Ronald Reagan, who often seems his ideological father, but James K. Polk, a dynamic and willful leader few discuss anymore.

Polk, when elected president as a Democrat in 1844, had more political experience than Bush (Polk had spent 20 years in elective office, compared with Bush's six). But like Bush (who was 54 in 2000), Polk was young (49) and extremely self-confident when he took office.

Polk may be the only predecessor who matched Bush's determination to drive massive change on a minute margin of victory. Polk won by fewer than 38,000 votes of 2.7 million cast. Over four tumultuous years, he pursued an ambitious, highly partisan agenda that offered little to those who had voted against him. Sound familiar?

Strong on vision but weak on building consensus, Polk advanced his goals more than seemed possible in a closely divided country. But Polk's tactics deepened the nation's divisions and fanned the flames that later exploded into the Civil War.

It's worth considering Polk's record not because Americans will take up arms against each other anytime soon — although you might never know that from listening to talk radio — but because it suggests that a president who slights the need to build national consensus can seed long-term problems that aren't immediately apparent amid short-term successes.

Polk was inarguably a visionary: He saw the United States as a continental nation stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean. And he was determined to advance that vision over any obstacle. After completing the annexation of the independent Republic of Texas negotiated under his predecessor, Polk immediately targeted the vast Mexican holdings from the Southwest through California.

When Mexico wouldn't sell him the territory, Polk claimed that the border of Texas extended much farther South than when it had been a Mexican state, and provocatively sent U.S. troops to occupy the disputed terrain. Mexico, which had ruffled sabers itself, attacked and war began. It didn't end for nearly two years, proving much costlier and bloodier than the president had anticipated.

The war also profoundly divided the country. The opposition Whigs, who would mostly dissolve into the Republican Party in the 1850s, accused the president of "deliberately provoking a war and then lying about Mexico's responsibility for starting the conflict," wrote historian Joel H. Silbey in his recent book "Storm Over Texas."

Among the Whigs most outraged by Polk's conduct was a freshman U.S. House member from Illinois named Abraham Lincoln. Doris Kearns Goodwin picks up the story in her panoramic new book "Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln." Shortly after taking office, Goodwin writes, Lincoln voted for a Whig resolution that charged the president with "unceasingly and unconstitutionally" initiating the war. To accept Polk's justifications, Lincoln later complained, would be to "allow the president to invade a neighboring nation whenever he may choose to say he deems it necessary."

Polk eventually won the war and added to American territory an expanse that included California, New Mexico, Arizona and big pieces of the Mountain West. Yet in the process Polk sharpened conflict not only between the two major parties but within his own party, and deepened the antagonism between Northerners (many of whom sought to bar the spread of slavery into the newly acquired lands) and the South.

Polk failed to understand the cost to his presidency, and to the nation, of governing in a manner that was
increasingly seen as championing the priorities of one interest, Southern slaveholders. The charge wasn’t entirely fair, but the impatient Polk never recognized the value of concessions that could broaden consensus. When Polk stepped down, Silbey writes, he left behind "ominous cracks" in the political and social institutions that had encouraged national unity.

Much separates Polk’s war with Mexico from Bush’s with Iraq. But obvious echoes reverberate. Much like Polk with continental expansion, Bush has focused his presidency on a single goal: fighting Islamic terrorism, largely by encouraging the spread of democracy. In pursuit of that vision, Bush, like Polk, launched a war whose initial justification has spawned bitter dispute. And, like Polk, Bush has seen that war become more grueling and divisive than he had expected.

Polk’s unwavering, impermeable conviction defines one approach for organizing a presidency in such circumstances. But Polk’s early critics — Lincoln — offers Bush a better model for leadership during a difficult war. In the Civil War, Lincoln was nothing if not resolute. But as Goodwin notes, he also calibrated his decisions — from key personnel appointments to the timing of emancipation — to hold together all shades of opinion committed to the Union.

Bush lately has met more with Democrats and acknowledged mistakes on Iraq. But substantively, he has not conceded much, either about Iraq or his tactics in the broader war on terrorism (except his belated capitulation to Senate demands for a ban on torture in the interrogation of prisoners). The divisions over Iraq are so deep that nothing Bush could do would bridge them entirely, and his inclination to ignore his most implacable opponents is understandable. But Bush would place the nation’s security on a more stable foundation if he worked harder to find a consensus agenda with those critics whose assessment of the threat in Iraq and at home was closer to his own.

Part of Lincoln’s genius, as one close advisor wrote, was his understanding that in the pursuit of national unity, it was the task of the president "to mollify and moderate" the country’s fractious interests and diverse viewpoints. That’s one reason Lincoln is revered and Polk, for all his ferocious accomplishments, is barely remembered.

Ronald Brownstein’s column appears every Monday. See current and past Brownstein columns on The Times’ website at latimes.com/brownstein.