

REMARKS TO THE HENRY CLAY CENTER STUDENT CONGRESS

Good evening. My name is Seamus Carey, and I am the president of Transylvania University. You've probably already heard some of the history of this institution. Suffice it to say that when you stand on the steps of Old Morrison, it is quite probable that Henry Clay stood in the same spot with some relief in 1834 when the building was finally completed, under his direction. In fact, he may have felt some personal responsibility to oversee the construction of that building, since it was the servant of his young cousin Cassius Clay, then a student at Transylvania, who had fallen asleep while "blackening [Cassius's] boots" in the original college building across the street in Gratz Park, allowing the candle lighting his work to ignite the entire structure.

I want to thank the Henry Clay Center for giving me the last word this evening, though perhaps you should reserve judgment on that decision until after I finish. As you may have noticed, we academics have little capacity for recognizing "too much talk." You have already listened to a lot of words, and I will try not to increase too much the buzzing in your heads. Still, this congress is an important event at an important time in your lives and in our nation's history, and I want to take a moment to ponder what you might experience and especially what you might learn.

I want to begin by talking about John Brown. I am sure his exploits are familiar to you. The Kansas-Nebraska wars, the Harper's Ferry attack, his trial for treason and eventual execution, these are all well narrated in antebellum history.

So well told in fact that it may seem that he could not be relevant to the Henry Clay Center's High School Congress. Clay was the great statesman of the compromises of 1820 and 1850, and everything he stood for and everything this congress promises should seem a rejection of John Brown's principled and violent treason.

However, I want to suggest that Brown is where you might start. I want to suggest that this American embodiment of iron and steel, this unbending voice whose credo was so simple: "I am," he said, "quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land can never be purged away but with blood;" this man of whom Emerson said: "That new saint...awaiting his martyrdom...who, if he shall suffer it, shall make the gallows glorious like the cross" presents an example by which almost every idea you encounter this week can be examined.

What do I mean? Well, let's think about principled stands. Everyone tells us that they are what we ought to take. We ought to say the truth if we know it, and once we say it we should defend it with everything we've got. Like John Brown, when we see evil or hear evil, when we encounter injustice or brutality, we should stand up to the bully or sit down in the streets or try to overthrow a corrupt political system.

Oops, I went too far, didn't I? Because the corrupt political system John Brown tried to overthrow was The United States of America.

And that's the problem I've been thinking about. It is not that principled stands are not the thing to do. They are. It is not that we should not be women

and men of principle. We should. It is that these convictions can have very serious consequences for those who act on them. People can get hurt when other people cling to their principles. It's not that someone sets out to hurt someone else. It's just what happens, because principles are truths that cannot be questioned; they are lines in the sand that cannot be crossed. Principles are the convictions on which we base our identity and from which we derive our values. They are what we live for and sometimes what we die for.

And because principles are so heroic, they make compromise and statesmanship seem pale and weak. But stop and ask yourself: If all we have are principles, then how do we calculate the cost of a principled stand? How will you know what you will not do? How will you reconnoiter *this* far and no further? How will you decide what you will not accept, what cannot stand, unless you have tried the slow, often painful, seldom glamorous work of trying to figure out in an unsettling landscape with ambiguous expectations the solutions that just might do for the time being.

Because, you see, that's what compromise is and that's what leaders of conscience do. They explore the possible. They try to move boundaries to find the balance between what ought to be, what might be, and what is. They seek to discover where the firm and fixed is, even when they already believe they know. Compromisers test right and wrong in the crucible of life. They explore gingerly the meanings of good and bad, not to blur them but to make clear what cannot be done, what is not ever and will never again be done.

In this sense, compromise is the practical imagination at its best, doing the necessary, painful work. It is the dealing; the less than perfect choice; the subtle give and take; the close but no cigar by which we map out our lives as we actually have to live them day to day in the presence of each other and, we hope, for the benefit of the one and the many.

So this, then, is my suggestion of how you might use some of your time at this congress. Consider occasionally the delicate balance between principles and compromise, between John Brown and Henry Clay. When you are elbow deep in negotiation and trading, step back and ask yourselves not only, “What are we willing to give up to get what we want?” but also “What cannot be surrendered?” Try to answer both questions truthfully, at the same time. It is nearly impossible, I know. But understanding the answers to both those questions is one of the highest, most ethical forms of self-discovery I know. It is also, I believe with all my heart, one you should practice.

“Why?” you may be thinking. “Sounds hard.” Well, yes it is. But who knows? Perhaps very soon there will come a day, maybe this coming November if it’s your time to cast your first vote, when you may very well have to choose to do a John Brown for reasons as important to you as they were to him. On that day, you will be able to say, “I have tested the limits of compromise and will take my stand. I know the cost. I am prepared to pay the price.” And when you say that, just maybe you will remember your week at Transylvania in Lexington, Kentucky, when you first practiced statesmanship and compromise.

Thank you and have a great congress.