

Henry Clay:
The Essential American?

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Henry Clay was a great politician essential for America's success during the Age of Jackson. Though he repeatedly failed to become President, he succeeded in many other ways during his half century political career. Clay worked to balanced public authority with private enterprise to promote the economy and fought to maintain the Union during many turbulent crises while leaving an indelible mark on the United States. His role as The Essential American is best demonstrated in his transformation of the Speakership of the House of Representatives and the efforts that earned him the nickname The Great Compromiser: his roles in the Missouri Compromise, Compromise of 1833, and Compromise 1850.

Henry Clay became the Speaker of the House in 1811, at the time the youngest ever. He was strong and reliable in fulfilling the usual duties of assigning committees and maintaining order. These alone were no easy task with controversial issues like the War of 1812 and such difficult personalities as John Randolph. But in addition to what was expected of him in the role, he redefined and expanded the Speakership to make it a more significant position. He expanded the number of standing committees and increased the efficiency of the House by increasing the number of issues referred to committee. Clay recognized that since the majority party shapes policy and the Speaker was considered head of the majority, the Speaker needed to take an active role to "coordinate and direct the government's course." No Speaker before him had thought to merge "the roles of floor leader and presiding officer." Since it was against custom for the Speaker to participate in debates, Clay created the Committee of the Whole which allowed him on a technicality to use his oratory skills on the House floor.

During his time as a Congressman, Clay played an important role in 1819-1821 debate over the admission of Missouri as a slave state. It was Clay who suggested linking the admission of Missouri and Maine and, while he did not directly craft the legislation, the Senate picked up on this idea when they crafted the Missouri Compromise. After the Compromise had passed, he cleverly maneuvered around John Randolph's efforts to undermine it until the bill had already been delivered to the Senate and it was thus too late to reconsider. When the initial Missouri Compromise threatened to be unraveled again by wording in Missouri's state constitution, Clay crafted a second Missouri Compromise which he worked tirelessly to eventually pass. In the midst of that second crisis, he came up with a solution for handling Missouri's vote in the

presidential election lest something so irrelevant (it was a landslide victory for Monroe) become a major issue.

Clay joined the Senate just in time for the Nullification Crisis. South Carolina held a state convention that declared they would negate the Tariffs of 1828 and 1832 within their borders. This extreme form of States' Rights led to a showdown between John C. Calhoun and South Carolina with Andrew Jackson and the federal government. Jackson wanted to use armed force to stop what he considered treasonous rebellion. Gulian Verplanck put forward a steeply revised tariff that would appease Southerners, but would involve such a sharp decrease in the tariff as to devastate Northern industry. Furthermore, Verplanck's tariff had the support of Jackson which made it unappealing to anti-Jacksonians in Congress. Clay succeeded in working out a deal with Calhoun, his old ally-turned-enemy and personally led the committee to work out the details of the new tariff. When the requirement that revenue measures originate in the House became an issue, Clay got a supporter there to present his bill and get it officially passed there first. Clay's bill cut tariffs sufficiently to appease Calhoun and Southerners while doing so gradually so as to appease Northern protectionists. To appease Jacksonians, he let the Force Bill be included in this Compromise of 1833 since he realized South Carolina's acceptance of the revised tariff would make it purely symbolic. He even managed to boost his standing by being absent for the final vote on the Force Bill.

In 1849, Clay returned to the Senate for a final term after several years absence from Congress, motivated in no small part by concern for preservation of the Union. The debate over what territory from Mexican Cession should be free or slave had been going on since the highly controversial Wilmot Proviso in 1846. Other issues included a building demand in the North for abolishing slavery in the District of Columbia and desire for a more effective Fugitive Slave Law in the South. After a quiet first year, in January 1850 Clay took the floor to outline eight proposals to resolve "all questions in controversy between the free and slave states."

As was typical for his compromise measures, Clay's proposals displeased both extremes while trying to appeal to a broad center. Clay was willing to modify his initial proposals to gain wider acceptance, such as incorporating popular sovereignty. His role in giving direction to the debates, in bringing opposing factions closer together, and in keeping the spirit of compromise alive was crucial. He chaired a committee where he did nearly all the work himself to put

forward bills based on his proposals. Clay spent over 7 months trying to get the proposals passed, despite the fact that he was suffering from the tuberculosis that would claim his life two years later. He came very close to succeeding, but at the last moment issues related to the Texas-New Mexico border undid the bill. Though Clay was too exhausted and sick to fight on, he had done enough work that Stephen Douglas was able to drive through the proposals as separate bills.

During his political career, Clay was a major political leader. His leadership of the War Hawks helped originally elevate him to the Speaker of the House. He was also a leader of the National Republicans and a founding member of the Whigs. After John Tyler broken with the Whigs in 1841, the party might have been destroyed if they had not had Clay to rally around.

Henry Clay was essential in more than one meaning of the word. Besides being an indispensable figure in America's political history for four decades, he was also essential in that he contained the essence of "American." He moved to seek opportunity then raised his standing in life almost entirely through his natural talents, which he applied in the best ways possible. He made mistakes and suffered slander, the untimely death of many of his children, frequent personal health issues, the inability to ever fully implement his American System, and five defeats in five attempts to become president. Yet he still led an admirable, influential, and successful life. He lived a virtuously as a principled, honorable, loyal, and often forgiving gentlemen and dedicated family man. Like many people during his time period, he found religion.

Essential in many ways, Clay held the Union together through tough times and did his best to leave the United States stronger and more united. While he could not ultimately prevent civil war, he did everything he could to avoid it which helped the North develop enough unity to stand up to Southern secession while also inspiring the next generation of leaders like Abraham Lincoln.