

■ Speech in Congress on the War of 1812

Date: January 8, 1813

Author: Clay, Henry

Genre: address

“A nation ought but seldom to go to war. When it does, it should be for clear and essential rights alone . . . who is prepared to say that American seamen shall be surrendered, the victims to the British principle of impressment?”

Summary Overview

Henry Clay was a member of the House of Representatives and one of the most adamant proponents for declaring what became known as the War of 1812 (June 18, 1812–December 24, 1814) when it was debated in June of that year. Many had assumed the American forces would easily and quickly defeat the British and their allies, since the majority of the British forces were tied up in Europe in the war with Napoleon. When the anticipated success failed to come, support for the war declined. Following some naval victories, Congress passed bills authorizing additional naval forces. However, a bill proposed by President James Madison in December 1812 to increase the size of the American army by fifty thousand men stalled in part because the army had failed to achieve any significant victories against the British. In response to strong antiwar speeches, Henry Clay delivered speeches over a two-day period to strengthen support for the war effort and to ensure passage of the bill on January 11, 1813.

Defining Moment

Conflict continued between the Americans and the British after the formal conclusion of the Revolutionary War. The Jay Treaty, signed in 1794, relieved some pressure by granting Britain most-favored-nation status in terms of trade, but British and American interests

still differed. This treaty was supported by President George Washington, but it was actively opposed by Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. Toward the end of his second term, Jefferson encouraged Congress to pass legislation moving away from the Jay Treaty, allowing Americans to trade with everyone in Europe, including Britain’s enemy, the French. This policy, which was continued under President Madison, antagonized the British and led to them physically stopping American ships. When inspecting the American ships to confiscate goods going to or from France, the British at times used the opportunity to kidnap American sailors, as they needed more sailors for their war effort. In addition, the British were encouraging American Indians in the Northwest Territory to stop the influx of American settlers. As a result, in 1812, President Madison proposed war with Great Britain. Henry Clay, one of the two most outspoken supporters of this proposal in Congress, helped secure passage of the declaration.

In 1812, there were relatively few well-trained American troops. This resulted in a disastrous beginning to the war for the United States. The general at Detroit surrendered without a battle, and plans to invade Canada across the Niagara River failed to come to fruition. State militias did not want to fight outside their home states, and the northeastern part of the United States

was against the war. President Madison, a Democratic-Republican, desperately needed additional troops if the United States was going to win the war. Members of the Federalist Party gave strong speeches in Congress that questioned why the war was continuing, since Britain had agreed to free trade. On January 8, Clay temporarily stepped down from his position as Speaker of the House to debate the issue. In his response, he emphasized what he saw as the heart of the struggle: the impressment, or kidnapping, of American sailors by the British to man their ships. The strength of this speech not only allowed the bill to pass but also created more popular support for the war. Following the Federalists' loss on this issue, they became increasingly marginalized. By the end of the war, in 1815, they were no longer a major factor in national politics. After decisively losing the election in 1816, they did not even field a candidate for the 1820 election.

Author Biography

Henry Clay, the seventh of nine children, was born on April 12, 1777. His parents, Reverend John Clay and Elizabeth Hudson Clay, lived in Virginia. Clay worked in the legal profession at an early age, originally as a secretary and clerk. His employees noticed his abilities and tutored him, allowing him to pass the bar in 1797. He then moved to Lexington, Kentucky, where he established a law practice. On April 11, 1799, he married Lucretia Hart, with whom he had eleven children.

Clay's successful law practice brought him attention that resulted in his election to the state legislature in 1803, where he served until 1809. In 1806, he was appointed to fill the last year of a US Senate term, even though he was not constitutionally old enough. He was seated for the last year of the term but did not run for election to that position, instead returning to the state

legislature and becoming Kentucky's Speaker of the House. In early 1810, Clay was again selected to fill the last year of a US Senate term.

The 1810 elections took Clay to the US House of Representatives. He was part of the War Hawk wing of the Democratic-Republican Party, which was strongly anti-British. In a unique move, the returning and new members of the House elected Clay to the position of Speaker of the House on his first day in Congress. He transformed the position into one of power by appointing all his political allies to key committee assignments. In 1812, he assisted President Madison in passing the declaration of war for the War of 1812. Toward the end of the war, Clay resigned from the House to be part of the committee negotiating the Treaty of Ghent (1814). The following year, he helped negotiate a second treaty with Great Britain, this one regarding trade. After returning to the House, he strongly supported anti-European activities throughout the Americas. In 1820, one of his most notable legislative successes was securing the passage of the Missouri Compromise.

In 1824, Clay was one of four candidates for the presidency throwing his support to John Quincy Adams, who subsequently appointed him secretary of state. Later, strongly opposed to Adams's successor, Andrew Jackson, Clay returned to the Senate. He was on the national ticket as the presidential candidate for the National Republican Party in 1832 and the Whig Party in 1844. The second major legislative success of his career was developing the Compromise of 1850, which was intended to avoid secession and civil war. Like the Missouri Compromise, the Compromise of 1850 dealt with issues of slavery, statehood, and regulations for the Western territories. During this crisis, Clay was in declining health, suffering from tuberculosis, which caused his death on June 29, 1852.

HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

The war was declared because Great Britain arrogated to herself the pretension of regulating our foreign trade under the delusive name of retaliatory orders in council, a pretension by which she undertook to proclaim to American enterprise—"Thus far shalt thou go, and no farther"—Orders which she refused to revoke after the alleged cause of their enactment had ceased; because she persisted in the practice of impressing American seamen; because she had instigated the Indians to commit hostilities against us; and because she refused indemnity for her past injuries upon our commerce. I throw out of the question other wrongs.

The war in fact was announced, on our part, to meet the war which she was waging on her part. So undeniable were the causes of the war—so powerfully did they address themselves to the feelings of the whole American people—that when the bill was pending before this House, gentlemen in the opposition, although provoked to debate, would not, or could not, utter one syllable against it. It is true they wrapped themselves up in sullen silence, pretending that they did not choose to debate such a question in secret session. Whilst speaking of the proceedings on that occasion, I beg to be permitted to advert to another fact that transpired, an important fact, material for the nation to know, and which I have often regretted had not been spread upon our journals. My honorable colleague moved, in committee of the whole, to comprehend France in the war; and when the question was taken upon the proposition, there appeared but ten votes in support of it, of whom seven belonged to this side of the House and three only to the other!

It is said that we were inveigled into the war by the perfidy of France; and that had she furnished the document in time, which was first published in England in May last, it would have been prevented. I will concede to gentlemen every thing they ask about the injustice of France towards this country. . . . All the world knows that the repeal of the Orders in Council resulted from the inquiry, reluctantly acceded to by the ministry, into the effect upon their manufacturing establishments of our non-importation law, or to the warlike attitude assumed by this government, or to both. But it is said that the Orders in Council are done away, no matter from what

cause; and that having been the sole motive for declaring the war, the relations of peace ought to be restored. This brings me into an examination of the grounds for continuing the war.

I am far from acknowledging that, had the Orders in Council been repealed, as they have been, before the war was declared, the declaration would have been prevented. In a body so numerous as this is, from which the declaration emanated, it is impossible to say with any degree of certainty what would have been the effect of such a repeal. Each member must answer for himself. I have no hesitation, then, in saying that I have always considered the impressment of American seamen as much the most serious aggression. But, sir, how have those orders at last been repealed? Great Britain, it is true, has intimated a willingness to suspend their practical operation, but she still arrogates to herself the right to revive them upon certain contingencies, of which she constitutes herself the sole judge. She waives the temporary use of the rod, but she suspends it in terror over our heads. Supposing it was conceded to gentlemen that such a repeal of the Orders in Council as took place on the 23rd of June last, exceptionable as it is being known before the war, would have prevented the war, does it follow that it ought to induce us to lay down our arms without the redress of any other injury? Does it follow, in all cases, that that which would have prevented the war in the first instance should terminate the war? By no means. It requires a great struggle for a nation, prone to peace as this is, to burst through its habits and encounter the difficulties of war. Such a nation ought but seldom to go to war. When it does, it should be for clear and essential rights alone, and it should firmly resolve to extort, at all hazards, their recognition. The war of the revolution is an example of a war began for one object and prosecuted for another. It was waged, in its commencement, against the right asserted by the parent country to tax the colonies. Then no one thought of absolute independence. The idea of independence was repelled. But the British government would have relinquished the principle of taxation. The founders of our liberties saw, however, that there was no security short of independence, and they achieved our independence.

When nations are engaged in war, those rights in controversy which are not acknowledged by the Treaty of Peace are abandoned. And who is prepared to say that American seamen shall be surrendered, the victims to the British principle of impressment? And, sir, what is this principle? She contends that she has a right to the services of her own subjects; that, in the exercise of this right, she may lawfully impress them, even although she finds them in our vessels, upon the high seas, without her jurisdiction. Now, I deny that she has any right, without her jurisdiction, to come on board our vessels upon the high seas for any other purpose but in pursuit of enemies, or their goods, or goods contraband of war. But she further contends that her subjects cannot renounce their allegiance to her and contract a new obligation to other sovereigns. I do not mean to go into the general question of the right [of] expatriation. If, as is contended, all nations deny it, all nations at the same time admit and practice the right of naturalization. Great Britain herself does. Great Britain, in the very case of foreign seamen, imposes, perhaps, fewer restraints upon naturalization than any other nation. Then, if subjects cannot break their original allegiance, they may, according to universal usage, contract a new allegiance.

What is the effect of this double obligation? Undoubtedly, that the sovereign having the possession of the subject would have the right to the services of the subject. If he return within the jurisdiction of his primitive sovereign, he may resume his right to his services, of which the subject by his own act could not divest himself. But his primitive sovereign can have no right to go in quest of him out of his own jurisdiction into the jurisdiction of another sovereign, or upon the high seas, where there exists either no jurisdiction or it belongs to the nation owning the ship navigating them. But, sir, this discussion is altogether useless. It is not to the British principle, objectionable as it is, that we are alone to look;—it is to her practice—no matter what guise she puts on. It is in vain to assert the inviolability of the obligation of allegiance. It is in vain to set up the plea of necessity and to allege that she cannot exist without the impression of her seamen. The naked truth is, she comes, by her press-gangs, on board of our vessels, seizes our native seamen as well as naturalized, and drags them into her service. . . .

If there be a description of rights which, more than any other, should unite all parties in all quarters of the Union, it is unquestionably the rights of the person. No matter what his vocation, whether he seeks subsistence amidst the dangers of the deep, or draws it from the bowels of the earth, or from the humblest occupations of mechanic life, whenever the sacred rights of an American freeman are assailed, all hearts ought to unite and every arm should be braced to vindicate his cause. . . .

The disasters of the war admonish us, we are told, of the necessity of terminating the contest. If our achievements upon the land have been less splendid than those of our intrepid seamen, it is not because the American soldier is less brave. On the one element organization, discipline, and a thorough knowledge of their duties exist on the part of the officers and their men. On the other, almost every thing is yet to be acquired. We have however the consolation that our country abounds with the richest materials and that in no instance when engaged in an action have our arms been tarnished. At Brownstown and at Queenstown the valor of veterans was displayed and acts of the noblest heroism were performed. It is true, that the disgrace of Detroit remains to be wiped off. That is a subject on which I cannot trust my feelings, it is not fitting I should speak. But this much I will say, it was an event which no human foresight could have anticipated, and for which administration cannot be justly censured. It was the parent of all the misfortunes we have experienced on land. But for it the Indian war would have been in a great measure prevented or terminated; the ascendancy on Lake Erie acquired, and the war pushed perhaps to Montreal. With the exception of that event, the war, even upon the land, has been attended by a series of the most brilliant exploits, which, whatever interest they may inspire on this side of the mountains, have given the greatest pleasure on the other. . . .

It is alleged that the elections in England are in favor of the ministry and that those in this country are against the war. If in such a cause (saying nothing of the impurity of their elections) the people of that country have rallied around their government, it affords a salutary lesson to the people here, who at all hazards ought to support theirs, struggling as it is to maintain our just rights. But the people here have not been false to themselves; a great majority approve the war, as is evinced by the recent re-

election of the chief magistrate. Suppose it were even true that an entire section of the Union were opposed to the war, that section being a minority, is the will of the majority to be relinquished? In that section the real strength of the opposition had been greatly exaggerated. Vermont has, by two successive expressions of her opinion, approved the declaration of war. In New Hampshire, parties are so nearly equipoised that out of 30 or 35 thousand votes, those who approved and are for supporting it lost the election by only 1,000 or 1,500 votes. In Massachusetts alone have they obtained any considerable accession. If we come to New York, we shall find that other and local causes have influenced her elections.

What cause, Mr. Chairman, which existed for declaring the war has been removed? We sought indemnity for the past and security for the future. The Orders in Council are suspended, not revoked; no compensation for spoliations; Indian hostilities, which were before secretly instigated, now openly encouraged; and the practice of impressment unremittingly persevered in and insisted upon. Yet administration has given the strongest demonstrations of its love of peace. On the 29th June, less than ten days after the declaration of war, the Secretary of State writes to Mr. Russell, authorizing him to agree to an armistice upon two conditions only, and what are

they? That the Orders in Council should be repealed and the practice of impressing American seamen cease, those already impressed being released. . . . In return, the enemy is offered a prohibition of the employment of his seamen in our service, thus removing entirely all pretext for the practice of impressment. The very proposition which the gentleman from Connecticut (Mr. Pitkin) contends ought to be made has been made. How are these pacific advances met by the other party? Rejected as absolutely inadmissible . . . An honorable peace is attainable only by an efficient war. My plan would be to call out the ample resources of the country, give them a judicious direction, prosecute the war with the utmost vigor, strike wherever we can reach the enemy, at sea or on land, and negotiate the terms of a peace at Quebec or Halifax. We are told that England is a proud and lofty nation, that disdaining to wait for danger, meets it half way. Haughty as she is, we once triumphed over her, and if we do not listen to the councils of timidity and despair we shall again prevail. In such a cause, with the aid of Providence, we must come out crowned with success; but if we fail, let us fail like men, lash ourselves to our gallant tars, and expire together in one common struggle, fighting for “seamen’s rights and free trade.”

GLOSSARY

arrogated: claimed a right from another

chief magistrate: president

disgrace of Detroit: the surrender of forces without a fight by General Hull during the Siege of Detroit in August 1812

impressment: the forcible removal of sailors from one ship to another to serve as part of the crew on the new ship, based on the perceived nationality of the sailors

inveigled: coaxed or won over by flattery

Orders in Council: a series of British decrees from 1783 to 1812 that outlined a commerce policy aligned in support of their current military policy

perfidy: a breach of trust or faith

press-gangs: officially sanctioned groups that forced men into military or naval service

primitive sovereign: a person’s native country

Document Analysis

At one of the low points of the War of 1812, Henry Clay not only maintained his support for the war but pushed to strengthen the effort against the British and their American Indian allies. Acknowledging the changes that had occurred since the declaration of war on June 18, 1812, Clay outlined the issues that were still pertinent to the continuation of the war. In addition, he argued that the British had not changed their positions on the policies that had led to the declaration of war, thus mandating that the war should continue to be prosecuted. The bill that this speech supported would greatly expand the American army, which generally had performed poorly during 1812.

In order to understand the difficult situation of the United States, one should briefly look at the battles that Clay mentions in his speech. At the Battle of Brownstown (August 5, 1812), an American wagon train with supplies was advancing toward Detroit when its passengers spotted Shawnee allies of the British, and possibly British troops as well. They contacted the fort at Detroit, and General William Hull sent two hundred members of the Ohio militia to escort the supply train. While approaching the supply train, the soldiers were ambushed by twenty-four Shawnees, led by Tecumseh. The Ohio militia fled back toward the fort with losses of eighteen dead, twelve wounded, and seventy missing in action.

The Battle of Queenstown (October 13, 1812), also known as Queenston Heights, was an attempt by the Americans to invade Canada across the Niagara River. The initial goal was to take the high ground at Queenstown, where the British had cannons that could be used to fire on any troops trying to cross the river. The first stages of the early-morning attack went well, resulting in the New York militia, led by Major General Stephen Van Rensselaer, taking the high ground. This was to be followed up by a much larger invading force, composed of regular army and militia troops, which would then move toward Fort George, the primary British fortification overlooking the river. The regular army troops never arrived, as their commander did not believe it was acceptable for him to take orders from an officer in the militia. During the morning, Mohawk and Chippewa troops arrived to support the British, making their presence known with war cries, which scared members of the militia. With Fort George free from attack, all the British troops in the area could respond to the incursion. They also moved up more artillery to fire

on the American troops and any boats crossing the river. When the expected American reinforcements failed to arrive, the American general crossed back to New York to force the rest of his militia to cross. However, having heard the cries of the American Indians, none of the militia members on the American side were willing to cross into Canada. Even the boatmen refused to row across to help rescue the outnumbered Americans. The leader of the American forces saw that no help was coming, and with no possible route of escape, he surrendered to the superior British forces. After the surrender, he and the British commander were surprised by additional New York militia soldiers also surrendering, for a total of about nine hundred American troops captured and about two hundred dead. Small groups of them had been hiding all around the area of the battle to avoid being a part of it. For the next two days, the American general in New York tried to rally the troops to again attack across the Niagara River, but they refused to move because it was raining.

The “disgrace of Detroit”(August 16, 1812), which ended the two-day Siege of Detroit, was an even greater military and psychological defeat for the Americans. General Hull had invaded Canada from Detroit, spending several weeks just across the river in what is now Windsor, Ontario. Withdrawing to Fort Detroit, he was followed by Shawnee and British troops. British artillery shelled the fort from Canada, and the Shawnee circled past the fort in such a manner that they appeared to number several times as many as were actually present. At some point, all the Michigan militia troops deserted. Believing that his forces were badly outnumbered, Hull surrendered the fort and his regular army troops without a fight to a force that was actually only about half as large as his own. The Ohio militia at Fort Detroit agreed to go home and not fight, allowing the British to capture the fort, with its much-needed supplies, and gain control of the northwestern part of the United States.

Such poor performances caused many to doubt that the United States should continue its war effort. Clay wanted to try to convince doubters of the war’s necessity by supporting the bill with his skillful oration. In this speech, he moves directly to the four issues that had been the basis for the war. Great Britain, having been involved in the Napoleonic Wars for several years, had created a policy of controlling trade with France as one step toward winning that conflict. The United States, as a neutral party in the war, felt it was free to trade with any country in Europe. This is the issue

Clay refers to when he begins by stating that “Great Britain arrogated to herself the pretention of regulating our foreign trade.” The second issue was “impressing American seaman,” that is, forcibly taking sailors off American ships to work on the British ships. The third ongoing issue was the British support of American Indian resistance to American settlement in the Northwest Territory, land ceded to the United States at the end of the Revolutionary War. The final point in Clay’s list of British wrongs is the fact that they refused to pay for damages caused by their policies.

Moving in his speech to the process by which war had been declared, Clay refers to the closed sessions of the House and Senate in June 1812 in which the proposal had been discussed. As he states, Clay believed the declaration of war by the United States was passed “to meet the war which [Britain] was waging on her part.” For Clay, the restriction of trade and the impressment of American sailors were acts of war by Britain, even if undeclared. Clay may be stretching his case when he claims that no one spoke against the declaration in June because there was no support for remaining at peace. The Federalist legislators said they refused to “debate such a question in secret session,” but Clay pretends not to believe them. Historically, Clay and President Madison’s party, the Democratic-Republicans, had supported the French in their conflicts with the British. Clay’s reference to the proposed amendment to the declaration of war that would have included France as an enemy state is to illustrate his view that everyone understood Great Britain was the enemy. The amendment only getting ten votes from the 142 members of the House showed its general lack of support, as did the fact that most of those came from Democratic-Republican legislators.

Clay then moves on to address one of the major objections to the continuation of the war, in addition to France’s role in the conflict. He says he will “concede to gentlemen every thing they ask about the injustice of France towards this country.” However, Clay rejects the proposition that France caused the war by tricking the Americans into a conflict with the British. The Orders in Council were a series of British decrees that increasingly limited trade with France and others on the continent. Belatedly recognizing that this was an increasing cause of conflict with the United States, on June 16, 1812, two days before the United States’ formal declaration of war, the British government suspended the enforcement of the last three decrees regarding the

Americans. Clay saw this as the result of pressure from British merchants and manufacturers not wanting to lose the American market, rather than a true change in the British government’s position. Thus, even though later the British government said the decrees had been repealed, Clay neither accepted this nor believed it was grounds for ending the war. He cites the Revolutionary War as an example, stating that it began “against the right asserted by the parent country to tax the colonies” and ended only when the Americans “achieved [their] independence.” For Clay, once a war had begun, the desired outcome often changed.

The change in this case, as Clay describes it, was not the addition of a new goal but rather the clarification of what had been, or should have been, the central point of the war from the beginning: “the impressment of American seamen as much the most serious aggression” by the British. Rough surveys of the time, as well as later estimates, indicate that in 1812, about eleven thousand American sailors had been born in other countries. Of those individuals, probably more than 80 percent of them were of British origin. With American merchant ships having an estimated total of about seventy thousand sailors, it is clear that a substantial portion of American sailors were at risk of impressment by the British.

The need for more sailors on British ships was the result of the Napoleonic Wars. A massive increase in the number of naval vessels was mandated by the British decision to blockade French and other continental ports. This placed great stress upon the navy to recruit seamen for the 130,000 to 150,000 naval positions, in addition to their own merchant fleet. Failing to meet this goal, the navy used other means to secure enough sailors. Britain did not accept the idea that its citizens could immigrate to other countries and renounce their British citizenship; the government believed that Americans who had been born in Great Britain remained British citizens and should serve on British ships. They did this by stopping American merchant ships and taking anyone they believed to be originally British. Due to the lack of clear documents for many sailors, the British ended up also taking some sailors who had actually been born in the United States. In either event, the United States recognized the individual right to immigrate and change citizenship, so they believed that all the sailors were Americans, with the rights of American citizens. Clay believed that Britain also recognized the naturalization process because, as he says,

they had “fewer restraints upon naturalization than any other nation.”

Clay did understand the logic behind the country where a person was born, the individual’s “primitive sovereign,” demanding that any former citizen physically present inside that country could be forced to serve the country of his or her birth. However, the fact that these actions were being taken not in British ports or British waters but “upon the high seas” made this action totally unacceptable to Clay and enough of a provocation for war to be declared. At the height of the British effort, they stationed ships near major ports to search all ships entering and leaving the port. Thus, in Clay’s opinion, the fact that Britain had changed its Orders of Council did not amount to enough of a change in policy to end the war.

In the abridged edition of the speech presented in this document, Clay’s responses to specific points made by other speakers are not included. Therefore, his discussion of the possible annexation of Canada at the conclusion of a successful war is not a part of this edition of the speech. However, the passages not included in this text do not have a bearing upon Clay’s understanding of the essential reasons for the war and for the continuation of the war. The impressment of American sailors was the most obvious example of the British ignoring “the rights of the person.” Clay’s impassioned plea is that “whenever the sacred rights of an American freeman are assailed, all hearts ought to unite and every arm should be braced to vindicate his cause.”

Even though Madison had requested the expansion of American military forces in 1810, the American army and navy were very small compared to the British. After the Revolutionary War, the national army shrank to almost nothing, as it was assumed that state militias would serve the needs of the country. Because the American merchant fleet had grown rapidly during the first decades of nationhood, the navy had continued to be somewhat adequately funded and was much better trained than the army. Thus, when Clay moves on to briefly discuss the military situation in which the United States found itself, most of the report is bad. He recognizes that the failure to achieve early successes in the effort to move into Canada caused some to think about “terminating the contest.” However, Clay has confidence that, in the long run, the United States will prevail. He accepts the common American view that “our country abounds with the richest materials,” which will ultimately be used to support the war effort.

While Clay puts a positive spin on the army’s engagements against the British, it was clear from battles such as those described earlier that the additional forces authorized by the bill under debate were necessary. Members of the state militias were unreliable. They were willing to defend their individual states but were not very willing to be part of an offensive operation. In addition, the lack of cooperation between the militias and the regular army was very destructive. On the other hand, on the ocean, the ship-to-ship battles that had been fought had gone fairly well for the Americans. These battles included the two by the USS *Constitution* in which it destroyed HMS *Guerriere* and HMS *Java*, as well as the USS *United States*’ capture of the HMS *Macedonia*. The American frigates were armed as well as or better than their British counterparts, and the commanders understood the tactics necessary to win.

In the next-to-last paragraph of his speech, Clay refers to the political landscape of January 1813. Leadership of the British government had passed to Robert Jenkinson in May 1812, and he remained in office for the next fifteen years. Thus, there was no change in British politics that Americans might see as indicating any change in British policy. Those who thought the war was losing support in America were rebutted by Clay’s statement that the reelection of President Madison proved differently. Clay recognized the fact that the northeastern region of the United States generally did not support the war, although he did not give this much merit. It should be noted that in the Twelfth Congress, which voted to go to war, the Democratic-Republicans held 74 percent of the seats in the House, while after the elections in the fall of 1812, the Democratic-Republican membership of the House fell to 62 percent.

In the final section of this speech, Clay returns to the causes of the war and the need for additional troops to prosecute the war. Clay asserts that none of the original reasons for the war have ended. “The Orders in Council are suspended, not revoked,” is his response on that major issue. Everyone recognized that the impressment of sailors continued, and no compensation had been made for previous injustices, as judged by the Americans. Clay notes that early in the conflict an overture was made to the British for peace, but this was not accepted by them. Their offer had also been found to be unacceptable to the American leadership. Thus Clay states that “an honorable peace is attainable only by an efficient war.” In his view, this was the reason the House should pass the bill for additional troops. Clay

was certain that just as the Revolutionary War had been successful, “we shall again prevail.” He was willing to stake the existence of the United States and its entire future on the proposition that together the Americans could “prevail.” “If we fail,” Clay says, “let us fail like men, lash ourselves to our gallant tars, and expire together in one common struggle, fighting for ‘seamen’s rights and free trade.’”

Essential Themes

The central tenet of Clay’s speech to members of the House of Representatives in support of the bill to increase the size of the army by twenty thousand men was the need for these troops to support the rights of all American citizens, whether native born or naturalized. His assertion that everyone should support the “sacred rights of an American freeman” has been echoed down through the centuries. While the issues of free trade and the interference of the British in the northwestern part of the United States were certainly strong issues in initiating the conflict, the War of 1812 has come to stand for the rights of Americans in whatever location. While the situation at that time only involved sailors on American ships traveling across the ocean, the arguments made by Clay apply to American citizens in any location and at any time.

As a nation whose population has always been mainly immigrants or the descendants of immigrants, the United States continued to have a strong interest in the laws regarding immigration and the naturalization of citizens. In most eras, the country sought immigrants to help with territorial expansion or for a more diverse labor force. Thus, another country not recognizing the citizenship of those who had moved to the United States and renounced their former citizenship was a major issue. Forcing the British to accept the naturalization process in 1812 was a major step toward true

American independence. Establishing the fact that it was the American government that decided the status of an individual seeking to live in the United States, and not a foreign government, was of vital importance. From the time the war was successfully concluded, the United States has been able to set its own policy regarding immigration, naturalization, and citizenship, without outside interference.

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