

Zachary Taylor: The American Presidents Series: The 12th President, 1849-1850

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The rough-hewn general who rose to the nation's highest office, and whose presidency witnessed the first political skirmishes that would lead to the Civil War

Zachary Taylor was a soldier's soldier, a man who lived up to his nickname, "Old Rough and Ready." Having risen through the ranks of the U.S. Army, he achieved his greatest success in the Mexican War, propelling him to the nation's highest office in the election of 1848. He was the first man to have been elected president without having held a lower political office.

John S. D. Eisenhower, the son of another soldier-president, shows how Taylor rose to the presidency, where he confronted the most contentious political issue of his age: slavery. The political storm reached a crescendo in 1849, when California, newly populated after the Gold Rush, applied for statehood with an anti-slavery constitution, an event that upset the delicate balance of slave and free states and pushed both sides to the brink. As the acrimonious debate intensified, Taylor stood his ground in favor of California's admission—despite being a slaveholder himself—but in July 1850 he unexpectedly took ill, and within a week he was dead. His truncated presidency had exposed the fateful rift that would soon tear the country apart.

John S. D. Eisenhower was a retired brigadier general, a former U.S. ambassador to Belgium, and the author of numerous works of military history and biography, including *General Ike: A Personal Reminiscence*; *They Fought at Anzio*; *Yanks: The Epic Story of the American Army in World War I*; and *So Far from God: The U.S. War with Mexico, 1846-1848*. Chapter One Early Career Zachary Taylor was a man whose looks deceived those who met him for the first time. One glance at that rough physiognomy could convince the casual viewer that here was a son of a poor family, a man of the soil. The fact was that Zack Taylor—Old Rough and Ready—was indeed a farmer, but a gentleman farmer. Throughout his life, even when he was in the army, he kept ownership of several plantations, tilled by numerous slaves. His face was weather-beaten, to be sure, but his exposure to the elements came from his time in camp and field, a place where he endured the same hardships as the youngest and toughest of his soldiers. Taylor was born on November 24, 1784, in Orange County, Virginia, not far from Montpelier, the home of his distant cousin the future president James Madison. His father, Richard Taylor, had served as an officer in the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War and enjoyed the status of being the head of one of the prominent families of Virginia. The Taylors never reached the eminence enjoyed by the Lees and the Carters, but they were a family of respect. Richard Taylor's outstanding service in the Revolution ironically resulted in Zachary Taylor's leaving Virginia and becoming a Kentuckian. A grateful nation, still governed under the Articles of Confederation, granted Richard Taylor a large parcel of land at a point near Louisville, Kentucky. Richard Taylor accepted, presumably with enthusiasm. The land that comprised his extensive holdings in Tidewater Virginia was beginning to wear out from excessive tobacco raising. Further, they could never compare in size and quality with the land he was being offered in the West. Having determined to move, Richard Taylor began the journey with his pregnant wife, the former Sarah Dabney Strother of Maryland. They soon realized, however, that the journey would be too arduous for her. He therefore left her and their two

sons with relatives in Virginia while he headed west alone. He returned seven months later, having cleared some ground near his future homestead. Zachary Taylor, meanwhile, had been born in Virginia. But since he spent only his first eight months there, he could hardly be called a Virginian in the traditional sense. The Taylors made their way to Kentucky by water, reaching Louisville on August 2, 1785. They settled in their log cabin on Beargrass Creek, five miles to the east of town, on a four-hundred acre farm they called Springfield. There Zachary, his two older brothers, and yet unborn siblings were to be raised.¹ Louisville, on the wild frontier, bore no resemblance to the genteel Tidewater district the Taylors had left. Wild animals filled the woods surrounding Springfield, and wild Indians in the vicinity had not accommodated themselves to the invasion of the white man. As a result, young Zachary grew up in an atmosphere where danger was accepted. Sometimes it had its humorous side. A nearby neighbor, Mrs. Chenoweth, seemed to derive some strange pleasure in startling the young people by removing her headgear and displaying her bald head, which was described as "peeled like an onion by the Indians' scalping knife," and "shorn of her beautiful hair."² So the story went, though the circumstance of her being scalped is not disclosed. Zachary Taylor's formal education was scanty, despite the fact that both of his parents were considered upper class. He learned to read and write, of course, like many other isolated children, at "his mother's knee." His first extant letter, in which he accepted a commission in the United States Army, was rough and full of misspellings. But given the circumstances of the frontier, his training in farming and taking care of himself was far more important than book learning. He was also, like his father, a shrewd businessman and competent farmer. Throughout his life his properties continued to grow, and his conversation, even in camp, often dealt with agricultural subjects. He was able to accomplish this balancing act because of the peculiar nature of the army at that time. The establishment was scattered in small detachments along the western frontier and except for occasional Indian disturbances was at peace. The authorities, therefore, were generous in granting long leaves of absence whereby an officer could return to his ranch or farm for extended periods of time. Land was wealth, and during his lifetime Zachary Taylor, measured by that standard, became a wealthy man indeed. Though he was a planter, Zachary Taylor was first and foremost a soldier. The aura of his father's service in the Revolution apparently caught his imagination, and his participation in the various skirmishes with the Indians, while largely unrecorded, seems to have imbued him with a fighting spirit. He was not attracted to fancy uniforms nor to the parade ground, but practical soldiering seems to have become second nature to him. The personal informality was misleading, however; beneath his casual exterior, he was a martinet. He first joined the army in 1808, at the age of twenty-three, when he applied for and received a commission as a first lieutenant. Taylor was fortunate; normally a young man lacking in formal military experience could never enter service at that rank. It was a troubled time, and the army was being expanded in anticipation of possible war with Britain over the Chesapeake-Leopard Affair, in which the crew of a British ship, the HMS Leopard, had forcibly boarded the United States ship USS Chesapeake, killing three, wounding eighteen, and removing several sailors of British birth. Though President Thomas Jefferson did not resort to war, the tensions and talk of war remained. On being commissioned, Taylor was assigned to the new Seventh Infantry Regiment, just being organized. It was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel William Russell, another Kentuckian. The regiment at the moment existed only on paper; to fill its ranks the men had to be recruited. So Taylor began his career as a

recruiting officer. He was sent first to Washington, Kentucky, where he found little enthusiasm on the part of the citizenry for military life. He went on to Mayville, where he had better luck.³ In April 1809, he took his new company of about eighty men by boat from Kentucky to New Orleans. The situation at New Orleans was hardly conducive to inspiring a young man to remain in military life. The troops were suffering in the heat of the New Orleans summer, and to make matters worse they were commanded by a rogue, Brigadier General James Wilkinson. At a time when rogues abounded, Wilkinson was unique in the varieties of his villainy. Some officers were treacherous, some were avaricious, and some were simply incompetent. Wilkinson managed to combine all three. Perhaps the least of his flaws was his greed. "One of the more senior officers in the Army," writes the historian Edward Coffman, "set an extraordinarily bad example. In the range of his ventures—land speculation, assorted business enterprises, including some of dubious legality, and being a paid agent of Spain—General Wilkinson took second place to none."⁴ At about the time of Taylor's arrival at New Orleans, Wilkinson was about to embark on the project for which he is most infamous. At that time, the bulk of the army, about two thousand men, was concentrated under his command, and the condition of the troops was grim. They suffered from the heat and indulged in the fleshly temptations of the city to the extent that everyone, even Wilkinson, agreed that they had to be moved. Secretary of War Henry Dearborn therefore ordered Wilkinson to move his army up the Mississippi River to Fort Adams, near Natchez, where conditions were said to be relatively healthy. Wilkinson may not have received this order in time because communications were slow. In any case he moved, not to Natchez but to a spot below New Orleans on the Mississippi only thirteen miles away from the city. (It has been assumed that his business interests, plus the allurements of his current mistress, were instrumental in his choice.) The name of the spot was Terre Aux Boeufs, and a worse place could not be found. As aptly described by Taylor's biographer, Holman Hamilton, Here the general stood by helpless as his troops suffered, sickened, and died. The Kentuckians, who composed the Seventh Infantry and who had undergone the coldest winter in memory, succumbed even faster than their comrades. Conditions at camp beggared description. More men were sick than well, and it was impossible to care for all their needs. Sanitation did not exist. Spoiled food, supplied by seedy and frequently corrupt contractors, revolted those who were supposed to eat it. Attempts at burial were pitiful. Interred higgledy-piggledy in shallow graves, the protruding arms and legs of the deceased took the place of missing markers in reminding the living of the fate that might be theirs.⁵ The story did not end there. When orders finally arrived insisting that Wilkinson's troops be moved to Natchez, the trip by water, involving weakened men, was as deadly as the camp. Nearly the entire army was wiped out. It was one of those rare instances in which an army was destroyed without the firing of a single bullet. Taylor himself was spared most of the trials of the Terre Aux Boeufs calamity because he succumbed to the prevailing illness early but survived it. He was sent home to Louisville to recover while Wilkinson's army was being rebuilt at Natchez. He took his time back at Louisville in getting his personal holdings in order. While on this extended leave at Louisville, Zachary Taylor met his future wife, Margaret Mackall Smith, who was visiting her sister, Mrs. Samuel Chew, in nearby Jefferson County. The couple secured their marriage license on June 18, 1810, and three days later were married. In honor of the occasion, Taylor's father presented the couple with 324 acres of land. In the spring of the next year, their first daughter, Ann, was born.⁶ When he returned to duty, Taylor found himself in an

entirely different situation from that at New Orleans. The immediate crisis with Britain had passed, and the bulk of the...

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