

“Star of the West”—Henry Clay and the Rise of American Nationalism

Henry Clay—“The Great Compromiser” was one of the most influential political figures of the first half of the nineteenth century. Lincoln referred to him as “my beau ideal of a statesman.” Secretary of State, three time presidential candidate (and loser each time), key founder of the Whig Party during the 1830s, and author of three sectional compromises which temporarily saved the Union from Civil War, Clay should receive more credit than he generally receives in American historical memory. But ultimately, his moderate voice was drowned out by the more extremist elements in American politics; consequently he has been consigned to second class status in the American pantheon. That is unfortunate, for it seems to indicate that Americans tend to celebrate the more aggressive and bellicose figures from the past than the peacemakers.

Clay was born in Virginia in 1777, but came of age in Kentucky where he practiced law and became a member of congress in 1810. At the time a Democratic-Republican (the precursor of the Democratic Party), Clay became House Speaker in 1811 and used his office to assist President James Madison’s policies which ultimately led to what was called “the second war of independence,” the War of 1812. In 1814 he turned to diplomacy, and helped to arrange the Treaty of Ghent with Great Britain, ending the fruitless conflict. With the troubles with England safely behind us, Clay turned to his ambitious economic policies which he felt would promote American prosperity at home and prestige abroad. Over time he developed his “American System”, a set of interrelated measures which would unify the different sections of the country and finally create lasting national unity. The American System stood on four legs: protective tariffs, a sound financial system, federal backing for “internal improvements” (i.e., national roads, bridges, canals, enabling farmers and manufacturers in all parts of the country to sell to distant markets) and the sale of public lands to raise revenue for an orderly western expansion.

Such grand plans required political power for implementation, and Clay was not hesitant to enter the presidential arena. What he was proposing flew in the face

of most accepted political thinking at the time. The majority of Americans were at least skeptical about if not downright hostile toward a powerful central government capable of undertaking such breathtaking changes. For Clay's plan to succeed, he needed all the authority the White House pulpit could provide, and so he entered the fray in 1824, 1832, and one final time in 1844. But despite his lasting popularity, he was denied at each bid. The electorate proved fickle and easily dazzled by more charismatic candidate, and Clay never got the chance to redesign the young nation's economic infrastructure. Mores the pity; if Clay had been able to convince Americans that we were *one* people with *one* national destiny we might have been able to avoid the carnage of the Civil War.

In retrospect, Clay looks good not just in regards to his visionary economic outlook, but also on the most divisive issue of the day—slavery. Although he was himself a slaveholder, he hated the “peculiar institution” and firmly believed that emancipation was ultimately both unavoidable and desirable. Slavery was a curse that dragged down both the Southern economy, and set back our national development. But he knew that slavery was a Gordian Knot that wouldn't yield to quick fixes. Here Clay's genius for compromise, for devising formulas which both sides could live with, shined brightly. In 1820 during the Missouri Crisis, in 1833 with the South Carolina Nullification Crisis, and once again in 1850 when the admission of California to the Union as a free state threatened to disrupt the nation, Clay hammered out compromises which politicians on both sides of the Mason Dixon Line could accept, albeit reluctantly. Because of his uncanny ability to work out deals between competing constituencies, he has been criticized for temporizing. But he always maintained that the preservation of the Union as the guarantor of free government was the highest good, and that *any* compromise which prevented national disintegration was justifiable. Would that we had more politicians today that were willing to accept half a loaf, rather than insisting on full ideological purity.