Review: 'Heirs of the Founders: The Epic Rivalry of Henry Clay, John Calhoun and Daniel Webster,' by H.W. Brands


By Glenn C. Altschuler Special to the Star Tribune  |  NOVEMBER 9, 2018 — 12:03PM

In the first half of the 19th century, “the Great Triumvirate” — Henry Clay, John C. Calhoun and Daniel Webster — dominated American politics. Promoting the interests of the West, South and North, these three great orators played pivotal roles in the controversies of their era: the War of 1812, internal improvements of banks, tariffs and slavery.

Not coincidentally, some historians suggest, when they left the political stage, the United States plunged into the Civil War.

In “Heirs of the Founders,” H.W. Brands, a professor of history at the University of Texas at Austin and author of “Andrew Jackson,” “Lone Star Nation” and “The Age of Gold,” among other books, draws on the personal correspondence and public addresses of Clay, Calhoun and Webster to provide a political history of antebellum America.

“Heirs of the Founders” enters a crowded field. Thirty years ago, Merrill Peterson wrote “The Great Triumvirate.” Since then, several biographies of Clay, Calhoun and Webster have appeared, along with dozens of books assessing their impact on American politics.

Brands does not challenge current interpretations of American politics in the first half of the 19th century or the roles played by his protagonists. A gifted storyteller, he provides a traditional narrative that sets the context and then, in no small measure, allows them to speak for themselves.

The oratorical skills of “the Great Triumvirate,” Brands reminds us, were essential to their reputations as political giants.

When Webster replied to Robert Hayne’s attack on the “Tariff of Abominations,” nearly everyone in the gallery, an observer wrote, looked at him as the Israelites gazed at Moses, emerging from “the dark clouds and thick smoke of Sinai, his face all radiant with the breath of divinity.”

Clay, Brands indicates, used scorn to great effect, parrying Calhoun by declaring that South Carolina’s threats of nullification excited no more apprehension than would be felt by the sight of a regiment of 1,000 5-year-old boys, “with gaudy plumes and tiny muskets, marching up to assault a corps of 50,000 grenadiers, six feet high.”

That said, Brands does not adequately address a fundamental question about oratory. He claims, for example, that Webster’s speech opposing the conscription of citizens for the War of 1812 brought debate over legislation “to a neck-snapping halt.” And that Clay’s speech supporting the Missouri Compromise made his previously rejected proposal the preferred fallback of majorities in the House and Senate.

It seems to me, however, that on these occasions and others, rhetoric may not have changed minds or votes. Printed verbatim in partisan newspapers, the stirring speeches of “the Great Triumvirate” may, instead, have energized the base, with little impact on those on the other side.

Sound familiar?
Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American studies at Cornell University.

Heirs of the Founders
By: H.W. Brands.
Publisher: Doubleday, 413 pages, $30.