

Henry Clay during the War of 1812

Largely regarded for his efforts as a compromiser of national politics during the first half of the nineteenth century, Henry Clay of Kentucky urged for conflict with Great Britain in the years prior to the War of 1812. As leader of the War Hawks, Clay pressed President James Madison to declare war on Great Britain for British transgressions against the United States on the high seas and along the American frontier. In 1814, however, Clay joined a peace commission sent to Ghent, Belgium, to negotiate an end to the War of 1812.

On April 12, 1777, Elizabeth Hudson Clay gave birth to a son, Henry Clay, in Hanover County, Virginia. Born during the American Revolutionary War, Clay experienced the destruction of his home and the death of his father, Reverend John Clay, during a British attack in 1780 led by Banastre Tarleton. Following the war, Clay's mother remarried Henry Watkins, who provided Clay with a position in the office of Peter Tinsley, clerk of the Virginia High Court of Chancery. In 1793, Clay became the personal scribe of Virginia's chief officer of the High Court, Chancellor George Wythe. During his time with Wythe, Clay studied law, and by 1797 he had earned a license to practice in Virginia. Rather than remain in the Old Dominion, Clay left for Kentucky, where he envisioned greater opportunities for a legal and political career.

On April 11, 1799, the day before his twenty-second birthday, Clay married Lucretia Hart in Lexington, Kentucky. From 1800-1821, Lucretia would give birth to eleven children (six daughters and five sons). Within a few years after relocating to Kentucky, Clay had emerged as one of the leading Democratic-Republicans in the Lexington area, where he practiced as an attorney. In 1803, Clay began his political career in the Kentucky General Assembly, serving as a representative of Fayette County. Clay joined the U.S. Senate on December 29, 1806, as a replacement for John Breckinridge of Kentucky. Although only in the capital for two months, Clay impressed many leading politicians with his oratory skills. As a member of the U.S. Senate, Clay had hoped to address foreign affairs, particularly the British practice of impressment and interference with oceanic trade, but Congress adjourned on March 3, 1807, failing to grant Clay much time to speak on the issues.

Clay returned to Kentucky and was elected to the Kentucky legislature in 1807. On January 11, 1808, his colleagues chose him to serve as Speaker of the Kentucky House of Representatives. During his tenure as a Kentucky congressman, Clay became a powerful voice denouncing British acts of impressment and the seizure of American ships and cargo, including the *Chesapeake-Leopard* affair. He also strongly supported President Jefferson and the national government's responses to the British policies. Clay had a particular rivalry with fellow Kentucky representative Humphrey Marshall, an aristocratic Federalist who rebuked Jefferson's Embargo Act of 1807. On January 19, 1809, Clay fought Marshall in a duel across the Ohio River from Shippingport, Kentucky, on Indiana soil. Clay delivered the challenge following Marshall's refusal to accept Clay's homespun resolution, which would have required that all Kentucky congressmen wear American manufactured clothing instead of European garments.

On January 4, 1810, Clay was once again elected to serve a short term in the U.S. Senate. During this time, tensions intensified between the United States and Great Britain. A group of young Democratic-Republicans from the South and West (Kentucky was considered a western

state at this time) known as the War Hawks emerged on the national political scene. Advocating for war against Great Britain, the War Hawks believed that only through military force could the United States save its economy and maintain its global integrity. With Clay's election to the U.S. House of Representatives in August 1810 and his appointment as Speaker of the House on November 4, 1811, the War Hawks, led by Clay and John C. Calhoun of South Carolina, gained a prominent voice in Congress. As Speaker of the House, Clay appointed several of his supporters to important committees in Congress, thereby giving the War Hawk faction a strong position in Washington.

Not only did the War Hawks abhor Great Britain's policies on the Atlantic, but Clay and others were also convinced that British agents encouraged Native Americans to assault frontier settlements in areas such as the Old Northwest. At the time of Clay's appointment as Speaker of the House, Tecumseh, a Shawnee leader who opposed American incursion on native lands, attempted to unite Native Americans from the North and South into a confederacy against the United States. The War Hawks claimed that Great Britain had helped finance and arm Tecumseh's warriors and other Native Americans who assaulted frontier settlements. Following an American victory on November 7, 1811, at the Battle of Tippecanoe, where Governor William Henry Harrison led an attack on Tecumseh's settlement at Prophetstown, Clay and other War Hawks began to urge President Madison for a declaration of war against Great Britain. Although Clay and his supporters remained persistent, the official declaration did not come until June of the following year.

Most of the War Hawks had come of age in the period following the American Revolutionary War. Many of their fathers had fought during the conflict or suffered at the hands of the British (such as Clay's father). As a result, Clay and others wanted to assert their own stance against the British both to honor their forefathers and to prove their own capacity as members of a young nation. In addition, the War Hawks supported American expansion into the western territories occupied by Native Americans as well as the conquest of Canada and Florida. By eliminating British support of the Native Americans along the frontier, the War Hawks' constituents, such as Clay's Kentuckians, could more easily buttress the size of the republic.

As the war entered its third year, however, the United States and Great Britain began negotiations for peace. In January 1814, Clay, along with four others—John Quincy Adams, Albert Gallatin, James Bayard, and Jonathan Russell—departed for Ghent, Belgium, to represent the United States. Once negotiations commenced in August 1814, both sides brought immediate ultimatums to the table. Clay and his associates demanded that Great Britain cease their practice of impressing American sailors. The defeat of Napoleon in the spring of 1814 meant that British maritime policies of impressment and the regulation of international trade were no longer necessary. From across the table, the British commission called for the creation of a Native American buffer zone around the Great Lakes, the reversal of Oliver Perry's naval victory, and a portion of Maine. According to reports of the commission, Clay likened the negotiations to a card game, in which the Americans needed to determine how to out-bluff the British.

News of the burning of Washington in late August put the Americans at a disadvantage, forcing the commission to press for *status quo ante bellum*. Ultimately, this would bring peace and an end to the war with all territorial boundaries restored to their original place prior to the

war's beginning. The British attempted to gain rights to navigate the Mississippi River; however, Clay adamantly refused to sign any treaty that offered such cessions. Ultimately, British officials decided to end the fighting rather than continue the war in hopes of obtaining more territory. With the signing of the Treaty of Ghent on Christmas Eve 1814, Clay believed that negotiations remained favorable for the United States, considering the nation had lost no honor or territory.

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