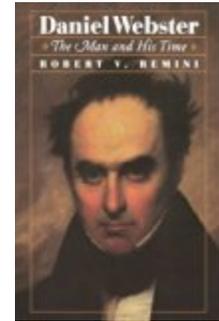


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert Remini. *Daniel Webster: The Man and His Times*. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997. vi + 796 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-393-04552-9.

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## An Unabridged Webster

For those familiar with the middle period of American historiography, the best and simplest review of this book requires me to say only that Professor Remini has done it again. His life and times of the Godlike Daniel fully matches his previous masterly lives of Andrew Jackson and Henry Clay in its completeness, the vividness of his writing, and soundness of his judgments. While no work of history can be pronounced as the final word, these three biographies will stand as definitive well into the future, together constituting a great triumvirate of American biography.

Remini makes full use of the sources relating directly to Webster and ably synthesizes relevant scholarship by others. His deep knowledge of the period enables Remini deftly to provide adequate context for Webster's actions, but without at any time losing sight of his subject. Not surprisingly, given the absence of newly unearthed Webster materials, there are no surprises concerning the most significant facts and events of Webster's life (although many unfamiliar, often fascinating, details) or any novel interpretations of those facts and events. The greatest strength of this biography lies rather in its comprehensiveness: all aspects of Webster's life, personal as well as public, are laid bare, analyzed, and appraised, warts and all. This is Webster in his entirety.

For forty years, from his election to Congress in 1812 until his death in 1852, Webster was a major figure and force in American national life, but not primarily because of the status conferred by the positions he held as senator, Secretary of State, constitutional lawyer, party

leader, and presidential candidate. These acquired significance mainly because he used them to forge and popularize a philosophy of government that provided the rationale for the triumphant nationalism he never lived to witness. Webster's enduring importance flows from his more amorphous, linked roles as interpreter of the Constitution, champion of the Union, and expounder of American destiny, which included his warm embrace of the economic and social changes associated with the market revolution.

Webster possessed formidable talents: intelligence, a prodigious memory, oratorical skills of the highest order which combined with his knowledge of the law, his energy, and ambition fitted him for political greatness. Yet Remini makes it clear that for all his abilities, the respect he commanded from all, and the adoration of many, Webster was seriously flawed as a leader. His repeated bids for the presidency fell pathetically flat, rejected time and again even for his own party's nomination. He was a poor political organizer and lacked a firm grasp of political realities, believing that somehow the prize could be won on the basis of personal brilliance. Most damning, however, was his disdain for the masses. Born a Federalist, he remained one in attitude all of his life, "a thoroughgoing elitist and he reveled in it" (p. 352). He was simply out of touch with the democratic spirit of the age. And even among his friends he had "a reputation for deceit and duplicity" (p. 575). Still, he would have become president had his pride not prevented him from turning down the Whig vice-presidential nomination in 1840 and 1848 on tickets headed by, respectively, William Henry

Harrison and Zachary Taylor, men he considered his inferiors (as they were).

Webster also had more personal failings that would have been politically fatal had they been fully exposed (rather than just rumored) as they undoubtedly would be today. Although he made enormous sums of money as a lawyer, he was unbelievably careless with money. He either borrowed huge sums of money (which he felt no obligation to repay), much of it from the Bank of the United States, or accepted large gifts from time to time from rich men whose interests he championed in Congress. As Secretary of State, he sold diplomatic appointments for personal gain. While the concept of conflict of interest existed only in rudimentary form in the mid-nineteenth century, his egregious mixture of public and private business clearly crossed such line as then existed. His sexual life also could not have survived scrutiny by today's media as he very likely had a long-term mistress and possibly short-term liaisons with others (including African-American women) that may have produced offspring. One tale of sexual assault committed while Secretary of State did make it into the newspapers, although never verified. Finally, his alcoholism could not have remained hidden as it largely did then, despite occasionally embarrassing public displays of intoxication.

As a representative and senator, Webster authored no important legislation. The Webster-Ashburton Treaty (1846) with England and the Treaty of Wanghia (1844) with China, his most important accomplishments as Secretary of State, do not qualify him for diplomatic immortality, especially in view of his bungling of a number of other negotiations. As a party leader, he was clearly overshadowed by Henry Clay, while Andrew Jackson obviously better embodied the democratic ethos of the era. Yet, on balance, Remini firmly believes Webster transcended his political as well as his personal shortcomings: "No one else at the time could articulate the history of the United States or its certain and monumental destiny that Americans felt at the time. No one could explain its institutional life or the pride the American people took in what they and their forbears had accomplished since the arrival of English settlers on these shores. The lyricism and beauty of his language when describing nature or the marvels of his country sometimes approached genuine literature" (p. 9). It is through his orations that Webster "still lives" (p. 764).

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