

PROCEEDINGS
IN RELATION TO THE
DEATH OF WILLIAM R. KING,

LATE VICE-PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES.

December 9th, 1853.

At the opening of the Court this morning, Mr. Cushing, the Attorney-General of the United States, addressed the Court as follows :—

May it please your Honors :—I rise to submit a motion, which seems to be called for by the nature of the subject-matter. God, in his inscrutable, but supreme will, has removed from the service of the country, and from that path of honor which, through a long lifetime of greatness and goodness, he has so nobly trod, the Vice-President of the United States. When the voice of some future panegyrist, on the banks of the Mississippi—the Bravo of Columbia,—shall speak of the heroes, the legislators, the statesmen, and the magistrates of our country, as it recounts the names borne on that glorious roll of immortality, it cannot fail to pause with unalloyed satisfaction at the name of William R. King. Providence, from time to time, raises up men to lead armies on to victory through the clash of the battle-field, or, by rare gifts of written or spoken thought, to wield, at will, the fiercest impulses of nations. Such men, if they have a superlatively splendid career, yet have an agitated one. They create events and they partake of the vicissitudes of events. They may, they often do, have shaded sides of the mental formation, without which the bright ones would be too dazzlingly brilliant. They come to be praised or dispraised alternately, according to the light in which their actions are viewed, and the flux or reflux of the tides of popular emotion. If William R. King be not one of these, yet he has an appropriate, and perhaps he has a more enviable place in the temple of fame and in the hearts of Americans. For of him, it is with plainest truth to be said, that with lofty elements in his character to merit and receive the most absolute commendation, there is nothing in it open to censure. He stands to the memory in sharp outline, as it were, against the sky, like some chiselled column of antique art, or some consular statue of the imperial republic wrapped in its marble robes, grandly beautiful in its simple dignity and unity of a faultless proportion.

Placed at an early age in that august assembly, the highest, all things considered, in this or any other land, the Senate of the United States,—and continuing there, save with brief interruption of the most eminent diplomatic employment, during a whole generation of time,—and repeatedly elevated to preside over its deliberations,—he had grown to be, not of it merely, but its representative man, its typical person, its all conspicuous model of an upright, pure, spotless, high-minded, chivalric American Senator. This it is, in my judgment, which constitutes the distinctive trait in his character and career, and which drew to him the veneration and the confidence of his countrymen.

We think of him almost as an historical monument of senatorial integrity, rather than as a mere mortal man of the age. Like that gallant soldier, who received the baton of marshal in the very scene of his achievements, and fell, struck by a cannon shot, in the act of grasping the insignia of his command, so the Vice-President did but reach the pinnacle of his greatness to die. Such a death, so timed, though premature for us whom he has left behind to the toils and cares of public duty, was not premature for the consummate completeness of his renown. Knowing how deeply his loss must be deplored by your Honors, it is deemed fitting for me to move that this Court, in unison with what has been done in both Houses of Congress, do now adjourn, in manifestation of its respect for the memory of the deceased Vice-President of the United States.

To which Mr. Chief Justice Taney replied :—

The Court is sensible that every mark of respect is due to the memory of the late Vice-President, William R. King.

His life was passed in the public service, and marked throughout by its purity, integrity, and disinterested devotion to the public good.

It is true that no part of it connected him particularly with the judicial branch of this government. But the people of the United States had elevated him to the highest office but one in their gift; and the loss of a statesman like him, so honored and so worthy of the honor bestowed, is felt to be a public calamity by this department of government as well as by that to which he more immediately belonged. And as a token of their high respect for him while living, and their sincere sorrow for his death, the Court will adjourn to-day, without transacting its ordinary business.

Whereupon, proclamation being made, the Court is adjourned until Monday morning at 11 o'clock.