



# The Presidencies of Zachary Taylor and Millard Fillmore (American Presidency (Univ of Kansas Hardcover))

*Elbert B. Smith*

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In this book Elbert B. Smith disagrees sharply with traditional interpretations of Taylor and Fillmore, the twelfth and thirteenth presidents (from 1848 to 1853). He argues persuasively that the slaveholding Taylor—and not John C. Calhoun—was the realistic defender of southern slaveholding interests, and that Taylor did nothing to impede the Compromise of 1850. While Taylor opposed the combination of the issues into a single compromise bill that could not be passed without amendments to suit the extremists, he would have approved the different parts of the Compromise that were ultimately passed as separate measures.

Most historians have written that Taylor's death and Fillmore's accession led to an abrupt change in presidential policy, but Smith believes that continuity predominated. Taylor wanted the controversies debated and acted upon as separate bills. Fillmore helped to accomplish this. Taylor was ready to defend New Mexico against Texas. Fillmore ordered 750 additional troops to New Mexico and announced publicly that he would do the same. Taylor had wanted statehood for California and New Mexico with self-determination on slavery. As separate measures, the Congress admitted California and preserved a viable New Mexico as a territory authorized to make its own decision on slavery.

With secessionists pitted against moderates in the southern elections of 1851, Fillmore had to choose between his constitutional oath and his personal antipathy to the new fugitive slave law. He supported the law and thereby helped keep southern moderates in power for a few more years. In fact, however, his efforts did not recapture a single slave. In Smith's view, Fillmore's most serious mistake was refusing in 1852 to get himself nominated for another term.

Smith argues that Taylor and Fillmore have been seriously misrepresented and underrated. They faced a terrible national crisis and accepted every responsibility without flinching or directing blame toward anyone else.

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