

John C. Calhoun and Daniel Webster Debate



ABOUT THE SOURCE In 1849 California sought admission into the Union as a free state. Many southerners opposed the request because it would leave the slave states outnumbered. A national crisis developed and talk of secession increased in the South. In January 1850 Senator Henry Clay proposed a compromise to save the Union. His plan sparked a lively debate in the Senate.



*As you read note how Calhoun and Webster differed in their views about the Union. The following words may be new to you: **ascertain**, **equilibrium**, **devolve**, **grapple**. You may want to use a dictionary to look them up.*

Passage 1: John C. Calhoun Addresses the Senate

On March 4, 1850, James Mason of Virginia read Senator Calhoun's speech opposing Henry Clay's compromise plan.

If the question is not now settled, it is uncertain whether it ever can hereafter be; and we, as the representatives of the States of this Union, regarded as Governments, should come to a distinct understanding as to our respective views, in order to **ascertain** whether the great question at issue can be settled or not. If you, who represent the stronger portion, cannot agree to settle them on the broad principle of justice and duty, say so; and let the States we both represent agree to separate and part in peace. If you are unwilling we should part in peace, tell us so, and we shall know what to do, when you reduce the question to submission or resistance. If you remain silent, you will compel us to infer by your acts what you intend. In that case, California will become the test question. If you admit her, under all the difficulties that oppose her admission, you compel us to infer that you intend to exclude us from the whole of the acquired Territories, with the intention of destroying irretrievably the **equilibrium** between the two sections.

Source: *Congressional Globe*, 31st Congress, 1st Session, pp. 451-455

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. Why was stopping the admission of California into the Union important to Calhoun?

The Nation Splits Apart

Primary Source

Passage 2: Daniel Webster Addresses the Senate

Three days after Calhoun's speech, Webster spoke in favor of Clay's plan.

I hear with distress and anguish the word "secession," especially when it falls from the lips of those who are patriotic, and known to the country, and known all over the world, for their political services. Secession! Peaceable secession! Sir, your eyes and mine are never destined to see that miracle . . . Peaceable secession is an utter impossibility. Is the great Constitution under which we live, covering this whole country,—is it to be thawed and melted away by secession, as the snows on the mountain melt under the influence of a vernal sun, disappear almost unobserved and run off? No, Sir! No, Sir! I will not state what might produce the disruption of the Union; but, Sir, I see as plainly as I see the sun in heaven what that disruption itself must produce; I see that it must produce war, and such a war as I will not describe . . .

Never did there **devolve** on any generation of men higher trusts than now devolve upon us, for the preservation of this Constitution and the harmony and peace of all who are destined to live under it. Let us make our generation one of the strongest and brightest links in that golden chain which is destined, I fondly believe, to **grapple** the people of all the States to this Constitution for ages to come.

Source: *Congressional Globe*, 31st Congress, 1st Session, Appendix, pp. 269-276

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. What did Webster believe would happen if the southern states left the Union?

MAKE A COMPARISON

1. How did the political goals of Calhoun and Webster contrast?

2. How did Calhoun and Webster differ in who they believed was responsible for the national crisis?
