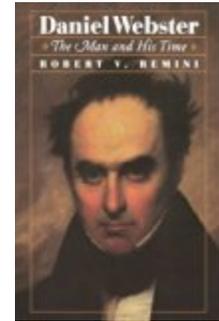


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Robert Remini. *Daniel Webster: The Man and His Times*. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997. vi + 796 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-393-04552-9.

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The Voice of (Jacksonian) America

Adam Gopnik recently commented on a puzzling paradox. On the one hand, life moves at an ever more rapid pace. This is the era of Nasdaq, day trading, the new new thing, and dazzling if not dizzying technological feats. Yet at the same time, there is a profusion of near three-hour movies and ample-sized books. This “attention-surplus syndrome” makes length, not brevity, the “new chic.” Bearing witness to Gopnik’s point, Robert V. Remini contributes a one-volume, 750-page reconstruction of Daniel Webster’s life “in the context of his own time” (p. 9).

Webster was a central figure of the early Republic, an imposing presence who constituted, alongside Henry Clay and John C. Calhoun, the Whig party’s Great Triumvirate. As a political leader, lawyer, orator, diplomat, statesman, and constitutional explicator, Webster figured prominently in the major public concerns and developments of his age: nationalism and sectionalism, industrialization and the advance of enterprise, the advent of democratic and party politics, and the enhanced power and sway of the Supreme Court. The United States of Webster’s lifetime pursued a distinctive direction from that of the previous, Revolutionary generation, and whether he used his energies to further or to resist these changes, Daniel Webster was a force to be reckoned with.

Webster’s distinguished career has not been overlooked by historians, of course. Richard N. Current, Robert F. Dalzell, Jr., Sydney Nathans, Norman D. Brown, and Merrill D. Peterson, among others, have written ex-

cellent studies of Webster, and in 1978, Irving H. Bartlett published a compelling portrait of the public and private Webster in his *Daniel Webster*. For professional historians, therefore, Remini’s intention “to remind” readers that Webster was “a truly major figure in the history of this nation” may not seem entirely justified, but the case may well be different outside academia. And even for specialists, Remini’s thoroughness and scope make this work an essential resource on Webster and the indispensable, standard biography.

Remini’s previous biographies of Andrew Jackson and Henry Clay demonstrated his affinity for lively prose, dramatic incident, and entertaining anecdote. In the multivolume, award-winning Jackson study, subject matter and style meshed harmoniously. Indeed, it was easy to overlook the enormous erudition and scholarship behind Remini’s bold interpretive assertions and dramatic presentation. In *Daniel Webster*, Remini aims “to enliven” the text with incident and anecdote, but his effort is somewhat more strained. Webster’s oratory may have been majestic, but its “florid language...historical and classical allusions, and...slower tempo” do not evoke the excitement of Jackson’s action-packed career (p. 9). There is only so much drama that can be infused into oratory and constitutional disputation.

While this is for the most part a sympathetic account, Remini is too expert a biographer not to appreciate Webster’s flaws. Indeed, he acknowledges that his research made him appreciate why so many contemporaries disliked Daniel Webster. To be sure, Jackson and Clay had

their detractors and their personal defects. But Webster was different. He not only failed to elicit the enthusiasm and personal devotion that Jackson and Clay received from their followers, but his character suffered from deeper flaws. Remini contrasts this “Black Dan,” the dark side of Webster, to that of the “Godlike Daniel,” the multi-talented, awe-inspiring orator, lawyer, and constitutionalist. Although the notion of a Janus-faced Webster is not new, Remini abundantly documents Webster’s blemishes, personal and political. His worst failing, according to Remini, was that “he was untrustworthy, particularly when it came to money or the demands of his ambition.” He shamelessly used people for personal enrichment and political advancement. John Quincy Adams deftly limned the problem: Webster had a “rotten heart” (p. 8).

Much of Webster’s character and behavior can be traced to his early life. “Permanently scarred” by a hardscrabble childhood, Webster greedily sought wealth and the comforts and influence that came with it. He curried favor with those who could provide him with those advantages (p. 67). Although Remini emphasizes Webster’s old-fashioned attitudes regarding his society’s democratic political culture, the grasping quality of Webster’s spendthrift and speculative behavior, as well as his delight in material possessions, seem entirely at home in nineteenth-century America. His was not the gentry-like self-indulgence of Thomas Jefferson. On one occasion, as secretary of state, Webster accepted a loan from a wealthy Philadelphia merchant, who was then appointed to a diplomatic post in Denmark. Later, when he wished to return to the Senate, Webster let it be known that his service was contingent upon the establishment of suitable financial arrangements by wealthy backers. In the words of one participant to this subscription fund, Webster was “a sort of public property” (p. 601). It was in character that, in the midst of the Bank War, Webster saw nothing inappropriate in requesting that his retainer from the Bank be renewed. Even Nicholas Biddle, the bank’s sometimes incautious president, appreciated the indelicacy of Webster’s timing, though not, it should be said, the request itself. In short, along with the heroic, statesmanlike, Godlike Daniel, there co-existed the “untrustworthy, power-and money-mad” Black Dan (pp. 402-3, 613).

Toward the end of his life, the consequences of Webster’s affection for food and wine became evident. In addition to a protuberant belly, he developed cirrhosis of the liver. An observer, with unintended pun, remarked that Webster had been “too free a liver.” Remini concludes that Webster’s heavy drinking shortened his life

“dramatically” (p. 508). Although a Whig spokesman and luminary, Webster lacked the religious mooring and self-discipline of so many New England Whigs, a quality that likely made him insensitive to the moral dimensions of the plight of fugitive slaves and the growth of a vigorous anti-slavery sentiment in the North.

Remini’s *Daniel Webster* is very much a traditional life-and-times biography, providing comprehensive coverage of the private and public affairs of a man of striking versatility and accomplishment. The outline of Webster’s career is familiar. Born in 1782 on a farm in Salisbury, New Hampshire, to respectable and supportive, though not affluent parents, the sickly Webster early revealed a bent for reading and a phenomenal memory to retain information. Possessed of a “ferocious ambition,” Webster attended and graduated from Dartmouth, and then turned to law, not so much because he loved it – his preference was for history and literature – but because it was the career best suited for gaining recognition, prominence, and wealth (p. 33).

Law shaded into politics, which meant Federalist politics, and he rapidly progressed in both activities. In 1812, Webster was elected one of New Hampshire’s congressmen, and he first made his political mark seeking to embarrass the Republican administration’s foreign policy. In light of Webster’s later association with “nationalism,” a theme that Remini emphasizes, Webster’s New England provincialism was evident not only in his attempt to hold the Republican party accountable for the War of 1812, but in his opposition to legislative expressions of post-war national republicanism, such as the chartering of the second national bank and the protective tariff of 1816.

To be sure, as Remini notes, by the mid-1820s, Webster had swung over and committed himself to the intensification of national feeling. In Remini’s account, Webster would henceforth speak “as an American who cared first and foremost about the good of the entire country – not Massachusetts and not New England” (p. 244). Yet it remains questionable that Webster ever lost his association with localism and narrow regional advantage. His ringing affirmations of constitutional and federal authority seem never to have convinced people outside New England that he spoke for their concerns.

“Nationalism” and Massachusetts seemed too closely conjoined in Webster to be analytically or emotionally severed. As Remini acknowledges, the original resolution that precipitated the famous Webster-Hayne debate gave him both “the opportunity to capitalize on the growing sense of nationalism in the country and defend the

honor and character of New England” (p. 321). Webster’s ringing affirmation, “Liberty and Union, now and for ever, one and inseparable,” may have constituted his “supreme gift to the American people,” but Webster never seemed to escape the judgment that “nationalism” all too conveniently served New England’s interests. He never created a popular base in the West or South, for example. Remini recognizes that nationalism is a slippery analytical construct, but his discussion of this ambiguity in Webster’s career is too brief and largely relegated to a footnote (p. 329n).

Once elected to Congress, Webster moved from the relative backwater of New Hampshire to Boston, the social and economic hub of New England. His legal reputation soared as he argued cases before the Supreme Court. So did his reputation for masterful oratory. Success followed success, and Remini adroitly relates Webster’s expanding fame and growing political and legal influence. There is a detailed account, for example, of Webster’s plotting and negotiation to line up Federalist support for John Quincy Adams during the contested presidential election of 1824-1825. Although Henry Clay’s responsibility for Adams’s victory in the House of Representatives has received the greatest historical scrutiny, Remini rightly establishes that Adams’s selection was due in no small measure to Webster’s efforts.

Webster’s election to the Senate in 1827 provided him with a platform to lead the opposition to Andrew Jackson and the Democratic party, pronounce constitutional doctrine, and pursue his ambition to occupy the White House. The leading events of the 1830s – the Bank War, nullification, Indian policy, the creation of the Whig party – all receive full treatment. Webster’s growing acclaim and influence was not, Remini notes, due to his legislative accomplishments. Unlike the skillful Clay, Webster was “no legislator” (p. 214). He is not identified with any significant program or legislation. Nor was he a profound or creative thinker. Although Remini at one point refers to the “profundity of his thinking,” he more frequently refers to Webster’s “extraordinary capacity for intense, concentrated work” (pp. 47, 354). Webster possessed special intellectual gifts, to be sure, but the evidence indicates that they centered more on his persuasive power to express widely held sentiments than on his ability to formulate new ideas or establish new connections. Antebellum oratory, as Kenneth Greenberg has explained, was more than just speech making; it involved the public presentation of one’s character and persona. Even though oratory was becoming less prominent in the North, Webster’s combination of compelling voice, “mag-

nificent” physical presence, and stirring theme found a responsive audience (p. 248). Equally important, Webster could polish and present his speeches in written form so that their power remained undiminished when they struck the eye rather than the ear.

But oratorical appeal did not readily translate into charismatic attraction. While Webster would remain a power to be respected, he never evoked the enthusiasm needed to fulfill his highest political aspirations. “His speeches were heroic, but he himself was not,” Remini cogently remarks (p. 451). For all their self-destructive rivalry, Clay and Webster shared two characteristics that blocked their advancement. At some level, the electorate did not trust them, and both had reservations about the democratic and partisan politics that increasingly characterized their age. Webster outdid Clay in both areas, thereby accounting for his more dismal political showing. Remini especially highlights Webster’s discomfort with modern political forms. He “distrusted democratic rule,” and his elitism was registered in “a superior attitude and an overbearing demeanor” (p. 451). He affirmed a special leadership role for wealth and talent, openly displayed his fondness for ease and elegance, and sided with property over communal responsibility. He was, Remini concludes, “out of touch with the democratic surge that swept the nation during the decades preceding the Civil War” (p. 353).

Without question, Webster’s elitism precluded the kind of mass popular appeal that was increasingly required for political leadership. Yet Remini also notes that Webster bent somewhat with the times and stood within an acceptable range of republican thinking. Whatever his discomfort with voter-oriented politics, he honored the ideal of government rooted in the consent of the governed. He also adhered to the idea that the American constitutional experiment was founded on majority rule as expressed through constitutional procedures. This was not the enthusiastic celebration of the popular will that Jackson announced, but it permitted Webster to operate in his increasingly democratized political culture. Indeed, Webster demonstrated on occasion that whatever his reservations, he could appeal to the electorate in a “witty, folksy, and direct” manner (p. 507). Thus, while Remini underlines Webster’s democratic cautions as an explanation for his failure to realize a national constituency, the evidence also indicates that Webster was capable of stretching to meet new expectations. Perhaps, then, Webster’s ultimate political failure was more personal, having to do with a lack of consistent and efficient effort, compounded by a streak of laziness, that pre-

vented him from building the network and structures of support that could have overcome his defects. As Martin Van Buren demonstrated, a lackluster personality could be overcome by effective organization. Webster never seemed to appreciate this element of politics, or if he did, he lacked the will to put it to use. Often things came too easily for Webster.

When the Whigs finally triumphed in 1840, it was William Henry Harrison, not Webster, who headed the Whig ticket. But Webster was rewarded for his support with the appointment of secretary of state, which he retained for part of the succeeding Tyler administration despite withering attacks from mainstream Whigs. By the spring of 1843, when Webster finally resigned from Tyler's cabinet, he had recorded an array of accomplishments, particularly the Webster-Ashburton Treaty, which succeeded in resolving a longstanding dispute over the northern boundary of the United States at a time when relations with Great Britain were unsettled by the *Creole* incident.

Remini's portrayal of Webster's last political hurrah as United States senator and then as Millard Fillmore's secretary of state poignantly evokes a man whose waning capacities diminished his power and influence. After leaving the Tyler administration, Webster reingratiated himself with Massachusetts Whigs, and with the assurance that he would be adequately compensated for his services, he was again elected to the Senate in 1845. But his public career now coincided, and collided, with increased sectional wrangling over territorial expansion and slavery. Webster's mild and gradualistic opposition to slavery – the idea that time and “the mild influences of Christianity” would somehow eradicate the institution – provided treacherous footing for a Massachusetts man with national political ambitions (p. 664). Growing anti-slavery voices at home challenged his position, while he also remained unacceptable to the South.

Thus, Webster's famous Seventh of March Speech, which favored conciliation and compromise during the crisis of 1850, was harshly treated, in marked contrast to the widespread admiration that greeted his second reply to Hayne twenty years before. As Remini comments, while the speech was a “magnificent outburst” for the perpetuation of the American republic, it fell short of Webster's greatest oratorical efforts. It failed to strike a resonant chord precisely because it ignored the fundamental moral principles that were as much involved in the controversy as were geography, politics, history, and constitutional law. Even though Webster found some

support for his position, his association with the Fugitive Slave Act and the Compromise of 1850 “hounded him for the rest of his life” (pp. 678, 681).

During this period, Webster also suffered physical affliction and personal and political loss. The late 1840s brought the death of two children, failure to capture a Whig presidential nomination, nagging indebtedness, and a serious drinking problem with associated debilities. Little wonder, then, that when Fillmore appointed Webster as secretary of state in 1850, his record was, at best, mixed. To his credit, Webster initiated the mission of Matthew C. Perry that opened Japanese ports to American trade, and he had a number of successes in expanding American commercial interests. But Webster bungled other diplomatic matters, notably with England, Austria, and Latin America, and he failed to make inroads among Whigs for a presidential bid in 1852. Indeed, his refusal to stand aside for Fillmore despite his own obvious lack of support ultimately gave the Whig nomination to Winfield Scott, for which Remini asserts, Webster's “all-consuming pride” must be blamed (p. 740). Unable to stomach another Whig general as the party's choice, the angry and frustrated Webster's last political effort was to undermine the nominee of his own party and praise the Democratic candidate, Franklin Pierce (p. 755). It was the darker side of Webster, the “Black Dan,” that predominated during the final years of his life. “Bitterness and frustration surfaced in his words and actions as one disappointment followed another,” Remini concludes (p. 710).

While it was Webster's public activities that brought him lasting renown, Remini also comprehensively treats the private Webster. Webster's management – actually, mismanagement – of his beloved estate, Marshfield, is exactly detailed. Marshfield, in Remini's felicitous phrase, was a “vehicle for spending money, not making it” (p. 348). Personally, the Webster that many found to be cool and arrogant could also be informal, witty, and affable. He was, in fact, an outdoorsman who loved boating, fishing, and hunting (though he forbade the killing of any animals on his own property). He generally disdained cards and other indoor games; instead, he was a voracious reader, with wide-ranging interests and an extensive library. Webster may have publicly extolled the virtues of self-reliance, but the circumstances of his own two marriages showed that he “could not properly function without a wife at his side” (p. 311). Remini's Webster is a nuanced figure, a man at once self-confident and commanding, yet given to emotional downturns and depression.

The major strength of Remini's biography is certainly its thoroughness. This is a "life and times" work, and given the significance and scope of Webster's career, it is no minor accomplishment to render an engaging portrait in one volume. Yet in some respects, the book's strengths are also its weaknesses. The contextual detail of Webster's life often seems excessive and the biography of Webster threatens to become a narrative history of his age. Ironically, at the same time, Remini's coverage of some minor and obscure public issues with which Webster was involved – for example, a legal brief concerning temperance, a judiciary bill that Webster himself "only halfheartedly pressed," the imbroglio with France and Great Britain over problems between Haiti and the Dominican Republic – lacks context (p. 273). Readers may think either too much or too little is said about these matters.

Inevitably some problems also arise in a narrative so amply punctuated by Remini's assessments and judgments. With a masterful knowledge of the period, most of Remini's analysis is sharp and insightful, as in his judicious comparison of the political defects of Clay and Webster. Some observations, however, are less happy, as in the exaggerated remark concerning a Senate debate over Calhoun's slavery resolutions in 1837-38: "Never before had there been such a debate, one so personal, so dramatic, so portentous" (p. 475). Other comments do not necessarily harmonize with assessments occurring elsewhere. At one point, for example, Remini defends Webster against historians (including himself!) who have criticized Webster's request to Biddle to refresh his retainer. In light of Webster's extensive financial improprieties, Remini's defense in this one case is not fully plausible. Remini also provides conflicting assessments

of Webster's stand on property rights. While he generally finds Webster a staunch defender of property, he also claims that in contesting Calhoun and the Independent Treasury plan, Webster upheld the government's right to place restrictions on private property. That was exactly why governments were formed, Webster insisted (p. 472). Remini also offers different explanations of Webster's association with the label "godlike" – an appellation frequently used in the text. We learn that in 1820, Webster's audience was so transfixed by his Plymouth Oration that "it knew it had heard something 'godlike'.... Soon a great many people referred to the orator as the godlike Daniel Webster" and "the appellation...spread..." (p. 184). But Remini also claims that it was not until six years later, on the occasion of the deaths of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, that Webster delivered a stirring eulogy that incorporated the word "godlike, and Americans were so moved that they applied the word to Webster himself. Thereafter he was known to many as the Godlike Daniel" (p. 266).

To some extent, then, the book's extensive narrative works against interpretive coherence. Nevertheless, attention will be fully rewarded with a host of incisive observations and insights into one of nineteenth century America's emblematic political figures. Although rivalry and conflict generally marked the association of Jackson, Clay, and Webster, Remini's *Daniel Webster* stands as a valuable and worthy companion alongside his already acclaimed biographies of Jackson and Clay.

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