

Henry Clay and the Compromise of 1850

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Henry Clay, one of the most successful and influential American Senators ever, and a member of the Great Triumvirate of the early 1800s, dominated politics for the first half of the 19th century. A five-time Presidential Candidate and the most powerful Senator of his time, he was known as the Great Compromiser, a title he lived up to. His character and charisma were such that he would orchestrate many compromises in order to prevent conflict. Some of the most famous were The Treaty of Ghent, the Missouri Compromise, and the Compromise of 1850. The Compromise of 1850 was important because it delayed the Civil War for ten more years by passing legislation that prevented the secession of Southern states. Henry Clay made the Compromise of 1850 in the face of great conflict, resulting in a temporary peace between the states on the brink of bloodshed.

In the year 1848 tensions were high between the slave states and the free states. Zachary Taylor, an intelligent general who served the U.S. military for more than thirty years, had campaigned for president under the auspices of the Whig Party in 1848. The foundation of his platform was that the contentious issues that were dividing the nation so violently should be left to the judicial system, and his popularity as a victorious general and slaveholder brought him into the White House. Four years earlier, Henry Clay's own bid for the Presidency had failed because of his belief in restricting the spread of slavery in United States territories and the westward expansion of the United States. The general sentiment of the time was the so-called "manifest destiny:" that the United States should control all westward territory to the Pacific Ocean. Clay believed that Texas should not be annexed because this could potentially create strife with Mexico. So Instead the "dark horse," James Polk, won the Presidency by an extremely narrow margin over Clay.

The Whigs had been founded rather recently to oppose President Andrew Jackson and his central bank and they stood as “champions of banks, business, corporations, economic growth, the positive liberal state, humanitarian reform, and morality in politics, and as opponents of expansionism, executive tyranny, states’ rights, labor, and the democratic suffrage, among other things.”¹ But the Whigs were not as united as it would seem, only fully agreeing at their founding on opposing Jackson’s central bank.

The presidential election of 1844 against Polk was not the first time Clay had campaigned for president. It was actually his fourth. In the previous three attempts, he was nominated by his party twice and failed to be receive the nomination the other time. In his first attempt for president, the election of 1824, he did not receive enough votes for his name to go to the House of Representatives in the contested election. He then became Secretary of State under John Quincy Adams, and he was a compromiser there too. He was qualified for the position because of his previous appointment to the Peace Commission to create the Treaty of Ghent after the War of 1812 and for serving as the Speaker of the House. After his tenure as Secretary of State, he ran for the Senate, which he would sit on for two terms and then retire. During these times in office, he was one of the most powerful politicians in the nation. Through these experiences he would adopt the position of keeping peace through compromise. He would be chosen by the Whig Party in the 1844 presidential election and subsequently lose it and return to the Senate for his final term there, which he would not finish due to his death from tuberculosis.

It was in this final term that Henry Clay orchestrated the Compromise of 1850. At stake was the unity of the United States of America. This time, the topic of contention was whether California should be admitted as a free state or a slave state. At the time, the balance of free and

slave states was equal so that neither had an advantage in the Senate thanks to the Compromise of 1820, also known as the Missouri Compromise, which Clay orchestrated as well. In that compromise, Missouri and any future states and territories south of latitude 36°30' would allow slavery, and Maine and any territory north of latitude 36°30' would not allow slavery. The Missouri Compromise had staved off conflict for thirty years, but war was looming again over the country. If California was admitted as a free state as it wanted to be, then the Missouri Compromise would have to be voided because California was South of latitude 36°30'. This then could have the effect of of bringing the country right back to the same issues that threatened before the Missouri Compromise. So a solution had to be reached if California was to be admitted, for it had outlawed any slavery in its territory in a unanimous vote.² Another unusual aspect of California's request was that the state asked to be admitted, something that had only been done before by Michigan. California had a proposed Constitution which outlawed slavery, so if it was admitted, that constitution would be the law for California. The North wanted California to be admitted to the Union while the South did not. So in order for this resolution to be passed, there would have to be a compromise somewhere.

Another topic of contention was the slave trade in the District of Columbia. It would have been impossible to abolish the slave trade and slavery in the South, but abolishing it in the nation's capital was a start. Henry Clay abhorred the institution of slavery, and clearly wanted it gone.³ He believed that the slave trade in Washington D.C. should be abolished due to the nature of the practice. So two of his resolutions dealt with this, one abolishing the practice in the capitol, and the other banning the slave trade and transport in Washington D.C.

The other resolution regarding the abolition of slavery regarded it in territories acquired from Mexico.

“Resolved, [t]hat as slavery does not exist by law, and is not likely to be introduced into any of the territory acquired by the United States from the republic of Mexico, it is in-expedient for Congress to provide by law either for its introduction into, or exclusion from, any part of the said territory; and that appropriate territorial governments ought to be established by Congress in all of the said territory, not assigned as the boundaries of the proposed State of California, without the adoption of any restriction or condition on the subject of slavery.”⁴

This was another resolution which would completely void the Missouri Compromise, because with Clay’s proposition, slavery would not be forcibly introduced to California even though it was south of the latitude set by the Missouri Compromise for free states. His logic was that it would be difficult to force these territories to become slave states like they would have to, so Clay advocated that a government on the other side of the country should not impose such a burden on them. The territory itself would decide what laws it wanted passed.

To offset these resolutions, Clay proposed a set of rules to further establish and protect the slave trade in states which allowed the practice. This would be done by establishing that Congress could not regulate or prohibit the slave trade in any way shape or form.⁵ Another resolution proposed dealt with the fugitive slave law. “Resolved, That more effectual provision ought to be made by law, according to the requirement of the constitution, for the restitution and delivery of persons bound to [service] or labor in any State, who may escape into any other State or Territory in the Union.”⁶ This resolution was a bill in Congress at the time.⁷ The proposed law

would effectively keep all slaves in bondage for the rest of their lives, a boon to economy in the South.

The other resolutions were more nonpartisan, such as two involved in establishing establishing a reasonable border for the state of Texas.⁸ This would settle the border dispute over the new borders with Mexico. Clay proposed that the new boundary would be at the Rio Del Norte.⁹

These resolutions were received with mixed results. The Compromise had been put forward, but how would it be received? The responses were varied, but the real question was what the Great Triumvirate thought. Made up of Henry Clay of Kentucky, John Calhoun of South Carolina, and Daniel Webster of Massachusetts, the Triumvirate held significant political sway over the other Senators, with each member representing a different region of the country.¹⁰ ([Triumvirate website](#)) Calhoun was certainly going to be an opponent to the compromise ([Triumvirate website](#)), and he would prove this in his March 4th speech.¹¹ Calhoun argued that a compromise would be pointless as the North was a despotic ruler over the nation and that a compromise would be the South submitting to this tyranny. He believed in “northern aggression” and that the South should consider secession. He argued the Constitution was biased against Southern states.¹² ([Triumvirate website](#)). Calhoun’s radical approach may have done more harm than good, and his final great speech spoke a death toll for the unity of the nation. If Calhoun’s position was taken and the compromise abandoned, this would trigger the Civil War right then and there. Webster’s stance was now of utmost importance to the preservation of the Union.

Clay had met with Webster before his speech to try and convince him to side with him on the compromise, but Webster was afraid of New England’s response to the fugitive slave law so

he was hesitant to throw his support behind him. He only promised Clay that he would not oppose him at first, but a response was expected from this prominent politician. So when faced with the fast approaching Nashville Convention, in which Calhoun planned to propose his arguments in favor of secession, Webster spoke his piece. Webster's position on the issue was clear from the beginning: "Mr. President, I wish to speak today, not as a Massachusetts man, nor as a Northern man, but as an American . . . [I] speak today for the preservation of the Union. 'Hear me for my cause.'"¹³ He then progressed into a three hour speech arguing for the preservation of America via the Compromise of 1850. What no one expected was that he would concede to the fugitive slave law, an act that many Northerners declared as too far, but for many other Southerners, it caused them to believe in the compromise.¹⁴ Now that the Triumvirate had weighed in, the Compromise of 1850 was set, and now followed the more technical aspect of law-making.

One final obstacle to be overcome was that of getting the President on the side of the Compromise. President Taylor was averse to the compromise because he believed that the legislature should not make laws on "those exciting topics" such as slavery, rather that they should be left to the judicial system. So any attempt at compromise could have failed, but Clay was determined to push forward anyways. His plan called for all the resolutions to be passed as one bill, the "Omnibus Bill." However, the bill fell short in the Senate.¹⁵

During the time the bill was being lobbied, Zachary Taylor died unexpectedly. Vice President Millard Fillmore was sworn into office, and he believed that Clay's resolutions were a good balance that could potentially save the Union and bring a balance between slave and free states while admitting California. While Fillmore was strongly opposed to slavery, he, like Clay,

believed that it must go on in states which it was already established in for the preservation of the Union. He endorsed the Compromise of 1850. In the legislative branch, Senator Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois proposed each of the resolutions separately, and each in turn was passed and signed by President Fillmore.

Henry Clay had done a service to his country by creating a series of brilliant resolutions to the Senate which would be passed in September of 1850.¹⁶ Henry Clay's resolutions saved the nation from the brink of deadly strife. His unfaltering stance on the issue and his resolve to save the unity of the United States of America saved the country. He would die only a few years later of tuberculosis, but his legacy of being The Great Compromiser would live on. While the peace created by the Compromise of 1850 was fragile and temporary, Henry Clay had done what he could. Henry Clay was often quoted by Abraham Lincoln and called "My beau ideal of a statesman,"¹⁷ indicating admiration for Clay as the perfect politician. Henry Clay's compromises to solve conflict go unrivaled in American history, and he will continue to be known as a great Senator who saved the country.

Footnotes

1. History.com Staff. "Whig Party." *History.com*, A+E Networks, 2009, www.history.com/topics/whig-party.
2. "Mr. Clay's Resolutions," *The North-Carolina Standard*. (Raleigh, N.C.), February 6, 1850.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. "The Great Triumvirate." *The Great Triumvirate - Essential Civil War Curriculum*, Virginia Center for Civil War Studies at Virginia Tech, 2018, essentialcivilwarcurriculum.com/the-great-triumvirate.html.
11. "Mr. Calhoun's Speech," *The North-Carolina Standard*. (Raleigh, N.C.), March 13, 1850.
12. "The Great Triumvirate." *The Great Triumvirate - Essential Civil War Curriculum*, Virginia Center for Civil War Studies at Virginia Tech, 2018, essentialcivilwarcurriculum.com/the-great-triumvirate.html.
13. "Mr. Webster," *The Daily Crescent*. (New Orleans, La.), March 16, 1850.
14. "The Great Triumvirate." *The Great Triumvirate - Essential Civil War Curriculum*, Virginia Center for Civil War Studies at Virginia Tech, 2018, essentialcivilwarcurriculum.com/the-great-triumvirate.html.
15. History.com Staff. "Compromise of 1850." *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 2009, www.history.com/topics/compromise-of-1850.
16. Urofsky, Melvin I. "Compromise of 1850." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 25 Apr. 2017, www.britannica.com/event/Compromise-of-1850.

17. "Henry Clay." *Biography.com*, A+E Networks Television, 2 Apr. 2014, www.biography.com/people/henry-clay-9250385.

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

"Mr. Calhoun's Speech," *The North-Carolina Standard*. (Raleigh, N.C.), March 13, 1850.

This was a transcript of John Calhoun's speech to the Senate in response to Henry Clay's resolutions. It was helpful because it showed me where the most opposition to the compromise came from. I needed it to know what Calhoun's arguments were against the Compromise of 1850 in his own words.

"Mr. Clay's Resolutions," *The North-Carolina Standard*. (Raleigh, N.C.), February 6, 1850.

This was a transcript of Henry Clay's speech to the Senate which I used for quotes and information on Clay's resolutions. It was helpful because it gave me very straight-forward information and showed me how Clay approached compromise. I needed it to show Henry Clay's reasoning for the Compromise of 1850 in his own words.

"Mr. Webster," *The Daily Crescent*. (New Orleans, La.), March 16, 1850.

This was a transcript of Daniel Webster's speech to the Senate in response to John C. Calhoun's speech against Henry Clay's resolutions. I needed to know what each of the Great Triumvirate's opinions were on the Compromise of 1850 and what Webster's arguments were for it.

Secondary Sources

"Henry Clay." *Biography.com*, A+E Networks Television, 2 Apr. 2014, www.biography.com/people/henry-clay-9250385.

This source was used for my general background knowledge of Henry Clay so that I could find out more about him and answer some key questions about who he was and what he did and what I needed to find more about. I used one quote from Abraham Lincoln on Henry Clay in my paper that I found on this website. It also was good for finding Henry Clay's legacy.

History.com Staff. "Compromise of 1850." *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 2009, www.history.com/topics/compromise-of-1850.

This was a source that I used to get a general idea of what the Compromise of 1850 was at the beginning of my research. The source also had enough information that I was able to reference it for more specific material on how the Compromise of 1850 went.

History.com Staff. "Henry Clay - Facts & Summary." *History.com*. A+E Networks, 2009. Web.

October, 2017. <http://www.history.com/topics/henry-clay>

I used this source in my early research to create a general idea of who Henry Clay was and what he did. It was especially helpful for when it briefly chronicled his political career.

History.com Staff. "Millard Fillmore." *History.com*, A+E Television Networks, 2009, www.history.com/topics/us-presidents/millard-fillmore.

This source was helpful for finding out information on Millard Fillmore and his role in the Compromise of 1850. It was especially helpful to find the reasoning of why Fillmore wanted the compromise passed.

History.com Staff. "Missouri Compromise." *History.com*, A+E Television Networks, 2009, www.history.com/topics/missouri-compromise.

This website was a good background for the Missouri Compromise and why it was so influential on the Compromise of 1850. I needed this information for a general background and it was mostly used for the situation into which the Compromise of 1850 was proposed.

History.com Staff. "Whig Party." *History.com*, A+E Networks, 2009, www.history.com/topics/whig-party.

I used this source to find out how the Whig party functioned and what its general political principles. It was helpful to find what the party stood for. It was also good for information on how the party got started and how it ended, which was good background information for me to know.

History.com Staff. "Zachary Taylor." *History.com*, A+E Television Networks, 2009. Web. <http://www.history.com/topics/us-presidents/zachary-taylor>.

This source was good for getting the small amount of information I needed on President Zachary Taylor. It also helped to give me a background on the politics of the era.

"The Great Triumvirate." *The Great Triumvirate - Essential Civil War Curriculum*, Virginia Center for Civil War Studies at Virginia Tech, 2018, essentialcivilwarcurriculum.com/the-great-triumvirate.html.

I used this source for a detailed account of what happened during the Compromise of 1850 outside of the speeches made. As the title suggests, this site focused especially on the Great Triumvirate. This website was extremely helpful because it filled in all of the gaps between Clay's proposals, Calhoun's speech, and Webster's speech.

The Office of the Historian. "Biographies of the Secretaries of State: Henry Clay (1777–1852)." *U.S. Department of State*. <https://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/people/clay-henry>

This source was helpful for finding out a more detailed position of Henry Clay's political positions. While this source focused mostly on Henry Clay's career as Secretary of State, it talked some on information that I didn't have from other sources, such as listing all of his positions in the Federal government.

Urofsky, Melvin I. "Compromise of 1850." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 25 Apr. 2017, www.britannica.com/event/Compromise-of-1850.

This source was primarily used as a background source for the actual compromise. It gave me a general idea of what was going on with the Compromise and it helped to fill any gaps not filled by "The Great Triumvirate" website on actions made by those other than the Great Triumvirate.