

My Allegiance is to this Union: Henry Clay, Political Compromise, and Integrity

- **Compelling Question**
 - How can Henry Clay's example inspire you to practice integrity in your own life?
- **Virtue:** Integrity
- **Definition** – Integrity is personal consistency in moral goodness.
- **Lesson Overview**
 - In this lesson, students will learn about the life and work of Henry Clay. They will explore how his actions were guided by his integrity and helped to advance freedom. Through his example, they will learn how they can act with integrity in their own lives.
- **Objectives**
 - Students will analyze Henry Clay's actions in Congress
 - Students will understand how acting with integrity can shape their purpose
 - Students will apply this knowledge to better act with integrity in their own lives
- **Background**
 - Henry Clay studied law with College of William and Mary professor, George Wythe, and then practiced law on the frontier in Kentucky before the turn of the nineteenth century. In 1810, was elected to the House of Representatives and was eventually made Speaker of the House. While serving in Congress, Clay earned a reputation for compromise, earning the nickname, The Great Compromiser, as he engineered a series of critically important compromises over the course several decades. He was known for his reason and integrity in brokering deals that respected different points of view in political debates.

In the early to mid-nineteenth century, America was strongly divided by sectionalism between northern and southern states. One of the key issues dividing these states centered on the contentious debates over slavery. As the nation expanded westward, new states entered the Union and a great debate ensued whether they would be slaveholding states. In addition to this issue, the Congress also had to deal with the constitutionality of protective tariffs and federally-funded internal improvements such as roads and canals. The North generally opposed the expansion of the slavery system to the West in part because it would increase Southern power in Congress. Many in the North also supported protective tariffs of its nascent industry and spending on the internal improvements in support of economic growth. The South, on the other hand, generally supported the expansion of slavery especially with the significance of cotton to the southern economy and opposed protective tariffs and internal improvements that increased the price of goods and taxes the South paid.

These differing views erupted into disputes that threatened the country with disunion. In 1819-1820, the admittance of Missouri into the Union led to discord that Clay helped resolve. The Missouri Compromise allowed Missouri into the Union as a slave state, Maine as a free state, and drew a line at 36 degrees, 30 minutes in the Louisiana Territory with all states north of the line free and all the states to the south of the line slave. In 1832-1833, a fierce quarrel broke out when South Carolina held a convention that "nullified" a protective tariff it labelled the "Tariff of Abominations." President Andrew Jackson sought the power from Congress to coerce South Carolina to collect the tariff and send federal troops into the state. Clay believed that the American republic was built on "that great principle of compromise and concession, which lies at the bottom of our institutions." Regarding the current crisis, Clay averred it was "true my friends do not get all they could wish for; and the gentlemen of the other side do not obtain all they might desire; but both will gain all that in my humble opinion is proper to be given in the present condition of the country." Consequently, Congress passed the Force Bill as well as a compromise tariff lowering rates.

Clay retired from the Senate in 1842 (where he had served since 1831) and attempted a run for the Whig Party nomination for president in 1848 but lost. In 1849, at the age of seventy-two, Clay let his wish be known that he wanted to re-enter the Senate during yet another crisis. This time, the American victory in the Mexican War had led to the acquisition of territory in the southwest from Mexico. As the sections divided over whether the territory would be slave or free, Clay offered a

compromise. California would enter the Union as a free state, New Mexico would decide through “popular sovereignty” in a vote of the people, the border of Texas would be settled at the Rio Grande, the slave trade (but not slavery) in Washington, D.C. would end, and the Fugitive Slave Law would be strengthened. In September, 1850, President Millard Fillmore signed the parts of the Compromise of 1850 into law. The compromise could not avert the Civil War from breaking out a decade later, but Henry Clay’s integrity had helped hold the Union together for several decades.

- **Vocabulary**

- Speaker of the House
- Sectionalism
- Tariff
- Nullify
- Aver
- Whig Party
- Mexican-American War
- Fugitive Slave Law
- Ovation
- Sunder
- Discordant
- Forbearance
- Amicable
- Abyss
- Laudatory
- Eulogy
- Nascent
- Coerce
- Acquisition
- Popular sovereignty

- **Introduce Text**

- Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the “Walk-In-The-Shoes” question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.

- **Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions**

- As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
 - What challenges are you facing?
 - What fears or concerns might you have?
 - What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?

- **Observation Questions**

- What was Henry Clay’s nickname in Congress? How does this reflect his identity?
- How did Henry Clay’s reputation in Congress affect his purpose?
- How were Henry Clay’s actions consistent with the principle of integrity?

- **Discussion Questions**

- Discuss the following questions with your students.
 - What is the historical context of the narrative?
 - What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
 - How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
 - How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
 - How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
 - What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
 - Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
 - How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?

- **Additional Resources**

- Remini, Robert V. *At the Edge of the Precipice: Henry Clay and the Compromise that Saved the Union*. New York: Basic, 2010.
- Eaton, Clement. *Henry Clay and the Art of American Politics*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1957.
- Heidler, David S. and Jeanne T. Heidler. *Henry Clay: The Essential American*. New York: Random House, 2010.
- Bordewich, Fergus M. *America's Great Debate: Henry Clay, Stephen A. Douglas, and the Compromise that Saved the Union*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012.

Handout A: My Allegiance is to this Union: Henry Clay, Political Compromise, and Integrity

Background

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In the early to mid-nineteenth century, America was strongly divided by sectionalism between northern and southern states. One of the key issues dividing these states centered on the contentious debates over slavery. As the nation expanded westward, new states entered the Union and a great debate ensued whether they would be slaveholding states. In addition to this issue, the Congress also had to deal with the constitutionality of protective tariffs and federally-funded internal improvements such as roads and canals. The North generally opposed the expansion of the slavery system to the West in part because it would increase Southern power in Congress. Many in the North also supported protective tariffs of its nascent industry and spending on the internal improvements in support of economic growth. The South, on the other hand, generally supported the expansion of slavery especially with the significance of cotton to the southern economy and opposed protective tariffs and internal improvements that increased the price of goods and taxes the South paid.

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Narrative

On December 3, 1849, members of Congress and spectators honored seventy-two-year-old Senator Henry Clay from Kentucky who had first been elected to the House of Representatives and chosen as Speaker of the House in 1810. Although he had to stop and catch his breath several times and was overcome by coughing fits, his arrival in the chamber was met with a thunderous ovation. Graciously, Clay humbly rose and said, “Much deference and consideration are shown me by even political opponents. I shall by a cruise of calmness, moderation, and dignity endeavor to preserve these kindly feelings.” Clay received such a welcome because of his reputation for honesty, humility, patriotism, willingness to compromise, and integrity.

Clay returned to the Senate and answered to the call from a deeply-divided country that sorely needed his character and art of political compromise. Congress was representative of the divisions that wracked American society at that moment. A southern Senator openly avowed, "I am for disunion...I will devote all I am and all I have on earth to its consummation." For their part, northern representatives were just as willing to sunder the Union to let slaveholders go. The primary issue responsible for this discord was the issue of slavery and its expansion into the western territories recently acquired from Mexico.

Clay supported gradual emancipation and colonization back to Africa but was primarily concerned with reconciling the discordant sides that threatened the Union. He sought above all to prevent "the dissolution of the Union . . . and all the horrors of civil war" and "exercise mutual and friendly forbearance" for the good of their "glorious country." Clay had devoted his entire life to public service and had engineered many of the key compromises of the nineteenth century to preserve the Union from the fierce sectional debates over slavery. One colleague praised him for that integrity and knew that Clay was the person to turn to during the crisis. "I rejoice at your election to the Senate....In these days of inordinate personal ambition it is cheering to see that there is one state in the Union where attachment to the honor and interest of the nation prevails over all personal considerations."

Clay was deeply troubled by the state of affairs in Congress and around the nation. He was confident enough in his purpose to realize that the nation needed his skill as The Great Compromiser, as he was known, and sprang into action. He informed his son that he had "been thinking much of proposing some comprehensive scheme of settling amicably the whole question in all its bearings." Daniel Webster later revealed that Clay sought to "accomplish something for the good of the country during the little time he had left upon earth." On January 21, 1850, Clay arrived at Webster's residence looking "very feeble" and shared his plan of compromise for the pair to discuss. Webster thought that the plan was "great and highly patriotic....That perhaps Providence had designed the return of Mr. Clay to the Senate, to afford the means and the way of averting a great evil to the country" by appealing to the men on both sides of the issue and finding common ground.

Two days later, Clay rose from his chair in the Senate to offer his resolutions that he offered for consideration. He thought that they "propose an amicable arrangement of all questions in controversy between the free and slave States, growing out of the subject of slavery." On February 5, Clay rose again at 1:00 p.m., and the chamber quieted to hear every word. Congress—and the country—in Clay's estimation was "so oppressed, so appalled, so anxious." He prayed "to implore Him . . . to calm the violence and rage of party – to still passion – to allow reason once more to resume its empire." He called on his fellow Senators to "elevate" themselves "from the mad and mire of mere party contentions" and act "as responsible men, and as lovers of liberty, and lovers, above all, of this Union." When he was overcome by fatigue, the Senate adjourned for the day out of respect for Clay and gave him the floor the following morning.

Clay recovered his failing strength and asked the next day for "mutual concession" from both sides of the question. He offered his resolutions as "an olive branch to both parts of this distracted, and at this moment, unhappy country." He finished with an emotional appeal: "Here I stand and here I mean to stand and die." The Constitution, he averred, was made for "posterity, undefined, unlimited, permanent, and perpetual." He called on all Americans "by all their love of liberty—by all their veneration for their ancestors—by all their regard for posterity...to pause—solemnly to pause—at the edge of the precipice, before the fearful and disastrous leap is taken into the yawning abyss below. I pray I may not survive to behold the sad and heartrending spectacle." When a southern Senator objected that he was betraying the South by granting too much to the North, Clay retorted, "I know no South, no East, no West, to which I owe my allegiance....My allegiance is to this Union."

Over the next several months, Clay continued to act as The Great Compromiser. Even though John Calhoun had been a leader of states nullifying federal law and talked of disunion for decades, Clay offered a laudatory eulogy when Calhoun died in the middle of the debate at the end of March. At the end of July, during a blistering hot day, Clay mustered the energy for one last defense of his compromise resolutions. It was one of the longest speeches of his lengthy, dignified career. He praised northern and southern congressmen for their spirit of compromise in "seeing the crisis of their common country . . . have met together . . . to compare their opinions upon this great measure of reconciliation and harmony." He received long and sustained applause as he collapsed in a pool of

sweat, his energy utterly spent. Clay had to vacation on the Rhode Island coast to recover his strength and left it to Illinois Senator Stephen Douglas to engineer final passage of the bills, which President Millard Fillmore signed.

In his final act of public life that showed his integrity and commitment to the country, Clay created the Compromise of 1850 that preserved the Union and averted civil war. Over several decades, he stood for the principle of doing what was good for his country and dedicated himself to deliberating and compromising in order to find practical solutions to seemingly intractable problems. Stephen Douglas said of Clay, "Let it always be said of old Hal that he fought a glorious and patriotic battle. No man was ever governed by higher and purer motives."