

**Polk Versus Lincoln:
Abraham Lincoln on Internal Improvements**

by

Richard F. Weingroff

“Polk versus Lincoln” is an excerpt pulling together sections of “A Vast System of Interconnected Highways: Before the Interstates,” about Abraham Lincoln.

During the 19th century, officials debated the role of the central government in internal improvements. The Constitution gave Congress the authority to “establish post offices and post roads,” but what did that phrase mean? Did “establish” mean Congress could approve funds for government agencies to build post roads or only designate which existing roads, built by some other means, would be used to carry the mail?

Presidents and Members of Congress also differed on the role of the central government and the value of involvement by the central government. Some thought the Constitution provided the authority to authorize construction of internal improvements while others disagreed but thought a constitutional amendment was a good idea. Others thought Federal funding for internal improvements was a bad idea, in part because the prospect would encourage Members of Congress to fight for improvements in their State, regardless of merit, and to trade projects for votes on other matters.

States also played a role in internal improvements, but it varied with policy changes at the Federal level and the ups and downs of the economy.

The Panic of 1837

With a strong national economy in the 1830s and the national debt retired, the States undertook many improvements, as historian Stephen Minicucci wrote:

Across the nation, the popularity of improvement schemes was never greater than during the last six years of [President Andrew] Jackson’s administration. State constitutions written during the period, in Tennessee, Michigan, and Arkansas, contained explicit clauses encouraging state support for internal improvements. In part inspired by the success of New York’s \$7 million Erie Canal, opened in 1825, a number of states undertook very ambitious schemes of improvement and were willing to incur substantial debts to do so Collectively, the states that borrowed only \$25 million during the 1820s, incurred more than \$40 million in debt in the first five years of the 1830s, and almost \$108 million in the three boom years before the depression [that began in 1837]. Many of these efforts were undertaken with the express expectation that the projects, like Erie, would be self-financing (that is, that projected earnings would service the debt).

[Minicucci, Stephen, "Internal Improvements and the Union, 1790-1860," *Studies in American Political Development*, 18 (Fall 2004), page 166]

Illinois provides an example. In the mid-1830s, internal improvements fervor swept the State. In 1836, when young Representative Abraham Lincoln arrived in the State capital of Vandalia, he was eager to support internal improvements, a tenet of his Whig Party and a personal preference. As former Senator Paul Simon described in his book about Lincoln's years in the Illinois legislature:

Lincoln had always favored a system of canals and roads and railroads for the state. In Vandalia he found that most of the other members of the Tenth General Assembly were of the same mind. One legislator wrote to the Galena newspaper, "This is doubtless a mammoth undertaking for a state like ours; yet I am in favor of it in almost every particular, and particularly the state doing the work. [Simon, Paul, *Lincoln's Preparation for Greatness: The Illinois Legislative Years*, University of Illinois Press, 1971, page 49]

Governor Joseph Duncan recommended that the General Assembly approve a cooperative public-private approach, with the State providing one-third of the money and private companies providing the rest:

The Governor's approach met with little enthusiasm among the members. Before the session ended, they had voted \$10,250,000 in bonds, including \$200,000 to be divided among counties that received neither a railroad nor a canal under the plan. The Governor's plan would have encouraged private enterprise to help bear the burden, but the legislators were afraid of monopoly.

The bill also provided for construction of railroads and canals to be constructed simultaneously at each end and at major points along the way. [Simon, page 50, 52]

Governor Duncan vetoed the measure, but the General Assembly overrode his victory, with Representative Lincoln in strong support of the override:

Vandalia went wild the night of the bill's passage. "The huzzas and acclamation of the people were unprecedented," the *Sangamo Journal* reported. "All Vandalia was illuminated. Bonfires were built, and fire balls were thrown in every direction." The newspaper also noted, "The names of those who have been conspicuous in bringing forward and sustaining this law will go down in the future as great benefactors." Several newspapers called it the beginning of "a new era." [Simon, page 51]

Martin Van Buren, President Jackson's top advisor, became President in March 1837, promising in his inaugural address a continuation of Jacksonian peace and prosperity. A few weeks later,

the country plunged into a depression known as the Panic of 1837. As Henry Clay biographers David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler explained:

The Panic of 1837 had many causes, some related to the ill-judged policies of Jackson's administration, some completely beyond the control of any president or any government.

Gold and silver prices, cotton demand, President's Jackson's elimination of the Bank of the United States, a poor harvest in England, and other factors contributed to the downturn:

These accumulating events reached a critical mass in early 1837, just as Van Buren was being sworn in. Panic shot through American financial markets, shattering the banking system and throwing the general population into disarray as a tide of business failures swept over the country. By summer, America had simply stopped working, and forlorn crowds of hollow-eyed men clustered at the doors of more and more banks, trying to get their money, wandering away dazed as those doors closed early, the vaults empty, their contents vanished Earlier financial downturns had never been so thorough and smashing [[Heidler, David S., and Heidler, Jeanne T., *Henry Clay: The Essential American*, Random House, 2010, page 278-279]

The panic also affected State attitudes about internal improvements. Minicucci explained:

The Panic of 1837 brought an abrupt end to both state and federal improvements activities. The federal government was thrown into deficit for the first time since 1824 and federal improvements spending nearly halted. Suddenly, too, state improvement efforts seemed reckless, not ambitious. As the downturn lengthened into 1841 and 1842, nine states (Florida, Mississippi, Arkansas, Indiana, Illinois, Maryland, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Louisiana) defaulted on debts, with four of these (Arkansas, Florida, Michigan, and Mississippi) actually repudiating debts of \$13.8 million. These failures, sometimes tainted by corruption, along with a popular rejection of state taxation to fund the not-self-financing improvements, led to a widespread "revulsion" against all government improvement efforts that included even successful states such as New York. [Minicucci, page 166]

Illinois suffered the consequences of its earlier enthusiasm for internal improvements. Senator Simon summarized:

The net result of the whole project was a mammoth debt for the state. The state was dotted with bridges from nowhere to nowhere, with partially dug canals, with roads with no meaningful beginning or ending. Of all the projects, only the Illinois and Michigan Canal (a separate bill and an additional debt) ever achieved success.

Four years after the passage of the measure, Illinois had a debt of \$15,000,000, and Illinois bonds were selling for fifteen cents on the dollar. In 1842, for example, interest charges for the bonds amounted to almost \$800,000, while the total state revenue for that year was \$98,546.14. The state debt kept climbing. By 1853 the debt had reached almost \$17,000,000. Not until 1857 was the state able to pay even the interest on the bonds. Not until 1882 were the bonds finally paid—forty-five years after passage of the measure and seventeen years after Lincoln’s death.

Meantime, the legislature in which Lincoln served refused to authorize private corporations to build where there might be “competition” with the state. The result was that neither the state nor private concerns met the need. While other states experienced rapid population growth, some settlers avoided Illinois because of the Gargantuan debt the taxpayers had.

All in all, it was a most unhappy chapter in Illinois history [Simon, pages 52-53]

Governor Duncan called a special session of the legislature for July 10, 1837, to determine the State’s response to the national panic. In an address to the legislature, he urged repeal of the Internal Improvement Act. “In the midst of disasters which have already fallen on the commercial world, and which are still threatening us on all sides, a favorable opportunity occurs to escape from the perils of that system of Internal Improvements . . . so fraught with evil.”

The legislature did not agree. “Instead of repealing the measure, the Senate passed a bill increasing the scope of internal improvements, with Lincoln voting for it.” [Simon, page 70]

The internal improvements issue remained a “big political headache” in later years, with the State’s solvency at stake and no obvious solutions. Aside from the financial difficulties, “the plans in Illinois were riddled with corruption A lot of money went into unbelievable schemes and found its way into the pockets of unconscionable rascals in public office or in charge of operations.” [Simon, page 173]

In 1939, Governor Thomas Carlin called a special session of the legislature for December, the first time the General Assembly met in the new capital of Springfield. In an address to the legislators, Governor Carlin said the Internal Improvements Act had caused a “truly alarming” situation. He urged passage of a law that would concentrate “all future labor and expenditures upon the most useful and promising [rail]road [sic] and to the improvement of such of the larger class of rivers as may be susceptible of steamboat navigation, and to suspend operations and expenditures upon all others.” He also called for an investigation of the Board of Public Works. [Simon, page 182]

The legislature considered many ideas, including repeal of the Internal Improvements Act, an option it rejected. It did pass a bill prohibiting new contracts for “any rail road, turnpike road, or river in this State.” It also passed a bill providing for settlement of debts and liabilities resulting from the Internal Improvements Act, but as Simon had pointed out, the problem would not be resolved for decades.

Abraham Lincoln was involved in the internal improvements fight, generally in support of internal improvements, although he “rarely entered into debate.” Simon summarized his record by saying that “sensible Lincoln actions on internal improvements were few.” He added that, “Viewed from the perspective of the present, Lincoln was always wrong.” [Simon, page 186]

The panic lasted through the remainder of Van Buren’s single term in office and was one of the reasons he lost his reelection bid in the 1840 election to General William Henry Harrison of the Whig Party.

President Harrison is best known today for serving the shortest term in office, only a month before passing away. Vice President John Tyler, who had represented Virginia in the House and Senate, became President on April 4, 1841.

By the mid-1840s, when the effects of the devastating Panic of 1837 had passed through the country’s economic system, the railroad had surpassed roads and canals as the dominant interstate mode of transportation.

According to Minicucci’s count of internal improvements prior to the Civil War:

Federal appropriations for internal improvements amounted to \$119.8 million between 1790 and 1860. The bulk of this amount, \$77.2 million, was distributed to the states through indirect methods, such as land grants or distribution of land sale revenues, which would today be labeled “off-budget.” And this figure included the 1836 “deposit” of the federal surplus in state banks, which was not explicitly earmarked for improvements. Thus, the first thirty-five Congresses appropriated \$42.6 million in federal funds for improvements to transportation of all sorts.

The largest category involved aids to navigation (\$14.9 million), including expenditures on rivers and harbors:

Of the \$10.4 million in direct road spending, the majority was dedicated to the National Road [\$6,834,000], the single largest federal project of the antebellum era. [Minicucci, pages 161-162]

President Polk's Stand

In November 1844, James K. Polk, former President Andrew Jackson's Tennessee ally, won election as the country's 11th President. He had served in the House of Representatives (March 1825-March 1839) and as Governor of Tennessee (October 1839-October 1841). During his years in the House, he became chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee in 1833 and Speaker in December 1835.

In accepting the Democratic nomination, he made clear he would serve only one term. He had four goals, as he explained to his new Secretary of the Navy, George Bancroft:

Speaking with a degree of animation seldom seen in the man, he slapped his hand upon his thigh and laid out the four central elements of his presidential ambition.

First, he said, he planned to settle the Oregon question with Great Britain and extend America to its Pacific Ocean. Second, he would acquire California from Mexico and secure for his country an additional broad expanse of coastal territory. Third, he would reduce the Tariff of 1842 and replace its overt protectionism with a pure revenue rationale. And finally he would revive Martin Van Buren's "independent treasury" designed to protect federal monies and ensure currency stability. [Merry, Robert W., *A Country of Vast Designs: James K. Polk, the Mexican War, and the Conquest of the American Continent*, Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2010, page 131]

(The goal of an independent treasury was to place Federal revenue in a Federal treasury instead of depositing it in State banks around the country, as President Jackson had done.)

President Polk's inauguration on March 4, 1845, took place on a rainy afternoon:

At the appointed time, before the swearing in, Polk stepped forward to deliver his inaugural address "to a large assemblage of umbrellas," as John Quincy Adams wryly noted in his diary. Standing at the front of the platform, protected from the rain by an umbrella held by a servant, Polk sought to quicken the hearts of Democrats while assuaging fears of Whigs and others. [Merry, page 9]

Beginning with the fourth paragraph of his inaugural address, he stated his central goal of adherence to the Constitution, which he called "the safeguard of our federative compact":

It will be my first care to administer the Government in the true spirit of that instrument, and to assume no powers not expressly granted or clearly implied in its terms. The Government of the United States is one of delegated and limited powers, and it is by a

strict adherence to the clearly granted powers and by abstaining from the exercise of doubtful or unauthorized implied powers that we have the only sure guaranty against the recurrence of those unfortunate collisions between the Federal and State authorities which have occasionally so much disturbed the harmony of our system and even threatened the perpetuity of our glorious Union.

The States and the central government, he said, were sovereigns of their separate spheres of reserved powers:

While the General Government should abstain from the exercise of authority not clearly delegated to it, the States should be equally careful that in the maintenance of their rights they do not overstep the limits of powers reserved to them.

The new President quoted President Jefferson who, in his first inaugural address “attached deserved importance to ‘the support of the State governments in all their rights, as the most competent administration for our domestic concerns and the surest bulwark against antirepublican tendencies’ and to the ‘preservation of the General Government in its whole constitutional vigor, as the sheet anchor of our peace at home and safety abroad.’”

During his 4 years in office, President Polk vetoed only three bills, two of which involved internal improvements. On August 3, 1846, he vetoed a bill appropriating \$1,378,450 for the improvement of certain harbors and rivers. His veto message stated:

The Constitution has not, in my judgment, conferred upon the Federal Government the power to construct works of internal improvement within the States, or to appropriate money from the Treasury for that purpose.

This “general proposition . . . is so well established . . . that it is not deemed necessary to reiterate the arguments by which it is sustained.” That this power was not “properly an incident to any of the granted powers I am fully satisfied.”

He also rejected the idea that the power was incidental to the granted powers. The fact that an action is convenient or beneficial does not make it an incidental power. “A construction of the Constitution so broad as that by which the power in question is defended tends imperceptibly to a consolidation of power in a Government intended by its framers to be thus limited in its authority.”

He had no doubt on the issue, but said “if there were doubts on this subject, experience has demonstrated the wisdom of the rule that all the functionaries of the Federal Government should abstain from the exercise of all questionable or doubtful powers.” If enlarging the powers of the government were deemed proper, Congress should pursue an amendment to the Constitution, thereby appealing to the States and the people to seek their approval of such an expansion:

This bill assumes the existence of the power, and in some of its provisions asserts the principle that Congress may exercise it as fully as though the appropriations which it proposes were applicable to the construction of roads and canals. If there be a distinction in principle, it is not perceived, and should be clearly defined.

Some of the projects to be funded were in a single State and though some projects were referred to as harbors, “they are not connected with foreign commerce, nor are they places of refuge or shelter for our Navy or commercial marine [sic] on the ocean or lake shores.”

He acknowledged that every previous Administration had accepted bills appropriating funds for lighthouses, beacon, buoys, and other measures “for the purpose of rendering navigation safe and easy and of affording protection and shelter for our Navy and other shipping.” He was “not disposed to question or disturb the authority to make appropriations for such purposes.” Beyond that, however, “the difficulty arises in drawing a line beyond which appropriations may not be made by the Federal Government.” In trying to make that distinction, he said:

To sanction the bill with such provisions would be to concede the *principle* that the Federal Government possesses the power to expend the public money in a general system of internal improvements, limited in its extent only by the ever-varying discretion of successive Congresses and successive Executives. It would be to efface and remove the limitations and restrictions of power which the Constitution has wisely provided to limit the authority and action of the Federal Government to a few well-defined and specified objects. Besides these objections, the practical evils which must flow from the exercise on the part of the Federal Government of the powers asserted in this bill impress my mind with a grave sense of my duty to avert them from the country as far as my constitutional action may enable me to do so.

It not only leads to a consolidation of power in the Federal Government at the expense of rightful authority of the States, but its inevitable tendency is to embrace objects for the expenditure of the public money which are local in their character, benefiting but few at the expense of the common Treasury of the whole. It will engender sectional feelings and prejudices calculated to disturb the harmony of the Union. It will destroy the harmony which should prevail in our legislative councils.

Aside from the constitutional objections, President Polk made clear he had other objections “of a serious nature.” Between \$1 million and \$2 million of the projects were “of no pressing necessity, and this is proposed at a time when the country is engaged in a foreign war,” namely the war with Mexico. Under such circumstances, he did not want to “waste” financial resources “on comparatively unimportant objects.” He also wanted to “avoid the accumulation of a large public debt, the existence of which would be opposed to the interests of our people as well as to the genius of our free institutions.” Further, if he approved the bill, it would “inevitably lead to large and annually increasing appropriations and drains upon the Treasury, for it is not to be

doubted that numerous other localities not embraced in its provisions, but quite as much entitled to the favor of the Government as those which are embraced, will demand, through their representatives in Congress, to be placed on an equal footing with them.”

The bill’s supporters tried to secure a vote overturning the veto, but Congress sustained it.

On March 3, 1847, the final day of the 29th Congress, H.R. 84 was passed appropriating \$6,000 to continue works in the territory of Wisconsin and over half a million dollars for harbor and river projects in several States. President Polk pocket vetoed the bill by taking no action on it. With Congress adjourned until December, the bill was not enacted.

President Polk sent a message to Congress on December 15, 1847, explaining his pocket veto:

I entertained insuperable objections to its becoming a law, but the short period of the session which remained afforded me no sufficient opportunity to prepare my objections and communicate them with the bill to the House of Representatives, in which it originated. For this reason the bill was retained, and I deem it proper now to state my objections to it.

He recalled his veto of the earlier harbor and rivers bill and his fear that if it became law, it would result in increasing appropriations for other similar projects.

In pocket vetoing the new bill, he pointed out:

The policy of embarking the Federal Government in a general system of internal improvements had its origin but little more than twenty years ago. In a very few years the applications to Congress for appropriations in furtherance of such objects exceeded \$200,000,000. In this alarming crisis President Jackson refused to approve and sign the Maysville road bill, the Wabash River bill, and other bills of similar character. His interposition put a check upon the new policy of throwing the cost of local improvements upon the National Treasury, preserved the revenues of the nation for their legitimate objects, by which he was enabled to extinguish the then existing public debt and to present to an admiring world the unprecedented spectacle in modern times of a nation free from debt and advancing to greatness with unequalled strides under a Government which was content to act within its appropriate sphere in protecting the States and individuals in their own chosen career of improvement and of enterprise.

The present bill did not appropriate funds for a road or canal, but he could see that if it became law, “it is not easy to perceive the difference in principle or mischievous tendency between appropriations for making roads and digging canals and appropriations to deepen rivers and improve harbors.” The history of congressional involvement in internal improvements was “full

of eloquent warnings.” Several States embarked on systems of roads and canals, not by taxing residents, but through debt to “ruinous” effect:

If the abuse of power has been so fatal in the States, where the systems of taxation are direct and the representatives responsible at short periods to small masses of constituents, how much greater danger of abuse is to be apprehended in the General Government, whose revenues are raised by indirect taxation and whose functionaries are responsible to the people in larger masses and for longer terms.

By the time President Jackson put a check on the practice, “it had begun to be considered the highest merit in a member of Congress to be able to procure appropriations of public money to be expended within his district or State, whatever might be the object.” He added:

We should be blind to the experience of the past if we did not see abundant evidences that if this system of expenditure is to be indulged in[,] combinations of individual and local interests will be found strong enough to control legislation, absorb the revenues of the country, and plunge the Government into a hopeless indebtedness.

One example of the abuse was how Congress stretched terms such as “harbors” and “rivers” to secure funds for bodies of water that in no other context than a Federal appropriations act would be so called. This illustrated how appropriations for internal improvements could be “perverted to the accomplishment of the worst of political purposes.” He continued:

During the few years it was in full operation, and which immediately preceded the veto of President Jackson of the Maysville road bill, instances were numerous of public men seeking to gain popular favor by holding out to the people interested in particular localities the promise of large disbursements of public money. Numerous reconnoissances [sic] and surveys were made during that period for roads and canals through many parts of the Union, and the people in the vicinity of each were led to believe that their property would be enhanced in value and they themselves enriched by the large expenditures which they were promised by the advocates of the system Whole sections of the country were thus sought to be influenced, and the system was fast becoming one not only of profuse and wasteful expenditure, but a potent political engine.

Inevitably, Congress would be called on “under the cloak of public good” for all sorts of improvements. “To enrich neighborhoods by spending within them the moneys of the nation will be the aim and boast of those who prize their local interests above the good of the nation” No such system could be administered “with any approach to equality among the several States and sections of the Union.” (President Polk had reached the same conclusion while serving as chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee during the Jackson Administration.) Further, “a greater practical evil” would arise in how the projects were chosen:

The most artful and industrious would be the most successful. The true interests of the country would be lost sight of in an annual scramble for the contents of the Treasury, and the Member of Congress who could procure the largest appropriations to be expended in his district would claim the reward of victory from his enriched constituents. The necessary consequence would be sectional discontents and heartburnings, increased taxation, and a national debt never to be extinguished.

Considering “these portentous consequences,” he thought “this course of legislation should be arrested, even were there nothing to forbid it in the fundamental laws of our Union.”

In fact, even if practical considerations did not argue against approval, he would veto the bill because the Constitution indicates a process for improving harbors and rivers within the States, “a process not susceptible to the abuses necessarily to flow from the assumption of the power to improve them by the General Government.” The Constitution provided that “no State shall, without the consent of Congress, lay any duty of tonnage.” President Polk wrote, “Here is a safe provision for the improvement of harbors and rivers in the reserved powers of the States and in the aid they may derive from duties of tonnage levied with the consent of Congress.” He cited the many examples of congressional consent, the first for Rhode Island in 1790 and the most recent in 1843 for Maryland. “That the power was constitutionally and rightfully exercised in these cases does not admit of a doubt.”

Previous Presidents had sometimes approved appropriations for internal improvements that they did not believe were permitted under the Constitution, but President Polk believed the government should return “to the early and approved construction of the Constitution.”

He recalled that he had been in the House when the Maysville bill was considered:

When the bill authorizing a subscription on the part of the United States for stock in the Maysville and Lexington Turnpike Company passed the two Houses, there had been reported by the Committees of Internal Improvements bills containing appropriations for such objects, inclusive of those for the Cumberland road and for harbors and light-houses, to the amount of \$106,000,000. In this amount was included authority to the Secretary of the Treasury to subscribe for the stock of different companies to a great extent, and the residue was principally for the direct construction of roads by this Government. In addition to these projects, which had been presented to the two Houses under the sanction and recommendation of their respective Committees on Internal Improvements, there were then still pending before the committees and in memorials to Congress presented but not referred[,] different projects for works of a similar character, the expense of which can not be estimated with certainty, but must have exceeded \$100,000,000

President Jackson’s powerful and disinterested appeals to his country appear to have put down forever the assumption of power to make roads and cut canals, and to have checked

the prevalent disposition to bring all rivers in any degree navigable within the control of the General Government. But an immense field for expending the public money and increasing the power and patronage of this Government was left open in the concession of even a limited power of Congress to improve harbors and rivers

He pointed out that Madison's report on the debates during the Constitutional Convention, published in 1840, did not contain any evidence that the founders intended to grant the General Government the power to build and maintain internal improvements within the States. The founders saw themselves as protecting the rights of their States and did not wish to concede any right of jurisdiction to the General Government over their soil:

A proposition was made in the Convention to provide for the appointment of a "Secretary of Domestic Affairs," and make it his duty, among other things, "to attend to the opening of roads and navigation and the facilitating [of] communications through the United States." It was referred to a committee, and that appears to have been the last of it. On a subsequent occasion a proposition was made to confer on Congress the power to "provide for the cutting of canals when deemed necessary," which was rejected by the strong majority of eight States to three. Among the reasons given for the rejection of this proposition, it was urged that "the expense in such cases will fall on the United States and the benefits accrue to the places where the canals may be cut."

During the consideration of this proposition a motion was made to enlarge the proposed power for "cutting canals" into a power "to grant charters of incorporation when the interest of the United States might require and the legislative provisions of the individual States may be incompetent;" and the reason assigned by Mr. Madison for the proposed enlargement of the power was that it would "secure an easy communication between the States, which the free intercourse now to be opened seemed to call for. The political obstacles being removed, a removal of the natural ones, as far as possible, ought to follow."

The original proposition and all the amendments were rejected, after deliberate discussion, not on the ground, as so much of that discussion as has been preserved indicates, that no direct grant was necessary, but because it was deemed inexpedient to grant it at all. When it is considered that some of the members of the Convention, who afterwards participated in the organization and administration of the Government, advocated and practiced upon a very liberal construction of the Constitution, grasping at many high powers as implied in its various provisions, not one of them, it is believed, at that day claimed the power to make roads and canals, or improve rivers and harbors, or appropriate money for that purpose. Among our early statesmen of the strict-construction class the opinion was universal, when the subject was first broached, that Congress did not possess the power, although some of them thought it desirable.

President Jackson had acknowledged the precedents established by earlier Presidents and Congresses, but his veto of the Maysville bill and other internal improvement measures had “reversed the precedents which existed prior to that time on the subject of internal improvements.”

President Polk also rejected the view of those who thought internal improvement appropriations could be justified because the Constitution granted Congress the “power to regulate commerce with foreign nations, and among the several States, and with the Indian tribes.” The authority to “regulate,” he said, “presupposes the existence of commerce, and, of course, the means by which and the channels through which commerce is carried on.” He added that the term did not confer “creative power”:

If the definition of the word “regulate” is to include the provision of means to carry on commerce, then have Congress not only power to deepen harbors, clear out rivers, dig canals, and make roads, but also to build ships, railroad cars, and other vehicles, all of which are necessary to commerce. There is no middle ground.

Following establishment of President Washington’s first administration under the Constitution, the provision was applied “by prescribing general rules by which commerce should be conducted,” for example by treaties with other countries and among the States by laws involving “the coasting trade and the vessels employed therein, and for the better security of passengers in vessels propelled by steam, and by the removal of all restrictions upon internal trade.” From the earliest years to the present that is how the constitutional grant of power had been administered.

If a power to appropriate funds for internal improvements was desirable, a constitutional amendment was the appropriate means for conveying that power to the Congress. “This course has been recommended successively by Presidents Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, and Jackson, and I fully concur with them in opinion.”

(President Polk’s third veto occurred on August 8, 1846. He vetoed S. 68, a bill to provide for the ascertainment and satisfaction of claims of American citizens for spoliations committed by the French prior to July 31, 1801. The veto was sustained.)

Lincoln Responds

One person who did not concur with President Polk was Representative Abraham Lincoln. He had been a lawyer and Illinois State legislator who won election to the House as a Whig in 1846, pledging to serve only one term (the 30th Congress, December 6, 1847 – March 3, 1849), a common practice of the period.

Representative Lincoln had been a member of the Whig Party since its inception and was active in the Illinois State Whig organization. The Whigs began as an opposition party to President Jackson, with their name dating to 1834. Senator Clay, Representative Lincoln's political hero, had secured a Senate censure of President Jackson for exceeding his authority in removing deposits from the Bank of the United States and placing the funds in State banks. The Heidlers explained the origin of the party's name:

In a speech to the Senate on April 14, 1834, Clay likened the opposition to Jackson to the British Whigs' opposing the dictatorial policies of their King [in the 17th through 19th century, still active at the time of Clay's speech]. Clay was not the first to call Jackson's antagonists Whigs, but his use of the label in the speech struck a chord because of the growing impression that the Democrat Old Hickory was becoming "King Andrew." This loose coalition of allies would henceforth be called Whigs. [Heidler, page 266]

Like any national party, the Whig Party consisted of a coalition of viewpoints, but the essence was Clay's American System:

Whigs wanted the government to establish a national bank to stabilize the currency, wanted protective tariffs to promote American industry, wanted internal improvements to facilitate American commerce. Democrats wanted an expanding, expansive "agricultural empire" and consequently pushed for Texas annexation and later fought a war to acquire California. Whigs wanted economic improvement through internal improvements and recoiled from expansionism. [Heidler, page 315]

During organization of the 30th Congress, Representative Lincoln was assigned to the Committee on Post Offices and Post Roads. In a book about Representative Lincoln's single term, Chris DeRose described the committee's work:

This was a major committee, charged with making policy for what was, and still is for many, the function of the federal government most relevant to their everyday lives. At the time, regular mail delivery was not guaranteed, which affected where people could choose to live and do business. The post office was also one of the largest components of the national government. The committee's mandate was "to consider all petitions, resolutions, and matters relating to post offices and post roads." This included 153,000 miles of postal routes; their employees and contractors traveled 39 million miles in the course of a year, 4 million by rail and 3.2 million by steamboat, 15 million by coaches and yet another 15 million by "modes of inferior grade." [DeRose, Chris, *Congressman Lincoln: The Making of America's Greatest President*, Threshold Editions, 2013, page 100]

Throughout his term, Representative Lincoln championed a committee bill establishing new postal routes:

If passed, it would stitch together thousands of new miles of postal routes, creating new migration and business opportunities for many Americans. Lincoln's handwriting is all over the legislation, not only for Illinois but elsewhere. This strongly suggests that he was conferring with other members, trying to see what the needs were in their home states and trying to secure their support for the bill. The bill itself was revised many times to reflect these concerns, with little scribbled amendments written on scraps of paper stuck to the page, lines crossed out by hand, sections covered over with paper that changed their language. Lincoln was careful to pay attention to the petitions of his constituents on the subject The bill faced a number of procedural setbacks, however, and it was returned to committee with its fate very uncertain. [DeRose, page 165]

Representative Lincoln "scored his most significant legislative achievement" when H.R. 599, "an act to establish certain post routes," emerged from committee again on July 19, 1848, for House consideration:

This time it passed the House of Representatives without a recorded vote, and headed for the Senate. A bill does not get shelved in committee only to return months later and pass without a recorded vote unless there is a substantial amount of behind-the-scenes work. No doubt Lincoln did his share and more to see this important legislation succeed. [DeRose, pages 183-184]

After the bill passed the Senate, President Polk signed H.R. 599 into law on August 14, 1848:

Lincoln had worked hard on this bill in committee and had navigated it through rough waters on the floor, working with members from other states to win their support. Lincoln did not give up when the bill was sent back to committee or again faced trouble on the floor. And now it was signed into law by the president of the United States. Thousands of Americans would benefit from the ability to send and receive letters and packages through the mail, and thousands more would be able to move to new towns. It might not have the excitement of the questions of war and slavery, but this is a concrete example of Congress doing real good for real people. And it was a major accomplishment for the freshman congressman who ran point on the bill. [DeRose, pages 198-199]

Representative Lincoln, the Whig, opposed much of the agenda of the Democratic President, including the Mexican war. The young Congressman's best known venture in the House was to introduce the "Spot Resolutions," which called on President Polk to show the exact spot on United States soil where blood was spilled in an attack that justified the war with Mexico. The bills failed and Representative Lincoln was later ridiculed for being "spotty" and lost popularity in Illinois.

Representative Lincoln, as in his days in the Illinois General assembly, was interested in internal improvements, a key tenet of the Whigs, as discussed earlier. In the long interval between his election and the start of his first session of Congress, Lincoln attended the Northwestern River

and Harbor Convention in Chicago on July 5-7, 1847. Sponsors had called the convention to protest President Polk's veto.

On the second day of the convention, David Dudley Field of New York, a leading attorney, defended the veto. According to a contemporary account in *The New York Weekly Tribune* on July 17, 1847, Field's was an "able and courteous speech in favor of strict construction and of such river and harbor improvements only as are consistent therewith." However, as Mentor L. Williams wrote in a 1949 article about the convention, "He was severely heckled from the floor and the meeting was conveniently adjourned."

Representative-elect Lincoln was a minor figure during the convention, but that afternoon began with Lincoln briefly responding to Field while the committee on resolutions completed its work behind the scenes. The *Weekly Tribune* reported that Lincoln, "a tall specimen of Illinoian, just elected to congress from the only Whig District in the state, spoke briefly and happily in reply to Mr. Field." Lincoln told the convention he had not planned an address, but agreed to respond in the few minutes before the committee on resolutions was ready to report. "We meet here to promote and advance the cause of internal improvements." He did not want to cause "division and discord," but harmony and good feeling. The Democratic and Whig parties disagreed on internal improvements, but he urged the convention "to unite, like a band of brothers, for the welfare of the common country." He urged the parties to "meet each other in the spirit of conciliation and good feeling."

In any debate on internal improvements, "it is impossible to speak without alluding, in some manner, to constitutional questions." He urged the convention to listen to Democrats:

Democrats do not wish to do any thing in this Convention that will conflict with their past course, and if questions should come up which they do not approve, they should be permitted to protest against them. I hope there will be no more interruption—no hisses—no jibes.

Although Field had begun his argument by questioning the constitutionality of making appropriations for internal improvement, Lincoln did not feel he could respond in detail in the limited time available, nor had he prepared to do so:

All agree that something in the way of internal improvement must be done. The difficulty is to discriminate, when to begin and where to stop. There is great danger in going too far. Members of Congress will be influenced by sectional interests and sectional feelings. I have not taken the pains to write out my opinions upon the construction to be put upon the constitution. Any construction, that there is something to be done for the general good and no power to do it, would be wrong. I do not go for sectional improvements, though all are more or less sectional. Is there any way to make improvements, except

some persons are benefited more than others? No improvement can be made that will benefit all alike.

Field had asked a “pertinent question” that he had not answered, as Lincoln summarized:

Who is to decide differences of opinion on constitutional questions? What tribunal? How shall we make it out? The gentleman from Pennsylvania, the Hon. Andrew Stewart, says Congress must decide. If Congress has not the power, who has? Is it not, at least, for Congress to remedy the objection, and settle this great question?

He concluded:

I have the highest respect for the gentleman from New York. In his speech, he made a beautiful appeal in behalf of the Constitution. He implores us, by all considerations, to foster and protect it. He loves the Constitution. I hope I may love it as well as he does, but in a different way. He looks upon it as a net work, through which may be sifted the seeds of discord and dissension. I look upon it as a complete protection to the Union. He loves it in his way; I in mine. There are many here who entertain the same views which I do, who will, I doubt not, sustain me and with these remarks I beg leave to close. [“Speech of Mr. Lincoln, of Illinois,” *Missouri [St. Louis] Daily Republican*, July 12, 1847; Williams, Mentor L., “The Chicago River and Harbor Convention, 1847,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, March 1949, page 610; also cited in Simon, page 317]

On June 20, 1848, Representative Lincoln took to the floor of the House to deliver an address on internal improvements in response to President Polk’s veto message of December 15, 1847. In the speech, Lincoln elaborated on the themes he had not introduced in his brief convention speech. Many years later, when circumstances had revived interest in Federal involvement in roads, good roads advocates occasionally cited Representative Lincoln’s floor speech as illustrating the need for Federal involvement in improving the country’s roads. For example, the National Old Trails Road Association reprinted the speech in editions of its promotional book, *The Great Historic Highway*.

Representative Lincoln began by referring to the Democratic convention, held in May 1848 in Baltimore, that had nominated Senator Lewis Cass of Michigan, a General during the War of 1812, and a Governor of his State, for President. (As noted, President Polk had pledged to serve only one term.) The convention had adopted a resolution stating:

That the Constitution does not confer upon the General Government the power to commence and carry on a general system of internal improvements.

Senator Cass pledged to adhere to this and other resolutions adopted during the convention.

Representative Lincoln stated that these developments, including the Polk veto message, showed that the internal improvements question was more intense than at any period. He knew many Democrats who disagreed with the resolution on internal improvements but would vote for Senator Cass out of party loyalty. “In this way the internal improvement Democrats are to be, by a sort of forced consent, carried over and arrayed against themselves on this measure of policy.” President Cass would then justify vetoing internal improvements bills by citing President Polk’s veto from the previous December and the “Democratic Platform” (quotation marks supplied by Representative Lincoln):

This being the case, the question of improvements is verging to a final crisis; and the friends of this policy must now battle, and battle manfully, or surrender all.

He listed the general arguments against appropriations for internal improvements as cited by President Polk:

First—because they would overwhelm the treasury. Second—Because, while their burdens would be general, their benefits would be local and partial, involving an obnoxious inequality. Third—because they would be unconstitutional. Fourth—Because the States may do enough by the levy and collection of tonnage duties; or if not. Fifth—That the Constitution may be amended.

He summed up these arguments by saying, “Do nothing at all, lest you do something wrong.” In short, “we must abandon the improvements of the country altogether, by any and every authority, or we must resist and repudiate the doctrines of this message.” He then responded to each point.

He could not deny that a system of internal improvements would lead to “a tendency to undue expansion. Such a tendency is founded in the nature of the subject.” He explained:

A member of Congress will prefer voting for a bill which contains an appropriation for his district, to voting for one which does not; and when a bill shall be expanded till every district shall be provided for, that it will be too greatly expanded is obvious.

This was true, however, also of State legislatures:

Go where we will, the difficulty is the same. Allow it to drive us from the halls of Congress, and it will, just as easily, drive us from the State legislatures. Let us, then, grapple with it, and test its strength. Let us, judging of the future by the past, ascertain whether there may not be, in the discretion of Congress, a sufficient power to limit and restrain this expansive tendency within reasonable and proper bounds.

President Polk's veto message demonstrated that he valued the evidence of history, as when he stated that at one point Members of Congress had \$200 million in appropriations pending for internal improvements:

Why did he not tell us how much was granted? Would that not have been better evidence?

President Polk had referred to the single term of President John Quincy Adams as the period when authority to appropriate funds for internal improvements "was fully asserted and exercised." Having quoted the President, Representative Lincoln said:

This, then, was the period of greatest enormity. These, if any, must have been the days of the two hundred millions. And how much do you suppose was really expended for improvements during that four years? Two hundred millions? One hundred? Fifty? Ten? Five? No, sir; less than two millions. As shown by authentic documents, the expenditures on improvements during 1825, 1826, 1827, and 1828 amounted to one million eight hundred and seventy-nine thousand six hundred and twenty-seven dollars one cent This fact shows that when the power to make improvements "was fully asserted and exercised," the Congress did keep within reasonable limits; and what has been done, it seems to me, can be done again.

As for the President's second point, Representative Lincoln again had to concede that "there is some degree of truth" in saying that while the burden of paying for improvements was general, the benefit would be local. "No commercial object of government patronage can be so exclusively general as to not be of some peculiar local advantage." He cited the U.S. Navy, which provided general protection by driving pirates from the ocean or removing a snag from a navigable river. Despite these undeniable general benefits, "yet even the navy is of some peculiar advantage to Charleston, Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, and Boston, beyond what it is to the interior towns of Illinois."

He added that, "the converse is also true. Nothing is so local as to not be of some general benefit." He cited the Illinois and Michigan Canal, which had opened a couple of months earlier in 1848, as an example. The State had established a commission in 1823 to build the 96-mile canal linking the Chicago River at Bridgeport near Chicago and the Illinois River at LaSalle. "Every inch of it is within the State of Illinois," but it was carrying sugar from New Orleans to Buffalo. "Supposing benefit of the reduction of the cost of carriage to be shared between seller and buyer, the result is that the New Orleans merchant sold his sugar a little dearer, and the people of Buffalo sweetened their coffee a little cheaper than before—a benefit resulting from the canal, not to Illinois, where the canal is, but to Louisiana and New York, where it is not." He drew the conclusion:

The just conclusion from all this is that if the nation refuse to make improvements of the more general kind because their benefits may be somewhat local, a State may for the same reason refuse to make an improvement of a local kind because its benefits may be somewhat general. A State may well say to the nation, "If you will do nothing for me, I will do nothing for you." Thus it is seen that if this argument of "inequality" is sufficient anywhere, it is sufficient everywhere, and puts an end to improvements altogether.

Inequality should "never be embraced for its own sake," he said, "but is every good thing to be discarded which may be inseparably connected with some degree of it?" Since the capital, Washington, benefited local land owners, he asked if it should be removed?

And if so, where shall we set it down, and be free from the difficulty? To make sure of our object, shall we locate it nowhere, and have Congress hereafter to hold its sessions, as the loafer lodged, "in spots about?" I make no allusion of the present President when I say there are few stronger cases in this world of "burden to the many and benefit to the few," of "inequality," than the presidency itself is by some thought to be. An honest laborer digs coal at about seventy cents a day, while the President digs abstractions at about seventy dollars a day. The coal is clearly worth more than the abstractions, and yet what a monstrous inequality in the prices! Does the President, for this reason, propose to abolish the presidency? He does not, and he ought not.

The question should be whether something had more evil than good because "few things [are] wholly evil or wholly good," and that was certainly true of government policy. In considering policies, therefore, "our best judgment of the preponderance between them is continually demanded." Why should not this proposition be applied to the question of internal improvements? "Why, as to improvements, magnify the evil, and stoutly refuse to see any good in them?"

Representative Lincoln admitted that on the third question, that of constitutionality, "I have not much to say." Being simply a new congressman from Illinois, he could not compete with the arguments advanced over the years by the "ablest and the best of men" who had "gone over the whole ground long ago." He would, however, briefly note a few of the arguments.

President Polk had cited President Jefferson's 1806 message to Congress arguing that an amendment would be needed if Congress wished to exercise the authority to appropriate funds for "the great purpose" of internal improvements. Representative Lincoln quoted from President Jefferson's 1806 message to Congress calling for an amendment. Referring to the fact that in contrast with President Polk, former President Jefferson thought such an amendment would be good for the country, Representative Lincoln said:

I introduce this not to controvert just now the constitutional opinion, but to show that, on the question of expediency Mr. Jefferson's opinion was against the present President—

that this opinion of Mr. Jefferson, in one branch at least, is in the hands of Mr. Polk like McFingal's gun—"bears wide and kicks the owner over."

Regarding the President's argument from the Constitution, Representative Lincoln turned to Chancellor James Kent's *Commentaries on American Law*. The 1825 edition described the arguments for and against the constitutional authority and noted that the subject had never been raised in court. "He shows that the legislative branch has usually been for, and the executive against, the power, till the period of Mr. J. Q. Adams' administration, at which point he considers the executive influence as withdrawn from opposition, and added to the support of the power."

The 1844 edition included notes on what had happened since the mid-1820s. One note described the arguments in *Commentaries on the Constitution of the United States* by Associate Justice Joseph Story of the Supreme Court (1833). Justice Story summarized the arguments, pro and con, on whether Congress had the constitutional authority to impose taxes and apply the power to regulate commerce as a way of encouraging and protecting domestic manufacturers. Representative Lincoln read from Chancellor Kent's note stating that Justice Story had not given his own opinion on the issue, but had "left the reader to draw his own conclusions." The Chancellor's note continued:

I should think, however, from the arguments stated, that every mind which has taken no part in the discussion, and felt no prejudice or territorial bias on either side of the question, would deem the arguments in favor of the Congressional power vastly superior.

Representative Lincoln conceded that after all, this was but the opinion of one man and that many "great and good men" have disagreed. "It is not disparagement to Mr. Polk, nor indeed to anyone who devotes much time to politics, to be placed far beyond Chancellor Kent as a lawyer." The chancellor, he said, employed truth and sound reasoning:

Can the party opinion of a party President on a law question, as this purely is, be at all compared or set in opposition to that of such a man, in such an attitude, as Chancellor Kent? This constitutional question will probably never be better settled than it is, until it shall pass under judicial consideration; but I do think no man who is clear on the questions of expediency need feel his conscience much pricked upon this.

President Polk argued that States could provide for their own internal improvements through tonnage duties with the consent of Congress. Representative Lincoln thought that improvement financed by tonnage duties might be satisfactory "in its own sphere," for example "to make slight improvements and repairs in harbors already in use and not much out of repair." But by President Polk's own arguments, allowing tonnage duties collected in one harbor to be used to repair or build a harbor or canal elsewhere in the State "would be an extremely aggravated form of that inequality which the President so much deprecates":

If I be right in this, how could we make any entirely new improvement by means of tonnage duties? How make a road, a canal, or clear a greatly obstructed river? This idea that we could [do so] involve[s] the same absurdity as the Irish bull about the new boots. “I shall never get ‘em on,” says Patrick, “till I wear them a day or two, and stretch ‘em a little.” We shall never make a canal by tonnage duties until it shall already have been made awhile, so the tonnage can get into it.

Representative Lincoln pointed out that if President Polk, like President Jefferson, believed that some improvements were “expedient, but not constitutional, it would be natural enough for him to recommend such an amendment” to the Constitution. However, Representative Lincoln quoted the President’s comment about the inevitable congressional abuse “under the cloak of public good”:

In view of these portentous consequences, I cannot but think that this course of legislation should be arrested, even were there nothing to forbid it in the fundamental laws of our Union.

Representative Lincoln responded:

For what, then, would he have the Constitution amended? With him it is a proposition to remove one impediment merely to be met by others, which, in his opinion, cannot be removed—to enable Congress to do what, in his opinion, they ought not to do it if they could.

Representative Richard K. Meade, a Democrat from Virginia, interrupted to ask if Representative Lincoln thought the President was opposed to every improvement on grounds of expediency. Representative Lincoln replied:

In the very part of his message of which I am speaking, I understand him as giving some vague expression in favor of some possible objects of improvement; but in doing so I understand him to be directly on the teeth of his own arguments in other parts of it. Neither the President nor any one can possibly specify an improvement which shall not be clearly liable to one or another of the objections he has urged on the score of expediency. I have shown, and might show again, that no work—no object—can be so general as to dispense its benefits with precise equality; and this inequality is chief among the “portentous consequences” for which he declares that improvements should be arrested. No, sir. When the President intimates that something in the way of improvements may properly be done by the General Government, he is shrinking from the conclusions to which his own arguments would force him. He feels that the improvements of this broad and goodly land are a mighty interest; and he is unwilling to confess to the people, or perhaps to himself, that he built an argument which, when pressed to its conclusions, entirely annihilates his interest.

Returning to the argument about the Constitution, Representative Lincoln said he thought it would be “much better to leave it alone.” The men who made the Constitution, he said, “have done their work, and have passed away. Who shall improve on what they did?” He added, “It can scarcely be made better than it is.”

Having analyzed President Polk’s arguments, Representative Lincoln turned to “some general remarks upon the subject of improvements.” It was a difficult subject for Congress, no doubt, but also for State legislatures, counties, and even the “smallest municipal districts” anywhere in the country:

All can recur to instances of this difficulty in the case of country roads, bridges, and the like. One man is offended because a road passes over his land, and another is offended because it does not pass over his; one is dissatisfied because the bridge for which he is taxed crosses the river on a different road from that which leads from his house to town; another cannot bear that the county should be got into debt for these same roads and bridges; while not a few struggle hard to have roads located over their lands, and then stoutly refuse to let them be opened until they are first paid the damages. Even between the different wards and streets of towns and cities we find this same wrangling and difficulty. Now these are no other than the very difficulties against which, and out of which, the President constructs his objections of “inequality,” “speculation,” and “crushing the treasury.”

The real question was, “How to do something, and still not do too much.” Each person could “contribute his mite in the way of suggestion,” he said, adding, “I will now contribute mine, which may be worth nothing” but at least “will mislead nobody, and therefore will do no harm.” He continued:

I would not borrow money. I am against an overwhelming crushing system. Suppose that, at each session, Congress will first determine how much money can, for that year, be spared for improvements; then apportion that sum to the most important objects. So far all is easy; but how shall we determine which are the most important? On this question comes the collision of interests. I shall be slow to acknowledge that your harbor or your river is more important than mine, and vice versa. To clear this difficulty, let us have that same statistical information which the gentleman from Ohio [Representative Samuel F. Vinton, a Whig] suggested at the beginning of this session. In that information we shall have a stern, unbending basis of facts—a basis in no wise subject to whim, caprice, or local interest. The pre-limited amount of means will save us from doing too much, and the statistics will save us from doing what we do in wrong places. Adopt and adhere to this course, and, it seems to me, the difficulty is cleared.

One of the gentlemen from South Carolina [Representative Robert B. Rhett, a Democrat] very much deprecates these statistics. He particularly objects, as I understand him, to

counting all the pigs and chickens in the land. I do not perceive much force in the objection. It is true that if everything be enumerated, a portion of such statistics may not be very useful to this object. Such products of the country as are to be consumed where they are produced need no roads or rivers, no means of transportation, and have no very proper connection with this subject. The surplus—that which is produced in one place to be consumed in another; the capacity of each locality for producing a greater surplus; the natural means of transportation, and their susceptibility of improvements; the hindrances, delays, and losses of life and property during transportation and the causes of each, would be among the most valuable statistics in this connection. From these it would readily appear where a given amount of expenditure would do the most good. These statistics might be equally accessible, as they would be equally useful, to both the nation and the States. In this way, and by these means, let the nation take hold of the larger works, and the States the smaller ones; and thus, working in a meeting direction, discreetly, but steadily and firmly, what is made unequal in one place may be equalized in another, extravagance avoided and the whole country put on that career of prosperity which shall correspond with its extent of territory, its natural resources, and the intelligence and enterprise of its people. [Speech of Abraham Lincoln in Favor of Internal Improvements, *The Great Historic Highway of America*, National Old Trails Road Association, March 1925, pages 173-184]

In these last comments, Representative Lincoln suggested the data-oriented approach that would be at the heart of road development in the 20th and 21st century.

In 1848, Representative Lincoln worked hard to secure the Whig presidential nomination for General Zachary Taylor and campaigned for him in several States. In November, General Taylor defeated Senator Cass. “Old Rough and Ready,” as General Taylor was known, was a hero of the Mexican war who had never given much thought to national issues; his views were unclear even to him. He had not voted in 1844, but in agreeing reluctantly to accept the nomination of the Whig Party, he said he would have voted for the Whig candidate, Henry Clay.

President Taylor’s brief inaugural address on March 5, 1849, expressed the Whig view on internal improvements:

It shall be my study to recommend such constitutional measures to Congress as may be necessary and proper to secure encouragement and protection to the great interests of agriculture, commerce, and manufacturers, to improve our rivers and harbors, to provide for the speedy extinguishment of the public debt, to enforce a strict accountability on the part of all officers of the Government and the utmost economy in all public expenditures . . .

President Taylor died of food poisoning on July 9, 1850, and was succeeded by Vice President Millard Fillmore, a former U.S. Representative from New York.

One reason General Taylor had been hesitant to accept the Whig nomination was the plague of office-seekers who tormented every President. Once elected, he decided to let his Cabinet Secretaries do the hiring. When Representative Lincoln sought the leadership of the General Land Office in the newly formed Department of the Interior, he thought he had the advantage of having worked hard to secure the presidency for General Taylor. However, the decision was left to Secretary of the Interior Thomas Ewing, Sr., who selected another Illinois attorney, Justin Butterfield, a Whig who had done nothing for President Taylor's election.

Former Representative Lincoln had returned to Washington to campaign for the job. DeRose wrote:

Yes, he had wanted a position in the national capital, the seat of power. But in this he had failed. Lincoln had much to consider as his train steamed out of Washington City, starting his long journey back to the West. From his earliest days, he was certain that he was bound for great things. But as the endless fields of the West now came into view, that dream seemed farther away than ever before. A train is fixed on its tracks, driven by an unseen engineer, and this one was carrying Abraham Lincoln, a former member of Congress, back to Illinois, where it had all begun, as though nothing had intervened, back to his family, friends, and frontier law practice, toward an uncertain future. [DeRose, pages 251-262]