



# Lincoln Lore

## A HAWK BECOMES A DOVE: Henry Clay's Speech on the Mexican War, November 13, 1847

On January 8, 1813, Henry Clay spoke in the House of Representatives in support of a bill to raise an additional twenty regiments of infantry for the war with England. It was one of Clay's more vituperative attacks on what he called "the parasites of opposition," and the speech said nothing of recruitment problems, availability of soldiers, casualties, or specific military needs. Suggesting that their previous opposition to Republican administrations had encouraged the enemy to make war on American independence, Clay accused the Federalists of "tacking with every gale, displaying the colors of every party, and of all nations, steady only in one unalterable purpose, to steer, if possible, into the haven of power." They were "for war, and no restrictions, when the administration is for peace," and they were "for peace and

restrictions, when the administration is for war." Thus he reduced the arguments used by the Federalists against the War of 1812 to hypocritical cant:

When, at length, foreign nations, perhaps, emboldened by the very opposition here made, refused to listen to the amicable appeals made, and repeated and reiterated by administration, to their justice and to their interests—when, in fact, war with one of them became identified with our independence and our sovereignty, and it was no longer possible to abstain from it, behold the opposition becoming the friends of peace and of commerce. They tell you of the calamities of war—its tragical events—the squandering away of your resources—the waste of the public treasure, and the spilling of innocent blood. They tell you that honor



BATTLE OF BUENA VISTA.

VIEW OF THE BATTLE-GROUND AND BATTLE OF "THE AVONTEIRA" BETWEEN AMERICAN AND MEXICAN FORCES, FEBRUARY 23<sup>RD</sup> 1847. (LITHOGRAPH BY J. WENT.)

Courtesy Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas

FIGURE 1. Henry Clay's son was killed at the Battle of Buena Vista just nine months before Clay delivered his speech on the Mexican War. Ronnie C. Tyler in "The Mexican War: A Lithographic Record" (*Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, LXXVII [July, 1973], 1-84) says that Henry R. Robinson, the lithographer of the above print, sent Clay a copy of the print and later published Clay's letter of acknowledgment to advertise his art. The battle was also instrumental in bringing General Zachary Taylor the fame which launched him to the Whig presidential nomination in 1848, a nomination which Clay himself desired.



is an illusion!

Of one Federalist opponent who had criticized Thomas Jefferson, Clay said that, whereas "the name of Jefferson will be hailed as the second founder of the liberties of this people," the Federalist's name will "be consigned to oblivion, or . . . live only in the reasonable annals of a certain junto."

Thirty-four years later, on November 13, 1847, Henry Clay spoke to a mass meeting in Lexington, Kentucky on the subject of another war, the War with Mexico. Clay, now a Whig, was in much the same position that his Federalist opponents had occupied years earlier, for the War with Mexico was the work of President James K. Polk's Democratic administration. Moreover, Clay himself was seeking the haven of power. Although he had proclaimed retirement after his loss to Polk in the presidential election of 1844, the Sage of Ashland was still interested in the presidency and would soon make known his availability as Whig nominee for 1848.

Nevertheless, Clay's speech began with careful disclaimers of any political intent; he was "most solicitous that not a solitary word may fall from me, offensive to any party or person in the whole extent of the Union." After all, Clay was "in the Autumn of life" and felt "the frost of Age" (he was 70 years old). He came to speak only reluctantly. He feared for "the harmony, if not the existence, of our Union," and, "while a single pulsation of the human heart remains, it should, if necessary, be dedicated to the service of one's country."

Clay then launched forth into a catalogue of the calamities of war highly reminiscent of those which he denounced Federalists for reciting years before. "In the sacrifice of human life, and in the waste of human treasure, in its losses, and in its burdens," he said, "it affects both belligerent nations, and its sad effects of mangled bodies, of death, and of desolation, endure long after its thunders are hushed in peace. War unhinges society, disturbs its peaceful and regular industry, and scatters poisonous seeds of disease and immorality, which continue to germinate and diffuse their baneful influence long after it has ceased. Dazzling by its glitter, pomp, and pagentry, it begets a spirit of wild adventure and romantic enterprise, and often disqualifies those who embark in it, after their return from the bloody fields of battle, from engaging in the industrious and peaceful vocations of life."

The most startling statement in the speech was Clay's assertion that he would not have voted with most Whigs for the bill which raised 50,000 volunteers once the hostilities had commenced. That bill also contained in its preamble a statement "falsely attributing the commencement of the War to the act of Mexico."

I have no doubt [said Clay] of the patriotic motives of those who, after struggling to divest the bill of that flagrant error, found themselves constrained to vote for it. But I must say that no earthly consideration would have ever tempted or provoked me to vote for a bill, with a palpable falsehood stamped on its face. Almost idolizing truth as I do, I never, never could have voted for that bill.

Only fourteen Whigs had voted against the bill in the House in 1846; only two Whig Senators opposed the measure. Clay thus aligned himself, after the fact, with the most radical members of the Whig party, men who, for the most part, were noted for their anti-slavery convictions. He was endorsing the votes of John Quincy Adams, George Ashmun, Joseph Grinnel, Charles Hudson, and D.P. King of Massachusetts; Henry Cranston of Rhode Island; Erastus Culver of New York; John Strohm of Pennsylvania; Luther Severance of Maine; and Joshua Giddings, Columbus Delano, Joseph Root, David Tilden, and Joseph Vance of Ohio.

The "immortal fourteen" had been immediately compared to the Federalists who had opposed the War of 1812 and accused of treason. Clay noted the charge, and, as a fervent supporter of that earlier war, was in a good position to dismiss it:

The exceptionable conduct of the Federal party, during the last British War, has excited an influence in the prosecution of the present War, and prevented a just discrimination between the two Wars. That was a War of National defence, required for the vindication of the National rights and honor, and demanded by the indignant voice of the people . . . It was a just War, and its great object, as announced at the time, was "Free Trade and Sailors' Rights," against the intolerable and oppressive acts of British power on the ocean. The justice of the War, far from being denied or controverted, was admitted by the Federal party, which only questioned it on considerations of

policy. Being deliberately and constitutionally declared, it was, I think, their duty to have given to it their hearty cooperation. But the mass of them did not. They continued to oppose and thwart it, to discourage loans and enlistments, to deny the power of the General Government to march the militia beyond our limits, and to hold a Hartford Convention, which, whatever were its real objects, bore the aspect of seeking the dissolution of the Union itself. They lost, and justly lost, the public confidence. But has not an apprehension of a similar fate, in a state of a case widely different, repressed a fearless expression of their real sentiments in some of our public men?

Clay was right. An extreme statement verifying his point had come from one-time Federalist Justin Butterfield. Asked whether he would oppose the Mexican War as he had the War of 1812, Butterfield replied: "No, by G-d, I opposed one war, and it ruined me, and hence forth I am for War, Pestilence and Famine." Clay claimed, however, that the Mexican War was "no War of Defence, but one unnecessary and of offensive aggression." Likewise, the Whig party, unlike the Federalist, had been so restrained in its opposition that "Far from interposing any obstacles to the prosecution of the War, if the Whigs in office are reproachable at all, it is for having lent too ready a facility to it, without careful examination into the objects of the War."

Clay's defense of the "immortal fourteen" and the Whig party in general from charges of Federalist defeatism or treason glossed over some complicating factors. When he claimed that the Federalists had opposed the war only on grounds of policy, Clay referred only to some Federalist arguments at certain stages in the conflict over the War of 1812. He no doubt referred to the Federalists' concern over the War's damage to shipping interests and to their argument that the United States should not fight England, whatever the injustice of England's treatment of American sailors and ships, because England was waging the world's battle against the French imperial despot Napoleon. He ignored the argument (that developed after the war began) that there was no cause for war once England had rescinded the obnoxious orders which had caused America's difficulties on the seas. Word that these had been rescinded reached America shortly after the declaration of war, but Clay in 1813 had simply countered that the War of 1812 was like the American Revolution, "an example of a war began [sic] for one object and prosecuted for another."

Clay also carefully avoided mentioning one of the objects for which the War of 1812 had been prosecuted: acquisition of Canada. Clay had discussed invading Canada before 1812, and he did not rely on the argument of the Revolutionary generation that the inhabitants of Canada would rise to greet their American liberators with open arms: after conquering Quebec, Clay speculated in 1811, "there would be no European enemy behind to be apprehended; but the people of the country might rise; and he warned gentlemen who imagined that the affections of the Canadians were with us against trusting too confidently on a calculation, the basis of which was treason." He had allowed himself to think expansively in 1817 too:

Every man who looks at the Constitution in the spirit to entitle him to the character of an American statesman, must elevate his views to the height which this nation is destined to reach in the rank of nations. We are not legislating for this moment only, or for the present generation, or for the present populated limits of these States; but our acts must embrace a wider scope—reaching northwardly to the Pacific, and more southwardly to the river [Rio Grande] del Norte. Imagine this extent of territory covered with sixty, or seventy, or an hundred millions of people.

After justifying the "immortal fourteen" and implying that other Whigs had been too hasty to support the war, Clay quickly shifted his ground: "Without indulging in an unnecessary retrospect and useless reproaches on the past, all hearts and heads should unite in the patriotic endeavor to bring it to a satisfactory close." Clay then advanced a bizarre constitutional argument that was defied by previous American experience. He said that Congress "must . . . possess the authority, at any time, to declare for what purposes it [a war] shall be farther prosecuted." All would have granted, no doubt, that the Senate had such power in a negative sense by being able to refuse consent to war-ending treaties which went too far or failed to go far enough. Congress, Clay asserted, could omit to "proclaim the objects for which it [war] was com-



menced or has since been prosecuted," and then "the President, . . . is, necessarily, left to his own judgment to decide upon the objects, to the attainment of which that force shall be applied." In the War of 1812, Clay had to admit, there had been no such direction, but the "whole world knew that it was a War waged for Free Trade and Sailors' Rights." The solution now was simple: "Let it [Congress] resolve, simply, that the War shall or shall not be a War of conquest; and, if a War of Conquest, what is to be conquered. Should a resolution pass, disclaiming the design of Conquest, peace would follow in less than sixty days; if the President would conform to his constitutional duty."

Clay made clear that, if the vote were for a war of conquest, it must not mean the conquest of all Mexico. Although he felt sure that the United States had the requisite power to conquer Mexico, Clay invoked the traditional arguments against wars of conquest. Historical example was against it: Caesar's and Napoleon's countries lost their liberties after wars of conquest sapped their strength. A standing army occupying a foreign country "and accustomed to trample upon the liberties of a foreign people" would become ready instruments of an ambitious chieftain who desired to bring about a coup d'état. A country based on liberty could not keep the Mexicans under military rule, and annexation was out of the question. "Does any considerate man believe it possible," asked Clay, "that two such immense countries, with territories of nearly equal extent, with population so incongruous, so different in race, in language, in religion and in laws, could be blended together in one harmonious mass, and happily governed by one common authority?"

Although Clay invoked the concept of racial differences to explain the poor wisdom of Mexican annexation, he was more careful than other Whigs to avoid implications that the Mexicans were a degraded or inferior race. The *National Intelligencer* would gag in December at the thought of adding "unknown" tribes and having "many-colored representatives" in the legislatures, and Virginia's *Richmond Whig* in 1846 had found "far more to dread from the acquisition of the debased population who have been summarily manufactured into American citizens, than to hope from the extension of our territorial limits." Clay used "race" to describe national pride, identity, and variety but eschewed ranking the different peoples. He put the greatest burden not on differences of race or color but on "the difficulty of combining and consolidating together, conquering and conquered nations."

After the lapse of eight hundred years [Clay explained with historical examples], during which the Moors held the conquest of Spain, the indomitable courage, perseverance and obstinacy of the Spanish race finally triumphed over and expelled the African invaders from the Peninsula. And even within our time, the colossal power of Napoleon, when at its loftiest height, was incompetent to subdue and subjugate the proud Castilian. And here in our own neighborhood, Lower Canada, which near one hundred years ago, after the conclusion of the seven year's War, was ceded by France to Great Britain, remains a foreign land in the midst of the British provinces, foreign in feelings and attachment, and foreign in laws, language and religion. And what has been the fact with poor, gallant, generous and oppressed Ireland? Centuries have passed since the overbearing Saxon overran and subdued the Emerald Isle . . . Insurrection and rebellion have been the order of the day; and yet, up to this time, Ireland remains alien in feeling, affection and sympathy toward the power which has so long borne her down. Every Irishman hates, with a mortal hatred, his Saxon oppressor.

Sympathy for Ireland had been much on Henry Clay's mind of late. Newspapers had given wide coverage to Clay's speech in New Orleans earlier in the year on the subject of relief of famine-stricken Ireland. It had been more than a run-of-the-mill public appearance because Clay had (privately) blamed foreign Catholic voters for having a hand in defeating him in 1844. Despite this and some alleged personal sympathy for the Native American movement, Clay apparently spurned suggestions that the Whigs cultivate nativist and anti-Catholic feelings. Clay's discussion of religious differences between Mexicans and Americans in his Lexington speech, though it clearly identified Catholicism as a stumbling block to annexation, was notable for its moderation and for its final complimentary remarks on the Pope:

[Clay compared Mexico and Ireland with England and America.] The Catholic Religion predominates in both the

former; the Protestant among both the latter. Religion has been the fruitful cause of dissatisfaction and discontent between the Irish and the English nations. Is there no reason to apprehend that it would become so between the people of the United States and those of Mexico, if they were united together? Why should we seek to interfere with them in their mode of worship of the common Saviour? We believe that they are wrong, especially in the exclusive character of their faith, and that we are right. They think that they are right and we wrong. What other rule can there be than to leave the followers of each religion to their own solemn convictions of conscientious duty toward God? Who but the great Arbiter of the Universe can judge in such a question? For my own part, I sincerely believe and hope, that those who belong to all the departments of the Great Church of Christ, if, in truth and purity, they conform to the doctrines which they profess, will ultimately secure an abode in those regions of bliss which all aim finally to reach. I think that there is no potentate in Europe, whatever his religion may be, more enlightened, or at this moment so interesting, as the liberal head of the Papal See.

Despite the conciliatory religious note which constituted a non sequitur in the remarks on the Pope (and which was, therefore, more probably a matter of domestic political relations to Catholic voters than of reasoned argument on the Mexican War), Clay did add the degrading remark that he feared Mexico's population was "Unprepared, . . . for the practical enjoyment of self-government." "Those, whom God and geography have pronounced shall live asunder," concluded Clay, "could never be permanently and harmoniously united together."

Aside from the practical difficulties from the standpoint of the United States' own interests, Clay did mention the moral problem. Everyone looked upon the partitioning of Poland as a "rapacious and detestable deed," and Clay feared that the United States did "not now stand well in the opinion of other parts of Christendom" because we too seemed "actuated by a spirit of rapacity, and an inordinate desire for territorial aggrandizement." Clay expressed a personal wish that the United States gain no Mexican territory at all from the contest, but he was willing to grant a little incidental expansion:

For one, I desire to see no part of her territory torn from her by war. Some of our people have placed their hearts upon the acquisition of the Bay of San Francisco in Upper California. To us, as a great maritime power, it might prove to be of advantage hereafter. . . . To Mexico, which can never be a great maritime power, it can never be of much advantage. If we can obtain it by fair purchase for a just equivalent, I should be happy to see it so acquired. As whenever the War ceases, Mexico ought to be required to pay the debts due our citizens [incurred before the war and defaulted], perhaps an equivalent for the Bay may be found in that debt, our Government assuming to pay to our citizens whatever portion of it may be applied to that object. But it should form no motive in the prosecution of the War, which I would not continue a solitary hour for the sake of that harbor.

Clay was more willing to tolerate the sort of expansion the North desired than the sort the South desired. He insisted that the United States "disavow, in the most positive manner, any desire on our part to acquire any foreign territory whatever, for the purpose of introducing slavery into it." Here again, as in his apology for the "immortal fourteen," Clay was approaching the more radical elements in the Northern wing of the Whig party who claimed that the Mexican War was a pro-slavery plot to gain more territory for slave expansion and eventually more slave-state representatives in the Congress. Yet Clay merely *approached* their position; he did not adopt it. He added immediately: "I do not know that any citizen of the United States entertains such a wish." Nor did he mention specifically the Wilmot Proviso, which would have forbidden slavery in any territory acquired from Mexico as a result of the war. To say that the United States should "disabuse the public mind in any quarter of the Union of the impression, if it anywhere exists, that a desire for conquest is cherished for the purpose of propagating or extending Slavery" was not precisely to say that slavery would not be allowed in anything acquired by conquest.

Having approached the Joshua Giddingses of the Northern wing of his party, Clay very quickly repaired his fences in the rear. Although he had "ever regarded Slavery as a great evil, a wrong, for the present, I fear, an irremediable wrong, to its unfortunate victims," he was, of course, no abolitionist. More



than that, however, Clay hinted that he might not be looking forward to any kind of abolition, no matter how gradual in the Deep South. "In States where the slaves outnumber the whites, as in the case with several, the blacks could not be emancipated and invested with all the rights of freedom, without becoming the governing race in those States. Collisions and conflicts between the two races would be inevitable, and after shocking scenes of rapine and carnage, the extinction or expulsion of the blacks would certainly take place." Clay added, "In the State of Kentucky, near fifty years ago, I thought the proportion of slaves, in comparison with the whites, was so inconceivable that we might safely adopt a system of gradual emancipation that would ultimately eradicate this evil in our State." What was one to infer from this? The Southerner *could* infer that Clay did not believe in immediate emancipation *anywhere* and that he believed in gradual emancipation only where blacks constituted a small part of the population. Clay did finally state that slavery had "continued, . . . for a period of more than a century and a half, and it may require an equal or longer lapse of time before our country is entirely rid of the evil." Clay still held out that ultimate ideal of a free country, but "ultimate" in this speech meant almost a *minimum* of 150 years and an open-ended maximum.

Every authority agrees that Clay's speech on the Mexican War was, as biographer Glyndon Van Deusen puts it, "really a bid for the nomination" for president in 1848. Yet none has analyzed the speech to see to whom it was a bid. Clearly, he was reaching out to the Northern wing of the Whig party and to the more radical members of that wing. No doubt as Clay read the situation in the autumn of 1847, the Zachary Taylor presidential boom was faltering. He must have surmised that it fundered on the rocks of Northern discontent with a Southern-sponsored slave-owning candidate whose views on slavery were not widely known. Clay would reach out to that constituency without totally losing his Southern moorings. Or perhaps he may even have realized that it would divorce him from the South more than ever. In a confidential letter to Horace Greeley, Clay suggested that the speech would make "me a Western man (I protest being considered as a *Southern* man) with Northern principles," but this, of course, was what Greeley as an anti-slavery Northern Whig wanted to hear. New York's William Seward knew the purpose of the speech. In letters to his wife he said of Clay's speech that it was "surpassingly beautiful and will affect many minds. But it is too late." More to the point, Seward said, "Mr. Clay's notices of slavery and of the extension of slavery will not satisfy the North."

Whig Congressman-elect Abraham Lincoln was in Lexington when Clay gave his speech, and many historians have assumed that he would not have missed this, his only chance to hear his "beau ideal of a statesman" speak in person. There is no direct evidence that Lincoln did hear the speech, however. When he commended "Mr. Clay's eloquence" in his eulogy on Clay in 1852, Lincoln asserted that "those who heard Mr. Clay, never failed to be moved by it, or ever afterwards, forgot the impression." Yet, Lincoln did not say that he had had that privilege himself, and there were doubtless many reminiscences of hearing Clay's speeches in print by that time.

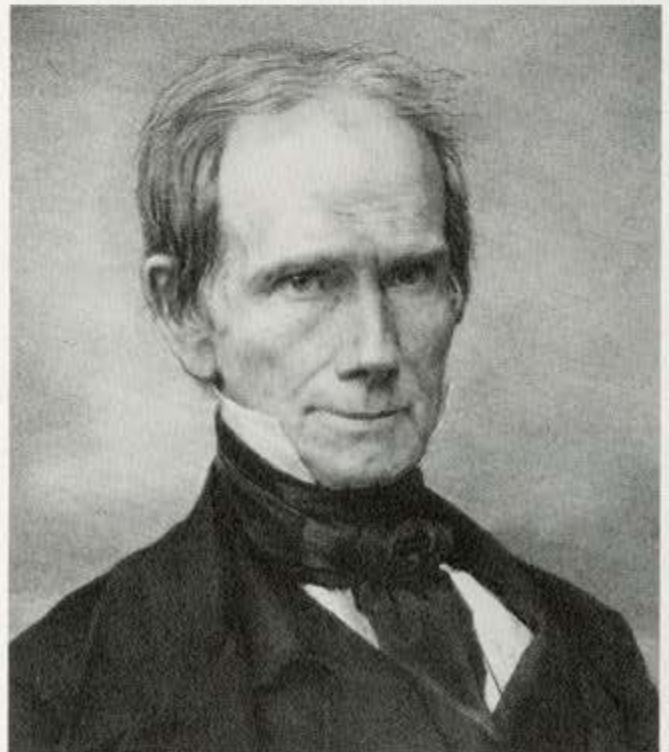
Nor did Clay's speech on the Mexican War notably influence Lincoln's famous speech in opposition to that war. Lincoln attacked the Mexican War in the House on January 12, 1848, but he confined himself largely to the issue of aggression. His concern was with the legal border of Texas and, thus, with the question whether hostilities had really begun on American soil. Lincoln scrupulously avoided even Clay's cautious intimations about the motive behind the war. Lincoln did say in a suggestive tone that President Polk had had "some strong motive—what, I will not stop now to give my opinion concerning," but he never mentioned slavery in the speech. Clay addressed his speech primarily to the question of war aims and attacked the movement to acquire all of Mexico at great length. By the time Lincoln delivered his speech, Polk had stated "that the separate national existence of Mexico, shall be maintained," and he therefore had less reason to attack the movement Clay had attacked. Still, Lincoln said little of the legitimate or illegitimate purposes of the war and mentioned some of the various objectives considered only to show that Polk was confused and had no clear purpose.

By February of 1848, if not before, Lincoln had embraced a

view of the proper objectives of the war. By that time Lincoln had endorsed the "defensive-line strategy" according to which American forces were to assume a stationary position along the Rio Grande to the southern border of New Mexico and then along the thirty-second parallel. This not only would establish the Rio Grande as the Texas border, but, as Lincoln said, "we shall probably be under a sort of necessity of taking some territory" but none "extending so far South, as to enlarge and aggravate[sic] the distracting question of slavery."

Ironically, the defensive-line strategy was largely the brain child of John C. Calhoun, with whom Lincoln was not often in agreement, but Lincoln claimed that Zachary Taylor "declared for, and, in fact originated, the defensive line policy." Herein lies an irony in all the concern over Lincoln's relationship to Clay's speech. Whether he heard it or not, it failed to have the desired effect on him, for Lincoln was supporting the movement to make Zachary Taylor the Whig presidential nominee at least as early as December 10, 1847.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Preparation of the above analysis of Henry Clay's speech would have been impossible without the aid of the following works: Glyndon G. Van Deusen, *The Life of Henry Clay* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1937); George Rawlings Poage, *Henry Clay and the Whig Party* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1936); Samuel Eliot Morison, Frederick Merk, and Frank Friedel, *Dissent in Three American Wars* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970); James F. Hopkins, ed., *The Papers of Henry Clay, Volume I: The Rising Statesman, 1797-1814* ([Lexington]: University of Kentucky Press, 1959); John H. Schroeder, *Mr. Polk's War: American Opposition and Dissent, 1846-1848* ([Madison]: University of Wisconsin Press, 1973); and G.S. Borit, "A Question of Political Suicide: Lincoln's Opposition to the Mexican War," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, LXVII (February, 1974), 79-100.



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

FIGURE 2. Henry Clay as he looked about three years after he delivered his speech against the Mexican War in Lexington, Kentucky. Though seventy when he delivered the speech, Clay made a bid for the presidential nomination the next year and was elected Senator when he was seventy-two. At seventy-three he played a prominent role in bringing about the Compromise of 1850. He was seventy-five when he died in Washington, D.C.