

Consumption and Compromise: Illness and Its Impact on the Political Career of Henry Clay

David Petriello

Lecturer, Department of History, Caldwell University, Caldwell, New Jersey, United States

Email: dpetriello@caldwell.edu

Abstract

Henry Clay's nearly fifty years of public service coincided with the social, economic, and territorial growth of the Early Republic. Though much has been made of the influences of geography and political philosophy on his accomplishments, little has been done in addressing the role played by his own health and various illnesses of the era. Disease and personal health issues were perhaps the greatest natural allies, catalysts, and limiting agents of Henry Clay's accomplishments. Ill health helped to start his career under the tutelage of George Wythe, the deaths of his daughters while undertaking the seasonal journey from Kentucky to Congress pushed his ideas on internal improvements, and disease collided with several of his campaigns for the presidency. This article focuses on the personal letters of Henry Clay and those around him to discern their views on the various illnesses of his day and gauge their impact on his career.

Keywords: United States, Henry Clay, public health

Henry Clay once claimed that he would, "rather be right than be president," a desire that would, perhaps unfortunately, come true for the indefatigable politician. Perhaps because of this he has largely been forgotten by the American public. Despite this, his nearly fifty years of public service spanned the most important events in the history of the early Republic, including the Louisiana Purchase, the War of 1812, the U.S.-Mexican War, and the various compromises that helped to slow the descent of the nation towards civil war. At the same time, his economic views pushed those early ideas of Hamilton towards greater national industrialization and internal expansion, helping to tie together the divergent economies of the nation. Yet, this long life and storied career was both directed and limited as much by events outside of his control as by his own philosophy and decades long domination of American politics. Disease and personal health issues were the greatest natural allies, catalysts, and limiting agents of Clay's accomplishments. The impact of illness on individuals and larger historical events is an often understudied subject, something that is especially true concerning the life of Henry Clay. A thorough understanding of the role of disease upon his life and the events of his time is essential to analyzing the larger events of the era and appreciating how they unfolded.

A few years after Clay's birth in 1777, his father John fell seriously ill, leaving him, "very sick & weak [sic]," and producing his death shortly afterwards.¹ Only thirty-eight years old at the time, the dying John Clay did his best to provide for his large family in his will, but in the uncertain and dangerous conditions of Revolutionary Virginia, his young widow was justifiably apprehensive. British raids in the region and internecine conflict were a harsh reality of the war. Though family legend later exaggerated the Clays' encounter with Col. Tarleton as he raided through the region in 1781, it certainly would have further magnified Elizabeth Clay's emotional and monetary instability. "I recollect [...] a visit made by Tarleton's troops to the house of my mother, and of their running their swords into the new-made graves of my father and grand-father [...]. [T]hat visit is vividly remembered, and it will be to the last moment of my life."²

In 1782, Elizabeth Clay subsequently remarried to Captain Henry Watkins, one of her deceased husband's cousins. At a time when slaves equated to social standing more than economic productivity, the marriage to Watkins brought both land and seventeen enslaved persons to the Clay household.³ As this tripled the number of slaves owned by the family, it provided a basis by which its members could slowly rise up the socio-economic pyramid of post-Revolutionary Virginia.

Illness again came to the aid of Clay's initial rise in the 1790s. While working in Richmond, Clay was able to secure a clerk position at the Virginia Chancery Court through his step-father's machinations. Shortly after joining the court, he was rescued from an obscure career of filing briefs by his impeccable penmanship. George Wythe, the famed legal scholar and signer of the Declaration of Independence, had apparently taken notice of Clay's handwriting and asked that the young man become his assistant. Rheumatism or gout had begun to cripple Wythe's right-hand, necessitating an amanuensis. In a letter to Thomas Jefferson in 1788, Wythe lamented that, "To write is difficult, and sometimes a little painful; caused by a weakness in my right thumb. I should suppose it to be a gout."⁴ While the aging politician slowly taught himself how to write with his other hand, Clay served as his transcriber during the early 1790s.⁵

Clay's time with Wythe helped to define much of his later beliefs and character. The latter's views on politics and slavery did much to mold the future senator. Only a few years later, during the debate about whether to amend the recently adopted constitution of Kentucky, Clay opined that "All America acknowledges the existence of slavery to be an evil [...] the sooner we attempt its destruction the better."⁶ While these ideas can be considered radical for a slave-owner such as Clay, they were not for a student of Wythe. As a slightly later writer suggested, "Mr. Wythe, to the day of his death, was for simple abolition."⁷ Throughout Clay's life, he used the metaphor of disease to discuss the issue of slavery. During debates over the establishment of the American Colonization Society and its efforts to remove former slaves to

¹ "Biographical and Genealogical Notes and Queries," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 14, no. 2 (April 1934): 174-179.

² Henry Clay, quoted in Epes Sargent, *The Life and Public Services of Henry Clay* (New York: Greeley & McElrath, 1844), 72.

³ David S. Heider, *Henry Clay: The Essential American* (New York: Random House, 2010), 13.

⁴ George Wythe to Thomas Jefferson, July 10, 1788, in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 13, Julian P. Boyd, ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956), 329-330.

⁵ George Wythe to Thomas Jefferson, April 10, 1800, in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 31, Barbara B. Oberg, ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 494.

⁶ Quoted in James Ramage, *Kentucky Rising: Democracy, Slavery, and Culture from the Early Republic to the Civil War* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 38.

⁷ Benjamin Watkins Leigh, *The Letter of Appomattox to the People of Virginia* (Richmond: Thomas White, 1832), 43.

Liberia, he stated, “Slavery is a chronic disease, and I believe that in such maladies speedy recovery is not expected.”⁸

Thanks to Wythe’s political influence, Clay was also able to gain a position in the office of the state attorney general, Robert Brooke.⁹ The latter helped Clay to continue his studies of the law and by late 1797 he appeared before the bar and was granted a license to practice in the state of Virginia. Unable to find employment in Richmond, though, Clay decided to venture west and join his mother in Kentucky. Wythe’s illness had helped to elevate the young man, creating an established and well-educated lawyer.

Clay’s appointment to the Senate in 1806 and eventual election to the House in 1810 finally brought him into the national spotlight. Though the youngest Speaker of the House to date, he was an active member of the body, devoting considerable time to his duties, often at the expense of his family’s health. Clay’s decades of service in the capital necessitated yearly travel between Kentucky and Washington, often in the cold of winter or the heat of summer. Several of these expeditions proved to be deadly to family members who accompanied him. During the winter of 1816 as the family trudged towards the capital, his infant daughter Laura fell deathly ill. Writing to Christopher Hughes, Clay mentioned that, “Mrs. Clay & all my children, except my two sons, are with me. Unfortunately, the youngest of them, Laura, took the whooping cough on the journey, and we are at this moment despairing of the recovery of the youngest Laura.”¹⁰ She died a week later and was buried in the Congressional Cemetery.

Washington itself was well known for its unhealthy environment, with seasonal fevers blamed for various sicknesses and the deaths of officials and their family members. Each year, congressmen and their families carefully weighed the decision of whether to risk either the pestilential terrors of the capital or the illnesses of travel. In fact, Clay himself pointed to the surprising lack of illness in the city in 1817 as justification for keeping his family there in the fall. “My family continues to enjoy good health, and I believe I shall not take them out of the City, if it should continue to be as healthy as it is at present- Lucretia’s situation renders travelling particularly inconvenient.”¹¹ As his middle daughter was close to giving birth, Clay felt the possibility of her contracting fever was less likely than the dangers associated with returning to Kentucky.

Several years later, in 1823, Lucretia did fall seriously ill. Clay cited her illness as a reason for his not attending court hearings in Cincinnati regarding arguments being made against the U.S. Bank. “One of my daughters is extremely ill, and I could not think of separating myself from her so far as Cincinnati.”¹² Despite his decision to remain close to his ailing daughter, Clay was able to do little to help her, and she passed away a week later.

Clay’s personal experiences with the travails of interstate travel in the early Jeffersonian Era certainly had an effect on his views of infrastructure. His letters made frequent references to the conditions of the roads connecting Kentucky to the capital, commenting on the tremendously negative effects that weather had on travel.¹³ In 1817, he wrote to William Thornton that, “Still I should think that, until the Country is more cultivated, occasional instances of Ague & fever & intermittens will occur in the months of August & September”.¹⁴ Clearly though, the death of several of his children while *en route* to Washington would have

⁸ Robert V. Reminin, *Henry Clay: Statesman for the Union* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), 440.

⁹ Reminin, *Henry Clay*, 12.

¹⁰ Henry Clay to Christopher Hughes, Jr., December 8, 1816, in Henry Clay, *The Papers of Henry Clay*, Vol. 2 (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1961), 259.

¹¹ Henry Clay to John Hart, September 11, 1817, in *The Papers of Henry Clay*, Vol. 2, 379.

¹² Henry Clay to Nicholas Biddle, June 11, 1823, in *The Papers of Henry Clay*, Vol. 3 (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1963), 430.

¹³ See Henry Clay to Benjamin Howard, March 12, 1811, in *The Papers of Henry Clay*, Vol. 1 (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1959), 548.

¹⁴ Henry Clay to William Thornton, December 6, 1817, in *The Papers of Henry Clay*, Vol. 2, 407.

certainly personalized the terrible reality of transportation in the country. During his time in the House, he constantly pushed for the expansion of roads to the West, lambasting Congress for failing to stretch the Cumberland road beyond Wheeling, so, “that we might have a way to reach the Capitol of our country...in the advancement of the national prosperity.”¹⁵ Interestingly, Clay’s children were not the only ones to suffer health issues and death in the journey west towards Kentucky. The young politician had purchased four Hereford red cattle from England in 1816 in hopes of breeding them here. Though all four made it safely across the Atlantic Ocean, the 150-mile journey from Baltimore to Virginia proved to be deadly, killing off one of the prized cattle.¹⁶

Yet at the same time, disease proved to be one of Clay’s greatest allies during the Election of 1824, specifically the tragic illness of William Crawford. Following the collapse of the First Party System and the ascendancy of the Jeffersonian Republican Party, the political landscape became more split by personalities than policies. Debate over who would follow James Monroe to the presidency in 1825 became more of an inner party decision than a general contest. A powerful section of the Republican Party settled upon William Crawford as the choice to succeed. Langdon Cheves wrote to Clay as early as 1822 that, “Crawford will be Supported because it is believed he will be Strongly Supported elsewhere.”¹⁷ Likewise, Senator Samuel Smith of Maryland, in a letter to Jefferson, wrote that, “M^rCrawford is the best Candidate for that Office, and I shall give him my support.”¹⁸ Apart from some support for John Quincy Adams in New England and Clay’s own base in Kentucky, the majority of the country seemed comfortably behind Crawford. Private talk about his lack of ability or concerns over the democratic paradox of having the party choose a president for the nation, were drowned out by prospects of an easy and assured transition.

This assured coronation suddenly changed in September of 1823 when William Crawford suffered a debilitating stroke. He appears to have developed erysipelas, better known as St. Anthony’s Fire.¹⁹ Typically caused by streptococcus bacteria, the condition left him covered in a large, red rash. As was all too common at the time, the treatment prescribed by his physician proved to be more deadly than the actual illness. An overdose of lobelia apparently caused a paralytic stroke, rendering Crawford blind, deaf, and dumb.²⁰ Confined to his bed for eight weeks, Crawford’s closest associates did their best to restrict the flow of information regarding his condition. His absence was largely written off as a bout of some minor ailment. Writing to James Madison in October of 1823, President Monroe queried, “How is Mr. Crawford- and when do you think that he will be able to move? His family, were recovering their health, when I left the city.”²¹ John Q. Adams likewise simply lumped Crawford into a larger list of politicians and notables who were seasonally ill at the time.

There has been a very sickly time here these two Months; though not much mortality among persons of your acquaintance...Mr Crawford continues ill at Mr Senator Barbour’s in

¹⁵ Clay, in *The Papers of Henry Clay*, Vol. 2, 592.

¹⁶ Henry Clay to John S. Skinner, August 19, 1822, in *The Papers of Henry Clay*, Vol. 3, 277.

¹⁷ Langdon Cheves to Henry Clay, November 9, 1822, in *The Papers of Henry Clay*, Vol. 3, 314.

¹⁸ Samuel Smith to Thomas Jefferson, April 24, 1823, *Founders Online*, National Archives, accessed September 29, 2019, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/98-01-02-3481>.

¹⁹ Herbert L. Abrams, “Presidential Health and the Public Interest: The Campaign of 1992,” *Political Psychology* 16, no. 4 (December 1995): 796. William Wirt, the Anti-Masonic candidate for president in 1832, likewise was stricken with the condition, dying of it in 1834.

²⁰ A. J. Languth, *Union 1812: The Americans Who Fought the Second War of Independence* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), 390. The exact cause of Crawford’s apparent stroke and decline in health is debated, but regardless of its origins, its impact on the election was severe.

²¹ James Monroe to James Madison, October 17, 1823, in *The James Madison Papers at the Library of Congress*, Series: Series 2, Additional General Correspondence, 1780-1837, Microfilm Reel: 26. https://www.loc.gov/resource/mjm.26_1813_1814/

Virginia—Mrs Crawford who has just recovered from illness herself, went yesterday accompanied by Dr. Sim, to join her Husband. He is convalescent, but has been so ill, and recovers so slowly that he will probably not be here for several weeks.²²

Yet as the months wore on, those in the political sphere began to take note of the health of the designated successor. While a nomination caucus held in Congress in February of 1824 officially chose him to represent the party, Crawford's absence from the event spoke volumes. In a letter to James Madison written in April, Crawford himself explained that "the imperfection of my sight obliges me still to make use of the pen of my daughter."²³ Madison's reply of a few days later noted, "I am very sorry for the prolonged weakness of your sight. As it is probably a sympathetic effect of the cause which has impaired your general health, it may be expected to yield to its re-establishment."²⁴ An attempt by the candidate to travel to Monticello and gain Jefferson's blessing shortly afterwards was derailed by a second illness that only further led people to question his electability.²⁵

Due to both the perceived undemocratic nature of the process as well as concerns over the extent of Crawford's illness, states and local party organizations soon moved to nominate rival candidates. In February of 1824, Massachusetts nominated John Quincy Adams and soon after Pennsylvania chose General Andrew Jackson. A relapse of Crawford's condition in late spring and early summer merely worsened his political chances. Writing to Crawford in April, Thomas Jefferson noted that, "I enquire always with anxiety of the state of your health, and am concerned to learn that your convalescence is more slow than I had wished and hoped."²⁶ A four way contest thus developed between Crawford, Adams, Clay, and Jackson.

Interestingly, while many ignored Crawford's illness, periodicals and commentators seized upon Clay's health scares. Reports surfaced in both late 1822 and 1823 that the senator was dead or dying.²⁷ Suffering from a "bilious fever," Clay was confined to his bed in Ohio where he had travelled for business. Treatments with mercury seemed to only have worsened his conditions, and at least one newspaper, the *National Intelligencer*, reported his demise.²⁸ Due to the lack of communication across the states, residents and friends in Louisville believed the worst. Writing in February of 1823, Henry Shaw sarcastically related how, "You was sick- I mourned over it- you died I wept for you- you regained your health, I rejoiced & thanked my God for your deliverance."²⁹ While his condition improved enough to allow for his return to Kentucky and the nation's capital, his health remained rather frail throughout 1823.

Concurrently, by August of 1824, the full extent of Crawford's condition had become apparent. In a letter to Henry Clay, Josiah Johnson revealed that

Crawford had no doubt a slight paralytic stroke- he speaks with difficulty, & can scarcely pronounce many words- his tongue was much affected- his eyes are still weak- & he is incapable

²² John Quincy Adams to George Washington Adams (Oct. 21, 1823) *Founders Online*, National Archives, accessed September 29, 2019, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-03-02-4331>.

²³ William H. Crawford to James Madison, April 8, 1824, in *The James Madison Papers at the Library of Congress*, Series: Series 1, General Correspondence, 1723-1859, Microfilm Reel: 20. http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mjm.20_0825_0827

²⁴ James Madison to William H. Crawford, April 13, 1824, in *The James Madison Papers at the Library of Congress*, Series: Series 1, General Correspondence, 1723-1859, Microfilm Reel: 20. http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mjm.20_0843_0844

²⁵ Dumas Malone, *Jefferson and His Times, Vol. VI: The Sage of Monticello* (Boston: Little Brown & Company, 1981), 432.

²⁶ Thomas Jefferson to William H. Crawford, April 20, 1824, in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, Retirement Series, Vol. 7, J. Jefferson Looney, ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 422–426.

²⁷ James C. Klotter, *Henry Clay: The Man Who Would Be President* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 113.

²⁸ *National Intelligencer*, October 30, 1822.

²⁹ Henry Shaw to Henry Clay, February 11, 1823, in *The Papers of Henry Clay*, Vol. 3, 372.

of reading or writing- & I have no doubt he uses a facsimile. His walk is feeble and hobbling- I see no indications of restoration- I see no reason to hope he Can ever recover his faculties- The members of Congress will know the truth of this before they vote & if any unfavorable turn should take place it may throw him out of the Contest.³⁰

Crawford seems to have actually recovered much of his faculties by the fall of 1824, and many of his more ardent supporters were still reasonably confident of victory in the election. Thomas Jefferson himself noted, “there is nothing publicly interesting. That question will surely lie between Crawford and Adams; and whether it will go into Congress is still uncertain.”³¹ Yet in the end, Crawford finished a distant third in terms of electoral votes and fourth in popular totals. His victories in Virginia and his home state of Georgia, as well as several electoral votes in New York and Maryland, were enough to edge out Henry Clay but fell far behind Adams and Jackson.

Due to the lack of a clear winner, the Twelfth Amendment was invoked and the vote was thrown into the House of Representatives. The contest that followed was largely between Adams and Jackson, with Crawford syphoning off southern votes from the latter. Clay and Adams then famously orchestrated what became termed the “Corrupt Bargain,” pushing enough votes in the West towards Adams to secure his ascension to the presidency. The bitterness that resulted between Adams and Jackson tore the political tranquility of the nation apart and gave birth to the Second Party System. Even some former friends of Clay turned against him, “I did not expect that my old friend Ritchie would join in the general cry...He is struggling for a man, I for the country- he to elevate an unfortunate gentleman worn down by disease.”³² Political parties were reborn in America thanks in part to illness and possibly the misuse of a plant to treat a skin rash. Likewise, Crawford’s stroke also aided Clay’s own rise to the position of Secretary of State and led to the subsequent political duels with Jackson that defined his legacy.

Henry Clay’s initial foray into the State Department continued the trend of disease impacting his personal life. In fact, the year 1825 proved to be the deadliest in the history of the Clay household. The new secretary of state and his family departed for Washington in July, but after only a few days of travel, Clay’s twelve-year-old daughter Eliza fell ill outside of Cincinnati. The family halted to consult a physician before continuing on to Lebanon. There, his daughter’s condition worsened and the Clays remained for two weeks while doctors tried numerous remedies to address the typhoid that was most likely afflicting her. The new secretary wrote both to his friends to explain the situation as well as to the newly inaugurated president to apologize for his delay. On July 21, Clay wrote to President Adams that, “I have been detained with my family at this place by the illness of one of my children...I regret extremely the occurrence.”³³ Several days later, a second letter was dispatched to the White House, “I am still detained here by the illness of my daughter...I am greatly mortified and distressed by the occurrence.”³⁴ On July 25, the local newspaper reported, “We are pleased, however, to learn that there are symptoms of a change for the better and that she is likely to recover, which circumstances will enable Mr. Clay in 5 or 6 days probably to proceed on his journey to

³⁰ Josiah Johnson to Henry Clay, August 9, 1824, quoted in Klotter, fn. 27.

³¹ Thomas Jefferson to Francis Walker Gilmer, October 12, 1824, in Richard Beale Davis, ed., *The Correspondence of Thomas Jefferson and Francis Walker Gilmer* (Columbia: South Carolina University Press, 1946), 112.

³² Henry Clay to Francis Brooke, February 4, 1825, in Calvin Colton, ed. *The Private Correspondence of Henry Clay* (New York: A.S. Barnes, 1855), 113.

³³ Henry Clay to John Q. Adams, July 21, 1825, in Henry Clay, *The Papers of Henry Clay, Vol. 4* (Louisville: University of Kentucky, 1972), 546.

³⁴ Henry Clay to John Q. Adams, July 25, 1825, in *The Papers of Henry Clay, Vol. 4*, 550.

Washington.”³⁵ Assured of her eventual recovery, Clay proceeded by himself to the capital, eager to begin work in his new position. Yet only a week later, as Clay was nearing Washington D.C., he read in a local newspaper that his daughter had, in fact, died.

Henry Clay’s arrival in the capital brought little relief to himself or his family. His daughter Susan wrote from New Orleans on August 8 to discuss both her sister’s illness as well as the general health of her own family:

My eldest son enjoys very good health but his poor little brother has been sick for a long time...he has also had the fever caused by a large abcess [sic] which was forming in his side...I have had the fever two or three times occasioned by my having eaten too much fruit. New Orleans continues to be quite healthy and as the season is advancing we are in hopes we will pass it off without any yellow fever.³⁶

Just over a month later Susan was dead at the age of twenty from that very disease. A letter from George Eustis recounted,

Your daughter was taken sick on the 13th ins. The news of the death of her sister weighed heavily on her; it depressed her spirits and perceptibly affected her health. The attack was not violent but it was insidious; and her danger was not apprehended until the disease had so far advanced as to render all remedies unavailing. She expired on the 18th...of a malignant fever.³⁷

Losing two of his children in such a short span of time weighed heavily on Clay’s conscience and altered both his demeanor and work habits. As one historian noted, “Susan’s death may well mark the first time Henry questioned his own invincibility.”³⁸ Adams wrote, “Mr. Clay is in deep affliction having lost two daughters in the course of a month... his own health is so infirm that he told me he feared he should resign his office.”³⁹ A contemporary suggested that “the coldness and hauteur of his manner has vanished and a softness and tenderness and sadness characterize his manner.”⁴⁰ Clay spent his time as secretary of state alternating between working long hours and his own episodes of illness, with the latter largely attributable to the former. Apart from efforts to increase trade with Latin America, he accomplished little of note in the office. The philosophy of Adams, the taint of the Corrupt Bargain, and the various illnesses that assaulted both him and his family, severely limited Clay’s accomplishments while in the cabinet.

The rising tide of Jacksonianism, as Clay’s adversary rose to the presidency in 1828, took a heavy toll on his health. While visiting the family’s home in the capital for the last time in January of 1829, Margaret Bayard Smith recounted that “on the sofa was stretched at full length Mr. Clay face and all, completely cover’d with a dark cloak, which looked like a black pall...I had not seen him for three weeks and was shocked at the alteration in his looks. He was much thinner, very pale, his eyes sunk in his head.”⁴¹ Nor was Clay the only stricken member of Adam’s inner circle. “Gentlemen came in and enquiries were made about the other sick members of the Cabinet...How strange it is that every member of the administration, should be ill.”⁴² Far from simple melancholy of loss, Clay’s illness drove him to consult the most

³⁵ *The Western Star*, July 25, 1825.

³⁶ Susan Clay Duralde to Henry Clay, August 8, 1825, in *The Papers of Henry Clay*, Vol. 4, 571.

³⁷ George Eustis to Henry Clay, September 20, 1825, in *The Papers of Henry Clay*, Vol. 4, 665.

³⁸ Lindsey Apple, *The Family Legacy of Henry Clay: In the Shadow of a Kentucky Patriarch* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2011), 67.

³⁹ Allan Kevins, *The Diary of John Q. Adams* (New York: Scribner’s and Sons, 1951), 352.

⁴⁰ Margaret Bayard Smith to Mrs. Boyd, February 16, 1829, in Margaret Bayard Smith, *The First Forty Years of Washington Society* (New York: Scribner’s and Sons, 1906), 276.

⁴¹ Smith to Boyd, in *The First Forty Years of Washington Society*, 256.

⁴² Smith to Boyd, in *The First Forty Years of Washington Society*, 257.

prominent physician in Philadelphia, Dr. Philip S. Physick. Writing to Clay in February of 1829, Dr. Nathaniel Chapman opined, “Your letter was shown to Dr. Physick who unites with me in sincere regret, that your health is not more improved, though released as you will soon be from the cares & vexations of office, we confidently believe in its entire reestablishment.”⁴³ Chapman and Physick’s suggestion to Clay was to escape from the world of politics in order to improve his health, but it was advice that was soon ignored.

After a twenty-years absence from the Senate, Clay was returned to that august body by the legislature of Kentucky in late 1831. During the year that followed, he emerged as the most ardent opponent of President Jackson, battling him on numerous issues such as the re-chartering of the US Bank and the President’s veto of the Maysville Road Bill. Jackson’s advance age, failing health, and rumors of his desire not to run for a second term most likely inspired Clay to once again try his hand at running for the presidency. The 65-year-old executive was suffering from a number of disorders brought on in part by his frequent use of lead and mercury. By September of 1829, President Jackson was already discussing his plans for a quiet retirement at the Hermitage.⁴⁴ Despite this, Jackson decided to run again against Clay, producing a vicious rematch of the 1824 election.

Disease again emerged as a campaign issue, this time seized upon by the now divergent views of the two men and their respective parties. The year 1832 saw the arrival of cholera in the United States for the first time. The Second Cholera Pandemic had emerged in India in 1828 and, thanks to advances in transportation and British imperialism, by 1832 it reached the shores of America. Soon, one-third of the residents of Manhattan had fled to the countryside to avoid the illness while 4,000 deaths were reported in New Orleans by October. *Vibrio cholerae* thrived in the unsanitary, urban environments produced by the industrial revolution and quickly became a political tool for both parties. Many saw the disease as an affliction of the poor and the sinful. As one contemporary proclaimed, “Cholera was a scourge not of mankind, but of the sinner.”⁴⁵ Others used it to attack the industrialization and urbanization then sweeping the nation. Clay mentioned the disease frequently in his personal letters, following its progress in Kentucky and discussing possible counter measures and treatments. In keeping with traditional notions of medicine and the humors, Clay praised the use of calomel (mercury chloride) and opium for use as purgative agents.⁴⁶

As with many other issues at the time, the proper way to deal with cholera became a partisan topic. National Republicans generally favored quarantines and restrictions on immigration. Yet these tactics were viewed by Democrats as an affront to personal liberty, while politically the party could not afford to alienate the Irish or slow the arrival of voters. The question of how best to deal with the pandemic entered presidential politics once the Dutch Reform Synod of New York asked for a “general observance of a day of fasting, humiliation, and prayer” from the President. The coming of the pandemic so soon after the unfolding of the Second Great Awakening convinced many Americans of the Biblical nature of the outbreak.

It is, indeed, a very solemn spectacle to see sick persons carried through the streets in such vast numbers...Great fear and much excitement prevail almost amidst all classes of people. The

⁴³ Nathaniel Chapman to Henry Clay, February 22, 1829, in Henry Clay, *The Papers of Henry Clay*, Vol. 7 (Louisville: University of Kentucky, 1982), 625.

⁴⁴ Andrew Jackson to John Coffee, September 21, 1829, *Andrew Jackson Papers, 1775-1874*, Series: Series 1, General Correspondence and Related Items, 1775-1885, MSS 27532, Vol. 39.

⁴⁵ Charles E. Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years: The United States in 1832, 1849, and 1866* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962), 40.

⁴⁶ Henry Clay to Francis Brooke, Letter, August 2, 1833, in *The Private Correspondences of Henry Clay*, 367-368.

cholera! The cholera! ... Oh that his fear might lead the wicked inhabitants of this city to humble and unfeigned repentance.⁴⁷

President Jackson's reply, written in June, harkened back to Jefferson's Danbury Letter of 1802. Though he acknowledged "the efficacy of prayer," the president doubted the constitutional wisdom of proclaiming a day of fast.⁴⁸ Yet his opponents were quick to point out that Washington, Adams, and Madison had all proclaimed days of fasting, making this hardly an unprecedented or unconstitutional act.

Henry Clay quickly seized upon the incident, combining it with the President's dissolution of the US Bank, to produce a formidable platform.⁴⁹ In Congress, Clay introduced a resolution two weeks after Jackson's letter, requesting the president to set aside a day of fasting and prayer in order to implore God to "avert from our country the Asiatic scourge which is now traversing and devastating other countries."⁵⁰ The Democratic Senate approved the measure the next day by a vote of thirty to thirteen, with almost half of the President's party breaking ranks to support the bill. The overwhelmingly Democratic House, though, voted to table the measure in July. Clay must have expected the bill to go no further than the Senate, but he continued his verbal assault regardless.

Upper class Whigs were not left untouched by the scourge either. William H. Maynard, a state senator from New York, was organizing a trip to Ohio in June of 1832 when he was stricken with the illness. Maynard was an influential member of the Anti-Masonic Party and was hoping to travel to the state to cement an alliance between the two main anti-Jacksonian parties. Unfortunately, his death reduced these prospects. Stronger support from the Anti-Masonic Party would have allowed Clay and his party to win New Jersey, Vermont, and possibly Ohio as well. As Clay himself lamented in a later October letter to James Brown, "The Ohio Election has gone against us... owing, as it is said, to the want of arranging a proper concert between the Anti Masons and N. Republicans."⁵¹

As the election grew closer, some newspapers once again reported Henry Clay's death from cholera.⁵² A minor illness experienced by the senator while attending his daughter's wedding in Louisville in the fall of 1832, was soon magnified by newspapers to show that Clay had perished due to cholera. Clay had to take the unprecedented step of informing his friends that he was in fact very much alive: "You may probably hear that I caught the pestilence, and have been long since dead and buried. You are authorized to contradict, most positively, such a report if you should hear it."⁵³ Clay himself utilized the disease as a foil for his attacks on the terrors of Jacksonian Democracy: "Jacksonism! It is worse than the Cholera, because it has been more universal, and will be more durable. The Cholera performs its terrible office, and its victims are consigned to the grave, leaving their survivors uncontaminated. But Jacksonism has poisoned the whole Community, the living as well as the dead."⁵⁴

Despite his hopes, Clay was defeated by Jackson, who remained popular with the public. Clay spent the next four years organizing the Whigs in opposition to President Jackson, perhaps

⁴⁷ Addison A. to Sanford Ferguson, July 18, 1832, in *The Ferguson-Jayne Papers, 1826 - 1938*, edited by Mary S. Briggs (Interlaken, New York: Heart of the Lakes Publishing, 1981), 80.

⁴⁸ Andrew Jackson to the Synod of the Reformed Church, June 12, 1832, reprinted in John Spencer Bassett, ed., *Correspondence of Andrew Jackson*, Vol. IV (Washington: Carnegie Institution, 1929), 447.

⁴⁹ Adam Jortner, "Cholera, Christ, and Jackson: The Epidemic of 1832 and the Origins of Christian Politics in Antebellum" *Journal of the Early Republic* 27 (Summer 2007), 27.

⁵⁰ Henry Clay Remarks in the Senate, June 25, 1832, in *The Papers of Henry Clay, Vol. 8* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2015), 545.

⁵¹ Henry Clay to James Brown, October 23, 1832, in *The Papers of Henry Clay, Vol. 8*, 587.

⁵² Jackson's well known use of newspapers to push stories, and his party's control over many of the periodicals in the nation, is reminiscent of the actions by both parties in the campaign of 1800.

⁵³ Henry Clay to James Brown, October 23, 1832, in *The Papers of Henry Clay, Vol. 8*, 587.

⁵⁴ Henry Clay to Alexander Coffin, June 11, 1834, in *The Papers of Henry Clay, Vol. 8*, 725.

hoping to run again in 1836. Yet once again, his path was influenced by illness. In late 1835, he received news that his daughter Anne had fallen ill. Subsequently writing to his wife, Henry Clay admitted, "I feel very uneasy about our dear daughter, Anne. I sincerely hope that she may get well, and that all my apprehensions may prove groundless."⁵⁵ Clay even turned to prayer, a move quite out of character with his professed agnosticism. Unfortunately, his worst fears came to fruition as he received word on December 18 that his daughter had passed away. Struck down by the news, Clay was heard to exclaim, "Every tie to life is broken." The death of his last surviving daughter pushed Clay to consider early retirement. When combined with the lack of support in certain areas of the nation, Clay opted not to run for the presidency in 1836.⁵⁶

As the election of 1840 approached, many Whigs naturally looked towards Clay to run. The Panic of 1837, twelve years of Democratic rule, and the inability of Martin Van Buren to emerge from the shadow of Andrew Jackson's presidency all seemed to bode well for a Whig victory. At the Whig Convention of 1839 held in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, Clay faced generals William H. Harrison and Winfield Scott for the nomination. Though defeated, Clay was mollified with the party's choice of John Tyler of Virginia as the running mate. Harrison's subsequent victory and the Whig seizure of Congress, seemed to promise the return of a national bank, a new tariff policy, and a focus on internal improvements. Clay even turned down an offer to once again become the secretary of state in order to remain in Congress and push forward these pieces of legislation. Yet Harrison's sudden death only a month into his presidency shattered the hopes of the Whig party.

At the time of his inauguration, "Granny Harrison," was sixty-eight years old, the most elderly president yet. To combat Democratic suggestions that his log cabin persona meant he was uneducated and to calm fears in both parties over his age and allegations of his enfeeblement, the new president delivered a lengthy inaugural address.⁵⁷ Though edited down, it still stretched a record breaking two hours, keeping the aged executive outside in the bitterly cold March weather with no hat, gloves, or overcoat. A week later the President developed a cold, which quickly grew into pneumonia and pleurisy. Despite the use of laxatives, bleeding, leeches, cupping, and a Native American treatment involving the application of live snakes to his chest, the sixty-eight-year-old Harrison succumbed to either right lower lobe pneumonia and septicemia or hepatitis.⁵⁸

Though his death was certainly mourned by the nation, to some it simply verified what had been presaged by many regarding Harrison's age. Henry Clay penned in a letter several weeks later,

I share with you in surprize and regret on the account of the unexpected death of the President. I cannot say that it was altogether unexpected to me; for altho' I did not anticipate it quite so early, I told some of his Cabinet that, unless he changed his habits, he could not live long.⁵⁹

Perhaps Clay had even seen the possible early death of Harrison as a way to further weaken the office of the presidency, promote the Whig agenda through the cabinet, and strengthen his own power and that of Congress.

⁵⁵ Henry Clay to Lucretia Clay, November 19, 1835, in Colton, *Private Correspondence of Henry Clay*, 400-401.

⁵⁶ Smith, 375, Remini, 483, and Apple, 73.

⁵⁷ See Ronald J. Zboray, "Gender Slurs in Boston's Partisan Press During the 1840s," *Journal of American Studies* 34, no. 3 (December 2000): 413-446.

⁵⁸ Michael P. Riccards, "The Presidency: In Sickness and Health," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 7, no. 4 (Fall 1977): 220.

⁵⁹ Letter, Henry Clay to John L. Lawrence, April 13, 1841, quoted in Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: Norton, 2005), 522-523.

What transformed the situation from a simple inconvenience for the Whigs to an outright disaster was the ascension of Vice President John Tyler. Though picked to balance out the ticket and for his perceived loyalty to Clay, the new president proved to be opposed to much of the party's agenda. His constant opposition to the economic policies of the Whig Congress earned him the enmity of his new party and prevented the return of the Bank of the United States as well as numerous other Whig projects. Political marches were organized against the president, his cabinet resigned in protest, and a move was made to impeach him.

The President's image sank to the point that an outbreak of influenza in 1843 became known as *Tyler grippe*.⁶⁰ As a newspaper at the time stated, "The prevailing epidemic, the 'Tyler Grippe,' has not neglected us in its visitations, and left us almost as prostrate, physically, as its great namesake is in a political point of view."⁶¹ That year Henry Clay, who was also stricken with the disease, commiserated with a friend who had likewise been afflicted by the illness. "I sympathize with you in your suffering under the Tyler Grippe. I too have had it, and I found it as mean & insidious as its detestable name implies."⁶²

Harrison's death and Tyler's betrayal opened a path for Clay to once again seek his party's nomination in 1844. Yet his advanced age of sixty-seven and his frequent bouts of illness over the years led to concerns about his viability following the health impaired presidencies of Jackson and Harrison. Epes Sargent, in his campaign biography of the candidate, made sure to note that

Notwithstanding his varied and arduous labors, tasking his mental and physical powers to an extraordinary degree, and the several periods of dangerous illness, to which he has been subject, he bears in his personal appearance the promise of a vigorous, healthful, and protracted old age.⁶³

Yet in the end, a number of factors combined to cause Clay to lose the election to James K. Polk, a victory that helped to cement a generation of Manifest Destiny expansionism for the nation. The Kentuckian opposed both the policy and its associated wars for a number of reasons, including its tendency to spread pestilence: "War unhinges society, disturbs its peaceful and regular industry, and scatters poisonous seeds of disease and immorality, which continue to germinate and diffuse their baneful influence long after it has ceased."⁶⁴

All of the various events and political episodes of his life were also framed by the mental illness which also stalked the Clay family. In 1830, his twenty-eight-year-old eldest son, Theodore, was confined to an insane asylum. Already infamous for his excessive gambling and disinterest in general employment, Theodore was arrested following his stalking of a young girl. Having broken into the girl's home at night he threatened her father with a pistol, demanding a marriage. Theodore spent the next forty years largely within mental asylums, experiencing treatment that only worsened his condition. Fifteen years later, in 1845, Clay's youngest son, John Morrison Clay, was likewise confined to a mental asylum. "He exhibited strong and unequivocal demonstration of derangement, and I understand manifested it more decisively than his unfortunate brother did when he was first put in the Hospital."⁶⁵ One last tragedy to befall the sons of Henry Clay affected his own namesake whose wife, Julia died shortly after delivering her fifth child in 1840. Driven into deep depression, Henry, Jr., largely

⁶⁰ Zachariah Frederick Smith, *The History of Kentucky: From its Earliest Discovery and Settlement to its Historic Characters* (Louisville, Kentucky: Courier Journal Job Printing Company, 1892), 845.

⁶¹ *Sunbury American Journal*, July 29, 1843, 2.

⁶² Henry Clay to John M. Berrien, September 4, 1843, in *The Papers of Henry Clay* 9, 859.

⁶³ Epes Sargent, *The Life and Public Services of Henry Clay* (New York: Greeley, 1844), 79.

⁶⁴ Remini, 692.

⁶⁵ Henry Clay to Henry Clay, Jr., April 8, 1845, in *The Papers of Henry Clay, Vol. 10* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1991), 215.

abandoned his children and drifted aimlessly for years. The U.S.-Mexican War, though opposed by his father, seemed to offer a purpose to the young man and he enlisted in 1846. An illness kept him off of the battlefield and within Taylor's headquarters for much of this time in the war, ensuring his relative safety.⁶⁶ Yet a slight improvement resulted in his return to his Kentucky regiment and his subsequent death at the Battle of Buena Vista in February of 1847. Due to the delays associated with communication at the time, Henry Clay's last letter from his son, referenced in a missive to James Brown Clay in late February, mentioned his "bad spirits, owing to his having no prospect of active service."⁶⁷

His string of electoral losses did little to slow the legislative career of Henry Clay. During the Whig convention held in Philadelphia in 1848, he campaigned vigorously for the nomination, emerging a close second to General Zachary Taylor on the first ballot. Yet the usual concerns over his habits, regional unpopularity, and health all served to prevent any momentum behind his candidacy. In fact, Henry Clay was unable to even vote for Taylor during the general election "because he was confined to his bed for most of November for an unspecified illness."⁶⁸ Likewise, the cholera outbreak of 1848 prevented an extended meeting between the two men in New Orleans after the latter's victory. Clay wrote in January of 1849 that "[t]he breaking out cholera here prevented my meeting General Taylor in this city, as had been expected."⁶⁹ Despite these limitations, the election of the Whig Taylor promised some hope to Clay and the party despite Congress remaining in Democratic hands.⁷⁰

Almost immediately a major political crisis arose as California sought to be admitted as a state into the Union. The proposed state was bisected by the Missouri Compromise line, which had been negotiated by Clay in 1820. Likewise, concerns over the need to empower the Fugitive Slave Provision of the Constitution threatened to push the country towards civil war. The great compromisers of the previous generations were unable to reach an agreement on how best to defuse the situation and President Taylor, though a Southerner, stood opposed to any deal, wishing only to see California and New Mexico admitted as two large, free states.⁷¹ A convention was soon called in Nashville to discuss the possibility of secession, while in March of 1850 Daniel Webster wrote that, "Hence I fear, the administration is doomed, & the Whig party doomed with it."⁷²

Once again, disease proved to be the influential factor that directed history. Both Calhoun and Clay were stricken with tuberculosis, the former so sick that his speeches on the subject had to be read by others in Congress as he was too infirm to attend. Calhoun died first, in March, thus removing his objections to the bill, preventing immediate secession, and allowing moderates to seize control of the southern Democratic wing of Congress. As one periodical opined several months before, "If he were to die at this time, his death would be a blessing to the Union [...] it is a blessing his voice has not been heard in Congress this session on the Slavery question, for we believe it would only have served to...strengthen the disunion faction."⁷³ Clay's inability to push through the bill when combined with his own enfeebled condition, led to his withdrawal from the Senate in August to be replaced by Stephen Douglas of Illinois, a younger and more moderating influence.

⁶⁶ Zachary Taylor to Henry Clay, March 1, 1847 in *The Papers of Henry Clay*, Vol. 10, 312.

⁶⁷ Henry Clay to James Brown Clay (Feb. 24, 1847) in *The Papers of Henry Clay*, Vol. 10, 310.

⁶⁸ *Lexington Observer & Kentucky Reporter*, November 29, 1848.

⁶⁹ Henry Clay to Thomas B. Stevenson, January 31, 1849, in Colton, *Private Correspondence of Henry Clay*, 584.

⁷⁰ Former president Polk himself succumbed to the disease, most likely following a visit to New Orleans, in June of 1849.

⁷¹ *New York Daily Tribune*, July 12, 1850, 4.

⁷² Daniel Webster to Jonathan Prescott Hall, May 18, 1850, in Rachel Sheldon, *Washington Brotherhood: Politics, Social Life, and the Coming of the Civil War* (Durham: UNC Press, 2013), 74-75.

⁷³ "John C. Calhoun," *The Evansville Daily Journal*, March 7, 1850, 2.

Perhaps equally important to the success of the compromise was the illness and death of President Taylor on July 9, 1850. While attending a Fourth of July celebration at the Washington Monument, Taylor

called for some refreshments, and ate heartily of cherries and wild berries, which he washed down with copious draughts of iced milk and water. At dinner he applied himself again to the cherries...and in an hour was seized by cramps, which soon took the form of violent cholera morbus.⁷⁴

Attempts by his doctors to save him probably only worsened his condition. While the exact cause of his demise is unimportant, his removal as a stumbling block to the impending compromise was historically valuable.

The new president, Millard Fillmore, was more amenable to the compromise, because he thought that it would preserve the union.⁷⁵ As well, Clay's replacement, Stephen Douglas, was able to pass the bill as a series of measures, thus piecing together various coalitions to achieve the compromise. Clay's absence due to illness proved to be more valuable to the compromise than his presence. Thanks to tuberculosis and acute gastroenteritis, North and South were placated and civil war was averted for another decade. In fact, it is not hyperbole to state that the Compromise of 1850 helped to win the war for the North. The South would have arguably stood a much better chance of successfully seceding in 1850. Many of the advantages of population, railroad, and industry, as well as the fervent abolitionism of sections of the Republican Party, emerged only in the latter half of the 1850s. Every year that revolt was delayed by the passage of the compromise helped to further increase the North's prospects of victory.⁷⁶

Clay himself did not long survive this last, great victory, finally succumbing to tuberculosis in June of 1852. Writing to his son, James Brown Clay, in April of that year, the elder statesman mentioned, "My health continues very feeble, so much so that I write with no comfort or ease as you may infer from this letter being written by the pen of a friend...My own own [sic] opinion of the case is less favorable than that of my physicians."⁷⁷ The man who had received his start as the pen of George Wythe was closing his career in the mold of his mentor. Shortly before noon on June 29, Clay fell victim to tuberculosis.

Henry Clay's life was intersected by various episodes of mental and physical illness. His initial rise in Virginia and Kentucky society stemmed in large part from the ill-health of George Wythe. Likewise, the deaths of his own children during the arduous journeys to Washington helped to solidify his staunch support of internal improvements. Finally, sickness helped to push him towards the presidency, achieve the final compromise of his life and preserve the union which he loved so dearly. Disease and its impact on individuals and larger historical events is an often understudied subject, something that is especially true concerning the life of Henry Clay.

To fully understand history and the impact of varied factors on the lives of individuals, larger social trends, and momentous events, effort should always be made to analyze the part played by illness. While investigations into the role played by economics, race, gender, resources, etc. are valuable, a focus on more biological and natural elements such as pestilence should receive equal attention. Humans are at the mercy of nature, and perhaps their greatest

⁷⁴ Henry Montgomery, *The Life of Major General Zachary Taylor* (Auburn, NY: Derby, Miller & Company, 1850), 425-426.

⁷⁵ See Millard Fillmore's speech in the *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, December 7, 1850, 3.

⁷⁶ For complete coverage of the compromise and its impact on the impending war, see John C. Waugh's *On the Brink of Civil War: The Compromise of 1850 and How it Changed the Course of American History* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003).

⁷⁷ Henry Clay to James Brown Clay, April 10, 1852, in *The Papers of Henry Clay*, Vol. 10, 964.

achievements have arisen in overcoming these obstacles. Traditional studies of the role of family, religion, party politics, and economics on the life and accomplishments of Henry Clay are only made stronger when analyzed in conjunction with the impact that illness had upon his life.