

Henry Clay at Richmond in 1842

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American history abounds with instances in which chance statements, seemingly unimportant at the time, subsequently exerted a tremendous influence upon political campaigns. This fact is aptly illustrated by the classic example of the Douglas reply to Lincoln's Freeport question; by the Burchard reference during the campaign of 1884 to the Democratic party as one whose affiliations were with "Rum, Romanism and Rebellion," an ill-chosen alliteration of which Blaine took no notice at the moment but which had a devastating effect on his chances for election to the presidency; or by the trap into which the British minister Lord Sackville-West stupidly stepped during the campaign of 1888 when he wrote his well-known letter advising a certain Mr. Murchison as a naturalized Englishman to vote for Cleveland rather than Harrison, a letter which no doubt seemed harmless to its composer, but which lost thousands of Irish votes for Cleveland.

In Indiana history, perhaps no better illustration could be found for this general thesis than the ill-fated reply of Henry Clay to an Abolitionist petition presented to him on his visit to Richmond in October, 1842. Obviously irritated by the raising of that vexing question at that time in his preliminary campaign for the Presidency, Mr Clay nevertheless answered the petitioners in a seemingly tactful speech which his biographer Carl Schurz called "a masterpiece of oratorical skill."¹ Near the close of the speech, however, the great man indulged in a disastrous bit of counselling when he advised the leader of the group, Hiram Mendenhall, to "Go home, and mind your own business, and leave other people to take care of theirs."²

At the time of its utterance this statement was gleefully hailed by the crowd as a fitting rebuff to the petitioner and his friends. The speech in its entirety was printed throughout the nation, and the full significance of the incident was not realized. "But," says Schurz, "many thousands of Menden-

¹ Carl Schurz, *Life of Henry Clay* (Boston, 1899), II, 230.

² James B. Swain, *The Life and Speeches of Henry Clay* (New York, 1844), II, 597. The version of the speech printed in this work was written sometime after delivery and was therefore phrased to suit the personal inclinations of Clay after reflection. The less elegant and cruder rejoinder: "Go home and slop your hogs," has likewise been preserved. Letter of Professor Frederick L. Paxson to the writer.

halls were to rise up in the campaign of 1844; and it was the cause represented by that humble Quaker that was to prove the absorbing question of the time, and the fatal stumbling block of the great orator's highest ambition."³

In order to fully appreciate the importance of that occasion and its reverberations, it is necessary to reset the stage on which this drama was enacted. Clay's announcement, shortly before this incident occurred, that he intended to withdraw from the Senate had created a popular demand for his appearance in different sections of the country as a prelude to his nomination as the Whig candidate for the Presidency. Such a nomination his host of admirers considered a matter of justice to him, inasmuch as he had loyally supported William Henry Harrison in 1840 despite the defeat he had received in the Whig National Convention at the hands of the old hero of Tippecanoe. As a reward for his support, Clay naturally expected to wield considerable influence in the Harrison administration, but upon the President's death and the elevation of Tyler, his hopes had been frustrated as far as the Executive was concerned. Now was the opportunity for his party to reward him for party service and leadership.

Clay's enthusiastic supporters eagerly seized this chance to express their belief in him. The North Carolina Whigs anticipated the action of the national convention by bringing Clay forward as their choice as early as April, 1842. Georgia and Maine followed the example of North Carolina while the Whigs in the New York Legislature, a state which had abandoned the Kentuckian in 1840, sent assurances of their support. Despite the influence of Daniel Webster, even the Whigs of Massachusetts could not be restrained and they joined the procession.

Clay was not untouched by such evidences of popular support and he agreed upon a western tour which led him to Dayton, Ohio, where he addressed an assemblage estimated at about 10,000 persons, on September 27, 1842. At that meeting resolutions were passed favoring Clay and John Davis of Massachusetts as the Whig candidates for the 1844 contest.

Meanwhile arrangements were being made for the visit of the "Old Prince," as he was affectionately known, to Richmond, Indiana. Plans for this momentous event in local his-

³ Schurz, *Henry Clay*, II, 231. It is necessary to add that several other factors contributed to Clay's slight defeat in 1844.

tory were in charge of various committees with Samuel Hannah, D. P. Holloway, editor of the Richmond *Palladium*, Lot Bloomfield and James Rariden prominent among the active members.⁴

The strong opponents of slavery were likewise busy, hoping to avail themselves of this exceptional opportunity to corner Clay and force him to express himself on the slavery question. The method they devised was the presentation of a petition calling upon him to free his own slaves. Whether its signers were actuated by a sense of political animosity or by real convictions is a matter of conjecture with a mixture of motives undoubtedly explaining the lengthy list of signatures. The existence of such a document seems to have been common knowledge, since the *Palladium* published an editorial as early as September 17, referring to it, and expressing the hope that "the committee will refrain from presenting it until Mr. Clay's return to his home [Ashland, at Lexington, Kentucky], if not altogether," and in the event of its presentation, pleading for no violence to its framers.

On October 1 the great orator arrived. He was met at the state line and ushered into the city of Richmond where he appeared in the afternoon at the rally in his honor held at the corner of what is now Seventh and North A Streets.⁵ Authorities disagree, but it seems probable that Clay delivered his speech, and then at its close, Mendenhall⁶ pressed forward to present the petition, meeting with opposition, but finally reaching the platform with his now historic document which he presented to James Rariden amid the hoots and jeers of the throng. Amid tense silence the petition was read:

To Henry Clay: We, the undersigned, citizens of Indiana, in view of the declaration of rights contained in the charter of American independence; in view of that justice which is due from man to his fellow men; and in view of those noble principles which should characterize the patriot, the philanthropist and the Christian; ask you, most respectfully, to unloose the heavy burdens and that you let the oppressed under your control, who call you 'master' go free. By doing so you would give liberty to whom liberty is due, and do no more than justice to

⁴ For the local aspects of this meeting the writer has drawn heavily upon Demas S. Coe, "Henry Clay's Memorable Visit," in *Richmond Palladium* (One-hundredth anniversary number, Appendix), January 1, 1931.

⁵ This site has been marked by a boulder and bronze plate.

⁶ The statement has been made that "Whatever may be the merits of Mr. Mendenhall, he has certainly found a place in history." Calvin Colton, Ed., *Life, Correspondence and Speeches of Henry Clay*. (New York, 1904), VI, 385.

those under your charge, who have long been deprived by you of the sacred boon of freedom; and set an example that would result in much good to suffering and debased humanity; and do an act altogether worthy of a great and good man.

The situation called for diplomacy and political sagacity. If Clay should bow to the wishes of the petitioners and intimate that he would eventually free his slaves, he would win thousands of adherents in the North, but he would alienate many southern Whigs, while if he refused the petitioners he would retain his southern friends and affront northern abolitionists. Probably warned that this petition would be presented long before he reached Richmond, Clay had his reply partially prepared.

As the last words of the document were reached, the crowd broke out again, prompting Clay to begin his remarks with the hope that "Mr. Mendenhall may be treated with the greatest forbearance and respect."⁷ He continued declaring that the petition had elicited no disagreeable emotion on his part and that he was glad to have it presented at a time when such a vast assemblage could hear it. This assertion was contradicted by a later remark when he complained that he did not see why the petitioners should have picked this time when they could have presented their request at his home at Ashland any time within the past twenty-five or thirty years. That he considered it a breach of hospitality and etiquette as well as a personal affront was likewise intimated by his asking Mr. Mendenhall how he should like to reverse conditions and have Clay place him in such a position were he his guest in Kentucky.

Mr. Clay then attempted to justify his position by the laws of his state which permitted slavery, declaring that "Until the law is repealed, we must be excused for asserting the rights—aye, the property in slaves which it sanctions, authorizes and vindicates." He then tried to explain away the importance of the large numbers of petitioners, many of whom he spoke of as "worthy, amicable and humane persons, who by erroneous representations," had been "induced inconsiderately to affix their signatures to this petition," persons whom he knew would later "deeply regret it." Others were free blacks

⁷ The speech in full is reprinted in different works. See Swain, *Life and Speeches of Henry Clay*, II, 591 ff.; Colton, *Life, Correspondence and Speeches of Henry Clay*, VI, 385 ff.

who had "been artfully deceived and imposed upon," while the large portion of them, he intimated, were merely his political opponents. That he should have entirely ignored those among the petitioners who were entirely sincere in their desire to know his stand on the vital issue of slavery was a grave omission.

Turning to the foundation of the appeal, the Declaration of Independence, he justified his position by stating that among the delegates who adopted that document were many from states where slavery existed and they certainly were not calling for its abolition by signing the Declaration. Furthermore, he expressed the belief that "in no society that ever did exist, or ever shall be formed, was or can the equality asserted among the members of the human race, be practically enforced and carried out." To demonstrate this he called attention to the fact that there would always be minors, women, insane persons, culprits and transient sojourners who could not be accorded equal rights. He ended this portion of his reply with the bold assertion that "if the doctrines of ultra political abolitionists had been seriously promulgated at the epoch of our Revolution, our glorious Independence would never have been achieved—never, never."

As to his personal attitude towards slavery, he considered it a great evil which he deeply regretted had been inherited by the people of his day. He stated that it was his wish that every slave could be sent back to his native country. But the evils of slavery, were, in his estimation, "nothing in comparison with the far greater evils which would inevitable flow from a sudden, general, and indiscriminate emancipation" with its attendant intermarriage and the possible subjugation of the whites by the blacks.

Clay then declared that his own slaves would suffer rather than benefit from emancipation inasmuch as some of them were incapacitated to earn their own living and were therefore a "heavy charge" upon their master; some were helpless infants "with or without improvident mothers," and still others "would not accept their freedom" if he were to offer it to them. Then the speaker's real feelings came to the surface and he spoke to the leader of the petitioning body, saying: "Excuse me, Mr. Mendenhall, for my saying that my slaves are as well fed and clad, look as sleek and hearty; and

are quite as civil and respectful in their demeanor, and as little disposed to wound the feelings of any one, as you are."

This latter somewhat derogatory remark was linked with an obvious bid for the Quaker vote of the community when Clay recommended that Mendenhall imitate the example of the Society of Friends⁸ which agreed with him in principle, but whose tactics consisted of peace and persuasion rather than blood, revolution and disunion. The strange coincidence in the matter was the fact that Mendenhall himself was a Quaker. Clay was anxious to correct the impression which he felt must exist in the minds of some of his listeners that he had no dealings with abolitionists, a fact which he vehemently denied although his friends among that group were not "monomaniacs who surrendering themselves to a single idea, look altogether to the black side of human life," ignoring the evils to be corrected among the whites.

The great Whig leader of the occasion then attempted to retaliate against the petitioners by making his demands practical. He therefore asked Mendenhall if he and his friends would be willing to reimburse him in case he did decide to free his slaves which he evaluated at a total of some \$15,000. It was a clever move and his strategy did not pass unnoticed by interested listeners among the crowd. In conclusion, Clay gave some politically unwise advice to Mendenhall suggesting that he should attend to his own affairs, limiting his "benevolent exertions" to his own neighborhood where he would find "ample scope for the exercise of [his] charities."

"The speech was received by the crowd as a masterpiece," according to Clay's grandson.⁹ This opinion is born out by Schurz, who declares that "The assembled multitude was lost in admiration."¹⁰ But the sequel was not so favorable to Clay. As Professor Paxson has pointed out, this meeting was an outstanding demonstration of the fact that "the settlers whom the North contributed to the Old Northwest were refusing to mix with those who derived their ideals from the South."¹¹

Thus the Great Compromiser seemed to meet the situation successfully for the time being, but within a few weeks

⁸ The next day Clay attended a session of the Indiana yearly meeting of Friends which was held in Richmond.

⁹ Thomas Hart Clay, *Henry Clay* (Philadelphia, 1910), 305.

¹⁰ Schurz, *Henry Clay*, II, 231.

¹¹ Frederick L. Paxson, *History of the American Frontier* (Boston, 1924), 398.

reverberations started that helped to shatter his life ambition in 1844. The name of the inconspicuous Hiram Mendenhall ranks with those of Dr. Burchard and Sackville-West in the history of American presidential contests.