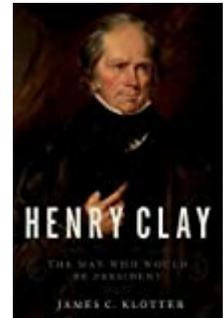




James C. Klotter. *Henry Clay: The Man Who Would Be President.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. 536 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-049804-7.



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Henry Clay never seems to lack for biographers. Perhaps that is why the jacket notes bill James C. Klotter's *Henry Clay: The Man Who Would Be President* as "not a biography." Readers may find that claim a bit much, but they will quickly notice that Klotter's study of Clay differs from many of the recent biographies of Kentucky's contribution to the Great Triumvirate. Klotter's book focuses on Clay's presidential aspirations and asks why he never achieved the highest office in American politics. Many biographers have asked the same question about Clay, but few, if any, have pursued it to the level of detail that Klotter has in this book. The product is a closely focused study on presidential politics in the early American republic and as straightforward an answer as we may ever get as to why Clay never held the office.

Only two Americans, William Jennings Bryan and Henry Clay, have polled votes in the Electoral College and lost election to the presidency three times. Clay's long record of service in Washington makes his presidential losses even more strange. Yet Clay, as Klotter makes clear in his book, found

himself beset by issues both within and beyond his control.

Clay's personal life created controversy that may have hindered his efforts to become president. Some contemporaries, like John Quincy Adams, portrayed Clay as a deceitful man. Skepticism of Clay in his time approaches the suspicion that many had of Richard Nixon in the mid-twentieth century. Adams famously predicted that a Clay presidency would be "a perpetual succession of intrigue" (p. 378). Clay's legislative acumen proved an asset in terms of his congressional career, but as a presidential candidate, opponents cited his powers of persuasion as evidence of manipulation. Others alleged that his personal habits made him unfit to serve as president. At various points in his public career, opponents accused Clay of intemperance with drink and tobacco, excessive gambling, and womanizing. Most of the allegations lacked merit, but they proved to be good fodder for the rumor mill. Clay's dueling also garnered him criticism. Clay fought in two duels and was blamed for playing a key role in a third—the 1838

duel in which Kentucky congressman William Graves killed Representative Jonathan Cilley of Maine. In the honor culture of the early republic, Clay could be viewed as manly and reckless at the same time. All these issues plagued Clay in his bids for the presidency.

Clay's reputation as a master of intrigue led to perhaps the most famous charge against him: that he and John Quincy Adams had engaged in a "corrupt bargain" by which Adams secured the presidency in 1824 with Clay's assistance in the House of Representatives and that in return Clay received an appointment as secretary of state. Klotter's narration of the election of 1824 and the allegations of a corrupt bargain show well his careful, sensitive approach toward the evidence as well as his keen sense of Clay's personality. Indeed, some of the freshest insights in this volume come from how Klotter explains Clay's political career in terms of his personality.

In terms of policy, Clay took strong stances on a number of key issues that defined his day. The Kentuckian seemed fearless in terms of defining where he stood on virtually every controversial issue between 1812 and 1850. He proved himself one of the early republic's most ardent defenders of national economic policy. His American System defined the lines of debate over American economic policy throughout the 1820s and 1830s. Likewise, his measured opposition to slavery and support for colonization placed him in the center of the early republic's most explosive political debate. It also gave his opponents much fodder for campaigns against him.

In the end, the closest that Klotter comes to a definitive reason why Clay never became president stems from his lengthy political record. Look to virtually every crisis between the War of 1812 and the Compromise of 1850 and there one will find Henry Clay. He had engaged in so many political battles, had taken stances on so many political issues that no one could help but know where Henry Clay stood on the great issues of the day. And in a

country like the antebellum United States, where the public found itself divided on a number of issues, taking many stands made many enemies. Other issues such as personality, timing, bad luck, and personality all played a role in denying Clay the spot he wanted. So, too, Klotter notes, did the fact that perhaps others coveted it even more. Clay proved unwilling to compromise on issues that he championed, even if it cost him support among key constituencies. Clay, then, did not become president because of the circumstances of his times. Klotter's nuanced portrait gives us a view of how Henry Clay's presidential aspirations went unfulfilled. Students of the early republic will appreciate his careful work.

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