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Source: *The Journal of American History*, Sep., 1976, Vol. 63, No. 2 (Sep., 1976), pp. 303-315

Published by: Oxford University Press on behalf of Organization of American Historians

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Daniel Webster and the Politics of Foreign Policy, 1850-1852

KENNETH E. SHEWMAKER

SCHOLARS generally assume that, to at least some extent, American foreign policy derives from and reflects domestic policy. Some authorities such as James N. Rosenau accord priority to international events in explaining United States foreign policy, while others such as Lloyd C. Gardner believe that it is fundamentally determined by “domestic pressures.”¹ Wayne S. Cole adopts a middle position, reasoning that “*America’s role in world affairs has been the product of both international and domestic influences—both external and internal forces.*”² Regardless of which of these interpretations is advocated, the links between domestic and foreign policy, as Rosenau writes, “are not easily observed and are thus especially resistant to coherent analysis.”³

Daniel Webster’s incumbency at the Department of State from 1850 to 1852 presents an unusual opportunity to explore the intersection between domestic and foreign affairs. He had served as secretary of state from 1841 to 1843 and had no particular desire to serve in that capacity again when Millard Fillmore asked him to do so in 1850. Webster’s main objective in accepting the post for a second time was not to bring his experience to bear on issues of international politics, but rather to further the Compromise of 1850. Accordingly, he made deliberate efforts in specific instances to use his office and foreign policy to promote national unity.

The republic was in peril in 1850, not by threat from without but by dissension from within. The internal crisis centered on the issue of whether to exclude slavery from the territories acquired during the Mexican War and was complicated by the boundary dispute between Texas and New Mexico, the Texas debt, the Fugitive Slave Law of 1793, the slave trade in the District of Columbia, and the petition for Mormon Utah’s admission into the Union.

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¹ James N. Rosenau, ed., *Domestic Sources of Foreign Policy* (New York, 1967), 4; Lloyd C. Gardner, Walter F. LaFeber, and Thomas J. McCormick, *Creation of the American Empire: U.S. Diplomatic History* (Chicago, 1973), xvi.

² Wayne S. Cole, *An Interpretive History of American Foreign Relations* (Homewood, Ill., 1968), 2.

³ Rosenau, ed., *Domestic Sources of Foreign Policy*, 2.

These divisive problems demanded a solution, for the Civil War, “or one like it,” might have erupted “in 1850 instead of 1861.”⁴ On January 29, Henry Clay commenced the historic debate which lasted into September by introducing resolutions designed to reconcile sectional differences. On March 7, in one of his greatest forensic endeavors, Webster threw his weight on the side of Clay and compromise. In what Webster himself later characterized as “probably the most important effort” of his life, he called for “the preservation of the Union,” even risking the displeasure of his antislavery New England constituents by endorsing stronger fugitive slave legislation as a means to that overriding end.⁵ The Seventh of March Speech accomplished little, and when President Zachary Taylor died on July 9, the so-called “Omnibus bill” incorporating Clay’s proposals appeared to be permanently stalled in the Congress. That stalemate was uppermost in Webster’s mind as he pondered Fillmore’s invitation to become the chief officer of the new cabinet.

Although Webster perceived the situation as a “golden hour of opportunity” to restore domestic tranquillity to the republic, he spent many sleepless nights before accepting Fillmore’s offer.⁶ He knew from past experience the time-consuming diplomatic routines and substantial monetary expenses that went with the office of secretary of state, and, as usual, he was short of funds and heavily in debt. Assurances of financial backing from some of his well-endowed supporters facilitated Webster’s decision, but the decisive consideration was a sense of responsibility. With aching heart, he explained to Peter Harvey, a Boston businessman and confidant, he had become persuaded that it was his “duty” to accept a cabinet post “in the present crisis.”⁷ In his final speech as a senator, on July 17, Webster proclaimed his determination, whatever the personal consequences, to “stand by the Union, and by all who stand by it.”⁸ His goal, he wrote privately shortly before he took charge of the Department of State on July 23, was to restore “peace and harmony to the Country.”⁹

Eight days after Webster assumed office, the omnibus went down to defeat

⁴ Holman Hamilton, *Prologue to Conflict: The Crisis and Compromise of 1850* (Lexington, Ky., 1964), 23-24.

⁵ Daniel Webster to [Edward Everett], Sept. 27, 1851, Edward Everett Papers (Massachusetts Historical Society). For the Seventh of March Speech, see [James W. McIntyre, ed.] *The Writings and Speeches of Daniel Webster* (18 vols., Boston, 1903), X, 56-98.

⁶ Webster to Franklin Haven, July 12, 1850, Webster Items (Houghton Library, Harvard University).

⁷ Webster to Peter Harvey, July 21, 1850, Daniel Webster Papers (New Hampshire Historical Society). See also Richard W. Etulain, “Peter Harvey: Confidant and Interpreter of Daniel Webster,” *Vermont History*, XXXIX (Winter 1971), 21-30.

⁸ [McIntyre, ed.] *Writings and Speeches of Daniel Webster*, X, 169.

⁹ Webster to Nathan Sargent, July 20, 1850, Miscellaneous Manuscripts (Illinois State Historical Library).

in the Senate. Deeply concerned about the continuing threat to the Union, Fillmore and Webster labored to resolve the deadlock, supporting Senator Stephen A. Douglas' strategy of enacting the adjustment proposals as separate pieces of legislation.¹⁰ The combined efforts of congressional moderates and the Fillmore administration soon produced results, and the President signed the various measures which made the Compromise of 1850 the law of the land. "The Country," Webster rejoiced, "has had a providential escape from very considerable dangers."¹¹ Writing to Harvey, he concluded that "We have gone through the most important crisis, that has occurred since the foundation of the Government." Secession and faction had been "put under," for many years, he hoped, and the Union stood firm.¹²

Webster's optimism proved to be premature. The immediate danger of secession may have been averted, but on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line important segments of the body politic remained unreconciled. The administration's conciliatory program was repudiated by the Whigs of the home states of both Fillmore and Webster. Led by Thurlow Weed and William Henry Seward, the Whig state convention in New York enacted resolutions calling upon the Congress to prohibit slavery in New Mexico and Utah.¹³ In Massachusetts, not only did Free Soilers and Democrats gain control of the legislature, but most Whigs were incensed by the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. "The fame of Webster ends in this nasty law," Ralph Waldo Emerson recorded in his celebrated journal.¹⁴ The Board of Aldermen of Boston, Whigs to a man, refused to allow Faneuil Hall to be used for a meeting at which the secretary of state would be the guest of honor, an unprecedented indignity under which Webster smarted.¹⁵ Passage of the adjustment measures only served to increase the secessionist movement in South Carolina, where firebrands like Robert Barnwell Rhett openly advocated southern independence and Governor Whitmarsh B. Seabrook privately held himself ready "for an immediate separation from a Union whose aim is a prostration of our political edifice." Concerned about rumors that Carolinians were planning to seize federal arsenals, the President dispatched reinforcements to Castle Pinckney and Fort Moultrie.¹⁶

¹⁰ Robert J. Rayback, *Millard Fillmore: Biography of a President* (Buffalo, 1959), 248.

¹¹ Webster to Haven, Sept. 12, 1850, Webster Items.

¹² Webster to Harvey, Oct. 2, 1850, Everett Papers.

¹³ Rayback, *Millard Fillmore*, 258-67.

¹⁴ Quoted in Irving H. Bartlett, "Daniel Webster as a Symbolic Hero," *New England Quarterly*, XLV (Dec. 1972), 487.

¹⁵ Robert F. Dalzell, Jr., *Daniel Webster and the Trial of American Nationalism, 1843-1852* (Boston, 1973), 228-30; Webster to Everett, April 23, 1851, Everett Papers.

¹⁶ Philip May Hamer, *The Secession Movement in South Carolina, 1847-1852* (Allentown, Pa., 1918), 70; Rayback, *Millard Fillmore*, 274-75.

The early aftermath of the Compromise of 1850, then, portended trouble ahead. In aspiring to have the compromise accepted as a permanent resolution of the sectional controversy, Fillmore and Webster were compelled to recognize that their task was far from complete. Enacting laws was one thing, implementing them and persuading citizens to honor them another. Achieving the goal of sectional peace, they discovered, required continual vigilance.¹⁷ Webster's anxiety for the Union was genuine, and he reacted accordingly. In desiring above all to restore national concord, he made "the execution of the compromise the main business of his two years as Secretary of State and chief adviser to President Fillmore."¹⁸ Fortunately for Webster, and in marked contrast to his first tour in the Department of State, there were no pressing involvements with other nations that carried with them the likelihood of war. "There never was a time, I think," he remarked in 1851, "in which our foreign relations were more quiet. There seems no disturbing breath on the surface."¹⁹ Though international affairs were not tranquil throughout Webster's second incumbency, the relative stability of international politics tempted him to use foreign policy to promote domestic policy.

Fortunately for historians, the secretary of state made little effort to conceal the fact that domestic policy held his first priority. He was remarkably candid both in his official and private correspondence, a characteristic that caused him much difficulty during his own lifetime. He even frankly acknowledged the close relationship between domestic politics and foreign affairs. For example, Webster recommended Horace H. Miller as chargé d'affaires to Bolivia because Senator Henry S. Foote believed "the appointment quite important to the 'Union Cause,' in Mississippi."²⁰ Miller received the commission. Even more pointedly, the secretary directed Abbott Lawrence, the minister to Britain, to do his best to secure the liberation of Irish rebels imprisoned in Van Diemen's Land. Although Webster recognized that the issue was not properly one for official interference, he told Lawrence to make discreet suggestions in the right quarters because of "the many natives of Ireland now in this Country and the influence . . . which they exercise over the policy of the government, by means of the elective franchise." The administration wanted credit for helping the Irish, even if it meant allowing those in question to emigrate to America.²¹

¹⁷ Rayback, *Millard Fillmore*, 268.

¹⁸ Richard N. Current, *Daniel Webster and the Rise of National Conservatism* (Boston, 1955), 173.

¹⁹ Fletcher Webster, ed., *The Private Correspondence of Daniel Webster* (2 vols., Boston, 1857), II, 441.

²⁰ Webster to Millard Fillmore, Dec. 20, 1851, Millard Fillmore Papers (Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society).

²¹ Webster to Abbott Lawrence, Dec. 26, 1851, Domestic Letters of the Department of State, General Records of the Department of State, RG 59 (National Archives).

The most significant manifestation of Webster's linking of foreign and domestic policy came in the "Hülsemann Letter" of December 21, 1850. Webster inherited the problem which led to the production of that famous missive. In the United States the Hungarian uprising against Austria was the most popular of the European revolutions of 1848. As Webster himself remarked in an address in 1849, all Americans were sympathetic toward the Hungarian struggle for liberty and saw "a more rational hope of establishing free government in Hungary than in any other part of Europe. . . ." ²² In response to public enthusiasm, President Taylor's secretary of state, John M. Clayton, on June 18, 1849, instructed A. Dudley Mann to proceed to Hungary as a confidential agent, and, if it appeared that the Hungarians were capable of maintaining their independence, to grant recognition to the regime headed by Louis Kossuth. Before Mann reached Vienna, the Russian army had come to the aid of Austria; and the Hungarians had been crushed. ²³ In his State of the Union message of December 4, 1849, the President referred to the Mann mission and expressed his deep empathy for "the sufferings of a brave people, who had made a gallant, though unsuccessful, effort to be free." ²⁴ Stung by Mann's instructions, a copy of which had been obtained surreptitiously, Taylor's address, and documents subsequently submitted to the Senate, the Austrian government instructed its chargé d'affaires to the United States, the Chevalier Johann Georg Hülsemann, to remonstrate.

Taylor's death postponed the delivery of the protest. In fact, there would have been no dispute with Austria had Webster had his way, for he tried to persuade Hülsemann to let the matter rest, arguing that a strong remonstrance would require an equally emphatic reply. ²⁵ The brash and punctilious Austrian diplomat persisted in his course, however, and on September 30, 1850, he formally charged the United States government with unwarranted behavior. Reasoning that his communication was made necessary by Taylor's message to Congress, Hülsemann denounced the Mann mission as a violation of international law and of the American policy of nonintervention. He went on to label Mann a "spy," to refer curtly to the ignorance of Washington policy makers about Hungarian affairs, to insinuate that civil war could break out in the United States as well as in the Austrian empire, and to conclude

²² Quoted in George Ticknor Curtis, *Life of Daniel Webster* (2 vols., New York, 1870), II, 558-59.

²³ Merle Eugene Curti, "Austria and the United States 1848-1852: A Study in Diplomatic Relations," *Smith College Studies in History*, XI (April 1926), 152-53; Holman Hamilton, *Zachary Taylor: Soldier in the White House* (Indianapolis, 1951), 198-99.

²⁴ Fred L. Israel, ed., *The State of the Union Messages of the Presidents, 1790-1966* (3 vols., New York, 1967), I, 776-77.

²⁵ Curti, "Austria and the United States," 163.

that the United States had intervened in the internal affairs of his country.²⁶ Upon reading Hülsemann's disdainful note, Webster informed the President: "We shall have a quarrel with Austria."²⁷

Hülsemann had so overstated his case that Webster could have dealt with the communication of September 30 in a few pages. Instead of doing so, he authored what has been characterized aptly as a lengthy "hymn of praise to American institutions, achievements, and destiny. . . ."²⁸ After summarizing the complaint of Austria, Webster turned Hülsemann's argument on its head, arguing that Austria was itself interfering in American domestic concerns by protesting Taylor's message to and communications with the Congress. Webster then boastfully contrasted the power and extent of the Austrian empire with that of the American republic, "in comparison with which the possessions of the house of Hapsburg are but a patch on the earth's surface," defended the Mann mission as "wholly unobjectionable," reiterated the sanctity of the American policy of nonintervention, and sternly warned that had Mann been treated as a spy the American people "would have demanded immediate hostilities" waged to the utmost against Austria. Webster ended by expressing indifference toward any possible acts of retaliation Austria might conceivably undertake against the United States, and, in a tone more appropriate to a Fourth of July oration than to a diplomatic paper, proclaimed that "nothing will deter either the government or the people of the United States from exercising, at their own discretion, the rights belonging to them as an independent nation. . . ."²⁹

Historians have been uniformly critical of Webster's letter, calling it, among other epithets, a "play to the gallery," a "brash and gratuitous lecture," and a "preposterous note." The essence of the critique is that the secretary of state had committed a grave and irresponsible indiscretion in giving in to the temptation to use a foreign policy issue to promote domestic political ends.³⁰ Although sometimes overstated, the charge is well-founded. The original thought to exploit the Austrian dispute for internal reasons came from William Hunter, Jr., a clerk in the Department of State. After observing that Hülsemann's inept communication of September 30 was "sufficiently

²⁶ Johann Georg Hülsemann to Webster, Sept. 30, 1850, Notes From the Austrian Legation in the United States to the Department of State, General Records of the Department of State.

²⁷ Webster to Fillmore, Oct. 3, 1850, Fillmore Papers.

²⁸ Dalzell, *Daniel Webster and the Trial of American Nationalism*, 226.

²⁹ [McIntyre, ed.] *Writings and Speeches of Daniel Webster*, XII, 165-78.

³⁰ Samuel Flagg Bemis, *A Diplomatic History of the United States* (New York, 1936), 311; Robert H. Ferrell, *American Diplomacy: A History* (New York, 1969), 250-51; Robert A. Brent, "Tarnished Brass: a New Perspective on Daniel Webster," *Southern Quarterly*, IV (Oct. 1965), 49-50; Graham H. Stuart, *The Department of State: A History Of Its Organization, Procedure, and Personnel* (New York, 1949), 114-15.

arrogant and saucy to justify us in requiring him to take it back,” Hunter advised against such a course. Instead, he suggested making a reply “to tell to . . . advantage on the public ear and to the public mind.”³¹ Hunter’s recommendation was immediately adopted by a secretary of state far more troubled by the condition of the Union than by the status of Austrian-American relations.

More effort went into the preparation of the letter to Hülsemann than into that of any state paper produced by Webster during either of his two terms as secretary of state. He asked both Hunter and Edward Everett to prepare responses to Hülsemann, commenting to the latter that a “master’s hand” was required for the occasion and pointing to the “favorable opportunity” presented “to show to the world, the difference between the fundamental principles of our Government, and those of the arbitrary monarchies of Eastern Europe.”³² By October 24 both drafts had been completed, and Webster went over them at his family retreat in Franklin, New Hampshire, also conferring with James Watson Webb, editor of the *Morning Courier and New-York Enquirer*, who was visiting him at the time.³³ On his return to Washington in mid-November, Webster had a third draft drawn up, which he further amended and altered. The final product was the result of eight to ten drafts, and the secretary of state was understating when he told the President that a “good deal of labor” had gone into devising the answer to Hülsemann.³⁴ Fillmore did not think that the letter could be improved, and on December 21 Webster informed Everett that it had been “revised, a little enlarged, copied, & dispatched.”³⁵ Although Everett’s draft formed the basis for the official communication, “what gave *eclat* to the letter,” as Everett himself acknowledged, was “wholly” Webster’s.³⁶

Hunter looked upon the correspondence with Austria as a subject “of the highest importance, looking both to the foreign affairs and the domestic politics of the United States,” but there is little doubt that the letter to Hülsemann was aimed more toward the American people than toward the world.³⁷

³¹ William Hunter, Jr., to Webster, Oct. 4, 1850, Webster Papers.

³² Webster to Everett, Oct. 20, 1850, Everett Papers.

³³ Hunter to Webster, Oct. 15, 1850, Webster Papers; Everett to Webster, Oct. 24, 1850, Everett Papers; Webster to James Webb, Jan. 8, 1851, Historical Manuscript Collection (Yale University Library).

³⁴ C. H. Van Tyne, ed., *The Letters of Daniel Webster: From Documents Owned Principally by the New Hampshire Historical Society* (New York, 1902), 449; Webster to Fillmore, Nov. 13, 1850, Fillmore Papers.

³⁵ Fillmore to Webster, Dec. 20, 1850, Miscellaneous Materials (Alderman Library, University of Virginia); Webster to Everett, Dec. 21, 1850, Everett Papers.

³⁶ Everett to Webster, Oct. 31, 1851, Everett Papers. Many of Daniel Webster’s specific contributions to the letter can be discerned by comparing the Everett draft with the official communication, conveniently printed in parallel columns. Edward Everett [ed.], *The Original Draft of the Hülsemann Letter* (Boston, 1853).

³⁷ Hunter to Webster, Oct. 15, 1850, Webster Papers.

There was a distinctive quality of tone to the document of December 21, and it contained many passages atypical of Webster's diplomatic papers. As a general rule, he conducted the foreign affairs of the United States in a prudent and moderate fashion; and he certainly was not a parochial chauvinist. He once remarked in a letter to Eugène de Sartiges, the French minister to Washington, that although Americans were republicans, so "thoroughly attached to popular, Representative" government that no other could possibly be established among them, admittedly "our Condition is peculiar & what suits us may not . . . be suitable" to others.³⁸ The flag-waving bombast of December 21 is explainable as an attempt by the secretary of state to use Austrian dissatisfaction with American foreign policy to further the Fillmore administration's domestic purposes.

In the fall of 1850 internal concerns were paramount. Confronted by opposition to the compromise from both northerners and southerners and fearful of a "decisive split" in the Whig party, Webster felt that the time had come to eradicate the spirit of disunion.³⁹ His consuming preoccupation, which was shared by Fillmore, was to "preserve the Institutions of our Fathers."⁴⁰ The secretary of state asked the President to look upon the proposed reply to Hülsemann as an opportunity to exhibit the "temper and spirit" of the administration, and the President did not undertake to question that judgment.⁴¹ More pointedly, in response to the mild reprimand of his friend George Ticknor, Webster excused the "boastful and rough" language of the letter by confessing that he had "wished to write a paper which should touch the national pride, and make a man feel *sheepish* and look *silly* who should speak of disunion."⁴²

Events subsequent to December 21 tend to confirm the conclusion that the letter was primarily an attempt to rally support behind the Compromise of 1850. The public response was all that the administration could have hoped for. With few exceptions, journalistic commentary was favorable; the Pennsylvania legislature passed a resolution of approval; Congress authorized the printing of 5,000 copies; and numerous individuals filled Webster's ears with words of praise.⁴³ Former Secretary Clayton thanked Webster for his able defense of the Mann mission; Lawrence, at his own expense, had the letter published in pamphlet form and distributed in Europe; Samuel F. B. Morse, the inventor, rejoiced that the "insolent, but impotent Austrian" had been

³⁸ Webster to Eugene de Sartiges, Feb. 6, 1852, *ibid.*

³⁹ Webster, ed., *Private Correspondence of Daniel Webster*, II, 399-400, 404.

⁴⁰ Webster to William Prescott, Nov. 7, 1850, Webster Papers.

⁴¹ Webster to Fillmore, Nov. 13, 1850, Fillmore Papers.

⁴² Quoted in Curtis, *Life of Daniel Webster*, II, 537.

⁴³ See Arthur James May, *Contemporary American Opinion of the Mid-Century Revolutions in Central Europe* (Philadelphia, 1927), 58-60.

admirably rebuked; and William Plumer, Jr., congressman from New Hampshire, observed that Webster's masterpiece had been "universally admired."⁴⁴

Despite the outpouring of public and private enthusiasm, Webster did not seek to exploit further his advantage over Hülsemann. On the contrary, since he had no desire to impair seriously Austrian-American relations over issues he had originally conceived of as unimportant in themselves, Webster acquiesced in an exchange of notes by means of which the two diplomats had terminated amicably the correspondence on the subject by March 1851. As Everett recalled, the letter did not produce even "a temporary suspension of friendly relations between the United States and Austria."⁴⁵ Even more suggestive, in spite of the fact that Webster had the added incentive of seeking to garner ballots for his quadrennial quest for the presidential nomination at the Baltimore convention scheduled for June 1852, he resisted additional temptations to manipulate foreign policy for political purposes, with the possible but in any event minor exception of his well-known toast to "Hungarian Independence" at a public banquet on January 7, 1852.⁴⁶

By the fall of 1851, Webster had decided to run again for the highest office of the land. On November 23, Charles W. March, a New York supporter and strategist, urged Webster to pave the way for the nomination by using foreign policy to political advantage.⁴⁷ More specifically, on December 2, March wrote that if Webster "could repeat the Hulsemann letter, we shall have but little to contend against."⁴⁸ An inviting opportunity to duplicate history presented itself when, in August 1851, the filibuster Narcisco López was captured and, along with fifty of his followers, mostly Americans and including William L. Crittenden, the nephew of the attorney general, executed in a public square in Havana; and 156 survivors were sent to work the quicksilver mines in Spain.⁴⁹ The popular response in the United States was unmistakable. Enraged citizens of New Orleans reacted with mob violence. The property of Spanish nationals was vandalized; the Spanish

⁴⁴ John M. Clayton to Webster, Jan. 12, 1851, Webster Papers; Lawrence to Webster, Jan. 27, 1851, Daniel Webster Collection (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress); Samuel F. B. Morse to Webster, Jan. 20, 1851, Samuel F. B. Morse Collection (Chicago Historical Society); William Plumer, Jr., to Webster, Feb. 9, 1851, Webster Papers.

⁴⁵ Everett [ed.], *Original Draft of the Hülsemann Letter*, v; May, *Contemporary American Opinion of the Mid-Century Revolutions in Central Europe*, 60. See also, Webster, ed., *Private Correspondence of Daniel Webster*, II, 441.

⁴⁶ See May, *Contemporary American Opinion of the Mid-Century Revolutions in Central Europe*, 99-101; Curti, "Austria and the United States," 184-86.

⁴⁷ Charles March to Webster, Nov. 23, 1851, Webster Papers.

⁴⁸ March to Webster, Dec. 2, 1851, *ibid.*

⁴⁹ Robert Granville Caldwell, *The Lopez Expeditions to Cuba: 1848-1851* (Princeton, 1915), 82-112; Philip S. Foner, *A History of Cuba and its relations with The United States* (2 vols., New York, 1962-1963), I, 60.

consulate broken into, its flag shredded and the portraits of the queen and captain general of Cuba defaced; and the Spanish consul had to flee the city for fear of his life. In Mobile, Spanish seamen were assaulted, and demonstrations occurred in Baltimore, Cincinnati, Louisville, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh. Even those who had opposed López's filibustering activities expressed their outrage at the summary execution of Crittenden and the other Americans: Philadelphians enacted a resolution calling for intervention in Cuba; and the Democratic press sought to make political capital out of the affair.⁵⁰

Webster's handling of the Spanish situation was quite unlike the Austrian episode. There were no Hülsemann notes, nor any postulating for political advantage. Indeed, Webster's response to the Spanish demand for redress braved the wrath of those calling for a strong stand. Instead of resorting to bombast, he apologized to the Spanish government and skillfully negotiated for freedom of the prisoners. On November 13, 1851, the secretary of state wrote a letter to Calderón de la Barca, minister of Spain to the United States, that Lord Palmerston characterized as "highly creditable to the good faith and sense of justice" of the United States government.⁵¹ Webster denounced the actions taken against Spanish citizens as "disgraceful," expressed regret at the indignity to the Spanish flag, that gallant "Castilian ensign, which, in times past, has been reared so high, and waved so often over fields of acknowledged and distinguished valor," promised to seek indemnity for the Spanish consul, and concluded that any Spanish representative returning to the post at New Orleans would receive "a national salute to the flag of his ship . . . as a demonstration of respect" and recompense for the "gross injustice done to his predecessor by a lawless mob. . . ."⁵² Claiming no right to intervene officially in their behalf, Webster pleaded for clemency for the prisoners on humanitarian grounds. His letter of November 13, which was published in Spain, had the intended effect. It induced the queen in December 1851 to pardon the Americans and earned Calderón a decoration for his zeal. After their release, the President asked Congress in return for the queen's magnanimity to compensate the Spanish subjects who had suffered losses in New Orleans and elsewhere, and Congress complied in 1852 by placing \$25,000 at Fillmore's disposal.⁵³

The contrast between the Calderón and Hülsemann exchanges hardly could be sharper, and it is important to know why. There was probably as much, if

⁵⁰ Caldwell, *Lopez Expeditions to Cuba*, 114-15; Basil Rauch, *American Interest in Cuba: 1848-1855* (New York, 1948), 161.

⁵¹ Quoted in Curtis, *Life of Daniel Webster*, II, 556n.

⁵² [McIntyre, ed.] *Writings and Speeches of Daniel Webster*, XII, 181-86.

⁵³ Rauch, *American Interest in Cuba*, 166-73; Lester D. Langley, *The Cuban Policy of the United States: A Brief History* (New York, 1968), 33-34.

not more, political mileage to be gained from the Spanish affair, and March had pointed to the Cuban incident in his letter to Webster of November 23, 1851. The difference is that both more and less were at stake. There was no danger of armed conflict with Austria, and Webster only had risked breaking diplomatic relations with a country peripheral to United States foreign policy, but the lives of Americans had to be considered in dealing with Spain. "If this has not been a religious duty," Webster wrote the President in November 1851 on his efforts to secure the liberation of the prisoners, "it has been at least a work of mercy."⁵⁴ Webster had long looked upon Cuba, moreover, as "to us the most interesting portion of the Spanish empire."⁵⁵ By 1851, as he wrote in a dispatch to Daniel M. Barringer, minister to Spain, American commerce with the island was "large and important" and steam-powered vessels had "greatly increased the proximity" of the Spanish colony to the United States.⁵⁶ By comparison, trade with Austria was slight; and he viewed the Hapsburg empire as distant and uninteresting. Finally, the Fillmore administration was not nearly as concerned about the specter of disunity by the summer of 1851 as it had been a year earlier. The secessionists in South Carolina, as unionist James Louis Petigru reported on October 22, had been beaten in the statewide elections, and a sectional truce of sorts prevailed throughout most of the country.⁵⁷ Although it remained Webster's "fixed determination" to uphold the adjustment measures, including the Fugitive Slave Law, until his death on October 24, 1852, by the time of the López expedition the compromise seemed well on its way to general acceptance.⁵⁸

Secretary Webster's letters to Hülsemann and Calderón embody dissimilar responses to pressures from other nations. Domestic policy had been crucial to the content and conduct of foreign policy in responding to Austria but less so in responding to Spain, and the significant variables seem to have been human lives, commerce, geographical location, and the level of intensity of an unresolved conflict in American society. Neither incident had been perceived of as involving the question of hostilities, and, in any event, unlike Secretary of State Seward in April 1861, Webster was too responsible a statesman to pay any heed whatsoever to a suggestion that he manufacture a war with a "great power" for the good of "our Country."⁵⁹ The letter to Calderón further implies that there were other limits to which Webster was willing to use foreign policy for internal reasons and that he had measured the possible costs

⁵⁴ Webster to Fillmore [Nov. 27, 1851], Fillmore Papers.

⁵⁵ Webster to Washington Irving, Jan. 17, 1843, Diplomatic Instructions of the Department of State, Spain, General Records of the Department of State.

⁵⁶ Webster to Daniel M. Barringer, Nov. 26, 1851, *ibid.*

⁵⁷ James L. Petigru to Webster, Oct. 22, 1851, Webster Collection.

⁵⁸ Webster to G. A. Tavenner, April 9, 1852, Webster Papers; Rayback, *Millard Fillmore*, 286.

⁵⁹ C. Cather Flint to Webster, Aug. 2, 1852, Webster Collection.

involved in playing politics with international affairs. In the interchange with Austria, however, while he did not risk lives, substantial economic losses, or a military confrontation, he did intentionally mold foreign policy to the imperatives of domestic politics.

Although Webster later sought to use the letter to Hülsemann to gain political backing in his bid for the presidential nomination, particularly the ethnic vote of German-Americans, there is no evidence to support Robert A. Brent's assertion that in December 1850 the secretary of state was looking toward the election of 1852.⁶⁰ At the time he composed the note to the Austrian chargé, he was thinking not so much of securing the Whig nomination a year and a half hence, if he was pondering that distant event at all, as he was of the desirability of creating a union party comprised of pro-compromise Whigs and Democrats.⁶¹ Economic influences also do not seem to have played a direct role in the shaping of the Austrian correspondence, though Richard N. Current has persuasively demonstrated that Webster was responsive to the viewpoints of Boston and New York business leaders. About all that can be said in this regard is that he was aware of and shared their desire to promote sectional concord.⁶² The key linking external to internal developments in the production of the letter to Hülsemann was the Compromise of 1850, which impinged directly on the secretary of state's deliberations. In accord with his primary objective of promoting national reconciliation, and in response to a domestic crisis which he perceived to be of such magnitude as to supersede the possibility of jeopardizing relations with Austria, Webster provided what qualifies as a classic example of tailoring foreign policy to the needs of domestic politics. The interrelationship is not only discernible but also critical, for scholars cannot understand the "Hülsemann Letter" without taking into account Webster's active participation in the politics of the compromise.

George F. Kennan's lament that American diplomatists exhibit a deplorable tendency to make statements not with regard to their impact on the international community but rather to their effect on American opinion is particularly applicable to the Hülsemann episode.⁶³ And yet the critique can be, and in this instance has been, too categorical. Webster himself owned up to the charge in his correspondence with Ticknor, but he maintained also, in a letter written to G. A. Tavenner six months before his death, that "nothing

⁶⁰ Webster to Haven, Nov. 23, 1851, Webster Items; Brent, "Tarnished Brass," 49.

⁶¹ See Dalzell, *Daniel Webster and the Trial of American Nationalism*, 223-25; Webster to Harvey, Oct. 2, 1850, Everett Papers; Webster, ed., *Private Correspondence of Daniel Webster*, II, 406; Webster to Thomas B. Curtis, Jan. 20, 24, 1851, Daniel Webster Manuscripts (Massachusetts Historical Society).

⁶² Current, *Daniel Webster and the Rise of National Conservatism*, 189-202.

⁶³ George F. Kennan, *Memoirs: 1925-1950* (Boston, 1967), 53-54.

but a deep sense of duty” had led him to take the part he did in bringing about the Compromise of 1850, and, he continued, “that same sense of duty” remained “with unabated force.”⁶⁴ The harm done to Austrian-American relations was negligible; he had not acted out of impulse or as irresponsibly as some scholars have assumed; and he was proud to have “rendered the Country some service.”⁶⁵ The United States may have gained more than it lost from Webster’s manipulation of the politics of foreign policy.

⁶⁴ Webster to Tavenner, April 9, 1852, Webster Papers.

⁶⁵ Webster to Cameron F. McRies, July 10, 1851, Daniel Webster Materials (Dartmouth College).