



Daniel Webster and the West

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DANIEL WEBSTER AND THE WEST¹

On the supposition that an audience will appreciate a reminder of the sequence of significant events in the career of Daniel Webster let us recall these facts: that he was born in New Hampshire on January 18, 1782; that after education at Dartmouth College, he was admitted to the bar in 1805; that he practiced law in New Hampshire, chiefly at Portsmouth, until 1817; that meanwhile he served two terms in the federal House of Representatives, from 1813 to 1817; that he removed to Boston in 1817 and thereafter resided permanently in Massachusetts; that he was again a Congressman from 1823 to 1827; that he became a United States senator from Massachusetts in 1827; that his service as senator was interrupted by a first term as secretary of state under Harrison and Tyler from 1841 to 1843; that he became senator again in 1845, and again interrupted such service by becoming secretary of state under Fillmore in 1850; and that he died while holding that office in October, 1852.

At least a general knowledge of his well-known career as a great lawyer, a surpassing orator, an industrious legislator, an adroit diplomat, an expounder and defender of the constitution, an outstanding exponent of nationalism, author of the still reverberating phrase, "Liberty and Union, now and forever, one and inseparable," is assumed in the present discussion of Daniel Webster's relation to the West and its problems.

Daniel Webster was born just at the close of the Revolutionary War into a family of adventurous and hardy pioneers who lived on the then frontier of New Hampshire facing a wilderness extending northward through unbroken forests to settlements on the Canadian St. Lawrence. His boyhood and

¹ Read on January 9 as the annual address of the seventy-ninth annual meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society. *Ed.*

youth thus enabled him to have an understanding appreciation of one of the most pervasive influences in the development of American life — the frontier — because he and his were a part of it.

The political opinions of this young man were moulded in his formative years by another outstanding fact — that his father, a Revolutionary soldier and officer under Washington, was a pronounced Federalist, an advocate of the new national Constitution as a member of the New Hampshire constitutional convention, a supporter of Federalist policies founded upon the nationalistic interpretation of constitutional powers of the new government. Is it not reasonable to find herein an explanation — the incline of the twig as later it was to grow — of the fact that even during his opposition to “ Mr. Madison’s war ” Webster’s ingrained and robust nationalism did not permit him to share the spirit of sectionalism and disunion displayed by many New England public men? An inherited temperament such as his, with the characteristic training of his environment, would avail to prevent party Federalism from degenerating into factional and rebellious localism even under serious and continued grievances.

A curious and little-known indication of the early views held by Webster is found in a college exercise written on December 15, 1800, while he was a student at Dartmouth and not yet nineteen years of age. It is as follows:

Question. Would it be advantageous to the United States to extend their territories?

It might be supposed that a Republic, whose territorial jurisdiction encircles a more extensive portion of the earth’s surface than falls to the share of almost any sovereignty in Europe, would never exert her energies for her dominion. It is true, on general maxims, that our country is sufficiently large for a Republican government; but if, by an inconsiderable extension of our limits, we can avail ourselves of great natural advantages, otherwise unattainable, does not sound policy dictate the measure? We reduce the question to a single point: would not the acquisition of the Floridas be advantageous to the United States? Here let it be

remembered, that that part of the territory of our government, which lies north of Florida, and west of the Alleghany Mountains, including the northwestern territory, Tennessee, Kentucky, and a part of Georgia, is, by far, the most fertile part of the Union. Nowhere does the soil produce in such exuberance; nowhere is the climate so mild and agreeable. The agricultural productions of this quarter, must then, in a few years, become immense, far exceeding those of all the Atlantic States. The next inquiry is, how shall this superabundance be disposed of? How shall the lumber, wheat, and cotton of this country be conveyed to a West India or European market? The only practicable method of transportation is down the Mississippi and the other rivers that run into the Mexican Gulf; and we have here to reflect, that those rivers all run through a country owned by the king of Spain,—a monarch, capricious as a child, and versatile as the wind; and who has it in his power, whenever interest, ambition, or the whims of his fancy dictate, to do us incalculable injuries by prohibiting our western brethren from prosecuting commerce through his dominions. Suppose the Spanish sovereign should, this day, give orders to the fortress of New Orleans to suffer no American vessel to pass up or down the river: this would be an affliction not to be borne by those citizens who live along the banks of the Mississippi; but what steps could our government take in the affair? Must they sit still and fold their hands, while such an intolerable embargo presses our commerce? This would be an ill expedient. We might as well give Spain our whole western territory, as suffer her to control the commerce of it. The only way we could turn ourselves, in this case, would be to declare war against Spain, and vindicate our claims to free navigation by force of arms. Here, then, we are under necessity of extending our territories by possessing ourselves of all the country adjacent those rivers, necessary for our commerce, or of giving up the idea of ever seeing Western America a flourishing country. Therefore, since we are liable every day, to be reduced to the necessity of seizing on Florida, in a hostile manner, or of surrendering the rights of commerce, it is respectfully submitted, whether it would not be proper for our government to enter into some convention with the king of Spain, by which the Floridas should be ceded to the United States.²

A received general maxim that the United States in 1800 was sufficiently large for a republican government! A recognition that the then West, between the Floridas, the Missis-

² *Writings and Speeches*, 15: 485 (National edition, Boston, 1903).

sippi, the Great Lakes, and the Allegheny Mountains was the most fertile part of the Union and that its rich commerce must have national security! An unquestioning implication that the United States could properly acquire territory, with the reservation that sound policy required the extension of limits to be inconsiderable! Affirmation of these principles and policies made in 1800 may well supply clues to the development of Webster's relation to the West throughout his political life.

It is a curious fact that extensive literary remains yield no satisfactory account of Webster's contemporary opinions concerning the revolutionary acquisition of the vast Louisiana territory under Jefferson or concerning its organization as an integral part of the Union under Madison and Monroe. True, at times of critical decisions Webster was not a member of Congress, but one would greatly like to know whether he expressed agreement or disagreement with violent protests made in the name of New England by Representative Josiah Quincy and by President Timothy Dwight of Yale. Nor have we positive and contemporary evidence on Webster's relation to movements culminating in the Hartford Convention and its almost pathetic demands and failures. We can only infer that he was like the majority of the people of New England at that time, really antagonistic to disunion while maintaining partisan opposition to measures detrimental to sectional interests.

It will be recalled that Webster was a member of Congress from 1813 to 1817. During that service he contributed much to shaping legislation for a second Bank of the United States, showing special interest in the maintenance of a nationally regulated currency based on specie and desirable for all sections. Likewise he collaborated with Calhoun, his friend and fellow nationalist, as he truly was until about 1825, to secure a comprehensive system of internal improvements at federal expense. When Madison vetoed the act providing for the use of the bank bonus and dividends to pay for internal improvements, Webster consistently voted against sustaining the

veto. In 1825, when he was again in the House, he favored appropriations for the Cumberland Road, declaring that as a matter of principle he would vote to aid internal improvements wherever they might be needed for national interests and especially wherever they would help the sale and settlement of public lands. His opinions had not changed on the constitutional power to make appropriations for objects of internal improvement. It mattered not to him whether benefits were greater for inhabitants of New Hampshire or on the Missouri. Said he: "When going into a system of improvement, the House has simply to inquire, where is improvement most wanted? . . . Wherever it was most needed, there it must first be made. . . . Works surely may be denominated national which are of extensive importance, although the benefit may not be strictly universal. . . . Congress had virtually said to the people of the West, that the road should be carried on till it reached them all. . . . The people consider it as under pledge; and the present bill, in carrying on the road for eighty miles, does but carry Congress eighty miles further towards the redeeming of its pledge."³ Asserting that the great object of the government as to the public lands was to get them settled, with no great expectation of large revenues from their sale, he favored fixing prices at a rate low enough to encourage rapid settlement but not so low as to stimulate speculation. "For his own part, he was in favor of letting population take its own course; he should experience no feeling of mortification if any of his constituents liked better to settle on the Kansas, or the Arkansas, or the Lord knows where, within our territory; let them go and be happier if they could." A new and fertile country "presents the most alluring of all prospects to a young and laboring man; it gives him a freehold; it offers to him weight and respectability in society; and, above all, it presents to him a prospect of a permanent provision for

³ *Writings and Speeches*, 14: 93-98.

his children. Sir, these are inducements which never were resisted, and never will be; and, were the whole extent of country filled with population up to the Rocky Mountains, these inducements would carry that population forward to the shores of the Pacific Ocean.”⁴

On January 18, 1830, Webster presented to the Senate with favorable comments a petition from a South Carolina canal and railroad company for a federal subscription to its stock, doing this because senators of that state were known to oppose the policy of such action. A touch of the dramatic was seen on the following day when Senator Robert Y. Hayne indicted New England for alleged attempts to retard migration to the West by the maintenance of illiberal land policies and to discriminate against the West by protective tariffs. With other features of the famous debates thus precipitated and renewed in 1832 and 1833, leading off into vital issues of nullification and secession, this address will not be concerned. But it must be noted that Webster's treatment of land and tariff policies was not only a vindication of New England, but an exposition of broadly national policies. Basing his argument upon the principle that public lands were held in trust by the government to be administered as a common fund for all the people of the Union and not merely for the benefit of settlers, Webster justified the sale of lands only after surveys but as rapidly as they would be absorbed by actual settlers at low minimum prices. He said:

From the very origin of the government, these Western lands, and the just protection of those who had settled or should settle on them, have been the leading objects in our policy, and have led to expenditures, both of blood and treasure, not inconsiderable; not, indeed, exceeding the importance of the object, and not yielded grudgingly; but yet entitled to be regarded as great, though necessary sacrifices, made for high, proper ends. The Indian title has been extinguished at the expense of many millions. Is that nothing? There is still a much more material consideration. These

⁴ *Writings and Speeches*, 14: 99.

colonists, if we are to call them so, in passing the Alleghanies, did not pass beyond the care and protection of their own government. Wherever they went, the public arm was still stretched over them. A parental government at home was still ever mindful of their condition and their wants, and nothing was spared which a just sense of their necessities required.

Virginia made her cession . . . upon the express condition that the lands so ceded should be considered as a common fund for the use and benefit of such of the United States as had become or should become members of the confederation, Virginia inclusive, and should be faithfully and *bonâ fide* disposed of for that purpose, and for no other use or purpose whatever. The grants from other States were on similar conditions. . . . These grants were all made on three substantial conditions or trusts. First, that the ceded territories should be formed into States, and admitted in due time into the Union, with all the rights belonging to other States; secondly, that the lands should form a common fund, to be disposed of for the general benefit of all the States; and thirdly, that they should be sold and settled, at such time and in such manner as Congress should direct.

. . . The States had looked to this territory, perhaps too sanguinely, as a fund out of which means were to come to defray the expenses of the war. It had been received as a fund, as a fund Congress had been bound to apply it. To have given it away, would have defeated all the objects which Congress and particular States had had in view in asking and obtaining the cession, and would have plainly violated the conditions which the ceding States attached to their own grants.

The honorable member from South Carolina . . . tells us we are charged with the crime of a narrow and selfish policy; of endeavoring to restrain emigration to the West, and, having that object in view, of maintaining a steady opposition to Western measures and Western interests.

I deny that, in any part of her history, at any period of the government, or in relation to any leading subject, New England has manifested such hostility as is charged upon her. On the contrary, I maintain that, from the day of the cession of the territories by the States to Congress, no portion of the country has acted either with more liberality or more intelligence, on the subject of the public lands in the new States, than New England.⁵

⁵ *Writings and Speeches*, 5: 251, 255, 261, 262.

In the following years Webster repeatedly urged that a liberal policy and sympathy with its interests was due to the West — bringing it nearer to the East by development of communications, granting rights of preëmption to actual settlers on public lands, and graduating the lands in price. In January, 1839, he declared: “ Let it be remembered that our trust is to sell and settle, not to hold permanently. It is to sell and settle, and to apply the proceeds to purposes beneficial to all the people of the United States. I am against all notion of permanent holding.”⁶

Attention must now be directed to the fact that Webster's interest in the West was not merely political and national, but also personal and financial. In 1836 a fever of land speculation was raging, which affected many men in public life. In association with others — such as Cass, Choate, and Caleb Cushing — and also on his own account, Webster invested heavily in Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Illinois. Agents, including his son, Fletcher, were employed, who acquired large farming tracts and town sites on partial payments and credit. In the common lot, with the panic of 1837, hopes of large profits were converted into losses and burdensome debts from which Webster never was able to free himself. In 1837 he made an extensive trip through Pittsburgh, Wheeling, Louisville, Cincinnati, St. Louis, Madison (Indiana), Alton, Chicago, Toledo, Detroit, and Buffalo. Politically the trip raised hopes that he might become the preferred presidential candidate of western Whigs. Financially it served only to involve him more deeply, for he prepared to develop large farms in Illinois near Springfield and between LaSalle and Peru. The latter place he called Salisbury, after his native town, and he had his agent, Ray Thomas, and his son, Fletcher, live there. As late as 1845 Webster entered into a speculative scheme with Rantoul, Choate, and Cushing to get control of lands on the

⁶ *Writings and Speeches*, 8: 264.

upper Mississippi in order to cut timber there for sale in cities lower down the river. The St. Croix and Lake Superior Mineral Company was chartered, but titles were dubious, a spring flood discouraged operations, and the enterprise failed.

Territorial expansion, or "manifest destiny," did not find a supporter in Webster. He was convinced that representative republican institutions, dependent for their vitality upon the strength of local governments but coördinated into a harmonious national system, would break down of their own weight if extended over a vast continental domain with inevitable divergent and sectional interests. For this and other reasons, in the period between his resignation as secretary of state and his return to the Senate, he agitated, spoke, and organized opposition to the annexation of Texas. On that issue, as much as on questions of a United States bank and the tariff, he had parted company with President Tyler, who was an ardent expansionist and had begun to urge annexation. After March 5, 1845, Webster was obliged to treat the acquisition of Texas as an accomplished fact. Yet he did not fail to expound the grounds of opposition by way of formal protest against both the policy and the method of its attainment. Remarks made in the Senate on December 22, 1845, include the following:

In the first place, I have, on the deepest reflection, long ago come to the conclusion, that it is of very dangerous tendency and doubtful consequences to enlarge the boundaries of this country, or the territories over which our laws are now established. There must be some limit to the extent of our territory, if we would make our institutions permanent. And this permanency forms the great subject of all my political efforts, the paramount object of my political regard. The government is very likely to be endangered, in my opinion, by a further enlargement of the territorial surface, already vast, over which it is extended.

In the next place, I have always wished that this country should exhibit to the nations of the earth the example of a great, rich, and powerful republic, which is not possessed by a spirit of aggrandizement. It is an example, I think, due from us to the world, in favor of the character of republican government.

In the next place, Sir, I have to say, that while I hold, with as much integrity, I trust, and faithfulness, as any citizen of this country, to all the original arrangements and compromises under which the Constitution under which we now live was adopted, I never could, and never can, persuade myself to be in favor of the admission of other States into the Union as slave States, with the inequalities which were allowed and accorded by the Constitution to the slave-holding States then in existence. I do not think that the free States ever expected, or could expect, that they would be called on to admit more slave States, having the unequal advantages arising to them from the mode of apportioning representation under the existing Constitution.⁷

Principles such as those just quoted naturally led Webster to outspoken criticism of the administration of Polk for bringing on the war with Mexico, as well as for the methods of its conduct, although he refrained from merely factious opposition and gave one of his sons to an untimely death in the war. Acquisition of territory beyond the limits of Texas would, he foresaw, prove an apple of discord to proslavery and anti-slavery interests, a danger to the harmony and even to the existence of the Union; therefore such expansion he deplored and resisted. Although supporting the Wilmot Proviso, he deemed it an insufficient palliative, and insisted that sound policy required abstinence from further acquisition of territory by war or by treaty. In March, 1847, after resolutions expressing this policy had been voted down in the Senate, he recorded his opinions in remarks including the following brief statements:

It is due to the best interests of the country, to its safety, to peace and harmony, and to the well-being of the Constitution, to declare at once, to proclaim now, that we desire no new States, nor territory to form new States out of, as the end of conquest. For one, I enter into this declaration with all my heart. We want no extension of territory, we want no accession of new States. The country is already large enough. I do not speak of any cession which may be made in the establishment of boundaries, or of the acquisition of a port or two on the Pacific, for the benefit of navigation and commerce. But I speak of large territories, ob-

⁷ *Writings and Speeches*, 7: 56.

tained by conquest, to form States to be annexed to the Union; and I say I am opposed to such acquisition altogether. I am opposed to the prosecution of the war for any such purposes.

...
 Sir, I fear we are not yet arrived at the beginning of the end. I pretend to see but little of the future, and that little affords no gratification. All I can scan is contention, strife, and agitation. . . . Will the North consent to a treaty bringing in territory subject to slavery? Will the South consent to a treaty bringing in territory from which slavery is excluded? . . . We appear to me to be rushing upon perils headlong, and with our eyes wide open.⁸

Consistently and with clear prevision of momentous consequences, Webster spoke and voted against the ratification of the treaty terminating the Mexican War because it added vast domains to the national territory and left open to controversy the status of that area with respect to slavery or freedom. Once more, as in the problems of Texas, he had to accept defeat and turn to problems arising from accomplished facts.

In another direction also Webster had occasion to show his conception of sound national policy with respect to western expansion. By agreement with Great Britain, after 1818 the Oregon country, without defined boundaries on the north, had been open to joint occupation of British and American citizens. Lord Ashburton had hoped in 1842 to obtain from the United States an agreement to make the Columbia River from its mouth to its intersection with the forty-ninth parallel the boundary between British and American Oregon, and he was instructed by his government not to accept a boundary less favorable. On the other hand the American government stood committed to accepting a boundary extending on the forty-ninth parallel from the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean. One learns from Webster's letters that he was interested in retaining Oregon south of the forty-ninth parallel only for the sake of having good commercial ports on the north Pacific coast. He depreciated the value of the Oregon country, comparing the Columbia unfavorably as to productivity and com-

⁸ *Writings and Speeches*, 9: 259-261.

merce with the St. John River in northern Maine. He was willing to accept a division of the area that would simply give the United States good ports on Puget Sound and territory south to the Columbia on the west of the Cascade Mountains. Thereupon President Tyler confidentially proposed to let Great Britain come south to the line of the Columbia if that power would assist the United States in getting from Mexico six degrees of latitude below the forty-second parallel, so that northern California, with San Francisco Bay and Monterey Bay, and northern New Mexico east to Texas would be under American sovereignty. Webster was by no means averse to acquiring the Bay of San Francisco with a small amount of adjacent territory for the benefit of American commerce, but he could not indorse substantial territorial expansion. Therefore he and Ashburton quickly agreed to postpone so difficult and novel a proposition on the plea that Tyler's suggestion would delay and might defeat critical negotiations on other more pressing questions that were to be included in the treaty of 1842.

When Webster again, this time in 1846 as senator, touched the Oregon question, it was to urge compromise on the line of the forty-ninth parallel, with a concession giving Great Britain all of Vancouver Island and access to her ports through the Strait of San Juan de Fuca. The value of the Oregon country he again maintained to be greatly overestimated, both in its resources and because of its remoteness from the remainder of the states. He could not see with prophetic vision that laborious overland journeys by hardy pioneers in creaking wagon trains or almost equally dangerous voyages around Cape Horn would soon give place to railway trips assisted by magnetic telegraphs — and still less the more facile means of communication now almost a commonplace in our generation. Coincident with his opposition to further annexations in the Southwest, he developed the thesis that the Pacific coast as a whole might better become a separate Pacific republic, peopled by

Americans, living in sympathetic relations with the United States, but shaping its own destiny and not complicating the enormously difficult sectional problems of a nation already too large for representative political institutions.

The American people and the dominant political leaders of his day rejected Webster's counsel against western expansion, responding instead to the plea of "manifest destiny" in harmony with the political desires of the proslavery party. But who may gainsay the validity of Webster's fears lest sectional strife disrupt the Union, when the march of events from 1846 to 1861 led with fatalistic directness to a great civil war? The surge of passions let loose by the issues of 1850 so alarmed this great-hearted lover of the Union that he joined Henry Clay in the heroic work of enacting the Compromise of 1850, perchance to prevent, but actually only to postpone for a decade, fratricidal war.

And what may one justly say in a final summary on Daniel Webster and the West? Is it not that here was first a great conservative in his ideas about political, legal, and social institutions? Then, that he was also a great nationalist, incapable of narrow localism and sectionalism? Next, that the depth and sincerity of his nationalism both led him to fear the effects of continental expansion and commanded his loyalty to his beloved Union even under conditions which he had striven to prevent? And finally, that he was so imbued with the spirit of a pioneer builder, so endowed with expansive sympathy, that he was incapable of being ungenerous to the West?

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