848, Mexico City was in American hands, Mexico had ceded from one-third to one-half of its territory to the United States, and American national dominion extended across much of the continental expanse. All in all, it was a good war for United States expansionists. Mexico, however, was not the sole battleground. A coterminous struggle was fought for the political spoils of the republic by Democratic and Whig politicians through the institution of the United States Army. Ironically, despite early Whig opposition to the war, Whig party leaders mimicked Democratic leads and hoped to use the war and the army as the means to promote their party's future too.

Democratic president James K. Polk chose the army officer corps as his battlefield for patronage and influence. The self-declared one-term president understood the attractiveness of war heroes to the electorate and the need to reward the party faithful through patronage. What better way, Young Hickory reasoned, to extend and insure Democratic control of American politics than through the popular exploits of a victorious army and its Democratic soldiery. In addition, the Tennessean believed an infusion of Jacksonian Democrats and their philosophical convictions into the ranks of regular officers might help reform the body. Polk, a believer in the myth of the citizen-soldier, equated the regular officer corps with everything antithetical to the American character. In Polk's mind regular officers, especially West Pointers, were loafing anti-democratic Whigs with aristocratic pretensions. And enlisted men were even worse. Any man who would willingly sign away his freedoms as a regular was a slavish hireling unfit to participate in the life of the republic. It was an existence that could appeal only to a failure or a foreigner. Polk realized that although he could not refashion the whole army, he could determine the character of much of its wartime leadership. With these thoughts in mind the president set out to Democratize the army.

Polk's estimation of American political tastes and his strategy for electoral victory was astute. The president officered the ten regular regiments raised for war with Democrats. All thirteen volunteer generals were Democrats. Polk expanded on his Jacksonian vision in the newly-raised Regiment of Mounted Rifles. The president, with only a few exceptions, commissioned officers, mostly Westerners, directly from civil life. Young Hickory hoped to prevent competition and professional jealousies among the regulars, to break the West Point monopoly, and to recognize the rising importance of the West through the officers of the new regiment. In the end, the results of Polk's efforts were mixed. Academy-trained officers continued to dominate the army. And while brigadier general and future-president Franklin Pierce emerged as a Democratic hero, his presidency followed that of Maj. Gen. Zachary Taylor, a Whig.

Winders, a historian and curator at the Alamo, has worked at integrating social, political, and military history in order to "link the army to the society that produced it "so that it might be understood as being emblematic of mid-nineteenth American political culture" (p. xii). The picture which emerges is one of political, professional, and personal conflict between Whigs and Democrats, regulars and volunteers, and the government and its army. James K. Polk was not unique in his attempt to fashion the army into an instrument of party policy and a prize for loyal supporters. Indeed, he had simply followed the example set by earlier presidents, including Thomas Jefferson, in his attempt to politicize the army. The good of the party had been equated with the good of the nation.

In detailing the creation and life of Mr. Polk's army, Winders has given the reader an insight into the organization, structure, and weaponry of the United States Army and its volunteer forces. Furthermore, the author

delivers a good account of the activities, experiences, and beliefs of the men who constituted the army. Not surprisingly, the undisciplined, parochial, and touchy conduct of the volunteers was simply the behavior of their home states and American society writ small. The author's background development on the causes of the war and on prevailing popular attitudes in the United States adds a good measure of depth to his story. Although much of what is offered in *Mr. Polk's Army* has been alluded to or directly posited by other historians of the Mexican War, none has gathered so much material and presented so comprehensive a picture of the army in one convenient book.

In spite of the overall quality of this work a concern arises over the issue and place of battlefield tactics. If, as Winders makes clear, military behavior and organization are indicative of greater cultural norms then surely the same principle must apply to the way an army fights. There is much knowledge which can be gleaned from tactical practices. Combat and the style in which it was performed were integral components of the American military experience in the Mexican War, and thus are deserving of greater analysis and development.

Mr. Polk's Army is a welcome addition to the historiography of the Mexican War. Mr. Winders has packed a great deal of valuable information in his work and his conclusions are judicious. Notwithstanding the sole reservation, this work should become a standard reference in the history of United States Army in the Mexican War. Historians and laymen alike will enjoy this book and find it a worthwhile read.

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