

The Struggle for the Union

Henry Clay - the Great Compromiser

The Formation of the Union
and its Early Challenges

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Teachers Guide

Program Overview

The Formation of the Union and its Early Challenges

Henry Clay was a statesman from Kentucky; his career in Congress spanned more than forty years. When he was first elected to the House of Representatives in 1811, he was chosen Speaker on his first day as a House member. He was chosen Speaker six times. He was elected to the United States Senate from Kentucky in 1831 and would serve in that body until his death in 1852.

An unsuccessful presidential candidate in 1824, 1832 and 1844, Clay's contributions to his country came about as a member of Congress. Henry Clay's efforts at forging compromises in 1820, 1833 and 1850 over the admission of Missouri and Maine, the high protective tariff of 1828, the admission of California and Texas and the status of the territories acquired as a result of the Mexican War, helped to postpone the civil war for forty years.

Discussion Topics/Questions

1. What was the first "Constitution" of the United States and why did it not last?

The Articles of Confederation was the first so-called Constitution. Ratified in 1781, it simply did not create a general government strong enough to meet the demands of the States to address the critical needs and issues that existed among and between them. The States needed a Constitution that created a federal government that could effectively provide for the "common defense" and was powerful enough to "regulate commerce" and trade among and between them.

2. What was the Union Henry Clay struggled to maintain?

By the Constitution, the thirteen original States formed a "union" in which they created a federal government with certain "limited and enumerated powers," reserving for themselves all other powers. Among the limited powers given by the States to the federal government in the Constitution were the powers to "provide for the common defense" and to "regulate commerce" among and between the States. That Constitution also acknowledged slavery to exist in some States. The "union" formed by that Constitution thus depended upon the federal government exercising only the limited powers given it by the Constitution and slavery being protected.

3. Why was there a need to keep the number of slave States and free States equal?

Under the Constitution, each State had two United States senators. If there was a balance between slave and free States, no legislation adversely affecting slavery could succeed in the Senate. Certainly, no constitutional amendment affecting slavery could ever pass the Senate and be reported to the States for ratification so long as that balance was maintained.

4. Why was there a struggle for the Union?

Slavery had existed in the American colonies from their earliest settlement, but there was a growing sentiment to abolish the institution by the end of the eighteenth century. While most persons acknowledged the moral wrong of slavery, how to abolish it was a question for which no one had an answer. By 1820 there were nearly two million slaves living in the southern States. The States in the South grew more and more dependent upon slave labor in the nineteenth century. There was a balance in the number of slave States and free States, which protected slavery, but as the country expanded, tensions grew over whether to allow slavery in the newly-acquired territories and newly-admitted States. When Missouri petitioned for statehood as a slave State in 1819, the nation came to the brink of civil war because its admission would upset the balance between slave States and free States.

5. Where was the first threat by States to secede from the Union and how was it avoided?

The first threat of secession was in the Hartford Convention of 1814. There, in the State House in Hartford, Connecticut, three New England States, Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Connecticut, along with delegations from other States in the region, threatened to secede from the Union because of the embargo placed upon foreign trade during the War of 1812 by the administration of President James Madison. The New England States were economically dependent upon foreign trade and the embargo crippled their economies. Secession was avoided because the War of 1812 ended with news of a peace treaty with Great Britain that was reached in Ghent, Belgium and General Andrew Jackson's victory at the Battle of New Orleans in January 1815.