

DANIEL WEBSTER AND THE CANADIAN REBELLIONS, 1837-1838

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Politician, Farmer, Orator, Diplomat, Statesman, Lawyer, Peace Advocate; these were some of the many hats Daniel Webster wore during his long career as spokesman for the conservative Federalist-Whig tradition in America. Webster's reputation, as one of the foremost American statesmen and diplomat-negotiators, rests primarily on his role in the well-known Webster-Ashburton talks, which led in 1843 to the Treaty of Washington.¹ Compromise, reconciliation, avoidance of extremes, peace, almost at any price — these were the key principles upon which Webster based his views in these negotiations.

Webster's stand, particularly for peace, should not have surprised anyone. In 1814, while a first-term congressman from New Hampshire, he declared in a speech on a Conscription Bill :

Where is it written in the Constitution, in what article or section is it contained, that you may take children from their parents, and parents from their children, and compel them to fight the battles of any war in which the folly or the wickedness of government may engage it? Under what concealment has this power lain hidden which now for the first time comes forth, with a tremendous and baleful aspect, to trample down and destroy the dearest rights of personal liberty? Who will show me any constitutional injunction which makes it the duty of the American people to surrender everything valuable in life, and even life itself, not when the safety of their country and its liberties may demand the sacrifice, but whenever the purposes of an ambitious and mischievous government may require it.²

Needless to say, the foregoing statement contains an important message for the leaders of all nations, at all times, in all places. The quest for peace, in his time, was one of the few consistent themes in Webster's career.

¹ For coverage of Webster's role in the Webster-Ashburton negotiations and the Treaty of Washington, see Clyde Augustus Duniway, "Daniel Webster," in Samuel Flagg Bemis, Ed., *The American Secretaries of State and Their Diplomacy* (New York, 1928), Vol. V, pp. 3-66; Richard N. Current, "Webster's Propaganda and the Ashburton Treaty," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* (Sept. 1947), Vol. XXXIV, pp. 187-200; Claude M. Fuess, *Daniel Webster* (Boston, 1930), Vol. II, pp. 93-129; J. R. Baldwin, "Ashburton-Webster Settlement," Canadian Historical Association, *Report*, 1938, pp. 121-133; John B. Brebner, *North Atlantic Triangle* (New Haven, 1945), Chapters 7-8, and George Ticknor Curtis, *Daniel Webster* (New York, 1870), Vol. II, pp. 94-205.

² J. W. McIntyre, Ed., *The Writings and Speeches of Daniel Webster* (Boston, 1903), Vol. XIV, pp. 61-2. (Hereafter *National Edition*.)