

Edited by Gene Santoro

**Henry Clay:  
The Essential American**  
by David S. Heidler  
and Jeanne T. Heidler  
Random House

## We Also Like

■ **An Artist in Treason: The Extraordinary Double Life of General James Wilkinson** by Andro Linklater (Walker). Youngest general in the Continental Army and unmasker of Benedict Arnold's treachery turns Spanish secret agent while commanding American forces, then foils erstwhile partner-in-treason Aaron Burr.

■ **Sherman** by Steven W. Woodworth (Palgrave Macmillan). Chronicles the life of General William Tecumseh Sherman and the debut of modern total war.

■ **The Long Way Home: An American Journey From Ellis Island to the Great War** by David Laskin (Harper). In 1917 a dozen European-born immigrants return to fight with the doughboys—and the experience reforges their American identities.

■ **Poker Bride: The First Chinese in the Wild West** by Christopher Corbett (Atlantic Monthly). Sold by her family into prostitution across the Pacific, Polly Bemis turned up in Idaho as a concubine, was "won" at a poker game, then became the winner's legal wife—a wild pioneer tale.

■ **The Blue Tattoo: Life of Olive Oatman** by Margot Mifflin (Nebraska). A 13-year-old Mormon girl's family is killed by Indians. She assimilates. Returned to white society several years later, she becomes an instant celebrity and banker's wife, with a lifetime of divided loyalties.

## Dubbed the Great Compromiser

by his antebellum contemporaries, Henry Clay is arguably the most powerful House Speaker ever and may well be the most significant American politician who never won the White House. But only now is he the subject of a book to match his stature. In *The Essential American*, a veteran husband-and-wife team of historians delivers a complex portrait of a man who loomed larger than most of the 10 presidents who came and went during his 46 years in the House and Senate.

Clay's legend begins with two superlatives, one welcome and the other not. His "melodious baritone" made him, along with Daniel Webster—a towering figure in the Senate—one of America's most accom-

plished public speakers, capable of holding audiences rapt for hours, even days. He was also one of America's all-time political losers, failing to capture the presidency in 1824, 1832 and 1844.

After leaping to national prominence as an 1812 War Hawk, Clay seemed destined for the presidency. As House Speaker, he pushed through numberless deals, including the 1820 Missouri Compromise, which helped maintain the Union, at least temporarily, despite growing sectional differences. And he developed an ambitious vision for the future he called the American System, a Federalist-inspired platform of tariffs, infrastructure development and centralized banking that reflected his

belief that rising national prosperity could bridge ever-widening regional fissures.

This, then, is the puzzle: Clay was supremely talented yet perpetually out of step with the country. For the Heidlers, he was by turns astonishingly naive and politically tone deaf. His greatest flub followed the deadlocked 1824 presidential election. In the special House of Representatives vote, he helped John Quincy Adams defeat Andrew Jackson, then accepted Adams' offer to become secretary of state. The ruthless Jackson political machine went into overdrive, casting this as the "Corrupt Bargain." The charge dogged Clay for the rest of his life.

It didn't help that Clay's American System began alienating voters outside the rapidly developing Northeast. As important, it placed Clay in direct conflict with both Jackson (over the Bank of the United States, which Clay saw as his system's linchpin and Old Hickory viewed as a competing power) and John C. Calhoun (who nearly led South Carolina into secession over Clay's attempt to raise import duties in 1832). These were the types of fights Clay relished and excelled at—close legislative combat that responded to speechmaking and brokering, as much about personalities as ideology. He became Congress' leading dealmaker.

But as America hurtled toward civil war, Clay's political views came to seem anachronistic. In the 1844 presidential election, when territorial expansion was the nation's foremost issue, Clay's Whig platform took no position on annexing Texas. Defeated by pro-annexation Jackson Democrat James K. Polk, Clay appeared buffeted by currents he never really understood. Nowhere was his blinkered view of American life more evident than in his failure from the outset to grasp the deep and irreconcilable passions dividing North and South on slavery. That was clear with the 1820 Missouri Compromise, a stopgap solution he had little to do with framing, but which ironically got him nicknamed the Great Compromiser.

Nevertheless, the authors' shrewd, detailed rendering of Clay and his times also demonstrates clearly why young Abe Lincoln so fervently esteemed him.

—Kevin Hartnett

## For the Coffee Table

■ **Framing the West: The Survey Photographs of Timothy H. O'Sullivan** by Toby Jurovics et al. (Yale). Awesome shots, taken as part of the government's post-Civil War topographic surveys, capture America's variegated beauty without romanticizing the landscape.

## On the Tube

■ **Turmoil and Triumph: The George Shultz Years** Airing on PBS in July; check local listings

CAUGHT FOR SEVEN YEARS IN THE REAGAN ERA between international explosions and Cabinet infighting, Secretary of State George Shultz maintained his belief that people can disagree but find reasonable

ways to mitigate their differences. His signal achievement came with Reagan's summits with Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev in Geneva and Reykjavik: The Cold War at last began to end as nuclear arsenals were dismantled. For this, as well as his opposition to Iran-Contra—the sale of embargoed arms to Iran to secure the release of American hostages and fund Nicaraguan opponents of the Sandinista regime—Shultz was undercut by Cold Warriors like Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger and CIA director William Casey, who complained he wouldn't "let Reagan be Reagan." But Shultz never pulled the president anywhere he didn't want to go. He encouraged Reagan to go one-on-one with Gorbachev about reducing nuclear weapons, which Reagan loathed, while his antagonists grew frantic that softheaded Ronnie would "give away the store."

A Republican moderate, Shultz trained as a labor economist and served as graduate school dean at the University of Chicago before entering politics. This solid documentary reveals how he accomplished more at State than many, right and left, admitted at the time. Unfortunately, however, the show's three-hour length also encourages padding that ill serves its subject, whose patient, firm realism often helped Reagan be the best he could be. —Gene Santoro

**Shultz and Gorbachev confer at the 1985 Geneva summit.**

"Look at that storm which is now raging before you," Henry Clay warned the Senate in 1850 as he urged passage of legislation that temporarily defused tensions between slave and free states.