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The Strange Death of President Zachary Taylor: A Case Study in the Manufacture of Mainstream History

Michael Parenti

Abstract *Was President Zachary Taylor poisoned? Sometimes an event in history wins our attention not solely because of its generalizable significance but because of its inviting singularity. In addition, the Taylor case is a perfect example of how "pack journalists" and "pack historians" can settle a controversy by fiat, manufacturing orthodox conclusions out of thin air, in this instance telling us to believe in the "cherries and milk" death of a president. The case demonstrates the sloppy and superficial investigative methods of both pathologists and mainstream historians. It also demonstrates how ideological gatekeepers rush to close ranks against any issue that challenges their expertise, or challenges the legitimacy and virtue of US political institutions by suggesting the possibility of conspiracy in high places.*

What follows is a case study of how unsubstantiated, highly questionable, raw speculations are transformed into acceptable history by public officials, academic historians, and the news media. The process is similar to propaganda. Some basic ingredients of propaganda are omission, distortion, and repetition. Regarding repetition, one cannot but be impressed by how mainstream historians, like mainstream journalists, find validation for their images in the images they have already produced, how without benefit of evidence or independent research they revisit each other's unsubstantiated representations again and again, creating an undeserved credibility through a process of repetition. If reiterated often enough by "experts and other reputable sources," an assertion becomes accepted as true. Along with pack journalism we have pack historiography. Indeed, pack journalism and pack historiography often work in tandem to buttress the politically safe conclusion. This seems to be the case regarding the death of the 12th president of the United States, Zachary Taylor.

On the evening of July 4, 1850, President Taylor suddenly sickened. Five days later he died. He was 65 years old. At the time, there were rumors he had been poisoned. More than 140 years later, an investigation was launched into his death by Clara Rising, a writer. In the course of doing a book about Taylor, she came to suspect that he had been murdered because of his uncompromising stance against the spread of slavery. After receiving permission from Taylor's descendants to have his remains examined, Rising enlisted the cooperation of the Jefferson County coroner in Louisville, Kentucky. Zachary Taylor's crypt was opened on June 17, 1991. Fingernail, hair, and tissue samples, along with bone scrapings, were removed from his body, and tests were run at three different laboratories.

The exhumation drew immediate and sharp criticism from the press. A *New York Times* editorial chastised Clara Rising for “a cavalier contempt for the dead” and for “tampering with a grave” while having no “serious historical evidence” to support her suspicions.¹ The *New Republic* described the investigation as a “sacrilege” and “grisly exercise.”² Syndicated columnist Charles Krauthammer likened the interest in Taylor’s death to the interest in President Kennedy’s assassination and denounced all such “conspiracy theories” for undermining the “constitutional transitions of power” in our political system.³

Professional historians were equally critical. Elbert Smith, author of books on the Taylor–Filmore years, thought the idea of foul play was “sheer nonsense.” He explained that historians never suspected Taylor was murdered because “conspiracies and poisoning” were common in ancient Rome and Greece but not in the United States of the 1850s. Civil War historian Shelby Foote thought that even if it were discovered that Taylor had been poisoned, it would not be of any significance and would lead only to a pointless engagement in “what-might-have-beens.”⁴ Foote is referring to the seemingly useless conjectures about what might have happened had Taylor lived and his anti-extensionist policy had prevailed. In fact, there is a far more important question: if Taylor was poisoned what does this say about the security of presidents from assassination and the role of murder in high places? Indeed, what does it say about US political institutions and the myth propagated by the guardians of orthodox history that America is a uniquely virtuous and blessed land where such things do not happen?

On June 26, 1991, Kentucky State medical examiner Dr George Nichols announced at a news conference in Louisville that Zachary Taylor had not been poisoned. Traces of arsenic were found in his body but nowhere near the lethal level. That evening ABC-TV news anchor Peter Jennings announced: “a mystery solved”; Taylor “died of natural causes.”⁵ The next day, the *New York Times* story was headlined: “VERDICT IN: 12TH PRESIDENT WAS NOT ASSASSINATED.”⁶ A *Washington Post* headline proclaimed: “NO EVIDENCE OF POISONING UNEARTHED IN TAYLOR CASE.”⁷ A follow-up story in the *Post* reported: “In a setback to conspiracy buffs everywhere, [Clara Rising’s] theory of assassination by arsenic-sprinkled cherries was disproved this week.”⁸ The media stories indicated that Taylor died from consuming cherries and milk.

Examining the Examination

Having never known cherries and milk to be fatal, I decided to examine the matter more closely. When my research assistant Peggy Noton called Dr Nichols, six weeks after his press conference, to request a copy of the

¹ *New York Times* editorial (June 20, 1991).

² Alex Heard, “Exhumed Innocent,” *New Republic* (August 5, 1991).

³ Charles Krauthammer, *Washington Post* (July 5, 1991).

⁴ Both Smith and Foote are quoted in *Newsweek* (July 1, 1991), pp. 64–65.

⁵ ABC-TV evening news report (June 26, 1991).

⁶ *New York Times* (June 27, 1991).

⁷ *Washington Post* (June 27, 1991).

⁸ *Washington Post* (June 28, 1991). Rising never expressed a theory about “arsenic-sprinkled cherries.”

medical report, he said it was still in the computer and had not been printed out. Eleven days later, he offered a different explanation, saying he was under orders from the county coroner not to release it. Several weeks later, Nichols' secretary offered yet another reason: the report was available only through the person who had requested and funded the autopsy. Noton contacted Dr Richard Greathouse, the county coroner in Louisville who had supervised the investigation. He eventually mailed us a copy of what appeared to be the medical examiner's statement.

Entitled "Results of Exhumation of Zachary Taylor," the report is a little over three pages, double-spaced, with no date, location, or letterhead. Though written in the first person, it lists no author. It concludes: "It is my opinion that President Zachary Taylor was not poisoned by arsenic." Arsenic was found in the samples taken from Taylor's remains but the amounts were "within the anticipated baseline concentration of that substance in human tissues." Regarding the symptoms preceding Taylor's death, the report says something interesting:

The symptoms and duration of Zachary Taylor's disorder are historically and medically compatible with acute arsenic poisoning and many natural diseases. Symptoms begin within 30 minutes to 2 hours after ingestion. The symptoms include nausea, vomiting, severe abdominal cramping pain, burning epigastric pain, and bloody diarrhea. Death usually results within 24 hours to 4 days ...

It is my opinion that Zachary Taylor died as the result of one of a myriad of natural diseases which would have produced the symptoms of "gastroenteritis."

Lastly, the symptoms which he exhibited and the rapidity of his death are clearly consistent with acute arsenic poisoning.⁹

Taylor's symptoms included abdominal cramps, diarrhea, vomiting, fever, burning epigastric pain, and severe thirst. Though not mentioned in the report, severe thirst is a common symptom of arsenic poisoning. While the report asserts that a "myriad of natural diseases" fit this clinical picture, it names none. Accompanying the report was a half-page statement entitled "Final Diagnosis" signed by Nichols, who concluded: "Opinion: No anatomic or toxicologic cause of determined by [sic] this examination. The manner of death is natural." He states further: "Historical data consistent with undetermined natural disorder presenting as [sic] clinical 'gastroenteritis.'" If I understand Nichols, Taylor died of an undetermined disorder, the symptoms of which resembled gastroenteritis—a catch-all diagnosis given to stomach and intestinal inflammation and other internal distresses, a term so imprecise that even Nichols felt compelled to bracket it repeatedly with distancing quotation marks in his report. Though he referred to "historical data" consistent with his conclusion, he offered none.¹⁰

Some months later, when asked if Taylor had died from gastroenteritis, Dr Greathouse emphasized that such a conclusion was "an opinion, an opinion only, an opinion based on symptoms."¹¹ It seems the investigators were not as

⁹ "Results of Exhumation of Zachary Taylor," released by the Office of the Coroner, Jefferson County, Kentucky (September, 1991).

¹⁰ "Final Diagnosis: Taylor, Zachary", no date, signed by George Nichols, attached to a brief statement entitled "Post Mortem Examination of the Body of Taylor, Zachary ME-91-514," no date, location, letterhead, or author.

¹¹ Greathouse interview (May 5, 1992). All interviews were conducted by telephone by Peggy Noton.

certain of their conclusions about how Taylor died as they—or as the media—were leading us to believe. Greathouse described gastroenteritis as “a very general term.” The cause could be “chemicals or viruses or bacteria, as in food poisoning or allergies.”¹²

As already noted, the medical examiner’s report states that Taylor’s symptoms were consistent with arsenic poisoning but also with “many natural diseases,” indeed a “myriad of diseases.” When asked what other afflictions displayed these symptoms, Greathouse could not say. He remarked that “they said at the time [Taylor] had cholera morbus ... [But] he didn’t really have the symptoms of cholera.” Cholera morbus is a noninfectious, rarely fatal affliction that brings on diarrhea and cramps. Greathouse also mentioned several varieties of food poisoning but admitted that these do not normally cause death. He conjectured that Taylor could have contracted some kind of bacterial or acute viral infection from the food and water he had consumed that day. He allowed that “myriad” was “too flowery a word” and that “several” other diseases would have been more accurate.¹³

Judging from Greathouse’s own comments, food poisoning seems to be the only other malady that fits Taylor’s symptoms. With food poisoning there comes the sudden onset of stomach cramps, vomiting, and diarrhea an hour or so after eating—but not five days of agony and not the raging thirst, peculiar weakness in the legs, and rarely the death that comes with arsenic poisoning.

Exactly how much arsenic was found in Taylor’s remains? Since arsenic is present in the atmosphere, anyone tested today would range from 0.2 to 0.6 of a microgram per gram, or parts per million (ppm).¹⁴ The colorimetric spectrophotometry tests done on Taylor’s hair and nails, conducted by Michael Ward, a forensic scientist with the Kentucky Department of Health Services, found up to 1.9 micrograms per gram of arsenic in Taylor’s hair sample—three to nine times the modern-day rate. His nail sample revealed 3.0 ppm—five to 15 times higher than today’s normal range.¹⁵

Taylor spent his life on his Louisiana and Kentucky plantations, on army bases in Wisconsin, Florida, Missouri, and Louisiana, and his last 15 months, mostly in Washington, DC. None of these sites had any industrial pollution to speak of. He should have had much less arsenic in him than do people exposed to today’s chemicalized environment. In fact, he had substantially more, although apparently not a lethal amount.

Nichols is quoted in the *Washington Post* as saying that the concentration of arsenic would have had to be “hundreds to thousands of times greater” than was found in Taylor to cause death.¹⁶ But the Swedish toxicologist Sten Forshufvud demonstrated that whole-hair samples (that is, the entire length of hair) from an arsenic victim showed amounts not much higher than Taylor’s.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Greathouse interview (February 17, 1992).

¹⁴ Oak Ridge National Laboratory researcher Frank Dryer quoted in the *Atlantic Constitution* (June 27, 1991).

¹⁵ Report filed by Michael Ward, June 29, 1991, Department of Health Services, Division of Laboratory Services, Frankfort, Kentucky. This report was sent to my assistant Peggy Noton by Dr Greathouse.

¹⁶ *Washington Post* (June 27, 1991). The quotation is the *Post*’s paraphrase of Nichols statement.

However, a *sectional* analysis of that same victim's hair (an analysis of specific portions of the hair shaft that grew during the time immediately after poisoning) revealed a value of 10.38 micrograms per gram, or 17–51 times higher than the "normal" modern range.¹⁷ As already noted, Taylor's level, though only of the gross sample, was still three to nine times higher.

Both the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* dismissed the presence of arsenic in Taylor's body, noting that the element was used in early medicines and embalming fluid.¹⁸ This is a true fact misleadingly applied. For at the request of his wife, Margaret Taylor, the president was not embalmed. And there is no evidence he was administered any medicine containing arsenic before or during his illness.¹⁹

Also mentioned as a contaminant was ground water arsenic, which sometimes seeps into graves. But Taylor was not interred. His crypt was above ground and his lead coffin tightly sealed. The press reported that arsenic was sometimes used in certain products like wallpaper. As far as we know, Taylor was not given to munching on wallpaper, which would have been the only way traceable amounts might enter his digestive tract, his blood stream, and eventually his nails and hair.

Greathouse contends that the arsenic in Taylor came from pollution. "Do you live in Los Angeles?" he asked when interviewed by my research assistant.²⁰ Certainly Taylor never lived in a polluted megalopolis like Los Angeles. If the main source of arsenic in our bodies is industrial effluent—of which there was far less in Taylor's time than today—would not the normal levels for 1850 be substantially lower? "Not necessarily," Greathouse insisted. "Arsenic was also present in some medications and in food." He offered no specifics.

The Search for Roots

In the above interview, Greathouse added an interesting comment: Taylor's symptoms were congruent with *acute* arsenic poisoning, the result of one lethal dosage, as opposed to *chronic* poisoning, involving ingestion of smaller amounts over a protracted period. At the post-mortem, Taylor's nails were removed in their entirety and hair samples were extracted in whole shafts. Even if Taylor had been poisoned, most of the hair and nail substance would have been free of high concentrations of arsenic—having been produced long before the poisoning. As already noted, acute dosages measure fairly low when a gross-sample analysis is done but are much higher when a sectional analysis is performed of the specific portion of hair that grew immediately after the poisoning. To test properly for acute poisoning, one would have to test only the base of the nail

¹⁷ Forshufvud was dealing with the chronic poisoning of Napoleon: Ben Weider and David Hapgood, *The Murder of Napoleon* (New York: Congdon and Lattes, 1982), p. 75; also Sten Forshufvud, *Who Killed Napoleon?* (London: Hutchinson, 1961). To be sure, a chronic poisoning would not have the single concentrated dosage of an acute poisoning, but over the entire shaft of hair, the smaller successive dosages might register as much or more than the acute dosage.

¹⁸ *New York Times* (June 15, June 20, 1991); *Washington Post* (June 27, 1991).

¹⁹ Dr William Maples, forensic anthropologist, interview (March 10, 1922); also *Newsweek* (July 1, 1991), p. 65.

²⁰ Greathouse interview (September 23, 1991).

and root end of the hair, the minute portions that had grown out during Taylor's illness, the last five days of his life. (Contrary to popular belief, hair and nails do not continue growing after death.)

The tests done by Michael Ward were of entire nails and hairs. But whole samples would greatly dilute the concentration of arsenic and mask the presence of an acute poisoning. The 3.0 ppm of arsenic found in Taylor's nail is the ratio of arsenic to the entire substance of the nail or "combination of finger and toe" nails, as Ward's laboratory report states. Almost all that substance would have been relatively free from arsenic whether or not Taylor had been poisoned. Had shavings only from the last five-day growth period been tested—assuming it was solidified enough not to have decomposed entirely—then the concentration might have been dramatically higher.

The same would be true of the hair sample. Since hair grows about one centimeter per month or 4.7 inches per year, then the arsenic content in almost all of Taylor's hair would have been around the "normal" level. The only portion of Taylor's hair that should have been tested is the 0.166 of a centimeter or slightly more than 1/20th (0.065) of an inch that might have grown in the last five days of his life. Here we are assuming Taylor's hair was growing at an average rate, which may not have been the case given his partial baldness, advanced years, and the mortal struggle his body was undergoing in those final days.

Would not the hair root have shown a much higher concentration of arsenic if not diluted by the whole sample? Dr Vincent Guinn, forensic consultant at the University of Maryland, thinks so, noting that gross-sample testing is useful in cases of chronic or repeated poisoning, but in regard to acute poisoning "the results would be invalid because you would be averaging the root section concentration with the rest of the hair shaft."²¹ What is needed is a sectional analysis—with special attention given to the root.

One of the pioneers of sectional hair testing, Dr Hamilton Smith of Glasgow University's School of Forensic Medicine in Scotland, demonstrated the masking effect of whole-hair analysis. Using neutron activation analysis, Smith tested a whole-hair sample (30 cm) taken from a modern-day arsenic victim and found an arsenic content of 0.86 ppm (substantially less than in Taylor's hair). But when the root and 1st cm were tested as a separate section it revealed a value of 9.40 ppm or 10.9 times the level in the whole hair.²²

Test results are only as good as the samples tested. Samples from a cadaver that is over 140 years old have less reliability than samples from recent victims. Both Dr Greathouse and Dr William Maples, a forensic pathologist who attended the post-mortem, mentioned that Taylor's nails and hair were loose

²¹ Guinn interview (July 13, 1992).

²² Hamilton Smith, "The Interpretation of the Arsenic Content of Human Hair," *Journal of the Forensic Science Society* 4, summarized in Sten Forshufvud and Ben Weider, *Assassination at St. Helena* (Vancouver: Mitchell Press, 1978), pp. 488–489. See also V. P. Guinn, M. Gavrilas-Guinn and R. Demiralp, "Measurement of Arsenic in Sectioned Hair Samples by Instrumental Neutron Activation Analysis," paper presented at the NAC-II conference, Toronto, June 3–5, 1992, for a sectional analysis of a case of present-day arsenic poisoning. The arsenic levels found in the base sections were up to 40 ppm and 100 ppm, demonstrating the importance of having the entire root section, something that is more easily accomplished with a fresh hair shaft than one that is 140 years old.

and, in Maples' words, "came out easily." Maples conceded that this might have been due to decomposition at the base.²³ According to Dr Richard Bisbing, senior research microscopist at McCrone Laboratory in Chicago, if the hair root had decomposed entirely or in part, this would call into question the reliability of any test.²⁴

There is the additional problem of how the samples were extracted from Taylor's remains. Dr Guinn notes that hairs removed from a body should be lain on a clean piece of paper, with the paper folded over the root end, "a procedure that sometimes is not followed because people do not know about it."²⁵ It was not followed in the Taylor autopsy.

Along with the work done at the Kentucky Department of Health Services, two other laboratories tested the Taylor samples. There appears to be no final report from the Analytical Electronic Microscope Laboratory at the University of Louisville. Laboratory manager Beverly Giammara spent a day working alongside Nichols and several other persons on the samples. Nichols then took all the materials with him. Giammara is not a pathologist and did not know the significance of the arsenic levels, but she kindly made available the raw data from the tests. In his "Final Diagnosis," Nichols refers to a finding "received and reported" from "Ms Barbara [sic] Giammara" showing an arsenic elemented weight percentage of "up to 1.80." Reviewing the same data, I found one nail sample test at 1.80 but another at 2.229. The test on one hair sample revealed an even higher arsenic elemented weight percentage of 3.84, which Nichols did not mention.²⁶ According to Dr Bisbing of McCrone Laboratory, the figures from electron microscopy tests ignore carbon and nitrogen, which make up over 99% of the hair, so they are of little significance.²⁷

A more accurate test is neutron activation analysis. This was the method used at the Oakridge National Laboratory by Drs Frank Dyer and Larry Robinson, who found 2.0 ppm of arsenic, a measure that is above average but not considered lethal.²⁸ Dyer himself raised questions about the procedure. He recognized the possibility that when Taylor's hair was extracted it could have broken off at the root because of decomposition. He would not be part of any further investigation unless he could participate in taking the samples. "I'm becoming more and more appreciative of the importance of quality assurance."²⁹ Dyer added, "I was very dependent on George Nichols to give me what I needed. I asked Nichols if he could see which ends were the root ends. He didn't seem too interested in talking about it. I feel now that Nichols didn't really understand it was the roots that needed to be measured."³⁰

Dyer was not certain he had tested the roots. He did not check the ends under a microscope. In any case, he was not sure how roots ought to look "after

²³ Greathouse interview (September 23, 1991); Maples interview (April 30, 1992).

²⁴ Bisbing interview (April 29, 1992).

²⁵ Guinn interview (July 13, 1992).

²⁶ Data with handwritten title "U of L scanning electron microscope EDAX," no date, from Beverly Giammara and David Birch, Analytical Electron Microscope Laboratory, University of Louisville.

²⁷ Bisbing interview (June 5, 1992).

²⁸ Dyer and Robinson to Nichols, letter (June 24, 1991), a copy of which Dyer provided.

²⁹ Dyer interview (February 17, 1993).

³⁰ Dyer interview (November 4, 1992).

sitting around for a hundred years." With one selection of hairs he cut a little off both ends mixed them together and tested. In another sample, hairs were stuck together with what he thought was blood. He allowed that the blood could add to the weight and reduce the arsenic measurement by about a factor of two.

Dyer volunteered that he knew very little about the morphology of hair, yet he seemed to know more than anyone else involved in the investigation. He pointed out that at any one time some of the hairs on one's head are growing, some are not growing, and some are in an intermediate state. "So if a hair was not growing, it would not have picked up the arsenic" even with its root intact.³¹ If nongrowing hairs do not take up arsenic, then their presence would further dilute the ratio of arsenic found in the gross sample.

Of more than passing significance is the fact that Dyer found a suspiciously high level of antimony, 8.0 ppm, in the hair samples and 10.0 ppm in what he took to be the root ends. Antimony, a heavy metal element, has been used as a poison. It has a clinical picture similar to arsenic poisoning, with symptoms of nausea, frequent vomiting, dehydration, and severe diarrhea.³² It has a higher toxicity level than arsenic; an antimony value of 10.0 ppm is equivalent in toxicity to 12.0 ppm of arsenic. Considering that the root probably was partly or largely decomposed, such a toxic level seems significant. Dyer was disturbed enough about the antimony to inform Nichols, who said he would look into it. But Nichols never called back.³³

The materials taken from Taylor's body were deposited with the Filson Club, a Kentucky historical society. To conduct further tests, I and my assistant requested hair samples from the club, representing our investigation as a serious, scholarly undertaking. We informed the club that we had contacted a forensic consultant who agreed to do a nuclear activation sectional analysis and that we would pay for the tests. The Filson Club denied our request, concluding that "thorough testing of these samples has already been accomplished and [additional tests] would be considered a duplication of previous effort."³⁴

Confrontation with the Slavocracy

What do historians say about the conditions surrounding Zachary Taylor's death? Not too much that can be considered reliable. Still, certain of the events surrounding his presidency are suggestive.

Capitalizing on Taylor's popularity as the hero of the Mexican War, the Whig Party nominated him as their presidential candidate in 1848. There was much interest in the candidate's views regarding what one contemporary called "the all-absorbing and most embarrassing subject of slavery."³⁵ Some Northerners feared that, being a Southerner, Taylor would support its extension into the newly acquired territories. Others were aware that Taylor, though himself a slaveholder, considered slavery "a social and political evil" and wanted it

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Serita Deborah Stevens and Anne Klarnar, *Deadly Doses, A Writer's Guide to Poisons* (Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 1990), pp. 203–204

³³ Dyer interview (June 12, 1992).

³⁴ R. R. Van Stockum, interim director, The Filson Club, letter to Noton (August 18, 1992).

³⁵ Henry Montgomery, *The Life of Major-General Zachary Taylor* (Philadelphia: Porter and Coates, c. 1851), p. 412.

contained.³⁶ Once in office, the new president left no doubts in anyone's mind. He sent representatives to urge California and New Mexico to apply for entry into the Union as free states—initiatives that greatly agitated both slaveholders and Whig “compromisers” like Senators Henry Clay and Daniel Webster, who were willing to make major concessions to the slavers.

Taylor entered the White House in apparently excellent health. A visitor to his Mexican camp sometime the year before described him as a “heartily-looking old gentleman” whose visage was “remarkable for a bright, flashing eye, a high forehead, a farmer look and ‘rough-and-ready’ appearance.”³⁷ In the fifth month of his administration, on August 9, 1849, the president embarked on a trip through a number of Northern states. His first stop was Pennsylvania. In Mercer, he made a bold public assertion: “The people of the North need have no apprehension of the further extension of slavery.”³⁸ Taylor was assuming an unambiguously anti-extensionist position.

On August 24, at Waterford, Taylor was suddenly stricken by vomiting and diarrhea. He continued on to Erie where his physician, Dr Robert Wood, put him to bed with the “shakes.” After a sleepless night, the president worsened and ran a fever. Dr Wood now feared for his patient's life. Not until the fifth day did he throw off the illness.³⁹ After a week of convalescence, the president was much improved but still suffered from a weakness in his legs that made it difficult to walk.⁴⁰

Taylor's illness alarmed members of his administration. “You have been so long accustomed to look danger in the face, that you do not fear it,” wrote Secretary of State John Clayton on behalf of the entire cabinet, “but we think that you have been sick so much since you left Washington, that it is evident your journey cannot be continued without peril.”⁴¹ Yielding to his cabinet's entreaties, Taylor returned to the capital in early September. He did not recuperate until several weeks later.

What was the malady that so mysteriously seized the president on his journey north? Neither contemporaries nor historians tell us. Dr Sten Forshufvud, the toxicologist who conducted an interesting study of the death of Napoleon, observes: “If someone in apparently perfect health is suddenly attacked by violent symptoms of illness, without anything to announce their approach, we are, first and foremost, led to think of poisoning. Generally

³⁶ Taylor quoted in Paul Wellman, *The House Divides* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), p. 332. In fact, Taylor was on good terms with such notable abolitionist families in the North as the Adamses. Henry Adams recalls the warm reception he and his father received when visiting Taylor in the White House. He opined that “President Taylor owed his election to Martin Van Buren and the Free Soil Party”: *The Education of Henry Adams* (New York: Random House, 1931, originally published 1918), p. 46.

³⁷ Newsclip (undated) in the Zachary Taylor papers, series 4, manuscript division, Library of Congress. From the newsclip's content, it is clear that the visit occurred after the war.

³⁸ Holman Hamilton, *Zachary Taylor, Soldier in the White House*, Vol. 2 (Hamden, CT: Anchor Books, 1966), p. 225.

³⁹ Jack Bauer, *Zachary Taylor, Soldier, Planter, Statesman of the Old Southwest* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), p. 269.

⁴⁰ Brainerd Dyer, *Zachary Taylor* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1946), pp. 402–403.

⁴¹ Clayton to Taylor (August 29, 1849), Zachary Taylor papers, manuscript division, Library of Congress.

speaking, a natural, normal sickness gives a number of warning signals before entering its pronounced phase."⁴² While the reaction to poisoning comes abruptly, the recovery is slow. The prolonged effects of arsenic poisoning, for instance, include a weakness in the legs that can linger for some time after.⁴³ This was one of Taylor's symptoms.

If Taylor was poisoned in Pennsylvania, this might explain the above-average arsenic levels in the gross-sample tests of his nails and bone tissue and the very high level of antimony in his hair.

In November 1849, as debates raged in Congress regarding the slavery issue, Taylor's health was once more deemed "excellent," by his doctor. By December, "he gave the impression of being robust."⁴⁴ The following spring found a fully restored president on a collision course with the slavocracy. Henry Clay wrote an associate, "The all-engrossing subject of slavery continues to agitate us, and to paralyze almost all legislation."⁴⁵ On January 29, 1850, Clay put together an omnibus bill, later known as the Compromise of 1850. It contained the following proposals: (a) a stronger fugitive slave law for the "restitution and delivery" of runaway slaves; (b) in regard to the slave trade, Congress would relinquish its constitutional power to regulate interstate commerce; there would be no restrictions against slavery in the territories; (d) New Mexico would remain as a territory with no decision on slavery; and (e) Texas would relinquish its claim to New Mexico. As compensation, the federal government would assume Texas's entire public debt.

Clay's package contained much of what the slave interests wanted. It earned the name of "compromise" because it offered a couple of concessions to the North: California was to be admitted as a free state and the slave trade would be abolished in the nation's capital. But slavery itself would continue in that city unless slaveholders agreed to its abolition—in which case they would get full compensation.

President Taylor adamantly opposed the bill. On May 20, Clay excoriated the president on the Senate floor for pursuing a dangerously uncompromising anti-extensionist policy. The slaveholding president was taking a surprisingly tough stance against the slaveholding interests. When threats of secession filled the air, Taylor let it be known that he personally would lead troops against any "traitors," and hang secessionists "with less reluctance than I hanged spies and deserters in Mexico."⁴⁶ On June 17, 1850, he informed Congress that Texas was threatening to use force to incorporate about half of New Mexico within its jurisdiction and that he was ready to send federal troops to crush such a move.

As for Clay's omnibus bill, in the words of one historian, "it was doomed as long as Zachary Taylor lived."⁴⁷ Here we might note the significance of

⁴² Forshufvud, *Who Killed Napoleon?* p.213.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 227. Despite the continued weakness in his legs, Taylor was writing to Secretary of State John Clayton about a matter of state five days after the attack in a handwriting that was firm and intact: Taylor to Clayton (August 29, 1849), John Middleton Clayton papers, manuscript division, Library of Congress.

⁴⁴ Hamilton, *Zachary Taylor*, pp. 227, 255.

⁴⁵ Henry Clay to James Harlan (March 16, 1850), in Calvin Colton (ed.), *Private Correspondence of Henry Clay* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1971, originally published 1855), p. 603.

⁴⁶ Paul Wellman, *The House Divides* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), p. 332.

⁴⁷ Hamilton, *Zachary Taylor*, p. 383.

Vice-President Millard Fillmore's views. A devoted friend and admirer of Henry Clay, Fillmore informed Taylor that in the event of a tie in the Senate on Clay's compromise package, the vice-president, as presiding officer, would cast the deciding vote in favor of it.⁴⁸ It must have been a discouragement to the chief executive to know that his vice-president would line up against him. It was no secret that if Taylor died and Fillmore became president, there would be a dramatic shift in policy on the slavery question.

A Lethal Dose of Cherries and Milk?

On July 4, 1850, Zachary Taylor attended the laying of the cornerstone of the Washington Monument. That evening after dinner, he suddenly took ill. Five days later he was dead. Trying to explain the suspicious affliction, historians repeatedly note that Taylor spent much of that afternoon walking around or sitting in the hot sun and humidity, thereby weakening himself. But Taylor evidenced none of the symptoms of excessive heat exposure, neither during that day nor throughout his ensuing illness.

"Rough and Ready," as he was affectionately known, had spent much of his life exposed to the elements at army camps around the country and on battlefields under the blazing sun. In any case, on July 4, he was not "walking around" but took a carriage to the site of the monument where he participated in the ceremony.⁴⁹ The *Philadelphia Bulletin* correspondent, who attended the event, described the president as "to all appearances, sound in health and in excellent spirits ... and even up to five o'clock, exhibit[ing] no symptoms of illness."⁵⁰ The *National Intelligencer*⁵¹ reported that he appeared "in the full enjoyment of health and strength participating in the patriotic ceremonies."⁵² Arriving at the Executive Mansion, Taylor remarked to his physician Dr Alexander Wotherspoon that he was "very hungry."⁵³ A hearty appetite is not symptomatic of someone debilitated by heat or impending illness.

Taylor's major biographer, Holman Hamilton, writes that the president seemed "slightly under par" on July 3. But others, including the reporters quoted above and the president's physician, said he seemed quite fit on July 4. Hamilton tells us that earlier in the day, Taylor "may have munched green apples immediately before or after attending a Sunday school recital." If he did, he made no complaint of indigestion for the entire day. And green apples are not known to be fatal.

Hamilton asserts that during the ceremony, Taylor "sat two hours in the broiling sun" as it beat on "his head which was probably bare most of the time."⁵⁴ Hamilton does not explain why the president would deny himself the protection of his hat while exposed to the broiling sun, nor why the president would remain bareheaded when the proper style was to keep one's hat on during formal outdoor ceremonies. Samuel Eliot Morison claims that Taylor

⁴⁸ Wellman, *The House Divides*, p. 333.

⁴⁹ *Daily National Intelligencer*, Washington, DC (July 12, 1850).

⁵⁰ *Philadelphia Bulletin* (correspondence datelined July 10, 1850); reprinted in *New York Daily Tribune* (July 12, 1850).

⁵¹ *Op. cit.*, note 49.

⁵² *Daily National Intelligencer* (July 10, 1850).

⁵³ *Philadelphia Bulletin* (July 11, 1850); *New York Daily Tribune* (July 12, 1850).

⁵⁴ Hamilton, *Zachary Taylor*, p. 389.

was “subjected to two hours’ oratory by Senator Foote in the broiling sun.”⁵⁵ Similar assertions are repeated by other historians—none of whom thought it odd that no provision was made for the comfort of the president and the numerous other dignitaries.

Two eye-witness reports I unearthed offer a different picture. According to a *National Intelligencer* reporter who was present, there was shade aplenty as “one to two thousand ladies and gentlemen assembled under the broad awning.”⁵⁶ Provision *was* made to protect the audience from the sun. Another participant, Senator Henry Foote, who exchanged friendly words with the president after delivering his hour-long oration, wrote, “Never had I seen him look more robust and healthful than while seated under the canopy which sheltered the speaker and the assembled concourse from the burning rays ...”⁵⁷ In sum, the image of Taylor sitting for hours under a “broiling sun” is a fabrication introduced by historians, made no less imaginary by repeated assertion.

Hamilton alludes to typhoid and cholera, observing that the District of Columbia had a “primitive water supply and arrangements for sewage disposal invited the worst from flies and insects.” He reports that “Asiatic cholera was still abroad in the land,” but admits “there is no proof that this scourge invaded Washington in 1850.” And “in diagnosing Taylor’s case, Asiatic cholera can be dismissed.” Likewise, “typhoid fever is out of the question; his symptoms simply were not those of typhoid.”⁵⁸

What then killed Taylor? Most historians who have dealt with the question say he consumed something that attacked his digestive track. They repeatedly ascribed the fatal results to seemingly innocuous food and drink: “cherries and cabbage,” “a glass of milk,” “bread and milk and cherries,” “ice water,” “mush and milk,” “raw fruit or vegetables or both.”⁵⁹ Samuel Eliot Morison decided the fatality was caused by “an excessive quantity of cucumbers.”⁶⁰ Another historian combines the weather and the food: “Zachary Taylor died very suddenly of indigestion contracted from too much iced water and milk and too many cherries, after he returned hot and tired from Fourth of July ceremonies.”⁶¹

Where did the historians get their peculiar information about what Taylor supposedly consumed? They do not tell us. Neither contemporary news reports nor latter-day historians offer any source for their widely varied and conflicting reports regarding the president’s ingestions that day.

Taylor had no history of chronic indigestion or delicate stomach. Quite the contrary, Hamilton reports that Old Zach was known to be a trencherman who could digest anything.⁶² Yet, in the next breath Hamilton describes Taylor as an

⁵⁵ Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Oxford History of the American People* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 573. In fact, Foote spoke for only one hour, which was probably long enough.

⁵⁶ *Daily National Intelligencer* (July 6, 1850).

⁵⁷ Henry S. Foote, *War of the Rebellion* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1866), p. 149.

⁵⁸ Hamilton, *Zachary Taylor*, pp. 388–389.

⁵⁹ Hamilton lists the various offerings: *Zachary Taylor*, p. 388.

⁶⁰ Morison, *The Oxford History of the American People*, p. 573. Elbert Smith opts for “raw fruit ... various raw vegetables as well, which he washed down with large quantities of iced milk”: *The Presidencies of Zachary Taylor and Millard Fillmore* (University of Kansas Press: Lawrence, KS, 1988), p. 156.

⁶¹ Wellman, *The House Divides*, p. 333.

⁶² Hamilton, *Zachary Taylor*, p. 389.

infirm old man who “had led a hard life,” who was “in less than the best of health,” and who “ate raw stuff and drank cold liquids” on July 4.⁶³ Taylor’s physicians would not have agreed with that portrait, having reported months earlier that the president was fully recovered from the Erie attack and in “excellent” health and of “robust” appearance—as Hamilton himself reports.⁶⁴ During the early phase of Taylor’s fatal illness, his physicians believed “his strong constitution and superb physique would overcome the temporary disability.”⁶⁵ Another contemporary, Montgomery, also talks about Taylor’s “naturally strong constitution.”⁶⁶

According to Taylor’s physician, Dr Wotherspoon, Taylor developed severe cramps about an hour after his evening meal. Later he suffered attacks of nausea and diarrhea and spent an uncomfortable night. The following day, Friday, July 5, the president’s discomfort worsened, as he continued to suffer diarrhea and some vomiting. On Saturday, Taylor’s family grew increasingly concerned. Summoned to the White House, Dr Wotherspoon diagnosed the ailment as “cholera morbus”—which, despite its awesome name, has no relation to the dread scourge of Asiatic cholera. As already noted, cholera morbus was a flexible mid-19th century term applied to diarrhea and other such intestinal ailments. Wotherspoon prescribed calomel, opium, and quinine, which appeared to produce an immediate improvement.⁶⁷

On Sunday other physicians were called in. The diarrhea subsided but the vomiting continued and an intermittent fever ensued. Taylor also experienced severe pain on one side of his chest and a raging thirst. He drank constantly until his stomach rejected the fluid. Dr Robert Wood, who had attended to Taylor when he journeyed north the year before, arrived on Monday. He observed that the sudden illness “was very like” Taylor’s “attack at Erie.”⁶⁸ (There is no indication that Taylor sickened in Erie because of heat exposure or raw foods and iced drink.)

By Monday the president was despondent. He commented to his medical attendant: “I should not be surprised if this were to terminate in my death. I did not expect to encounter what has beset me since my elevation to the Presidency. God knows I have endeavored to fulfill what I conceived to be an honest duty. But I have been mistaken. My motives have been misconstrued, and my feelings most grossly outraged.” This comment was reported in a number of newspapers of that day but has been ignored by every latter-day historian.⁶⁹ One might wonder whether Taylor himself was not entertaining suspicions of foul play.

By Tuesday, July 9, the physicians refused to administer any more medication, considering it a lost cause. That afternoon, Taylor was vomiting green

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 227, 255.

⁶⁵ Oliver Otis Howard, *General Taylor* (New York: D. Appleton, 1892), p. 370.

⁶⁶ Montgomery, *The Life of Major-General Zachary Taylor*, p. 426.

⁶⁷ Baur, *Zachary Taylor*, p. 315.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*; Holman, *Zachary Taylor*, p. 390.

⁶⁹ *Philadelphia Bulletin* (July 11, 1850); *New York Daily Tribune* (July 12, 1850); *Daily Evening Transcript*, Boston (July 12, 1850) and various other publications. For a contemporary report, see Montgomery, *The Life of Major-General Zachary Taylor*, p. 426.

matter from his stomach.⁷⁰ He died that night at 10:35 p.m.⁷¹ Hamilton records the cause of death as “acute gastroenteritis, the inflammation of the lining membrane of his stomach and intestines.”⁷²

If gastroenteritis caused Taylor’s death, what caused the gastroenteritis? Could his intestinal passage have been so fatally assaulted by the seemingly wholesome food and drink he is said to have consumed? That remains to this day the acceptable view. Thus, on June 27, 1991, the *New York Times* misinformed its readers that Taylor fell ill “after consuming large quantities of iced cherries and milk at the dedication of the Washington Monument on July 4.” There is no evidence that Taylor consumed cherries and milk at the ceremony. In fact, he took sick after his evening meal.

On June 28, 1991, the *Washington Post* told its readers: “A too-active, too-hot Fourth of July celebration, too many cherries and bad medicine were indeed responsible for killing off the 12th president.” A *Post* article from the previous day reported that his gastroenteritis worsened when doctors “bled the president.”⁷³ But the bleeding did not come until the fifth and last day, well after his illness had reached a critical stage.⁷⁴

Newsweek offered the view “advanced by many mainstream historians, that Taylor died of the mercury and other poisons used in the medicines.”⁷⁵ In fact, the “mercury” was calomel, a mercurous chloride used as a cathartic. The electron microscope scanning shows no mercury in Taylor’s nails and a percentage level in his hair (0.70) lower than the arsenic level (1.42). It might be important to note that one effect of calomel is to mask the traces of arsenic in a victim’s body.⁷⁶ The “other poisons” were quinine and opium. None of the medicines were administered until Saturday afternoon, the third day of illness, well after the bloody diarrhea and vomiting had begun.

A Reversal of Policy

Immediately after Taylor’s demise, the policy of containment against the spread of slavery was dramatically reversed. Historians as prominent as John McMaster, Edward Channing, Avery Craven, A. C. MacLaughlin, Allen Nevins, and Henry Steele Commager agree that Taylor’s death marked a significant turning point in policy. On July 11, 1850, with Taylor not yet buried, Daniel Webster wrote to an associate that Fillmore’s “coming to power is a heavy blow” to the “half abolition Gentlemen. I believe Mr Fillmore favors the compromise, & there is no doubt that recent events [the president’s death] have increased the probability of the passage of that measure.”⁷⁷ Later, Webster wrote, “I think the

⁷⁰ Montgomery, *The Life of Major-General Zachary Taylor*, p. 428.

⁷¹ Frequent telegraphic bulletins covering the last two days of Taylor’s life were reprinted in the *New York Herald* (July 10, 1850).

⁷² Hamilton, *Zachary Taylor*, p. 389.

⁷³ *Washington Post* (June 27, 1991).

⁷⁴ Hamilton, *Zachary Taylor*, p. 392.

⁷⁵ *Newsweek* (July 1, 1991), p. 66.

⁷⁶ Weider and Hapgood, *The Murder of Napoleon*, p. 20.

⁷⁷ Webster to Franklin Haven (July 11, 1850), in Charles Wiltse and Michael Birkner (eds), *The Papers of Daniel Webster*, Vol. 7 (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1986), p. 123.

country has had a providential escape from very considerable dangers."⁷⁸ Clay was of like mind, writing to his daughter-in-law: "I think the event which has happened [Taylor's death] will favor the passage of the Compromise bill."⁷⁹ The two old rivals, Clay and Webster, joined forces with Clay's friend and admirer, the newly installed President Fillmore, who put the power of his office, including its ample patronage resources, behind the compromise package.⁸⁰ Within a month after Taylor's death, many of the issues that fervently concerned the slaveholders were settled to their satisfaction. The Texas boundary was set at expanded limits of 33,000 square miles above even what Clay had proposed. The interstate slave trade continued without federal interference and a strong fugitive slave bill was passed. Fillmore's vigorous enforcement produced "an era of slave hunting and kidnapping."⁸¹ California was made a state but New Mexico remained a territory. Both Clay and Webster went to their graves not long after Taylor thinking that the president's death and their compromise efforts had averted war. At least one contemporary, Congressman Abraham Lincoln, was of a different opinion: Zachary Taylor's death meant a loss in confidence that the people had, "which will not soon pertain to any successor ... I fear the one *great* question of the day [slavery], is not now so likely to be partially acquiesced in by the different sections of the Union, as it would have been, could General Taylor have been spared to us."⁸²

Honorable Men and Official History

If someone had wanted to poison Taylor, it would not have been too difficult a task to accomplish. There was no Secret Service in those days. Security in the White House was poor and in the White House kitchen nonexistent. Uninvited guests wandered about upstairs.⁸³ A would-be assassin who gained employment on the White House staff or perhaps a well-bribed Southern sympathizer or an interloper on familiar terms with the staff could have done the deed. Ten years after Taylor's death, some people still entertained misgivings. In 1860, numerous

⁷⁸ Webster to Franklin Haven (September 12, 1850), in *op. cit.*, p. 144.

⁷⁹ Clay to Mrs Thomas Clay (July 13, 1850), *Private Correspondence of Henry Clay*, pp. 610–611.

⁸⁰ On Fillmore's efforts, see Benson Lee Grayson, *The Unknown President: The Administration of Millard Fillmore* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1981).

⁸¹ Hamilton, *Zachary Taylor*, p. 404.

⁸² Hamilton, *Zachary Taylor*, p. 411. When I submitted a slightly modified earlier version of this article to *Radical History*, the editor of that academic journal wrote back that all three of the anonymous reviewers were impressed by the forensic critique but rejected the piece because I "impose the corollary conclusions of assassination, conspiracy, and a fundamental altering of the course of American history." In fact, I conclude no such thing. The closest I come to that is in the above quotation by Lincoln conjecturing that the different sections of the Union would have more likely "partially acquiesced" on the slavery question had Taylor lived—a view I do not share at all. Had Taylor survived in office, I cannot image that the course of sectional conflict would have been dramatically different. The conclusions the academic reviewers leap to is yet another example of the knee-jerk response of those who live in fear that someone somewhere is trying to explain the "fundamental" course of history as a series of conspiracies. As history shows us, excessive vigilance often leads to imaginary perceptions. If true of some conspiracy theorists, it is at least equally true of conspiracy phobics.

⁸³ Interview with Clara Rising (September 23, 1991).

letters from private citizens to President-elect Abraham Lincoln expressed the suspicion that Zachary Taylor had been poisoned and urged Lincoln to be aware of his enemies and exercise the utmost caution in what he ate and drank.⁸⁴

As far as I know, no political leader of Taylor's day publicly questioned the sudden, suspicious nature of his death. Nor did the press. A discovery of assassination might have brought the nation to the brink of sectional war. There was no investigation into Taylor's death. No one examined the food or drink at his table, nor the plates and cups he used. There was no interrogation of the staff, no autopsy, no tests for poison.

Would any political protagonist in the United States of 1850 be capable of such a deed? Historian Eugene Genovese thinks not. While granting that the political circumstances of the era suggest that an assassin would likely be a pro-slavery Southerner, he concludes, "I can't imagine any Southern personalities who would have been involved in such a conspiracy. But there is always the possibility that there were some nuts who had access to him and did it."⁸⁵

History shows us that "nuts" are not the only ones capable of evil deeds. Gentlemen of principle and power, of genteel manner, can arrive at grim decisions. We should recall how the slavery question dwarfed all other issues during the antebellum period, filling the air with dire misgivings about secession and civil war. Leaders facing a crisis of such magnitude will often contemplate drastic options. If they commit crimes, it is not because they harbor murky and perverse impulses but because they feel compelled to deal with the dangers posed to their way of life. This does not mean they are motivated merely by pocketbook concerns. They equate their vital personal interests with the well-being of their society and nation, or in this case, with "the cause of Southern rights."

Far from being immoral or unscrupulous, they are persons of principles so lofty as to elevate them above the restraints of ordinary morality. They do not act on sudden impulse. But, confronting inescapable urgencies, they soon find themselves no longer shocked by the extreme measures they are willing to employ. The execution of the unsavory deed is made all the easier by delegating its commission to lower-level operatives. Most of the evil in history is perpetrated not by lunatics or monsters but by persons of responsibility and commitment, whose most unsettling aspect is the apparent normality of their deportment.

In any case, the men whom Genovese refers to as "Southern personalities" had few scruples when dealing with those who challenged their slavocracy. They presided over their huge estates like heartless aristocrats, each owning hundreds of hapless slaves over whom they exercised the unrestrained law of the whip and the gun. They were colonels of militia regiments that hunted down runaways. "They openly carried pistols and Bowie knives. Alternately courtly and dangerously belligerent, they interpreted political opposition as a slight upon their honor. Abolitionism they looked upon as simple robbery."⁸⁶ They

⁸⁴ David Chambers Mearns (ed.), *The Lincoln Papers, The Story of the Collection*, Vol. 1 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1948), pp. 292–294, 301–302, 306, 318–319.

⁸⁵ As quoted in *New York Times* (June 15, 1991).

⁸⁶ Gene Smith, *High Crimes and Misdemeanors, The Impeachment and Trial of Andrew Johnson* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), p. 13.

would as soon kill an abolitionist or opponent of extensionism as look at him. They spent decades before the Civil War threatening to secede from the Union and secure their slaveholders' "way of life" with force and violence. The "Southern gentlemen" who led this slavocracy happened to compose one of the most brutal and vicious ruling circles in US history.

What I have tried to demonstrate with the Zachary Taylor case is how self-legitimizing history is fabricated before our very eyes through a ready tendency of past and present opinion makers to find unsuspecting causes in the face of suspicious symptoms. Once science, in the guise of the Kentucky medical examiner, joined the mainstream press and academic historians to put an imprimatur on a particular interpretation of events, haphazard opinions were transformed into official truth. Thus, in 1992 *Life* magazine could report with false finality that Taylor died "after eating cherries and cream on a steamy July Fourth ... Last year amid speculation he'd been poisoned, his body was exhumed, but no arsenic was found."⁸⁷ In 1994, in an article on how "high-tech tests" were inspiring new investigations into the deaths of famous people, the Associated Press referred to the "conclusive results ... obtained from the 1991 exhumation of President Taylor in Kentucky. Dr George Nichols, the state's medical examiner, determined that the president died of natural causes, not arsenic poisoning as a writer speculated."⁸⁸

In 1996, five years after the exhumation, the mythology continued in full force, as *Time* magazine announced that Taylor died a few days after "he ate a bowl of cherries and downed a glass of buttermilk." But after "his tissue samples were assailed with neutrons ... the forensic conclusion was that he had not been poisoned after all."⁸⁹

Contrary to what has been widely publicized by historians, scientists, and the media, nothing conclusive has been offered to demonstrate that President Taylor died a natural death. The explanations for his death that are offered to us remain no less incredible for being tirelessly repeated. Through a process of uncritical repetition, historians and media have reinforced each other's implausible speculations about fatal sun exposure and lethal cherries and milk. Historians and media, joined by forensic investigators, offered the imprecise diagnoses of "gastroenteritis," wrongly treating a set of symptoms as the cause of death. The chief medical examiner's investigation pretended to a precision and thoroughness it never attained. And the press eagerly cloaked the inquest with an undeserved conclusiveness.

A closer examination of the post-mortem investigation and the historical record leaves one more discomfited than ever. The presence of arsenic was never satisfactorily explained, the levels not even always accurately reported. The suspiciously high antimony level went unreported. The samples themselves were of dubious reliability. No precise sectional hair analysis was performed. The symptoms were distinctly those of poisoning. The ludicrous cherries-and-milk, cucumbers-and-cabbage, sunstroke-and-sickness explanations for Taylor's death conjured by historians are without a shred of supporting evidence and cannot be taken seriously—yet they are. If we cannot say for sure that Zachary

⁸⁷ *Life* (October 30, 1992).

⁸⁸ Associated Press report, *San Francisco Chronicle* (October 27, 1994).

⁸⁹ Roger Rosenblatt, "Dig, Must We?" *Time* (July 8, 1996).

Taylor was poisoned, we *can* say with certainty that he did not die from sun stroke or cherries and milk. Yet these latter imaginings remain the acceptable explanation, the one that puts to rest any thoughts about an ugly side to US history. The case of Zachary Taylor's death demonstrates how ideological gatekeepers close ranks against any issue that challenges their expertise or any issue that challenges the benign and virtuous image of our political institutions by suggesting the possibility of conspiracy in high places.

Historians and journalists may not consciously plan to grant legitimacy to the more reassuring, less controversial finding. But to move in a contrary direction would definitely require swimming against the ideological tide, a special effort attendant with possible risks to one's credibility. Those who hasten to assure us that Taylor was not poisoned are reassuring us that, unlike other lands, such things do not happen in this country. So "our" institutions remain untouched by crime, conspiracy, and covert action. The legitimacy that sustains these institutions would be open to question were it shown that a president can be exterminated without anyone knowing it. What would such an assassination say about assassination controversies of more recent times, like the ones around John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King? What would such an assassination say about our nation and the people who have ruled it? What would it say about our history and the historians who write it?

In regard to poisoning, the absence of conclusive proof is not conclusive proof of absence. In this case the absence of proof may be more the result of sloppy and superficial investigative procedures, fuzzy and farfetched speculations by academics, and the heraldry of a present-day press that vigilantly reassures us that all is basically well with political life in America. Inconclusive and highly questionable results are now treated as settled fact. Through a process of unexamined reiteration these findings come to occupy a secure place in the manufactured history whose function is to legitimate existing institutions. In the face of such ideological forces, an empirical investigation of the actual facts does not stand a chance.