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The Double Character of Daniel Webster

Irving H. Bartlett

Between 1815 and 1852, when people in New England wanted advice on matters of public policy, they sought out Daniel Webster. His extraordinary reputation rested in large measure on his ability to play a conservative role, to assure his followers that the federal Union was sound and that their role in a rapidly changing democratic society was consistent with their historic legacy. In 1850 the message failed and Webster fell.

In his most recent book, Daniel Patrick Moynihan has written, “The central conservative truth is that it is culture, not politics, that determines the success of a society. The central liberal truth is that politics can change a culture and save it from itself.”¹ The obvious corollary to this is that the successful politician is one who can avail himself of both kinds of truth, or—to reduce Moynihan’s elegant expression to the level of cliché—those who are winners in public life know when to be conservative and when to be liberal.

The same corollary provides a convenient way to approach the career of Daniel Webster. For more than thirty years in the first half of the nineteenth century, New Englanders who wanted advice on public policy went to him. From 1815 until his death in 1852, Webster dominated the American scene in Congress, before the Supreme Court, as secretary of state (twice), and as the consummate ceremonial orator of his age.

Daniel Webster’s reputation rested less on his ability to formulate policy and make laws than on his ability to articulate basic values in the culture. From our vantage point it is difficult to envisage the awe that Webster inspired in New Englanders and in hordes of other Americans, but a key to it can perhaps be found in the irresistible tendency of his admirers to refer to him as the Godlike Man. Americans liked to give nicknames to their favorites in those days. Andrew Jackson was the Old Hero, Henry Clay was the Great Compromiser, and John C. Calhoun was the Great Nullifier, but the extravagance of rhetoric applied to Webster is without example in our history if we except Washington and the Christlike imagery attached to Lincoln after his death. One

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smiles at the prospect of applying the ultimate sobriquet to the most successful politician of our time. President Reagan can be called Ronnie. No one ever called Webster Danny.

Part of Webster's extraordinary reputation in his own lifetime can be explained by the apparently effortless way in which he performed his multiple roles as lawyer, politician, legislator, diplomat, orator, and writer (he was read even more than he was heard). "Mr. Webster had a giant's brain and a giant's heart," one of his contemporaries wrote, "and he wanted a giant's work."² And part of it was the product of the mysterious quality called charisma which we recognize in some public figures but find so difficult to explain.

Webster's charisma derived to a considerable extent from his personal appearance. A man of ordinary height, he always gave the appearance of towering over his companions. What people noticed most about him was the massive chest (bellows for the famous Webster voice), leonine head, and the heavily browed black eyes so often compared to furnaces. In an age of phrenology, the size of Webster's head caused a good deal of speculation and was sometimes likened to the dome of St. Peter's. His head was measured, of course, and Americans were solemnly informed that the Webster dome was twenty-five inches around, as compared to twenty-three inches for both Henry Clay and John Quincy Adams. At Webster's death, his brain weighed in at more than sixty-three ounces, close to the largest brain on record. Small wonder that the Dartmouth Archives today treasure a picture of one of Daniel Webster's straw hats, with a careful notation of its inside measurements.³

A trained actor can play a charismatic role on the stage, but the politician becomes a charismatic leader by finding a clearly defined role to play in times of crisis. By ministering to a people in psychological or material distress, he or she is perceived as responding to a transcendent call, as possessing more than human powers. Such names as Saint Joan, Ghandi, and Hitler come immediately to mind. Leaders like this find their power not just in practical accomplishment but through the projection of a public image—as martyrs, spiritual leaders, crusaders, dictators, and so on. It was Daniel Webster's glory and fate to become a symbolic leader for countless numbers of Americans by playing the role of Guardian or Defender of the political culture.⁴

More than 150 years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote that "Americans, the freest, most enlightened" people in the world, "placed in the happiest circumstances that the world affords," acted "as if a cloud habitually hung upon their brow, and I thought them serious and almost sad, even in their pleasures."⁵ It took a long time, but after World War II, historians finally began to take Tocqueville's insight seriously, and we now have a formidable body of literature which argues that the great age of democratic expansionism, from about 1815 to 1860, was not a time of buoyant optimism for most Americans, but rather a period when rose-colored visions of the future competed with bouts of melancholy and fear and trembling over the velocity of change in their society.

There were plenty of things for Americans to worry about in the first half of the nineteenth century. They might worry about the uncertainties of a boom-and-bust economy or the volatility of a newly expanded and unwashed electorate; about the perils of immigration and urbanization; about the "barbarism of the West" or the barbarism of slavery; or about the durability of the Union. More than anything else, they seem to have worried about squandering a glorious legacy, about losing touch with the virtuous citizenry in themselves that had fought the Revolution and created the

new republic.

Daniel Webster assumed his godlike image and became a symbolic leader not as a result of the policies he made but because of the way he addressed American anxieties during the decade of the 1820s. Four major speeches were involved (three orations and one congressional debate), all of them delivered under extraordinary circumstances: On December 22, 1820, Webster went to the First Church in Plymouth to speak on the bicentennial anniversary of the landing of the Pilgrims. In 1825 he spoke at the laying of the cornerstone of the Bunker Hill Monument; Lafayette was there, along with the Bunker Hill veterans, and a crowd of thousands spread out on the hill. The following year he gave the funeral oration in Faneuil Hall for John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, who had died, providentially, it seemed to most Americans, on the same day.

What Webster did in all three orations was to remind his audience that as Americans they were part of a long and honorable tradition, inherited from great leaders and embracing great principles and institutions. He raised the rock and the unmarked Plymouth burial ground and Bunker Hill and Faneuil Hall and the reputations of Adams and Jefferson to the level of myth, and he assured his listeners and readers that if they would be true to the past, they could be sure of the future. He explained to them what they vaguely felt but could not articulate themselves about what it meant to be an American. Only when we understand that Webster was addressing himself successfully to the profound question of national identity can we comprehend the ecstatic reaction of some of his listeners. George Ticknor, for example, one of the most highly educated and sophisticated young scholars in the country, wrote to a friend immediately upon hearing Webster at Plymouth, "I was never so excited by public speaking before in my life. Three or four times I thought my temples would burst with the rush of blood. . . . When I came out, I was almost afraid to come near him. It seemed to me as if he was like the mount that might not be touched and that burned with fire. I was beside myself, and am so still."⁶

It was a good deal easier for Webster to project his godlike image at great ceremonial occasions in New England than in the Senate, where statesmanship more often than not played second fiddle to partisan maneuvering and bickering. Webster's greatest moment in the Senate, the one that is frozen in time in the monumental painting above the platform in Faneuil Hall, occurred in January 1830, when he helped raise a political squabble to the level of formal debate over two opposing interpretations of the American political system.⁷

Although Webster's highly publicized patriotic orations in the 1820s all emphasized national pride in a glorious common history, the political dialogue during the period, both in and outside Congress, was becoming increasingly focused on sectional tensions. The hottest issues involved tariff and public-land policies. Slaveholding states, reeling from the effects of low cotton prices on the world market and fearing that they had become a permanent minority in the Union, accused leaders from the manufacturing states of voting for protective-tariff policies and high prices for public lands in order to enrich their own wealthy constituents and create a bloated treasury that would encourage the consolidation of power in the federal government. The famous Webster-Hayne debate began when Webster inadvertently strolled into the Senate just in time to hear Robert Y. Hayne, the Democratic senator from South Carolina, launch these charges against New England. Webster replied in a short speech, defending New England's patriotic role in the past and citing as one evidence New England support for the Ordinance of 1789, which kept slavery out of the Northwest Territory. The

implied criticism of the South's most cherished institution brought Hayne to his feet in a rage, and he began to harangue the Senate on the cupidity of New Englanders, who, having failed to sabotage the war effort against England fifteen years earlier, now in the guise of strengthening the Union sought to turn the government into a bastion of federal power that would rival the British model. South Carolinians, under the direction of their famous political chieftain, Vice President John C. Calhoun, had developed a theoretical defense against unjust federal legislation, and Hayne was really acting as Calhoun's mouthpiece when he closed his speech by arguing that the states, which had originally ratified the Constitution through state conventions, had retained their sovereignty and the right, acting again through state conventions, to nullify national acts they judged unconstitutional. The clear implication was that South Carolina would nullify a protective tariff or any other law that threatened its prosperity. Hayne spoke for the better part of two days in exhaustive historical and political detail, and Webster sat through the entire punishing performance, taking notes.

In his first reply to Hayne, Webster had accused his opponents of bringing the whole value of the Union into question as "a mere matter of profit and loss." After taking the floor for his second and longer speech, Webster concentrated on rebutting the conception of the federal government which lay at the heart of nullification theory:

I hold it to be a popular government, erected by the people; those who administer it, responsible to the people; and itself capable of being amended and modified, just as the people may choose it should be. It is as popular, just as truly emanating from the people, as the State governments. It is created for one purpose; the State governments for another. It has its own powers, they have theirs. There is no more authority with them to avert the operation of a law of Congress, than with Congress to arrest the operation of their laws. We are here to administer a Constitution emanating immediately from the people, and trusted by them to our administration.

Who was to decide the constitutionality of state or federal law? The answer, Webster said, was clearly given in the Constitution itself, in the two clauses that made it "the supreme law of the land" and extended the judicial power "to all cases arising under the Constitution and laws of the United States":

These two provisions cover the whole ground. They are, in truth, the keystone of the arch! With these it is a government; without them it is a confederation. In pursuance of these clear and express provisions, Congress established, at its very first session, in the judicial act, a mode for carrying them into full effect, and for bringing all questions of constitutional power to the final decision of the Supreme Court. It then, Sir, became a government. It then had the means of self-protection; and but for this, it would, in all probability, have been now among things which are past.

To proceed on the opposite assumption—that the states were sovereign and could decide to obey or disobey federal laws at their pleasure, was to take a giant step toward civil war. Webster contrasted this bloody prospect with the harmony of the early republic, when Massachusetts and South Carolina had united to throw off British tyranny. "Would to God that harmony might again return! Shoulder to shoulder they went through the Revolution, hand in hand they stood round the administration of Washington, and felt his own great arm lean on them for support."

When my eyes shall be turned to behold for the last time the sun in heaven, may I not see him shining on the broken and dishonored fragments of a once glorious

Union; on States dissevered, discordant, belligerent; on a land rent with civil feuds, or drenched, it may be, in fraternal blood! Let their last feeble and lingering glance rather behold the gorgeous ensign of the republic, now known and honored throughout the earth, still full high advanced, its arms and trophies streaming in their original lustre, not a stripe erased or polluted, nor a single star obscured, bearing for its motto, no such miserable interrogatory as "What is all this worth?" nor those other words of delusion and folly, "Liberty first and Union afterwards"; but everywhere, spread all over in characters of living light, blazing on all its ample folds, as they float over the sea and over the land, and in every wind under the whole heavens, that other sentiment, dear to every true American heart—Liberty and Union, now and for ever, one and inseparable!⁸

Webster's second reply to Hayne did not reach the American public in written form until February 23, 25, and 27, when it appeared in three installments in the *National Intelligencer*. Soon it was being sold everywhere and was in greater demand than any previous congressional speech in American history. A correspondent from Jackson's home state wrote that Webster was known "in every log house" in western Tennessee as "the champion of the Union."⁹

The Hayne debate not only nationalized Webster's reputation; it gave him a base of popular support from which he might reasonably seek the presidency, and also forged the final link in the magnetic chain that bound him to his worshiping followers in New England. The speech that was powerful enough to draw plaudits from an old adversary like Madison and from competitors like Clay inspired reverence and awe among more intimate friends. One of these friends was Amos Lawrence, who wrote, "I thank you as a citizen of Massachusetts, of New England, of the United States, not only for myself but for my children."¹⁰ George Ticknor, who reviewed the first volume of Webster's speeches a year later, felt he could now explain Webster's power:

We feel as if the sources of his strength, and the mystery by which it controls us, were, in a considerable degree, interpreted. We feel that like the fabulous giant of antiquity, he gathers it from the very earth that produced him, and our sympathy and interest, therefore, are excited not less by the principle on which his power so much depends, than by the subjects and occasions on which it is so strikingly put forth. We understand better than we did before not only why we have been drawn to him, but why the attraction that carried us along, was at once so cogent and so natural.¹¹

What Ticknor seems to have sensed was that Webster had made possible a new perception of America, rooted in constitutional order and liberty, the present and future continuous with the wisdom and virtue of the past. Webster's friend William Sullivan wrote from Boston that the most valuable thing about Webster's replies to Hayne was that "they teach the citizens in general what their relation to the Federal government is," and Webster's oldest son, Fletcher, wrote to his father, "I never knew what the constitution really was, till your last short speech. I thought it was a compact between the states."¹²

What did it mean to be an American in 1830? Many of Webster's countrymen were troubled and confused by a question so fraught with implications for their own identity. Webster answered the question by demonstrating that to be an American meant to believe in the supremacy of the Constitution and the Union, a stupendous accomplishment made possible partly by his masterful talents as a communicator and partly because the depth of his convictions seemed equal to the grandeur of the subject.

Whatever calamities might befall him on other matters, on this great theme Webster's followers would always find him "independent, self-poised, steadfast." They would be able "to calculate him like a planet."¹³

The image of Daniel Webster, which had been an emerging phenomenon in the 1820s, became fixed in the minds of many Americans after 1830. Webster's name became symbolically attached to the concepts of Constitution, Union, and the wisdom and virtue of the age of Washington. He became Guardian of the nation, Defender of the Constitution, Preserver of the Union. By believing in him, thousands of Americans inside New England and out could continue to believe in their own future and the future of their country.

In a study of the "symbolic life" of Americans, William Lloyd Warner has said that symbolic heroes "release and free us, yet bind and control us, for they take us out of ourselves and permit us to identify with the ideals of our culture. The sacred ideals of godhead are never more than one step beyond: sometimes they are immediate and present, for in human history heroes often become gods." It was Daniel Webster's destiny to become godlike while he lived, but in the end this was probably a dubious blessing, for, as Warner has also observed, "a champion in America . . . must be forever on his guard to be more the common man than champion, lest his followers look for new Davids to slay him."¹⁴

The Davids in American political history have always outnumbered the Goliaths, and in this instance they inevitably tried to cut Webster down to size. Even if he had been as selfless as a saint, Webster would have had trouble maintaining the exalted image he projected as a symbolic leader. And a saint Webster certainly was not. Few American leaders have had a greater appetite for the good things of life. Toward the end of his life, the Webster belly had become as much a national landmark as the great dome surmounting it. Contemptuous of Spartan ways, the Guardian bragged openly about his knowledge of good food and drink. Eventually, people said he drank too much, even in public—and they were sometimes right. They said he pursued women, a harder matter to judge, but there were thousands of intelligent Americans who never doubted it. Above all, Webster seemed to give the lie to his superhuman reputation by his incredible improvidence with money. Perhaps the highest-paid lawyer in the country, he made a fortune of his own as a relatively young man and took at least another fortune in gifts from his constituents. How much he accumulated in other ways from his career in public service was a matter of dark speculation for more than twenty years. Despite these munificent sources of income, he could never pay his debts; yet at the crest of his career, Webster was put before the people as the nation's greatest fiscal expert. When he died, even his closest friends said that to live off other people's money had become a governing principle in his life.¹⁵

After his tenure as secretary of state in the Tyler administration, Webster was accused of misusing public funds. A House committee exonerated him, but not before his enemies had done their worst. While Whig legislators lavished praise on the great man's statesmanship, Democrats asked if it was true that Webster's constituents had raised a purse of \$100,000 for him. Such information might be useful to have, they said, before the debate on the tariff began. And when Whig supporters insisted on a genteel line of defense by comparing Webster to Washington, the going got rougher. "If he is paid, what is it for?" demanded William Yancey, the Democratic congressman from Alabama. Perhaps, Yancey suggested, the Massachusetts senator had "two characters which, Proteus-like, he can assume as his interests or necessities demand—

the God-like and the Hell-like—the ‘God-like Daniel’ and *Black Dan*.”¹⁶

By 1850, the issue that had begun to swallow up all others in the Congress involved the introduction of slavery into the new territories in the Southwest which had been acquired in the Mexican War. The antislavery movement, still unborn when Webster had debated Hayne twenty years earlier, had not only penetrated the two major parties but had been able to form a third—the Free Soil party, which had held the balance of power in the presidential election of 1848. The pressure on senators and representatives from the free states to keep slavery out of California and New Mexico was intense, while at the same time southern Democrats under the aging Calhoun predicted anarchy, civil war, and widespread disaster if the equal balance of slave and free states in effect since 1820 were to be destroyed. There was more at issue with southern politicians, however, than the matter of political balance. Not only had they been suffering for almost two decades under an abolitionist onslaught of propaganda and petitions, but their constituents were finding it increasingly difficult to reclaim their property when slaves sought refuge in the North. The situation was crying out for compromise when Henry Clay, with the foreknowledge and support of Webster, laid a complex series of proposals before the Senate which, among other things, were designed to appease the North by admitting California as a free state and to reassure the South by making it a federal offense to harbor fugitive slaves.

It was expected that under Calhoun’s influence many southern states would oppose the measure but that followers of Clay and Webster in the North and West would carry the day. Supporters of the compromise relied heavily on Webster to reassure southern moderates by demonstrating that abolitionists, who despised the proposed Fugitive Slave Law, did not speak for the entire North. Webster advocated in favor of the compromise on March 7, 1950. The Senate was packed with visitors when he began to speak.

Mr. President—I wish to speak today not as a Massachusetts man, nor as a Northern man, but as an American, and a member of the Senate of the United States. . . . I have a part to act, not for my own security or safety, for I am looking out for no fragment upon which to float away from the wreck, if wreck there must be, but for the good of the whole, and the preservation of all. . . . I speak today for the preservation of the Union: “Hear me for my cause.”¹⁷

Webster’s cause was reconciliation. In the 1820s he had tried to bind his listeners to an earlier generation of patriots and to a common, heroic past. Now he tried to get them to understand how slavery had always been a part of that past and why it had expanded along with the new nation. He pointed out that slavery had existed in the world for centuries and had only recently fallen under disapprobation. It had been a fact of life when the Union was formed. The founders, who had protected it in the Constitution, had expected it to gradually disappear; but in the South, unexpected changes had made large-scale cotton production profitable, and slavery had increased until most Southerners had come to believe that their prosperity, even their survival, depended on it. In the North, circumstances were quite different. There had been few slaves in the beginning and no economic incentives to keep them. It was natural for Northerners to hope and work for the abolition of slavery, but, unhappily for national unity, this movement had begun to attract religiously motivated Northerners at the same time that Southerners, no less religious than their northern neighbors, were beginning to find slavery an essential part of their way of life, not only in the present

but for the foreseeable future.

Webster did not believe that the possibility of extending slavery into the southwestern territories warranted serious debate. Climate and geography would keep plantation agriculture out of that part of the country forever. The real question was not whether slavery would move westward but whether or not slaveholding citizens would be allowed to enjoy their constitutionally guaranteed property rights—that is, whether they had a right to expect Northerners to obey their constitutional obligation to return fugitive slaves. Several states, including Massachusetts, had passed Personal Liberty Laws, which created legal obstacles to the return of fugitives and provided the Underground Railroad with a kind of official legitimacy. Most of the people in Massachusetts who supported this law had also supported Webster, but he met the issue head on. “I put it to all the sober and sound minds of the North,” he asked, lumping antislavery activists and politicians together, “what right have they in their legislative or any other capacity, to endeavor to get round this Constitution, to embarrass the free exercise of the rights secured by the Constitution to the persons whose slaves escaped from them? None at all, none at all. Neither in the forum of conscience, nor before the face of the Constitution.” Dismissing abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips with a paragraph, Webster claimed that they had agitated for twenty years and “produced nothing good or valuable.” Their one accomplishment had been to create a great counterreaction and thus “not to set free, but to bind faster, the slave population of the South.”¹⁸

The unspoken premise upon which Webster based his remarks on slavery and his criticism of the abolitionists was that social change takes place slowly and is determined more by culture (“the mysterious hand of Providence”) than by policy. Therefore, he was more sympathetic toward the slaveholders whose place in history tied them to slavery than toward the passionate northern philanthropists who sought to impose their own convictions upon the culture.

They deal with morals as with mathematics; and they think what is right may be distinguished from what is wrong with the precision of an algebraic equation. . . . They are impatient men; too impatient always to give heed to St. Paul, that we are not to “do evil that good may come”; too impatient to wait for the slow progress of moral causes in the improvement of mankind.¹⁹

The separate laws that became known as the Compromise of 1850 were not signed until September of that year. In the interim, Webster became secretary of state again, this time under Millard Fillmore, and was able to add his weight as the president’s chief adviser to the already considerable influence he had exerted for the legislation in the Senate. Supporters of the compromise in Washington were jubilant and formed a torchlight parade that stopped at Webster’s door. He appeared in his dressing gown, supported by two friends. His legs were wobbling but his tongue was ready, and after one false start, he quoted Shakespeare: “Now is the winter of our discontent/Made glorious summer by this son of York.”²⁰ A few days later, in a less exalted mood, he said simply to a friend, “It is over. My part is acted and I am satisfied.”²¹

He was wrong. It was true that he had given a momentous speech and had helped to resolve a national crisis. He had a right to be proud of that. But it was not over. In misjudging the culture of New England, he had reinforced the darker image of Daniel Webster, which would be a dramatic and highly controversial part of his historical character forever.

In voting for what he called the “settlement” in 1850 (he disliked the implications of the word *compromise*), Webster was shifting his power base. He would always retain a hard core of support in Massachusetts but henceforth would be looking to southern Whigs and northern Democrats to keep his presidential hopes alive. This strategy had seemed effective enough when Webster was given the top cabinet position in Fillmore’s administration, but it also had the effect of isolating him at home. Webster’s closest friends were dismayed by his support of the Fugitive Slave Law and wondered if he had studied the bill, which was so loaded against anyone accused of being a fugitive that it posed a genuine threat to any free black living outside the South. Although Boston Whigs agreed that it was madness for a Massachusetts man to support such a bill, none of them had courage enough to say so to Webster.

Meanwhile, the abolitionists, untroubled by any feelings of obligation toward Webster, organized to resist the law. A vigilance committee in Boston drove two slave catchers out of the city and rescued a fugitive being held in the Court House. Such incidents proved a great embarrassment to Webster, because at this time it was the secretary of state rather than the attorney general who was responsible for administering the federal courts. Webster knew that the southern Whigs in Congress and in Fillmore’s cabinet were watching him closely, and he was determined that Bostonians would obey the law. When the president asked whether federal troops should be used, Webster was emphatically affirmative. “There must be no flinching, nor doubt, nor hesitation. The thing must be done as mildly and quietly as possible, but it must be done.” This was fantasy, of course. There is no mild, quiet way in a democratic society to enforce a law on an unwilling community. Webster might reassure the president by saying there were “thousands of young men in Massachusetts ready to help enforce fugitive slave warrants,” but that was the view from Washington; the secretary of state’s friends in Boston knew better.²²

In April 1851, a young mulatto named Thomas Sims, claimed by a man in Georgia, was arrested on a fugitive slave warrant. He was held in the Boston Court House, which was surrounded by an iron chain and guarded by three hundred policemen, with a pack of bloodhounds held in readiness nearby. This was not as mild and quiet an enforcement of the law as Webster might have liked, but at least the vigilance committee was thwarted. Webster came to Boston in person to make sure there were no slip-ups. Under the new law, Sims’s fate would be decided by a commissioner rather than a trial by jury. Although the commissioner had not yet made his decision, Webster assured the president that “the proofs are clear and the Marshall will move south with him on Friday.”²³ That is the way it worked out. On April 13, a band of policemen marched Sims to the wharf, and he boarded a ship bound for Savannah, where Georgian authorities celebrated his return by having him publicly whipped. Three days later, Webster addressed a meeting at Bowdoin Square in Boston. “Gentlemen,” he said, “let me congratulate you and ask you to congratulate me, that the events of the last year or two have placed us under better auspices; we see clearer and breathe freer . . . Every citizen feels that he is a man.”²⁴

The reason Webster spoke at Bowdoin Square rather than in Faneuil Hall was that the board of aldermen refused to let the hall be used for a meeting whose purpose was to honor Webster for sending a fugitive slave back to Georgia. Although the aldermen could hardly be grouped with the “insane” abolitionists he was regularly denouncing, Webster refused to get the message. In his speeches that spring, he ridiculed the notion that a citizen’s “honor” might force him to break the law, and he condemned all

abolitionists as traitors. When reminded of the “higher law” that reformers appealed to, he demanded to know how high that law was—was it higher than the Blue Ridge—higher than the Alleghenies?²⁵

Daniel Webster was riding the last great peak of his career, close to the seat of power, confident that he was routing the forces of disunion in 1851, just as he had routed Robert Hayne in 1830. He was not entirely wrong. Most Americans were unwilling to see the Union break up over slavery, and the big interests in the country—the merchants and manufacturers in the North and the big planters in the South—were decidedly in favor of having the laws obeyed and the agitation over fugitive slaves ended. For them, Webster’s behavior at midcentury was still in the godlike tradition, but for a growing number of others, especially in New England, Webster had fallen like Lucifer: one of the greatest men God ever sent, Wendell Phillips said, to “let the devil buy.”²⁶

The denigration of Daniel Webster at the hands of New England reformers and intellectuals after 1850 has been described by historians more than it has been explained. It is important to understand that most of the men who turned on him with such ferocity had been his disciples twenty years earlier. “Did men honor Daniel Webster?” asked Theodore Parker, Boston’s most famous abolitionist minister. “So did I. I was a boy ten years old when he stood at Plymouth Rock, and never shall I forget how his clarion words rang in my boyish heart.” But Webster fell. Great men had fallen in the past, said Parker, “but it was nothing to the fall of Webster. The Anglo-Saxon race never knew such a terrible and calamitous ruin. His downfall shook the continent. Truth fell prostrate in the streets.”²⁷ John Greenleaf Whittier, who had once compared the futility of ordinary politicians attacking Webster to that of tomcats trying to bring down an eagle or mice nibbling at the heels of an elephant, now wrote,

Of all we loved and honored, naught
Save power remains:
A fallen angel’s pride of thought,
Still strong in chains.
All else is gone; from those great eyes
The soul has fled:
When faith is lost, when honor dies,
The man is dead!²⁸

Perhaps the saddest of all his Massachusetts critics was Ralph Waldo Emerson, who had been watching Webster’s progress for thirty years. After Bunker Hill, Emerson had simply observed that Webster was as impressive as the monument. Upon reading the reply to Hayne, Emerson had judged Webster’s performance as a moral achievement “second only to the praise of Godliness.”²⁹ But after March 7, 1850, Emerson said that when Webster used the word *liberty*, it sounded like the word *love* in the mouth of a whore. The great political moralist of the 1820s, the man who once had given voice to the genius of the culture, had been lost, for Emerson, to the political opportunism of the 1850s. In 1829, the great idea in the culture had been Union. In 1850, the great idea was freedom—“the idea of emancipation”—and Webster was squandering his powers to squelch it. “The eulogies of liberty in his writing,” Emerson sorrowfully concluded, now sounded as false as they would from a “Metternich or Talleyrand. This is inevitable from his constitution. All the drops of his blood have eyes that look downward.”³⁰

It was Webster's great misfortune that the American Davids who assaulted his "godlikeness" were among the most eloquent speakers and writers of their generation. Their words were bound to stick, and once New Englanders accepted that Webster had finally come down on the immoral side of the slavery issue, it was easy for them to believe that the other stories so damaging to his character must have been true. Thus the mythology of Black Dan and the hell-like character of Daniel Webster has come down to us alongside the myth of the Godlike Man.

Webster would have known instinctively what Moynihan meant about the central truth of conservatism, and few Americans have played the conservative role in public life better than he did. But there are times when the culture changes, when traditional values and institutions are no longer adequate to the moral and political demands of the present, when something new is demanded to save the culture from itself. Webster was not up to that challenge in 1850, but neither was any other leading American politician. When the crisis could no longer be postponed and the culture had to be saved, Webster would be dead but not forgotten. When the war came, Lincoln would call on Americans whose sense of nationalism had been sharpened by Webster's rhetoric and whose moral sense had been sharpened by the abolitionists, and he would ask them to turn civil war into a victory for emancipation and union. 🍌

Notes

1. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Family and Nation* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), 190.
2. This remark about Daniel Webster is attributed to George S. Hillard; cited in S. P. Lyman, *The Public and Private Life of Daniel Webster*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Harper and Brothers, 1852).
3. Ibid., 217; Nelson Singer and H. S. Drayton, *Heads and Faces and How to Study Them* (New York: Fowler and Wells Co., 1892), 47, 52.
4. Hugh Duncan, *Symbols in Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 96.
5. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 2 (New York: Vintage Books, 1945), 144. For an example of modern historical scholarship on the same theme, see Fred Somkin, *Unquiet Eagle: Memory and Desire in the Idea of American Freedom, 1815–1860* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1967).
6. George Ticknor, *Life, Letters, and Journals of George Ticknor*, vol. 1, ed. George S. Hillard, assisted by Mrs. Ticknor and her eldest daughter (Boston: J. R. Osgood and Co., 1876), 328ff.
7. The account of the Hayne debate which follows is taken from Irving H. Bartlett, *Daniel Webster* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1978), 119–21.
8. Daniel Webster, *The Writings and Speeches of Daniel Webster*, vol. 6 (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1903), 66, 68, 49, 75.
9. A. M. Hughes to Daniel Webster, 28 April 1830, *Microfilm Edition of the Papers of Daniel Webster*, 8722, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1971. Sponsored in part by the National Historical Publications Commission and carried to completion under the editorship of Charles M. Wiltse. The project originated at Dartmouth College under the direction of Edward Connery Lathem.
10. Amos Lawrence to Daniel Webster, 3 March 1830, in Webster, *Writings and Speeches*, vol. 17, 489.

11. George Ticknor, "Webster's Speeches," *American Quarterly Review* (June 1831).
12. William Sullivan to Daniel Webster, 23 March 1830, in Charles M. Wiltse, ed., *The Papers of Daniel Webster*, vol. 3, 37, a project of the Dartmouth College Library, 1967; Daniel Fletcher Webster to Daniel Webster, 23 March 1830, in *ibid.*, 39.
13. Daniel Webster, *The Life, Eulogy, and Great Orations of Daniel Webster* (Rochester, N.Y.: W. M. Hayward & Co., 1854), 6.
14. William Lloyd Warner, *The Living and the Dead: A Study of the Symbolic Life of Americans* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 90, 97.
15. Bartlett, *Daniel Webster*, chap. 15.
16. William Yancey, *Congressional Globe*, 10 April 1846, 652.
17. Webster, *Writings and Speeches*, vol. 10, 57.
18. *Ibid.*, 87.
19. *Ibid.*, 64.
20. Claude Moore Fuess, *Daniel Webster*, vol. 2 (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1930), 240.
21. Daniel Webster to Peter Harvey, 10 Sept. 1850, in Webster, *Writings and Speeches*, vol. 18, 385.
22. Daniel Webster to President Millard Fillmore, 29 Oct. 1850, *Microfilm Edition*, 31562.
23. Daniel Webster to President Millard Fillmore, 9 April 1851, in Webster, *Writings and Speeches*, vol. 16, 605.
24. *Ibid.*, vol. 13, 406.
25. *Ibid.*, 408–35.
26. Wendell Phillips, *Speeches and Lectures* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1863), 615.
27. Theodore Parker, *A Discourse Occasioned by the Death of Daniel Webster* (Boston: B. B. Mussey and Co., 1853), 75.
28. John Greenleaf Whittier, "Ichabod," stanzas 7 and 8, in John Pollard, *John Greenleaf Whittier: Friend of Man* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949), 82.
29. William Gilman and Alfred Ferguson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 3 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963), 225.
30. *Ibid.*, 202–4.