

Historical Highlights

The House “Gag Rule”

May 26, 1836

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James K. Polk of Tennessee, Speaker at the time the gag rule was instituted, served seven terms in the House of Representatives before becoming governor of Tennessee and, eventually, U.S. President.

On this date, during the [24th Congress](#) [\(/Congressional-Overview/Profiles/24th/\)](#) (1835–1837), the U.S. House of Representatives instituted the “gag rule,” the first instance of what would become a traditional practice forbidding the House from considering anti-slavery petitions. Representative [James Hammond](#) [\(/People/Listing/H/HAMMOND,-James-Henry-\(H000128\)/\)](#) of South Carolina first proposed the gag rule in December 1835. Speaker [James Polk](#) [\(/People/Listing/P/POLK,-James-Knox-\(P000409\)/\)](#) of Tennessee referred the issue to a special committee to resolve the problem which tied up floor debate for weeks. Committee Chairman [Henry L. Pinckney](#) [\(/People/Listing/P/PINCKNEY,-Henry-Laurens-\(P000355\)/\)](#) of South Carolina reported back that all petitions, memorials, or resolutions regarding slavery should automatically be tabled and that no further action be taken upon them. Representative [John Quincy Adams](#) [\(/People/Listing/A/ADAMS,-John-Quincy-\(A000041\)/\)](#) of Massachusetts raised the first and most impassioned objections to the procedure. Adams shouted during the roll call vote, “I hold the resolution to be a direct violation of the Constitution of the United States.” For the next four Congresses, Adams fervently fought against the gag rule, declaring it a restriction on free speech. Despite his efforts, the House successfully reintroduced the gag rule each Congress until Adams finally mustered enough votes to repeal it on December 3, 1844.

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