

Book Review: *On the Brink of Civil War: The Compromise of 1850 and How it Changed the Course of American History*, John C. Waugh, Wilmington, Delaware, Scholarly Resources, Inc., 2003. No. 13 in The American Crisis Series, Books on the Civil War Era. 217 pages, \$17.95, paperback. Reviewed by Daniel H. Reigle, Cincinnati Civil War Round Table.

As the 31st Congress convened during a bitter winter storm in December, 1849, it faced five major issues: (1) whether California would be admitted for statehood with its draft constitution that outlawed slavery; (2) whether slavery would be prohibited or allowed in the Utah and New Mexico territories, newly wrested from Mexico, when they were ready for statehood; (3) whether Texas would be allowed to claim part of New Mexico, including Santa Fe, now part of the Federal territory; (4) whether slavery and/or the slave trade would be abolished in Washington, D.C.; and, (5) how the increasing “problem” of fugitive slaves would be handled.

Henry Clay was returning to the Senate from Kentucky after an 8-year absence that included two unsuccessful attempts at the Presidency. He joined his two colleagues in the “Great Triumvirate” that had dominated politics in the Senate in the first half of the century, Daniel Webster of Massachusetts and John Calhoun of South Carolina. They led a Congress of three parties (Democrats, Whigs, and Free-Soilers) angrily split sectionally (north, south) and in their attitude toward compromise on the five major issues. Further, the Congress convened in a climate of tension which had been building from the Missouri Compromise of 1820 and the Nullification Crisis of 1832, and boiling during the recent war with Mexico (that some northern Whigs saw as a war contrived to extend slavery) and the furious debate in the last Congress over Pennsylvania Representative David Wilmot’s proposal to ban slavery from all new land acquired from Mexico. Further, President Zachary Taylor, a slave-owner from Louisiana and military hero of the war with Mexico, was confounding southern expectations of him by building a strong alliance with anti-slavery New York Senator William Seward and by coming to the conclusion that it was the Southerners who were being unreasonable and whose position on the territories was threatening the “greatest of calamities”, the dissolution of the Union.

John C. Waugh, a past speaker at CCWRT (September, 2000, “The Politics of the 1864 Election”), has created in this short book a very readable, concise summary of the tangled issues and volatile relationships in the Senate as it wrangled through ten months of acrid, frustrating debate on these issues before passing a set of bills in late September that would become known as the Compromise of 1850. The book is one of fourteen published as “The American Crisis Series: Books on the Civil War Era” by Scholarly Resources, Inc. The book itself well-constructed, with clear photographs of major participants, a substantial bibliography, careful citation of sources, and no obvious typos or printing errors.

We know from Jack Waugh’s previous books, among them *The Class of 1846* and *Reelecting Lincoln*, that he is able to construct clear narrative using substantial research in both primary and secondary sources, and he does so again in this book, drawing heavily on the *Congressional Globe*’s daily publication of Senate speeches, debate, and voting. Along the way, he develops illuminating sketches not only of the primary characters (Clay, Webster, Calhoun, Taylor), but also of important participants less well known to most of us, such as Millard Fillmore and David Wilmot. An intriguing side-effect is his description of the views and roles of many who will later become primary participants in the war, including Jefferson Davis, William Seward, Alexander Stephens, Salmon Chase, and John McClernand.

I recommend the book for a better understanding of the issues of slavery, territorial expansion, and the threat of secession at the point in time when events have rendered the Missouri Compromise obsolete, and as the nation enters its ten-year slide into war through the Kansas-Nebraska Act, bleeding Kansas, destruction of the Whig Party and formation of the Republican Party, the Dred Scott decision, and Harper’s Ferry. I would question, however, the choice of subtitle for the book: I am not sure the Compromise of 1850 “changed the course of American history”. It seems to me that, unfortunately, it was not able to change the course of American history. The debates continued, the differences deepened, and the war came.