Essay on henry clay: the great compromiser

Sociology, Slavery

Henry Clay was born in Hanover County, Virginia in 1777 at a time when the American colonies were still engaged in a Revolutionary War for independence with Great Britain. The young Virginian would develop a deep love and respect for the concept of a United States that would lead him to become the greatest compromiser and one of the most pivotal figures of 19th century American history. Clay's notable accomplishments include his status as one of the founding members of the Whig Party and his conception of the American System of economics (Bordewich, 2009). Above all of his ideologies though, Clay firmly believed in keeping the Union intact and during his time as a political leader, the United States faced challenges that threatened to tear apart that Union. Working to appease leaders on both sides of the slavery issue, Clay negotiated two compromises that strove to avert war between slave states and free states. Although he ultimately could not negotiate peace between the Northern and Southern states, Clay's Missouri Compromise and the Compromise of 1850 stand as two of the most significant accomplishments in American diplomacy because they delayed a costly Civil War.

After serving as a lawyer in both Virginia and Kentucky, Clay was elected to the Kentucky House of Representatives in 1803. For the next five decades, Clay served in several different government positions such as the aforementioned Kentucky State Congress, the United States House of Representatives, and the United States Senate (Bordewich, 2009). After a losing bid for the presidency in 1824, Clay was appointed as Secretary of State by John Quincy Adams in a move that some labeled as corrupt since Clay's vote in the House of Representatives had helped break the tie in the

presidential election (" Biographies"). However Clay had the diplomatic and political experience to serve as the Secretary of State and during his tenure he presided over several important negotiations between the United States and other countries. Most notably, Clay served on the Peace Commission following the War of 1812 and helped negotiate the Treaty of Ghent with Great Britain to end that war (" Biographies"). His knack for compromise and his ability to produce results often angered other politicians, both within the United States and in other countries. However as Secretary of State Clay negotiated more treaties than any of his predecessors and established important international relations with other countries, most notably those in Latin America (" Biographies").

One of Clay's most important negotiations was his efforts in the Missouri Compromise. By 1820, Americans were already divided over the issue of slavery. Westward expansion aggravated the issue because Americans could not agree whether the new Western states should be slave or free states (" The Missouri Compromise," 2014). Balancing slave states and free states had been an issue since the writing of the Constitution. In fact, one of the key compromises in the Constitution was the 3/5th Compromise which decreed that all slaves would be counted as 3/5th of a person for the purpose of the census, which determined the number of representatives each state received in the House of Representatives. In 1819 when Missouri petitioned to join the Union as a slave state, those in the government had another compromise to make. The states were evenly balanced between slave and free, with each side having 11 states represented. Sensing a potentially disastrous situation if Missouri were denied entrance into the Union as a

slave state, Clay devised a compromise that appeased both sides of the issue. The Missouri Compromise stated that Missouri would enter as a slave state and as a balance, Maine would break off from Massachusetts and enter the Union as a free state. Also, slavery would not be permitted in any future states that came into the Union if they were located above the 36º 30' line (" The Missouri Compromise," 2014). While many people on both sides of the issue did not like the compromise and thought the terms were flawed, Clay's plan temporarily eased the tensions between those representing slave and free states for the next thirty four years until the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854. Clay's plan ultimately could not avoid war; however the Missouri Compromise did delay the Civil War as long as possible (" The Missouri Compromise," 2014).

The other crowning achievement in Clay's career was the Compromise of 1850 which again was an effort to avoid a war between the states over the issue of slavery. By 1850, the United States had gained even more territory as a result of the war with Mexico and faced the task of transforming those territories into states. California was especially problematic because the gold rush of 1848 and 1849 had caused a huge population increase. California wanted to enter as a free state, which would unbalance the number of free and slave states. Texas' boundaries were also an issue, as was the booming slave market in Washington, D. C (" The Compromise of 1850"). In January of 1850, Clay proposed yet another compromise that he hoped would solve all these problems and again, avoid war between the states. With the help of Senators Daniel Webster, John C. Calhoun, and Stephen Douglas, Clay was able to pass several bills through Congress that became the Compromise of

1850 (Bordewich, 2009). The main conditions of the compromise were: 1) Texas would relinquish its claim on the disputed land in return for 10 million dollars which they would use to pay off their debt to Mexico. This land would create the territories of New Mexico, Utah, Nevada, and Arizona whose citizens would decide for themselves whether or not they wanted to enter the Union as slave or free states. 2) The slave trade was outlawed in the District of Columbia but citizens there could still own slaves. 3) California would enter the Union as a free state in return for a Fugitive Slave Act. The Fugitive Slave Act was the most controversial of all the conditions because it stipulated that every citizen had the responsibility to return runaway slaves back to their masters and that fugitive slaves would not receive a jury trial. The Fugitive Slave Act made the process of recovering runaway slaves easier for slave owners and increased the number of law enforcement officials responsible for recovering runaway slaves. In the words of one fugitive slave living in New York, " passage of the law was the beginning of a reign of terror to the colored population" (" The Compromise of 1850").

Like the Missouri Compromise, the Compromise of 1850 was controversial to many people, especially those who opposed slavery. Abolitionists felt that when the territories of New Mexico, Nevada, Utah, and Arizona did petition for statehood they would want to enter as slave states. However they were most disturbed by the possible consequences of the Fugitive Slave Act; their concerns prompted abolitionists to increase their efforts in the Underground Railroad and other measures designed to subvert slave owners (" The Compromise of 1850").

Because of this lack of presidential service, Clay is often overlooked in the

conversations about pivotal historical figures of the 19th century. However, as much as any other statesman, Clay strove to keep the nation united at a time of great strife over slavery. His attempts to negotiate with leaders of both sides of the slavery issue often produced results that were (and still are) regarded as flawed. However the compromises he crafted, most notably the Missouri Compromise and the Compromise of 1850, produced the result Clay most desire—to keep the Union united (Bordewich, 2009). These compromises held the Union together until the Civil War which Clay did not live to see. He died in 1852, just two short years after he had brokered one of the most significant diplomatic negotiations in his career.

Works Cited

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