

This Day in History... November 24, 1784

Zachary Taylor Born

Zachary Taylor, the 12th president of the United States, was born near Barboursville, Virginia on November 24, 1784. A hero of the Mexican-American War, he only served 16 months of his time in office.

In 1785, Taylor's family moved near Louisville where his father, Richard Taylor, an officer in the Revolutionary War, had been granted 6,000 acres of land for his military service. There were no schools in this frontier area, so Taylor studied with private tutors.

In 1808, Taylor enlisted in the Army, starting 40 years of service to his country. He was an excellent soldier, and was promoted quickly and consistently. He served in the War of 1812 in the defense of Fort Harrison, in the Black Hawk War during which he received the surrender of Chief Black Hawk in 1832, and in the Seminole War in Florida in 1837. However, it was his victories in the Mexican-American War that made him a national hero. Taylor never lost a battle, earning him the nickname "Old Rough and Ready" from his troops.

Although Taylor never held an elected office, or even voted in a national election, the Whig Party nominated him for president in 1848 based on his Mexican-American War popularity. Despite opposing several of the primary Whig ideals, Taylor said, "I am a Whig, but not an ultra-Whig." The Whigs sent Taylor a letter offering the party's nomination with postage due, but he didn't read it, since he never accepted postage due letters. They sent him another one, and also sent a telegram that finally got the offer across.

Taylor did not commit himself on the major issues (mostly regarding slavery, despite owning enslaved people himself), and his casual manner and military heroics gained him many admirers. The Free Soil Party pulled enough votes away from Democrat Lewis Cass that Taylor was able to win the election with a 163-127 margin in the electoral votes. This presidential election was the first to be held at the same time in every state.

Taylor quickly confirmed Whig fears. In his Inaugural Address, he asked Congress to accept New Mexico and California's applications for statehood with their own preference on whether they'd be slave or free states, rather than one decided by territory location. Neither state was in favor of slavery, and the Southern Whigs wanted the process controlled through negotiations for territory status in order to maintain the balance between free and slave states.

Taylor also affirmed his plans to use presidential vetoes only for Constitutional issues, and not to block legislation for policy reasons. When he later noted that he would not use tariffs for anything other than increasing revenue (as opposed to protective reasons), this represented a near-complete rejection of Whig core values. It contributed to the weakened party's further loss of influence, and helped lead to the party being disbanded after losing the 1856 presidential election.

As president, Taylor lacked experience, so he relied upon the advice of others. However, a man of strong conscience, he could not be convinced to do anything he opposed. During his administration, efforts were taken to build a canal across Nicaragua – a forerunner of the Panama Canal. Britain also showed interest in building such a canal. Eventually the two countries signed the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty, in which both sides agreed to share the expense of the canal. In turn, the canal itself would remain neutral territory, belonging to neither nation.

Issues over slavery laws complicated admission of lands acquired from Mexico into the Union. Taylor attempted to make California and New Mexico states before such controversy could erupt, but was unsuccessful. Southerners threatened to secede from the Union, and Northerners threatened to hold the Union together by force. In fact, Taylor promised that if the South seceded, he would "command the army in person and hang any man taken in treason." The outbreak of the Civil War was delayed eleven years by the Compromise of 1850, which was signed shortly after Taylor's death.

On July 4, 1850, President Taylor was present at the laying of the cornerstone for the Washington Monument. For several hours, the 65 year-old president stood in the sweltering summer heat wearing a heavy coat and snacking on ice milk and cherries. After he returned to the White House, Taylor suffered from heat stroke. Five days later, on July 9, 1850, President Zachary Taylor died. He had been president for just 16 months. Taylor was succeeded by his vice president, Millard Fillmore.

In 1991, a team of medical experts examined Taylor's remains to determine if his death had been caused by poisoning. The panel concluded that Taylor's death was due to natural causes.



"Bank Note" stamp that covered the rate to foreign countries in the Universal Postal Union.



1938 Zachary Taylor "Prexie" stamp



1879 American Bank Note Printing

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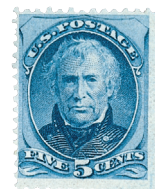
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