



Millard Fillmore

Millard Fillmore, who succeeded Zachary Taylor as the conflict over slavery intensified.

2 of 9

Millard Fillmore: A Compromise That Could Not Last

President he succeeded: Zachary Taylor

Term of office: July 9, 1850–March 4, 1853

Millard Fillmore became president following the sudden death of Zachary Taylor. He inherited more than the presidency. He also inherited an escalating national crisis over slavery.

The Mexican-American War had added vast western territories to the United States, raising the explosive question of whether slavery would be allowed to expand into them. Taylor had opposed several proposed compromises, but Fillmore was more receptive. He believed an agreement between North and South could prevent the Union from breaking apart.

Fillmore supported the measures collectively known as the Compromise of 1850. California entered the Union as a free state, while territorial governments were established in Utah and New Mexico without immediate restrictions on slavery. The slave trade—but not slavery itself—was abolished in Washington, D.C.

The most controversial provision was the Fugitive Slave Act. It strengthened federal assistance for capturing people who had escaped slavery and returning them to bondage. Accused fugitives

received few legal protections, and citizens could be compelled to assist in their capture. The law enraged many Northerners and increased support for the antislavery movement.

Fillmore believed enforcing the compromise was necessary to preserve the Union. For a time, sectional tensions eased. In retrospect, however, the agreement delayed rather than resolved the conflict. The Fugitive Slave Act also made the brutality of slavery harder for Northerners to ignore.

His administration supported railroad construction and attempted to improve federal financial management. Fillmore also resisted Southern efforts to use American adventurers to seize Cuba from Spain. Abroad, he authorized Commodore Matthew Perry's expedition to Japan. Although Perry reached Japan after Fillmore left office, the mission helped end the country's long isolation from the West.

The Whig Party denied Fillmore its presidential nomination in 1852. He later ran unsuccessfully as the candidate of the anti-immigrant American, or Know-Nothing, Party.

Historians generally rank Fillmore below average. He attempted to save the Union through compromise, but the concessions he supported—especially the Fugitive Slave Act—left a lasting stain on his presidency.