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To Save the Union

By ANDREW CAYTON, Sunday Book Review
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Henry Adams made his first visit to the floor of the United States Senate in May 1850, when he was 12. It was, he recalled, a “pleasant political club,” a “friendly world” where even slaveholders seemed “genial and sympathetic.” Adams didn’t mention the contemporary controversy over the vast territory recently acquired by conquest from Mexico: Would slavery be legal in the states that would eventually emerge from the region? While angry Americans demanded an answer, members of Congress debated and dithered. Then in August they approved a series of bills known as the Compromise of 1850, which resolved the political crisis by making no one happy.

The Senate that Adams remembered was like the eye of a hurricane, the calm at the center of a storm. And standing in the middle of that calm was Henry Clay of Kentucky. No one had done more to nurture the familiar atmosphere of Congress and indeed of the capital city. Clay thrived in Washington, a small town whose transient denizens were susceptible to the kind of adroit personal management he was known for.

This reputation earned the 73-year-old Clay greater credit for the Compromise of 1850 than he deserved. Still, even if Clay’s role was more ceremonial than substantive, his name has become forever associated with efforts to save the Union, and that, according to Robert V. Remini, the historian of the House of Representatives, was what mattered most. “The Compromise of 1850,” Remini writes in his new, polemical book, “At the Edge of the Precipice,” is a “prime example of how close this nation came to a catastrophic smashup, and the way the power brokers of that period avoided that disaster — just in time.”

In popular history, especially biographies, prominent members of the second generation of American leaders — Clay, Daniel Webster, John C. Calhoun — have been assigned roles in a drama we might call “Saving the Union.” Their contribution, as Remini indicates, was to keep the large and rambunctious United States together, an imposing challenge because Americans had so many intractable differences.

The founders had essentially tabled issues, most notably slavery, that threatened to destroy their fragile Union. The next generation tried to avoid confronting slavery, too. But in the end they couldn’t, not because of their personal failings but because too many Americans saw the issue as a question of power. Who actually ran the United States: slaveholders or free men? The Compromise of 1850 saved the Union temporarily, but at considerable cost to the legitimacy of the American political system. Growing numbers of people lost faith in their government, not because their leaders wouldn’t compromise but because they did.

Clay was the face of Congress in the early 19th century. He pioneered the role of political insider, inventing the rules and procedures that governed Congress for decades. As speaker of the House of Representatives, secretary of state, United States senator and perennial contender for the presidency, Clay was more comfortable in Washington than in Kentucky. Congress was his true home. In June 1852, his corpse became the first to lie in state in the Rotunda of the Capitol.

Among Clay's greatest assets was his congeniality, David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler explain in their thorough if conventional biography, "Henry Clay: The Essential American." He enjoyed a good time, including drinking, gambling and flirting with women. He wanted people to like him even when they clearly didn't. Characteristic was a scene at the deathbed of his longtime rival, Senator Calhoun of South Carolina. Clay worked hard to make conversation while Calhoun stared at him in icy silence. Devotion to the Union made sense for a man who flourished within its structures. Born in 1777 to a comfortable farm family in Virginia, Clay came of age in Richmond in the 1790s under the tutelage of George Wythe, a revered figure who had taught the law to Thomas Jefferson. A young man in a hurry, Clay joined the rest of his family in Lexington, Ky., toward the end of the decade. His legal practice boomed as his reputation for oratory and his skills at negotiating grew. His marriage to Lucretia Hart enhanced his local standing and connections. The Clays were apparently devoted to each other, despite long separations and the wrenching deaths of several children. The Heidlers, the authors of many books of American history, portray Lucretia as the patient wife affectionately supporting an ambitious man who was happiest when he was out making speeches and brokering deals.

But there was more to Clay than personal charm and mastery of Congress. His governing vision throughout his career was the development of the United States into a prosperous and powerful nation. He championed the War of 1812; the independence of Spanish colonies in the Americas; and federal support for roads, canals, education, industry and commerce. At the same time, he believed individuals should be left free to regulate their own conduct and dispose of their property, including enslaved African-Americans, as they wished. Like other members of the Whig Party, he asserted the rights of Congress against the iron will of President Andrew Jackson, for whom compromise was a violation of his duty to the People.

Clay came closest to winning the White House in 1844 but lost to James K. Polk. The skills and personality that got things done in Washington struck many Americans as evidence of the corruption and lack of principle that Jackson never tired of denouncing, particularly where Clay was concerned. But voters were reacting to more than personal attributes and tactical errors. A significant number in Clay's own party wouldn't vote for a slaveholder; some issues were beyond compromise.

The problem with these informative books runs deeper than the criticism that they concentrate on dead white men. The stress on individuals, especially on whether they were likable or not, and the emphasis on compromise as an unqualified good, assumes

that issues can — and should — be resolved politically. Good men (Clay) compromise; bad men (Calhoun) don't. That approach obscures the obvious fact that some human conflicts are structural and that sometimes people value a sense of justice above everything else. After all, had the founders of the Republic pursued compromise in 1776, there might never have been a Union to save. Similarly, the price of compromise in 1850 was prolonged enslavement for millions.

No one admired Henry Clay more than Abraham Lincoln. Still, while Lincoln's fervent attachment to the United States never waned, he was persuaded that slavery was a moral offense that Americans could no longer ignore. Lincoln's achievement lay in his ability to lead his fellow citizens toward doing the right thing in ways that increased rather than diminished respect for their political institutions. We remember Lincoln more than Clay, in short, not just because he saved the Union, but also because he insisted that a Union worth saving was a Union that stood for something more than itself.