

This Day in History... July 9, 1850

Death of President Zachary Taylor

On July 9, 1850, President Zachary Taylor died just 16 months after taking office. His sudden death ended the presidency of a career soldier who had won national fame on the battlefield, then faced one of the most dangerous political crises in the nation's history.

Taylor was born on November 24, 1784, in Virginia. He grew up on the Kentucky frontier. His education was limited, but he liked farming and outdoor life, and he developed an early interest in the military. After serving in a local militia, he joined the US Army in 1808.

Taylor first won notice during the War of 1812. In September 1812, he commanded Fort Harrison in Indiana. He had about 50 soldiers, and many were sick. A Native American force, fighting in the conflict tied to Tecumseh's Confederacy and Britain, surrounded the fort. Attackers set part of the stockade on fire. Taylor refused to surrender, and the garrison held until help arrived.

He stayed in the Army for decades, serving in the Black Hawk War and the Second Seminole War, a campaign to force the Seminole people from Florida. On Christmas Day 1837, Taylor fought at Lake Okeechobee. The battle was bloody and not a clear victory, but the American press celebrated it. Taylor was promoted to brigadier general and became known as "Old Rough and Ready."

His greatest fame came during the Mexican-American War. After the United States annexed Texas, Mexico and the US disagreed over the border. Mexico claimed the Nueces River. The United States claimed the Rio Grande. President James K. Polk sent Taylor into the disputed region. In May 1846, Taylor won at Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma, then advanced into northern Mexico. He captured Monterrey and later held Saltillo.

Polk worried that Taylor's popularity could make him a political rival. He shifted many of Taylor's best troops to General Winfield Scott. In February 1847, Mexican president Antonio López de Santa Anna marched north with a much larger army. At Buena Vista, Taylor's smaller force held its ground and won.

Taylor had little political experience. He had never held office and had not even voted before 1848. The Whig Party still nominated him, hoping another military hero could repeat William Henry Harrison's 1840 success. Taylor called himself "a Whig, but not an ultra-Whig." He was a Southern slaveholder (and would become the last president to own enslaved people while in office), but he opposed secession and did not want slavery debates to tear apart the Union.

In 1848, Taylor defeated Democrat Lewis Cass. Former president Martin Van Buren ran as the Free Soil candidate and drew anti-slavery votes. Taylor won the Electoral College, 163 to 127.

As president, Taylor quickly angered both parties. He urged California and New Mexico to seek statehood directly, letting their people decide on slavery. Southern leaders feared this would block slavery from the lands gained from Mexico. Taylor also rejected key Whig ideas. He said he would use the veto only when a law was unconstitutional.

When Southern politicians threatened secession, Taylor said he would enforce federal law, even if it meant leading the Army himself. Henry Clay and Daniel Webster then helped shape the Compromise of 1850, but Taylor opposed parts of it.

On July 4, 1850, Taylor attended ceremonies near the Washington Monument. After eating cherries and drinking cold milk, he became violently ill with stomach cramps and fever. He died at the White House on July 9. Rumors of poisoning lasted for years, but later testing found no evidence of it. Most historians believe he died of a severe gastrointestinal illness. Vice President Millard Fillmore became the 13th president and supported the compromise Taylor had resisted.



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