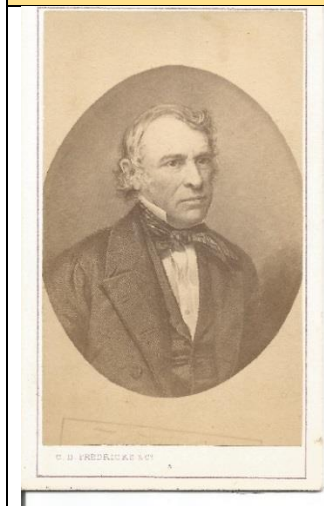


Chapter 181 – President Taylor Dies Suddenly



Dates:
July 4-9, 1850

- Sections:**
- Debate Over The Omnibus Bill Resumes In Congress
 - The President Dies After An Independence Day Celebration

Date: Spring-Summer 1851

Debate Over The Omnibus Bill Resumes In Congress



Zachary Taylor (1784-1850)

Throughout the spring and early summer controversy continues to swirl around the various components of Clay’s “Omnibus Bill” and the admission of California.

Abolitionist Thad Stevens continues to lampoon both the South for its treasonous threats of secession and the North for its timid defense of human liberty.

It is my purpose nowhere in these remarks to make personal reproaches; I entertain no ill-will toward any human being, nor any brute, that I know of, not even the [Democrat Ross] skunk across the way to which I referred.

Least of all would I reproach the South. I honor her courage and fidelity. Even in a bad, a wicked cause, she shows a united front. All her sons are faithful to the cause of human bondage, because it is their cause. But the North—the poor, timid, mercenary, driveling North—has no such united defenders of her cause, although it is the cause of human liberty ... She is offered up a sacrifice to propitiate southern tyranny—to conciliate southern treason.

In the Senate, Thomas Hart Benton suggests splitting Texas into two slave states to off-set California.

Others keep coming back to extending the 34’30” Missouri line west to the Pacific.

At the same time, Northerners begin to express outrage over the Fugitive Slave portion to the Omnibus Bill, which would enlist them in finding and returning run-aways.

Clay wishes to slow down the California admission as a bargaining chip; Taylor insists on going full speed ahead.

All sides are concerned that the old General will run out of patience and act rashly on bringing all the new territories into the Union.

Then the calculus changes abruptly.

Date: July 4-9, 1850

The President Dies After An Independence Day Celebration

On Wednesday, July 4, 1850, the 65 year old President faces a jam-packed schedule of Independence Day events, the centerpiece being an afternoon ceremony to lay the cornerstone for the pending Washington Monument.

This event drags on in the blistering heat, as Senator Foote delivers a two hour dedication speech.

From there Taylor continues to tour the city, feasting along the way on a smorgasbord of raw vegetables (cucumbers, cabbage and corn) followed by a jug of iced milk and a large bowl of cherries.

Suddenly he is struck by stomach cramps which turn into a severe case of diarrhea.

By Saturday his condition is substantially worse and White House doctors ratchet up their aggressive treatments to “void the toxins” attacking the President’s body.

Leeches are applied to draw off tainted blood. A mercury chloride compound called calomel, later found to be poisonous, is ingested to induce vomiting. Painful blisters are raised to draw out internal impurities.

Instead of helping Taylor recover, these “treatments” only prove to weaken his natural defenses.

On Sunday he slips even further and remarks on his possible death, which comes two days later, on Tuesday, July 9. The official cause is listed as gastroenteritis.

In passing, the often beleaguered President returns to his standing as a national hero.

He is given an elaborate military funeral, orchestrated by General Winfield Scott, another Mexican War hero, who travels the procession alongside Taylor’s horse, “Old Whitey,” riderless, with boots reversed in the stirrups. Senator Benton eulogizes the dead leader in glowing terms.

His death was a public calamity. No man could have been more devoted to the Union or more opposed to the slavery agitation, and his position as a Southern man and a slave-holder, his military reputation and his election...(gave) him power in the settlement of these questions which no (other) President...would have possessed.

Speculation surrounds Taylor’s sudden death, especially among the Whigs, who have just seen their second President taken from them early in his term.

Was it a simple case of Taylor “shocking his system,” getting overheated during the events, then ingesting foods that overwhelmed his digestive tract? Or was he instead poisoned by a Southerner who regarded him as a traitor to the cause of slavery? The mere suggestion of such an act reflects on the growing intensity of the sectional divide over slavery.

Either way, the task of holding the nation together now devolves upon Taylor’s Vice-President, Millard Fillmore.

Sidebar: What Killed Zachary Taylor?

Inquiries into the cause of Taylor’s death persist to the present day – the most provocative theory being that he fell victim to arsenic poisoning, given his symptoms at the time.

The leading proponent here being one Professor Clara Rising who eventually convinces Taylor’s closest living relative to have his body exhumed and tested for the substance, after efforts to locate and test a proven sample of his hair fail.

On June 17, 1991, authorities exhume the General’s body from its resting place in Louisville, Kentucky, and literally power saw their way through a metal sarcophagus to access his remains.

Samples of hair, bone and teeth are gathered by the state’s Medical Examiner and sent to three independent labs to search for the presence of arsenic, using the latest technological advances.

While very small amounts of arsenic are found, the concentrations are commonplace for humans, and far too slight to be fatal. Instead the conclusion reached is that Taylor died of natural causes:

[Though] the symptoms which he exhibited and the rapidity of his death are clearly consistent with acute arsenic poisoning, it is my opinion that Zachary Taylor died as the result of one of a myriad of natural diseases which would have produced the symptoms of gastroenteritis. Final Opinion: The manner of death is natural.

But another less sinister, albeit no less fascinating, theory is that Taylor, like two of his predecessors, William Henry Harrison and James Polk, was the victim of tainted water fed into the White House from a nearby spring contaminated with salmonella bacteria.

At the time, the city of Washington lacks basic sanitation preventing human waste in the Potomac River from seeping into fresh water wells and causing typhoid fever – with its symptoms of severe diarrhea shared by all three Presidents while in office.

The younger Polk survives his bouts, but perhaps the two considerably older Whigs are not so fortunate in the end.