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Jeremy Shier  
*College of DuPage*

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by Jeremy Shier

(History 1130)

The Assignment: This assignment was a book review on one of seven historical periods. Students were to choose a book from the instructor-recommended booklist.

The United States of America, from 1844 to 1848, acquired the massive territory west of the Mississippi River that stretched to the Pacific Ocean. During this period, the present-day continental borders of the United States took shape. Norman Graebner's *Empire on the Pacific: A Study in American Continental Expansion* deals exclusively with the Polk administration's acquisition of Oregon and California. In addition, the events that led to the international recognition of Texas as a U.S. state are also discussed. In his text, Graebner cites many relevant social, political, and industrial factors that influenced continental expansion. However, with the presupposition that American westward expansion was economically motivated, Graebner focuses mainly on the diplomatic side of the expansion ordeal.

As American commercial interests play a dominant theme in Graebner's work, many key reasons why the U.S. sought land along the Pacific coast are given. Chief among these reasons were the harbors of Puget Sound, San Francisco, and San Diego. A then recent conflict between Great Britain and China had ended a monopoly of East Asian ports by the Hong Dynasty. An ensuing maritime commercial power vacuum brought the issue of controlling Pacific ports to the forefront of American political affairs in the mid-1840s. The west coast of North America was not topographically outfitted for mass naval accommodations. Therefore, the body in control of the few Pacific ports would dictate a commercial empire through lucrative Oriental markets.

In addition to economic incentives, an ideal known as *Manifest Destiny* would also stimulate the Polk administration's decision to pursue land on the west coast. John O'Sullivan coined the phrase Manifest Destiny in 1845. Graebner cites O'Sullivan as commenting: "We are a nation of human progress, and who will, what can, set limits to our onward march?" (Graebner, 17). The American public jumped on the notion of a continental empire and the masses exerted their respective pressures on Congress and the Presidency. Graebner also noted the darker side of *Manifest Destiny* by way of James Belser, an Alabama Congressman. According to Belser, moving west was merely extending the "area of freedom – the area of the Anglo-Saxon race" (Graebner, 84).

Given the Pacific's commercial benefits, America's growing economy, and public sentiment, the President and his administration began negotiating the cession of Oregon to the United States in 1845. As a territory under joint-occupancy of two belligerent nations fully aware of its economic importance, the issue of forming borders along the North West almost led to war. For the side of the United States, Graebner points out the discovery of the Columbia River by Captain Robert Gray, the Lewis and Clark expedition, the American Fur Company at Astoria, and the underlying principles of the Monroe Doctrine as American arguments for claim over Oregon. Graebner develops the conflict by supporting that, in joint occupancy, Great Britain sought borders based on territorial residence. Due to the presence of the Hudson's Bay Company, Great Britain would lay claim to controlling portions of Puget Sound.

Graebner illustrates the territorial debate as a diplomatic endeavor. Initially, Polk pulled a hard-line stance in declaring a border at 54°40'. There had been a long-standing, unwritten, assumption between the U.S. and Great Britain that the natural border was at 49°. Some attributed the

proposal of 54°40 as an absurd bluff, a way for Polk to shift negotiations onto the British. The problem arose when the idea of 54°40 gained public support. Polk was also obligated to hold firm in his claim because of promises he had made to members of the Democratic Party. In the eyes of the British, and many Congressmen, the proposal of a border at 54°40 was outrageous to the point that Britain entertained the idea of waging war on the U.S. for a third time in less than one-hundred years.

As the threat of war developed, the general public and the powers that be on both sides grew more accustomed to a border at 49°. This latitude would secure what Graebner describes as the only real territorial objective the United States had in Oregon: the possession of Puget Sound. After a small amendment that bent the boundary line south of Vancouver Island, leaving the British access to navigable inland waters, the Oregon Treaty was ratified in 1846.

Graebner employs the views of many different historians in his explanation of the Oregon Treaty. In relevance to the British plight, Graebner summarizes four motives for the acceptance of the 49° line. The first involves a low yield of British crops in 1845, thus leading to a dependence on more American grain during the period of debate. A second view utilizes America's previous claims to the territory and the abundance of pioneer emigrants into Oregon. The third aspect of negotiation notes the neutrality in the boundary waters of the Juan de Fuca Strait. The final point in reference to Great Britain is the "free-trade analysis" (Graebner, 138). This analysis supposes that the profusion of commerce between American and British merchants was too important to hinder on account of a war. Graebner holds true in his work that neither side truly wanted war nor was 54°40 a reasonable proposition in the first place.

America, on the other hand, had another reason for avoiding war with Great Britain; the acquisition of California. During this period California was a Mexican providence. Yet, Mexico did not have the strength to control the small Pacific populations. Graebner alludes to the deterioration of California's civilization under Mexican ownership. Graebner also refers to the harbors of San Francisco and San Diego as having exquisite economic potential. It was in this realization that the United States found itself not only competing with European nations for the coast, but with Mexico as well.

Since the 1840s began, the U.S., Great Britain, and France all desired to pry the two California bays from Mexican control. France soon dropped out of the conflict due to lack of claim and insufficient force. By 1845, slavery debates over Texas had soothed and an annexation was ratified by Congress. Although the annexation was rejected by Mexico, American focus quickly turned to Great Britain. Graebner draws on an article from the *New York Herald* to summarize the situation: "Should Texas be annexed, the next movement of Great Britain will probably be to negotiate with Mexico for the purchase of California.... In this she will be successful unless intercepted by our government" (86).

Great Britain did in fact try to purchase California from Mexico but without success. Both the U.S. and Great Britain had attempted to purchase California from Mexico in the past but to no avail, even after revolutions. In spite of British attempts to control California, the American press encouraged thousands of pioneers to migrate into the region. Not only did the onslaught of Americans on the Pacific Coast discourage further British encroachment, but it also displaced many of the local authorities (or lack there of) as well.

With the aims of making Mexico quickly submit to American demands by the occupation of California and New Mexico, Polk necessitated a war. Graebner outlines Polk's motives as being quite simple. He merely wanted the bays of San Francisco and San Diego. Mexico was too weak to hold on to them and the United States had bent its entire will towards attaining them. The subsequent quarrel would be known as the Mexican-American War. It did not take long after the war's official outbreak in May of 1846 for America to exercise its dominance over the weaker republic. With the help of General Zachary Taylor and, later, General Winfield Scott, the United States won a series of military victories over Mexico. The pioneer-led Bear Flag rebellion in California also sealed the fate

of San Francisco as an American indemnity. Nevertheless, the Mexican government would not admit defeat.

Graebner dedicates an entire chapter in his book to the problems the Polk administration faced upon the early stagnation of the conflict. The Whig party had always criticized the war, believing it to be an unjustified attack on a sovereign republic. On the other hand, the Democratic Party had been splitting since Polk took office in 1844 and offered him little support. The war had dragged on to no end and was costing the government more money than it cared to spend. Moreover, the tariffs with Mexico were hurting free trade and the issue of slavery in Texas continued to aggravate bitter rivalries in Congress. Aside from a small group of Democrats, it seemed that everyone in the country was turning their backs on expansionism.

Polk's salvation came in the form of a diplomat named Nicholas P. Trist. In April of 1847, Polk sent Trist to Mexico City to negotiate with the Mexican government. The United States had already sacked Mexico City but could find no one to make terms with. The Whig party hated Trist (Democrat); they saw his presence as undermining Scott's (Whig) authority. Trist and Scott, however, became fast friends and together negotiated the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. This infuriated Polk, who had ordered Trist to return to Washington months earlier. Even so, the treaty satisfied Polk's desires by confirming the areas of California and New Mexico to American control and establishing Texas as an American State. The treaty also acquired the port of San Diego and established a border at 32°30'. With the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo America's expansion would lay dormant until the early twentieth century.

According to his book, Norman Graebner earned his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago in 1949 (Graebner, back cover). Graebner has also attained an entire host of degrees from universities all over the country. He is considered to be one of the world's foremost historians; writing, co-writing, or editing over 20 books and 120 articles (Marshall University 2005). In *Empire on the Pacific*, Graebner uses over 430 sources of information from seven sub-categories. The types of sources employed by Graebner are manuscripts, public documents, memoirs, diaries, and collected papers, accounts of travelers, newspapers, periodicals, and secondary works.

This writer found *Empire on the Pacific* to be very interesting. Graebner's approach was a bit on the diplomatic side, yet, the text was not void of discussion on political, social, and especially economic factors involved in the expansion. Although it was not done in any great depth, Graebner also theorizes the historical significance of the period through other historians. The book might have had greater clarity if Graebner would have focused more on the events leading up to the period of expansion. In his book, Graebner only explores the four years of the Polk administration. He says nothing of the previous administrations and fails to correlate European expansion ideals, such as the White Man's Burden, into American schools of thought. The content of the book is agreeable, having led this writer to a better understanding of an important event in American history and a glimpse into the troubles a leader of an ambitious nation can undergo. *Empire on the Pacific: A Study in American Continental Expansion* is a recommendable book to those primarily concerned with American politics and diplomacy in the 1840s.

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#### Works Cited

"Dr. Norman Graebner: University of Virginia." 20 April 2006

<http://www.marshall.edu/drinko/gruebner.htm>.

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