

IN PURSUIT



LESSON #18 • FROM MILLARD FILLMORE

AVOIDING CONFLICT CAN PRECIPITATE A WORSE ONE



by Steve Israel

They walk all over Millard Fillmore in Washington. Literally.

One of my favorite rooms in the U.S. Capitol is the National Statuary Hall, where the House of Representatives met from 1807 to 1857. Scattered across the floor are small gold tiles indicating where U.S. Presidents sat when they were in Congress. Tourists regularly stride right over the tile bearing Millard Fillmore's name. He's a historic punchline — best remembered, ironically, for being so forgotten.

And yet, a core lesson of Fillmore's presidency deserves to be remembered — and may be particularly relevant today. His ultimately doomed compromise to preserve the Union underscores that avoiding conflict can actually precipitate a worse one.

Seventy-four years after the Founding Fathers signed the Declaration of Independence, the United States confronted a crisis over slavery that threatened to tear the country in two. As excitement over the country's victory in the Mexican-American War subsided, a heated debate broke out among pro-slavery and pro-abolition Members of Congress over how to incorporate the new lands awarded to the U.S. in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. On July 4th, 1850, with the crisis still unresolved, President Zachary Taylor

celebrated Independence Day near the sun-bathed construction site for the Washington Monument. Five days later, Taylor died unexpectedly after a sudden illness. On July 9th, Vice President Millard Fillmore became the leader of the country — just as the fight over slavery appeared poised to break it apart.

Born in a log cabin in 1800 and mostly uneducated until the age of eighteen, few would have predicted that Millard Fillmore of Cayuga County, New York would someday be destined to occupy the highest office of the land. After leaving an apprenticeship to a wool carder, Fillmore joined a law firm and went on to pass the bar at the age of 23. Over the next five years, he married Abigail Powers, welcomed the first of his two children into the world, and began a career in politics.



Millard Fillmore Desk Location Tile
National Statuary Hall Collection

In 1829, Fillmore won election to the New York State Assembly, where he served three terms. Fillmore next won election to Congress, representing New York's 32nd District and joining the Whig party. The latter move brought him into the orbit of influential Whig leader Thurlow Weed. The mentorship Fillmore received from Weed would shape his growing political career but also foreshadow the source of the inevitable conflict that would later destroy the powerful Whig Party: slavery.

While Fillmore was personally opposed to slavery, he was skeptical of the federal government's role in curtailing the practice. One branch of the Whigs, led by Senator Henry Clay, agreed with this position, but another, spearheaded by Thurlow Weed and William H. Seward, advocated a more interventionist approach by the government to legislate an end to slavery. Fillmore would later preside over the eruption of this conflict as the last Whig president and describe his position in a letter to Secretary of State Daniel Webster by stating, "God knows I detest slavery, but it is an existing evil, for which we are not responsible, and we must endure it and give it such protection as is guaranteed by the constitution, till we get rid of it without destroying the last hope of free government in the world."

By the election of 1848, Fillmore had established himself as an influential figure in Whig politics. When former General — and slaveowner — Zachary Taylor won the Whig nomination, the anti-slavery wing of the party began to mobilize towards rebellion. To unify the party, Fillmore was selected as an anti-slavery Vice President. The Taylor-Fillmore ticket would go on to win 47.3% of the popular vote, narrowly beating Democratic Senator Lewis Cass and Free Soil candidate Former President Martin van Buren.

After becoming president, Taylor increasingly believed that California and other future states created from former Mexican lands should decide their own positions on slavery independent of Congress. Yet with the nation equally split between slave and free states, the prospect of California joining as a free state would tip the scales in abolitionists' favor in the Senate. As the influential Kentucky Senator Henry Clay and others labored to find a legislative compromise, the crisis steadily worsened — with some Southern states even beginning to consider the prospect of secession. Behind the scenes, Fillmore voiced support for the emerging but controversial Clay bill. With Taylor's unexpected death, Fillmore was thrust into the presidency with little time left to get the bill over the finish line to prevent all-out disunion.



Official Presidential Portrait of Millard Fillmore
George Peter Alexander Healy

Skepticism abounded that the previously quiet, deliberative-to-a-fault Vice President could defuse the legislative tinderbox. On July 12th, William Seward told Thurlow Weed, “Providence has at last led the man of hesitation and double opinions, to the crisis, where decision and singleness are indispensable.” “Whigs everywhere greeted the potential changes created by Taylor’s death with a mixture of hope and fear,” notes the historian Michael F. Holt. As a result “both Stewardites and conservatives bombarded the harried president with unsolicited and conflicting advice.”

Fillmore voiced public support for Clay’s proposed compromise, but the bill failed at the end of July. Suffering health issues, the elderly Clay temporarily withdrew from his congressional duties, and the upstart young Senator Stephen Douglas — who would later become a key rival to President Abraham Lincoln — took charge of the legislative strategy, breaking the bill into smaller parts to ease its passage.

First, California would be admitted as a free state. Second, a strict Fugitive Slave Act would be instituted that obligated free states to cooperate with slave states in returning escaped slaves. Third, the slave trade would

be abolished in Washington DC. Fourth, Texas’s borders would be clarified, and New Mexico would get its own territorial government — without stipulating whether either state would allow slavery. Fifth, Utah would likewise establish a territorial government and be able to choose its position on slavery.

The five bills — known as the Compromise of 1850 — were passed by Congress and signed by Fillmore in September. “The long agony is over,” Fillmore said afterwards. “These several acts are not in all respects what I could have desired, yet I am rejoiced at their passage.” The compromise would successfully stave off immediate threats of disunion, but it would ultimately fail to halt the slow slide to Civil War 11 years later. And in the meantime, slaves continued to suffer unspeakable violence as a result of a personally anti-slavery president compromising his values.

Backlash to the Compromise of 1850 grew over the years, especially as free states resented the demand that they enforce the Fugitive Slave Act, rather than aid escaped slaves seeking their freedom. Determined to ensure that the compromise held, Fillmore took pro-prosecution stances in fugitive slave cases in Pennsylvania and his home state of New York, further inflaming divisions in the Whig party and the country over slavery. Today, many historians consider the Compromise of 1850 and Fillmore’s role in presiding over it as a brief stalling measure that ultimately failed to solve the intractable divide in America.

Not far from Fillmore's plaque in Statuary Hall, there is another tucked near the back of the chamber. It marks the desk location of Illinois Rep. Abraham Lincoln, who served only one term in Congress but as president went to war rather than sacrifice the Union or its highest ideals. Whereas Lincoln — much like America's Founders — embraced conflict in the name of defending deeply-held principles, Fillmore prioritized the avoidance of conflict over those same principles. In so doing, he helped bring about the very the calamity he sought to prevent. At the spot where Lincoln once sat, tourists linger, admire, and take photographs. Then, they continue exploring the rest of the Hall, stepping over Millard Fillmore.

A study in contrast on the nature of compromise.