

**A New National Identity****BIOGRAPHY READING****Henry Clay**

*Henry Clay was an American statesman and politician and one of the most popular and influential leaders in U.S. history. Especially known for his skills in the art of compromise, he helped resolve several major conflicts that threatened to tear the young nation apart. He was often referred to as the Great Pacificator.*

Henry Clay was born in 1777 in Virginia to a middle-class family. His father was a Baptist minister who died when Clay was only four years old. After attending public school and studying for the bar, Clay moved to Lexington, Kentucky, in 1797. There he established a successful criminal law practice. In 1799 he wed Lucretia Hart. The couple had 11 children.

Clay had a quick mind, a talent for public speaking, and the ability to charm almost everyone with his easy and attractive manner. It has been reported that no person was ever hanged in a trial where Clay appeared for the defense. He was elected to the Kentucky state legislature, where he served for six years. Clay served several terms in the U.S. House of Representatives between 1811 and 1825. During his first term in the House, he established a reputation as one of the leading War Hawks, a group that favored going to war with Great Britain. Clay was later selected as one of the commissioners to negotiate the Treaty of Ghent, which ended the War of 1812.

In 1820 and 1821 Clay played an important role in drafting the Missouri Compromise, which temporarily ended the conflict about the balance between slave states and free states. Although Clay was a slaveholder, he was able to gain support from people on both sides of the issue. In 1824 Clay made an unsuccessful bid for the presidency. When his campaign failed, he threw his support behind John Quincy Adams. President Adams then named Clay secretary of state.

Clay took a very strong view on what he called the "American System." He called for protectionist tariffs in support of manufacturing, internal improvements such as road and canal projects, a strong national bank, and the distribution of money from federal land sales to individual states. Clay was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1831, where he served until 1842. In 1833 he drew up a compromise that resolved a crisis brought on by South Carolina's attempt to nullify a tariff set by Congress.

Clay's reluctance to support the annexation of Texas cost him the 1844 presidential election. He was elected to the Senate in 1849. Many believe that his greatest service to the nation came in 1850, when he helped win acceptance of a compromise that temporarily ended the threat of civil war over the issue of slavery in the new territories. He warned the South not to

secede, because he believed that no such right existed. Clay died in 1852 at the age of 75.

**UNDERSTANDING WHAT YOU READ** After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions in the space provided.

1. In what way did Clay establish his reputation in the House of Representatives?

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2. What were some of the items that Clay viewed as essential to the "American System"?

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3. Why did Clay lose the 1844 presidential election?

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4. What was Clay's opinion about secession?

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### ACTIVITY

On a separate sheet of paper, write a proverb or a saying that incorporates some of the values and political sensibilities of Henry Clay. The proverb might discuss the art of compromise or point out the wisdom of negotiating. You may want to search the Internet through the HRW Go site for examples of proverbs.



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