



America 1844: Religious Fervor, Westward Expansion, and the Presidential Election That Transformed the Nation

John Bicknell

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The presidential election of 1844 was one of the two or three most momentous elections in American history. Had Henry Clay won instead of James K. Polk, we'd be living in a very different country today. Polk's victory cemented the westward expansion that brought Texas, California, and Oregon into the union. It also took place amid religious turmoil that included anti-Mormon and anti-Catholic violence, and the "Great Disappointment," in which thousands of followers of an obscure preacher named William Miller believed Christ would return to earth in October 1844.

Author and journalist John Bicknell details even more compelling, interwoven events that occurred during this momentous year: the murder of Joseph Smith, the religious fermentation of the Second Great Awakening, John C. Frémont's exploration of the West, Charles Goodyear's patenting of vulcanized rubber, the near-death of President John Tyler in a freak naval explosion, and much more. All of these elements illustrate the competing visions of the American future—Democrats versus Whigs, Mormons versus Millerites, nativists versus Catholics, those who risked the venture westward versus those who stayed safely behind—and how Polk's election cemented the vision of a continental nation.

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