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Daniel Webster and the Crisis of the Union, 1850

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Abstract
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Alarmed by the fierceness and radicalism of the polemics that passed for debate in the Congress since it had convened a month earlier, and dismayed by the lack of flexibility in President Zachary Taylor's approach to the problems then vexing the country, Clay had come to see Daniel Webster to lay out a comprehensive plan for sectional conciliation. Without Webster's sincere and firm support, Clay knew his compromise had little prospect of winning public acceptance in the North, and hence in the Congress.

Over the course of an hour, Webster heard Clay out, and responded at the end of their conference in plain language: he would sustain Clay's objectives and his compromise plan. The means Webster would employ were left unsaid, but his

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The events leading to that fateful, little known encounter in Daniel Webster's home are familiar to virtually all Americans with a passing interest in their nation's history. A diverse and energetic people, Americans had earned their independence, created a remarkable polity, and sustained their nationhood in a second war with England, all within a span of less than forty years. Over the next generation, led by the likes of Webster, Clay, Andrew Jackson, John C. Calhoun, Thomas Hart Benton, and others of lesser fame, they built on the original foundation, measurably advancing both the boundaries of the nation and the material welfare of the citizenry. On special occasions, like the dedication of monuments to those who had fought in the Revolution, and annual July 4 celebrations, Americans heard and applauded orations expounding these themes.² In effect, they were applauding themselves. And who could blame them? Indeed, one could even forgive a bit of boasting, endemic to the July 4 addresses, that Europe would do well to follow America's example.

Another dimension to the American experience during this period, however, proved rather more ominous. Committed at its inception to democracy and liberty, the young nation had not completely resolved all issues flowing from these twin goals.

Nor had it fulfilled their promise. Questions remained. Could a society committed to majority rule act effectually on behalf of majority will, without trampling on minority rights? Could a nation dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal long exist half slave and half free? Could Union survive the growth of distinctly sectional interests and sectional values?

These questions had been sidestepped in the leap of imagination and faith that marked the adoption of the Constitution in 1787. They were largely ignored by the orators celebrating the heroic past. But increasingly, from the Missouri Controversy of 1819 to that snowy January evening when Clay and Webster conferred in 1850, such themes had come to dominate public debate.

At the heart of the matter in 1850 lay the explosive issue of slavery in the territories newly won from Mexico in the late 1840's. Between 1846 and 1848 the United States prosecuted a controversial though undeniably successful war with its weaker neighbor to the south. Triumph brought an immense territory to the national domain.

Not all Americans approved the war, and not all appreciated the fruits of victory. Daniel Webster, for example, argued that the Mexican War was unjust and unnecessary, that it was a war for "territory," not American ideals, and that it would inevitably provoke "controversy" over the disposition of the spoils.³

Webster and his allies in Congress, including a young Illinois representative named Lincoln, failed to blunt President Polk's policies, but they were right that controversy would follow the war.⁴ Witness the debate which began in 1846, when a Penn-


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sylvania congressman named David Wilmot introduced an amendment to a war appropriation bill which, if successful, would have prohibited the introduction of slavery into any territory won from Mexico. Wilmot's proviso failed to pass, but it inflamed Congress and the nation through the remainder of the war, and injected a new, sectionally tainted virulence into the presidential campaign of 1848. Indeed, by monopolizing the energies of politicians and undermining cross sectional alliances, the issue threatened the very fabric of the Union.  

Presidential politics in 1848 exemplified and exacerbated the problem confronting the public. Slavery and the new territories were central issues of that contest. For its duration, the political mood of the country was deeply, dangerously infected by extreme sectional rhetoric and, in some quarters, warnings were issued about the future of the Union should certain candidates and policies prevail. Despite the fury, the election of Zachary Taylor, a Louisiana slaveowner, hero of the Mexican War, and political novice, solved nothing. Nor did the debates and maneuverings that followed in a special session of Congress in the summer of 1849. With the looming issue of California's application for statehood, and the South's conviction that it would be reduced to permanent minority status in Congress following the admission of California as a free state, a palpable sense of crisis enveloped much of America. Pulpit sermons, newspaper commentary, casual conversation among private citizens and, above all, the debates in Congress, reflected a deepening intensity of feeling on each side of the slavery issue.

In this climate, the partisans of moderation and restraint were not to be heard. Threats, invective, and ridicule were the order of the day. If the North did not respect their right to carry slaves westward, southerners solemnly swore, the nation would face the most severe consequences. As Representative Robert Y. Toombs of Georgia bluntly told his northern colleagues on the floor of the House, shortly after the convening of Congress in December 1849, "if by your legislation you seek to drive us from the territories of California and New Mexico, thereby attempting to fix a national degradation upon half the states, I am for disunion."  

If the southern rights faction in the Congress was, as an Illinois senator observed in December of 1849, "in a state of excitement which prepares them for the most desperate resolves," northern men were equally adamant on the other side of the issue.  

The expansion of slavery, free soilers insisted, violated the promise of America, for laboring men in the North would lack the opportunity to realize a competency in life. Free labor could never compete with the labor of slaves. And what would be the value of Union if honest toil did not bring its just reward? "I consider no evil so great as the extension of slavery," Horace Mann wrote as the crisis deepened in the winter of 1850. "I do not concede their right to carry slavery into the territories at all. . . . I should prefer dissolution, even terrible as it would be, to slavery extension."  

Moderate men in all regions, who believed with Henry Clay and Daniel Webster that the Union was both a transcendent ideal and a practical necessity for continual progress and prosperity, listened to the assertions on both extremes with

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Clay did recognize the consequences and feared them deeply. Thus he formulated his plan for compromise and sought Webster’s aid. Together, they would work to defuse the crisis of the Union and to strengthen the intangible but nonetheless compelling strands of memory and emotion that helped bind a diverse people together under one flag and one government.

* * *

Clay’s program for conciliation was presented to the Senate on January 29, 1850. Sensitive to southern insistence that only a broad settlement of all sectionally tinged controversies was acceptable, Clay had pieced together a seemingly diverse package. His plan provided for the admission of California as a free state; the organization of Utah and New Mexico as territories without reference to slavery; the adjustment of the Texas-New Mexico boundary controversy; assumption of Texas debts by the federal government as part of the boundary settlement; abolition of the slave trade in the District of Columbia; and a new, strengthened, Fugitive Slave Law. Despite their evident variety, the proposals were bound together by two broad concerns: first, to provide concrete concessions to public opinion in each section, and second, to remove the slavery issue, insofar as possible, from politics. Though feeble as he addressed his colleagues and a large audience in the gallery Clay was sustained by the knowledge that Webster supported both his broad objectives and his practical remedies.¹⁰

For his part, Webster’s inclination to back compromise was reinforced mainly by a conviction that Clay was right, that mutual concession was essential, or the center would not hold. In truth, the easiest course for Webster in 1850, and the course most consistent with his avowed antislavery principles, would have been to oppose the South. To back Clay’s compromise, with its strengthened Fugitive Slave Law that infuriated much of the North, and without a positive prohibition of slavery in New Mexico and Utah, was dangerous to a northern man with future political ambitions. Yet this is what Webster had pledged to support. Is it any wonder that in the weeks following Clay’s presentation, Webster hoped that he would not have to enter the ongoing debate in any substantial way?

Through much of February, Webster tried to convince himself and his friends that there was no need, as he told Peter Harvey, to be “frightened” for the Union. The most pressing issue—California’s petition to enter the Union as a free state—would be resolved without sectional “disruption.” “If, on our side, we keep cool,” he told his Massachusetts friend Edward Everett on February 16, “things will come to no dangerous pass.” Perhaps Clay’s plan, and the Kentuckian’s heartfelt plea to the nation for harmony would carry the day.¹¹


¹¹ Webster to Peter Harvey, February 12, 13, 1850, Webster Papers, New Hampshire Historical Society, M[microfilm] DW [frame numbers] 29802, 29804; DW to Harvey, February 14, 1850, Sang Collection, Brandeis University, mDW 29805; DW to Everett, February 16, 1850, Everett Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, mDW 29818. Dalzell argues that Webster never interpreted developments in 1850 as a secession crisis. Webster and the Trial of American Nationalism, pp. 173-177, 192. For a different view, see below and Herbert Darling Foster, “Webster’s Seventh of March Speech and the Secession Movement, 1850,” American Historical Review, 27 (January, 1922): 245-270.
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The shift in Webster's position from optimism to the conviction that a genuine secession crisis was in the making may be linked to events within and outside Washington during the third week of February. On February 16, the day Webster wrote optimistically to Everett, the House of Representatives had voted to table a resolution endorsing the Wilmot Proviso. Two days later, however, Georgia Congressman Alexander H. Stephens led a successful southern filibuster in the House obstructing the admission of California without a decision regarding the status of New Mexico and Utah. And on the twenty-third Stephens joined his Georgia colleague Robert Toombs in a visit to the White House, where a tense dialogue with President Taylor ensued. When Stephens and Toombs warned the president that the South would secede from the Union if its concerns were not addressed, the president responded with a Jacksonian like dictum that any secessionist act would be crushed. Reports of the exchange spread rapidly through Washington, dashing any lingering hopes that the president would endorse a compromise acceptable to his native region. Finally, and perhaps most ominously, southern efforts to convene a June convention in Nashville, Tennessee, to weigh options in the crisis—including the possibility of secession—were advancing, to widespread publicity, despite the conciliatory moves of the senator from Kentucky. 12 That the Nashville Convention enjoyed broad support in the South was made evident to Webster on February 23 when, in a meeting with southern congressional leaders, he was shown letters demonstrating the strong views of their constituents. 13

It was in this context, and with an increasingly grave frame of mind, that Webster began work on the last great speech of his long political career. 14

The news that Webster intended to make a formal address spread rapidly in Washington during the early days of March. The famed senator's public silence since the session had opened contributed to the keen interest in the speech, as well as to uncertainty about the stand he would take. What position Daniel Webster intended to assert was a mystery to all save himself, Henry Clay, a few close friends and, strangely enough, John C. Calhoun. Indeed, as late as March 3, Massachusetts Congressman Robert Winthrop, widely viewed as a Webster intimate, speculated that his colleague would sustain President Taylor's position in favor of the immediate admission of California, without conditions and without concessions to the South on related issues. 15 Others felt Webster would take a more conciliatory approach but could not predict the particulars he would embrace.

To gauge the mood of the South as he prepared his formal remarks Webster met with his old adversary, Calhoun, at the latter's rooms in the capital. The drama of the meeting was heightened by the approach of Calhoun's own speech in the Senate, scheduled for March 4, and by the awareness of both men that the South Carolina man was approaching the end of his earthly mission. Closeted with Calhoun, Webster


13 Jennings suggests that the enthusiasm for a southern movement "reached a peak around the end of February." Nashville Convention, p. 81.

14 Webster to Peter Harvey, February 22, 1850, in The Private Correspondence of Daniel Webster, ed. Fletcher Webster (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1857), 2: 356.

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Calhoun’s own speech on March 4, read for him by Senator James M. Mason of Virginia, was unequivocal. He intended not to raise Clay’s compromise proposals, but to bury them. The South, he insisted, had no concessions to make. Maintenance of the Union depended entirely on what the North was willing to concede. His speech emphasized the need to restore equality between the North and South which he claimed had been dissolving slowly for a generation, and which he attributed to northern “aggressions.” Northern “agitation” on the slavery issue must cease. Finally, he hinted at the need for constitutional protections for southern interests, perhaps including a dual presidency. Though Calhoun’s remarks were the equal of his many previous efforts in their piercing realism, the substance of his anticompromise position offered nothing moderates could embrace.  

Yet Calhoun’s hard line did have its value for Webster. It underscored the depth of southern rights sentiment and the immediacy of the crisis at hand. Its very fierceness drove home the urgency of the South’s unhappiness with current events. No man, on reading Calhoun’s words, could fairly claim that southerners were simply posturing in their talk of disunion. Paradoxically, Calhoun’s tough talk increased the chances that the Union could be saved, because it made evident the South’s earnestness. Moreover, as Webster quickly perceived, Calhoun did not speak for all the South. There was a body of southern opinion, particularly among Whigs and independents, that could accept the admission of California, provided the North made concessions on other matters. To this audience Webster would direct much of his argument on the Seventh of March.  

Once Calhoun had had his say, the stage was set for the dramatic highlight in the crisis of 1850—Webster’s formal speech. A crowded, excited Senate convened on March 7, with private citizens jamming every gallery seat and crowding aisles. Senator Isaac Walker of Wisconsin held the floor, but quickly relinquished it to his colleague from Massachusetts. “Mr. President,” he noted, “this vast audience has not come together to hear me...there is one man...who can assemble such an audience. They expect to hear him, and


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I feel it to be my duty . . . as it is my pleasure, to give the floor to the Senator from Massachusetts.”

Webster rose, and after thanking Walker for his courtesy, commenced with the words that are so familiar, and yet still thrilling, to us: “I wish to speak to-day,” he said, “not as a Massachusetts man, nor as a Northern man, but as an American . . . . I have a part to act, not for my own security or safety, . . . but for the good of the whole, and the preservation of all . . . . I speak to-day for the preservation of the Union. ‘Hear me for my cause’.”

Having set the tone by announcing at the outset his commitment to the Union, Webster devoted the body of his three hour oration to a deft analysis of the causes of conflict between the sections—rooted, as everyone recognized, in slavery—and to an appeal for moderation, obedience to the constitution, and renewed faith in America’s noble destiny.

Sonorous but grave, emotional yet closely controlled, and informed by an acute reading of American history, Webster’s words were deftly crafted to cool passions and convince his audience that harmony made far more sense than conflict, that the current crisis could be resolved, and that a dissolution of the Union was unthinkable. Each side, he said, had legitimate grievances; at the same time, each was making some extravagant demands that simply had to be withdrawn. In Webster’s view, the vexing question of slavery in the territories had been blown entirely out of proportion. It was, he argued, simply an abstraction which was needlessly paralyzing the nation at a time when important work remained undone.

Following an extended survey of changing attitudes towards slavery in American history, and a recollection of the circumstances surrounding the admission of new states to the Union since 1800, Webster evenhandedly rejected southern demands for legislation opening New Mexico and California to slavery and likewise condemned northern insistence on legal prohibition of slavery there. The South’s position was unrealistic, the North’s ungenerous and, for that matter, unnecessary.

Webster saw what others failed to see—that slavery had no future in the Far West. California, he noted, was already on record against slavery, and the peculiar institution could never thrive in New Mexico’s arid climate. “Who,” he asked, “expects to see a hundred black men cultivating tobacco, corn, cotton, rice, or anything else, on lands in New Mexico . . . ?” The territories won in the late war, he added, were “destined” to be free, and northern efforts to ram the Wilmot Proviso down southern throats were ill-advised. Why taunt the South with the Proviso given the geographic and climatic realities? “I would not take pains uselessly to reaffirm an ordinance of nature, nor to reenact the will of God.” For Webster, if men North and South of the Mason and Dixon line simply acknowledged that slavery had no future in the new territories, much of the current rancor would dissolve.

Nonetheless, on other issues, Webster argued that each section had legitimate complaints. He agreed with the South, for example, that abolitionism was pernicious. The operations of abolition societies had, over the previous twenty years, “produced nothing good or valuable . . . .” All that they had achieved was to anger the South and encourage a counter extremism and agitation. Without impugning the motives of individual antislavery activists, Webster offered a sharp critique of their moral absolutism, suggesting in the process that abolitionism was not morally uplifting, but rather morally obtuse and unChristian.


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Other southern grievances won less sympathy. Southerners' insistence on the suppression of northern petitions and legislative resolutions against slavery and newspaper comment critical of the South, Webster observed, were outside the bounds of government to influence.

To charges, most recently made in the Senate by Louisiana's Solomon Downs, that slavery was a more humane and practical system than the free labor system of the North, Webster offered a spirited and effective rebuttal.22 "Who," he asked, "are the laboring people of the North? . . . They are the people who till their own farms with their own hands; freeholders, educated men, independent men. Let me say, Sir, that five sixths of the whole property of the North is in the hands of laborers of the North; they cultivate their farms, they educate their children, they provide the means of independence. If they are not freeholders, they earn wages; these wages accumulate, are turned into capital, into new freeholds, and small capitalists are created. . . . And what can these people think when . . . the member from Louisiana undertakes to prove that the absolute ignorance and the abject slavery of the South are more in conformity with the high purposes and destiny of immortal, rational human beings, than the educated, the independent free labor of the North?"

In all of his comments to this point, Webster had maintained a relatively low key, but in the closing passages he deliberately shifted tone, to highlight his contention that secession as a response to sectional differences was unnatural, unthinkable, impossible. "Peaceable secession!" he exclaimed. "What would be the result? Where is the line to be drawn? What states are to secede? What is to remain American? What am I to be? An American no longer? Am I to become a sectional man, a local man, a separatist, with no country in common with the gentlemen who sit around me here? . . . No Sir! No Sir! There will be no secession!"

Rather than looking towards the dismemberment of the Union, Webster urged his listeners to remember their common heritage, and their magnificent mission. "Let us cherish those hopes which belong to us; let us devote ourselves to those great objects that are fit for our consideration and our action . . . Let us make our generation one of the strongest and brightest links in that golden chain which is destined, I fondly believe, to grapple the people of all the States to this Constitution for ages to come."

The virtues of American democracy, Webster concluded, were not theory, but fact. "In all its history," he observed, the American nation "has been beneficent; it has trodden down no man's liberty; it has crushed no State. Its daily respiration is liberty and patriotism; its yet youthful veins are full of enterprise, courage, and honorable love of glory and renown." Since its founding, the American republic had prospered and grown to cover a continent, bounded by "two great seas of the world." Nature itself pronounced a verdict for unity. Hence, at the close of his address, Webster summoned his audience to imagine the ornamental border of the buckler of Achilles:

Now, the broad shield complete, the artist crowned
With his last hand, and poured the ocean round;
In living silver seemed the waves to roll,
And beat the buckler's verge, and bound the whole.

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Webster's speech was an immediate sensation, not simply in Washington, but across the expanse of the land. Prominently featured in major newspapers, it was read by thousands of Americans, often with the most intense feelings. Webster himself franked several thousand reports of the speech, and more than 100,000 copies of a handsome pamphlet edition—its cost underwritten by northern business friends—were expeditiously printed and circulated. In the wake of the speech, letters commending its message inundated Webster from all parts of the nation. Significantly, some of the strongest reaction—virtually all favorable—came from the South. William Jones, an Alabama Democrat, claimed to speak for many when he offered Webster "my most heartfelt thanks for the noble & patriotic stand you have lately taken in the U.S. Senate for our common country." From a Virginian, John Pendleton, he learned that the speech had been received in that state "without distinction of party, unanimous & ardent approbation." James B. Thornton, of Memphis, Tennessee, put the matter succinctly: "Your speech, sir, has created new hopes [for the Union]."

Southern newspapers, on the whole, were equally ardent in embracing Webster's magnanimity. Even the normally radical Charleston Mercury described the Massachusetts senator's effort as "emphatically a great speech, noble in language, generous and conciliating in tone." It cannot have been entire coincidence that, in the wake of Webster's speech, North Carolina declined to send any delegates to the Nashville convention, and that Virginia turned a surprisingly cold shoulder to the enterprise.

In the North, the Seventh of March speech received a markedly different reception. Though Webster was cheered by letters from the likes of his old New Hampshire foe Isaac Hill, by editorials in the Boston Courier and the Daily Advertiser praising his patriotism, and by the dinners, public letters, and Union rallies organized by leaders of the business and professional classes, reaction to his speech in New England was mainly negative, in some quarters, virulently so. Webster's sentiments, the traditionally conservative Boston Atlas noted, "are not our sentiments. They are not, we venture to say, the sentiments of the Whigs of New England." Antislavery men were deeply dismayed, some to the point of disgust, that New England's greatest statesman and orator should reject the Wilmot Proviso and, worse, approve a strengthened Fugitive Slave Law. Ralph Waldo Emerson called Webster's absence of moral sensitivity "degrading to the country." "Infamy," he wrote, "has fallen on Massachusetts." The poet Whittier lamented "the light withdrawn which once he wore," and in his memorable poem, Ichabod, stigmatized Webster as a "fallen angel," whose soul had fled. Theodore Parker likened him to Benedict Arnold, Horace Mann compared him to the devil, and James Russell Lowell characterized him as a statesman "whose soul has been absorbed in tariffs, banks, and the constitution, instead of devoting himself to the freedom of the future." Webster's speech, the abolitionist Wendell Phillips declared in a Faneuil Hall meeting, reminded him of what might have happened during the Revolution if Sam Adams "had gone over to the British or John Hancock had ratted."


24. Jones to DW, March 17, 1850, Webster Papers, Library of Congress, mDW 30029; Thornton to DW, March 28, 1850, Webster Papers, Library of Congress, mDW 30138; Pendleton to DW, March 12, 1850, Webster Papers, Dartmouth College, mDW 29972. See also H.J. Anderson of Tennessee to DW, April 8, 1850, Webster Papers, LC, mDW 30201.

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The epithets doubtless stung, but they did not surprise or sway Webster. Convinced that his "truth-telling" approach, as he had put it to Charles H. Warren, was essential to a settlement of the current crisis and a return to normalcy, he plunged ahead with increased resolve. 29 As he told his old rival Isaac Hill, he would work "to the full extent of my power, to cause the bellows of useless and dangerous domestic controversy to sleep, & be still." 29

This was no small assignment. Passions were at a high pitch. As has frequently been the case in American history, political commitment tended to be least intense in the center of the political spectrum—precisely the position Webster had staked out. To stimulate and nurture a passion for moderation, and to reaffirm a broad and inspiring Unionism, was Webster's charge and his main priority in 1850.

Throughout the spring and summer, he waged this fight with patience, consummate skill and, for a man his age, remarkable vigor and spirit. He was active on various fronts—in the Senate, for example, he continued his efforts to pass Clay's compromise, either as a package or, preferably, section in separate bills. At home in Massachusetts for several weeks in March and April, and again later in the spring, he wrote and planted newspaper pieces favorable to compromise, responded to public letters endorsing his speech, and debated in the press with his critics. 30


29. Webster to Isaac Hill, April 20, 1850, Webster Papers, Dartmouth College, mDW 30296.

30. Webster's activities are documented in his correspondence for this period and in Fuess, Webster, chap. 25.

It would be poetic to say that Webster's speech and his unstinting efforts on behalf of compromise in subsequent months resolved the great issue. But it would not be true. For all its undoubted power as a discourse, there is no evidence that Webster's Seventh of March address changed a single vote in the Congress. 31 At most, one can safely say that Webster's eloquence forced Americans to think deeply about their Union and to weigh its benefits and their republican heritage against the evident perils of secession and war. If Webster did not sway votes, he did call into play emotions, as David Potter has observed, "which prepared the American people for conciliation"—no mean achievement. 32

Problems nonetheless remained with Webster's approach to the issues that divided the country, not least of which was the growing strain of opinion in the North that a compromise on slavery was morally wrong. Webster had spoken, and continued to press, for constitutional principles and the observance of law—hence his support for a strengthened statute regarding fugitive slaves, on the ground that the Congressional Act of 1793 mandated the reclamation of slave property. 33 In a strict legal sense, Webster was on sound ground, but what he refused to concede, in 1850 or later, was that other considerations may be relevant in the making and enforcing of laws. Webster's enemies, the rabid antislavery men of the North, argued with


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Similarly, Webster's impatience with those who sought legislative prohibition of slavery in the new territories was based on premises that were at best debatable and at worst, dead wrong. He sincerely believed that the climate and soil in New Mexico was inhospitable to slavery, thus rendering "abstract" the whole question of legally protecting or forbidding the introduction of slaves across its borders. The weakness of this perspective was at least twofold. First, Webster underestimated, perhaps even willfully ignored, the adaptability of slavery to non-plantation situations, notably in mines and factories. For generations slaves had performed effectively in such circumstances, and there was no natural bar to their doing so in New Mexico.  

Second, Webster failed to grasp the depth of public opinion on each side of the question. Slavery in the territories was not merely an abstraction, but a matter that affected thousands of lives—and


35. Ronald L. Lewis, Coal, Iron, and Slaves: Industrial Slavery in Maryland and Virginia, 1715-1865 (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979), is one of the best recent studies in a large and growing literature on this subject. See also, for the New Mexico context, Loomis Morton Ganaway, New Mexico and the Sectional Controversy, 1846-1861 (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1944), chaps. 1-2. In fairness to Webster, it should be noted that whatever the possibilities were for slavery in New Mexico, slaveholders did not migrate there after 1850. The census of 1860 reported not a single slave in New Mexico. Fehrenbacher, Dred Scott Case, p. 176.

"Daniel Webster Studying Constitution." One legacy of Webster's Seventh of March Speech and its subsequent defense, was Webster's virtually mythical association with the federal constitution and the Union. Barry Faulkner captured this myth by painting Webster as a young boy reading the constitution. (NHHS collections)
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The balance sheet on Webster and the Crisis of the Union is difficult to draw, entailing as it does the kinds of “moral” judgments Webster himself was loathe to make. To his critics in 1850 and for many years after his death, Webster was hopelessly obtuse, a man without conscience, wed to the pocketbook and interested, above all, in personal gain.

There is, to be sure, a measure of truth to this, both over the course of Webster’s career and in his final years, when his quest for the presidency took on an air of desperation. Yet that measure of truth is not the truth. Webster’s critics failed to credit his deep commitment to sectional comity, within the constitutional system established by the framers, just as they failed to acknowledge the depth and sincerity of his attachment to the “sacred trust” implicit in American experience.36 On a less elevated plane, they failed to see the immediacy of the problem that Webster was addressing—a true secession crisis at a juncture when the outcome was even less “inevitable” than that following the crisis of 1861.

Americans had essentially two choices in 1850: to fight with one another or to calm down and accept some middle ground, be it in the form of a compromise or, at minimum, a kind of truce. To Webster’s relief, and the relief of the great mass of the public, the middle ground ultimately prevailed in the sweltering months of that summer. Credit for this belonged in large measure to Clay and Webster, to the new president, Millard Fillmore (who took on Webster as his chief adviser and pursued a firm pro-compromise course) and, not least, to Senator Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois, who in August and September shrewdly broke Clay’s stalled omnibus bill into its constituent parts and engineered different majorities for each individual bill.37

The compromise of 1850 was a milestone in American history. Not only was it the last great episode in which the magnificent Senate triumverate—Clay, Calhoun, and Webster—would share the stage, it was a signal to the American people that some reckoning with slavery would have to be made. Webster tried with all his energy and talent to eliminate the slavery issue from politics. He failed.

But in other respects, his role in the crisis of 1850 was triumphant. By his labors, he bought time for younger statesmen to work out new arrangements to contain sectional strife over slavery, if indeed such arrangements were possible. And when they proved not to be possible, Webster’s fervent and heart touching case for the American nation, wed to the growing moral strength of the antislavery crusade, made possible the successful prosecution of a terrible but irrepressible conflict between the North and South. Under the leadership of Abraham Lincoln, the American people reaffirmed the principles of 1776 as well as the perpetuity of the nation, and they did so on terms Webster had made so familiar. “Liberty and Union, now and forever, one and inseparable.”

36. Paul C. Nagel, This Sacred Trust: American Nationality, 1798-1898 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971) is helpful on Webster’s contribution to this theme.

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The balance sheet on Webster and the Crisis of the Union is difficult to draw, entailing as it does the kinds of “moral” judgments Webster himself was loathe to make. To his critics in 1850 and for many years after his death, Webster was hopelessly obtuse, a man without conscience, wed to the pocketbook and interested, above all, in personal gain.

There is, to be sure, a measure of truth to this, both over the course of Webster’s career and in his final years, when his quest for the presidency took on an air of desperation. Yet that measure of truth is not the truth. Webster’s critics failed to credit his deep commitment to sectional comity, within the constitutional system established by the framers, just as they failed to acknowledge the depth and sincerity of his attachment to the “sacred trust” implicit in American experience. 36 On a less elevated plane, they failed to see the immediacy of the problem that Webster was addressing—a true secession crisis at a juncture when the outcome was even less “inevitable” than that following the crisis of 1861.

Americans had essentially two choices in 1850: to fight with one another or to calm down and accept some middle ground, be it in the form of a compromise or, at minimum, a kind of truce. To Webster’s relief, and the relief of the great mass of the public, the middle ground ultimately prevailed in the sweltering months of that summer. Credit for this belonged in large measure to Clay and Webster, to the new president, Millard Fillmore (who took on Webster as his chief adviser and pursued a firm pro-compromise course) and, not least, to Senator Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois, who in August and

September shrewdly broke Clay’s stalled omnibus bill into its constituent parts and engineered different majorities for each individual bill. 37

The compromise of 1850 was a milestone in American history. Not only was it the last great episode in which the magnificent Senate triumverate—Clay, Calhoun, and Webster—would share the stage, it was a signal to the American people that some reckoning with slavery would have to be made. Webster tried with all his energy and talent to eliminate the slavery issue from politics. He failed.

But in other respects, his role in the crisis of 1850 was triumphant. By his labors, he bought time for younger statesmen to work out new arrangements to contain sectional strife over slavery, if indeed such arrangements were possible. And when they proved not to be possible, Webster’s fervent and heart touching case for the American nation, wed to the growing moral strength of the antislavery crusade, made possible the successful prosecution of a terrible but irrepressible conflict between the North and South. Under the leadership of Abraham Lincoln, the American people reaffirmed the principles of 1776 as well as the perpetuity of the nation, and they did so on terms Webster had made so familiar. “Liberty and Union, now and forever, one and inseparable.”

36. Paul C. Nagel, This Sacred Trust: American Nationality, 1798-1898 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971) is helpful on Webster’s contribution to this theme.