



## PROFILES IN COURAGE

Teacher's Guide

# DANIEL WEBSTER

### CREDITS:

Starring Martin Gabel, Martine Bartlett, Sandy Kenyon, Robert F. Simon, Malcolm Atterbury, and Carl Benton Reid. Written by A.J. Russell. Directed by Robert Gist. Produced by Gordon Oliver and Robert Saudek Associates. Inspired by John F. Kennedy's Pulitzer Prize-winning book. **50 minutes.** Guide prepared for Social Studies School Service by Robert D. Barnes, 1983.

### OBJECTIVES:

- To understand the difficulty and frustration inherent in compromise.
- To examine the contribution of Daniel Webster to the preservation of the Union.
- To discuss the difference between compromise on issues and compromise on principles.
- To understand the meaning of moral courage.

### BACKGROUND:

On March 7, 1850, Daniel Webster spoke to a packed Senate chamber:

"Mr. President, I wish to speak today not as a Massachusetts man, nor as a Northern man, but as an American... I speak for the preservation of the Union..."

The issue was slavery, and it had bitterly divided the nation. In the North there were demands for the total abolition of slavery and in the South there was growing talk of secession.

### SYNOPSIS:

Senator Henry Clay, a Southerner, often a political opponent but a trusted friend, pays a late night call to the Washington, D.C., residence of Daniel Webster, senator from Massachusetts.

Appealing to Webster's commitment to the country, Clay asks him to set aside his strong antislavery sen-

timents and support what will become known as the Compromise of 1850, or the Clay Compromise. Under the plan, California will be admitted into the Union as a free state, and the slave trade (but not slavery) will be abolished in the District of Columbia. But as a gesture to the South, the Fugitive Slave Act will be strengthened. Webster agrees to consider Clay's proposal.

Webster's abhorrence of slavery is reinforced when he views slaves penned for auction in Washington, yet he is also tormented by the thought of civil war.

Webster in a meeting with his son is told of a growing constituency seeking a Webster presidency. Troubled financially and in poor health, Webster tells his son he is considering supporting the Clay Compromise. His son tells him what he already knows: This will be political suicide.

Returning to Massachusetts, Webster's fears are substantiated by angry, influential antislavery constituents. They will accept no compromise.

Webster returns to Washington. The most respected and accomplished speaker of his day, Webster captivates the Senate audience with a three-hour speech supporting the Clay Compromise.

He is denounced by his Northern supporters: "No living man has done so much to debauch the conscience of the nation," rails Theodore Parker. Emerson says that Webster demonstrates an "absence of moral faculty," and Whittier mourns that "from those great eyes the soul has fled: When faith is lost, when honor dies, the man is dead!"

Webster is a broken man, but the Compromise passes and war is averted for ten years.

**VOCABULARY:**

The following words and phrases appear in the program. Teachers may wish to check for student understanding:

oratory	flippant
advocate	joviality
abolition	converged
wherewithal	inevitable
vile	abhor
Compromise of 1850	avert
Fugitive Slave Acts	reconciliation
equitable	enfeeble
secession	recipient
eloquence	debauch
inducement	odious
refute	thwarted
constituency	

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:**

1. Why was the Compromise of 1850 unacceptable to many Northerners and Southerners alike? Give examples.
2. Why did Senator Clay choose Webster to help him pass his compromise? Give several reasons.
3. Describe and explain Webster's reaction to the episode at the slave auction.
4. What is the significance of the scene where Webster reminisces with an old Massachusetts friend on a wagon ride? Consider his friend's ordered, simple life.
5. What attitudes are presented at the meeting with Emerson, Parker, and the other New England intellectuals? How does Webster respond to their attempts to sway him?
6. What problems in Webster's personal life might have contributed to his frustration and sense of doom?

**ACTIVITY:**

Have the entire class "brainstorm" for 15–20 minutes to develop a list of controversial issues. Record their list on the chalkboard. Ask each student to choose one of the issues where they are both knowledgeable and have a strong opinion in one direction. Working individually on paper, each student should list several of his/her strongest arguments and several strong arguments he/she might expect an opponent to advance. Ask each student to develop a compromise that will equitably strike a middle ground. A follow-up discussion might consider the difficulty and perhaps unsatisfactory outcome of the compromises.

**FOR RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION:**

1. Find out what happened in the period between the Clay Compromise and the Civil War. Events to consider might include the Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854), the Dred Scott Decision (1857), the Lincoln-Douglas Debates (1858), and John Brown's Raid at Harper's Ferry (1859).
2. In the 1950s and 1960s the North and South were divided on the issue of civil rights for black Americans. Find out what specific issues were involved. How were they resolved? You might wish to consider such issues as integration of education, voting rights, access to public facilities, and equal employment opportunities. Are any of these or other civil rights issues still unresolved in your community today. What solutions do you suggest?