

Chapter 185 – Fillmore Offers A “Delayed Inaugural Address” To Congress



Dates:
December 2, 1850

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- The New President’s Annual Address To Congress Lays Out His Goals

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The New President’s Annual Address To Congress Lays Out His Goals



Millard Fillmore (1800-1874)

With hope that the 1850 Compromise bills have resolved the crises over slavery in the west, a more confident Fillmore decides to use his annual message to Congress as the inaugural speech he was never afforded. The document is extremely long, with dispassionate rhetoric befitting Fillmore’s history as NY comptroller. That aside, it does identify a laundry list of things he hopes to accomplish, several forward-looking in character.

He begins the address by asking for indulgence to explain his “sentiments” about government – given his missed opportunity to do so after Taylor’s sudden death.

Being suddenly called in the midst of the last session of Congress by a painful dispensation of Divine Providence...I contented myself with such communications to the Legislature as...the moment seemed to require. I trust, therefore, that it may not be deemed inappropriate if I (now) avail myself to ...make known my sentiments in a general manner in regard to the ...intercourse with foreign nations and management and administration of internal affairs.

Like his predecessors, he promises to seek friendly relations with foreign powers and avoid entanglements in conflicts.

We should act toward other nations as we wish them to act toward us... to maintain a strict neutrality in foreign wars, to cultivate friendly relations, to reciprocate every noble and generous act, and to perform punctually and scrupulously every treaty obligation—these are the duties which we owe to other states...

On domestic affairs, he is likewise formulaic in his commitment to following the Constitution, faithfully executing all laws, and selecting appointees who will act on behalf of the people.

In our domestic policy the Constitution will be my guide... I deem it my first duty not to question its wisdom, add to its provisions, evade its requirements, or nullify its commands. The Government of the United States is a limited Government... The beauty of our system of government consists, and its safety and durability must consist, in avoiding mutual collisions and encroachments.... I shall at all times and in all places take care that the laws be faithfully executed.

The appointing power is one of the most delicate with which the Executive is invested. I regard it as a sacred trust, to be exercised with the sole view of advancing the prosperity and happiness of the people.

With that boilerplate out of the way, he begins to identify his personal priorities. One is to follow up on the 1850 Clayton-Bulwer treaty and build a canal across Nicaragua, connecting the two great oceans.

I am happy in being able to say that no unfavorable change in our foreign relations has taken place since the message at the opening of the last session of Congress... A convention was negotiated between the United States and Great Britain in April last for facilitating and protecting the construction of a ship canal between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

The company of citizens of the United States who have acquired from the State of Nicaragua the privilege of constructing a ship canal between the two oceans through the territory of that State have made progress in their preliminary arrangements.

Another is a railroad line, situated at the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, which would enable goods to be transported back and forth between ports on the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean.

Citizens of the United States have undertaken the connection of the two oceans by means of a railroad across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, under grants of the Mexican Government to a citizen of that Republic....

The canal and railroad references feed into a broader theme – expanding America’s role in global commerce. In the Pacific, openings to China, begun by fur traders such as John Jacob Astor, have been formalized in the 1844 Treaty of Wangxia. Fillmore now hopes to broaden the U.S. reach throughout the region, including Hawaii and possibly even the insulated nation of Japan.

The unprecedented growth of our territories on the Pacific in wealth and population and the consequent increase of their social and commercial relations with the Atlantic States seem to render it the duty of the Government to use all its constitutional power to improve the means of intercourse with them.

Closer to home, he ticks off potential opportunities in Santo Domingo, Brazil, Chili and even mentions the growing demand for “Peruvian guano” (bird dung).

The President then segues to finance, first praising a reduction in the federal debt.

I refer you to the report of the Secretary of the Treasury for a detailed statement of the finances. The total receipts into the Treasury for the year ending 30th of June last were \$47,421,748.90. The total expenditures during the same period were \$43,002,168.90. The public debt has been reduced since the last annual report from the Treasury Department \$495,276.79.

True to his Whig roots, he supports raising the tariff to help fund infrastructure initiatives and protect manufacturers – a rare departure from his typically pro-Southern leanings.

All experience has demonstrated the wisdom and policy of raising a large portion of revenue for the support of Government from duties on goods imported. The power to lay these duties is unquestionable, and its chief object, of course, is to replenish the Treasury.

A high tariff can never be permanent. It will cause dissatisfaction, and will be changed.... I therefore strongly recommend a modification of the present tariff, which has prostrated some of our most important and necessary manufactures, and that specific duties be imposed sufficient to raise the requisite revenue, making such discriminations in favor of the industrial pursuits of our own country as to encourage home production without excluding foreign competition.

He calls for a mint located in California to respond to the gold rush.

There being no mint in California, I am informed that the laborers in the mines are compelled to dispose of their gold dust at a large discount.... I doubt not you will be disposed at the earliest period possible to relieve them from it by the establishment of a mint.

The Department of the Interior, just begun in 1849, is charged with starting up an “agricultural bureau,” updating the nation’s land laws, especially related to mineral rights.

More than three-fourths of our population are engaged in the cultivation of the soil.... I respectfully recommend the establishment of an agricultural bureau, to be charged with the duty of giving to this leading branch of American industry the encouragement which it so well deserves.

I also beg leave to call your attention to the propriety of extending at an early day our system of land laws, with such modifications as may be necessary, over the State of California and the Territories of Utah and New Mexico...

When it comes to tribal relations, Fillmore exhibits the xenophobic hostility he reserves throughout his career for all minority populations. The Indians are “a source of constant terror” and he urges Congress to add cavalry units to subdue their murderous activities.

Texas and New Mexico are surrounded by powerful tribes of Indians, who are a source of constant terror and annoyance to the inhabitants. Separating into small predatory bands, and always mounted, they

overrun the country, devastating farms, destroying crops, driving off whole herds of cattle, and occasionally murdering the inhabitants or carrying them into captivity... The military force stationed in that country, although forming a large proportion of the Army, is represented as entirely inadequate... The principal deficiency is in cavalry, and I recommend that Congress should, at as early a period as practicable, provide for the raising of one or more regiments of mounted men.

The litany continues with hope for “an asylum for the relief of disabled and destitute soldiers,” naval upgrades suggested by its secretary, and a reduction in postal rates.

I am happy to find that the fiscal condition of the Department is such as to justify the Postmaster-General in recommending the reduction of our inland letter postage to 3 cents the single letter when prepaid and 5 cents when not prepaid.

Still not done, he swings back to “internal improvements,” at this point focusing on ports and harbors, as well as refurbishing Washington DC itself “to render it attractive to the people of the whole Republic.”

I entertain no doubt of the authority of Congress to make appropriations for leading objects in that class of public works comprising what are usually called works of internal improvement.... Where commerce is to be carried on and imposts collected there must be ports and harbors as well as wharves and custom-houses... I therefore recommend that appropriations be made for completing such works as have been already begun and for commencing such others as may seem to the wisdom of Congress to be of public and general importance.

It should be the pride of Americans to render (Washington) attractive to the people of the whole Republic and convenient and safe for the transaction of the public business and the preservation of the public records.

At long last he wanders into the one arena that will most define his term in office – what he calls “healing the sectional differences which had sprung from the slavery and territorial questions.” The tenor of his remarks suggest a man who hopes that the tensions have been resolved, but is already seeing signs to the contrary. Thus he notes that “no information has yet been received” from the Texans about their boundary dispute with New Mexico.

The act, passed at your last session, making certain propositions to Texas for settling the disputed boundary between that State and the Territory of New Mexico was, immediately on its passage, transmitted by express to the governor of Texas, to be laid by him before the general assembly for its agreement thereto. Its receipt was duly acknowledged, but no official information has yet been received of the action of the general assembly thereon. It may, however, be very soon expected, as, by the terms of the propositions submitted they were to have been acted upon on or before the first day of the present month.

Of course, he says, “it was hardly to have been expected” that negotiations that took “many months” to resolve would be realized immediately.

It was hardly to have been expected that the series of measures passed at your last session with the view of healing the sectional differences which had sprung from the slavery and territorial

questions should at once have realized their beneficent purpose...It required many months of discussion and deliberation to secure the concurrence of a majority of Congress in their favor...

But despite any delayed reactions, Fillmore remains convinced that the “great majority of citizens” support the 1850 Compromise Bill and “still cherish...the Union of their fathers.”

I believe that a great majority of our fellow citizens sympathize in that spirit and that purpose, and in the main approve and are prepared in all respects to sustain these enactments. I can not doubt that the American people, bound together by kindred blood and common traditions, still cherish a paramount regard for the Union of their fathers, and that they are ready to rebuke any attempt to violate its integrity, to disturb the compromises on which it is based, or to resist the laws which have been enacted under its authority.

As if to reassure himself, he declares it a “final settlement in principle and substance...the best, if not the only, means to restoring peace...and the integrity of the Union.”

The series of measures to which I have alluded are regarded by me as a settlement in principle and substance—a final settlement of the dangerous and exciting subjects which they embraced.... The best, if not the only, means of restoring peace and quiet to the country and maintaining inviolate the integrity of the Union.

In the tradition of his predecessors, he closes with an invocation to what he calls “the Great Ruler of Nations.”

And now, fellow-citizens, I can not bring this communication to a close without invoking you to join me in humble and devout thanks to the Great Ruler of Nations for the multiplied blessings which He has graciously bestowed upon us.