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John M. Belohlavek



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REVIEW ESSAY

Henry Clay and the Historian: A One-Hundred-Year Perspective

by JOHN M. BELOHLAVEK

Henry Clay, Statesman for the Union. By Robert V. Remini. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991. xxviii, 818 pp. Preface, chronology, genealogy, abbreviations, photographs, bibliographical essay, index. \$35.00.)

Asked on his deathbed if he had any regrets of things that he had not done in his life, Andrew Jackson replied, "Yes, I didn't shoot Henry Clay and I didn't hang John C. Calhoun." Jackson viewed Clay as a "base, mean scoundrel," while Clay judged Old Hickory to be an ignorant, corrupt hypocrite. Although Clay attained an enviable list of public contributions during his lifetime, the enmity between him and Jackson often serves as the focal point of the Kentuckian's forty-year career. Clay scholars have struggled for over 150 years to bring him out of Jackson's shadow and into the warm light of recognition of his accomplishments as politician and diplomat.

As one of the most prominent men of the early republic and a three-time presidential candidate, Clay has been the subject of numerous adulatory biographies, including a predictable effort by his grandson.¹ Late nineteenth-century authors, troubled by the greed and financial corruption of the Gilded Age, saluted Clay's sense of selfless public responsibility. Civil service reformer, editor, and politician Carl Schurz praised "Harry of the West" in his two-volume biography, noting, "In no sense was he

John M. Belohlavek is professor of history, University of South Florida, Tampa.

1. George D. Prentice, *Biography of Henry Clay* (Hartford, 1831); Calvin Colton, *The Life and Times of Henry Clay*, 2 vols. (New York, 1846), and Colton, *The Last Seven Years of the Life of Henry Clay* (New York, 1856); Nathan Sargent, *Life of Henry Clay* (Philadelphia, 1844); Epes Sargent, *The Life and Public Services of Henry Clay Down to 1848* (New York, 1848); Thomas Hart Clay, *Henry Clay* (Philadelphia, 1910).

a money-maker in politics. His integrity as a public man remained without blemish throughout his long career."²

Although several monographs in the early twentieth century traced particular aspects of Clay's service, he did not receive serious biographical consideration again until the 1930s. In that decade, studies by Bernard Mayo and George Poage but especially Glyndon Van Deusen, documented Clay's place in American history.³ Generally sympathetic works marked Clay's career as nationalist champion of government promotion of the economy and patron saint of the Whig party. Most importantly, the "Great Compromiser" and "Pacificator" guided the troubled Union through a series of life-threatening crises. Satisfied with Clay's image, historians generally eschewed revisionist biography in favor of an examination of political party structure and membership.⁴ It is subtle irony, of course, that Robert Remini, the author of more than a half-dozen books on Jackson, has

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2. Carl Schurz, *Life of Henry Clay*, 2 vols. (Boston, 1887); Howard Caldwell, *Henry Clay: The Great Compromiser* (Chicago, 1899); Joseph M. Rogers, *The True Henry Clay* (Philadelphia, 1904).
 3. Mary Follett, *Henry Clay as Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives* (Washington, DC, 1892); John Bassett Moore, *Henry Clay and Pan Americanism* (New York, 1915). Bernard Mayo's *Henry Clay: Spokesman of the New West* (Boston, 1937), intended as part of a multi-volume biography, ends with the War of 1812. George Poage, *Henry Clay and the Whig Party* (Chapel Hill, 1936), focuses largely on politics. The best biographer of Clay was Glyndon Van Deusen, *The Life of Henry Clay* (Boston, 1937). Over 400 pages, the book is well researched and written and, while sympathetic to Clay, even handed in overall treatment. Claude Bowers, *Party Battles of the Jackson Period* (Boston, 1922), a Democratic loyalist, renders an unusually negative view of Clay as a "political opportunist" (p. 174).
 4. Clement Eaton's *Henry Clay and the Art of American Politics* (Boston, 1957) was not intended to be a comprehensive biography, but it is the best brief study available. Studies such as Merrill D. Peterson, *The Great Triumverate: Webster, Clay and Calhoun* (New York, 1987), intertwine the careers of Jackson's enemies brilliantly, and Marie-Luise Frings, *Henry Clay's American System und die Sektionale Kontroverse in den Vereinigten Staaten Von Amerika, 1815-1829* (Frankfort, 1979), argues local not national motives prompted Clay's desire for the American System. Florida Whiggery was addressed in the 1950s by Herbert J. Doherty, Jr., *The Whigs of Florida, 1845-1854* (Gainesville, 1959), and in Doherty, *Richard Keith Call: Southern Unionist* (Gainesville, 1961). In the post-war era, historians such as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (Boston, 1945); John William Ward, *Andrew Jackson: Symbol for an Age* (New York, 1955); Marvin Meyers, *The Jacksonian Persuasion* (Stanford, 1957); and Lee Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy* (Princeton, 1961), moved the focus away from biography to issues of class, psychological forces, and voter analysis.

emerged as the first serious biographer of Clay since the Great Depression.⁵

Readers familiar with Remini's work know that his views are more pro-Jackson than anti-Clay. Surprisingly, however, the author has a genuine respect and even affection for the Kentuckian. Philosophically, Remini shares Clay's beliefs in an activist role for government. Personally, he admires Clay's class and style, his sense for the dramatic and daring. Remini takes obvious delight—some may argue to the point of overkill—in extolling Clay's virtues as an orator: "His style was . . . relaxed and freewheeling, his movements always graceful, even when propelled by passion. When the Kentuckian spoke, listeners did not have the sense that they were hearing an oration, yet they found themselves utterly absorbed in his argument and fully persuaded by his logic and commanding language. His enthusiasm, his total involvement in his cause, and his frequent majestic flights of oratory mesmerized his audience" (p. 431).

Pausing at the appropriate moment to adjust his spectacles or dip a pinch of snuff from his silver box, Clay appears unequaled as a debater. The combination of gifted mind, quick wit, and sharp tongue devastated ill-armed opponents. Unfortunately, his insensitivity toward, and often humiliation of, those who disagreed with him created enemies. For Clay the attacks were political, rarely personal, and he generally tried to salve the wound with a handshake and a glass of whiskey. Remini speaks with fondness of Clay's emotion and sentimentality, but especially of his self-deprecating sense of humor and the ability not to take himself too seriously—the latter qualities Jackson certainly lacked.

Although a middle-class Virginian by birth (1777), Clay moved to rough-and-tumble Kentucky at the age of twenty and became a man of the frontier. He loved to drink, carouse, swear, gamble, and tell stories— all qualities that endeared him to Westerners of his era. When his wife Lucretia was asked if she objected to Clay's cardplaying, she retored, "Heavens, no, he almost always wins!" These virtues later became vices. Critics at-

5. Robert V. Remini's works include *The Election of Andrew Jackson* (Philadelphia, 1963); *Andrew Jackson* (New York, 1966); *Andrew Jackson and the Bank War* (New York, 1967); *Andrew Jackson*, 3 vols. (New York, 1977-1984); and *The Legacy of Andrew Jackson: Essays on Democracy, Indian Removal, and Slavery* (Baton Rouge, 1988).

tacked Clay's "lewd" lifestyle. Remini admits that Clay was a "wretched father," drank excessively, and was "quite possibly" unfaithful to Lucretia. Yet the author contends that "Prince Hal" generally remained in control of his habits and never let them affect his work. Rumor and perception contributed to Clay's reputation for hard living.

Within a decade of arriving in Lexington, Kentucky, the young barrister had achieved both prosperity and national political office. Comfortable in his beloved estate, "Ashland," Clay married into a good Kentucky family and surrounded himself with slaves and horses. He aligned himself with the "aristocratic" as opposed to the "democratic" elements after his election to the state assembly in 1803. This bonding illustrated a nagging flaw in Clay's political character— a failure to identify with the "populist" elements of the frontier. He perceived himself as a "Madisonian Republican" and mistrusted the transformation of American politics from the representative republicanism of the Jeffersonian era to the emerging majoritarian democracy of the Age of Jackson. Elected to the United States Senate in 1806, Clay emerged as a leader of the nationalist "War Hawks" in Congress. Decrying high seas violations by Great Britain, they championed American expansion into British Canada and the Spanish Floridas. Ever pragmatic, Clay's nationalism evaporated, however, in opposition to the rechartering of the Bank of the United States in 1811.

Eagerly switching to the House of Representatives, Clay served as speaker for the next decade, seizing the opportunity to reshape the office into an instrument of political power. In the process, he displayed troublesome qualities that haunted him throughout his congressional career. Colleagues branded him "The Dictator," and Remini notes that "his arrogance, his overbearing conceit, his presumptuousness, eventually turned men against him" (p. 84).

Although some historians more sympathetic with James Madison might disagree, the War Hawks in Congress became increasingly distraught over the "appalling failure of leadership" provided by the president (p. 87).⁶ Reluctantly pushed

6. Madison's major biographer, Irving Brandt, *James Madison, The Fourth President* (London, 1969), sees his subject as bold and aggressive, although Jack Rakove, *James Madison and the Creation of the American Republic* (Glenview,

towards hostilities in 1812, Madison proved to be an unimpressive wartime chief—Clay dubbed him “too benevolent.” Nonetheless, the Kentuckian led the House in defense of the administration until he departed for Europe as a member of the peace mission in 1814. This eighteen-month sojourn provided Clay with his only European travel and an opportunity to work closely with John Quincy Adams. Although the delegation concluded a favorable treaty at Ghent, Belgium, in December 1814, Remini excoriates Clay for his “inexcusable” and “childish” behavior during the negotiations and for playing the role of “capping critic” rather than constructive force. When he returned to the United States in September 1815, Clay’s ego had grown geometrically. Contemplating the presidency, he viewed the State Department as a proper stepping stone and a place rightfully due him. He was consequently furious when James Monroe offered the post of secretary of state to John Quincy Adams. In an amazing display of pettiness, Clay sought to utilize his speakership to cripple the new administration. Remini observes, “Clay set out to replace the executive as the controlling arm in the conduct of American foreign policy” (p. 155). Shifting his pragmatism to domestic affairs, Clay experienced a rebirth of economic nationalism. Based on the debacle of the War of 1812, the Kentuckian embraced the need for a new national bank, a tariff with selected, protective rates, and federally funded internal improvements. Later dubbed the “American System,” this became the bedrock program with which Clay would live and eventually, die.

During the years 1817 to 1825 Clay demonstrated that the term “The Era of Good Feelings” was a national political misnomer. He unsuccessfully battled Monroe on internal improvements and Adams on foreign affairs. Adams proved to be one of the most successful secretaries of state in American history, scoring triumphs in negotiations with Great Britain, Russia, and

IL, 1990), views him as more thoughtful and deliberate. Most historians join Remini in harsher criticism. Roger H. Brown, *The Republic in Peril: 1812* (New York, 1963), notes, “He [Madison] was beyond his depth in managing the affairs of an unruly, fractious, nineteenth century republic as it moved towards war” (p. 189). Donald Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict* (Urbana, IL, 1989), also criticizes Madison as “one of the weakest war leaders in the nation’s history” (p. 301).

Spain. The United States acquired Florida and laid down the Monroe Doctrine.⁷

In a brilliant speech in January 1819, Clay bashed the administration for executive abuse of power in ordering an invasion of Spanish Florida. He also, unfortunately, harshly criticized Andrew Jackson for his conduct in leading that operation. A House investigation exonerated Old Hickory, but Clay had committed a serious mistake. Jackson neither forgave nor forgot. Even so, Clay enhanced his national reputation as a champion of union and compromise through his role in promoting the Missouri Compromise of 1819-1821. Remini laments, "He was one of the most gifted men of his age. He distinguished himself as a public speaker, a lawyer, a politician, and Speaker of the House of Representatives. He might have made a truly great President" (p. 209). This primary goal of Clay's life— his driving passion— would never be achieved.

Clay made his first serious attempt at the White House in 1824. While most Americans acknowledged his administrative and political talents, leadership, and oratorical skills, increasing doubt arose over his ambition and integrity. He could not escape this duality. Many contemporaries feared that he "lusted" for the presidency in an era when candidates were expected to "stand" not "run" for the office. In 1887 Carl Schurz noted Clay's "chronic" ambition, suggesting that such zealotry was "apt to unsettle the character, and darken the existence of those afflicted with it by confusing their appreciation of all else" (p. 413). Schurz sadly observed that Clay would have been a happier and greater man if he had never coveted "the glittering prize." Remini contends that Clay likely had "a greater natural force of mind than any of his contemporaries," but he recklessly squandered it in the pursuit of pleasure and ambition (p. 339). He was "a savagely ambitious man," and the passion for power colored all that he did and took precedence over his personal and family life (p. 687). No historian of "Harry of the West" neglects to comment on this characteristic and its negative im-

7. The success of Adams in outfoxing Clay in the timing and delineation of American policy regarding Florida and Latin America is explained by William Weeks, *John Quincy Adams and American Global Empire* (Lexington, KY, 1992). A similar view, but less-obviously Machiavellian, is presented in Samuel F. Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Foundations of American Foreign Policy* (New York, 1949).

pact upon his career. Clay's reputation suffered dramatically in the aftermath of his failed bid for the presidency in 1824. When an electoral deadlock sent the names of John Quincy Adams, Andrew Jackson, and William H. Crawford to the House of Representatives in 1825 for resolution, Clay threw his support behind his old nemesis from Massachusetts. Although he personally disliked Adams, Clay agreed with his nationalistic outlook and respected his abilities. Adams was elected on the first ballot in early February, and a week later Clay accepted the post of secretary of state. The "corrupt bargain" had been sealed.

Clay's biographers have battled the charge since its inception. Calvin Colton, in a chapter entitled "The Great Conspiracy," refers to the corrupt bargain charge as "one of the greatest atrocities in the moral history of mankind" (p. 287). Carl Schurz calls the bargain issue "absurd" (p. 249). Joseph Rogers presents greater balance by suggesting that "history has fully justified the purity of Clay's and Adams's motives, but it has not sustained them in their conduct, either from a political or practical point of view" (p. 137). The recent scholarship of Clement Eaton emphasizes that "the most careful searching of the evidence has turned up nothing to incriminate Clay" (p. 56), and Merrill Peterson agrees that Clay was "innocent of bargain and corruption" (p. 130). Samuel Bemis concurs that an "implicit bargain, a gentleman's agreement" occurred, but "nothing corrupt." Remini is probably closest to the mark. He denies that any overt bargain ever took place; it was unnecessary. Both men were intelligent enough to assume the obvious. Tragically, the corrupt bargain charge haunted Clay for the remainder of his career and, in Remini's judgment, played the major role in keeping him from the White House.⁸

Clay served four joyless years in the State Department. He focused upon the promotion of a dynamic policy with the newly emerging Latin American republics. Remini views this as a forerunner of the "Good Neighbor Policy" of the next century.

8. Samuel F. Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Union* (New York, 1956), 130-31. A frustrated Clay continually addressed the corrupt bargain charge throughout his career, at one point publishing a thirty-page pamphlet in rebuttal. Mary Hargreaves, *The Presidency of John Quincy Adams* (Lawrence, KS, 1985) argues that Clay's great betrayal was not supporting fellow Westerner Jackson, and his "corruption was the error of political misjudgment in generalizing the trends of intrasectional change."

Including such elements as free trade, freedom of the seas, self-determination, and a transisthmian canal, the visionary policy sank on the reef of a hostile Jacksonian Congress. Negotiations with Mexico and Britain also failed, prompting Remini to give the administration high marks for imagination and low marks for achievement.

When Adams failed in his re-election bid against Andrew Jackson in 1828, the field finally opened for Henry Clay. As the new leader of the National Republican party, "Prince Hal" fully expected that the popular American System would catapult him into the executive mansion. Surely, the people would reject Jackson, a "military chieftain" and petty tyrant who had abused the presidential office through his veto of the Second Bank. Once again, Clay erred. The people trusted the Old Hero and re-elected him in 1832 by a solid margin.

Clay was promptly presented, however, with another opportunity to restore his reputation and save the union in 1833. Tariff conflict had brought about nullification in South Carolina and a contest of wills between the president and state officials. Remini praises Clay's patriotism in masterminding the compromise tariff, which alleviated the crisis. Here the Kentuckian was at his best as national statesman.

For the remainder of the decade Clay played the role of opposition leader in the Senate. Obsessed with the despotic excesses of "Jacksonism," he tormented the administration at every opportunity. Referring to the enemies of "King Andrew" as Whigs, Clay sought to save the republic and bring this tyrannical lunatic to heel. No doubt his most triumphant moment came with the censure of the president by the Senate in March 1834 for violations of executive power.⁹

Although Clay and his compatriots functioned most effectively as critics, they could not mount a unified campaign in 1836 and select a candidate to oppose Jackson's heir, Martin

9. The philosophical underpinnings of the Democrat and Whig parties have been examined most recently by Harry Watson, *Liberty and Power* (New York, 1990), and Lawrence Kohl, *The Politics of Individualism* (New York, 1989). Also important for placing Clay in the context of Whig thought is Daniel W. Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago, 1979). Key for understanding the market forces at work in party definition is Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York, 1991).

Van Buren. Clay's disillusionment peaked as he watched the Jacksonians dismantle his economic programs, and he failed to capture the Whig party's nomination in either 1836 or 1840. The contest in 1840 became particularly painful because a national financial collapse predicated a Whig victory. Clay campaigned for the nomination, but the negatives mounted. His albatross—the corrupt bargain—continued to hang around his neck; people suspected Clay's integrity and questioned his "loose morals." He suffered a "popularity problem" with the masses, as evidenced by two previous defeats. Continuing to rely on the American System as his platform, Clay dismissed the increasingly controversial issue of slavery. Time and Providence would cure all in Clay's judgment. In lashing out at abolitionist "ultras" Clay had cried, "I would rather be right than be president." Remini suggests he would rather be right and president. Despite the patriotic resonance of such statements, the Whigs jumped on the bandwagon of their own "military chieftain," William Henry Harrison, who was swept to victory in November.

Clay responded to "Old Tip's" triumph with bittersweet arrogance. Clearly, the Kentuckian expected to dominate the administration and to resurrect his American System in Congress. But Clay, domineering and demanding, did not gain the influence with his new chief as planned. When Harrison died one month after taking office, Clay viewed the ascent of John Tyler with relief. Once again branded a "dictator" by his Senate peers, Clay rushed ahead on a collision course with the president. Remini criticizes Tyler for lacking "moral firmness" but indicts the headstrong Kentuckian for almost single-handedly destroying the Whig party in his obsession to recharter the Bank of the United States. Although a number of significant Whig economic gains were made, the struggle left the party exhausted and Tyler and Clay bitter enemies.

Clay's commitment to domestic affairs revealed a naiveté about the evolving American concern for Texas and Oregon. Although Clay desperately wanted the presidential nomination in 1844, he failed to envision expansion as a key issue. A victim of overconfidence and an abiding desire to set the national agenda, he finally recognized the importance of Texas in the spring of 1844; Clay's views on the subject, published in a series of letters in the summer, tried to divorce the heated topics of slavery and annexation and created an air of indecisiveness

about his position. Voters may have loved Henry Clay, but they distrusted him. The letters doomed his candidacy, and he lost to a "dark horse" Democrat, James K. Polk.

The Kentuckian spent the next four years attacking the myopic economic policies of the Jacksonians and speaking out against the Mexican War. Betrayed again by a party bent on expediency, Clay lost the 1848 nomination to war hero Zachary Taylor. A failure in leadership, however, allowed "the Star of the West" one last chance to assert his talents in the Senate. Legislation surrounding the fate of territories in the West acquired during the recent conflict once again paralyzed the government and threatened disunion. Into the breach stepped the "Great Pacificator" to author and argue for the Compromise of 1850. Remini joins other Clay biographers in praising the Kentuckian as "the one person most responsible for the ultimate solution of the crisis of 1850" (p. 761). Other historians disagree. Holman Hamilton argues that Congressional Democrats, especially Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois, should be given credit for the compromise. E. B. Smith makes a more difficult argument in advocating a leadership role for Zachary Taylor, who died in July before the various segments of the legislation had passed.¹⁰

The year 1850 marked the passing of the political torch to a new generation of American political leadership. Some historians have argued that the flickering flame of union burned out with them. Calhoun had died in March 1850, Clay succumbed to tuberculosis in the summer of 1852, while Webster followed a few months later from complications of liver disease. These were the men who ardently desired the presidency, yet none reached the brass ring of executive office. Remini clarifies why Clay never reached the White House. Simply put, he never understood the people. Americans loved and respected Clay's talents and abilities but could not overcome their far-reaching reservations about his persona: the aristocratic predilections, ar-

10. Holman Hamilton, *Prologue to Conflict: The Crisis and Compromise of 1850* (Lexington, KY, 1964), E. B. Smith, *The Presidencies of Zachary Taylor and Millard Fillmore* (Lawrence, KS, 1988). William Freehling, *The Road to Disunion* (New York, 1990), 507-08, is critical also of Clay and praises Douglas. Recent Clay scholars have given other figures, particularly Douglas, credit for the passage of the compromise but insist that Clay should receive maximum credit for originating and arguing the Omnibus measure. See Eaton, *Henry Clay*, 192-93, and Peterson, *Great Triumverate*, 474-75.

rogance and conceit, consuming ambition, and tainted character. Perhaps Americans could never elect a man who used a silver snuff box.

Sympathetic yet critical, this volume stands as the best work on Clay ever written. Its preeminence arises, however, not from interpretive innovation. In fact, it is striking how Clay's biographers have generally recognized and agreed upon their subject's strengths and failings. Instead, Remini's effort excels through its exhaustive research, narrative force, and detailed description of over 800 pages. The press may possibly agree to publish an abridgement, which would give the reader an opportunity to discover Clay without embracing the present edition's daunting size. It might also allow the overzealous author an opportunity to winnow some of his very lengthy, descriptive sentences. Sharper analysis in some instances would also have been more helpful. For example, if Clay was as politically clever and cunning as Remini suggests, why did he agree to accept the appointment of secretary of state in an atmosphere so shrouded in controversy, and why did he fail to recognize the rising tide of slavery as a national issue? Minor issues aside, this tour-de-force on Henry Clay has simply reinforced Robert Remini's position as one of the nation's premier scholars in the field of nineteenth-century political biography.