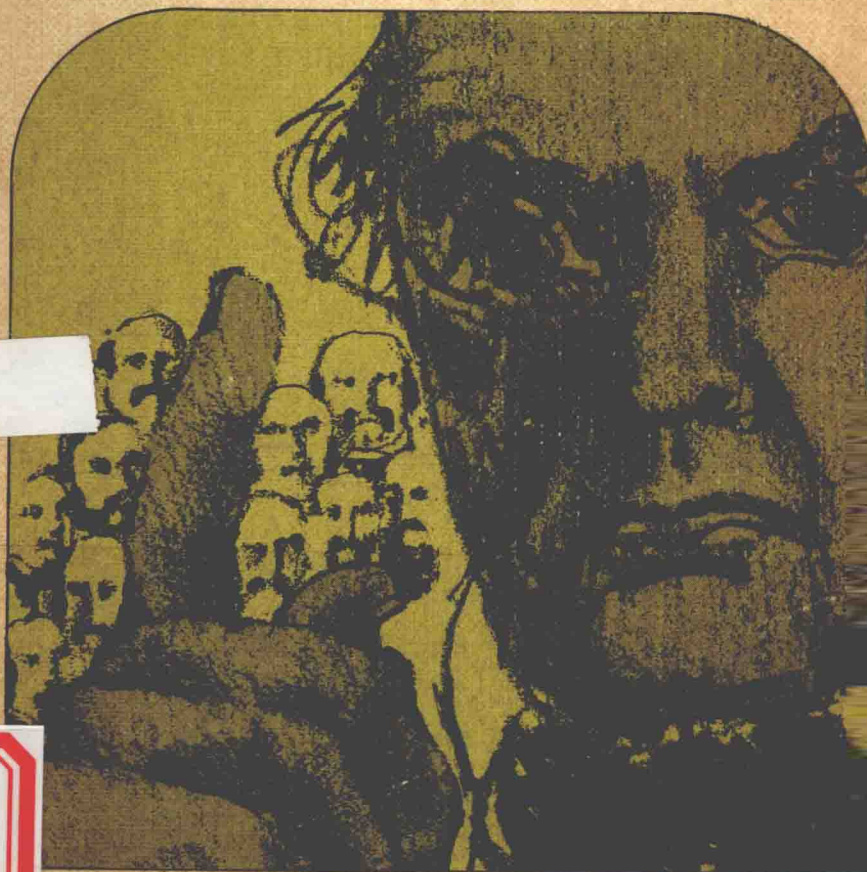


Library of American Biography/EDITED BY OSCAR HANDLIN

Richard N. Current

Daniel Webster

and the Rise of National Conservatism



Richard N. Current

Daniel Webster
and the
Rise of
National Conservatism



Edited by Oscar Handlin

Little, Brown and Company • Boston • Toronto

COPYRIGHT, 1955, BY RICHARD N. CURRENT

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. NO PART OF THIS BOOK IN EXCESS OF FIVE
HUNDRED WORDS MAY BE REPRODUCED IN ANY FORM WITHOUT
PERMISSION IN WRITING FROM THE PUBLISHER

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NO. 54-7468

B

*Published simultaneously in Canada
by Little, Brown & Company (Canada) Limited*

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Daniel Webster
and the
Rise of
National Conservatism

***To
Rose***

Editor's Preface

AFTER 1810 new personalities and new issues came to dominate the American political scene. A new generation moved to the forefront of events, and in the next half century confronted the consequences of tremendous territorial and economic changes. As the nation's boundaries reached westward to the Pacific and as the plantation and factory system recast the modes of production, the problems of politics took on a fresh configuration.

Often the troubled men of these decades were tempted to look back upon their predecessors with envy. The issues, it seemed, had been much clearer in the Revolutionary years when the common British enemy had drawn the nation together, when it was possible to define tyranny and liberty in simple terms, and when the pressure of crisis had given a plain meaning to the common interest of the commonwealth. In the retrospective view of the later era, the actual divisions of the earlier period faded away and left an impressive appearance of harmony and unity.

A sad contrast indeed with their own days! The War of 1812, unlike that of 1776, came to an inglorious end; and thereafter conflicting interests wrangled interminably

about the tariff or the currency, about internal improvements and the bank, while the portentous slavery issue reaching into the territories seemed to threaten the future of the Union itself. Often enough the question was asked whether the descendants of the Revolutionary patriots were fulfilling the promises of their valiant ancestors.

In some sections of the country the heady currents of expansion were exciting enough to still occasional qualms on this account. But the merchants and the prosperous country squires of New England felt a growing unease at the course of national development. Having earned their wealth in the flush post-Revolutionary decades, they sought stability, whether in trade or in the newly developing industries. As the country grew and their section lost in relative importance, they came to fear the impetuous actions of wild new men heedless of established personal and property rights. Yet even the most perturbed of the New Englanders found it difficult to surrender the democratic faith that was their heritage from the Revolution. Rather they longed for some saving line of action and body of ideas that would temper the will of the majority with respect for property rights and the interests of minorities — including their own. Their point of departure was the political theory of John Adams and his Revolutionary contemporaries; under the pressure of the practical necessities of their own time the New England merchants contrived from it a conception of national conservatism that has had continuing significance to our own times.

Daniel Webster played a crucial role in this development. Himself the product of the New England back country and the son of a family of Federalist squires, he entered in early life upon an intimate association with the

merchants of Boston for whom he was often to speak in national affairs. Thereafter his career was inextricably bound up with the most important events of the period that led to the Civil War.

His colorful life is instructive, however, for more than the light it throws on that fateful period. His experience reveals also the difficulties and dilemmas encountered by the men in our past who wished to work out a conservative philosophy for American politics. From that point of view Richard Current's incisive analysis has a direct and continuing pertinence for the citizens of a democratic republic.

OSCAR HANDLIN

Contents

<i>Editor's Preface</i>	ix
I Substance, Not Form (1782–1816)	3
II Power and Property (1816–1827)	24
III Words Are Things (1827–1833)	47
IV Hate the Rich (1833–1836)	70
V The New Democracy (1836–1840)	91
VI Fair Negotiation (1841–1844)	115
VII Example of a Republic (1845–1848)	136
VIII Exigent Interests (1849–1852)	158
IX Posterity, Its Judgment (1852–1952)	184
<i>A Note on the Sources</i>	203
<i>Index</i>	207

Daniel Webster
and the
Rise of
National Conservatism

I

Substance, Not Form

1782-1816

"We are, sir, from principle and habit, attached to the Union of the states. But our attachment is to the substance, and not to the form."

IN THE BEGINNING both nature and man were kind to Daniel Webster. Though frail and sickly as a boy, with a head a bit large for his body, he had the makings of one of America's most magnificent physical specimens; and that oversized head contained a brain with startling powers of assimilation and retention. His childhood was happy, and throughout his life he clung with more than ordinary fondness to his early memories. He was born on January 18, 1782. The world he first knew, in the valley of the Merrimack, near the middle of New Hampshire, to others seemed inhospitable with its long, deep winters and its granite hills. But he remembered best its inviting aspects — the summer sun and shade in the woods and on the waters about his father's farm, which lay on meadowland along the riverbank. It was, for him, a world of well-disposed people. He seldom lacked attention and appreciation as he grew up.

He did not want for inspiration, either. His father was a man to stir the pride of any son. Ebenezer Webster, six feet six, with his broad shoulders and full chest, his Roman nose, his black hair and eyes and his skin almost as dark, looked the born soldier and frontiersman that he was. After fighting with Rogers's Rangers in the French and Indian War, he pioneered on the upper Merrimack, then went off to command a company in the Revolution. Back home again in Salisbury, Captain Webster farmed and kept a tavern while filling one role after another in the public life of the town: highway surveyor, moderator of the town meeting, selectman, town clerk, coroner, judge. As a delegate to the state convention of 1788, he voted to ratify the new Federal Constitution, and as a presidential elector the next year he cast his ballot for his old acquaintance of Revolutionary days, George Washington.

From his father, Daniel heard many a story of the early settlers, of red men and redcoats, of far-off things and battles long ago. Daniel became a man of peace, not war, yet all his life he delighted in that lore of fighting, revered the sites of historic bloodshed, and treasured such relics as the two silver buttons his father had picked up on the battlefield of Bennington. He felt honored when old General Stark told him he had, like Captain Webster, a complexion most suitable for a soldier, one so dark that burned gunpowder would not change it.

From his father he also heard about the great men of the country, and much indeed about the greatest of them all, who was first in war, first in peace, and first in Daniel's heart. When President Washington lost the support of Thomas Jefferson, and politics divided people into Federalists and Republicans, there could be no more question

about Daniel's sympathies than about his father's. "Carry me back home!" the aging captain was supposed to have cried when he fell sick in a village that had gone for Jefferson. "I don't want to die in a Republican town."

Among Ebenezer Webster's ten children, five of whom were born to his first wife and five to his second, Daniel was the youngest except for one girl. He loved the farm but not the labor of it, and his brothers and sisters, like his father, yielded to his winning ways which, as much as his physical weakness, often enabled him to escape the more irksome family chores. His favorite brother, Ezekiel, did his own work and much of Daniel's too. Once, at hay-ing time, when Daniel could not or would not "hang" (adjust) his scythe to satisfy his father, the latter told him to hang it to suit himself, so he hung it in a tree and went off to play with one of his sisters, while everybody laughed.

He liked nothing better than an appreciative audience, and as an expert reader, he was always ready to perform. His mother or his older sisters had taught him his letters from the Bible when he was very young, or so he afterward supposed, though he could not recollect how or when he had learned to read. To teamsters stopping at his father's tavern he recited from the Scriptures while he watered their horses, and these men were much taken with the bright lad they knew as "little Black Dan." An illiterate Yorkshireman, a deserter from the British army, who lived with his wife on a corner of the Webster farm, depended on Daniel to read him newspaper accounts of England's fortunes in the war with France. Years later Webster apostrophized his long-gone Yorkshire friend: "Thou hast carried me many a mile on thy back, paddled me

over, and over, and up and down the stream, and given whole days in aid of my boyish sports, and asked no meed, but that, at night, I would sit down at thy cottage door, and read to thee some passage of thy country's glory!"

Daniel received the best of his early education from newspapers that the occasional post rider brought, from the political gossip of wayfarers at the farmhouse tavern, from his mother's Bible, and from the books in the circulating library his father had helped to found. When well enough he also went to school at the different houses, sometimes two or three miles away, where the schoolmaster boarded in succession around the township. He won prizes for his excellence at the rote-learning of that day, quickly memorizing long strings of Biblical verses or stanzas from the hymnal.

At thirteen, as a casual helper in the local lawyer's office, he picked up a Latin grammar, committed it to memory, and made such an impression that his employer insisted he should go on to an academy. To Exeter the captain accordingly took his son, shod in clumsy cowhide and dressed in homespun which no longer fitted. Here, away from home, Daniel for the first time failed to shine. Dreading the ridicule of his more sophisticated classmates, the orator-to-be was too weak and nervous even to get up and open his mouth when his turn at declamation came. After a couple of terms, the family funds ran low and he quit Exeter; at fifteen he was teaching a country school not far from home. Again a *deus ex machina* intervened, this time in the person of a neighboring minister of the gospel, who declared that Daniel's talents marked him for college and who offered to prepare him for it.

Though Webster's phrase later described it as a "small

college," Dartmouth was actually a large and flourishing institution, numbering nearly a hundred and fifty students and graduating larger classes than any of its contemporaries except Harvard. Among his fellow students in Hanover the youth from Salisbury, now growing into robust and handsome manhood, soon found a satisfying place. He did well enough in the classroom, though he was too casual with his studies to become a top scholar. He stood out above all the rest in the most highly esteemed competitive sport, which was public speaking.

His reputation reached the local villagers, and while yet a junior he was invited to deliver their Fourth of July address. "I had not then learned," he apologized in after years, "that all true power in writing is in the idea, not in the style." And the style at Hanover, on that July 4, 1800, was perhaps a little overdone (though less bombastic than in hundreds of other places on the same day). But the ideas, if unoriginal, were good enough to appeal to the strong Federalist proclivities of the campus and the community in 1800, and good enough for Webster to repeat with variations for half a century thereafter: the beauties of the Federal Constitution; the "virtuous manner" in which it had been administered by President Washington and his successor John Adams; the blessings of peace in the United States, while war continually devastated Europe; the expansion of the "gentle empire" of science and learning from Maine to Florida; the special destiny of America, "designed to be inhabited by a nobler race of men."

After his graduation Webster spent several years in rather desultory preparation for a legal career. He read law with the attorney at home, then taught school in Frye-

burg, Maine, and finally took the bold step of going all the way to Boston and introducing himself to one of the city's most distinguished advocates, Christopher Gore. He won his way immediately into the good graces of the genial Gore, who became his instructor, patron, and friend. An ardent anti-Jeffersonian, long resident in England, Gore confirmed him in his preference for the Federalist party as against the Republican and for English ways as opposed to French.

A gentleman of well-cultivated tastes, Gore also introduced him to some of the delights of good living. Once, when Webster was unwell, Gore asked him how he lived, and Webster said he fared rather poorly at his humble lodgings, ate corned beef and cabbage, drank nothing except plain water. "That will not do," said Gore. "You must drink a glass of good wine occasionally." Webster replied: "I cannot afford to drink wine." Taking the hint, Gore began to supply him with occasional bottles from a well-stocked garret. "I recovered my health," Webster related more than forty years afterward. "But, alas! like a beleaguered city which is compelled to call in the aid of auxiliary forces, I repulsed the enemy; but, the auxiliaries having established themselves in the citadel, I have never been able to dispossess them."

Gore helped his protégé to make a decision that was crucial to the latter's career. Daniel's father needed financial support in his old age, the college education of his sons — Ezekiel as well as Daniel — having left a burden of debt. By teaching school Daniel had helped with Ezekiel's college expenses and had contributed something, but not enough, toward paying off the mortgage. Both the Webster boys spent faster than they could earn or beg or