

Henry Clay: The Great Compromiser

Henry Clay, a man known as the Great Compromiser, masterfully negotiated many of America's domestic issues during the 1800s. He served as Secretary of State, Speaker of the House, and also in the Senate. Though he never had a successful presidential bid, there is no doubt that he was a huge player on the American stage, and his negotiations over three important and heated issues earned him his nickname. His ability to see problems from all sides and then negotiate compromises where each party had their viewpoints represented to some degree earned him his reputation. There were three landmark deals that he made possible through this negotiation strategy. In 1820 he negotiated the conflict over Missouri's controversial request to become a slave state. He also proposed the Tariff of 1833 using his method of compromise. Finally, in 1850 as the nation tried to negotiate the issue of slavery in the West, he masterminded the Compromise of 1850. After considering the viewpoints of all parties, he negotiated all three of these deals in order to have everyone get some of what they wanted, but with no one getting everything they wanted. He hoped it could keep enough people happy that all sides would agree to the compromises. By listening to all parties and making his negotiations a win-win scenario, he was able to mediate disputes and bring people of differing viewpoints into agreements.

Clay's first important compromise on the national scene emerged at a heated time in America's history, when the balance between slave and free states was tied. Near the end of 1819, Missouri requested admission as a slave state. This was a tricky problem because there were eleven free states and eleven slave states at the time. Adding another state to either side would throw off the balance of congressional power. Clay stepped in. Rather than exercise one-sided personal bias, he approached the problem from all sides. He could see the point of view of the free states who abhorred slavery and wanted to stop its spread. Likewise, he could see the

point of view of the slave states who feared the loss of their productivity, economy, and personal property. Knowing that both sides needed to feel a win, he proposed that Missouri be made a slave state but also that the territory of Maine become a free state. Both sides won something in the proposal. At the same time, he also proposed that all future states in the Louisiana Purchase land above latitude line 36°30' would become free states, and that those south of the line would become slave states as they were admitted to the Union. The compromise was made, and everyone got some of what they wanted. It was a win-win because Clay could see all sides and make sure both sides had their priorities acknowledged and had at least a partial win.

The next important deal Clay negotiated was the Tariff of 1833. At the time, other countries were importing cheap goods into America, and domestic business could not compete with the prices. Northern businesses were suffering and failing. Several tariffs had been passed in succession, but none met the demands of the crisis. In 1828 the highest tariff ever passed up to that time began, and it earned the nickname “The Tariff of Abomination.” Suddenly prices went up on goods that could not be produced domestically. Soon Andrew Jackson passed another tariff that replaced the Tariff of 1828. There were still lots of flaws in the new law however, and anger over it led to the Nullification Crisis, during which the previous tariffs were proclaimed unconstitutional. The country needed a solution, and Clay provided it. Again, he looked at the issue from both sides. The northern industries and factories needed to be able to have a fair start in the American economy without steep competition from foreign producers. The southern consumers wanted affordable imports. Clay considered both needs and negotiated the Compromise Tariff in 1833. It established that tariff rates above 20% would be reduced by 10% every two years, bringing them back down to 20% by 1842. This forced import tariffs to gradually drop over the next ten years. The deal pleased the Southern states that depended on

cheap imports and simultaneously gave time for the northern factories to build their businesses and become competitive. With the needs of both sides considered, Clay worked out another win-win compromise.

Clay's third important compromise stemmed from the acquisition of a lot of land all at once in western America. The new territory led to debates over how the land should be handled, and in particular, whether the new states that arose from it should become free or slave states. When gold was discovered at Sutter's Mill it jumpstarted settlement in the region even more quickly. A huge population migration occurred, not just from the eastern states, but from all over the world. America had to quickly decide how to treat the land in the West, some of which was north of the Missouri Line and some that was south. California, with its new population of people, became a state before it was ever an official territory. The previous Missouri Line was not adequate to make the decisions about slave and free states for the growing nation, and there were lots of issues to decide on all at once. Clay, the Great Compromiser, masterfully negotiated a package of proposals about many of the issues. He proposed a deal that took into account all viewpoints and tried to give all parties at least a partial win. He proposed some wins for the north, namely that California would be admitted as a free state, slave trade would be prohibited in the District of Columbia, and that the Texas border would be moved to below the Missouri Compromise Line, keeping slavery within the South. The South was also given some wins in the package – the southwestern territories wouldn't be automatically restricted from having slavery, the District of Columbia would continue to allow slavery, and the Fugitive Slave Act would be established which combatted the problem of runaway slaves. In the end, Clay heard the needs of both sides and negotiated another win-win deal that allowed for all sides to achieve at least a partial victory.

Clay's negotiating abilities and his willingness to see all sides of an issue helped the young American nation to navigate through tough decisions. In all three of these cases he was able to help every party involved feel heard and understood, which made them more readily accept their partial wins. Clay kept enough people happy by giving them some of what they wanted that he could create win-win compromises. He truly earned his nickname - the Great Compromiser.