Henry Clay, the American System, and the Sectional Controversy

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This selection presents another view of the Jacksonian era, from the perspective of a man who fought against both Andrew Jackson and the abolitionists, particularly the political wing of the movement. Indeed, Henry Clay was Jackson’s arch rival on the political battleground of the 1830s, which saw a major new party, the Whigs, organize under the leadership of Clay, John C. Calhoun, and Daniel Webster. A coalition of Jackson haters, the Whigs favored an active federal role in stimulating economic and industrial growth (the Jacksonians, by contrast, preferred a policy of laissez faire, or minimal government interference in economic affairs). On the platform, Whig campaigners such as young Abraham Lincoln of Illinois championed the Whig principles of national order and unity and called for a strong federal government with responsibility to provide a prosperous, stable economy that allowed everyone an opportunity to get ahead. Unlike Jackson, the Whigs favored internal improvements — roads, railroads, and canals — financed by the federal government, federal subsidies to help the states build their own canals and turnpikes, and state banks to ensure financial growth and stability. Lincoln summed up the Whig creed when he said, “The legitimate object of government is ‘to do for the people what needs to be done, but which they can not, by individual effort, do at all, or do so well, for themselves.’”

Henry Clay, whom Lincoln idolized, was the most glamorous of the three Whig leaders, all of whom served in the Senate. His nickname, “Prince Hal,” fit him to the dot. Charming, debonair, arrogant, and exceedingly ambitious, Clay considered himself the best politician in the land and viewed the presidency as his almost by divine right.
He tried five times to reach the White House but never made it, to his bafflement and despair. As historian Holman Hamilton has said, Clay was “one of the most spectacular victims of what became an American tradition.” Hamilton explains: “From Clay’s day well into the 20th century, only one sitting senator was elected president of the United States, and not a single chief executive was chosen wholly because of an outstanding congressional career.” Had Clay had an outstanding military career, or any military career at all, he would probably have won the White House.

Henry Clay was a household name in his day, yet few Americans in the 1990s would be able to state with precision who he was or what he did beyond negotiating certain compromises over slavery. In point of fact, Clay’s illustrious political career spanned the entire first half of the nineteenth century, and he left an indelible mark on the America of those years. He coined the term self-made man to describe an ambitious individual such as himself—the ultimate go-ahead American. And his rise to national prominence was meteoric. He became a United States senator at age twenty-nine, speaker of the House of Representatives at thirty-three. Within a few years, “Harry of the West,” another of his nicknames, was one of the most powerful men in Washington, a nationalist with a sweeping vision of a powerful, productive, and unified America. He helped lead America into the ill-starred War of 1812 with England and went on to serve for twenty years in the Senate. At a time when political debates were major theater, Clay was one of America’s greatest orators—people flocked to Washington just to watch him perform.

As the selection that follows shows, Clay did indeed help forge several significant compromises to save the Union. But his great plan for national growth and unity—the celebrated American System—never became a reality in his day because of the inflammable slavery issue. An antislavery slaveholder like Jefferson, his hero, Clay genuinely hated the institution and searched desperately and in vain for some way to solve the slavery problem. His solution, gradual emancipation and the voluntary repatriation of free blacks to Africa, resurrected Jefferson’s old scheme and brought Clay into a dramatic collision with the abolitionists, black and white alike. As we shall see, Clay’s solution proved unworkable. At one point, gazing into the future, he saw the country in flames, torn apart by civil war, and he begged his countrymen to find some way to avert such a disaster.

Reading the life of Henry Clay will introduce you to some of the most important themes, events, and historical figures in the first fifty years of the new century. This portrait attempts to personalize the historical record, to thrust a face and a personality into the vortex of events. It focuses on the human side of the past, showing how the interaction of individuals and events dictates the course of history.
GLOSSARY

ALABAMA LETTERS Clay’s public statements during the 1844 presidential canvass favoring Texas annexation so long as it did not provoke a war with Mexico.

AMERICAN COLONIZATION SOCIETY Private philanthropic organization, cofounded by Clay, that sought financial aid from governments and citizens alike for the voluntary repatriation of free blacks to the African colony of Liberia.

AMERICAN SYSTEM Economic program championed by Clay that called for a protective tariff, a national bank, and internal improvements.

ASHLAND Clay’s Kentucky plantation and his proudest possession.

COMPROMISE OF 1820 (Also known as the FIRST MISSOURI COMPROMISE) Admitted Missouri as a slave state and Maine as a free state and drew an imaginary line that divided the rest of the Louisiana Purchase into slave and free territory.

COMPROMISE OF 1850 Warded off a powerful disunion movement over the issue of slavery in the territories. The compromise, the work of Clay and Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois, among others, admitted California as a free state, organized the territories of New Mexico and Utah without congressional conditions on slavery, outlawed the slave trade in the national capital, and created a stringent new fugitive slave law.

DOUGLASS, FREDERICK A former slave and editor of a black newspaper in Rochester, New York, Douglass was one of the great leaders and orators of the abolitionist movement.

GREAT SOUTHERN REACTION To counteract the abolitionist argument that slavery was a sin, southerners defended slavery as “a positive good.”

LIBERTY PARTY Antislavery third party that ran James G. Birney for the presidency in 1840 and again in 1844. The party advocated that the federal government abolish slavery in all areas under its jurisdiction — namely, Washington, D.C., and the territories — and that it outlaw the interstate slave trade.

MISSOURI COMPROMISE (FIRST) See COMPROMISE OF 1820.

MISSOURI COMPROMISE (SECOND) Engineered by Clay, this “sleight-of-hand solution” allowed Missouri to retain a Negro exclusion clause in its constitution so long as the legislature pledged never to restrict persons who were or might become United States citizens.

NULLIFICATION Doctrine formulated by John C. Calhoun that the states were supreme in the American confederation and that each state had the power to nullify within its borders any federal measure it disliked.

POLK, JAMES K. Expansionist Democrat who became president in 1844 and led the country to war with Mexico in 1846.

SLAVE TRADE (INTERNATIONAL) Outlawed by Congress in 1808.

WARHAWKS Hotspurs such as Clay, mainly from the South and West, who advocated a second war with England. They got their wish in the War of 1812.
Had we attended one of his speeches in the United States Senate in the 1830s, we would have found the galleries crowded with people who had come out to enjoy the show. In his day, political oratory was a form of theater, and he excelled at it. Always elegantly dressed, he spoke with impeccable elocution and theatrical gestures, his gray-blue eyes glittering with amused contempt for the inferior mortals sitting around him. He was tall and slender, with a receding hairline, a long nose, and a mouth so wide that he could never learn to spit. Nicknamed “Prince Hal,” he exuded a charm and physical magnetism that few could resist. In the galleries women would smile, bewitched, when he made a point with a graceful sweep of his arm, his head held high, his whole body moving to the rhythms of his voice. He was a master of the bon mot and the satiric jest, and he even used his snuff box to dramatic effect. As ambitious as he was arrogant, he was certain that his destiny was to become president of the United States and to forge the nation into a great world power.

When he spoke of his early years, Henry Clay spun a myth of himself as a poor, orphaned, uneducated “mill boy from the Slashes.” Thus he wove his story into his mythic vision of America as a land of limitless opportunity where even the lowest-born had the right to rise, to go as far as his talent and toil would take him. In reality, Clay was the scion of tobacco planters of Tidewater Virginia. At the time he was born, on April 12, 1777, his preacher father owned twenty-one slaves and a four-hundred-acre homestead in an area in Hanover County called The Slashes. Henry’s father died when he was four, leaving his mother to raise him and his four brothers and three sisters. The boy loved his mother deeply, would always think of her with warmth in his heart. His formal education was about average for children of his time, consisting of three years before the master of the neighborhood log school. Inspired by Patrick Henry, he developed a passion for public speaking and practiced it wherever he could, haranguing livestock in the barn or assemblies of trees in the forest.

In 1791 his mother married a kindly man named Henry Watkins, who moved the family to his home in Richmond. Taking a particular interest in young Henry, Watkins found him employment in a retail store and then in the clerk’s office in the High Court Chancery. When the family migrated to Kentucky, Clay remained in Richmond, where he had fallen under the spell of the chancellor, a bald, erudite gentleman of the Enlightenment named George Wythe.

As it happened, Wythe had been Thomas Jefferson’s mentor, had taught him law, the classics, and an adamant hatred of slavery. Like Wythe, Jefferson had denounced human bondage as a “blot” on Virginia, a “great political and moral evil” that should be gradually abolished. Now Clay too became Wythe’s protégé; he too damned slavery as “the greatest of human evils” and embraced the “sacred cause” of gradual emancipation, turning to Jefferson’s own Notes on Virginia, published in 1785, for a plan to bring that about. Jefferson called for the state of Virginia to free all its slaves who were born after the scheme was adopted; first they were to live with their parents as charges of the state, which was to provide for their education in the arts, the sciences, and the practical aspects of farming; they were to be freed at a prescribed age — eighteen for females, twenty-one for males — and then colonized outside Virginia so as to avoid race-mixing, a prospect that filled Jefferson with loathing. Jefferson hoped that the other slave states would follow Virginia’s example and that bondage would ultimately disappear in America, thus consummating the promise of the Revolution.

It was a vain hope. In 1796 the Virginia legislature emphatically rejected a variation of Jefferson’s plan;
it did so because slavery was the cornerstone of Virginia’s entire way of life: it was a potent status symbol, a valuable labor system, and an indispensable means of race control in a white man’s country. Even so, Wythe still hoped that somehow, someday, slavery could be removed from the commonwealth, and he passed that hope on to Clay, who echoed his mentor’s impassioned rhetoric about the Rights of Man.

Under Wythe’s influence, Clay had decided to become a lawyer. He studied one year with the attorney general of the commonwealth and at age twenty was admitted to the Virginia bar. By then he stood well over six feet, with a slender, loose-jointed frame, prematurely white hair, and a wide and winning smile. He could have remained in Richmond, where he had friends and connections. But he decided that the new state of Kentucky offered better opportunities for a young lawyer on the rise. In late 1797 Clay turned up in Lexington, “the Athens of the West,” owning only his clothes, the horse he was riding, and an ambition to get ahead that burned in him like a furnace.

No sooner had he arrived in Kentucky, a slave state, than he plunged into an abolition movement, aligning himself with a group of reformers who called for a new state constitution that would allow for general, gradual emancipation similar to Jefferson’s plan. Just turned twenty-one, a member of the Lexington bar for only one month, Clay published in the Kentucky Gazette a ringing appeal to Kentuckians to rid themselves of the curse of slavery. “Can any humane man be happy and contented when he sees near thirty thousand of his fellow beings around him, deprived of all rights which make life desirable, transferred like cattle from the possession of one to another?” Borrowing an argument from Jefferson, Clay pointed out that blacks were not the only victims of bondage. “All America acknowledges the existence of slavery to be an evil, which while it deprives the slave of the best gift of heaven, in the end injures the master too, by laying waste his lands, enabling him to live indolently, and thus contracting all the vices generated by a state of idleness. If it be this enormous evil,” said Clay, “the sooner we attempt its destruction the better.”

But the vast majority of white Kentuckians, from wealthy planters to nonslaveholding farmers, objected to emancipation in any form, lest it result in racial violence and amalgamation, that bugaboo of white supremacists everywhere in the Republic. In 1799 Kentucky voters sent an overwhelming number of anti-emancipation delegates to a state constitutional convention, which went on to draft a new charter that incorporated the proslavery provisions of the old, thus smashing the hopes of Clay and the
other reformers that Kentucky might lead the way in removing slavery from America.

Clay always insisted that this was one of his bitterest disappointments. Yet he considered himself a realist. There was no point, he decided, in crusading for an unpopular cause, so he accepted the will of the majority and proceeded to blend into his Kentucky environment. In 1799, the same year Kentucky turned back the gradual-emancipation movement, Clay bought a slave, married the eighteen-year-old daughter of Lexington’s most prosperous businessman and speculator, and started building what became a lucrative law practice.

Clay was living in the age of the go-ahead man, a time when an entire generation of white American males reached out and seized the future as if by divine right. Clay came to personify the acquisitive spirit of the era and even coined the term “self-made man” to describe an individual like himself—the ultimate go-ahead American. His rise to wealth and power was so meteoric that it earned him another of his nicknames: he was the Star of the West, a man who reflected perfectly the heady optimism of his young section.

By age twenty-eight, Clay had risen to the top of the legal profession in Kentucky and was serving in the state legislature as a Jeffersonian and a spokesman for the lawyer aristocracy centered in Lexington. Suave as he was, he could be touchy about his honor. When a Federalist adversary called him a liar, Clay challenged him to a duel with pistols at ten paces; both were wounded in the ensuing faceoff, which got them censured by the Kentucky legislature. The episode, however, scarcely hurt Clay in his spectacular rise to power. At age twenty-nine, he became a United States senator when the Kentucky legislature chose him to fill out the term of John Adair, who had resigned. One of Clay’s first speeches was an impassioned denunciation of the international slave trade, whose atrocities appalled him. Later he called it “the most abominable traffic that ever disgraced the annals of the human race.” No politician was happier than he when Congress, following President Jefferson’s lead, outlawed the “infamous commerce” in 1808.

Back in Kentucky, Clay acquired a plantation near Lexington, named it Ashland, built a brick mansion on it, and bought additional slaves to work his fields—all before he turned thirty. He could be seen at Olympian Springs, a fashionable resort near Lexington, where wealthy members of the master class met for mint juleps, billiards, and cards as well as medicinal baths. He soon ruled over an impressive personal empire comprising six hundred acres on the home plantation, a second farm, a house in Lexington, and additional land in Missouri.

Ashland was his proudest possession. Here he created his own nirvana, with immaculate grounds and tree-lined paths, flourishing fields of corn, hemp, and rye, and rolling bluegrass meadows, landscaped with clusters of trees like a park, where his blooded cattle and horses grazed. He kept buying slaves, too, rooting himself ever deeper into the very system he abhorred. Eventually he owned sixty of his “fellow human beings,” a number that ranked him in the middle of the planter class, considerably behind Jefferson, who held some two hundred slaves when he left the presidency, and Washington, who owned more than three hundred when he died.

To justify being a slaveowner, Clay resorted to the Jeffersonian rationalization that slave labor was “a necessary evil” and that he was at least a “kind” master. There was, of course, no such thing as a kind slavemaster—the ownership of another human being was in itself a cruel act, a violent act. Over the years Clay did manumit several of his slaves who gave him faithful service. But like every other master, he knew that the whip made the slave system work, and his overseer used it to keep Clay’s “people” in line. Perhaps that is why Kentucky slaves sang a work song about him:

Heave away! Heave away!
I’d rather co’ a yell gal,
Dan work for Henry Clay
Heave away, yaller gal, I want to go.

Actually, several of his slaves did leave, demonstrating with their feet what they thought of their treatment under Clay. At least one of his slaves, a woman named Black Lottie, sued for her freedom while the Clays were living in Washington, D.C. To forestall further defections, Clay dealt harshly with Black Lottie: he had her jailed while successfully contesting the suit, then dragged her back into a life she hated. When another house servant, a mulatto boy, took flight from Clay’s wife, Clay offered a $50 reward for his capture and made a remark that betrayed his true feelings about kindness to slaves. “We have spoiled him,” Clay said, “by good treatment.”

At least one of Clay’s slaves, a man who escaped to Canada, accused him in the abolitionist press of being heartless and cruel. The man claimed that Clay had once had him stripped and whipped with 150 lashes on his naked back for a trifling offense. Clay’s overseer testified that the slave in question had been insolent and violent, which presumably, at least in the overseer’s eyes, justified such brutal punishment.

Claiming to be a kind participant in a brutal system was not Clay’s only contradiction when it came to slavery. While he damned the international slave trade in some of his most memorable utterances, he no longer condemned the domestic slave trade in Kentucky, despite its cruel breakup of families, its brutal coffles, rancid jails, and demeaning auctions. In private conversation Clay said that internal slave traders performed a service for Kentucky: they acted “as scavengers for the public” by “carrying off the vicious and incorrigible [slaves] to another country where new characters may be formed with better habit and propensities.”

Meanwhile, Clay continued to prosper politically. Deciding to forego the Senate so that he could be “an immediate representative of the people,” he ran for the national House of Representatives in 1811 and won easily. On his first day there, he was elected Speaker of the House, a remarkable achievement for a man of only thirty-three. He was now Harry of the West, the spokesman for his entire section, which, in addition to Kentucky, included the new free state of Ohio and the free territories of the Old Northwest. In Congress, Clay articulated the West’s militant nationalism. He led the Warhawks in clamoring for another war against England, boasting that the Kentucky militia alone could seize Upper Canada; he helped push President Madison into the War of 1812 and stood resolutely by him throughout the vicissitudes of that unpopular conflict.

By now, Clay had earned a reputation as a bon vivant with a love for his glass and a singular passion for cards. His love for gambling became legendary. In Washington he won $1,500 in a single night, only to lose $600 in another. In one marathon match, he won $40,000 from a friend, but because Clay was a gentleman, he settled for the man’s $500 note. A few nights later, Clay lost $60,000 to the same friend, who returned the favor by asking only that Clay hand back the $500 note.

In 1814 Clay was one of three U.S. commissioners sent to Ghent, Belgium, to negotiate a peace treaty with Britain. He saved the Mississippi River for the United States when he blocked a move by fellow commissioner John Quincy Adams to give England free access to the Mississippi in exchange for fisheries in Newfoundland. Working by day and gambling and drinking by night, Clay seemed never to sleep. Such debauchery shocked Adams, a prudish man who always rose early and read five chapters of his Bible before breakfast. When Adams awoke in his room, he noted with disgust, the company in Clay’s quarters was often just departing. There was gossip that Clay sought the pleasures of women, too, in Ghent as well as in America. But such stories were unsubstantiated. From all appearances, he remained loyal to his wife, Lucretia, throughout their married life.

As postwar Speaker of the House, Clay became one of the most powerful men in Washington, a
brilliant parliamentarian and mesmerizing orator who helped raise legislative leadership to supremacy in national affairs. In a day of rampant localism, Clay had an international vision, a dream of the United States as the world’s foremost power. His vision, fueled by his ambition, made him aspire to the presidency with palpable self-confidence. Certain that he had never met his superior, he thought himself the best man to lead America into a golden new age of prosperity and world prominence.

With fellow congressman John C. Calhoun, who was then in his nationalist phase, Clay devised the celebrated American System to implement his vision. It called for a tariff to protect America’s infant industries, a national bank to stimulate and stabilize the country financially, and internal improvements to promote the general welfare. In the long run, Clay and his supporters hoped to unify the country by establishing a mutually supporting and balanced economy of manufacturing, commerce, and agriculture. In this scheme of things, each of the three great sections was to produce what suited it best: the South was to concentrate on staples like cotton and rice, the West on livestock and grain, and the Northeast on manufactures. Clay conceded that the system was founded on sectional interests, yet he believed that the whole—national interest—would exceed the sum of its parts.

On paper it was a brilliant idea. In reality it was doomed by the combustible slavery issue, which split Clay’s own section, bitterly divided the country into slave and free states, and eventually blew them apart. Clay was aware of the danger: the Missouri crisis of 1819–21 revealed to him and his generation the grim possibility of sectional war over slavery. The crisis came about when Missouri sought to enter the Union as a slave state. At that time the free states had a majority in the House of Representatives and a margin of one state in the Senate. The admission of Alabama, due to take place in December 1819, would tie the score. If Missouri entered the Union as a slave state, it would not only give the South a one-state margin in the Senate but open a gateway for proslavery expansion into the West.

To prevent that, Senator James Tallmadge, Jr., of New York proposed an amendment to the Missouri enabling bill that prohibited white settlers from taking any more slaves into Missouri and decreed that all henceforth born there would be freed at age twenty-five, which was a variation on Jefferson’s plan. The Tallmadge Amendment provoked riotous debates in Congress, with both sides threatening war. “If you persist, the Union will be dissolved,” a Georgia senator told Tallmadge. “You have kindled a fire which seas of blood can only extinguish.” Retorted Tallmadge, “If a dissolution of the Union must take place, let it be so! If civil war … must come, I can only say, let it come!”

Contrary to legend, Clay did not put forth the compromise that averted a blowup in 1820. In fact, he sided with the South, contending that slavery was a state institution and that Congress had no constitutional authority to prohibit bondage in Missouri after it had become a state. With the fate of his American System hanging in the balance, he complained that “it is a most unhappy question, awakening sectional feelings, and exasperating them to the highest degree. The words, civil war, and disunion, are uttered almost without emotion.” When a compromise package finally emerged, Clay threw his enormous influence behind it, thus ensuring its passage. The Compromise of 1820 admitted Maine as a free state and Missouri as a slave state, thus maintaining an equilibrium of power between North and South in the Senate. It also divided the rest of the Louisiana Purchase Territory at the latitude of 36° 30’ north, excluding slavery above that line and endorsing the principle of congressional nonintervention south of it. In practice, this meant that slavery could and did expand there.

It was the second Missouri Compromise for which Clay was responsible and for which he became famous. When Missouri adopted a constitution that excluded free blacks from entering the state, antislavery northerners leaped on the offending passage
as a violation of the privileges and immunities clause of the federal Constitution and demanded that Missouri delete the restriction or be kept out of the Union. This in turn only provoked southerners into renewed threats of secession and war. “Unhappy subject!” Clay exclaimed. Yet his sympathies again were Southern. Indeed, it seemed to him that free-state forces were ganging up on Missouri and the South since few places in the country allowed free blacks equal privileges and immunities with whites. To make matters worse, he had resigned as speaker, leaving the House rudderless in the currents of the controversy. When nobody else would do so, the go-ahead man himself took charge and promoted compromise with all his powers of persuasion: “he begs, instructs, adjoins, supplicates, & beseeches us to have mercy on the people of Missouri,” reported one northern congressman. Clay wanted mercy for the white people of Missouri; he had no interest whatever in the rights of black Americans there. In the end, Congress approved his compromise, which allowed Missouri to retain its exclusion clause as long as the legislature pledged never to restrict persons who were or might become U.S. citizens. It was, as one writer has pointed out, “a sleight-of-hand solution, upholding the supremacy of the federal Constitution in the face of the Missouri provision that flagrantly violated it.” Yet it avoided apparent catastrophe and won Clay kudos throughout the country as a man for whom Union was his motto, conciliation his maxim.

Clay hoped that the slavery issue was now “happily settled” and that “mutual forbearance and mutual toleration” would restore “concord and harmony” to the country. But in truth he worried about the future of the Union, worried that slavery and its concomitant problem—the presence of blacks in a white man’s country—would continue to inflame and divide white Americans. To Clay, it seemed clear that both slaves and free blacks had to be removed if the nation was ever to be united under the banners of his American System.

The slavery issue haunted him. Despite his own status as a slaveowner, Clay hated the peculiar institution, consistently calling it the “greatest of human evils” and a “great stain upon the American name,” and he hoped that all the southern states would one day eradicate it by schemes of gradual emancipation. The problem, of course, was how to persuade them to do so, especially in view of what had happened to gradual emancipation in Kentucky. The more he thought about that, the more Clay believed that emancipation had failed there for want of a program of colonization that would ease white racial fears by resettling the liberated blacks outside the country. Had not Jefferson warned that emancipation without colonization was unacceptable to whites? For Clay the key to emancipation was to establish a successful colonization scheme first, as an inducement to the states to act. They might be willing to rid themselves of slavery, he reasoned, if they could count on a flourishing colonization operation to siphon off liberated blacks.

Throughout the next three decades, Clay held up the American Colonization Society, a private, “philanthropic” organization he had co-founded in 1816, as the instrument for the nation’s salvation. It became his panacea, a cure-all that would save the nation from the horrors of sectional war over slavery. Sponsored at its inception by such prominent figures as James Madison, John Marshall, Daniel Webster, Andrew Jackson, and Francis Scott Key, the society sought financial aid from governments and citizens alike for the voluntary repatriation of free blacks in Liberia. The society’s leading spokesman and its third president, Clay rehearsed again and again what he deemed to be the manifold benefits of deporting “free persons of color.”

First, colonization would remove “the most vicious,” “degraded,” and “contaminated” class in America, whose wretched condition was the inevitable consequence of liberating members of an inferior race and allowing them to remain among the
superior white race, with its “unconquerable prejudices.”

Second, there was “a peculiar, moral fitness in restoring blacks to the land of their fathers,” Clay argued. If through such black “missionaries” Americans could heathen Africa “the blessings of our arts, our civilization and our religion, may we not hope that America will extinguish a great portion of that moral debt which she has contracted to that unfortunate continent?” Clay seemed blissfully unaware of the contradiction involved in this point, never explaining how a “vicious,” “degraded” people were supposed to civilize a “pagan” continent. Nor was his disparaging description of free blacks likely to draw many of them to his voluntary program. He was directing his arguments exclusively at white Americans, especially skeptical slaveholders, who tended to view colonization as abolitionism in disguise.

Clay assured them that the society entertained “no purpose, on its own authority or by its own means, to attempt emancipation partial or general.” Nor did it desire that the national government remove slavery, for the society acknowledged that only the states where it existed had the power to do that. The goal of the society, Clay explained, was to point the way, to demonstrate to the slave states that colonization was practicable, in hopes that they would incorporate the society’s plan into their own schemes of gradual emancipation. Clay contended that if the southern states freed and transported only the annual increase of blacks within their borders, the value of slave labor would one day diminish to the point where it would succumb to superior white labor, and the states would thus “rid themselves of a universally acknowledged curse.”

For all the zeal and sincerity Clay brought to his arguments, they seemed to have been devised in never-never land. In the end, they failed to win over a single slave state, not even Kentucky. In truth, many slaveowners called Clay a traitor to his region for even suggesting gradual emancipation by the states. The society also offended genuine abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison. Calling it “malignant,” “sinful,” and “inhumane,” “the foulest conspiracy in the history of the world,” Garrison led the New England Antislavery Society in a successful campaign against it in his region. But the main reason the colonization society failed was because the vast majority of free blacks opposed it and refused to participate in its voluntary program. No matter how badly America treated them, as black spokesman Frederick Douglass said, it was their country too: they had roots here, families here, and most had no intention of leaving. In the thirty-six years Clay was associated with the society, it persuaded only 6,792 black volunteers to relocate in Liberia. Thus the society never had a viable operation to offer the slave states as an enticement to emancipation. Instead of dying out, as Clay hoped, slavery became more entrenched in the South than ever.

Frustrated in his efforts to remove slavery, Clay also suffered a string of personal and political defeats that scarred him deeply. His wife bore him eleven children, five sons and six daughters, but all his daughters died, the last in 1835. Clay was inconsolable. “Alas! my dear wife, the great Destroyer has come and taken away from us our dear, dear, only daughter!” Lucretia said he never recovered from the loss. His sons were a source of sorrow, too. His eldest, Theodore, suffered brain damage in an accident, became mentally deranged, and had to be institutionalized. Another son, Thomas, almost cost Clay his cherished plantation. When Thomas’s Lexington manufacturing firm collapsed, Clay had to sell off his additional property and mortgage Ashland itself to pay his son’s debts. Later, thanks to the generosity of friends throughout the country, Clay was able to re-purchase the mortgage.

Meanwhile, Clay found himself on a political roller coaster. In 1824 he made his first bid for the presidency, but ran last in a controversial, four-man race that put pious John Quincy Adams in the White House. It was a galling setback for a man of Clay’s
enormous ambitions. He spent four miserable years as Adams’s secretary of state, the dullest position he ever held, and then had to sit on the sidelines while Andrew Jackson, a military man Clay despised, beat Adams for the presidency in 1828. Three years later, to put Clay into a more advantageous position for seeking the presidency, the Kentucky legislature again sent him to the United States Senate, where he served on and off for the next twenty years, always with his eye on the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue.

As senator, Clay employed all his prodigious skills to get his American System established, only to see Jackson destroy the second Bank of the United States, which Clay had sought to recharter, and South Carolina almost detonate a civil war by nullifying Clay’s protective tariff of 1832 as well as the tariff of 1828. The slavery issue was involved, too, since the nullifiers, led by eagle-eyed John C. Calhoun, hoped to legitimize nullification as a shield against federal tampering with the peculiar institution in the southern states. Clay saw slavery involved in another way, since he considered it a wasteful labor system that retarded economic development, and blamed it for the economic ills then plaguing South Carolina.

Once again, slavery and sectionalism were playing havoc with Clay’s dream of a united American empire. Thundering defiance, South Carolina raised twenty-five thousand volunteers and prepared for war. When Jackson threatened to hang Calhoun and vowed to hurl a federal army into South Carolina to uphold national authority, Clay was appalled. Once again he stepped in to mediate, forging a compromise tariff acceptable to South Carolina. The nation had another reprieve, and Clay had a new nickname: the Great Pacifactor. The nullification crisis, however, had shaken him profoundly: he had peered into the future and grimaced at what he saw. “We want no war,” he pleaded with his countrymen, “above all no civil war, no family strife. We want no sacked cities, no desolated fields, no smoking ruins, no streams of American blood shed by American arms!”

By 1832 Clay was trapped in a monstrous contradiction: he was promoting a program of nationalism based on sectional interests at a time when sectionalism threatened the nation’s very existence. Yet he fought doggedly on. From the Senate, he dueled and harassed Jackson, calling King Andrew a menace to the country. Supremely confident, Clay ran against Jackson in the 1832 presidential election, but he was no match for the popular president and suffered a disastrous defeat. Clay plunged into gloom. What was wrong with the country that it would not, could not, see that he was its president of destiny? He helped found the Whig party, a coalition of Jackson haters, and employed it to promote his programs and his ambitions. But the Jacksonians remained so powerful that Clay did not even offer himself as candidate in the presidential canvass of 1838, which put Jackson’s successor, Martin Van Buren, in the White House.

Enduring four years of Little Van was almost more than Clay could bear. In his eyes the country desperately needed him as president, needed Harry of the West to heal its divisions and restore its prosperity after the disastrous 1837 panic. To make matters worse, the abolitionists had launched a crusade that further polarized the country. Demanding that the slaves be emancipated “immediately” and assimilated into America’s social order, they held rallies across the North, bombarded the South with abolitionist literature, and inundated Congress with petitions. Soon they invaded politics, too, organizing the Liberty party and promoting antislavery men for state and national office.

Clay was horrified. He thought the abolitionists “rash and impolitic,” not to say dangerous. Yet the stridency of the Great Southern Reaction distressed him, too. To counter the abolitionist attack, southern spokesmen argued that slavery was a “positive good” ordained by God from the beginning of time. Gone was the Jeffersonian argument that slavery was “a necessary evil.” Now proslavery apologists proclaimed it “the greatest of all blessings” and the sine
qua non of southern patriotism. In 1837, on the floor of the Senate, speaking in his rapid-fire fashion, John C. Calhoun warned that overturning slavery in the South would result in a war of extermination between the races, and he insisted that the abolitionists be silenced.

In the ensuing war of words over slavery, Clay tried to stand in the middle. In the Senate he expressed “the strongest disapprobation of the course of the northern abolitionists, who were intermeddling with a subject that no way concerned them.” Yet he emphatically disagreed with Calhoun, too. “I consider slavery as a curse,” Clay told the Senate, “a curse to the master, a wrong, a grievous wrong to the slave. In the abstract it is ALL WRONG; and no possible contingency can make it right.”

Clay succeeded only in provoking both sides, as proslavery men damned him as an abolitionist, and the abolitionists castigated him as a canting hypocrite. How, they demanded, could a man who held slaves, represented a slave state, and advocated colonization be a true friend of liberty? In his newspaper, The North Star, Frederick Douglass declared Clay’s “the most helpless, illogical, and cowardly apologies” for the wrong of slavery Douglass had ever heard. “You are at this moment,” Douglass told Clay, “the robber of nearly fifty human beings, of their liberty, compelling them to live in ignorance.” If the senator meant what he said about the crime of bondage, Douglass said, then he should emancipate his human property and enlist in the abolitionist cause. “Let me ask if you think that God will hold you guiltless in the great day of account, if you die with the blood of these fifty slaves clinging to your garments[?]”

Stung by such criticism, Clay struck back in self-defense. He told one abolitionist, “Excuse me, Mr. Mendenhall, for saying that my slaves are as well fed and clad, look as sleek and hearty, and are quite as civil and respectful in their demeanor, and as little disposed to wound the feelings of any one, as you are.” Yet, Clay perceived what the controversy cost him politically. “The Abolitionists are denouncing me as a slaveholder,” he wrote in 1838, “and slaveholders as an Abolitionist, whilst they both unite on Mr. Van Buren.”

Convinced that he had to make a choice, Clay sided with his fellow slaveholders. In an 1839 speech in the Senate, he not only defended slavery but accused the abolitionists of promoting amalgamation (“revolting admixture, alike offensive to God and man”) and trying to foment civil war. The speech so excited Calhoun that he leaped to his feet and happily proclaimed it “the finishing stroke” to the abolitionists in American politics. It was a premature benediction, since the Liberty party ran James G. Birney for president in the election of 1840. Alas for Clay, he lost the Whig party nomination to war hero William Henry Harrison, who went on to win the presidency that year. Clay could hardly believe that the Whigs preferred a political tyro like Harrison to himself. When Harrison died, Clay felt even more cheated since Vice-President John Tyler of Virginia, a cranky, old-school Democrat, now succeeded to the presidency. After Tyler vetoed Clay’s attempts to recharter the national bank and raise the tariff, the go-ahead man was so disillusioned that he resigned from the Senate, said he was “retiring” from politics, and went home to his stock farming, his family, and his slaves.

He soon came out of retirement, thanks to a ground swell of popular support for him as president. The fact was, Harry of the West towered over his lackluster rivals, so much so that by 1843 more than two hundred Whig newspapers and seventeen Whig conventions or Whig-dominated legislatures had announced for him. When he spoke at a barbecue in Dayton, Ohio, more than 100,000 people turned out for the event, in what was perhaps the largest political gathering the Republic had witnessed thus far. It was clear to party bigwigs that, lacking another military man to run in the 1844 presidential contest, Clay was the only potential winner they had. When the Whig national convention nominated him by acclamation, Clay had never seemed so close to the White House and the consummation of his dreams.
His victory seemed assured when the Democrats nominated James K. Polk, the first dark-horse candidate in American presidential history. The Democrats thereupon endorsed the annexation of slave-holding Texas, an explosive issue that Clay's forces had hoped to keep out of the campaign. Clay had gone on record as opposing annexation, on the grounds that "annexation and war with Mexico are identical." What America needed, he said, was "union, peace, and patience." Now the Democrats shrewdly linked Texas annexation to Oregon and the popular notion that America had a God-given right to rule the continent. Sensing that they had Clay on the run, the Democrats grew malicious. They attacked him as a duelist, a rake, and an abolitionist who opposed Texas annexation because he wanted to free the blacks. This in turn aroused zealots of the Liberty party. Fearful that antislavery voters would go for Clay, they pummelled him as a "man-stealer" under the sway of the Slave Power.

The Texas question proved Clay's downfall. Convinced that his southern support was slipping away, he resorted to a desperate ploy, asserting in a series of labored public statements—the "Alabama letters"—that he had no personal objection to annexation, indeed that he would like to have Texas, slavery and all, if it could be done "without dishonor" and "without war." The Alabama letters may have won Clay some support in the South, but they cost him pivotal New York State, where antislavery Whigs went for Birney and threw the state and the election itself to Polk. Clay lost by only 38,000 popular votes out of a total of 2,700,000 cast. It was the most painful setback of his political life. Blaming it on fraud, slander, and abolitionism, he declared himself "forever off the public stage."

The annexation of Texas led to exactly what Clay had feared—war with Mexico. That war hurt him personally, for it took his favorite son, Henry Clay, Jr., who fell at Buena Vista. It also made a military hero of Zachary Taylor, who won the Whig nomination and the presidency in 1848. Clay was thoroughly disgusted that the party had again passed over him in favor of a man utterly devoid of political experience. Clay was certain that had he been the nominee, he would have been sitting in the White House in Taylor's place. This overlooked a crucial fact. Clay lacked the one thing—military glory—that had ensured the victory of the Whig party's only two elected presidents. Had he possessed a military record, he would doubtless have won the presidency long before.

In 1849 the Kentucky legislature again elected Clay to the Senate. Seventy-two now, he was tired and in poor health; the bons mots and repartee no longer came so quickly as they once had. What was more, he had a haunting fear that he had failed in politics, having been unable to win the presidency, the pinnacle of his ambition, or to unite the country behind his American System. What he had was a reputation as the Great Compromiser—"I go for honorable compromise whenever it can be made," he said. "Life itself is but a compromise." And now, in the winter of 1849–50, the country needed him again as sectional mediator, for the Mexican War had thrust the slavery question back into the center of American politics, precipitating a desperate power struggle between free and slave states for control of the territories and ultimately of the nation itself.

At issue now was the status of slavery in the newly acquired territories of the Southwest. If northern free-soilers demanded that Congress ban slavery there, southern militants like Calhoun argued that Congress had a constitutional obligation to safeguard slave property in all federal territories. To make matters worse that fateful winter, California had drawn up a constitution prohibiting slavery and was ready for admission as a free state, with New Mexico not far behind. The California and New Mexico questions rocked Congress to its foundations. Two new free states would alter the balance of power against the South, perhaps forever, and southerners swore they would sunder the Union before they would let
that happen. “Slavery here is the all-engrossing theme,” Clay wrote a friend; “and my hopes and my fears alternately prevail as to any settlement of the vexed question.”

Frail and weak, racked by a persistent cough, Clay labored once again to avert catastrophe. In January 1850 he introduced in the Senate eight separate measures designed to settle all current disputes in the vexed slavery question. Among other things, his measures called for California to enter the Union as a free state, for New Mexico and Utah territories to be organized without congressional conditions on slavery (Clay assumed that Mexican law, which had abolished it, would continue in both territories), for the slave trade to be outlawed in the District of Columbia, and for a stringent new fugitive slave law to be enacted as a sop to southerners. At one point in his speech, Clay mentioned a “precious relic” he had
recently received—it was a fragment that had been taken from the coffin of George Washington. Holding it aloft, Clay said that the “venerated” father of the country was warning Congress from Mount Vernon not to destroy his handiwork. In his major speech in February, Clay beseeched his colleagues to pause “at the edge of the precipice, before the fearful and disastrous leap is taken into the yawning abyss below.” If the Union were dissolved, he fervently prayed that he might not live “to behold the sad and heart-rending spectacle.”

But his separate compromise measures ran into seemingly insurmountable opposition from both sides. Frustrated in his initial efforts, Clay tried a new tack. In May he offered all of his proposals in a single omnibus bill, only to see it sink in a vortex of acri-monious speeches, amendments, and shouts to adjourn. It was too much for him. Lacking the strength or the will to continue, he left for Rhode Island, to rest and recuperate on the seashore before returning to Washington. It remained for Senator Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois, in a remarkable display of legislative skill, to guide Clay’s measures one by one into law. In Washington crowds shouted “The Union is saved!” and drank toasts of champagne and whiskey. President Millard Fillmore went so far as to pronounce the Compromise of 1850 “a final settlement” of all sectional disputes. But events were to prove how wrong he was. The compromise contained a fatal measure, the draconian fugitive slave law, which inflamed sectional passions anew and took the country another step toward the very precipice Clay had hoped to avoid.

In late 1851, back in Washington after a long stay at Ashland, Clay tried to resume his duties, but he was suffering from insomnia and coughing worse than ever. When a friend urged him not to be despondent, Clay showed a flash of his old go-ahead spirit. “Sir,” he said with eyes blazing, “there is no such word in my vocabulary.” By June 1852, too sick to go home, he lay dying in a bed in the National Hotel, his son Thomas at his side. At one point he called out, “My mother, mother, mother!” On June 29 he murmured, “I believe, my son, I am going,” and asked Thomas to button his shirt collar. He caught Thomas’s hand, held it tight, and then let go.

Clay’s will provided for the gradual liberation and colonization of all children born after January 1, 1850, to the thirty-five slaves he held when he died. In the end, the act was all Clay accomplished in removing slavery from his troubled country, which continued its headlong rush toward its own destruction. Ironically, the Union disintegrated over the election of a Republican president who deeply admired Clay, who hated slavery as Clay had hated it, and who found only in “the sad spectacle” of civil war a means of vanquishing it.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 Describe the development over time of Henry Clay’s feelings about slavery. What was his youthful judgment on the South’s peculiar institution and under what influences did it form? How and why did his early position change? Can these early tensions be seen throughout his life?

2 What solution to the slavery problem did Henry Clay eventually put forward? To whom was he most indebted for his plan? What were the methods and purpose of the American Colonization Society? It was supported by many prominent Americans, so why did it fail?

3 What were the basic tenets and purpose of Henry Clay’s American System? How did the particular political climate of the country at that time doom its fulfillment during Clay’s life?

4 Describe the basic issues and outcomes of the Missouri Compromise and the Compromise of 1850. Why were these crises so explosive? What role
did Henry Clay play in them and what did he hope to accomplish? Did he succeed?

5 Although Henry Clay was an enormously popular and widely admired figure, he was forever disappointed in his highest political ambitions. What reasons for this can you find in the political climate of the time? How did Clay contribute to his own disappointment with the particular positions he took? In his role as “the Great Compromiser” how effective was he in easing sectional tensions and averting disunion?