

MILLARD FILLMORE: A REVIEW

“Over the past several years, Millard Fillmore has no longer been ranked as one of the worst five President in history; the goal of my book is to knock him back down as one of the worst three.” – Paul Finkelman, author of Millard Fillmore, speaking about the purpose of his book at a Teaching American History Seminar, August 2011.

The above quotes is not found within the pages of the book which is being reviewed; however after hearing the author state the purpose of the book, and then to read the book, once can clearly see that Paul Finkelman had a clear purpose in mind: to attack the legacy of Millard Fillmore. In his book, Finkelman provides the reader with an interesting approach to understanding one of the lesser known Presidents. Finkelman clearly states that Fillmore was a terrible President and gives many reasons as to why this is so. However, in using terms to describe Fillmore and his actions, such as “betrayed”, “stupidly” and “insecure”, Finkelman makes it impossible for the reader to second guess his motives for writing the book. Does the author wish to give the reader a thorough glimpse of the former accidental President and get carried away, or is it his goal from the outset to malign the character and reputation of a man who was not worthy of the office which he possessed?

Whoever believes the old saying “Don’t judge a book by its cover” needs only to take a glance at the back cover of Millard Fillmore, as in the very first sentence the author condemns Fillmore as one of our worst Presidents. Throughout the initial pages of the book, the author discusses Fillmore’s early life and how he became a lawyer of moderate success in New York. The author makes it very clear that Fillmore had little formal education and was a factory apprentice. Furthermore, Fillmore educated himself and eventually impressed many members of the New York Bar so much so that they pushed through his paperwork and even offered him positions at important law practices in Buffalo. However, according to Finkelman, Fillmore turned these down not only so he could monopolize citizens of more rural areas with his legal skill, but because he lacked the confidence necessary to succeed in a city such as Buffalo. Instead of praising Fillmore for self-educating himself and becoming a lawyer, Finkelman states:

He was the son of a dirt farmer, a self-educated factory apprentice who had somehow become a lawyer.¹

This is a fantastic example of the author's choice of wording. The word 'somehow' clearly illustrates that the author has very little respect for Fillmore.

There are several recurring themes throughout the book, the most powerful of which deal with Fillmore being an obscure nobody who had no business holding political office at such a distinguished level. Furthermore, an intense focus is placed on how out of touch Fillmore was with many of the issues concerning slavery and the union, his lack of self-confidence, and his disloyalty to his party, his predecessor, and his country. Early in the book, as Fillmore's political affiliation with the Whig party is made known, the author discusses how Fillmore often wrestled with his party over many issues, some sectional, some not.

Fillmore's nearly fanatical support of the Fugitive Slave Act is one of the issues discussed, as is his intriguingly silent position regarding slavery altogether. At one point in the book the author states that Fillmore privately condemned slavery, yet at no point in his career does he actively speak out against nor take action towards the abolition or further spread of the institution. In fact, Fillmore supports such laws as the Fugitive Slave Act and later in his career he speaks out against the right of the federal government to take action regarding slavery, claiming that such decisions should be left to the states to decide.

There are long stretches in the book in which Mr. Finkelman does not mention Fillmore as much as he delves into certain political and legal matters of the day. While informational, in some cases these examples cited have no relevance to the life or work of Fillmore. One example of this is during the Mexican American War. The author discusses the basics of the war over several pages, only to conclude the Fillmore did not occupy an elected office at the time and therefore had no opinion on the matter.² While such events certainly affected his Presidency, the impacts at that time were of little importance to Fillmore.

¹ Finkelman, Paul. Millard Fillmore. Times Books, Henry Holt and Company. New York, New York, 2011. pg. 6.

² Ibid, 35.

One subject which is discussed at great length is the Compromise of 1850, which the author takes a most unflattering stance on. In a book of less than 150 pages, the Compromise of 1850 and how ‘terrible’ it was it mentioned on nearly twenty-six different pages, or around one-sixth of the book. Fillmore’s role of course in the Compromise of 1850 was basically an appeasement, according to Finkelman, in which President Fillmore refused to take a stand against Texan demands and lost an opportunity to strengthen his image while at the same time passively promoting Southern desires ahead of Northern wishes and slavery ahead of liberty.³

Finkelman also discusses the failure of Fillmore to be decisive when it came to setting boundaries for New Mexico. Instead of making a “Presidential” decision, Fillmore somehow created a scheme in which the President could sign a law determining the boundaries for New Mexico, but at the same time granting Texas the right to dispute and even reject the result. This, according to the author, is a direct conflict with Fillmore’s previous belief on nullification.⁴ On this same topic, Fillmore eventually came to a settlement in which Texas received a \$10 million bailout from the United States, the New Mexico territory became open to slavery, and gave Texas a huge chunk of land. On page 83, the author states that Fillmore played the fear game that if such a compromise was not reached it could mean civil war between Texas and the United States. The author then goes on to speculate what the recently deceased president Zachary Taylor would have believed had he been alive. In the opinion of this author, in a biography it is unnecessary to speculate about what a dead person might have done.

One of the best phrases in the book is when Mr. Finkelman states:

Could Fillmore have had a happier, more congenial vice presidency? It might have been different if Fillmore himself had been a different person.⁵

This seems like the author is just trying to fill in some pages. Why not say the sky would be a different color if it were not blue? The President would not be President had he not

³ Ibid, 64-71,75.

⁴ Ibid, 78-79.

⁵ Ibid, 57.

received the most electoral votes? Obvious statements such as this that are unnecessary seem to litter the book, and are one of the negative aspects of this work.

However, Finkelman does a fantastic job when it comes to analyzing how ineffective of a President Millard Fillmore actually was. He was not on the same playing field as many of the men who worked around him. He was not a military man, he was of average intelligence, and he had little to no political experience at the national or international level with the exception of four quiet terms in the Congress. By noting how Fillmore usually clashed with Zachary Taylor over many important issues only to fire his entire cabinet out of mere frustration once Taylor had died, Finkelman paints a very clear portrait of how bad Fillmore was. His backwards thinking and unwillingness to condemn slavery would not be so glaring if he also had not fanatically supported such laws as the Fugitive Slave Act.

Another one of Fillmore's downfalls is that because this was a time when no active campaigning was really done, there were many people who assumed that because Fillmore was a northerner, he automatically opposed slavery. On the other hand, southerners believed that because he had never actually spoken out against slavery or the spread of the institution that he could possibly be an ally. To even further complicate matters and make matters worse for Fillmore and the nation, no one bothered to question him on his stance. Thus, when Fillmore was nominated for the vice presidency, it was due to people assuming that an unknown local political figure from Buffalo sided with their view of slavery.

The author declares that Fillmore's legacy as President of the United States was defined by his "reckless enforcement" of the 1850 Fugitive Slave law. This seems to be accurate, and Finkelman gives clear examples of this so called reckless enforcement in the Shadrach and Jerry prosecutions. Each case involved the Fugitive Slave law being enforced in which Fillmore sought prosecutions for those who had either assisted in the escape of slaves or hindered a slave owner's attempt to recover his "property". Truly, Fillmore was a "doughface" President, or a northerner with southern pro-slavery leanings.

Interestingly enough, Finkelman gives great detail with regards to how Fillmore's political mind worked. A fantastic example of this is when the author notes how Fillmore's personal goal of winning his own term for the Presidency was heavily influenced by his want to not offend the South. Citing the appeasement of Texas and certain fugitive slave laws, one can see that Fillmore became more and more willing to side with the South on certain issues; and sometimes not necessarily because he agreed with them, but because he feared losing support in the South. However at the same time he was increasingly strict when it came to the punishment of Northerners who fought against the kidnapping of free blacks in the free states.⁶

To add to this argument, Finkelman make a solid point when he states that Fillmore was worried about a secessionist movement. The fact that a secessionist movement in 1850 was unlikely is not the point; what is important is whether or not Fillmore thought it was possible, as Finkelman states. Basically, the President feared something which presented no immediate threat to him, as several secessionist conventions had completely fallen apart and failed to gain any momentum whatsoever.

Finkelman ends the book in a somewhat humorous manner. After absolutely tearing apart Fillmore for his inadequacies as President, his incompetence and his failure to understand the scope of his actions and his backwards political thinking and actions, the author actually dedicates an entire paragraph in which he describes many of Fillmore's ideas as visionary. It is here that the reader is struck by all the things Fillmore did accomplish: the push for a transcontinental railroad, the opening of Japan to American diplomacy and trade, maintaining a strong presence in Hawaii and pushing for a canal in central American which would eventually be completed by the Theodore Roosevelt administration.⁷

Finkelman concludes with summarizing the shortcomings of the President, with a focus on the inability of the President to gain perspective on the pressing issues of his day. He condemns Fillmore for being on the "wrong side of the great moral and political

⁶ Ibid, 112.

⁷ Ibid, 137

issues of the age”, citing immigration, equality, religion and of course slavery.⁸ The book itself could be used in a classroom setting at the high school level. Personally, I would use the book in tandem with other accounts of Fillmore’s life and Presidency. It would not take high school students too long to realize the biased nature of Finkelman’s work. They could compare it to other readings on Fillmore of a less biased nature and have a classroom open floor debate based on what they think of this “accidental President.”

⁸ Ibid, 137.

WORKS CITED

Finkelman, Paul. Millard Fillmore. Times Books, Henry Holt and Company. New York, New York, 2011.

MLLARD FILLMORE: A REVIEW

Nicholas Liberto

Teaching American History Grant

CHARMS Collaborative

September 15, 2011