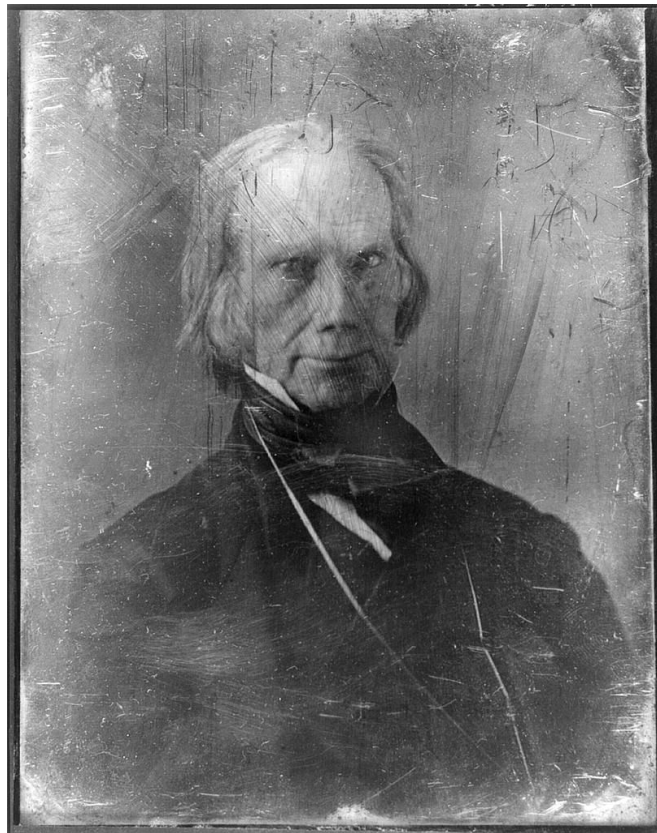


Henry Clay and the Election of 1844:
The Downfall of America's Greatest Statesmen



Price Withers
B - Honors United States History
Nate Jackson
March 19, 2016

A biography of Henry Clay, published in 1831, profoundly states that “his name is one, of which the absence from our list of presidents would be remarked in after times much more than its presence there.”¹ Clay campaigned for president in 1824, 1832, and 1844, but he never won the election. In his first attempt, Clay had the eloquence and ability to become president, but not the prestige. In his second, he was well-respected, but not at the level of incumbent Andrew Jackson. However, in 1844, the political climate was ripe for victory. Henry Clay was revered by many as the “Great Compromiser,” “Father of the American System,” and “Founder of the Whig Party.” Biographer George D. Prentice, and many others, regarded him as “the most influential statesman in the country.”² But for the third and final time, he came up short. Henry Clay lost the election of 1844 because his praised rhetoric of compromise ironically led to inconsistencies and hypocrisy in his candidacy, allowing the opposition to successfully counter his bid.

By December 15, 1824, Henry Clay was certain that he had been eliminated from his first bid for the President of the United States;³ his role in the election, however, was just beginning. At the time of the election, Clay was the Speaker of the House; therefore, he held considerable sway in the votes of members of Congress. According to Representative William Plumer, Jr, out of New Hampshire, “it is very much in Clay’s power to make the president -- If he says Jackson, the nine Western states are united at once for him -- If he says Adams, two or three states fall off -- & Jackson must fail.”⁴ Out of his three running mates, Clay immediately dismissed William H. Crawford due to his failing health and Virginia rivalry with Clay. Remaining were General

¹ Prentice, George D. “Life of Henry Clay”. (Review of *Biography of Henry Clay*. 1831. *The North American Review* 33 (73). University of Northern Iowa: 351–96.), 394.

² Prentice. “Life of Henry Clay,” 366.

³ Remini, Robert V. *Henry Clay: Statesman for the Union*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), 253.

⁴ Plumer, William, and Everett Somerville Brown. *The Missouri Compromises and Presidential Politics, 1820-1825, from the Letters of William Plumer, Junior, Representative from New Hampshire*. (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society, 1926), 123.

Andrew Jackson, war hero from the Battle of New Orleans, and John Quincy Adams, Secretary of State and son of the founding father John Adams. But Henry Clay was never a supporter of Genl. Jackson. In a letter written to Francis P. Blair in 1825, Clay wrote, "I cannot believe that killing 2500 Englishmen at N. Orleans qualifies for the various, difficult and complicated duties of the Chief Magistracy."⁵ This repudiation of Jackson's legitimacy as a candidate, conveys the extent to which Clay disliked Andrew Jackson. As expected, Clay formally endorsed Adams, leading to his victory in the election of 1824. Upon election, Adams selected Clay as his Secretary of State. This controversial move, called the "Corrupt Bargain," caused opposition to believe that Clay and Adams had prearranged this nomination. As a result, Jackson began a campaign against Clay's "corruption," which continued through the election of 1844. When most historians consider why Henry Clay lost the election of 1844, they cite his "Corrupt Bargain" as the most defining fault in his reputation. However, Clay's role in the events twenty years prior did not play a major role in the failure of his campaign; instead, it served as a platform for the Democrats to attack Clay. David Heidler, a renowned historian from Colorado State University, states that "James K. Polk began talking about Clay's 'Corrupt Bargain' with references so casual as to indicate they had become a reflexive routine with Democrats.... As 1844 approached, they again resorted to the charge as if to fill the air while thinking of something else to say."⁶ Based on this, it is clear that Democrat opponents of Clay mentioned the bargain often, yet it was largely inconsequential in their campaign against the Whig party frontrunner. Prentice confirms

⁵ James F. Hopkins et al., *The Papers of Henry Clay, IV*. (Lexington, Ky., 1959-), 47.

⁶ Heidler, David Stephen, and Jeanne T. Heidler. *Henry Clay: The Essential American*. (New York: Random House, 2010), 361.

this claim, asserting that “the charge was of course not believed for a moment by any impartial man.”⁷

The debate over the annexation of Texas played a pivotal role in the election of 1844. William Ellery Channing, a Unitarian preacher from the 19th century, details the important arguments of the Texas debate in a letter written to Henry Clay in 1837. In it, he writes that the Royal Government (i.e. Spain) gave out land grants in Texas to American citizens, but put strict restrictions on religion and slavery.⁸ When the Spanish Empire relinquished its control of Mexico, it left the country in a state of disarray. A series of factors including “the distance of Texas from the seat of government, her scattered population, her vicinity to a slave country, the general character of the first settlers”⁹ all contributed to its conflict with the General Government. Aside from the moral and legal complications of annexing Texas, the addition of Texas into the United States posed a problem to the precarious balance of slavery. For all of these reasons, the issue of Texas was frequently discussed in the election of 1844 and divided the American Electorate based on sectionalism, forcing Clay to issue his opinions on the subject.

In Clay’s Raleigh Letter, he declared his views on the annexation of Texas, in an attempt to set it aside during the election. At this time, candidates did not directly campaign for the presidency for fear of being labeled “dangerous;” instead, candidates developed the device of the public letter in order to campaign indirectly. In some instances, a letter would be sent from the candidate straight to a newspaper editor, so that it might be published immediately, as was the

⁷ Prentice. “Life of Henry Clay,” 394.

⁸ Channing, William Ellery. 1837. “[A Letter To] the Hon. Henry Clay, on the Annexation of Texas to the United States”. (*Earl Grey Pamphlets Collection*), 6.

⁹ Ibid.

case with Clay's Raleigh letter.¹⁰ While his friends urged him not to do so because "his well-known lack of restraint might result in a catastrophic blunder,"¹¹ Clay disregarded their advice and submitted his first position on the annexation of Texas in April of 1844. In his so-called Raleigh letter, Clay writes that "it is...perfectly idle and ridiculous, if not dishonorable, to talk of resuming our title to Texas, as if we had never parted with it."¹² He goes on to compare such an acquisition with Great Britain resuming control of the thirteen colonies.¹³ Clay continues: "I do not think that Texas ought to be received into the Union.... I think it far more wise and important to compose and harmonize the present Confederacy, as it now exists, than to introduce a new element of discord and distraction into it."¹⁴ Once again, Clay reaffirms his anti-annexation ideology in favor of a more peaceful route -- the defining characteristic of a compromiser. To conclude, Clay assumes a more adamant tone: "I consider the annexation of Texas, at this time... as a measure compromising the national character, dangerous to the integrity of the Union, inexpedient in the present financial condition of the country, and not called for by any general expression of public opinion."¹⁵ With this strong credo, Henry Clay gained support from anti-slavery voters who believed that the annexation of Texas was a pro-slavery conspiracy. Moreover, he received the unanimous nomination of the Whig Convention on May 1, as a direct consequence of his Raleigh letter. Clay's letter was written with a clear purpose: to put the problem of Texas to the side during the election of 1844. Yet, by basing his argument in expediency, with the phrase "at this time," Clay left his position open to

¹⁰ Zarefsky, David. 2003. "Henry Clay and the Election of 1844: The Limits of a Rhetoric of Compromise". (*Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 6 (1). Michigan State University Press: 79–96.), 83.

¹¹ Remini. *Henry Clay: Statesman*, 635.

¹² Clay, Henry. "Raleigh Letter." (*American History Online*. Facts On File, Inc. Accessed January 30, 2016.)

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

change at later circumstances, as is the rhetoric of compromise.¹⁶ Ironically, Clay writes in his letter: “I conceive that no motive for the acquisition of foreign territory would be more unfortunate, or pregnant with more fatal consequences, than that of obtaining [Texas] for the purpose of strengthening one part against another part of the common Confederacy.”¹⁷ When considering his later Compromise of 1850, one realizes the major inconsistencies of Clay’s position on slavery. While Clay did not know it at the time, his Raleigh Letter was the crucial flaw of his campaign bid in 1844.

Two months later, on July 1, 1844, Henry Clay wrote his infamous Alabama letter, addressed to Stephen F. Miller of Tuscaloosa. David Zarefsky, professor of history at Northwestern University, argues that Clay feared “southern Whigs would be tempted to place section over party and defect to the Democrats.”¹⁸ Consequently, Clay wrote the First Alabama letter to gain more Southern voters. In his letter, Clay stated his new position: “Personally I could have no objection to the annexation of Texas; but I certainly would be unwilling to see the existing Union dissolved or seriously jeopardized for the sake of acquiring Texas.”¹⁹ In this unfortunate change in ideology, Clay failed to mention war with Mexico as a reason to oppose the annexation of Texas. In summary, he reversed the position established by his Raleigh letter, in order to compromise with more people, and narrowed the grounds of his resentment. As a result, there was public backlash over Clay’s inconsistency. Only making matters worse, Clay wrote his second Alabama Letter, which attempted to clarify his position on the issue. In it, Clay wrote, “I have, however, no hesitation in saying that, far from having any personal objection to

¹⁶ Zarefsky. “Rhetoric of Compromise,” 84.

¹⁷ Clay. “Raleigh Letter.”

¹⁸ Zarefsky. “Rhetoric of Compromise,” 87.

¹⁹ James. *Papers, X*, 78-79.

the annexation of Texas, I should be glad to see it, without dishonor -- without war, with the common consent of the Union, and upon just and fair terms. I do not think that the subject of slavery ought to affect the question, one way or another.”²⁰ While he cleared up the war issue with the first sentence, Clay instigated the downfall of his career with the second. Saying that he did not think “slavery ought to affect the question,” was interpreted as his indifference on the issue of slavery. So, instead of gaining Northern voters for an anti-slavery policy or Southern voters for being pro-slavery, Clay turned away most of his supporters. In effect, this was the turning point of Clay’s final campaign for the presidency.

Attempting to conserve Clay’s anti-slavery Whig fanbase, Cassius M. Clay, Clay’s cousin, began an abolitionist campaign under Henry Clay’s name. Yet, Clay immediately disavowed his cousin’s remarks in order to conserve any positive effects of the Alabama letters on the Southern vote. In a letter to Daniel Wickliffe on September 2, Clay wrote, “Mr.C.M. Clay's letter was written without my knowledge without any consultation with me, and without any authority from me.”²¹ On September 30, Clay apologized for rejecting Cassius’ claims, but stated that “his letter, if it remained unnoticed by me, was calculated to do very great prejudice to the Whig cause.”²² Placing these events in chronological order, reveals a disturbing chain reaction, in which Clay continues to deny, apologize for, and accept claims in order to save his run for the presidency. All the while, he buries himself deeper and deeper in a predicament from which there is no escape. Clay sends out one final letter, arguing that “nothing was further from my intention than to express, in either of my Alabama letters, on the subject of Texas any feeling sentiment or opinion contrary to those which I had expressed in my Raleigh letter....only... by

²⁰ James. *Papers*, X, 91.

²¹ James. *Papers*, X, 108.

²² Ibid.

the grossest perversion and misrepresentation of my letters... has [any attempt] been made to establish a conflict between them.”²³ Nonetheless, his complaints go unnoticed. Clay concludes his letter with the smartest decision of his campaign: deciding to thereafter send out no other letters for publication, contending that “every new letter from me becomes the parent of misconception if not perversion.”²⁴

While Henry Clay attempted to gain supporters, yet only succeeded in losing them, the opposing candidates geared their platforms towards acquiring Clay’s lost followers. In April, when Clay released the Raleigh Letter, Van Buren, the likely Democrat nominee, made public a very similar statement on the same day,²⁵ suggesting that Van Buren and Clay collaborated on the Texas issue so that it would not play a major role in the election. When Jackson was informed that Van Buren had come out against annexation, he repudiated Van Buren, and colluded with other Democrats to give the nomination to James K. Polk, the governor of Tennessee, and a firm annexationist.²⁶ This change of nominations effectively secured a group of Democrats and Southern Whigs, who would vote for Polk, entirely based on his pro-annexation beliefs. In the North, Henry Clay lost voters due to a third-party candidate, James G. Birney, who was running on the Liberty Party ticket, which opposed slavery as a moral wrong.²⁷ Zarefsky argues that “Polk would not have won the election were it not for the course of the vote in New York, where the Alabama letters clearly hurt Clay.”²⁸ Birney received 15,000 votes in New York, most of which were from Clay’s proponents. Consequently, Polk won New York by a narrow

²³ James. *Papers*, X, 108.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Zarefsky. “Rhetoric of Compromise,” 82.

²⁶ Zarefsky. “Rhetoric of Compromise,” 86.

²⁷ Zarefsky. “Rhetoric of Compromise,” 90.

²⁸ Zarefsky. “Rhetoric of Compromise,” 92.

margin of just 5,000 votes.²⁹ Figure 1 demonstrates that Clay would have beaten Polk with 141-134 electoral votes, instead of losing 105-170, if he had received a plurality in New York. Therefore, Clay's loss in New York was the culminating effect of his mistakes and was the ultimate cause of his defeat.

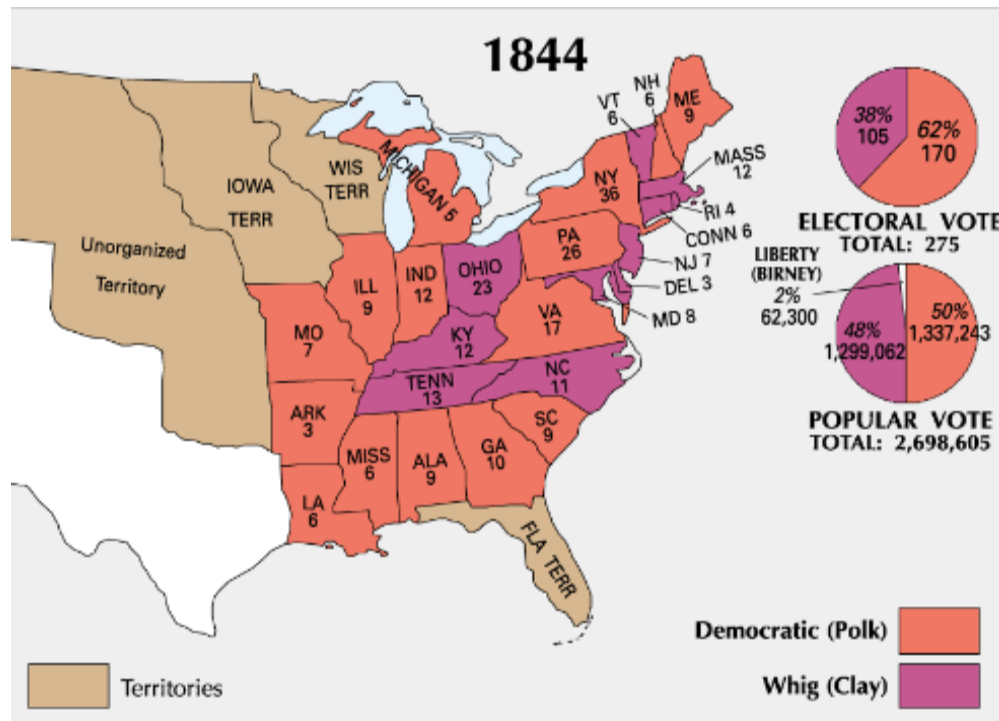


Figure 1. Electoral Map of 1844. Source: "Bowdoin College. "Electoral College 1844." (Map. Accessed February 8, 2016.)"

Three years after Polk was elected as the 11th president of the United States, Frederick Douglass sent a letter to Clay, criticizing his inconsistencies and moral hypocrisy. In reference to a recent speech given at the Mass Meeting in Lexington, Kentucky, he wrote "even this speech abounds with inconsistencies such as to materially affect the consolation you seem to draw from this source. Indeed, if you are uniform at all, you are so only in your inconsistencies."³⁰ This

²⁹ Zarefsky. "Rhetoric of Compromise," 92.

³⁰ Douglass, Frederick. "Letter to Henry Clay," North Star. (Letter. From Library of Congress, Frederick Douglass Papers at the Library of Congress. Accessed January 31, 2016), 3.

reprimand seems unjustified, until one learns the contents of Clay's speech. Douglass soon tells us: "In the speech under consideration, you say 'My opinions on the subject of slavery are well known; they have the merit if it be one of consistency, uniformity, and long duration.'"³¹ Given the aforementioned letters (Raleigh, Alabama, etc.), this seems deeply ironic; Douglass agrees. He claims that Clay's speech is "mere cant by which to seduce the North into your support, on the ground of your sympathy for the slave."³² Note that Douglass is an independent, unbiased source, yet he still stresses the inconsistent, devious nature of Clay. Douglass' most profound statement talks about Clay's unerring commitment to compromise. He writes, "You disavow... any wish to acquire any foreign territory whatever for the purpose of introducing slavery into it. I... earnestly hope that you may be able to keep your vow unsullied by compromises which (pardon me) have on former occurrences too often marred and defaced the beauty and consistency of your human declarations and pledges."³³ Douglass' insightful comments emphasize that the Clay's ideology was intrinsically flawed.

Henry Clay is undoubtedly one of the greatest figures in the history of American politics. However, in his three campaigns for the presidency, he fell short of success. In 1844, Clay had the most potential for victory, but due to a series of conflicting letters about the annexation of Texas, he lost the election. Ultimately, Clay's rhetoric of compromise was both the driving force behind his accomplishment and downfall of his candidacy. The election of Polk, in lieu of Clay, had incalculable effects on American history. Polk is known for his heavy expansion into neighboring territories, while Clay is famous for his American System. If Clay had won the election of 1844, the antebellum foundation of our nation would have been dramatically altered.

³¹ Douglass. "Letter to Clay," 2.

³² Douglass. "Letter to Clay," 4.

³³ Douglass. "Letter to Clay," 1-2.

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