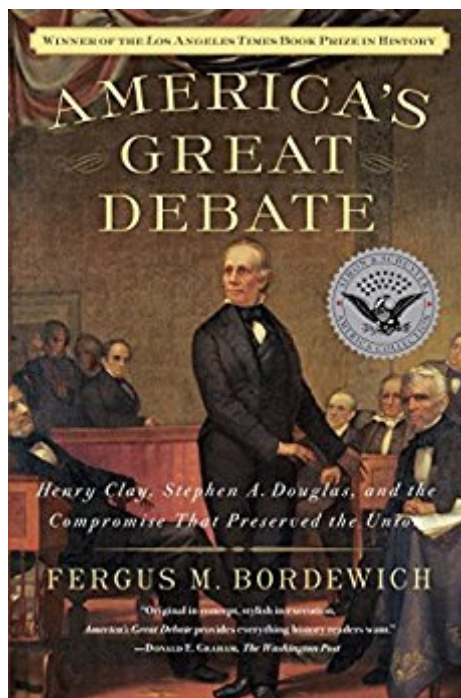


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America's Great Debate: Henry Clay, Stephen A. Douglas, And The Compromise That Preserved The Union



Synopsis

The Mexican War introduced vast new territories into the United States, among them California and the present-day Southwest. When gold was discovered in California in the great Gold Rush of 1849, the population swelled, and settlers petitioned for admission to the Union. But the U.S. Senate was precariously balanced with fifteen free states and fifteen slave states. Up to then states had been admitted in pairs, one free and one slave, to preserve that tenuous balance in the Senate. Would California be free or slave? So began a paralyzing crisis in American government, and the longest debate in Senate history. Fergus Bordewich tells the epic story of the Compromise of 1850 with skill and vigor, bringing to life two generations of senators who dominated the great debate. Luminaries such as John Calhoun, Daniel Webster, and Henry Clay—who tried unsuccessfully to cobble together a compromise that would allow for California's admission and simultaneously put an end to the nation's agony over slavery—were nearing the end of their long careers. Rising stars such as Jefferson Davis, William Seward, and Stephen Douglas—who ultimately succeeded where Clay failed—would shape the country's politics as slavery gradually fractured the nation. The Compromise saved the Union from collapse, but it did so at a great cost. The gulf between North and South over slavery widened with the strengthened Fugitive Slave Law that was part of the complex Compromise. In America's Great Debate Fergus Bordewich takes us back to a time when compromise was imperative, when men swayed one another in Congress with the power of their ideas and their rhetoric, when partisans on each side reached across the aisle to preserve the Union from tragedy.

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Customer Reviews

Believe me, I hadn't been thinking a whole lot about the Compromise of 1850 lately but an excellent review of this book in the Wall Street Journal piqued my interest -making me realize how little I actually knew about that crucial time, less yet how pivotal the events were in American History and how integral they were to the Civil War 10 years later. Not only does this book read like a gripping novel, but it provided me with a truly new and genuinely expanded understanding of how the US arrived at the War Between the States! 1850 was just the first skirmish, so to speak, a first spark that was extinguished, unlike the next spark that would engulf the nation. But yet more enlightening for me was the concept that had the war actually begun in 1850 there is a strong likelihood that the Confederates could have emerged victorious! The insights into the workings of Congress alone are worth the price of admission. And, oh, what a cast of characters that jump from the pages full of life: Stephen A. Douglas, Jefferson Davis, Millard Fillmore, Henry Clay, John C. Calhoun, Daniel Webster, Sam Houston. I have to quote a line here from the dust jacket that says it all: "A peerless narrative of one of the most momentous --and ambiguous- episodes in American History: the compromise that both saved the Union and, ultimately, destroyed it." Now, lately, I'm thinking about the Compromise of 1850 a lot thanks to this marvelous historical tome. Highly recommended.

At first I was going to say that this is a book only for history buffs, to keep casual readers from wasting their time, but I don't think it's even for all history buffs, because I am one and I didn't care for this book. It's not terrible, but it's just too much of conveying-all-the-facts and not enough historical-analysis-of-events. This book is all about debate. But the problem is that debate (especially political debate) gets to be pretty convoluted and complex. Bordewich seems to leave nothing out. Every idea, every proposal, every speech, every piece of minutia is included. It gets to be a bit head-spinning as the story line seems to lurch back and forth through varying versions of varying ideas. Now, I'm not saying it's all bad. It's a very laudable effort. This is a daunting topic and I'm glad Bordewich took it on, but it seems like this book could have benefitted from a bit more editing or a better approach. It's far too overwhelming to comprehend for the average reader. Unless you enjoy

the nitty gritty of political and legislative debate, this book is probably not the best book for understanding the 1850 compromise. The subtitle is also a bit misleading. It seems to suggest that Clay and Douglas will feature equally in this book, but they do not. Douglas gets limited mention until near the end when he manages to do what Clay had failed to do, but even then Douglas seems like a minor character in this grand scheme. This is not so much a complaint about the content of the book, but of the poorly chosen subtitle. All in all, if you are interested in the debate over slavery and the causes of the Civil War, this is probably worth reading, but it might be worth taking the time to become fully familiar with the 1850 compromise first so everything will make sense.

Reading Brodewitch's account of the debate over the Compromise of 1850 was like reading the New York Times today. A country bitterly divided, no middle political ground, and issues so serious it would change if not destroy the nation. Brodewitch makes Clay, Webster, Calhoun, and even Stephen Douglas come alive as we watch them struggle to cobble together the compromise that saved the Union, if only for a short time. Their courage to put country over party was the key to their success. I agree with Brodewitch's conclusion that the Compromise of 1850 gave the North a precious 10 years it needed to get ready for the war that came. The North became radicalized over the Fugitive Slave Law and began to muster the will and the means to fight and win the war with the South. I am left to wonder if a Clay or Douglas will emerge today to forge an economic compromise we so desperately need today? Great history well told.

I have read short chapters or paragraphs in other books about this period of history and I have read many biographies of Clay and Douglas but here the author gives us an exciting detailed presentation of what went on. And the little details are what make the story even more interesting. If you are interested in the Civil War era then you have to read this book to see what delayed the war for a few years and it gives you more of an insight as to what really was the cause of the war.

Fergus M. Bordewich brings an excellent history and story of the great debate of 1850, which saved the Union but at the same time, I feel, showed that the United States could not continue to develop complex compromises for many more years before it would be torn apart. There is an excellent cast of characters, most notably Henry Clay at the end of his career and life, Stephen Douglas, Jefferson Davis, Daniel Webster, John C. Calhoun, and others of great statesmanship, superb oratory, and intensely opinionated regarding their views on slavery, and its containment or expansion. As you read through this book, you understand that the South was not interested in compromise, and

certainly not in being a part of a Union that they felt was set up against them. I suppose that a bloody civil war was unavoidable and so it came about a little more than a decade later. No matter how stirring the prose, the oratory, the reasoning, and the appealing, it is evident that the nation was bent on self destruction. For those who would argue that the war was not about slavery, this book will certainly expel that idea. It was totally about slavery, and while it may have been disguised in states rights, it was about slavery. This book is a good companion to *We Have the War Upon Us: The Onset of the Civil War, November 1860-April 1861* and provides excellent background material to help the reader understand that by the end of 1860, after the Lincoln election and prior to the inaugural, we were destined to be divided and resolve the political differences on the battlefields that proved to be the deadliest war in our history.

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