TO CAMPAIGN OR NOT TO CAMPAIGN:
HENRY CLAY'S SPEAKING TOUR THROUGH THE SOUTH

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Henry Clay, his thoughts turned toward the presidential election of 1844, sat in his study at Ashland reading an invitation to visit Norfolk, Virginia, during his proposed tour through the South. The letter expressed the hope that his acceptance of the invitation would better facilitate the "placing at the head of our government a patriot and a statesman who is incapable of betraying a trust."[1] The sentiments expressed in the Norfolk invitation added yet another voice to the escalating move to call upon Henry Clay, for the third time, to be the national standard-bearer for the Whig party. The stage had already been set in Philadelphia when Josiah Randall, Esq., representing the cheering Whig prospects, expressed the "almost absolute certainty of electing Henry Clay to the next presidency."[2] Similarly, the Illinois State Whig Convention which met in Springfield on December 11, 1843, unanimously resolved that "with Henry Clay and any tried true whig for vice president, we mutually pledge ourselves to use all honorable means to carry the state in the contest of 1844."[3] Other Whig state conventions were scheduled to convene during the first quarter of 1844 and Clay did not overlook the prospect of gaining additional support for his cause in planning his itinerary.

An additional vote of confidence had recently been received from Levi Fahnestock, representing the Young Men's Whig National Convention, who requested that a staff "be cut by the honored hands of the farmer of Ashland, from the growth of the soil of his own home."[4] The staff was to carry a banner with Clay's likeness and would be presented to "such state delegation . . . as shall have the largest proportionate number in attendance" at the Young Men's Whig National Convention of Ratification scheduled to convene in Baltimore in May, 1844.[5]

This request fulfilled, a jubilant Clay, riding on the exuberant hope of at last attaining his goal to serve his country in its highest office, set his course for New Orleans. From New Orleans, his itinerary included visits to Georgia, Alabama, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia.[6] Commenting on Clay's trip, the Lexington, Kentucky, *Reporter* indicated that the prevailing motive was business.[7] How-

ever, there can be little doubt that "the old coon" had sniffed a prevailing favorable political wind and had set his sail accordingly.

Clay's stay in New Orleans spanned the holiday season and continued until March, 1844. While there, he transacted business, kept up ever-increasing correspondence, and received the delegates from the Louisiana House of Representatives in a gesture of bipartisan friendship.[8]

During this time more and more states aligned themselves with the Clay cause. On January 7, 1844, the North Carolina Whig convention resolved that Henry Clay was "the first and only choice of the whigs of North Carolina for the Chief magistracy of the nation."[9] On February 12, 1844, the Whigs of Middle Tennessee greeted "the nomination of Henry Clay for the presidency with bursts of applause."[10]

Further accolades came from the Whig State Convention of Ohio, which met in Columbus, February 22, 1844. After nominating Clay, delegates proclaimed "Henry Clay is eminently the honest man of the nation and of the age."[11] Whig state conventions in Maine, Rhode Island, and Virginia voiced similar expressions of confidence.[12]

Clay began his tour through the South with the knowledge that Whig party organizations in at least eight states had overwhelmingly selected him as their candidate. That awareness, doubtlessly, was on the one hand an immense source of satisfaction, and on the other, a thorn in Clay's side. Since it appeared that his nomination by the National Whig Convention, which was to assemble in Baltimore, May 1, 1844, was assured, Clay was confronted with the traditional belief that it was beneath the dignity of a presidential candidate to campaign. Being a clever politician, he was not unaware that a favorable opportunity was at his disposal as he toured the South.

The chosen way out of this dilemma became obvious during the speech Clay delivered in Milledgeville, Georgia, March 19, 1844. This speech, which established a model for all the remaining speeches on Clay's tour, sought to assume the guise of non-campaigning, while at the same time presenting topics which Clay felt would win the country to the Whig cause.

Clay began the speech by expressing his pleasure for being in Georgia and quickly added that "he had come as a private citizen, seeking no honor and desired his reception to be freed from every party bias."[13] A reminder that he was "not electioneering" immediately followed a declaration that served to focus attention on the forthcoming election.[14]

Having sown the proper seeds of suggestion in his introduction, Clay launched a discussion of the problems which he felt were pertinent to the time and the causes for which he stood, sprinkled them with appropriate local issues, and related them all to the internal policy arguments on which he felt the election would turn. Because of the position

taken by the South concerning the admission of Missouri to the Union, Clay began the body of this speech by explaining his role in the proceedings. In doing so, he garnered what support he could from local people.[15] He then discussed the tariff of 1842 by laying the groundwork for his middle ground proposal which rejected the extremes of high tariff and free trade, stated his position of being "decidedly in favor of the distribution of proceeds from the sale of public lands amongst the states," and offered his congratulations to the state of Georgia for its contribution to the fund.[16]

Correctly believing that his voting against the Cherokee Treaty, by which Georgia acquired some of her land, had created some animosity toward him among some of the people in his audience, Clay explained that his action was governed by the fact that the treaty was not a true contract since it did not bind "two willing parties."[17] Clay concluded on this note. He attributed the reasons which prompted this speech to the warm and gracious welcome he had received, the "beautiful smiles of the fair daughters here assembled," and to the fact that "the remarks to which he had been drawn were demanded by feelings which it would have been wrong for him to suppress."[18]

As Clay continued his tour, his audiences and the receptions they gave him became larger. A festive, holiday-like atmosphere hovered over the crowd on the day the Honorable Mr. Clay came to town. In this, Savannah, Georgia, was no exception. On Thursday, March 21, 1844, fifteen hundred persons thronged the area of the depot to await Clay's arrival.[19] As Clay disembarked from the train, a twenty-six gun salute was fired by the soldiers of the Chatham Artillery.[20] Following a short introduction by a welcoming committee, Clay was conducted to an open carriage and in the company of "one hundred and fifty gentlemen on horseback he was escorted to his lodgings at the house of Mr. J. McPherson Beruen."[21] "The cavalcade," reported the *Savannah Republican*, "was accompanied by an immense throng and the piazzas and doorways of every house, almost without exception, were lined with attentive spectators, while the waving of handkerchiefs showed clearly with how much enthusiasm he was welcomed by the gentler sex."[22]

The following morning Clay arose to address the "immense concourse of people who thronged the square and adjacent streets," protesting all the while that he "had commenced his tour with the determination not to speak."[23] Clay's consent to speak must have been a great source of satisfaction to the manager of the Pulaski House, the site of the speech, since the manager had taken the trouble to have the southern portico railed in, the floor carpeted, an awning hung, and provided suitable space to accommodate "some ten or twelve gentlemen besides the distinguished guest."[24]

The Savannah speech was very similar in content to the Milledgeville speech. Clay again defended himself against the charge of making an electioneering tour, tactfully reprimanded some leading democrats who had attempted to array against him unfriendly feelings foreign to the dictates of a liberal southern hospitality, and attempted to defend his honor against any who would poison the public mind against him by stating that he had brought neither war, pestilence, nor famine with him, and since he was sufficiently blest with an estimable wife, he did not mean to bear away any of the fair daughters of Georgia.[25]

Stronger notes of political overtones were sounded in the Savannah speech as Clay discussed issues which he hoped would woo the people of Georgia. To the issues of the Missouri question, the tariff compromise, and distributing to the states the proceeds from the sale of public lands, he added the necessity of establishing another national bank, and that the president of the United States should only serve one term. Each issue was carefully transmitted by means of an appropriate appeal. For example, in defense of the tariff compromise Clay appealed to a spirit of nationalism by stating, "If the tariff is slightly injurious to any one section of the country, it is satisfactory to know that the advantages derived from it are enjoyed by our country and not by foreigners."[26] An appeal to sectionalism was used to defend the establishment of another national bank. Clay pointed out that people in the North, especially the bankers on Wall Street, opposed the bank because "its existence would jeopard [*sic*] their interest."[27] He then added that while the large emporiums of the North did not want the bank, the people of the South and West did. The fact that the Georgia legislature was at that time working for an improvement in standardizing the currency—a major point provided by the national bank—was not overlooked.

After treating the major issues with their corresponding appeals, Clay devoted his attention to the defense of the Whig party. He took personal issue with the stigmas attached to the party which labeled it as the British party and avowed that it held no distinct principles. In each instance, Clay's defense was geared so that the democratic party would bear the brunt of the blame for propagating such erroneous conceptions.

Leaving Georgia, Clay traveled up the East Coast to Charleston, South Carolina. No national holiday celebration could rival Clay's reception in this city. Political trends which favored Clay as the next Whig candidate for president, plus the extended newspaper coverage which the tour had received, joined forces to increase the peoples' anticipation. On the appointed day of Clay's arrival, the people of Charleston turned out in force. Rifles were fired in salute, and banners

which proclaimed: "Welcome to Henry Clay," and "Welcome, thrice Welcome Bright Star of the West," greeted Clay as he was escorted through the city to the theater where he was to speak.[28] The *Charleston Courier* stated that "the side walks were thronged with spectators and the windows and balconies of the adjacent houses were crowded and graced by the lovely daughters of the city who occasionally showered a flowery as well as a smiling welcome to the illustrious stranger."[29]

As Clay entered the theater, the crowd rushed in to claim seats. The ladies were already in their places, the stage was covered with the various committees, the first and second tiers of boxes were thronged, while the pit and gallery and lobby were stowed full of citizens.[30] This excited, clamoring crowd made it difficult for Clay to keep intact his curtain of pretense. No one was less concerned with effecting possible repairs than the planning committee. They had arranged for the venerable Dr. William Read, a veteran of the Revolutionary War, to welcome and introduce Clay.[31] This worthy gentleman did not disappoint the committee as he drew upon his fame to flatter Clay. "I feel," said Read, "with those who have gone before me, and more deeply than the youthful generation around me can feel, the great debt we all owe you for your patriotic labors in defense of the institutions of the men of '76."[32]

Responding to this welcome and to the enthusiastic reception he had received, Clay again mentioned that he was not on an electioneering tour, and that he was not a candidate for president. The feebleness of this attempt is pointed up when Clay quickly added that he was well aware of the spontaneous—however, unsought for—demonstrations in his favor. He added that he had not declared his candidacy (indeed, he had not at that time been nominated) and was at present merely "a plain farmer, earning his labor by the sweat of his brow."[33]

Not forgetting to return his thanks to the various committees, the throng of citizens, and especially to the "assemblage of fair ladies who had united to greet him," Clay plunged into the body of the speech.[34] The issues were, again, middle ground policy regarding the tariff, a stable currency provided by the establishment of another national bank, and the Missouri question, in which he had been ably assisted by William Lowndes of South Carolina. (Clay often referred to members of his immediate audience, or to other well known citizens of the state, for added support for his position on controversial issues.)

After the speech, Clay was a guest at a banquet which was followed by a meeting of the Clay Club. Before leaving Charleston, "a splendid ball, attended by the citizens without distinction of party, was given at the Charleston Hotel in honor of Mr. Clay."[35]

With such merriment and festivities adding fuel to his burning am-

bitions, Henry Clay arrived in Raleigh, North Carolina, April 12, 1844 —his sixty-seventh birthday. The awareness that the Whigs of North Carolina had made him their choice for president further rent the curtain of pretense and paved the way for the strongest political speech given by Clay on his tour.

Clay's reception in Raleigh proved to be no exception to those he had received in other cities on his tour. The *Raleigh Register* reported that the "city was crowded with strangers from all parts of the state and from other states."[36] Of this greeting Clay said in the opening remarks of his speech, "Nowhere had I expected such a distinguished reception and such enthusiastic greetings as those with which my arrival here has been attended."[37] Then expressing his delighted amazement at "seeing the whole state congregated together," Clay launched into a speech which would warm the hearts of the delegates at any political convention.[38]

The Raleigh speech was deliberative. Motivated by political exigencies of the occasion, Clay told his audience that he would "make some exposition of his sentiments and views in respect to public affairs."[39] His purpose thus established, Clay plunged with customary directness into an attack on the democratic party. Devoting fully half of his speech to this attack, Clay began by stating the differences between the two major parties, cited recent cases where the action of the democratic party was in error, and through comparison ascribed the greater good to the Whig party while indicting the democrats for giving vent to base motivations.[40]

Having thus dealt a heavy blow to the democratic party, Clay turned his attention to the major issues which had dominated his previous speeches. He refused, however, to discuss abolition, asserting that his audience was aware of his feelings on this subject since he had "fully expressed them in the senate."[41] Not content to let his previous attack on the democratic party suffice, Clay took one final jab. "I should have been happy to have been able to make a full examination of the principles and measures of our opponents," Clay pointed out, ". . . but I am really and unaffectedly ignorant of the measures of public policy which they are desirous to promote and establish."[42] He added that the democratic party, while claiming to be a friend of the people, preferred sparkling champagne to hard cider, the drink of the poor people, that they disliked the log cabins in which the poor dwell, and what is worse, they disliked the Whig songs "although chanted by the loveliest daughters and most melodious voices of the land."[43]

Expressing his gratification for his reception and for the opportunity of addressing this audience, Clay closed his Raleigh speech. No one could doubt that the "farmer from Ashland" protested too much when

he declared that he was not campaigning. Indeed, Clay made maximum use of his ethos throughout the Raleigh speech by proclaiming "I am a Whig, warmly attached to the party which bears that respected name."[44] He appealed to the emotions of his audience by aligning them with his cause and his cause to the noble virtues of honor and patriotism. Logical proof included specific instances, examples, quotations from newspapers, and personal observations.

The speech was arranged in an orderly manner. The introduction and conclusion were directed to the immediate audience and were replete with emotional appeals. The body was topically developed under propositions of value.

Clay employed a rather plain style characterized by frank and direct references. Only when the emotion of the moment seemingly overwhelmed him did he elevate the style by means of imagery and ornate comparisons.

The Raleigh speech was the high-point of the tour. Few in the audience misinterpreted Clay's ambitions and they voiced their approval through ringing shouts and cheers. Much encouraged, Clay continued his tour to Norfolk, Virginia, and from there proceeded to Washington, D.C. Clay's prospects appeared bright indeed, especially when the major issues which dominated his speeches throughout the South became the major planks of the Whig platform.[45] Unfortunately, this platform chose to ignore the issue of Texas annexation. Likewise, Clay never mentioned Texas in his speeches although he wrote a letter from Raleigh expressing his views as being against the annexation. This stand indicated poor analysis and failed to win for Clay popular support in the South. Thus, Clay's tour was unsuccessful as evidenced by the fact that of all the states which he visited, only North Carolina pledged him her electoral votes.[46] However, Henry Clay's tour through the South was not a complete failure for it ranks as one of the first examples of a prospective presidential candidate taking to the campaign trail.

FOOTNOTES

[1] *Niles' Register*, Vol. LXV (Nov. 25, 1843), p. 203.
[2] *Niles' Register*, Vol. LXV (Dec. 9, 1843), p. 231.
[3] *Niles' Register*, Vol. LXV (Jan. 6, 1844), p. 293.
[4] From a letter dated October 19, 1843, and reprinted in *Niles' Register*, Vol. LXV (Nov. 25, 1843), p. 203.

[5] The *American Whig* gave this description of the banner: The banner will be painted on satin—on the front side will be painted a portrait of Henry Clay, on a shield, supported by two female figures, the one on the right Agriculture, supported by a sheaf of wheat, the one on the left, Fame, in the act of recording the many noble, useful, and patriotic acts in the life of that great American statesmen and patriot. See: *Niles' Register*, Vol. LXV (Dec. 2, 1843), p. 218.

[6] The *Richmond Whig* gave this account of Clay's itinerary: A citizen of Richmond who descended the Mississippi River with Mr. Clay writes to the editor that Mr. Clay will go from New Orleans to Mobile—thence through Macon, Milledgeville, and Augusta in Georgia, to Charleston—thence to visit Col. Preston at Columbia—thence to Raleigh and Wilmington, N. C. to Norfolk and Portsmouth, Va.—thence by the peninsula of the Eastern Shore of Virginia to Wilmington in Delaware. See: *Niles' Register*, Vol. LXV (Jan. 20, 1844), p. 331.

[7] *Niles' Register*, Vol. LXV (Dec. 23, 1843), p. 272.

[8] *Niles' Register*, Vol. LXV (Jan. 20, 1844), p. 304.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 327.

[10] Reprinted in *Niles' Register*, Vol. LXVI (March 9, 1844), p. 23.

[11] *Niles' Register*, Vol. LXVI (March 2, 1844), p. 7.

[12] *Niles' Register*, Vol. LXVI (Feb. 17, 1844), p. 390.

[13] From the *Milledgeville Union*, (March 19, 1844), reprinted in *Niles' Register*, Vol. LXVI (April 20, 1844), p. 119.

[14] *Ibid.*

[15] "Henry Clay in Charleston," *Niles' Register*, Vol. LXVI (April 13, 1844), p. 105.

[16] *Niles' Register*, Vol. LXVI (April 13, 1844), p. 120.

[17] *Ibid.*

[18] *Ibid.*

[19] *Savannah Republican*, March 25, 1844, reprinted in *Niles' Register*, Vol. LXVI (April 13, 1844), p. 106.

[20] *Ibid.*

[21] *Ibid.*

[22] *Ibid.*

[23] *Ibid.*

[24] *Ibid.*

[25] *Ibid.*

[26] *Ibid.*

[27] *Charleston Courier*, April 1, 1844, reprinted in *Niles' Register*, Vol. LXVI (April 13, 1844), p. 105.

[28] *Ibid.*

[29] *Ibid.*

[30] *Ibid.*

[31] *Ibid.*

[32] *Ibid.*

[33] *Ibid.*

[34] *Ibid.*

[35] *Ibid.*

[36] *Niles Register*, Vol. LXVI (April 13, 1844), p. 112.

[37] *Niles' Register*, Vol. LXVI (July 6, 1844), p. 296.

[38] *Ibid.*

[39] *Ibid.*

[40] *Ibid.* (Taken from the Raleigh speech, April 13, 1844, pp. 298-299.)

[41] *Ibid.*, pp. 298-300.

[42] *Ibid.*, p. 299.

[43] *Ibid.* (Taken from the Raleigh speech, April 13, 1844, p. 300.)

[44] *Ibid.*, p. 296.

[45] See *Niles' Register*, Vol. LXVI (May 18, 1844), pp. 179-187 for an account of the Whig National Convention of 1844. Resolutions are listed on p. 181.

[46] *Niles' Register*, Vol. LXVII (Dec. 21, 1844), p. 243. An analysis of all electoral votes revealed that Virginia, South Carolina, and Georgia all supported Polk. Of all the states Clay visited, he was only successful in carrying North Carolina.