John C. Calhoun Essay, Research Paper

John Caldwell Calhoun, statesman and political philosopher, was vice-

president, a congressman, secretary of war, senator, secretary of state, and a

leading champion of Southern rights. [Netscape 1] Throughout his life, Calhoun

kept advocating for the South and pushing for the growth of the South. Threw

his career as the vice-president, he kept pushing Jackson to help out his fellow

Southerners and keep the South alive. [Bartlett 26]

He was born on a farm near Abbeville, S.C., on Mar. 18, 1782. His

father, Patrick Calhoun, a man of Scotch-Irish decent, was a very religious man

that treated John very harshly. His father owned more than a score of slaves,

was a judge, and had served in the South Carolina legislature for a while,

fighting to get more representation for the newly set up land that he represented.

[Faber 74-75] John attended college at Yale and graduated in 1804. He studied

in the law school of Tapping Reeves in Litchfield, CN. He was admitted to the

South Carolina bar in 1807 and quickly established a practice near his home in

Abbeville. [Von Holst 37] He married a distant cousin in 1811 and had 9

children. This marriage brought him a large fortune. He enlarged his fortune

and in 1825 he built a plantation, called Fort Hill, in his native area. [Bartlett 39]

He was a very handsome man that had piercing eyes throughout his life. In his

later years, he was thought of as a “thinking machine”, speaking very quickly

and always very earnestly. He concerned himself with political philosophy, idea,

and business. [Niven 49] As one author wrote: “John C. Calhoun is best

remembered as an American statesman and a political philosopher.” [Netscape

1]

Calhoun began his political career by being elected to the South Carolina

state legislature in 1808 and 2 years later won election to the United States

House of Representatives. During his Congressional term, Henry Clay made

Calhoun the chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee and he and other “War

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Hawks” and advocated strongly for the War of 1812. [Faber 76] He led the

effort in the House to build up a strong Army, and after the war he continued to

work for a stronger , military establishment. [Niven 98]

Calhoun entered James Monroe’s Cabinet (1817-1825) as secretary of

war as a nationalist. [Bracelet 87] He became less and less militaristic through

his life. In 1812 he said that, “a war, just and necessary in its origin, wisely and

vigorously carried on, and honorably terminated.” [Niven 208] But in 1846, he

refused to vote for the declaration of war against Mexico. He thought that the

grounds that the President set for this war was wrong and said, “I regard peace

as a positive good, and war as a positive evil.” [Von Holst 107] In 1821, John

Quinsy Adams appraised Calhoun as:

A man of fair and candid mind…of enlarged philosophical views,

and of ardent patriotism. He is above all sectional and factional

prejudices more than any other statesman of the Union. [Bartlett

91]

Calhoun was J. Q. Adams’s vice president from 1825-1829 and was elected

vice-president again in 1828 under Andrew Jackson. [Netscape 1] This time in

history is referred to as the Nullification Crisis which refers to the Nullification of

the Tariff of Abominations by South Carolina and the turmoil that it caused.

[Bartlett 102] Calhoun had hoped to run for the presidency after Jackson left the

White House but during Jackson’s first term they had their share of conflicts.

Jackson discovered that Calhoun criticized his invasion of Florida in 1818 and

Jackson blew a fuse. Calhoun began to despise even the sight of Jackson.

[Morris 96] Calhoun anonymously wrote the “South Carolina Exposition” in

response to the Tariff of 1829 or the Tariff of Abominations. He argued that the

state had the right to “nullify” a Federal document, if the state believed that it

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was unconstitutional. Calhoun believed that the Tariff of 1828 was a direct

attack on the South by depressing the foreign markets for the cotton in the

South. [Niven 180-181] As one author put it:

Calhoun had been driven by what he believed was the growing

weakness of his state and his section in an industrialized society.

Uncertain about a future in which the slave-plantation system

seemed to be increasingly on the defensive, Calhoun, with his

speculative mind and his latent insecurity, tended toward

rationalizing a potential minority position as the only proper

political logic that was blessed by Jeffersonian precedent and

confirmed by historical fact. [Niven 181

Jackson began to threaten military force to collect the duties in South

Carolina. [Morris 165] In 1832, Calhoun resigned the vice-presidency and was

elected to the senate so that he could defend South Carolina’s cause and in

1832 South Carolina proclaimed that the Tariff of 1828 was null and void in the

state of South Carolina. South Carolina expected the other Southern states to

follow suit and also nullify the Tariff. This didn’t occur and so Henry Clay

stepped in and negotiated a compromise tariff that would lower the tariffs over

many years. [Netscape 1] That cooled things down and averted a Civil War for

the time being.

In the Senate, in the 1830s, Calhoun attacked the abolitionists, as one

author wrote:

Demanding that their publications be excluded from the mails, that

their petitions not be received by Congress, and finally that a stop

be put to agitation against slavery in the North as had been done in

the South. [Bartlett 210]

By 1837, Calhoun was defending slavery as “a positive good” and had become

an advocate for the suppression of open discussion and a free press. [Von Holst

122] Calhoun’s shift from national to a sectional (South, specifically South

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Carolina) position ruined his chances for the presidency but he continued to

strive for that office. [Morris 199] He had now become slavery’s strongest

defender. [Bartlett 235] Although Calhoun had made it abundantly clear in his

letters to his friends that he was willing to run for the presidency if chosen, no

one expected him to act like a candidate. [Bartlett 237] He occasionally gave a

some hints as to his intentions. For instance, he made it a point to join the Irish

Immigrant Society of New York in order to emphasize his pride in being the son

of an Irish immigrant. It pulled great weight with the working class in New York.

[Bartlett 238] He declared his candidacy in 1843 but withdrew to accept

appointment as secretary of state for the last year of John Tyler’s term. [Niven

264] During his service to Tyler, Calhoun wrote a letter to the British minister in

Washington, arguing that annexation was necessary to protect slavery in the U.

S. A. and making it a point to show that freed Negroes are deaf, dumb, blind,

and insane in far higher proportions than those in slavery. This letter didn’t help

his cause in Congress and the first treaty for the annexation of Texas didn’t pass

Congress. [Von Holst 241] In 1844, Texas was admitted into the Union by a

joint resolution of Congress. This kept sectional balance in the union by

enlarging the slavery area of the U. S. A. [Netscape 1]

Calhoun returned to the Senate in 1845, where he first opposed the war

against Mexico and then the Wilmot Proviso, which would have prohibited

slavery in all territories acquired from Mexico by that war. Calhoun called

Mexico the “forbidden fruit.” He knew that if America had a war with Mexico, it

would be fought for all the wrong reasons. [Bartlett 341] During his stay in the

Senate, he was able to secure passage of the Gag Rules, which forbade the

discussion of slavery on the floor of Congress. He denounced the Compromise

of 1850, which did not guarantee the right of Southerners to take their slave into

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all territories of the Union. Unfortunately, he never got the chance to see the

Compromise of 1850 adopted. [Niven 293]

It was his tragedy to become the spokesman for the dying institution of

slavery. [Morris 268] “His fierce defense of the South made him the hero of his

own region. At the same time, it made him hated in the North during this period

when sectional enmity grew increasingly bitter.” [Faber 79]As one author wrote,

“Calhoun’s last appearance in Congress was on 7 March 1850, as he heard and

approved Daniel Webster’s appeal for sectional peace. Three days earlier, too

ill to speak, Calhoun sat in the Senate as his speech was read for him. he died

in Washington on 31 March 1850.” [Netscape 1] To conclude, the words of one

author were, “Calhoun’s thought dominated the southern mind.” [Heritage 101]

His writing in defense of the rights of the South as a minority region within the

Union are a significant contribution to American political theory. [Von Holst 155]

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