

At the Edge of the Precipice: Henry Clay and the Compromise That Saved the Union

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Review

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Remini, Robert V. *At the Edge of the Precipice: Henry Clay and the Compromise That Saved the Union.* Basic Books, \$24.00 ISBN 978-0-465-01288-6

Re-appraising Compromise

Robert Remini has long been a major player in antebellum political history. Best known for his widely hailed biographies of such luminaries as Andrew Jackson, Daniel Webster, and Henry Clay, he has also produced a number of focused studies of various aspects of Jackson's career. *At the Edge of the Precipice* continues this pattern of isolating and examining key events in the lives of Remini's biographical subjects, as he explores Henry Clay's role in the fashioning of the "Great Compromise" of 1850. The result is a concise and lively account of a critical but understudied episode that, while it breaks no new scholarly ground, does raise valuable points about the importance of compromise in republican government.

Remini's books are generally as much story- and character-driven as analytical – perhaps more – and the same holds true here. A brief first chapter introduces the thesis – that early generations of American statesmen routinely subordinated their own political agendas to the larger imperative of compromise – and sketches Clay's central roles in resolving the Missouri Crisis of 1819-1821 and the Nullification Crisis of 1832-1833. The author then outlines the explosive political situation that arose from the controversial Mexican-American War of 1846-1848, adds flesh to the ensuing crisis that threatened to tear down the Union in a maelstrom of secession and civil war, and vividly paints a venerable Clay, weary but determined, boldly striding into the storm in a desperate effort to avert disaster with one final compromise.

Well-drawn vignettes bring to life key figures such as John C. Calhoun, Daniel Webster, and President Zachary Taylor, but it is in depicting Henry Clay

himself that the author truly shines. The portrait that emerges over the course of the book is both heroic and credible: Remini's Great Compromiser is a principled and dedicated patriot whose passionate eloquence, discerning political analysis, and shrewd negotiations succeeded in keeping disunion at bay, and at the same time a deeply ambitious but flawed politician whose tragic political miscalculation in 1824 and weaknesses for cards and women had thwarted his presidential aspirations and whose sanctimonious moralizing and ham-handed hectoring nearly derailed the compromise he so dearly desired in 1850. Throughout, Remini reminds his readers of Clay's advanced age, of the illness and exhaustion that hampered his efforts and eventually forced him from Washington before his task was complete.

There is a strong element of authenticity to Remini's thesis: beginning with the Constitutional Convention – and, one could argue, further back than that – the American Union had indeed been held together with a series of legislative compromises engineered by political leaders who understood the necessity of finding middle ground in which neither side fully won and neither fully lost. Yet he carries the point too far, oversimplifying the argument to the extent of ignoring six decades of scholarship and returning to the “blundering generation” interpretation of the 1940s and 1950s, as when he claims that “once the great men of the antebellum era passed away – men such as Andrew Jackson, Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, and John C. Calhoun – the nation lacked individuals in positions of power who were passionately devoted to the Union, men possessing genuine leadership ability who could find solutions to the crises that arose repeatedly over the issue of slavery” (xi-xii). The Crisis of 1850, he goes on, “was averted because there were a number of men in Congress who were willing to compromise” (xii).

The logical and evidentiary problems this interpretation raises are legion, as it ignores not only the deeper political, cultural, economic, and ideological pressures that shaped the views of northern and southern politicians in the late 1840s and 1850s but also the rather obvious fact that among leaders of the older generation, Jackson and Calhoun were not generally disposed to compromise, while it was the 37-year-old freshman senator Stephen A. Douglas who (as Remini acknowledges) was responsible for actual passage of the compromise that Clay failed to achieve.

Similarly, the author passes silently over the concern first raised by David M. Potter nearly thirty-five years ago that the Compromise of 1850 was not

really a compromise at all, but more of an armistice: Clay's "omnibus" bill, composed of all elements of the multi-part compromise, failed when most northern congressmen rejected the pro-Southern pieces and most Southerners rejected the pro-Northern bits – thus, Congress was in fact *not* convinced by Clay's impassioned pleas for compromise. Clay's proposal became reality only when Douglas broke it up and maneuvered through each pro-Northern portion with the support of Northerners and a handful of border-state moderates and each pro-Southern plank with the support of Southerners and those same border-state moderates. Remini praises the "gallant four" senators who supported every bill, but neglects to discuss the profound significance of there being so few of them (147).

Finally, Remini falls into the common trap of extolling both Clay and Abraham Lincoln, overlooking their contradictory stances in 1850 and 1860-1861, respectively. While his central thesis is that republican government can only function if its leaders appreciate the need to compromise, Remini notes approvingly that the ten-year delay in disunion gained by the Compromise of 1850 was crucial for the North to develop both its industrial advantage and Abraham Lincoln, the "statesman who would provide the wisdom and leadership" to "save the Union" by translating that advantage into military victory (158). The clear implication, of course, is that compromise does not possess intrinsic value, as the author appears to argue throughout the book, but is merely the preferable means of maintaining the American state; if compromise fails, then national survival requires war.

In addition to undermining the book's ideological position, this reflects only dimly the position occupied in 1861 by Lincoln, who actively and successfully worked to prevent a war-averting congressional compromise. It was not Lincoln but Stephen Douglas who struggled frantically to find a peaceful resolution to the Secession Crisis even as he insisted grimly that if compromise should fail the federal government must prevent disunion through force of arms, and indeed leapt to Lincoln's support once fighting commenced. Yet rather than briefly discussing Douglas's carrying on the torch of compromise (while, like Clay, angling doggedly but unsuccessfully for the presidency), Remini instead uses his Epilogue to present a disappointingly thin analysis of the 1850 Compromise's importance and a one-page summary of the decade that followed. With no mention of the failed 1861 compromise efforts of Douglas, John J. Crittenden, and others, never mind Lincoln's pivotal role in their failure, he concludes with a lament steeped in the "blundering generation" interpretation that informs most of

the book: "If only Henry Clay had been alive" (159).

At the Edge of the Precipice is an exciting account of a critical moment in U.S. history, well-told from the standpoint of one of America's most important (and, in popular culture at least, underappreciated) historical figures. If scholars will wish the author had engaged more actively with the existing literature and had probed more deeply into the larger questions the crisis raised, general readers will appreciate Remini's vibrant portrait of a true statesman at work and thoughtful musings on the importance of compromise.

Russell McClintock is the author of Lincoln and the Decision for War: The Northern Response to Secession (University of North Carolina Press, 2008). He is currently at work on a biography of Stephen A. Douglas. He teaches at St. John's High School in Shrewsbury, Massachusetts.