

# ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

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## The Great Triumvirate: Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, and John C. Calhoun

By David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler

Beginning in the War of 1812, Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, and John C. Calhoun achieved a national prominence that endured for more than four decades. As they rose in fame, they personified the regions that quarreled over expansion, finance, foreign policy, and slavery. Webster, who originally represented New Hampshire and then Massachusetts in the House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate, reflected a New England Yankee's promotion of merchant trade and rejection of slavery. The South Carolinian Calhoun personified the South's gradual transformation from staunch nationalism after the War of 1812 to the belligerent sectionalism that caused all the trouble during the 1850s. Henry Clay was from Kentucky, which at the time made him a westerner, and he too mirrored his section's role in the unfolding national strife. The West was seen as a potential counterweight by North and South as the two sections sought to prevail politically in Congress. When they quite literally took the argument outside and began shooting at each other, the West became the decisive military counterweight for the Union. It was fitting, for through it all Henry Clay had been the most consistent nationalist of the three. Over the course of his long career, he refused to tolerate anything that threatened the Union.

Because these three wielded often irresistible political influence during the sectional crises that led to the Civil War, their careers are linked to the catastrophe despite their having died roughly a decade before secession brought on the conflict. By then, they were called the "Great Triumvirate," a label that attests to their towering significance but misleads by suggesting that they more than occasionally cooperated for the good of the country. Rarely were they allies, and on those few occasions when they were, it was a shifting partnership between changing duets, not a solid trio, whose motives and goals could vary widely.

From disparate backgrounds, they possessed the kind of native intelligence and political acumen that usually make men rivals, and it is probably fortunate that they were strangers before meeting in the House of Representatives during the War of 1812. For a brief time after the war, antagonisms and differences did not impede the important work that the war and the subsequent peace required. As much could be said about an America that was united, healthy, and purposeful in 1815 but was destined for division, political infirmity, and aimlessness as the years wore on.

John Caldwell Calhoun was the last of them born (on March 18, 1782, to Webster's January 18 birthdate that year) and the first of them to die, passing away from tuberculosis in the spring of 1850 just as the debates over the crises of that year were heating up. Descended from Scots-Irish immigrants, Calhoun was a youthful prodigy, a fact that persuaded his family to continue his schooling despite its somewhat straitened circumstances after the death of Calhoun's father. John did not disappoint their expectations. He graduated from Yale in 1804 and then honed legal skills at Tapping Reeve's academy in Litchfield, Connecticut. Practicing law was a natural avenue to politics, and Calhoun won a seat in the South Carolina legislature in 1807. Four years later at age thirty he was in that extraordinary freshmen class of the 13<sup>th</sup> Congress that took the country to war with Britain in 1812. Calhoun entered the House of Representatives in the same year as Henry Clay and became a dedicated member of Clay's War Hawk faction. By then, Calhoun was a handsome man with a beautiful, rich wife—his cousin Floride (pronounced Florida) Bonneau Colhoun. Yet, he was humorless, could be severe, and seemed to be always climbing. He and Clay shared an allegiance to Jeffersonian Republicanism, but it was Clay's election to Speaker in the opening days of the 1812 session that made him a valuable friend for Calhoun.

It was a fruitful partnership as long as it lasted. Nobody could have been more different from Calhoun than the happy-go-lucky fellow from Kentucky with the deep baritone voice that mesmerized audiences and made women forget his peculiar looks. Unlike the dark Carolinian, Clay was far from handsome, never bookish, and seldom melancholy. He charmed as a way of persuading and laughed even when troubled, a habit that a close friend described as Clay's donning a "mask of smiles."<sup>1</sup>

Henry Clay was born in 1777 in Virginia's Hanover County. His family was already of modest circumstances when his father died when Henry was only four, but he was a promising lad who eventually became Chancellor George Wythe's secretary. The post made him the latest in a long line of prominent Virginians mentored by Wythe, including Thomas Jefferson and James Monroe. Wythe arranged for Clay to apprentice in the law, and by the time he migrated to Lexington, Kentucky, in 1797, Clay was a member of the bar with a polished air and commanding presence. He established an excellent legal reputation in the Bluegrass, married a rich girl, and built a fine home. He also unsuccessfully tried to persuade the state to adopt gradual emancipation, an unpopular initiative that would have damaged the career of a less popular man. Clay instead became a force in the Kentucky legislature and so irked Federalist opponents that he was wounded in a duel with one of them. The legislature twice selected him to fulfill unexpired terms of Kentucky's U.S. Senators, but the experience convinced him that he preferred the boisterous nature of the House of Representatives, a place that for the next thirteen years would be his political home with him often its master as Speaker.

Clay used his influence in the House of Representatives to secure a declaration of war on Great Britain in 1812, a move that allied him with Calhoun but made Daniel

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<sup>1</sup> David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler, *Henry Clay: The Essential American* (New York: Random House, 2010), 214.

Webster an adversary. Like his New England neighbors, Webster ardently opposed the war with Britain, and he hinted that any such conflict would warrant the region's secession from the Union, an early (and temporary) stand that his political enemies never let him forget in later years. Webster, however, was a natural contrarian—he once proclaimed that he was seldom persuaded but never forced—and that trait was on full display as he became one of the few antiwar freshmen in the 13<sup>th</sup> Congress. He excoriated Republican opponents and the Madison administration for being delusional in starting the fight with Britain and feckless in waging it. He would not be tamed, even when Clay tried to mollify him with an appointment to the House Foreign Relations Committee, a move prompted by Clay's astute evaluation of Webster as a dangerous opponent.

Like Clay and Calhoun, Webster was born in a rural, farming community. Growing up in Salisbury, New Hampshire, he early displayed the exceptional intelligence that prompted his family to send him to fine schools (Philip Exeter Academy and Dartmouth), which made him a northern counterpart for the northern educated southerner Calhoun. That is where the similarities ended, though. New Hampshire was far different from the agrarian South of Clay and Calhoun. Those two were grounded in Jeffersonian Republicanism, but Webster came of age in Federalist-dominated New England. He also became a superb lawyer with a quick mind that obsessed over details but was able to frame almost poetic legal arguments with a matchless voice. Though legal work handsomely rewarded a man of Webster's talents, he never liked the law and always dreamed of being an author. The literary career remained an unfulfilled dream as he married and set up his legal practice in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. He also became involved in state politics as an outspoken Federalist.

Webster could be rash and impetuous, as his reckless talk of separating from the Union showed. It was a flaw not unlike Clay's, and it pointed to a political daring in Clay and Webster that was missing in the dry theoretician that Calhoun became. Calhoun tried to rise by grasping the main chance, and he rarely made rash mistakes. Calhoun's mistakes in fact were almost always the result of bad judgment. Webster was a swarthy, hulking presence with a baritone to match Clay's, though it was usually deployed at such volume that audiences felt Webster's voice as much as heard it. Struck by his complexion, admirers called him "Black Dan"—a nickname that one day would become a pejorative—but he also acquired another, "Godlike Daniel," which matched Clay's "Prince Hal" and "Star of the West," making them like folkloric figures featured in parables, quaint tales, and the kind of anecdotes that humanized campaign biographies. Calhoun earned his share of monikers, too, but they were seldom admiring ones.

In 1815, the War of 1812's conclusion seemingly removed the only bar to cooperation between three men who had become confirmed nationalists. Webster moved from carping about Republicans to collaborating with Calhoun to revive the Bank of the United States. Webster also judged Clay's plans for internal improvements and the promotion of American industry as sensible and appealing. Unfortunately, the three men's congeniality was as brief as the nation's. For the United States, the Missouri crisis

and the tortured compromise that resolved it abruptly closed “the Era of Good Feelings.” For the men, it was a combination of their vaulting ambitions, their quests for the presidency, and their gradually emerging perception that fundamental philosophical differences separated them, just as those differences were estranging the sections from which they hailed.

A major point of contention between Clay and Calhoun arose after Calhoun’s nationalist period and centered on the plan called the American System, whose particulars Calhoun had supported for a time after the War of 1812. Clay was the American System’s major advocate, and the three elements that comprised it and the techniques for their implementation rapidly became sources of irritation for state’s rights Democrats in the South. The foundation for the American System was the Second Bank of the United States (BUS), a central financial institution designed to control the currency supply and provide for sound credit throughout the country. As noted, Calhoun originally supported the BUS, but it competed with local banks, which made it unpopular with state banking interests, and it constrained credit, which vexed debtors and cash-strapped planters. These people became important constituencies for Calhoun, who noted that “to be too national has, indeed, been considered by many, even my friends, my greatest political fault.”<sup>2</sup>

The American System also called for a robust program of internal improvements, projects that today we know as infrastructure. Early on, Calhoun like Clay believed that road and canal construction would tie the sections together economically through transportation links that facilitated commerce and encouraged interdependence. Aside from the benefits to the economy, a salubrious result from mutual economic interests would be the blunting of sharp sectional disagreements over slavery. It was the hope that after a time disunion would be too costly for even the most disgruntled sectionalist to consider. Yet Calhoun gradually gravitated to a localism that caviled over having the government using money for projects that benefitted only one section or even a particular state. More than that practical objection, however, his opposition to the practice would inform his most telling insights in political philosophy.

The most controversial part of the American System was the protective tariff that was meant to shield domestic manufacturing from foreign competition. Before the Sixteenth Amendment authorized direct taxation on income by the federal government, tariffs, excises, and the sale of public lands were its principal sources of revenue. Protectionism changed the tariff’s goal from raising revenue to discouraging the purchase of imported goods by tacking on import duties that made them artificially expensive. The advantages for American manufacturers were obvious. Selling in a protected market meant larger profits, which encouraged expansion and innovation. Yet the ramifications were also obvious. Farmers and planters paying higher prices for domestic goods felt victimized by manufacturing interests. Because most manufacturing operations were

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<sup>2</sup> Paul C. Nagel, *The Sacred Trust: American Nationality, 1778-1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 66.

outside the South, the protective tariff became a distressing sectional issue that encouraged the growing polarization over slavery.

In fact, the protective tariff caused a sectional crisis more serious than the discord over Missouri. In 1828 Calhoun wrote *The South Carolina Exposition and Protest* that condemned the tariff policy for the economic hardships it worked on the South. He tried to hide his connection to the pamphlet because he was John Quincy Adams's vice-president at the time and would soon be Andrew Jackson's, and his prescription for opposing federal authority placed him in an awkward position both politically and ethically. Drawing on the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions of 1798, Calhoun argued that states had a right as well as a responsibility to protect their citizens from either obnoxious or unconstitutional federal statutes. The theory held that a state legislature could nullify federal law by blocking its enforcement. Clay and Webster thought nullification was most ill-conceived. In the Senate, Webster debated Calhoun's spokesman Robert Young Hayne about the matter in April 1830, and though he hardly demolished Hayne in these lively exchanges, Webster's commanding presence, booming voice, and sentimental message won the day. For the rest of the nineteenth century, schoolboys would memorize Webster's exaltation of the Union that firmly established him as his country's champion rather than a mere special pleader for New England's interests.

At the time, Webster failed to convince the angry Palmetto State, and when South Carolina nullified the protective tariff in 1832, it nearly caused a civil war. Andrew Jackson threatened to use force to collect the tariff in Charleston and Beaufort, and South Carolina Nullifiers responded by arming their state militia. The specter of the nation broken and bloodied brought Clay and Calhoun together again to craft the Compromise of 1833, which adjusted the tariff and gave everyone an opportunity to back away from the precipice while saving face. It was, however, the last meaningful cooperation between them. After the Nullification Crisis, Calhoun rejected the nationalism of his early career and by the end of the 1830s he had become a hardline southern sectionalist. Events in the 1840s made him a southern nationalist who never directly advocated secession but did not take pains to discourage those who did.

Meanwhile, Clay tried to defend his American System from dismantlement, but the problems over the tariff were only the beginning, and the crushing blow came when Jackson vetoed the early renewal of the BUS's charter, thus removing the lynchpin of the entire plan. Moreover, Jackson's extraordinary display of executive prerogative in the indiscriminate use of the veto for policy preferences rather than constitutionality gave rise to the Whig Party, so named for its resistance to "King Andrew's" executive usurpation. Clay founded the party, Webster joined it, and Andrew Jackson became their archenemy. The Whig concept of legislative supremacy became a principal philosophical legacy for the Republican Party, the heirs of Whiggism in other ways, and when the Civil War required remarkably enhanced presidential power, it troubled Republicans, including Abraham Lincoln, who admired Henry Clay more than any other statesman.

Though their work in the legislature earned the most renown, Clay, Webster, and Calhoun served in the executive branch as well. Calhoun was unique among the three for being vice president, but he was also unique among vice presidents for serving two consecutive terms in that office from 1825 to 1832 under two different men who despised each other, John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson. Calhoun's most distinguished achievements were as James Monroe's secretary of war (1817-1825) when he instituted important reforms in the post-War of 1812 military. Less impressive was his work as John Tyler's last secretary of state, a brief stint in 1844-45 that revealed Calhoun's growing preoccupation with protecting slavery and promoting the interests of the South.

Webster was secretary of state twice, the first time for the unsettled Harrison-Tyler presidencies (1841-43) during which he negotiated the important Webster-Ashburton treaty with Great Britain that settled disputes over the Canadian border and resolved other long-standing issues. His second time in the post was from 1850 to his death in 1852 when he most notably helped President Millard Fillmore retire some problems persisting from the sectional crisis of 1850 while providing gravitas to Fillmore's otherwise unremarkable cabinet.

Henry Clay was singular among the three for his diplomatic service as an influential member of the peace commission that negotiated the Treaty of Ghent to end the War of 1812. Yet Clay was also and notoriously John Quincy Adams's secretary of state following the controversial election of 1824. Angry Jacksonians charged that Clay had corruptly bargained for the post in exchange for supporting Adams over Jackson in the House vote. From that troubled start, Clay's time at State would be riddled by frustration and disappointment as Jackson's lieutenants aimed to destroy him personally as well as politically.

The legislature, however, was the true home of the Great Triumvirate, especially for Clay, who embraced George Washington's principle that Congress was the first wheel of government, supreme in everything federal and the most certain bulwark against executive excess. Wielding a peerless ability to persuade, Clay in Congress committed himself to the growth of his American System and the preservation of the Union. It was a sign of anxious times that in both endeavors he scored at best incomplete and temporary triumphs.

Clay's American System anticipated modern concepts of government interaction with the economy. The goal was to advance a national program of material progress, fiscal control, and industrial encouragement. The vision achieved an apparently irresistible popularity after the War of 1812 when the Bank of the United States was revived, protective tariffs were established, and the digging of canals and cutting of roads proceeded with the help of federal funding. The American System became the foundation for the Whig Party, but much of it worried southern Whigs as much as it did their Democrat neighbors. Many of those Whigs had drifted into the party out of disgust with Andrew Jackson's executive encroachments rather than from an enthusiastic embrace of a central bank, tariffs, and internal improvements.

Sectional discontent always threatened Whig unity, but it also made the American System vulnerable to attacks by Jacksonians. They relentlessly condemned it as a way for special interests to pilfer the federal treasury and feather local nests. Clay could not forever fend off such attacks, and in the end he was reduced to salvaging certain of the American System's parts rather than promoting the whole as a coherent agenda.

By no means was Clay alone in his apprehensions about the growing power of the presidency, but he was the most stalwart opponent. Andrew Jackson humbled the Supreme Court with his defiance of Chief Justice John Marshall's ruling approving the Cherokee challenge to U.S. Indian policy and then altered the court itself with appointees who adjusted decisions to comply with Jackson's extraordinary view of executive power. Similarly, Jackson's behavior during the fight with the BUS established, in Clay's view, an appalling set of precedents, beginning with the infamous veto of the BUS charter on the grounds of political preference rather than constitutional law. The veto employed in this way demoted the legislative branch to a position subordinate to the president by requiring extraordinary majorities to challenge his will. The discipline of political parties approximately balanced in the legislature made extraordinary majorities unlikely, as Clay was chagrined to discover during John Tyler's presidency.

Tyler had been a vice-presidential candidate on the Whig ticket, but he was actually a state rights Democrat accidentally elevated to the presidency by William Henry Harrison's death only a month after Harrison took office. Clay and the Whigs were nonplussed by President Tyler's opposition to the Whig program, a stance that found expression in repeated vetoes of a new central bank, behavior that brought Andrew Jackson to mind. The effort to embarrass Tyler into submission by arranging for his cabinet to resign en masse miscarried when Daniel Webster refused to step down as secretary of state. Clay judged it as a startling display of opportunism at his expense, and a relationship that had never been warm was to be chilly for the rest of his and Webster's lives.

By the time James K. Polk defeated Clay for the presidency in 1844, the American System seemed to be at best a quaint relic whose time had passed. It was likely small consolation that after Polk the return of relatively passive presidents vindicated Clay and the Whigs. Yet it is apparent in retrospect that the passive executive could not steady the political drift in the 1850s that helped bring about secession and war. In that lay the ultimate irony of Clay's career, which always had as its core the preservation of the Union through compromise. By 1850, the act of compromise itself became another facet of political drift eroding a meaningful solution for an increasingly insoluble problem

Had Daniel Webster pursued his literary ambitions he might have preserved a more complete sense of how he viewed the American political system's strengths and weighed its weaknesses. As it is, the most systematic treatment Webster gave us is inferred through the parsing of his speeches and his court pleadings. The constant theme is a clear statement that spanned his lifetime. Webster's reverence for the principles of

the founding as embodied in the Constitution and given form by the Union guided his politics from the start to the end. Protecting those principles, the Constitution, and the Union was the obligation of his generation, and anything that threatened those institutions had to be demolished, whether it was abolitionism or secession. “The great trust,” Webster said, “now descends to new hands.”<sup>3</sup>

Virtually everything Daniel Webster said was a celebration of America as a beacon in the darkness of a less fortunate world. He lauded the blessing of learning in an intellectually free society and the ingenuity of entrepreneurs in a commercially vibrant environment. He exalted “broad, representative, popular systems” as “practicable” examples for Europe as it periodically resorted to revolution in search of liberty.<sup>4</sup>

A devotee of Edmund Burke’s concept of ordered liberty and tradition as the helm that plots a steady course, Webster insisted that reforms of government systems should only “do what was necessary and no more and to do that with the utmost temperance and prudence.” Property rights and the sanctity of contracts merited protection for reasons other than the rational ones of ensuring investments and holding parties to good-faith agreements. Let the foundations of property and contract sink, and the economy would collapse under uncertainty. Worse, the principles of responsibility and the rewards for stability would be hopelessly impaired.<sup>5</sup>

These seemingly narrow economic positions were actually part of a larger, more encompassing philosophy that embraced stability as a way to foil federalism’s efferent trend to disunion while checking its potential for centralization. Properly understood, federalism made localism compatible with a degree of concentrated authority. When localism inclined to separation, however, as it did when discontent over slavery threatened the Union, Webster agreed with Clay that the benefits of common commerce were the most effective way to smooth differences and promote consensus. The nationalization of the commerce power would be a major point of friction with Calhoun, who extolled state rights, and Webster’s sometimes quixotic efforts to have his view validated by the Supreme Court met with enough disappointment to sour him on the high tribunal that he perceived as increasingly parochial.

Most of all, though, it was Webster’s insistence that America did not have stark class divisions that put him at odds with Calhoun. The southerner, heavily influenced by his reading of David Ricardo, predicted that capital and labor was fated to clash as it did in Europe. Webster countered that the broad ownership of property in America marked its fundamental and most salutary differences with Europe. It was the reason, he believed,

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<sup>3</sup> James W. McIntyre, ed., *The Writings and Speeches of Daniel Webster*, 18 vols. (New York: Little, Brown, and Co., 1903), 1:253.

<sup>4</sup> Merrill D. Peterson, *The Great Triumvirate: Webster, Clay, and Calhoun* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 396.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Webster, *The Works of Daniel Webster*, 6 vols, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1853), 6:221.



that a large and predominant middle class made the very rich and the very poor less relevant as sources of social discontent.

Jacksonians early cultivated the tactic of demonizing opponents as heartless toadies of the rich, and they described Webster as just another minion of the wealthy remorselessly exploiting the working poor, but Webster took sincere offense at the charge and vehemently challenged it at every turn. A sacred duty of legislators, he insisted, was to create a stable economic environment. Sensible fiscal policies were not the device of exploitation but the engine of strong manufacturing and widespread employment. Labor in that setting could earn decent wages while secure in the knowledge that Franklin's admonition about saved pennies was more than a quaint saying. Rather, it held the real promise of economic gain and social improvement. Europe's hidebound class structure determined a man's status at birth and did worse than lock him in it for life; it predetermined the status of his children and their children. America not only renounced the fetters of class but opened a thousand doors of opportunity. Labor and capital became so intermingled as to be indistinguishable. Yeomen became free holding farmers, and apprentices one day would hold in their pockets the keys to their own shops. Education was key to this happy chain of events. For Webster, America's educational opportunities for ordinary people meant that humble jobs would never be humiliating. That was the pledge in the readily available tools for improvement. The lowliest man willing to work hard and make plans would rise.

As noted, Webster never wrote any of this down in a studied or systematic way. Although deeply grounded in classical literature and well-read in science, Webster resembled Clay in his inclination for the practical rather than the abstract. Both men found polemics more appealing than philosophy and both had a prodigious mental storehouse of quotations they could deploy with agility. In Webster's case, his manner gained him an undeserved reputation for superior erudition. He sometimes exhibited, though, the flaw of the facile mind. As he grew older his belief in extemporaneous inspiration could make him lazy in preparation, and some of his last public appearances were embarrassing.

Clay, Webster, and Calhoun shared the belief that the republic could survive only if it were committed to preserving the founders' vision. The attitude made them reactive to events, though not necessarily reactionary in their fundamental outlook. Clay and Webster, in fact, exhibited a buoyancy that stemmed from their temperaments as much as from an intellectual engagement with large ideas. Calhoun, on the other hand, often succumbed to a melancholy view of people as untrustworthy guardians of their own liberty and of events as almost always portending calamity. Clay once caricatured him: "tall, careworn, with furrowed brow, haggard, and intensely gazing, looking as if he were dissecting the last and newest abstraction which sprang from the metaphysician's brain, and muttering to himself, in half-uttered sounds, 'This is indeed a real crisis!'"<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Cong. Globe, 27<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1st Sess. 344-5 (1841).

This was no exaggeration of a man who believed that democracy celebrated license over liberty, that centralism promoted remotely administered tyranny, and that abolition destabilized orderly economic and social transactions. The British writer Harriet Martineau described Calhoun as “the cast-iron man, who looks as if he had never been born and never could be extinguished.”<sup>7</sup> Calhoun should have been so lucky. His mettle was malleable, as Clay saw, and his life was framed by fears. Calhoun’s tuberculosis began to wear him down in 1845, and he quickly worsened as his voice grew frail and his rugged features became a gaunt shadow of their former vigor. His most prominent features—the arresting eyes, the aquiline nose, the severe mouth—became accentuated to the point of caricature. As the famous Matthew Brady daguerreotype of Calhoun seemed to prove, things burned within him, fires that consumed while lighting his eyes with an unsettling stare, marking a man who believed too much too deeply. In those final years, if he laughed at all, he laughed ruefully, without humor.<sup>8</sup>

He was the deepest thinker of the three. Strip away the connection to slavery and secession, and Calhoun’s ideas on democracy, majority rule, and minority rights are a seminal contribution to American political theory. Among the triumvirate, he alone left a coherent body of writings on political theory in four major essays, two from the nullification controversy and two he produced twenty years later at the end of his life. The first two of these —“The South Carolina Exposition and Protest” (1828) and “The Fort Hill Address” (1831)—are the less cogent of the lot but only because they were obviously efforts to provide a rationale for South Carolina’s challenge of the protective tariff. The other two pieces were “A Disquisition on Government” and “A Discourse on the Constitution and Government of the United States”, which Calhoun wrote in that order beginning in 1846, about the time of the Wilmot Proviso debates.<sup>9</sup>

His labors on the “Disquisition” and “Discourses” sapped his energy, and the latter of the essays would not be published until after his death. They are nevertheless an exceptional window on the workings of a first-class mind that disclose how Calhoun viewed the American political system as it was beginning to plunge into an almost unceasing sectional argument. In that, they also show how the country came to the serious disagreements of 1850, which were about more than the metrics of populations and the fate of western territories. On a deeper level, they were about the purpose of the Union as an instrument of democratic government. The traditions that had developed

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<sup>7</sup> Martineau, *Retrospect of Western Travel*, 3 vols. (London: Saunders and Otley, 1838), 1:243.

<sup>8</sup> Oliver Dyer, *Great Senators of the United States Forty Years Ago, 1848-49* (New York: Robert Bonner’s Sons, 1899), chap. 3.

<sup>9</sup> “The South Carolina Exposition [and Protest]” and “The Fort Hill Address” are in John C. Calhoun, *The Works of John C. Calhoun*, 6 vols. (New York: Appleton, 1854), 6: 2-94. Sometimes called “The Fort Hill Letter,” the address was officially titled “Address on the Relation which States and the General Government Bear to Each Other.” “Disquisition” and “Discourse” are in *Works*, volume 1. Although he essentially finished “Disquisition” before his death, it’s not likely that he had the time or energy to edit it carefully, and it is certain that he was never able to take “Discourse” beyond a rough draft, which accounts for the comparatively ragged nature of the work itself, despite the fact that it clearly reflects his thinking in the months before the sectional crises of 1850. Traces of that are easily identifiable in the speech he prepared for March 4 of that year. See Calhoun, *Works*, 6: vi.

from the positivism of Henry Clay and Daniel Webster had become strikingly at odds with a southern view shaped by the South's minority status. From that perspective, Calhoun thought that organic changes in the constitutional framework were the only solution to the country's problems.

It was strange that he believed this. Of the three Calhoun most avidly embraced the existing order. Yet his way of defining that order paradoxically made him willing to support radical change as the only way to squash the greatest danger to liberty, which Calhoun believed was government corruption.<sup>10</sup> Early on he thought that the power of the states could preserve southern liberty under a corrupt federal government, but only if the power of the states remained unimpaired and southerners were willing to use it for resistance. This concept of muscular and meaningful states' rights was the basis for his theory of nullification, and though the theory failed in application in 1833, Calhoun remained convinced that it was a sound way to limit government, if only someone had the nerve to use it. For him, the United States always had been and always would be "an assemblage of nations" held together by the consent of constituencies with the overarching stipulation that they had never surrendered "their separate and independent existence."<sup>11</sup>

Calhoun's supporters claimed that this was a direct legacy of Jeffersonian republicanism pure and simple, and for a time many southerners accepted Calhoun's version of the Jeffersonian tradition as an astute intellectual modification to protect the sectional minority the South was becoming. Yet Calhoun's writings are marinated in nostalgia and alarm rather than Jefferson's optimism and rationalism. Jefferson's celebration of natural rights that informed the Declaration of Independence is noticeably missing in Calhoun's philosophy as it leans away from Locke and toward Hobbes.<sup>12</sup>

Calhoun's reality is the inequality of men rather than any leveling influence imbued by God-given inalienable rights. In fact, Calhoun saw government's main reason for being in its ability to bring order to the nasty, brutish, and short human condition. The danger was government's predisposition to increase its control for the sake of increasing its power. In Calhoun's philosophy, rights were neither natural nor inalienable. They proceeded from the law as a controlling authority that ideally set priorities rationally

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<sup>10</sup> Calhoun, *Works*, 2:614.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:81.

<sup>12</sup> In a telling digression in the "Disquisition" Calhoun explains that a correctly disposed democratic government balanced liberty and security to make possible intellectual and moral improvement. Government was therefore a divine force, the creation of God, or as Calhoun sometimes described Him, the "Infinite." It was the rational mechanism of government, not a blanket bestowal by nature, that granted human liberty as a reward rather than an indiscriminate endowment. Calhoun thus rejected the natural rights doctrine Jefferson used in the Declaration of Independence as preposterous, since clearly children in cradles depended on parents for basic needs, were subject to parental authority, and later had to obey the laws of where they were living. Calhoun's rejection of natural rights seems strange given the prevailing philosophy that had melded romanticism with Enlightenment ideals, but it was within another context that Calhoun concluded that natural rights as a concept had to be discarded. The statements about life and liberty in the Declaration of Independence had become a mainstay of the abolitionist movement. See Calhoun, *Works*, 1:58.

rather than sentimentally. Society achieved equilibrium by deftly balancing freedom and slavery. Freedom was for exemplary citizens of a master class; slavery was the natural lot of the unfit.

Calhoun saw the solutions for his time through a sectional lens. Disparate societal influences and economic conditions had made the naturally occurring slave class in the North merely different in form from the one in the South. Chattel bondage on the southern plantation was merely the counterpart of wage slavery in the northern factory. The contrasts in Calhoun's perception of these similar systems gave him evidence to exalt southern slavery over its northern counterpart. The southern plantation was more benevolent with its traditions of care from crib to grave. Northern factory owners cared nothing for people. Capitalism exploited them as laborers and blithely discarded them when they became aged or infirm. Rather than render judgments about this disparity in the two systems, Calhoun coldly concluded that the northern and southern systems beneficially coexisted. Social stability derived from southern slavery, which was a healthy counterweight to the endless agitation and clashes arising from capitalism's exploitation of labor.<sup>13</sup>

Calhoun's political theory fixated on the inevitable corruption of democratic systems. The most virtuous politicians would be eventually tempted to buy influence and sustain power with other people's money, especially when an expanded franchise disguised the real object of politics, which was to gain control of the public till. Majorities could shift, and the identities of the people who populated them could change, but the goal for everyone eventually became the same: achieve power by promising supporters material rewards and sustain power by brazenly dispensing favors. The self-interest of groups and self-serving politics posed the greatest danger to liberty by removing states' rights as a controlling influence on the federal government. As states became accustomed to the spoils flowing from ascendant central power, curbing central power would become impossible. Calhoun reprised arguments from the earliest days of the constitutional republic that criticized Alexander Hamilton's plan to assume state debts as a crafty way to master the states themselves.<sup>14</sup>

Calhoun's solution was not a reform of existing processes because he saw no way to force people to prefer principles over prevarication; rather he wanted to check potentially tyrannical majorities by empowering competing factions within them. He saw majorities as a more complex organism than a mass of numbers merely larger than its opposition. The complexity could be used to make government more virtuous as well as more responsive through devices to give the "concurrent majority" a voice. The result

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<sup>13</sup> "I care nothing about slavery," Calhoun insisted to a British visitor. "It is entirely a secondary question to me." He was convinced that capitalism's exploitation of labor in the North would throw the section "into a state of social dissolution." He believed the "system of the South is the counterpoise to this, and for that reason I wish to maintain it so as to bridge over the dangerous period, and enable the nation to arrive quietly, by careful study and experiment, at a higher social state." Redelia Brisbane, *Albert Brisbane: A Mental Biography with a Character Study* (Boston: Arena Publishing, 1893), 221-2; See Calhoun, *Works*, 3:180, for his idyllic description of harmony on a southern plantation.

<sup>14</sup> Calhoun, *Works*, 2:565-6.

would be better than a simple numerical majority because compromise and accommodation would be necessary to reconcile competing interests and promote a broad harmony. Calhoun noted that this was essentially the process that allowed the Constitution to be drafted and then ratified.<sup>15</sup>

Sectionally based majorities, such as the northern one created by a surging population and northern control of territorial expansion, had broken Madison's pledge in "Federalist No. 10" that diversity resulting from immense geographical scope would prevent tyranny by a majority. Instead, said Calhoun, the northern majority had collapsed constitutional protections, which required a new structure to restore the concept of the concurrent majority that had been the Constitution's original intent. He did not want to destroy the Union with secession (except as a last resort), but he did want to return its contours to the pre-constitutional framework that elevated state authority and shriveled the central government, a structure that recalled the Articles of Confederation.

He realized his defense of the South, and by extension slavery, rested on shaky ground clinging to a weak reed, though he didn't see the problem as stemming from obstructionism and fantasy. In the 1840s the character of sectionalism had changed as southern animosity over such issues as the bank and the tariff was subsumed by the northern determination to prevent the spread of slavery. Calhoun and many southerners feared it was only a prologue to the elimination of slavery itself. He also judged northern resolve as impervious to reasoned argument, which is how he saw the ideas in "Disquisition" and "Discourse". Given that frustration, he felt the need to knit the South into an equally impervious fabric of confrontation that could threaten the Union and bring the North to its senses.

That was the situation when Calhoun returned to the Senate after leaving the State Department in 1845, just in time for the heated arguments over the Wilmot Proviso that confirmed his worst suspicions about northern aims. Daniel Webster had become a fixture in the Senate, and as the argument over the fate of the Mexican Cession rapidly turned into another serious sectional crisis, Clay was persuaded in 1849 to end his retirement. He had been sorely disappointed by his loss to Polk in the 1844 presidential election, was deeply wounded when the Whigs passed him over for Zachary Taylor in 1848, and was suffering so from tuberculosis that he wanted only to spend his final days at his Lexington home. The seriousness of the political moment, however, summoned him for one last effort on the Union's behalf. All three men were suffering from age and illness.

Clay knew that Calhoun was certain to be an active opponent to compromise. He pinned his hopes on Webster. Shortly after arriving in Washington, he visited Webster to sketch out a proposed solution to the country's multiplying problems. Clay had drafted a set of ostensibly offsetting concessions that actually favored the North, but Webster was troubled by the certain reaction of New England to a fugitive slave law and only

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<sup>15</sup> Calhoun explained that "the assent of each taken separately" would amount to "the concurrence of all constituting the majority." See Calhoun, *Works*, 6:181.

promised to let Clay proceed without him in opposition. As had always been the case, the last partnership of the Great Triumvirate was a fragile ad hoc arrangement that circumstances could derail at any moment.

On January 29, 1850, Henry Clay rose in the Senate to propose “an amicable arrangement of questions in controversy between the free and slave states, growing out of the subject of slavery.” Clay enumerated those difficulties over two days the following week in a lengthy speech that spanned February 5-6. Neither Calhoun nor Webster were present in the chamber when Clay began on February 6; Calhoun was bedridden with the tuberculosis that would kill him in only a few weeks, and Webster was arguing a case before the Supreme Court. Yet the Senate, and by extension the ailing nation, heard Clay parse the problems and propose his solutions to them. California’s desire to enter the Union as a free state should be granted; the balance of the Mexican Cession that comprised New Mexico and Utah should be organized without restrictions on slavery (Clay had crafty reasons for framing his argument this way); slavery in the District of Columbia should not be assailed but the embarrassing slave trade in the nation’s capital would be ended; the South should have a revised and more effective measure that involved federal officers in the return of fugitive slaves. Nobody could doubt the seriousness of this episode. Clay described the problems as “bleeding wounds” that threatened to hemorrhage the life out of the Union.<sup>16</sup>

Northern and southern extremists violently opposed Clay’s solutions, but his proposals roused a strong center consisting of previously despondent Unionists, especially among southern Whigs. Clay also won a tactical victory in moving the focus of action from the executive to the legislature, a fact that angered President Zachary Taylor but had the salutary result of making the idea of a compromise at least viable. He also attracted support in the Democratic Party from men such as Lewis Cass and Stephen A. Douglas who offset the alienation of friends and the hostility of the administration.

As Clay suspected Calhoun was implacable and was the second of the Great Triumvirate to weigh in on the issue. He was absent with illness for the first month and a half of 1850, but he returned to the Senate in mid-February prepared to state the South’s case. In Calhoun’s view, compromise had become worse than pointless; it had become perilous. In an unprecedented bid to shape southern nationalism with a manifesto and with plans for a sectional emulation of the Continental Congress of 1775, Calhoun tried to reclaim leadership of a cause that was beginning to chafe under what it regarded as the blatant political aggression of the North. Calhoun’s manifesto was suitably radical in the form of the “Southern Address,” but its very radicalism gave southern congressional delegations pause. The proposed convention scheduled to meet in Nashville in June looked more promising, and from that momentum Calhoun began piecing together his ideas during February’s final days. He and everyone else knew that it would be his valediction.

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<sup>16</sup> Cong. Globe, 31st Cong., 1st Sess. Appendix 115-27 (1850).

Webster had a sense of Calhoun's intentions after he called on him on March 2, and they both saddened and alarmed him. Others would soon see why. By March 4, Calhoun was too frail to read the speech, so that day Virginia senator James Mason stood near the slumped figure of the dying Carolinian and presented it to the Senate.<sup>17</sup>

Calhoun was convinced that everything consequential had already been tried to calm sectional anger. Rather than bothering with the fruitless question of how to preserve the Union, he concentrated on the source of the disharmony that seemed destined to destroy the country. Calhoun blamed the North for its increasing hostility to southern institutions, which had begun in 1787 and had only become more obvious over the years. He said the North had deliberately changed the federal ideal in the Constitution to consolidate national authority with broad but bogus appeals to democracy. Simultaneously, the North blocked southern access to territories that could have sustained a sectional balance, a tactic whose purpose was now given away by plans to admit California as a free state. Meanwhile formerly firm bonds of Union were coming apart, as evidenced by divisions within Protestant denominations and national institutions.

Mason's delivery suited the confrontational tone of Calhoun's words, which matched the Taylor administration's obstinate dismissal of Clay's plan. Calhoun offered little beyond the vague allusion to some sort of constitutional amendment, possibly a hint of the plural executive armed with negatives that was in his manuscript of "Discourse". In any case, that March day Calhoun's purpose was confrontation, not conciliation.

Calhoun's last major address disheartened Clay and Webster because its author was an associate of long acquaintance and a man whose bitterness had made him a stranger in his own land. But it also struck most southerners as worse than a eulogy for the Union. It was a ghastly obituary served up while the patient still lived and, given Clay's prescriptions, was hopeful of recovery. That mood caused even some southerners who had endorsed the Nashville Convention to inch toward Clay's compromise proposals.

The defusing of the Nashville Convention was all but sealed three days later when Daniel Webster stood in the Senate chamber and solemnly intoned, "Mr. President, I wish to speak today, not as a Massachusetts man, nor as a Northern man, but as an American. . . ." He would, he said, "speak today for the preservation of the Union. 'Hear me for my cause.'"<sup>18</sup>

Everyone had known that Webster intended to have his say on March 7, and they rightly suspected that his words would be a response to the morbid prophecies of Calhoun. Yet nobody was certain of Webster's mind, and those who expected him to throw in with Zachary Taylor's plan, which was to do no more than admit California as a free state, were in for a shock.

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<sup>17</sup> Cong. Globe, 31st Cong., 1st Sess. 451-5 (1850).

<sup>18</sup> Webster's speech is in Cong. Globe, 31st Cong., 1st Sess. 476-83 (1850).

In the more than three hours that followed his impressive opening, Webster was uncharacteristically sluggish and his usually certain manner was tentative. He hesitated over words and left listeners at intervals suspended by lengthy silences. It gave the impression of deep meditation and a careful selection of words. That was likely true for several reasons. The one that nobody but Webster could have known was probably the foremost for his halting performance. It did not seem like it, but this was to be the most selfless act of Daniel Webster's career. He fittingly had saved it for the last, his finest hour.

He began innocuously enough by expressing puzzlement over what had happened to perceptions of slavery in the course of his life. He could recall when slavery was regarded in North and South alike as a plague upon the land and that its sequestration in the South had been by design, most notably by preventing its spread into the Northwest Territory. Webster reminded everyone that during his debate with Robert Y. Hayne in 1830, southerners had insisted that the South should be credited for that visionary policy. Now besotted by cotton, the South embraced slavery as a positive good and fought ferociously to extend it. Texas was an example of this astonishing change and its capacity to poison political discourse. But Texas, insisted Webster, was also fated by nature to be the last of slavery expansion because "some irreplaceable law, beyond the power of the action of the government" decreed it. He spoke of this "law" dictated by arid soil desert climes and the limits imposed by terrain as naturally barring slavery from the Mexican Cession. He marveled over the insistence to ban slavery where nature had already done so. Such persistence, he concluded, had to be the work of fanatics intent on winning their argument at any cost.

In that vein, Webster weighed northern and southern attitudes about slavery to parse what all the fuss was about. It was clear that slavery was anathema to the North, but abolitionists pursued a course in response to it that was politically unreasonable. On the other hand, southern secessionists were engaging in tedious blackmail with empty bluster about breaking the Union, an entity that Webster insisted was physically indivisible even if politically troubled.

Webster then moved to dangerous ground. He conceded that the South had a legitimate grievance about fugitive slaves being abetted by the North. It was a grievance, he said, that could be redressed by reinforcing extant constitutional arrangements. A reasonable accommodation, Webster said, was the fugitive slave bill proposed as part of the compromise under consideration.

It was the most stunning part of the speech. Nervous southerners grasped it like a lifeline. Many northerners saw it as a craven abandonment of principle, an act so terrible that it caused their instant estrangement. "Godlike Daniel" became for them "Black Dan" indeed. Even Webster's attempt to capture some of the old magic of his peroration on the Union during the Hayne debate twenty years earlier could not dull the sharp edge of the knife in his speech on March 7.



It is sad to consider that Webster's remarkable salvo was really the last discharge of the Great Triumvirate's batteries, for all that followed was the technical business of legislative details punctuated by the expected but sobering death of Calhoun on March 31. Otherwise, debates stalled as southerners balked over the possibility that northerners would find a way to increase their advantage by obtaining their free California and then renegeing on the South's fugitive slave law. That fear was the reason that Clay agreed to bundle his resolutions into one bill, unwisely making the compromise an all or nothing affair. Dubbed the "Omnibus Bill," it attracted diverse coalitions of opposition that in sum made the bill's success most uncertain, and when the crucial moment came, it fell short. While the Omnibus was a procedural mistake, the eventual if separate passing of its components justified Clay's original plan. And though Clay's initiative collapsed, it was his influence that compelled Congress to debate through the months of that dangerous spring, laying bare the bleak vision of Calhoun and giving Webster the chance to argue for a sectional rapprochement.

The crises of 1850 exposed the limits of politics, which almost never rises to the moral occasion. Stark confrontations between right and wrong are antithetical to the tractable purpose of the political art. As a result, the Great Triumvirate, like Alexander Pope's butterfly, was broken on the wheel in 1850 with Calhoun dead, Clay spent, and Webster ruined. And the dark future also appeared briefly during the final pyrotechnics of the Great Triumvirate in a speech delivered to an all but empty Senate chamber four days after Webster's address.<sup>19</sup> New York's William Henry Seward was a freshman Whig, but the affiliation did not draw him to Clay, whom he mildly detested. In turn, Seward could not abide Calhoun, and after March 7, Webster appalled him. Seward's speech was his maiden effort and mainly an academic exercise, but it would be remembered. At the time, it was judged inflammatory and pointlessly provocative, especially in its characterization of the three giants passing into the shadows. Seward accused Clay of rank expediency, Calhoun of posterous unreason, and Webster of spineless hysteria.

Antislavery groups lauded Seward's speech as a corrective to Webster's mystifying apostasy, but the gruff New Yorker was neither widely popular nor especially persuasive, as the sparsely populated Senate chamber and galleries showed. Henry Clay was in the chamber, however, and moved closer to hear better Seward's muffled voice. He listened as Seward invoked the higher law of God as the better guide for a Congress adrift under the Constitution's vague and incomplete embrace of human freedom. Clay watched as Seward made no recommendation but acted the part of a Greek chorus commenting on the futility of great men confronting hard questions. Seward could not have known but Clay likely suspected that the sentiment was the Great Triumvirate's epitaph as it and the country passed into the long night.

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<sup>19</sup> Seward's Speech is in Cong. Globe, 31st Cong., 1st Sess. Appendix, 260-69 (1850).