

Primary Source

# Henry Clay on Presidential Vetoes

*With his 1832 veto of the Bank recharter bill, Jackson's controversial expansion of presidential power reached unprecedented heights. The twelve vetoes he issued during his two terms in office totaled more than those of the first six presidents combined. Jackson shocked opponents in Congress who saw the presidential veto as a drastic measure to be adopted in extreme circumstances only, not as a weapon with which to overawe the legislature. On July 12, 1832, two days after Jackson issued his veto of the Bank bill, Henry Clay decried it in the Senate as a violation of the spirit of the Constitution. The following excerpt is taken from the opening remarks of Clay's speech.*

The veto is an extraordinary power, which, though tolerated by the constitution, was not expected by the convention to be used in ordinary cases. It was designed for instances of precipitate legislation, in unguarded moments. Thus restricted, and it has been thus restricted by all former Presidents, it might not be mischievous. During Mr. Madison's administration of eight years, there occurred but two or three cases of its exercise. During the last administration, I do not now recollect that it was once. In a period little upward of three years, the present Chief Magistrate has employed the veto four times. We now hear quite frequently, in the progress of measures through Congress, the statement that the President will veto them, urged as an objection to their passage.

The veto is hardly reconcilable with the genius of representative government. It is totally irreconcilable with it . . . .

**Source:** *Register of Debates in Congress . . . First Session of the Twenty-Second Congress* (Washington: Gales and Seaton, 1833), p. 1265.