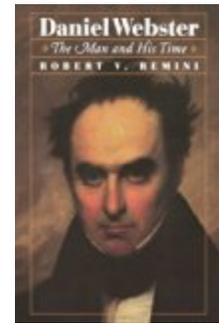


H-Net Reviews

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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Defender of the Union

Robert Remini has done it again. For the third time in twenty years, he has produced a first-rate biography of one of the nation's early nineteenth century leading political figures. With his book on the life of Daniel Webster, Remini matches the breadth, depth, and narrative power of earlier biographies on Andrew Jackson and Henry Clay,[1] securing his place as one of the preeminent historians of the early-middle period.

Although there is probably little new in Remini's account of Webster, the genius lies in the book's comprehensiveness—that is, in the fact that all portions of Webster's life are laid open for analysis and scrutiny. Here Remini does not pull any punches: he tells the good with the bad and leaves it to the reader to make the final judgement about Webster's moral and political character. In doing so, he rarely departs from the narrative, except to tell an anecdote or provide context that is relevant to the story. When he strays, he does not go too far: Webster is always at the center of his account, even when it seems as though Remini has lost his way.

From the time he first entered public life in 1812 until his death in 1852, Webster was a *tour de force* in American political circles. During his forty years in national politics Webster served in the House of Representatives for ten, the Senate for nineteen, and held the office of Secretary of State under three presidents. During the early years of his political career Webster was a Federalist. When the War of 1812 began (and the Federalist party disintegrated), he then became a National Republican for a short period, before joining the Whig party for

the remaining part of his career. From 1836 to 1852 Webster lobbied hard for the Whig nomination for president, but despite his fame as a statesmen and party leader, he never succeeded in winning the nomination (his old rival Henry Clay always had the edge on him). He came close in 1836 when the Whigs supported three regional candidates, hoping to deny Democratic nominee Martin Van Buren an electoral majority and thus throw the election into the House of Representatives, but that strategy backfired and Webster's only real chance to be elected president went up in flames.

In an era when the forces of democracy were enveloping the Jeffersonian elitism of an earlier age, Webster could not bring himself to support the new political climate. It was this trait that kept him from the presidency. Quite simply "he was not a man of the people," and the people knew it (p. 451). Instead, "he was a thoroughgoing elitist" (p. 352) who "was disconnected from his own age" (p. 451). Webster had never renounced the Federalist belief "that the educated and wealthy should guide the nation's future direction" and that posture, Remini observes, left him "out of touch with the democratic surge that swept the nation during the decades preceding the Civil War" (p. 353).

As he knew so well, Webster belonged to a bygone era. But his elitism hurt him in other ways too. Webster could have been president if he would have accepted William Henry Harrison's invitation as running mate in the 1840 election, but he spurned the idea of being vice president to a man he thought was his inferior. He

politely declined, and as a result missed the opportunity to slide into the president's chair when Harrison, who emerged victorious in the election, died after only a month in office. With that occurrence, Remini writes, Webster blew "the prize he so desperately craved," falling victim to "his all-consuming pride" (p. 740).

This elitism also spilled over into other facets of his political career. Because of Webster's extravagant tastes (he spent enormous sums of money on wine, boats, and improvements to his Marshfield estate), he never had any money in his pocket. He was a poor money manager, who always seemed to spend more than he made. Consequently, Webster relied on wealthy friends for loans to sustain his spendthrift lifestyle, which made him dependent upon monied interests—a phenomenon that led his enemies to call him "Black Dan." This moniker also applied to other phases of his life. He was often deceitful to some of his closest friends. All that mattered to him, Remini notes, was "whatever served his own self-interest" (p. 575). Women, too, were a weak spot with Webster, which added yet another facet to the "Black Dan" image. Through the years Webster had several mistresses, and at least on one occasion he was accused of sexual assault. Finally, he drank excessively, and on more than one occurrence ventured out in public while intoxicated. This led some of his most ardent detractors to conclude that Webster was no longer fit for public office.

Despite his foibles, however, there were many who remained loyal to Webster, calling him "Godlike Dan." This sobriquet illustrated the other side of the man's dual personality, one that emphasized a "heroic ... truth-seeking, and statesmanlike" quality (p. 613). It was a side exhibited in the countless orations and Senate speeches he gave during his long and distinguished career as a public servant. Remini tells us that Webster's orations in the 1820s, honoring the anniversaries of the landing at Plymouth and the Battle of Bunker Hill and commemorating the deaths of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, provided Americans with the first history of "their origins as a nation" (p. 187). It was probably in his Senate speeches, Remini asserts, where Webster's words left the most enduring impressions on our nation's memory. During the height of the succession crisis he gave two powerful speeches that earned him a reputation as defender of the Union. The first came as a second reply to Senator Robert Hayne of South Carolina in 1830, where Webster emphasized the indissoluble nature of the government, and the second, given in response to the Compromise of 1850, stressed the need for compromise and reconciliation to preserve the Union. The Hayne reply

was particularly impressive because it spelled out in clear and unmistakable language that the power of government resided not with the states but with the people. Abraham Lincoln was so impressed by this line of reasoning that he called it "the grandest specimen of American oratory" (p. 331). Lincoln later included some of the Hayne reply in his own famous "House Divided" speech.

Webster was also "Godlike" in other ways. He was unarguably the best constitutional scholar of his generation and probably had more influence on the powerful Marshall Court than any lawyer of his time. Of the 223 cases he argued before the Supreme Court, he won about half of them. But, even more, Webster played a crucial role in eight of the most celebrated constitutional cases decided by the Court between 1801 and 1824. In many of these—particularly in *Dartmouth College v. Woodward* (1819) and *Gibbons v. Ogden* (1824)—the "Supreme Court handed down decisions based largely on Webster's arguments" (p. 208). Marshall patterned some of his Court decisions after Webster's briefs, and Webster played a crucial role in helping many of the justices interpret matters of constitutional law. It was for these reasons, Remini affirms, that "many people began calling him the Great Expounder of the Constitution" (p. 162).

Yet, for all that is admirable, Remini is quick to note that Webster had serious problems as a party leader and politician. He produced not one significant piece of legislation as a member of the Congress or Senate, and his record as Secretary of State fares even worse. He botched a number of important negotiations and his greatest accomplishment, the Webster-Ashburton Treaty (1842), was marred by corruption and scandal. There is also evidence that Webster took bribes while in public office and sold diplomatic appointments for private gain, both taboos even by nineteenth-century standards. However, whether "men hated or admired him," Remini writes, "all agreed on the majesty of his oratory, the immensity of his intellectual powers, and the primacy of his constitutional knowledge" (p. 9).

Remini's account is sure to be the definitive work for some time to come. His writing style is engaging, his research exceptional, and anecdotes seem to always come at the right moment. The author makes extensive use of the Webster papers and draws on much of the relevant secondary literature, placing Webster in the context of the time. Indeed, the real strength of the book lies in its narrative power. Remini has the rare gift of being able to capture virtually all phases of his subject's life in an interesting and coherent fashion. From Webster as statesman,

lawyer, presidential hopeful, husband, father, and friend, Remini leaves no stone unturned. He is especially adept at explaining the nuances of Webster's complex and enigmatic personality, and in this respect his account can be compared to Doris Kearns Goodwin's study of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt and David Herbert Donald's treatment of Abraham Lincoln, both of whom display a similar talent in their work.[2]

More attention, however, could have been devoted to Webster's role in the market revolution. Remini writes that Webster played an important role in structuring economic and social changes after the War of 1812, but he does not pursue the theme further. Nor does he provide a real sense of Webster's relationship with the "common man," although he makes it clear that there was something to it. Finally, Remini misreads Webster's influence on the Supreme Court. He writes that Marshall "came under the spell of Websterian eloquence" (p. 117), but the truth of the matter is that Marshall found Webster's arguments compelling because both men already saw eye-to-eye on most constitutional issues. These criticisms notwithstanding, this is an impressive body of scholar-

ship. It will be the starting point for all future Webster biographers.

Notes:

[1]. In the last twenty years Remini has had three books published on Andrew Jackson: *Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Empire, 1767-1821* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), *Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Freedom, 1822-1832* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), *Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Democracy, 1833-1845* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984). For Clay, see *Henry Clay: Statesmen of the Union* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991).

[2]. Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II* (New York and London: Simon & Schuster, 1994); Donald, *Lincoln* (New York and London: Simon & Schuster, 1995).

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