

## Chapter 52 -- Clay, Calhoun And Webster Begin To Shape America's Political Debate



**Dates:**  
1811-1852

**Sections:**

- The "Great Triumvirate"
- Henry Clay Of Kentucky
- John C. Calhoun Of South Carolina
- Daniel Webster Of Massachusetts

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Time: 1811-1852

### The "Great Triumvirate"



Calhoun, Webster and Clay

The run-up to, and outbreak of, the War of 1812, witnesses the emergence of three politicians who will shape US foreign and domestic policy over the next four decades.

Henry Clay and John Calhoun enter politics as Democratic-Republicans, before later founding their own political parties in opposition to President Andrew Jackson. Calhoun starts up the "Nullifier" Party in 1828 and Clay begins his Whig Party in 1834.

Daniel Webster is a rock-ribbed Federalist who eventually joins the Whigs, while moving back and forth between public office and his lucrative law practice.

Each man will become the leading spokesman for his region of the country – Webster for the Northeastern states, Calhoun for the South, and Clay for the new West.

All three play critical roles as regional differences over slavery threaten to tear the Union apart – with Clay and Webster trying to hold it together and Calhoun eager to have his South secede.

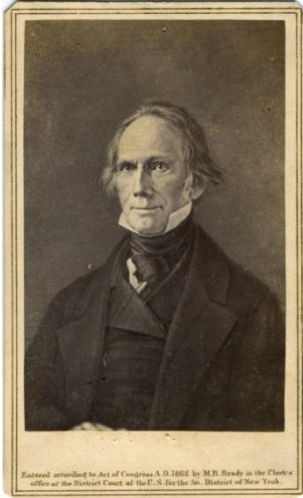
Along the way they will also battle back and forth for the presidency, Clay running on five occasions, Webster on three and Calhoun twice. But each man's long and often controversial track record in public office invariably leads to defeat.

Together they will earn their reputation as "the Great Triumvirate."

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Time: 1806-1852

## Henry Clay Of Kentucky



Henry Clay (1777-1852)

After serving two brief stints in the U.S. Senate, Henry Clay decides that the House, with its “power over the purse,” is where he belongs. In 1811, at age 33 years, he is elected to the lower chamber. On his first day there, March 4, 1811, he is chosen as Speaker by a 75-38 margin, a signal recognition of his intellect and his ability to find middle ground between his Democratic-Republicans and the Federalist opposition. He will serve his country in Washington over a 46 year span, until his death.

Clay is born on April 12, 1777, in eastern Virginia, where his family has lived for 150 years. His first home is a modest-sized plantation, with 25 slaves, situated in Hanover County, near a swampy area known as The Slashes. When Henry is 14 years old, his family moves west to Kentucky, leaving him behind to find his way in the world. He moves to Richmond, where he first works in an emporium and then lands a job clerking at the state’s high court chancery.

Clay’s formal education is minimal, but he is intensely curious about the world, naturally gregarious, and meticulous, especially when it comes to his handwriting. This latter trait recommends him to Judge George Wythe, who suffers from a crippled hand and is looking for a private secretary. Clay lands the job and stays with the Judge over a four year period.

Wythe has signed the Declaration of Independence, and become a classical scholar at the College of William & Mary, where he mentors a host of political leaders, including Thomas Jefferson and James Monroe. He transforms Clay, intellectually, socially and inspirationally, during their four years together, and prepares him for a planned career in law. He also advises Clay on slavery, touting the idea that education must accompany freedom, if the problem is to be solved. Clay’s posture on the dilemma tends to mirror Jefferson’s. On one hand he decries it as an evil practice all his life:

*Can any humane man be happy and contented when he sees nearly thirty thousand of his fellow beings ‘around him, deprived of all rights which make life desirable, transferred like cattle from the possession of ‘one to another...when he hears the piercing cries of husbands separated from wives and children and parents. ‘The answer is no...*

But he too will continue to buy and own slaves up to his death, when he finally embraces Wythe’s solution – granting emancipation and supporting education and employment for those freed.

In 1797 Clay passes the bar, heads west to visit his family, and settles down in the well-established town of Lexington. Once there, his law practice, both civil and criminal, takes off, as does his lasting reputation as Shakespeare’s “Prince Hal,” a good fellow, well met, ready to drink, gamble on cards and horses, and share his opinions with all comers. In 1799 he marries Lucretia Hart, adding both wealth and slaves in the process. He joins the law faculty at Transylvania College, and enters politics in 1803, winning a seat in the Kentucky State Assembly that he will hold for six more years.

In 1806 his national notoriety grows by successfully defending Aaron Burr against charges of treason filed by the U.S. District Attorney in Kentucky.

Ill will over this support for Burr accounts in part for the first of two non-fatal duels Clay will instigate during his career. On January 19, 1809, he exchanges three shots with another legislator, Humphrey Marshall, leaving both men with slight wounds.

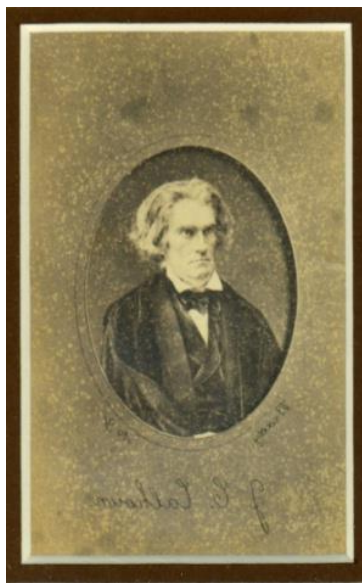
Within Democratic-Republican circles, he is known as the “Rising Star of the West.”

As a leader of the “War Hawk” faction, he supports Madison’s call to war with Britain in 1812.

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Time: 1811-1850

### John C. Calhoun Of South Carolina



John C. Calhoun (1782-1850)

If Clay brings a western perspective to Congress, John Calhoun will become a leading spokesperson for the more conservative partisans of the south, across his four decades in office.

He is born on March 18, 1782 in Abbeville, South Carolina, a frontier settlement in the northwest corner of the state, abutting Georgia. His ancestors are Scots-Irish immigrants, who put down roots in Long Cane, some thirteen miles to the south, before being driven out by hostile Cherokees. His father, Patrick Calhoun, Jr., a survivor of the Cherokee’s Long Cane massacre of 1760, builds a cotton plantation, worked by his family and 30 slaves. Patrick is also active in the state legislature, and known for strong anti-Federalist positions.

John Calhoun is raised as a Presbyterian, with its Calvinistic emphasis on hard work, personal discipline, stern demeanor, and a rather bleak view of human nature. He is frail as a youth, and drawn early on to academics rather than farming. His early formal education is limited, but his parents

recognize his bent, and enroll him at Yale University in the fall of 1802. While there, his Calvinist traditions come up against early strains of Unitarianism, with its emphasis on beliefs born of rational, independent thought.

He graduates from Yale in 1804 and soon moves on to Litchfield Law School in Connecticut, run by its founder, one Tapping Read, whose students include both Calhoun and Aaron Burr. Ironically, Read is an outspoken supporter of a strong national government, something his two famous graduates come to question.

In 1807, Calhoun is back in South Carolina and practicing law, when the British frigate *HMS Leopold* attacks the *US Chesapeake* off the Virginia coast and impresses four of her sailors. Calhoun organizes a protest meeting held at the Abbeville courthouse, and delivers a stirring speech in favor of an embargo against Britain and stepped up preparations for war. This entry into the political arena leads to two terms of service in the South Carolina state legislature.

At this time he is also falling in love with his first cousin once removed, Floride Boneau Colhoun, later famous for her outspoken moral rectitude in the 1830 “Petticoat Affair.” The strait-laced suitor is uncharacteristically affective in his pursuit of Floride:

*My dearest one, may our love strengthen with each returning day, may it ripen and mellow with our years, and may it end in immortal joys. ... May God preserve you. Adieu my love; my heart's delight, I am your true lover.*

The two marry and move into her 1100 acre Fort Hill Plantation, in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, as Calhoun is about to become a political fixture in Washington. He arrives there soon after the Twelfth Congress convenes on November 4, 1811. Like most congressmen of the time, he resides in a boardinghouse, his named “the War Mess” and shared with his new colleague and ally, Henry Clay of Kentucky.

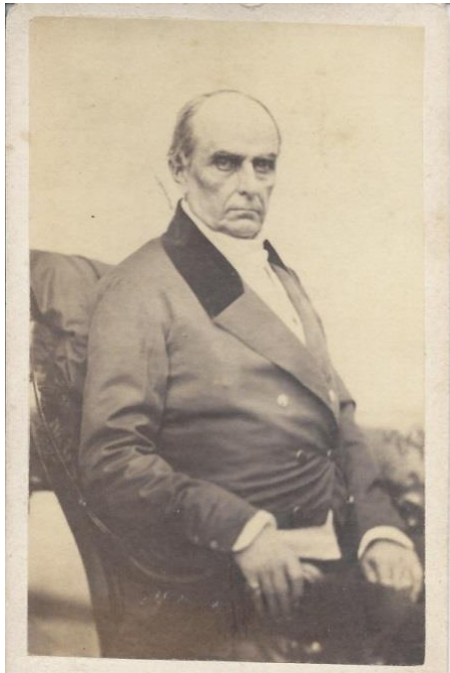
His administrative skills are immediately apparent to all, as is his willpower. He is appointed in the House to the Foreign Affairs Committee and soon becomes its chair. On June 3, 1812, he sums up the feelings of his fellow committee members toward the recent British aggression:

*The mad ambition, the lust of power, and commercial avarice of Great Britain, arrogating to herself the complete dominion of the Ocean, and exercising over it an unbounded and lawless tyranny, have left to Neutral Nations—an alternative only, between the base surrender of their rights, and a manly vindication of them... (The committee) feels no hesitation in advising resistance by force—In which the Americans of the present day will prove to the enemy and to the World, that we have not only inherited that liberty which our Fathers gave, us, but also the will & power to maintain it.*

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Time: 1813-1852

### **Daniel Webster Of Massachusetts**



(Daniel Webster (1782-1852))

The third member of the triumvirate who assume political leadership from 1810 to 1850 is Daniel Webster, whose famous oratory captures the sentiments of the elite Federalist establishment in New England.

Webster's antecedents emigrate from Scotland to New Hampshire in 1637. His father, Ebenezer, fights in the French & Indian War and in 1761 carves out a 225 acre farm on the western frontier in the town of Salisbury. In 1775 he organizes the Salisbury Militia and leads it throughout the Revolutionary War. Back home, Eben serves in the New Hampshire state legislature and as an elder in the Congregational Church.

Daniel Webster is born on January 18, 1782, Eben's fourth child. The boy adores his father, who tells him tales of the patriotic war, reads to him from the Bible and encourages his penchant for learning. Unlike his father, young Webster is frail, more prone to books than farming. In 1796 he is admitted to Phillips Exeter Academy, being placed at the bottom of his class for want of Latin. One year later he has risen to the top rank, before being called back to Salisbury to begin working as a teacher.

He escapes this fate with the help of a local minister, Thomas Thompson, in nearby Boscawen, who agrees to tutor him for one dollar a week. In 1797 he enrolls at Dartmouth College. Once there, Webster comes fully into his own. His self-confidence grows – some would say into arrogance – and he uses his powerful memory and love of words to become a dominant public speaker and debater. Classmates label him their “ablest man.”

After graduating, he is prodded into pursuing a legal career by his father. Webster himself sees the profession as filled with cunning and hypocrisy and says “I pray to God to fortify me against its temptations.”

But his feelings change in 1804 when he goes to work in Boston for Christopher Gore, ex-Attorney General of Massachusetts, who has made a fortune in financial speculation around Revolutionary War bonds, and in representing dispossessed Loyalists (to the Crown) in property disputes. Webster regards Gore as a genuine legal scholar to be emulated, and Gore encourages the youth to stick with the law and aim high in his career.

In 1805 Webster passes the bar and opens a law practice in Boscawen. His talents as a trial lawyer are soon evident to all, and his annual income soars to over \$2,000 a year.

The courtroom becomes his stage, a place to show off both forensic logic and a love of language, accumulated over years of reading and memorizing doses of the Bible and Shakespeare and John Milton. One of his legal adversaries admires his innate theatrical talents:

*There never was such an actor lost to the stage as he would have made, had he turned his talent in that direction.*

His legal successes and oratorical skills soon draw Daniel Webster into the political arena, despite his warning in an 1809 Phi Beta Kappa address at Dartmouth:

*The main impediments to moral improvements are love of gold and pursuit of politics.*

His father’s stories of the revolution make him first and foremost a Union man – and his emotionally charged pleadings to preserve the “great experiment of 1776” will form his lasting legacy.

But politically he is a staunch Federalist. His faith lies in the Constitution, in a strong national government and in visionary leaders like George Washington. In an 1812 convention held by New Hampshire Federalists in Rockingham county, he assails Jeffersonian democracy.

*The path to despotism leads through the mire and dirt of uncontrolled democracy.*

He also, prophetically, announces another potential path to doom, this time related to secession.

*If a separation of the states shall ever take place, it will be, on some occasion, when one portion of the country undertakes to control, to regulate, and to sacrifice the interest of another.*

It is finally the impending war with Britain War that draws Webster onto the political stage. He is elected in 1812, at age thirty, to represent New Hampshire in the U.S. House.

Once in Washington, he boards with two influential senators, his former mentor, Christopher Gore, and Rufus King of New York.

Unlike Clay and Calhoun, Daniel Webster will be a sharp critic of Madison’s preparations for and management of the War of 1812.