

## Chapter 161 – The Whigs Choose Another General



**Dates:**  
June 7, 1848

**Sections:**

- The Whigs Have Their Own Opportunities And Challenges Going Into 1848
- The Whigs Meet In Philadelphia To Choose A Nominee
- Taylor Is Chosen On The Fourth Ballot
- Millard Fillmore Is The Nominee For Vice President

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Date: 1848

### The Whigs Have Their Own Opportunities And Challenges Going Into 1848

The Whigs are once again optimistic as they look ahead to the 1848 election, while still having internal policy issues on slavery needing resolution.

As a party, they have added 37 House seats to their side in 1846, giving them a slim 116-112 majority. Twenty of these pick-ups come from New York and Pennsylvania, where the Wilmot Proviso garners widespread public support.

But Wilmot's proposed ban is a two-edged sword, even for the Whigs, where 17 of their 19 Southern House members vote "no" on August 8, 1846, when it is attached to Polk's initial Appropriations Bill.

The strategic question for the Whigs is therefore how to leverage the popularity of the Wilmot ban in the North without alienating their membership in the South.

One advantage they have over the Democrats is that much of their party strength lies in the upper South rather than in the hard-core cotton belt. The Border states of Kentucky, Maryland and Delaware, together with Tennessee, account for 7 of their 21 senators, and 16 representatives. The old South states of North Carolina, Virginia, and Georgia add 3 more in the Senate and 16 in the House.

What these Whig-heavy states have in common is a less cotton/slave-centric economy, a long-standing commitment to the Union, and a conservative hesitancy toward any talk of secession.

The Southern Whigs also boast many established congressional leaders -- men like Senators John J. Crittenden of Kentucky, John Clayton of Delaware, Reverdy Johnson of Maryland, and John Bell of Tennessee -- who share personal reservations about slavery and do their best to moderate threats from the emerging Southern "Fire-Eaters."

In the House they are joined by the likes of the Virginians, John Minor Botts and William Preston, Daniel Barringer and George Badger of North Carolina, and two exceptional Georgia Whigs, Alexander Stephens and Robert Toombs, who will persevere through many ups and downs in search of compromises to protect the Union.

**Southern States Where Whigs Have Strengths In 1848**

<b>Border</b>	<b>House</b>	<b>Senate</b>	<b>“Influentials”</b>
Kentucky	6	2	JJ Crittenden, Charles Morehead
Maryland	4	2	Reverdy Johnson, James Pearce
Delaware	1	2	John Clayton
Southeast			
North Carolina	6	2	Daniel Barringer, George Badger
Georgia	4	1	Alex Stephens, Robert Toombs
Virginia	6	0	John Minor Botts, William Preston
Southwest			
Tennessee	5	1	John Bell
Alabama	2	0	
Louisiana	1	1	

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**The Whigs Meet In Philadelphia To Choose A Nominee**



Thurlow Weed (1797-1872)

Two weeks after the Democrats nominate Lewis Cass, Philadelphia hosts its first national convention, as the Whigs pour into the “Chinese Museum” venue on Ninth Street, so-called for its historical display of eastern artifacts.

What’s on the mind of the delegates is finally electing a President who will put into practice the “American System” principles that Henry Clay laid out some twenty years ago.

They came close in 1840, until General Harrison, “Old Tippecanoe,” died one month after his inauguration, only to be replaced by the “turncoat” Tyler, at heart a thoroughgoing Virginia Democrat. Their disappointment is repeated in 1844, when Clay, making his third run, loses a tight race to Polk.

But circumstances in 1848 appear much more hopeful. Unity within the Democratic Party has been severely tested by the Wilmot controversy, and the sitting president, Polk, has given way to a less formidable foe in Cass. Victory should be in store, if the party can nominate the right candidate.

With Clay’s influence waning, the two leading strategists for the Whigs are Kentucky Senator John Crittenden, and journalist, Thurlow Weed, who controls party politics in New York. In 1830 Weed

launched the Anti-Mason Party to bring down Andrew Jackson, and his drive to unseat the Democrats remains undiminished. Together the two men will play the kingmaker role at the convention.

Crittenden himself is regarded by many as a possible candidate, but he dismisses the idea. Clay remains a favorite, but lacks momentum after prior defeats. Senator John Clayton sparks interest, but his tiny home state of Delaware works against him. A few back Supreme Court Justice John McLean of Ohio. Webster's decision to remain in Tyler's administration eliminates him.

This leaves two men in the spotlight – the recent war heroes, Generals Winfield Scott and Zachary Taylor.

The Democrats fear Scott more than Taylor, and Polk acts to diminish his reputation and deprive him of getting the nomination. He does so by initiating a “court of inquiry,” charging that Scott “compromised military operations” in Mexico by dealing directly with Santa Anna to end the war. Future war heroes such as Robert E. Lee and George McClellan decry Polk's cynical ploy and Scott is acquitted – but not before the Whig convention is over.

All eyes then turn to Zachary Taylor – still a very uncertain candidate in the months leading up to the convention.

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### **Taylor Is Chosen On The Fourth Ballot**

Two questions have surrounded Taylor from the beginning: does he want to be President and is he really a Whig?

His own words, recorded soon after his February 1847 victory at Buena Vista, seem to rule out a run.

*On the subject of the presidency...under no circumstances have I any aspirations for the office, nor do I have the vanity to consider myself qualified.*

In fact, since departing Mexico in November 1847, Taylor has been happily retired at *Cypress Grove Plantation*, one of several he owns around Baton Rouge, Louisiana. He lives modestly in a small cottage, spending his days mixing easily with townspeople and overseeing the labor of his slaves, which number over one hundred.

When asked about politics, he claims that he is an Independent, not a Whig, and admits that he has never voted before in an election.

Despite these “limitations,” Thurlow Weed is certain that Taylor will win, if nominated. Like Harrison, he is a military hero, a southerner, a slave holder, and one who believes in the sanctity of the Union. Moreover he arrives on stage with no political baggage, no public positions on controversial issues like the Wilmot Proviso, nothing liable to offend one side or the other.

Still Weed recognizes that Taylor must publicly embrace the Whig Party prior to the Philadelphia convention.

He communicates this to Colonel William Bliss, a military aide to the General, who sends a contingent to Baton Rouge in late April 1848 to extract the needed pledge. It comes in the form of what could only be characterized as a tepid commitment:

*I reiterate what I have often said...I am a Whig but not an ultra Whig. If elected I would not be the president of a party (but) would endeavor to act independent of party domination and should feel bound to administer the Government untrammelled by party schemes.*

Along with a promise to insure a strong banking system, this is enough for Weed and Crittenden to proceed, and they rally a diverse band of supporters for Taylor. Included here are seven congressmen known as the “Young Indians,” including Abraham Lincoln and two Georgians, Robert Toombs and Alexander Stephens. Endorsements also appear from non-Whigs, the General’s son-in-law, Jefferson Davis, a Democrat, and the leader of the Nativist American Party, Lewis Levin. Even Scott writes glowingly about Taylor in a September 16 note to one D.F. Miller:

*I know General Taylor to be one of the best citizens in our land. In point of integrity he can have no superior. His firmness of purpose is equally remarkable, and I consider him a man of excellent sense and sound judgement. He has always been known as a republican in principles and manners....*

Crittenden serves as Taylor’s floor manager on June 7 and steers his way through a variety of de-railers: a motion to force the nominee to obey the party platform; a denunciation from a Massachusetts delegate that the General would “continue the rule of slavery for four more years;” and the demand by backers of other candidates to register their preferences in the early balloting.

In the end, Taylor leads from the first vote forward. Clay is shown the respect he deserves, before his support drifts to the two generals. On the fourth reckoning, Taylor goes over the top.

#### **Whig Nomination For President - 1848**

<b>Candidate</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
Taylor	111	118	133	171
Clay	97	86	74	32
Scott	43	49	54	63
Webster	22	22	17	14
Clayton	4	3	1	0
McLean	2	1	0	0

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### **Millard Fillmore Is The Nominee For Vice President**

With Taylor heading the ticket, the Whigs turn to selecting a running mate.

They have learned from the John Tyler fiasco of 1840 that their choice needs to be certifiably Whiggish in regard to his political beliefs and history – a litmus test that is doubly true this time given uncertainties surrounding Taylor.

Out of fourteen names teed up at the convention, four are given serious consideration – two New Yorkers, ex-Governor William Seward and State Comptroller, Millard Fillmore; the textile tycoon from Massachusetts, Abbot Lawrence; and former Treasury Secretary under Harrison/Tyler, Thomas Owing of Ohio.

Owing is supremely qualified, but is eliminated by a dirty trick in the form of a false assertion on the floor that he wants his name withdrawn from consideration.

Thurlow Weed is forever firmly behind Seward, with both regarding Fillmore as a serious threat to their control over New York state politics. Seward also opposes much of what Fillmore has come to represent: lukewarm opposition to slavery, fierce anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant attacks, and a lack of curiosity, depth and decisiveness regarding national affairs.

At the same time, the energetic Seward has relatively little interest in serving as Vice-President and, along with Weed, throws his support behind Lawrence.

Lawrence, however, faces sharp divisions within his own Massachusetts delegation. Daniel Webster never forgives him for backing Clay for the 1840 nomination, while the anti-slavery “Conscience Whigs” regard him as far too aligned with Southern cotton interests, who supply his mills.

With Owings out by deception and Seward by intent, the race comes down to Lawrence versus Fillmore.

Fillmore has climbed out of poverty as a youth to a successful legal career, four terms in the U.S. House, the founding of Buffalo University, and his current position as Comptroller of New York, overseeing accounting practices and financial reporting for state government. He is intent on returning to the national stage, and has campaigned over a year for the Vice-Presidency.

He is also well organized at the convention, and offers the delegates a Northerner who appears to be mildly against the spread of slavery, thus balancing Polk, the Southern slave owner.

The first ballot is tight, but Fillmore pulls away on the second and wins the position he is after – along with a destiny that will surpass his wildest ambition.

**Ballot Results For Vice-President**

<b>Candidate</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>
Fillmore	115	173
Lawrence	109	87
Others	51	