"A Chapter from the History of an Administration,"
Buffalo (NY) *Commercial*, March 25, 1851
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A Chapter from the History of an Administration.

From the Washington Republic.

It is now but little more than eight months since, by the demise of his lamented predecessor, Mr. Fillmore became the President of the United States. No one who is familiar with the circumstances of his accession can doubt that the day which witnessed it was the most trying and painful of his life. The firmest heart might have quailed under the responsibilities that were thus suddenly thrown upon him. Party feuds, personal jealousies, sectional animosities, popular discontents, seditious combinations, prevailed to a degree which might well have embarrassed the most experienced statesman, and alarmed the boldest. To bring order from the political chaos which then existed—to restore alienated relations—to harmonize conflicting interests—to tranquilize the public agitation—was a task which required forecast, decision, and energy of no ordinary stamp. To accomplish this difficult, this almost impossible work, it was necessary for the President at once to determine upon his policy and organize his Cabinet with a single view to its successful prosecution. A mistake would be fatal to his Administration, and might be fatal to the peace of the country.

On the 10th of July President Fillmore took the oath of office; ten days afterwards he sent to the Senate the nominations of the members of the new Cabinet. On the announcement of his constitutional advisers it was at once understood that the countenance and influence of the Administration were no longer to be withheld from the measures which had been matured in Congress for the pacification of the country. To say that this understanding brought relief to the public mind would be a very inadequate expression of the feeling which it everywhere excited. It carried to all quarters hope—assurance—confidence—rejoicing. The people saw, or thought they saw, the beginning of the end. Within two months after the appointment of his Cabinet, President Fillmore signed an act to establish the boundaries of Texas and a territorial government for New Mexico; an act for the admission of the State of California in. to the Union; an act to establish a territorial government for Utah; an act to carry out the constitutional provision for the extradition of fugitives from labor; and an act to suppress the slave trade in the District of Columbia. A great work had thus been accomplished; and if President Fillmore had at that moment terminated his public career, he would have established a just title to the undying gratitude of his country.

It was not, however, to be expected that the men who had been instrumental in exciting the agitations which these measures were designed to soothe, would at once abandon their vocation.—One of the measures, the Texas Boundary act, was assailed by the extremists of both sections with unmeasured violence, for contradictory reasons.—Mr. Julian, of Indiana, described it as that act of "the last session, by which one hundred thousand square miles of territory had been given up to slavery, with $10,000,000 to keep Texas from making war on the General Government." Mr. J. A. Campbell, an eminent lawyer of Alabama, on the other hand, averred in a published speech that "Congress had offered $10,000,000 for 100,000 square miles of Texas to convert into free States like California." The Abolition newspapers in the North proclaimed that freedom's banner trailed in the dust, and that uncounted millions of acres of free soil had been basely sold to slavery. Gov. Quitman raved over the enormity of raising ten millions of dollars by taxation from the industry of the country "to purchase from Texas a portion of her territory, for no other apparent object than to convert it to Free Soil purposes;" and Mr. Langdon Cheves declared that the excision of Texas was worse than the affair of California. These antagonist allegations neutralized each other. It was clear enough that both could not be true; and though at the start the Boundary bill was rather the favorite topic of excitement, the ultras of both sections were compelled to abandon it from the difficulty of settling to the satisfaction of the people, whether it was a case of free soil sold to slavery or of slave soil sold to freedom.

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At the South the act establishing California as a State was the substantive topic of agitation;—but perhaps the most fruitful was the rather vague and indefinite outcry against "northern aggressions." It was for these that one orator announced that the men of the South "were ready to march up to 36 degrees 30 minutes with their coffins on their backs." It was in the event of not getting 36 degrees 30 minutes that Governor Quitman recommended peaceable secession—and that Mr. Woodward preached disunion and treason in the Presbyterian churches of South Carolina, violating at the very altar the oath by which he had bound himself to support the Constitution of the United States. It was for this aggressive legislation that Governor Collier of Alabama, recommended a kind of non-intercourse, and that public meetings in Georgia, the Carolinas, and even in Virginia, advised that their people should "buy at home," and carry on "no trade with the enemies of the South." It was for this that Mr. ex-Senator Bagby, of Alabama, and Mr. Yancey, of the same State, of Baltimore Convention notoriety, levelled their indignant eloquence at "base and inglorious submission," and called upon their copatriots for resistance to the last. It was for this that Southern Rights Associations were formed, and that the Nashville Convention passed resolutions contemplating ultimate action for "safety and independence," and that Mr. Rhett, on his return from that treasonable assembly, said to the citizens of Charleston: "I invite you to a calm and serious consideration of your condition in the Union, in order that you may do your part in the grand drama of its dissolution, which, it appears to me, will take place at no distant day." It was for this that the Governor of Mississippi called an extra session of the Legislature, and that the Governor of Georgia called a convention to consider the mode and measure of redress.

Whilst a portion of the peace bills were thus employed by the Southern Disunionists for purposes of agitation, the Fugitive Slave law was a similar God-send to the Abolitionists and agitators of th North. In this regard, again, Mr. Julian, of Indiana, distinguished himself. He protested that he would go to the stake and burn before he would engage in such "hellish business," as restoring fugitives from labor; and declared in the "name of God and humanity, he was determined to trample the law under foot." Mr. Campbell, of Ohio, another member of Congress, also threatened to "trample it under foot." A runaway black, addressing a meeting at Faneuil Hall, declared that "if the Americans gave in their adhesion to this bill the streets of Boston will flow with blood." The Rev. Mr. Colver, following or leading his clerical brother of South Carolina, proclaimed that, Constitution or no Constitution, law or no law, they would not suffer a fugitive slave to be taken in Massachusetts. Other reverend gentlemen volunteered in an anti-fugitive law agitation. The telegraph wires were brought into requsition, and all manner of stories ran through the country of the meetings of negroes armed to the teeth, and of stampedes to Canada, and threats of white men to resist the execution of the law, and to aid the escape of the fugitives. The Abolition press, and the resolutions of Abolition meetings, not only abused the law, but assailed the Constitution itself as an "atrocious bargain," and a "compact with hell." Following all these announcements came the case of the Crafts in Boston, the maltreatment of Hughes and Knight, and the letter of the owner of the slaves Dr, Collins, to the President. It was in reply to this letter that the President first had occasion to make public his intentions in regard to these movements and manifestations at the North, when he uttered the sentiment that has controlled his entire Presidential course: "Our Union, so dear to every American heart, can only be preserved by a strict observance of the Constitution and an impartial administration of the laws."

Such were the manifestations, North and South, by the parties who sought in the laws composing the adjustment the topics of dissention. Meanwhile there was but little disposition manifested for agitation among the leading men of either of the great political parties. Those who had been in the Congress which passed the acts had been too deeply impressed with the convulsions and perils from which the country had so recently escaped. Meetings in support of the adjustment were held in the chief towns of the Union, North and South. Letters sustaining it of great point and ability addressed to their constituents, were written by Mr. Elliott, of Massachusetts, and Mr. Toombs, of Georgia, and many letters to public meetings by Mr. Webster, Mr. Clay, Mr. Cobb, Mr. Stuart, Mr. Cass, and many other leading men of both political parties. Many leading clergymen, in all sections, volunteered in the cause of the Compromise; but in a great measure the effect of all these movements was neutralized by the manifestations of the agitators, and the result of the efforts to execute the Fugitive law in the Northern States. Mr. Fillmore was a Northern man. The South had seen him manifest a firm determination to maintain the laws in the contest between New Mexico and Texas; but they were doubtful to what extent he might exhibit the same firmness in the execution of a law unpopular in his own section of the country, and supposed to be at war with his own prejudices and prepossessions. They looked with solicitude for his annual message, and they found it breathing not only words of "courage," but of wisdom and of weight. It called forth from all quarters expressions that compelled respect from the agitators, silenced them in Congress, tranquilized the public mind, extorted even from political adversaries reluctant commendation, and vindicated to the world the character of president Fillmore for consistency and decision. Before drawing from these somewhat minute sketches of the times the "instruction" which they inculcate, it will be necessary for us to make the message and its consequences the subject of a Second Chapter.