



## Historian brings Clay to present day

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Robert V. Remini, in his fifth year as the House historian, has published more than two dozen books, including a biography of Henry Clay, a history of the House of Representatives and a three-part biography of Andrew Jackson, which won the National Book Award in 1984. Remini, also a professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago, has a new book, *At the Edge of the Precipice: Henry Clay and the Compromise that Saved the Union*.

### **Q: Why did you want to write about Henry Clay and the Compromise of 1850?**

I was asked by a publisher to write about one of the important moments of American history that isn't well-known. And then what happened was it became more than just the Compromise of 1850; it became a story about the importance of compromise and getting things done.

And then back when I was writing the biography of Henry Clay, I told one of my students what I was doing, and I asked him if he knew who Henry Clay was. He said, "Oh, sure, he was the father of Cassius Clay," the prizefighter. Nobody knows who Henry Clay is or what he did. People need to know more about the individuals who have not been president who have made great contributions.

### **Q: How do you see the story that's detailed in this book reflected in our current political state?**

They've not been compromising in Congress [recently]. What Henry Clay says is that nothing gets done effectively for the good of the people if members on both sides of a question aren't willing to come together and work out some agreement. It may not be the best at first; it can always be improved on. But you've got to get it started. If one side jams what it wants to do down your throat, [then] when you become the majority, you'll jam it down your opponent's throat. Look at what happened with the healthcare bill. The Democrats finally had to pass it without much help from the Republicans. If the Republicans win in November, they're going to change it. And where does that leave the American people? That's not how you get anything done effectively.

The Founders understood the need for compromise. The Constitution is nothing but one long compromise on the government, on its powers, on the people elected and how they're elected.

### **Q: What role would Henry Clay play in today's political environment?**

He would be trying to find solutions to the big problems that we're facing. He was a statesman who really cared about the union and the dangers to it and the American

people. And then he would find ways to prevent that from happening, and he was good at that. I was telling [House Minority Whip] Eric Cantor [R-Va.] that I'd like to see the picture they have in the House of George Washington removed and Henry Clay's picture put in its place.

**Q: How did Clay go about reaching political compromises?**

Clay always said there can be no winners and no losers. Everybody should get something. And you have to figure out, what is it that you really want? And in order to get that, you have to give something to the other side.

**Q: What was the most difficult part of working on this book?**

The most difficult part was probably sitting down every day and writing. Sometimes it was easy, and I'd wake up in the middle of the night and think of something, and I'd get up and go to the computer. And my poor wife would say, "What's the matter?" She thought there might be somebody in the house who didn't belong there. I've always enjoyed the research. But then you have to sit down and think about, what do I have to say? And what can I bring to this story that will be important? And what do people need to hear?

**Q: How did you approach the writing process?**

I learned from my Jesuit teachers at Fordham University that when you have to do something, you do it. You don't find excuses. It may not be very good when you're writing, and you know it's not. I've even written to myself in the margins at the time, "This is rotten! You've got to change it." But you can't find excuses to do nothing and sit there and wait until you're inspired. You just have to keep working at it.

**Q: What's one thing about Henry Clay that people should know?**

How he saved the union. He worked constantly for the country and for the people. And he was very popular, except when he ran for president. I think it's a big shame that he was never elected. But he was accused of a corrupt bargain of giving the presidency to John Quincy Adams in return for an appointment as secretary of State, because at that time the secretary of State automatically became the president. Another thing about Clay is that he was a man of contradictions — he loved to drink and carouse, and he loved to flirt with attractive women. But when a compromise was necessary, he worked as hard as anyone.

**Q: When do you think the ability to compromise began to disappear from modern politics?**

In the modern period it begins with [former House Speaker] Newt Gingrich [R-Ga.]. Newt Gingrich really preached that members should go out and kill them. Get elected. Don't cooperate with them. And William Kristol also came out against cooperation, saying that the only way that a party that's out of power gets into power is not by cooperating but by showing the other side up for all their mistakes, and that has continued to get worse.

**Q: Who are some of the more recent politicians who have embodied Henry Clay's qualities of being able to compromise?**

In the House, [former Speaker] Sam Rayburn [D-Texas] or [former Speaker] Tip O'Neill [D-Mass.] or even [former Speaker] "Czar" [Thomas] Reed [R-Maine]. But there have been others. Woodrow Wilson, Teddy Roosevelt and Franklin Roosevelt. Harry Truman.