REVIEW CHAPTER 3

Section 2

AMERICAN LIVES Henry Clay
Westerner with a National Vision

*"I know no South, no North, no East, no West, to which I owe any allegiance. . . .
My allegiance is to the American Union."—Henry Clay, Senate speech (1850)*

From 1810 to 1850, Henry Clay helped shape national policy. He pushed for a government role in building the American economy. He also fashioned compromises to resolve the growing differences between North and South.

Clay (1777–1852) had only a few years of formal schooling, but soon went to work as a clerk in a Virginia court. He studied law and, once admitted to the bar, moved to frontier Kentucky where he achieved fame and power.

Clay was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1806 and then the House in 1810, where he won election as Speaker. Though young, he was a leader. Writing of him, a colleague said, "He stalks among men with an unanswerable and never doubting air of command." Angry at the British and Native American threat in the West, he urged war on Great Britain. He remained optimistic about the war even in the face of early defeats. President Madison named him one of the peace negotiators, and Clay's tough stand ensured that the United States did not give up its claim for the right to travel and trade on the Mississippi River.

During the 1810s, Clay played an increasingly major role in national politics. He made an enemy when he denounced Andrew Jackson's invasion of Spanish Florida. He made friends in Latin America, saying that the United States should recognize the new governments that had won independence from Spain. In 1820, he won House passage of the Missouri Compromise, resolving a crisis over slavery in the territories and earning the nickname "Great Pacifier."

Clay urged a wide-ranging program to promote American industry and commerce. He backed tariffs on imports to allow industry to grow. He called for new roads and canals to transport goods. These actions were required to establish American economic independence. "We are," he said "independent colonies of England—politically free, [but] commercially slaves."

Clay finished last among four candidates in the 1824 presidential election. With no candidate win-

ning the electoral vote, the election was thrown to the House. Clay gave his support to John Quincy Adams, earning the additional nickname of "President Maker." When Adams named him secretary of state, supporters of Andrew Jackson charged that a "corrupt bargain" had sold the presidency. One Jackson backer went so far as to call Clay "this being, so brilliant yet so corrupt, which, like a rotten mackerel by moonlight, shined and stunk." Clay challenged him to a duel, and both were wounded. Taking the appointment was a political mistake, and Clay was hounded by the charge for the rest of his life. He never won the presidency, an office he deeply desired.

He remained, however, a powerful figure in Washington, and worked on two more occasions to prevent sectional conflict. In 1833, South Carolina threatened to leave the Union over the tariff, which many in the South felt was too high. Clay helped calm the crisis by working out a compromise that gradually lowered the tariff.

His final compromise came in 1850, when conflict over slavery in the territories again threatened to dissolve the Union. A 73-year-old Clay proposed a package of bills, offering some favoring the North and others appealing to the South. Pleading with the Senate to pass the package, Clay made his last great speech: "I believe from the bottom of my soul that his measure is the re-union of this Union. I believe it is the dove of peace." Eventually, the bills were approved, and the sectional conflict that Clay dreaded was postponed—for a time. Two years later, he died. His body lay in state in the Capitol Rotunda for a day—the first person so honored.

Questions

1. Why did Kentucky offer more opportunities to Clay than Virginia might have?
2. How did Clay's economic and political plans both express his idea of nationalism?
3. How was Clay, from Kentucky, well suited to forge a North/South compromise?