Morality, Politics, and Compromise: The Plight and Prospects of the Moderate, Then and Now

Angry voices rising at the intersection of morality and politics. Boycotts of businesses, localities, and even whole states led by passionate supporters of

one side of the issue. Talk of nullification as an acceptable tactic given the apocalyptic stakes involved. This could be the 1850s and the issues surrounding slavery. It is also the 2010s and issues surrounding hot-button topics like immigration and LGBT rights. As groups ranging in size from congregations to the nation grapple with how to preserve community as totalizing rhetoric flies around and within them, there are contrasts and parallels with the American sectional conflict that may prove instructive.

One moral of the story of attempted compromises in the past is that the path of the moderate is certainly not that of least resistance. In polarizing times, there is a price to be paid—at the polls and otherwise—for attempting to chart a middle path. The career of Edward Everett may prove an apt case study. A man of deep moral conviction who sought to chart a middle path on the tortuous issue of slavery across four decades at every level of American political life, Everett left his position as a Unitarian minister in the 1820s and served as a representative and senator in Congress, as Massachusetts' governor, as U.S. minister to Great Britain, and as secretary of state. He pursued cultural and political means toward national reconciliation in this fractured era, notably by his nationwide speaking tour to hold up George Washington as a unifying figure while raising money to purchase Mount Vernon as a national shrine of Union. A confirmed Whig dedicated to the ethic of Improvement, he sought to balance his commitment to reform and to constitutional Union through a conservative antislavery position that at different moments emphasized "conservative" or "antislavery." As such he rallied great masses, especially with his Mount Vernon campaign in the late 1850s, but he also exasperated hardcore antislavery and proslavery men and women. His career in formal politics thrived during times of relative sectional quietude, but his very health (alongside his political prospects) suffered greatly during times such as the sectional hurricane sweeping the nation while he was senator during the Kansas-Nebraska debates.

The crisis that produced and surrounded the Compromise of 1850 proved especially wrenching for Everett. Gathering as much information about debates in Washington as he could from his semi-private position as recently retired president of Harvard, Everett expressed unequivocal fear for the Union's survival. But in March 1850, when his close friend and political ally Daniel Webster came out in favor of Southern-friendly compromise measures including a harsh new Fugitive Slave Act (FSA), Everett experienced wrenching indecision. When he received an incomplete early version of Webster's highly anticipated Seventh of March speech explaining his position, Everett felt he could support its overall tenor. On March 11, he recorded in his diary that it was "an exposition of great ability, well calculated if moderate counsels prevail to pilot the country through the broken & stormy sea: — but _____." The dissent with parts of the discourse that Everett could not bring himself to register even in his diary emerged slowly in the coming weeks. When he read a fuller version, he was mortified especially by its passage supporting the fugitive bill. To oppose Webster was no small step, so he initiated a confidential correspondence with friend and congressional leader Robert C. Winthrop to talk

through how to deal with the matter. “I always support him at the expense of my own” judgment, Winthrop responded, “when my conscience will allow me.” But this was not such an occasion, in part because the FSA was so gratuitously pro-Southern. Everett responded that his own reaction had been precisely the same: “habitual deference” to Webster’s “authority” coming face to face with massive qualms about the FSA. The old law had been “against the feeling of the People,” and this new one was even worse. “I could not vote for it, were I a member of Congress; nor as a citizen would I perform the duty which it devolves ‘on all good citizens.’” By March 22, Everett decided he had to send Webster a modified retraction of his assent to the speech. He found he had “misgivings” about the new FSA, for two basic reasons. One was that it was manifestly inhumane. Another, stronger reason from a political point of view was because runaway slave renditions were “the incident of Slavery . . . which is most repugnant to the Public Sentiment of the Free States.” In this and a follow-up letter in April, Everett wished “it were possible to arrange some extradition bill that would be less likely to excite the North.” “Southern gentlemen, who wish the Union preserved, must make that allowance for Northern feeling, which they claim for Southern feeling.”

In anguished expressions such as this, Everett offered an insight that would benefit modern would-be moderates: for a compromise to take hold, it has to be a true compromise. Because the FSA did violence to the voluntary bonds of feeling that were essential to the Union, Everett severely doubted whether it would be the Union-saving measure its proponents advertised. “It is out of the question,” he informed a British friend, “to awaken any <u>feeling</u> in favor of such a law” in the Northern citizenry. It was thus the height of political madness for the South to demand the enforcement of a law that was sure “to make every man, woman & child in the Free States ready for Separation” of the Union. He agreed with Winthrop that the FSA “more resembles in some of its details” the draconian laws of ancient civilizations “than any American or European Code.”

Everett’s episode with Webster and the Compromise of 1850 was among the many in his life that made him an authority on the price of compromise. In future weeks and months, he would try to keep his dissent private because of the personal and political difficulties involved with differing from Webster. By the summer and fall of 1850, he would finally find this attempted silence on the matter unsustainable in light of attacks on Webster, and came out in favor of the Compromise of 1850. He would likewise support compromise measures in the secession winter of 1860-1861, just as he had in previous crises such as the one in the 1830s surrounding the tariff and South Carolina nullification. When Everett died in January 1865 after having delivered a plethora of speeches around the country (including most famously at the Gettysburg National Cemetery) in support of the Union war effort, some of his harshest antebellum critics thought carefully about Everett’s long-running attitude toward compromise.

The radical Republican man of letters Richard Henry Dana Jr. offered an

especially nuanced assessment that took Everett's prewar conservatism seriously while maintaining some distance from it. Dana still counted himself one "of the number of those who disapprove, nay, who condemn, the course of concession and compromise to which Mr. Everett inclined." But that made him "feel the more bound to render to Mr. Everett, on this point, the justice that I think his due" by looking "at the subject . . . from his interior state." Everett's devotion to the Union, Dana posited, flowed from nothing less than "a solemn conviction that it was the one great experiment . . . for the widest and highest moral and intellectual development of human nature." "Those who did not value the Union as he did," he continued, "can hardly judge him in the price he would pay for its ransom," or understand how difficult it was for the (conservatively) antislavery man Everett to pay it. His seriousness about what he gave up with compromise distinguished him from the Democrats, who had embraced sectional compromise "with alacrity" rather than reluctantly. After having "done what he could" to preserve the peace, when the Slave Power began the war, he threw himself into the Union cause at all hazards. On multiple occasions during his wartime career, Everett rather stunningly admitted that he had been in error to seek to conciliate Southern leaders who did not truly want to be conciliated. But that admission seems only to have increased his authority as a prowar speaker for most hearers.

Those who find anything ennobling in this sort of career may well take important cues from Everett's life. He experienced secession and the Civil War as a failure of his and his kind's antebellum nation-building projects, but that did not keep him from being a powerful contributor to the Civil War's own nation-saving project. That was in large part because he had come to accept that the way of the moderate would not be short or easy. Everett as much as any in his generation illustrates how creative and persistent sectional moderates could be in the face of setbacks.

One contrast between the antebellum debates and our own is that religious leaders today are among the most prominent voices calling for moderation. The enormously influential Pope Francis, for instance, has repeatedly sought to transcend the boundaries of the political right and left. As one columnist has written, "he seems to have no intention of collaborating with those in the U.S. or anywhere who are seeking, as he once put it, to 'reduce culture to a battle field.'" He has taken this stance as a fiercely principled position. "If one has the answers to all the questions," Francis has lectured, "that's the proof that God is not with him. It means that he is a false prophet using religion for himself." Leaders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (aka the Mormons) have sought to forge a middle way on LGBT issues in the context of Utah state politics. They were among the chief sponsors of the Utah Compromise, state legislation passed in 2015 that seeks to balance religious freedom with LGBT rights. Its main provisions include banning employers and property owners from discriminating on the basis of gender identity and sexual orientation, but exempting religious organizations and those affiliated with them from this proscription. "Although none of the parties achieved all they wanted," trumpeted Mormon Apostle M. Russell Ballard, the Utah Compromise "lessened the

divisiveness within our communities without compromising on key principles. We can love one another without compromising personal divine ideals," he insisted. In October 2015, another Mormon apostle, Dallin H. Oaks, publicly criticized Kentucky county clerk Kim Davis for her refusal to issue same-sex marriage licenses. He urged both sides in this debate to seek balance rather than "total victory," and declared "extreme voices" such as Davis' unhelpful.

Time will tell whether people on either side of this issue will accept such a position as true compromise in the long term. Donald Trump's February feud with Pope Francis over a wall on the Mexican border found the former calling the latter "a very political person" despite Francis' studied nonpartisanship. In Utah, the broad principles of the Utah Compromise of the 2015 session were challenged in the 2016 session by bills testing its limits and specific applications. A Mormon Republican lawmaker's bill protecting LGBT people from hate crimes found no traction. Neither did a bill proposed by an openly gay Democratic legislator that would have banned businesses from discriminating against LGBT customers for religious reasons. It also remains to be seen whether religious leaders like these will be able to exercise effective public leadership in the rapidly secularizing Western world. Indeed, it may well be that Mormon and Catholic leaders are taking such moderate stances from a position of defensiveness as public policy goes against them.

There are a few potential parallels between modern and antebellum religious leaders. Many modern religious leaders seemingly hope to set aside thorny issues such as LGBT rights and immigration so they can refocus on their core religious missions. That was also the motive for Georgia Methodist leaders' attempts to preserve a neutrality on slavery in the 1840s and 1850s. And there were Northern religious leaders who taught sectional compromise as a moral duty, chief among them noted biblical scholar Moses Stuart. The very title of his pamphlet in favor of the Compromise of 1850 appealed to both "Conscience and the Constitution." All the antislavery men staking proprietary claims to conscience, Stuart charged, in reality violated the "peaceful spirit" of the gospel, which guided "those who love their country, love peace, love their neighbor."

But Stuart and other religious leaders who made a principled, biblical case for compromise have been treated in historical scholarship as they seem to have been treated then: as exceptions to the overall pattern of sectionalizing religion. Historians of antebellum religion and politics do not associate religious leaders or even overtly religious ideas with compromises over slavery. The most influential histories of religion and the Civil War era are almost entirely tales of religious groups and leaders splitting along sectional lines—indeed of them exacerbating the sectional divide. The treatment of the idea of compromise in these works ranges from cursory to non-existent.

The advocates of moderation amid the polarizing politics of slavery in antebellum America therefore received very little aid and comfort from their religious leaders. Nevertheless, many of them such as Everett soldiered on as

seeming oxymorons: deeply committed, even passionate, moderates. Those who wish to shore up what seems in the presidential election of 2016 to be the eroding ground of political moderation may well take a page from these predecessors' book. And they may find their hope nurtured by having some outspoken religious leaders at their side.

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Further Reading

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