

On Clay

On compromising—

Clay would compromise his deepest held beliefs if it was necessary to keep the still-fragile union together. As he said, “the Union is my country” and to paraphrase him, the key to my heart is the Union. While he worked for the things he held dear, such as a high tariff to preserve hemp, he was willing—as in the forgotten 1833 compromise—to sacrifice even that, over time, for the greater good and even to work with a bitter enemy—Calhoun—for the benefit of the nation.

In my view, the need to compromise is vital to a successful democracy. In fact, without major compromises, we might not have had a Constitution or even a nation. It is hard to do, however, for you risk alienating voters by your stands. Yet it must occur.

I asked the question about other compromisers to a friend, the former Historian of the United States Senate, and he remarked that Lyndon Johnson, Ted Kennedy, and Everett Dirksen all were successful in that regard. I might add Stephen Douglas to that mix as well. But, he noted, that all of them paled in comparison with Clay.

CLAY and slavery

Why didn't Clay emancipate his slaves until after his death? Had he done so, he might have lost the entire vote of the South, but it would have helped him in the North. Slavery was the great contradiction of the early republic. Otherwise good men, like Jefferson (and Clay) remained slaveholders, despite their personal beliefs. Perhaps it was finances, perhaps the use of labor, perhaps just the habit of ownership that caused them to remain the holders of other humans. But it is a serious flaw in the the lives of so many leaders. Clay voiced the view that slaves were humans with feelings like him, but never acted on those beliefs, except for some trusted servants that he freed in old age. Why? My guess is that he enjoyed the fruits of slave labor too much and the financial hurt would have been too hard, but the fact remains that he could have freed his slaves and did not. For that, he should be criticized, but so should his society and much of America.

CLAY and the Presidency

Why a general rather than an experienced politician? Perhaps the general society of the times was more to blame for it idolized military men and “pomp and circumstance.” It elected generals Jackson, Harrison, Taylor during Clays lifetime and rejected another in Scott in 1852. After the Civil War, for a quarter century, the presidents had mostly served in that conflict. And TR got the vice presidency in part because of San Juan Hill. The “Hero on Horseback” image was difficult to overcome in that era, plus the fact that most of these men had no record for opponents to run against. Taylor had not even voted!

On white men voting, not until the 1820s did large turnouts occur, but by then politics had become the national pastime. With no organized sports, no mass entertainment, politics filled the void. But had women voted, Clay would have been easily elected.

If Clay could change one thing, what do I think it would be? Perhaps not to write letters in 1844 when he came so close? Or to openly campaign for the office after the nomination?

Clay and primaries—I suspect Clay would personally like them, since they would allow him to use his personal powers of persuasion, while at the same time, philosophically opposing them, as putting too much power in that practice.

GENERAL

In my view, strict construction of the Constitution is a flawed concept, in that it ascribes to the founders no sense of change. It likely exists chiefly to serve particular interests. But to assume that the rules created in a society of horse and buggies, flintlock muskets, slavery and limited rights for women and children, and dozens of other anachronistic practices, should be the rules for today is outdated, nostalgic, and just wrong.