

The Struggle for the Union

Henry Clay - the Great Compromiser

The Missouri Compromise
of 1820 to the Tariff Compromise of 1833

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Teachers Guide

Program Overview

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Discussion Topics/Questions

1. What event triggered the need for compromise in 1819 and what other event in 1820 saved the nation from splitting apart?

The need for compromise came about with Missouri's Petition for Statehood in 1819. Missouri was the first State outside of Louisiana to seek admission to the Union from the old Louisiana Purchase of 1803. Missouri would be a slave State, and its admission upset the balance between slave and free States. There were eleven slave States and eleven free States at the time. What saved the nation from splitting apart was the petition by Maine (then part of Massachusetts) to enter the Union as a free State in 1820.

2. What was the final compromise of 1820?

Under Henry Clay's compromise, Missouri would be admitted to the Union as a slave State and Maine would be admitted as a free State, making twelve slave States and twelve free States. A line would be drawn along the southern border of Missouri – the 36° 30' parallel. Slavery would be prohibited in the Louisiana Purchase territory north of the 36° 30' parallel; it would be allowed in the lands south of it.

3. After a compromise was reached admitting Missouri and Maine as States, what caused a second crisis over Missouri's admission to the Union?

Missouri's Constitution prohibited free African-Americans, or persons of African-American descent, from entering Missouri. That violated the clause in the U.S. Constitution that guaranteed every citizen of every State "the privileges and immunities" of the citizens of any and all other States. With Henry Clay's proposed compromise, Missouri's statehood was finally conditioned on it never enacting any law that would undermine "the privileges and immunities" of any citizen of any other State entering its borders.

4. What act of Henry Clay's nearly ruined his political career?

In the presidential election of 1824, Clay had been one of four candidates. The election wound up deadlocked between two candidates, John Quincy Adams of Massachusetts and Andrew Jackson of Tennessee. The election was left to the House of Representatives to decide. Clay was Speaker of the House, and he engineered the vote that finally gave the presidency to Adams. When Adams became president he offered Clay the post of Secretary of State, which Clay accepted. As every president since James Madison had been Secretary of State before he became president, Clay's opponents charged him with having entered into a "corrupt bargain" with Adams so he could succeed Adams as president.

5. What events triggered the need for compromise in 1833?

A high protective tariff was enacted by Congress, with the support of the administration of President John Quincy Adams, in 1828. The tariff protected northern manufacturing interests by making it more expensive to import foreign manufactured goods. The tariff, however, crippled southern States that manufactured little because they were almost completely agricultural. They relied upon imports. South Carolina enacted an ordinance nullifying the tariff in 1832, and threatened secession from the Union if the tariff was not repealed; it even called out the State militia to keep federal officers from collecting the tariff in its ports. President Andrew Jackson sought and obtained from Congress the passage of the "Force Bill" which called upon federal troops to enforce the collection of the tariff in South Carolina. The nation was on the brink of civil war.

6. What kept South Carolina from seceding and plunging the Nation into civil war?

Henry Clay proposed a compromise in early February 1833 which, if enacted, would cause the tariff to diminish over a course of years, and prohibited Congress from enacting new tariffs. Senator John C. Calhoun, who had resigned as Andrew Jackson's Vice President in order to be elected to the United States Senate from South Carolina, convinced his State to accept the compromise, thereby avoiding the impending clash with federal troops. The compromise passed both houses of Congress and was signed by President Jackson.