
Henry Clay

In Defense of the American System

February 2, 3, and 6, 1832

From the nation's earliest days, Congress has struggled with the fundamental issue of the national government's proper role in fostering economic development. Henry Clay's "American System," devised in the burst of nationalism that followed the War of 1812, remains one of the most historically significant examples of a government-sponsored program to harmonize and balance the nation's agriculture, commerce, and industry. This "System" consisted of three mutually reinforcing parts: a tariff to protect and promote American industry; a national bank to foster commerce; and federal subsidies for roads, canals, and other "internal improvements" to develop profitable markets for agriculture. Funds for these subsidies would be obtained from tariffs and sales of public lands. Clay argued that a vigorously maintained system of sectional economic interdependence would eliminate the chance of renewed subservience to the free-trade, laissez-faire "British System." In the years from 1816 to 1828, Congress enacted programs supporting each of the American System's major elements. After the 1829 inauguration of President Andrew Jackson's administration, with its emphasis on a limited role for the federal government and sectional autonomy, the American System became the focus of anti-Jackson opposition that coalesced into the new Whig party under the leadership of Henry Clay.

Henry Clay has been aptly labeled "the most influential member" of the Senate during its golden age of the 1830's and 1840's. His personal 'Magnetism--his passionate, charming, and ingratiating manner--made Clay one of America's best-loved politicians; but his consuming ambition for the presidency led him to compromise his principles in a series of major blunders that frustrated those public figures and private citizens who sought his forceful leadership. One biographer concluded that "there was a serious statesman in him along with the gamester-politician; behind his never-ending series of plausible expedients there was a consistency of purpose. Clay has been overrated as a politician and underrated as a statesman."

The Kentuckian took his first Senate oath of office in 1806 at age twenty-nine, despite being three months under the constitutionally required age for membership. Filling out

an unexpired term, he served less than three months, and in January 1810 he returned for another brief period. Moving to the House of Representatives in 1811, Clay was chosen Speaker on his first day in that body, a post he held intermittently for a decade. He served as Secretary of State in John Quincy Adams' administration, and following Andrew Jackson's 1828 defeat of Adams, Clay returned to the Senate in November 1831. Within months, the National Republican party nominated Clay to oppose Jackson in the 1832 election.

Clay's move to the Senate in 1831 symbolized the increasing prestige of the upper chamber, which was rapidly becoming the principal theater for the nation's intensifying legislative battles.

Early in 1832, as the Jackson administration moved closer to paying off its national debt, Clay recommended abolishing tariffs on foreign goods that did not compete with American products. This would have obvious political appeal to the purchasers of those goods and would reduce the flow of revenue into the treasury, preventing Jackson from extinguishing the debt in time to take credit for it in the 1832 election campaign.

Southerners who hated protective tariffs argued that Clay's reductions were inadequate.

By 1831, the Kentucky senator enjoyed a national reputation as an outstanding orator. A book entitled *The Speeches of Henry Clay* had appeared four years earlier, "the first such volume to be published in the United States and [an indication of] the importance parliamentary eloquence had attained in the nation's life. Clay's oratorical power, unlike that of Webster, lay not in his choice of words or extent of his knowledge, but in his style of delivery. Raised in a western tradition that valued oratory for its entertainment rather than educational value, Clay tailored his remarks for a wide audience, filling them with popular allusions while omitting the learned quotations that other classical orators favored. Unlike Calhoun, who delivered scholarly addresses with a maximum of speed and a minimum of ornamentation, Clay adopted a deliberative style that made effective use of calculated pauses, well-timed body gestures, and simple direct arguments. Carl Schurz, who served in the Senate in the 1870's with those who had known Clay, believed the Kentuckian possessed "the true oratorical temperament, that force of nervous exaltation that makes the orator feel himself, and appear to others, a superior being, and almost irresistibly transfuses his thoughts, his passions, and his will into the mind and heart of the listener."

On February 2, 1832, Clay used the first speech of his Senate career to launch a major attack on the Jackson administration. This three-day speech, entitled "[In Defense of the American System](#)," ([pdf](#)) focused principally on the importance of maintaining protective tariffs, despite complaints of such southern spokesmen as Senator Robert Y. Hayne of South Carolina and Vice President John C. Calhoun that they would ruin the region's economy.

Historian Merrill Peterson reconstructed the image Clay conveyed to his audience during delivery of this address. "The chamber was packed to hear the man whose powers of persuasion—now charming, now badgering; now beseeching, now deprecating; now subdued, now vehement—were legendary, and who, if he did not command assent by the strength of his views, won it with his captivating manner and seductive voice." Friends and foes alike admired the sound of Clay's voice. Another scholar concludes, "His voice was a magnificent instrument to express his emotions and ideas, remarkable clear, at times 'soft as a lute' and other times 'full as a trumpet,' beautifully modulated." Clay's modern biographer, Robert Remini, offers this cogent evaluation of the American System address:

Despite its frequent histrionic outbursts, its penchant for overkill, its wrongheadedness about southern interests and concerns, its statistical errors, its irrelevancies, and its overtly insincere courtesies it was a masterful speech, one of Clay's more triumphant efforts at influencing the minds and votes of his colleagues. It buttressed logical arguments with statistical data, all compellingly presented with humor, grace, passion, a touch of sarcasm here and there, and the force of personality and language.

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