

Chapter 170 – Taylor Names His Cabinet And Is Inaugurated



Dates:
1849-1850

Sections:

- Taylor's Cabinet Picks Tend To Oppose Further Expansion Of Slavery
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Date: January – February 1849

Taylor's Cabinet Picks Tend To Oppose Further Expansion Of Slavery

As the various congressional factions spar over slavery in the District of Columbia, President Taylor assembles a cabinet comprising seven Whigs, all formerly lawyers.

His choice for Secretary of State is a sitting U.S. Senator from Delaware, John Clayton, a man he has never met before in person. But Clayton has long been considered presidential timber and enjoys support within the party during the 1847 nominating process. He opposes both the Texas Annexation and the Mexican War, but vigorously supports the troops once the fighting begins.

Neither of the military posts is filled with experienced service men, signaling Taylor's intent to focus on his duty as commander-in-chief.

The War Secretary, George W. Crawford, serves only briefly in the Georgia militia before being chosen as the state's Attorney General and Governor. His early record in politics includes a prolonged duel in which he kills a local congressman on a third exchange of gunfire. The Navy post goes to House member William "Ballard" Preston, a planter and slave owner who support abolition during his time in the Virginia state legislature.

For the Treasury, Taylor is said to favor Horace Binney, defender of the Second U.S. Bank against Jackson, but instead ends up with another Pennsylvanian, William Meredith. He is the son of a famous Philadelphia banker, and an unflinching proponent of protective tariffs to support American jobs.

Congressman Jacob Collamer of Vermont becomes a Postmaster General who, to his benefit, refuses to follow the tradition of immediately sacking all party-opposite employees within his realm.

The Attorney General position goes to the renowned Maryland trial lawyer, ex-slave owner, and sitting U.S. Senator, Reverdy Johnson. He becomes a strong supporter of Taylor and a particularly influential member of the cabinet.

Given the sudden and vast expansion westward, congress approves a new Department of the Interior, its mission being to manage the lands, natural resources, and Indian affairs in the new territories. The first to fill this slot is Thomas Ewing of Ohio, formerly a U.S. Senator and then, momentarily, Treasury Secretary under Harrison.

While four of his seven picks come from “slave” states, all members share Taylor’s opposition to expanding the institution into the west.

Zachary Taylor’s Cabinet

Position	Name	Home State
Secretary of State	John Clayton	Delaware
Secretary of Treasury	William Meredith	Pennsylvania
Secretary of War	George Crawford	Georgia
Attorney General	Reverdy Johnson	Maryland
Secretary of Navy	William Preston	Virginia
Postmaster General	Jacob Collamer	Vermont
Secretary of Interior	Thomas Ewing	Ohio

Date: March 5, 1849

The Inaugural Speech Calls For “Enlarged Patriotism” To Assuage Sectional Conflicts



The Vision Of A Unified Nation

A crowd of some 20,000 gather at the East Portico to hear the new President deliver his inaugural address, an abbreviated and largely perfunctory effort of only 1090 words.

Taylor begins by expressing gratitude for his election and acknowledging the “fearful responsibilities” he will face.

The confidence and respect shown by my countrymen in calling me to be the Chief Magistrate...have inspired me with feelings of the most profound gratitude; but when I reflect that the acceptance of the office..involves the weightiest obligations (and) by fearful responsibilities.

He anticipates “able cooperation” from a divided congress (a Whig House and a Democrat Senate) and the judiciary, so that he can execute his duties “diligently, impartially, and for the best interests of the country.”

Happily, however...I shall not be without able cooperation (from) the legislative and judicial branches of the Government ...whose talents, integrity, and purity of character will furnish ample guaranties for the faithful and honorable performance. With such aids and an honest purpose to do whatever is right, I hope to execute diligently, impartially, and for the best interests of the country the manifold duties devolved upon me.

In enumerating his duties, Taylor promises to operate within the strict guidelines laid out for the Executive in the Constitution. His first priority will be to act as the military commander-in-chief. He will oversee all treaties, appoint ambassadors, update congress on emerging issues, and insure that all laws are faithfully executed.

To command the Army and Navy of the United States; with the advice and consent of the Senate, to make treaties and to appoint ambassadors and other officers; to give to Congress information of the state of the Union and recommend such measures as he shall judge to be necessary; and to take care that the laws shall be faithfully executed....

At this point his mind is clearly on the tensions surrounding slavery in the new territories – as he returns to the notion of serving “the whole country,” and not “any particular section or local interest.” His determination will be to maintain the “national existence” (i.e. the Union) by scrupulously following the Constitution.

Chosen by the body of the people under the assurance that my Administration would be devoted to the welfare of the whole country, and not to the support of any particular section or merely local interest, I this day renew the declarations I have heretofore made and proclaim my fixed determination to maintain to the extent of my ability the Government in its original purity and to adopt as the basis of my public policy those great republican doctrines which constitute the strength of our national existence.

He cycles back to an old favorite from his days at war, the need for a strong Regular Army as opposed to trying to fight effectively with amateur militiamen.

In reference to the Army and Navy, lately employed with so much distinction on active service, care shall be taken to insure the highest condition of efficiency, and in furtherance of that object the military and naval schools, sustained by the liberality of Congress, shall receive the special attention of the Executive.

Despite this focus on the army, Taylor says he will follow Washington’s dictate to avoid involving America in foreign conflicts, and will exhaust all diplomatic efforts to settle disputes before any resort to warfare.

As American freemen we can not but sympathize in all efforts to extend the blessings of civil and political liberty, but at the same time we are warned by the admonitions of history and the voice of our own beloved Washington to abstain from entangling alliances with foreign nations.... It is to be hoped that no international question can now arise which a government confident in its own strength and resolved to protect its own just rights may not settle by wise negotiation; and it eminently becomes a government like our own, founded on the morality and intelligence of its

citizens and upheld by their affections, to exhaust every resort of honorable diplomacy before appealing to arms.

He acknowledges his responsibility to appoint honest and capable government officials.

The appointing power vested in the President imposes delicate and onerous duties. So far as it is possible to be informed, I shall make honesty, capacity, and fidelity indispensable prerequisites to the bestowal of office, and the absence of either of these qualities shall be deemed sufficient cause for removal.

Finally he pledges to “protect the interests” of all three sectors of the economy (“agriculture, commerce, and manufactures”), to “extinguish the public debt,” to achieve “economy in all public expenditures,” and to rely on Congress to properly regulate...domestic policy.”

Consistent with his predecessors, Taylor invokes “Divine Providence” to sustain the “high state of prosperity” the nation has long experienced, while also calling on “enlarged patriotism” to “assuage the bitterness...marking differences of opinion” and strengthen the Republic.

In conclusion I congratulate you, my fellow-citizens, upon the high state of prosperity to which the goodness of Divine Providence has conducted our common country. Let us invoke a continuance of the same protecting care which has led us from small beginnings to the eminence we this day occupy, and let us seek to deserve that continuance by prudence and moderation in our councils, by well-directed attempts to assuage the bitterness which too often marks unavoidable differences of opinion, by the promulgation and practice of just and liberal principles, and by an enlarged patriotism, which shall acknowledge no limits but those of our own widespread Republic.

Overview Of Taylor’s Term

Zachary Taylor’s time in office will be brief – only sixteen months – but it will further set the stage for the national debate around slavery that dominates the next decade.

The South’s assumption that Taylor’s ownership of three plantations will translate into support for extending slavery into the new Mexican Cession territories is soon proven false. Like Andrew Jackson before him, the General’s highest calling lies with preserving the Union, and he is convinced that a flat-out prohibition on more slavery will put an end to further sectional hostilities. On this score he will be proven dead wrong.

When Taylor signals his wish to immediately admits California to the Union as a Free State, Southerners in Congress, including his own Whig associates, rise up to oppose him. Their apparent sense of betrayal is so intense that the aging patriarch of the party, Henry Clay, decides to step directly into the fray in search of a solution on slavery similar to his 1820 Missouri Compromise.

Along with the powerful Democrat, Stephen Douglas, Clay crafts what becomes known as the 1850 Omnibus Bill, which includes off-sets to the South for the admission of a Free California. Central here are promises to allow voters in the New Mexico and Utah Territories to choose their status (i.e. the Democrat’s “popular sovereignty” principle) and new rules requiring Northerners to enforce the Fugitive Slave Law.

Congressional debate over the Omnibus Bill in March 1850 produces memorable exchanges between aging lions such as John Calhoun and Daniel Webster and next generation leaders such as William Seward, who, like Taylor himself, opposes passage. Seward's "Higher Law" address goes so far as to argue the primacy of God's law over that in the U.S. Constitution, a fearful consideration for all slave-owners.

In response, Southern Fire-Eaters hold a convention in Nashville in June seeking a call for secession, but they are turned back by more moderate Unionist forces. Still further wrangling over the Omnibus Bill resumes.

In the middle of all this, Taylor is struck down by a severe case of gastroenteritis and dies after a six day battle to try to recover. He is the second President to succumb in office and the last ever elected under the Whig banner. His successor is a mere shadow of the decisive Taylor, his Vice President, Millard Fillmore.

President Taylor's Term: Key Events

1848	
Nov 7	Taylor is elected President
Dec 5	Polk confirms discovery of gold in California
Dec 21	Abolitionist Giddings offers bill to ban slavery in DC
Dec 22	Calhoun convenes Southern conference. Sets up Committee of 15
Year	Multiple attempts by Polk to buy Cuba
	German revolution fails & many immigrate to U.S.
1849	
January	Amelia Bloomer publishes <i>The Lily</i> focused on women's movement
	Moderate Southerners defend Taylor, reject Calhoun's pleas
June 15	President Polk dies suddenly in Nashville
July 27	Memorial service in DC for ex-President Polk
Feb 7	Supreme Court denies Mass/NY attempt to tax incoming aliens
Feb 12	Temporary government set up in San Francisco
Mar 5	Taylor inaugurated
Aug 11	Taylor forbids any filibustering actions in Cuba
August	Taylor: "the North need have no apprehension of the further expansion of slavery"
Sept 13	Convention delegates sign a California Constitution declaring it a "Free State"
Nov 13	California Constitution ratified by voters: bans slavery & hopes for all-white population
Dec 4	Taylor calls for California statehood & says he will fight secession
Dec 22	A troubled Howell Cobb elected House Speaker after 3 week battle and 63 ballots
Year	The Pacific Railroad Co. is chartered, looking westward
	Regular shipping voyages from NY to Liverpool take 33 days
1850	
Feb 5-6	Clay proposes initial 1850 Compromise (Ca a free state; NM tbd; fugitive slave act)
Feb 20	Thad Stevens joins the attack on slavery in the House
Feb 27	Unionist Robert Toombs pleads with North to honor Southern rights
Feb	Hawthorne's <i>Scarlet Letter</i> is published
Mar 4	Calhoun's final speech warns of two nations split over slavery & southern secession
Mar 7	Webster speech calling on North to accept slavery to preserve the Union
Mar 11	Seward counters with "there is a higher law" speech opposing the Compromise
April 17	Senator Foote draws pistol on Senator Benton on floor during California debate
April 19	Clayton-Bulwer Treaty guarantees US & UK neutrality in Central America
May 8	Senate committee reports "Omnibus Bill" – one on territories, other on DC
May	Narciso Lopez filibustering expedition lands in Cuba & is later ousted
Jun 3-12	Nashville Convention rejects secession & calls for 36'30" line to coast
July 9	Taylor dies suddenly & Fillmore becomes president

The economy begins to tick up toward the end of Taylor's term in office, as the California gold rush gets underway.

Key Economic Overview

	1848	1849	1850
Total GDP (\$000)	\$2,427	2419	2581
% Change	1%	NC	7%
Per Capita GDP	\$111	108	111