The Strangest American

John Randolph

JOHN RANDOLPH — A CONTEMPORARY BRITISH CARTOON

THE YOUTHFUL RANDOLPH—PAINTING BY GILBERT STUART

Henry Clay

By ELMO SCOTT WATSON

ONE hundred and four years ago this month there took place on the Virginia side of the Potomac river one of the strangest duels in the history of the American code duello. It was between a member of the United States senate, John Randolph of Virginia, and Henry Clay of Kentucky, secretary of state. Back of the duel lay the conflict between two political theories, those of President John Quincy Adams, supported by Clay, and those of a future President, Andrew Jackson, supported by Randolph. But the immediate cause of the duel was a speech which Randolph had made in the senate.

The debate which produced this speech was of minor importance. It had to do with a resolution calling for the production of certain documents. But Randolph made it the occasion for such a vitriolic speech as only he could make. He assailed the administration, paying particular attention to the "close association in it of the austere, correct and pious Adams with the frequently drunken, incessantly gambling Clay," and ending up with these famous words: "I was defeated horse, foot and dragoons—cut up and clean broke down by the coalition of Blifil (Adams) and Black George (Clay)—by the combination, unheard of till then, of the Puritan with the blackleg."

Heretofore Clay had ignored the whispering campaign against him, based on his drinking and his gambling. But this was a denunciation which he could not disregard. He challenged Randolph to a duel and as word of the affair got out the excitement in Washington was tremendous. Thomas Hart Benton, senator of Missouri, by permission of the principals, was allowed to attend the duel which was held on the afternoon of April 8, 1826.

Noted for his eccentricity and running true to form, even on the dueling field, Randolph appeared for the encounter with a white flannel wrapper over his coat. Despite the fact that his seconds had "haired" the trigger of his pistol, he insisted upon keeping on a pair of thick buckskin gloves even though these would destroy his delicacy of touch and perhaps cause him to fire before the word was given. And that is exactly what happened. As he stood holding his pistol, muzzle downward, it was discharged. Clay's seconds immediately protested but Clay silenced them and demanded that his opponent be given another pistol.

When the word was given both men fired but neither shot took effect, although Randolph's bullet nearly struck Clay in the leg and Clay's bullet passed close to Randolph's waist. Benton immediately rushed in and tried to stop the fight, but Randolph angrily refused. He had determined to make a grand gesture and was willing to imperil his life to make it. So the pistols were reloaded and again the men fired. The secretary of state put his bullet through the senator's coat, but the latter purposely fired high in the air over Clay's head. At this, Clay rushed forward with outstretched hand. "I trust in God, my dear sir, you are untouched. After what has occurred, I would not have harmed you for a thousand worlds!" he exclaimed. "You owe me a coat, Mr. Clay," replied Randolph with a smile.

The whole affair is characteristic of John Randolph of Roanoke, for surely he was the strangest American of his time and perhaps of all time. Gerald W. Johnson in a recent biography of him, published by Minton, Balch and Company, calls him "A Political Fantastic" and perhaps "fantastic" is a more apt word than either "eccentric" or "strange" when applied to his life, both private and political.

Declaring that "he has come down in history with one of the most terrible reputations ever attached to an American politician who never was convicted of murder, or treason or theft," the biographer points out that he was in public life for a third of a century, during which he served as a congressman and Jefferson's floor-leader in the house of representatives, as a senator from Virginia, as ambassador to Russia, as a member of the constitutional convention of Virginia and on many commissions and special missions. But, he declares, he is not remembered for these services. Rather Randolph's reputation lives because he carried "the wickedest tongue that ever hung in the head of an American congressman, or at any rate, in the head of one who had both the courage and the wit to use it."

Many Americans can remember the day when invective, with all its synonyms of abuse, reproach, railing, censure, sarcasm, satire and vituperation were an indispensable part of the equipment of the politician. But of all who ever used them, Randolph was the acknowledged master, intimates Johnson, when he says:

> No man since his day, when attacked in debate by half a dozen honorable members, has had the superb insolence to rise and quote, as he leisurely surveyed the United States House of Representatives:
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> "The little dogs and all,
> Tray, Blanch and Sweetheart,
> See, they bark at me!"

Nor have we since had invective as startling as the metaphor which he is frequently said to have used against Henry Clay, but which he really applied to Edward Livingston: "Fellow-citizens, he is a man of splendid abilities, but utterly corrupt. Like rotten mackerel by moonlight, he shines and stinks." His characterization of John Quincy Adams and Clay as "Blifil and Black George—the Puritan and the blackleg," hardly needed the duel which followed to stamp it upon the memory of the country, for, although there was no duel as a result, the country had remembered the description of Thomas Jefferson as "St. Thomas of Cantingbury," because, as in the other case, there was just enough truth in it to make it stick and sting.

Although John Randolph himself once complained that "All the bastard wit of the country has been fathered on me," Johnson cites some of his brilliant sallies.

He once spoke of "the glorious privilege of finding fault—one very dear to the depraved condition of human nature." Of Robert Wright and John Rea (Ray) he said that the house of representatives had two anomalies: "A Wright always wrong and a Rae without a light." Once a new member, elected to fill a vacancy in the house caused by a death, attacked Randolph, who ignored it at the time. Later, however, while discussing a bill in which the dead congressman had been much interested Randolph remarked that this bill has lost much in the death of his dear friend, Mr. ....., "whose seat remains vacant."

When Richard Rush was appointed secretary of the treasury, the gentleman from Virginia declared that "Never were abilities so much below mediocrity so well rewarded; no, not when Caligula's horse was made Consul." Of a certain pedantic individual he said that his mind was like a parcel of land which he knew—poor to begin with and made more barren by too intensive cultivation. "Denouncing me?" he demanded when a friend told him that a certain person had attacked him. "That is strange. I never did him a favor." One day he met an enemy on the narrow sidewalks of Washington. The man halted in the middle of the walk and belligerently declared "I never step out of my way for puppies." "I always do," replied Randolph, stepping aside, "Pass on!"

But Randolph's place in history is much more significant than that of a mere coiner of epigrams, according to his biographer, who declares that he was "the most powerful single influence in transforming the South from the nourishing mother of the republic into the frantic opponent of the republic" and while "it would be far too much to say that John Randolph of Roanoke diverted the spirit of southern statecraft from the philosophy of Thomas Jefferson to that of Jefferson Davis; it is incontestably true that he witnessed that transition and that he assisted it." It seems strange perhaps that the man who was "admittedly the first orator in a congress that included Webster, Clay and Calhoun," should be remembered mainly because of his violence of action and vituperation of speech. For, says Johnson:

> John Randolph of Roanoke was a strong man and he contended mightily. His human opponents were impressive enough, for he dared the wrath successively of Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, John Marshall, John C. Calhoun, John Quincy Adams, Henry Clay, Daniel Webster and Andrew Jackson. . . . He asked no quarter of the best of them, and no weak man could have stood a moment against the least of these.
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> Certain of the elements of greatness John Randolph of Roanoke possessed beyond the shadow of a doubt. In intellectual keenness and alertness, he rivalled the great Virginians; in courage no man among them surpassed him and not all were his equals; in depth of learning he was superior to most of them perhaps to all! in personal integrity not Washington himself was further beyond reproach. In addition Randolph possessed a quality which none of the stars in Virginia's political firmament shared in anything like the first degree. This quality was his sheen, his coruscation, his sheer, blinding brilliance.
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> But for all this, he was a man attended by fatality, the heir of the House of Usher. Born to the purple, wealthy, a handsome youth, charming in his personal relations and equipped with a magnificent mind, it seemed upon his entrance into public life that all the beneficient powers had combined to insure his happiness and his glory. But his fair prospects were all illusory. Instead of primroses, his path was strewn with stones and thorns. . . . Instead of becoming even the stepfather of his country, "I mean the Commonwealth of Virginia," he urged her along a road strikingly similar to the one he trod, and which led not to glory everlasting, but to defeat, madness and death.
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> For a physical affliction which Randolph sustained at the age of nineteen, following an attack of scarlet fever, changed the whole course of his life and made him an embittered, frustrated man. To the end of his days he retained a curiously boyish appearance, beardless, with a shrill, high-pitched voice. This fact, coupled with the statement that he was "the first orator" of his time and his own statement of "I am an aristocrat. I love justice and hate equality," only accentuates the grotesque character of the picture of the man who was John Randolph of Roanoke. "When he was over forty a spectator in the house gallery was dumfounded at learning that the skinny youth he saw on the floor, and whom he had believed to be about sixteen, was the great Mr. Randolph of Virginia."
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> The result of this affliction was inevitable. "Here was an intensely proud member of a proud race, a man who cherished his lineage above all his material possessions, a man to whom the family was not merely a sacred, but a downright awe-inspiring institution, deprived of the privilege of continuing his family," writes Johnson. "Here was a scornful man doomed forever to be the target of the shafts of the scornful. Here was a romantic man ridiculously debarred from amorous romance. Here was a man whose finest quality, perhaps, was his capacity for unflagging devotion to the domestic interests of his kin, denied the possibility of setting up a domestic establishment of his own. It is inconceivable that this frustration, this profound humiliation should have failed to work out in bitterness of spirit."
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> So John Randolph of Roanoke, who had in him the elements of greatness, just missed greatness. If he had not been such a strong man, his story would be a pathetic one. His "own people have remembered him with a curious mixture of terror, pride and wild delight. For, dark as is his story, on occasion it glitters and sparkles as does that of no other American of any generation. It is the story of a fighting man of the breed of Roland, and no one who is stirred by a tale of a warrior who lays about him with a right good will can fail to be stirred by Randolph. But it is above all else a fantastic tale, frequently verging upon the grotesque. The incredibly, long, incredibly lean figure was Don Quixote to the life; but John Randolph's own were the glittering eyes, and the almost fabulous forefinger with which he seemed to transfix a shivering opponent"—this, the strangest American.