8.61 Describe the major events and impact of the presidency of James K. Polk, including his “Dark Horse” nomination, the settlements of the Oregon boundary, the annexation of Texas, and the acquisition of California through the Mexican War. (E,G,H,P)
James K. Polk Presidency

In 1844 the Democrats nominated JAMES K. POLK, an unknown candidate from Tennessee. It appeared as though the Whig Party candidate, Henry Clay, would win in a landslide. Very few Americans had ever heard the name Polk, but Clay’s illustrious career was widely known. James K. Polk had served in seven terms in the U.S. House of Representatives, representing Tennessee. However, Polk was an excellent strategist. He tapped into the public mood and realized that manifest destiny was the very issue that could lead him to victory. Polk called for expansion that included Texas, California, and the entire Oregon territory. The northern boundary of Oregon was the latitude line of 54 degrees, 40 minutes. "FIFTY-FOUR FORTY OR FIGHT!" was the popular slogan that led Polk to victory against all odds. He was known as a "dark horse" candidate because his nomination and election was a surprise.

Under Polk’s presidency, the United States grew in size with the addition of Texas and nearly all of the land of New Mexico, Utah, Nevada, Arizona, California, Oregon, Washington, and parts of Idaho and Montana. During Polk’s administration the Smithsonian Institution and the Naval Academy was created.

From PBS Video, watch about James K. Polk’s Historical Home

http://video.pbs.org/video/2365086966/
Biography of President James K. Polk

Read about President James K. Polk at Biography.com!
http://www.biography.com/people/james-polk-9443616

The Presidency of James K. Polk
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9t64GBVNRFW

"American Blood on American Soil"

(Pictured Above: President James K. Polk was not favored to win his party’s nomination to the presidency, but his expansionist views were favored by the American people. While Polk awaited the Presidency, the trouble of Texas resurfaced.)
Congress admitted Texas to the Union in a joint resolution passed the day before Polk’s inauguration. Mexico was outraged. Inclusion in the United States would forever rule out the possibility of re-acquiring the lost province.

Furthermore, the boundary was in dispute. Mexico claimed that the southern boundary of Texas was the NUECES RIVER, the Texan boundary while under Mexican rule. Americans, as well as the incoming President, claimed that the boundary of Texas was the RIO GRANDE RIVER. The territory between the two rivers was the subject of angry bickering between the two nations. Soon it would serve as the catalyst for an all-out war.

President Polk’s true goal was to acquire the rich ports of California. He envisioned a lucrative trade with the Far East that would revolve around San Francisco and Monterey. Great Britain also had designs on the territory, so Polk thought he would have to act fast. He sent JOHN SLIDELL to Mexico with an offer. The United States would pay Mexico a combined sum of $30 million for the Texan boundary of the Rio Grande, New Mexico territory, and California.

The Mexican government was livid. They were not interested in selling the valuable territory. Instead they issued the highest diplomatic rebuke. They refused even to receive Slidell to hear his offer. The American President was enraged. He resolved to fight Mexico.
In July of 1845, Polk ordered GENERAL ZACHARY TAYLOR to cross the Nueces River with his command of 4,000 troops. Upon learning of Slidell’s rejection, Polk sent word that Taylor should advance his troops to the Rio Grande River. From the standpoint of Mexico, the United States had invaded their territory. Polk hoped to defend the disputed area with armed force. He also knew that any attack on American troops might provide the impetus Congress was lacking to declare war.

Sure enough, in May of 1846, Polk received word that the Mexican army had indeed fired on Taylor’s soldiers. Polk appeared before Congress on May 11 and declared that Mexico had invaded the United States and had "SHED AMERICAN BLOOD ON AMERICAN SOIL!" ANTI-EXPANSIONIST Whigs had been hoping to avoid conflict, but news of the "attack" was too much to overlook. Congress passed a war declaration by an overwhelming majority. President Polk had his war.

(Pictured Above: Oregon City, along the banks of the Willamette River, the final stop along the Oregon Trail as it appeared in 1848.)

Oregon Boundary Treaty Information

http://www.fofweb.com/History/MainPrintPage.asp?iPin=EAHIV180&DataType=AmericanHistory&WinType=Free

Claiming the territory in an election campaign was one thing. Acquiring it from the powerful British was another. Although Polk blustered about obtaining the entire territory from Britain, he was secretly willing to compromise. Trouble was brewing with Mexico in the south. Surely the new nation could ill afford to fight Mexico in the southwest and the British in the northwest simultaneously. Nevertheless, Polk boldly declared to Great Britain that joint occupation would end within one year. The British were confident they could win, but by 1846 they were vastly outnumbered in Oregon by a margin of greater than six to one. In June of that year, Britain proposed splitting Oregon at the 49th parallel. Polk agreed to the compromise, and conflict was avoided.

The Mexican-American War

(Pictured Above: General Winfield Scott’s entrance into Mexico City, September 14, 1847, is depicted in this print by Carl Nebel.)

When war broke out against Mexico in May 1846, the United States Army numbered a mere 8,000, but soon 60,000 volunteers joined their ranks. The AMERICAN NAVY dominated the sea. The American government provided stable, capable leadership. The economy of the expanding United States far surpassed that of the fledgling Mexican state. Morale was on the American side. The war was a rout.

Polk directed the war from Washington, D.C. He sent a 4-prong attack into the Mexican heartland. JOHN FRE-MONT and STEPHEN KEARNY were sent to control the coveted lands of CALIFORNIA and NEW MEXICO. Fremont led a group of zealous Californians to declare independence even before word of hostilities reached the
West. The "BEAR FLAG REPUBLIC" was not taken seriously, but Fremont and his followers did march to Monterey to capture the Mexican PRESIDIO, or fort. By 1847, California was secure.

(Pictured Above: *The original Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was printed in two columns, the English translation on the left and the Spanish on the right.*)

Meanwhile, Kearny led his troops into Santa Fe in August of 1846 causing the governor of New Mexico to flee. The city was captured without a single casualty. Soon he marched his army westward across the desert to join Fremont in California.

The attack on Mexico proper was left to two other commanders. Zachary Taylor crossed the Rio Grande with his troops upon Polk’s order. He fought Santa Anna’s troops successfully on his advance toward the heart of Mexico. WINFIELD SCOTT delivered the knockout punch. After invading Mexico at Vera Cruz, Scott’s troops marched to the capital, Mexico City. All that remained was negotiating the terms of peace.

At home, the Whigs of the north complained bitterly about the war. Many questioned Polk’s methods as misleading and unconstitutional. Abolitionists rightly feared that southerners would try to use newly acquired lands to expand slavery. Anti War sentiment emerged in New England much as it had in the War of 1812. Writer Henry David Thoreau was sentenced to prison for refusing to pay the taxes he knew were used to fund the war effort. His essay, *Civil Disobedience*, became a standard of peaceful resistance for future activists.

The MEXICAN-AMERICAN WAR was formally concluded by the TREATY OF GUADALUPE-HIDALGO. The United States received the disputed Texan territory, as well as NEW MEXICO territory and CALIFORNIA. The Mexican government was paid $15 million—the same sum issued to France for the Louisiana Territory. The United States Army won a grand victory. Although suffering 13,000 killed, the military won every engagement of the war. Mexico was stripped of half of its territory and was not consoled by the monetary settlement.

*From Annenberg Learner, read about the annexation of Texas*
James K. Polk was a Tennessean. View his home in Columbia, Tennessee on this site.

http://www.learner.org/interactives/historymap/states_texas.html

http://jameskpolk.com/