

ZACHARY TAYLOR

[1784—1850]

WALTER L. FLEMING

ZACHARY TAYLOR was the twelfth President of the United States, the sixth and last who was born in Virginia. The Taylor family came from England in the Seventeenth Century and settled in south eastern Virginia. By marriage the Taylors were related to the leading families of the Old Dominion, among them the Lees, Barbours, Madisons, Conways, and Pendletons. Richard Taylor, the father of Zachary, was of an adventurous disposition and left school when a mere boy to make a trip into the Kentucky country, which was at that time a wilderness in which not a single white person lived. He went as far as Natchez before turning back. When the Revolution broke out he enlisted in the Virginia troops, rendered good service, and rose to the rank of colonel. In 1779 he married Sarah Strother. On November 24, 1784, Zachary, their third son, was born, and a year later the family removed to Kentucky, a move that Richard Taylor had planned years before.

In Kentucky the family settled near Louisville, where the father rapidly accumulated land and rose to a prominent position in State politics. Young Zachary, with his brothers, was reared on a frontier farm, and there learned the lessons of industry, courage, self-reliance and self-denial. For in the early years of its history, life in Kentucky was hard. There were still the Indians to guard against, and hunting was almost a regular occupation of the men. Zachary and his brothers were trained to hunt by Wetzel, the famous scout and Indian fighter. Of schooling there was little. Elisha Ayers, a Connecticut Yankee, kept a school near by, and from him the Taylor boys learned the rudiments of English. Zachary lived and worked on the farm until he was twenty-four years old. When the Burr movement alarmed the Kentuckians, Taylor joined a troop of cavalry for the purpose of opposing Burr's forces.

The Taylor brothers were inclined toward the military life, and the two elder brothers early secured commissions in the United States Army. In 1808 one of them, Lieutenant Hancock Taylor, died, and Zachary Taylor applied for and secured a commission in the Seventh Regiment of Infantry. In 1810 he married Margaret Smith, the daughter of an officer in the Marine Corps.

Taylor's first tour of service was on the northwest frontier and lasted several years, in fact, through the War of 1812. His duty was to defend the frontier settlements from the attacks of the Indians, who were instigated and led by the British. For his services he was made major by brevet, the first instance of such a title in the United States Army. The earliest writings of Taylor that exist are the despatches from his post on the border. They are unaffected, clear, and blunt.

When the war with England was ended the army was cut down and Taylor was reduced in rank from major to captain. Believing this to be an injustice, he resigned and went home "to make a crop of corn." But before the end of the year he was, through no effort of his own, reinstated in the army with the rank of major. During the next fifteen years he saw hard and monotonous frontier service. In 1832 he was sent with his regiment to occupy and complete Fort Crawford, in the Illinois country. He established a post library and secured a good collection of books. When off duty the "book room" was his favorite place of resort, and one who knew him then said later that his "hardihood [in drilling his men in February] was no more characteristic than his liberal-minded intelligence."

In 1832 Taylor was made colonel, and with his regiment took a prominent part in the Black Hawk War. From 1836 to 1840 he was engaged in the Seminole War in Florida, and for his services was made a brigadier-general. From 1840 to 1845 he was in command of the Southwestern Department and made his home at Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

When trouble with Mexico was threatened Taylor was ordered to the Rio Grande, and for two years, during the war that followed, he was in command of the United States forces in northern Mexico. His letters and despatches written at the beginning of the war indicate that he was not in favor of precipitating a contest of arms and that he conducted the affairs of the United States with great moderation and in a conservative spirit. His despatches are remarkably free from egotism and from the uninteresting detail that litters up most military communications. The capture of Monterey and the battle of Buena Vista made Taylor famous as a general. The terms granted by him to the Mexicans at Monterey were, owing to a misunderstanding of the situation, not approved by the War Department. Taylor wrote a vigorous defence of his policy, of which Jefferson Davis, a colonel in Taylor's army, said: "His reply to Secretary Marcy's strictures in regard to the capitulation of Monterey exhibited such vigor of thought and grace of expression that many attributed it to a member of his staff who had a literary reputation. It was

written by General Taylor's own hand in the open air by his camp fire at Victoria, Mexico."

After the war Taylor's friends urged him to be a candidate for the Presidency, and he frankly entered the contest. He himself never had voted, but his sympathies were with the Whigs. He constantly declared that he would not be a partisan President, and he was not. Before and after the election his letters, statements, and messages show that he appreciated the dangers that threatened the Union. He thought that the remedy was to return to the moderate principles of the founders of the Republic. He used his own influence for conciliation and for moderation on both sides. His California-New Mexico Message shows that he endeavored to keep the slavery question out of Congress, if possible. His restraining influence in politics was felt for only one short year. He died July 9, 1850—his last words being: "I am ready to die. I have faithfully endeavored to do my duty."

Zachary Taylor was a soldier during the best part of his life; he loved his profession; he had the soldier's ideals of duty and conduct, and these ideals he carried with him to the White House. The best estimate of his character was made by another soldier and statesman, Jefferson Davis, who opposed him in politics:

"Many years of military routine had not dulled his desire for knowledge; he had extensively studied both ancient and modern history, especially the English. Unpretending, meditative, observant and conclusive, he was best understood and most appreciated by those who had known him long and intimately. In a campaign he gathered information from all who approached him, however sinister their motives might be. By comparison and elimination he gained a knowledge that was often surprising as to the position and designs of the enemy. In battle he was vigilantly active, though quiet in bearing; calm and considerate, though stern and inflexible; but when the excitement of danger and strife had subsided, he had a father's tenderness and care for the wounded, and none more sincerely mourned for those who had bravely fallen in the line of their duty."

Walter L. Fleming

THE CONVENTION OF MONTEREY

From J. R. Fry's 'Life of General Zachary Taylor.'

CAMP NEAR MONTEREY, November 8, 1846.

SIR: In reply to so much of the communication of the Secretary of War, as relates to the reasons which induced the conversation resulting in the capitulation of Monterey, I have the honour to submit the following remarks:

The convention presents two distinct points: *First*, the permission granted the Mexican Army to retire with their arms, &c. *Secondly*, the temporary cessation of hostilities for the term of eight weeks. I shall remark on these in order.

The force with which I marched on Monterey was limited by causes beyond my control to about six thousand men. With this force, as every military man must admit, who has seen the ground, it was entirely impossible to invest Monterey so closely as to prevent the escape of the garrison. Although the main communication with the interior was in our possession, yet one route was open to the Mexicans throughout the operations, and could not be closed, as were also other minor tracks and passes through the mountains. Had we, therefore, insisted on more rigorous terms than those granted, the result would have been the escape of the body of the Mexican force, with the destruction of its artillery and magazines, our only advantage being the capture of a few prisoners of war, at the expense of valuable lives and much damage to the city. The consideration of humanity was present to my mind during the conference which led to the convention, and outweighed, in my judgment, the doubtful advantages to be gained by a resumption of the attack upon the town. This conclusion has been fully confirmed by an inspection of the enemy's position and means since the surrender. It was discovered that his principal magazine, containing an immense amount of powder, was in the Cathedral, completely exposed to our shells from two directions. The explosion of this mass of powder, which must have ultimately resulted from a continuation of the bombardment, would have been infinitely disastrous, involving the destruction not only of Mexican troops, but of non-combatants, and even our own people, had we pressed the attack.

In regard to the temporary cessation of hostilities, the fact that we are not at this moment, within eleven days of the termination of the period fixed by the convention, prepared to move forward in force, is a sufficient explanation of the military reasons which dictated this suspension of arms. It paralyzed the enemy during a period when, from the want of necessary means, we could not possibly move. I desire distinctly to state, and to call the attention of the authorities to the fact, that, with all diligence in breaking mules and setting up wagons, the first wagons in addition to our original train from Corpus Christi, (and but one hundred and twenty-five in number,) reached my head-quarters on the same day with the secretary's communication of October 13th, viz: the 2d inst. At the date of the surrender of Monterey, our force had not more than ten days' rations, and even now, with all our endeavors, we have not more than twenty-five. THE TASK OF FIGHTING AND BEATING THE ENEMY IS AMONG THE LEAST DIFFICULT THAT WE ENCOUNTER—the great question of supplies necessarily controls all the operations in a country like this. At the date of the convention, I could not of course have foreseen that the Department would direct an important detachment from my command without consulting me, or without waiting the result of the main operation under my orders.

I have touched the prominent military points involved in the convention of Monterey. There were other considerations which weighed with the commissioners in framing, and with myself in approving the articles of the convention. In the conference with General Ampudia, I was distinctly told by him that he had invited it to spare the further effusion of blood, and because General Santa Anna had declared himself favorable to peace. I knew that our government had made propositions to that of Mexico to negotiate, and I deemed that the change of government in that country since my instructions, fully warranted me in entertaining considerations of policy. My grand motive in moving forward with very limited supplies had been to increase the inducements of the Mexican Government to negotiate for peace. Whatever may be the actual views or disposition of the Mexican rulers or of General Santa Anna, it is not unknown to the Government that I had the very best reason for believing the statement of General

Ampudia to be true. It was my opinion at the time of the convention, and it has not been changed, that the liberal treatment of the Mexican Army, and the suspension of arms, would exert none but a favorable influence in our behalf.

The result of the entire operation has been to throw the Mexican Army back more than three hundred miles to the city of San Luis Potosi, and to open the country to us as far as we choose to penetrate it up to the same point.

It has been my purpose in this communication not so much to defend the convention from the censure which I deeply regret to find implied in the Secretary's letter, as to show that it was not adopted without cogent reasons, most of which occur of themselves to the minds of all who are acquainted with the conditions of things here. To that end I beg that it may be laid before the General-in-chief and Secretary of War.

THE CONSTITUTION AND THE UNION

Extract from the First Annual Message, December 4, 1849.

. . . OUR government is one of limited powers, and its successful administration eminently depends on the confinement of each of its co-ordinate branches within its own appropriate sphere. The first section of the constitution ordains that "all legislative powers therein granted shall be vested in a Congress of the United States, which shall consist of a senate and house of representatives." The executive has authority to recommend (not to dictate) measures to Congress. Having performed that duty, the executive department of the government can not rightfully control the decision of Congress on any subject of legislation, until that decision shall have been officially submitted to the president for approval. The check provided by the constitution in the clause conferring the qualified veto will never be exercised by me, except in the cases contemplated by the father of the republic. I view it as an extreme measure, to be resorted to only in extraordinary cases—as where it may become necessary to defend the executive against the encroachments of the legislative power, or to prevent hasty and inconsiderate or unconstitutional legislation. By cautiously confining this remedy within the sphere prescribed to it in the contemporaneous expositions of the fram-

ers of the constitution, the will of the people, legitimately expressed on all subjects of legislation, through their constitutional organs, the senators and representatives of the United States, will have its full effect. As indispensable to the preservation of our system of self-government, the independence of the representatives of the states and the people is guaranteed by the constitution; and they owe no responsibility to any human power but their constituents. By holding the representative responsible only to the people, and exempting him from all other influences, we elevate the character of the constituent, and quicken his sense of responsibility to his country. It is under these circumstances only that the elector can feel that, in the choice of a lawmaker, he is himself truly a component part of the sovereign power of the nation. With equal care we should study to defend the rights of the executive and judicial departments. Our government can only be preserved in its purity by the suppression and entire elimination of every claim or tendency of one co-ordinate branch to encroachment upon another. With the strict observance of this rule and the other injunctions of the constitution; with a sedulous inculcation of that respect and love for the Union of the states which our fathers cherished and enjoined upon their children; and with the aid of that overruling Providence which has so long and so kindly guarded our liberties and institutions, we may reasonably expect to transmit them, with their innumerable blessings, to the remotest posterity.

But attachment to the Union of the states should be habitually fostered in every American heart. For more than half a century, during which kingdoms and empires have fallen, this Union has stood unshaken. The patriots who formed it have long since descended to the grave; yet still it remains, the proudest monument to their memory, and the object of affection and admiration with every one worthy to bear the American name. In my judgment, its dissolution would be the greatest of calamities; and to avert that should be the study of every American. Upon its preservation must depend our own happiness and that of countless generations to come. Whatever dangers may threaten it, I shall stand by it and maintain it in its integrity to the full extent of the obligations imposed and the power conferred upon me by the constitution.

CALIFORNIA AND NEW MEXICO

Extracts from a Message to Congress, January 23, 1850.

I DID not hesitate to express to the people of those territories my desire that each territory should, if prepared to comply with the requisitions of the constitution of the United States, form a plan of a state constitution, and submit the same to Congress, with a prayer for admission into the Union as state; but I do not anticipate, suggest, or authorize, the establishment of any such government without the assent of Congress; nor did I authorize any government agent or officer to interfere with or exercise any influence or control over the election of delegates, or over any convention, in making or modifying their domestic institutions or any of the provisions of their proposed constitution. On the contrary, the instructions given by my orders were, that all measures of domestic policy adopted by the people of California must originate solely with themselves; that while the executive of the United States was desirous to protect them in the formation of any government republican in its character, to be, at the proper time, submitted to Congress, yet it was to be distinctly understood that the plan of such a government must, at the same time, be the result of their own deliberate choice, and originate with themselves, without the interference of the executive.

I am unable to give any information as to laws passed by any supposed government in California, or of any census taken in either of the territories mentioned in the resolution, as I have no information on those subjects.

As already stated, I have not disturbed the arrangements which I found had existed under my predecessor.

In advising an early application by the people of these territories for admission as states, I was actuated principally by an earnest desire to afford to the wisdom and patriotism of Congress the opportunity of avoiding occasions of bitter and angry dissensions among the people of the United States.

Under the constitution, every state has the right of establishing, and from time to time, altering its municipal laws and domestic institutions, independently of every other state and of the general government, subject only to the prohibitions

and guaranties expressly set forth in the constitution of the United States. The subjects thus left exclusively to the respective states were not designed or expected to become topics of national agitation. Still, as under the constitution, Congress has power to make all needful rules and regulations respecting the territories of the United States, every new acquisition of territory has led to discussions on the question whether the system of involuntary servitude which prevails in many of the states should or should not be prohibited in that territory. The periods of excitement from this cause which have heretofore occurred have been safely passed; but during the interval, of whatever length, which may elapse before the admission of the territories ceded by Mexico as states, it appears probable that similar excitement will prevail to an undue extent.

Under these circumstances, I thought, and still think, that it was my duty to endeavor to put it in the power of Congress, by the admission of California and New Mexico as states, to remove all occasions for the unnecessary agitation of the public mind.

It is understood that the people of the western part of California have formed a plan of a state constitution, and will soon submit the same to the judgment of Congress, and apply for admission as a state. This course on their part, though in accordance with, was not adopted exclusively in consequence of, any expression of my wishes, insomuch as measures tending to this end had been promoted by the officers sent there by my predecessor, and were already in active progress of execution before any communication from me reached California. If the proposed constitution shall, when submitted to Congress, be found to be in compliance with the requisitions of the constitution of the United States, I earnestly recommend that it may receive the sanction of Congress.

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Seeing, then, that the question which now excites such painful sensation in the country will, in the end, certainly be settled by the silent effect of causes independent of the action of Congress, I again submit to your wisdom the policy recommended in my annual message, of awaiting the salutary operation of those causes, believing that we shall thus avoid the cre-

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ation of geographical parties, and secure the harmony of feeling so necessary to the beneficial action of our political system. Connected as the Union is with the remembrance of past happiness, the sense of present blessings, and the hope of future peace and prosperity, every dictate of wisdom, every feeling of duty, and every emotion of patriotism, tends to inspire fidelity and devotion to it, and admonish us cautiously to avoid any unnecessary controversy which can either endanger it or impair its strength, the chief element of which is to be found in the regard and affection of the people for each other.