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John Gregory Jacobsen
University of Nebraska at Omaha

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**HISTORIANS AND JOHN C. CALHOUN: ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS OF
HISTORIOGRAPHY**

A Thesis

Presented to the

Department of History

and the

Faculty of the Graduate College

University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

University of Nebraska at Omaha

by

John Gregory Jacobsen

March, 1999

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Acceptance for the faculty of the Graduate College,
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University of Nebraska at Omaha.

Committee

Leut A. Fierman
Tommy R. Thompson

Chairperson *Geord Simions*
Date *3/24/99*

To my Mother and Father, who never stopped believing

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My sincere thanks goes to Dr. Jerold L. Simmons for directing this thesis. From suggestion of the topic, to constitutional and editorial advice, his role in the completion of this study has been invaluable. I wish also to thank Dr. Tommy R. Thompson for his suggestions and encouragement, and Dr. Kent A. Kirwan of the Political Science department for freely giving his time and input. In addition, the University Library staff deserves recognition for their friendly assistance. Finally, I am sincerely grateful to my wife Marlene for her patience and support. The format and content of this study, as well as any omissions, are strictly the responsibility of the author.

HISTORIANS AND JOHN C. CALHOUN: ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS OF HISTORIOGRAPHY

John G. Jacobsen, MA

University of Nebraska at Omaha, 1999

Advisor: Jerold L. Simmons, Ph.D.

In a public career spanning forty years, South Carolinian John C. Calhoun served in a variety of offices from state legislator to United States vice president. A central antebellum figure, he presents something of an enigma. Historically, Calhoun has been identified with the South and slavery, both of which he defended vigorously. Yet his significant, if challenging, contributions to American political and constitutional thought have proven to be his most enduring legacy. In the century and a half since his death, he has been the focus of a vast number of historical works ranging from multi-volume biographies to narrowly-focused interpretive articles, many of which are passionately, if not always carefully, argued. Filled with reverence or denunciation, the extensive Calhoun historiography has become a significant story in itself. The purpose of this study is an examination of this long trail of works.

The sheer enormity of studies made an inclusive approach to this historiographical analysis all but impossible, for aside from the large number of books and articles specific to Calhoun, he is also discussed in many biographies of his contemporaries, in numerous political and constitutional studies, and in countless American antebellum histories. With only rare exceptions, therefore, the fifty works herein analyzed represent only the major

published works specific to Calhoun. While examined individually and in general chronological order, the studies are viewed in relation to the various schools of historical thought which have developed regarding the controversial Carolinian. Although the primary source collections and Calhoun's own political treatises are examined in a separate chapter, all works addressing special topics are fit into the overall chronological pattern.

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INTRODUCTION

U.S. Congressman, Senator, Secretary of War, Secretary of State, and Vice President of the United States; titles marking the extraordinary and controversial career of John C. Calhoun. He has been labeled a war hawk and an unwilling imperialist, a nationalist and a states rights fanatic, a patriot and a traitor. Historians have both villainized and worshipped him. They have described Calhoun as the embodiment of a defeated idea, yet have placed him “in the first rank of men America has produced.”¹ Both a splendid statesman and tragic figure, he defies precise definition. Even his leading biographer asked “what manner of man” could incite “such abiding passions in so many”?²

What manner of man indeed. A key figure in antebellum American history, Calhoun has been identified primarily with the South and its historical baggage, above all slavery. Yet, he was one of the country’s foremost constitutional thinkers, a fact which has over time proven to be his most important legacy. In the nearly one hundred and fifty years since his death, he has been the subject of an enormous amount of historical writing, with levels of passion rarely evidenced in the profession. An almost constant flow of Calhoun biographies, scholarly articles, and related works representing a variety of perspectives have appeared from the time of his death to the present. This vast amount of writing has become a story of its own. It is a tale of condemnation and vindication, of

¹Christopher Hollis, *The American Heresy* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1927), 99; quotation from Margaret L. Coit, *John C. Calhoun: American Portrait* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1950; reprint, Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1961), 531.

²Charles M. Wiltse, *John C. Calhoun*, vol. 3, *Sectionalist: 1840-1850* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill co, 1951; reprint, New York: Russell & Russell, 1968), 481.

propaganda and scholarly analysis, and of historians with names forever fixed to the Calhoun debate; a saga spanning a period over twice as long as the famous Carolinian's own lifetime. It is this story — a dynamic historiography — which this study examines.

Born in 1782, the subject of this lengthy and stormy debate was a product of the South Carolina frontier. The son of a fiercely independent and slave-holding — although never wealthy — farmer, Calhoun learned early the Jeffersonian fundamentals; above all, a belief in small, decentralized, and unintrusive government. He also developed an interest in agriculture and a lifelong love of the South Carolina foothills, both of which later provided a haven for the often-embattled Carolinian. The young Calhoun received his early education at a local institution before entering Yale in 1802, where he determinedly retained his Jeffersonian beliefs despite studying in the heart of Federalist country. He graduated with high marks leaving a strong impression on the college president, Timothy Dwight. Calhoun spent an additional two years studying law in Connecticut before returning home to South Carolina to practice his new profession. Quickly tiring of routine law practice, however, the young lawyer was sent to the state legislature for two years where he made enough of an impression to win election to the U.S. Congress. Newly married and ambitious, he served three terms, first making his presence known by joining House Speaker Henry Clay and his spirited group of war hawks. Calhoun played key roles in both leading the young nation into its second war with Britain, and in sustaining its spirit throughout the conflict, eventually earning the nickname of “young Hercules.”³ Following the war, he used his forceful presence in the House to push the popular nationalist agenda of a tariff, national bank, and internal improvements. His optimistic and strongly nationalist outlook continued while serving with distinction as President James

³Margaret L. Coit, ed., *John C. Calhoun* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1970), 4.

Monroe's secretary of war, an office he received in 1817. Calhoun's star rose still higher with his election to the vice presidency in 1824 and re-election to the same office four years later. Yet, it was during this time — on the threshold of the nation's highest office — that his career, and life, changed forever.

An acclaimed nationalist when first elected vice president, Calhoun was seemingly in agreement with the new chief executive, John Quincy Adams. But the South Carolinian distanced himself from the President, allying instead with the rising forces of Andrew Jackson before again capturing the vice presidency in 1828. Increasingly suspicious of executive power, which seemed to be growing under Adams, he saw the presidency's monarchical potential as a constant danger to liberty. Particularly troublesome was the supposed corrupt bargain made during the 1824 election when Henry Clay, allegedly in exchange for the office of secretary of state, threw his support, and with it the victory, to Adams. Despite capturing the most popular votes, Andrew Jackson failed to achieve a majority in the electoral college, thereby throwing the matter into the House of Representatives where the influential Clay was able to control the outcome; hence, the charge of corrupt bargain.

Equally disturbing to Calhoun was the increasing economic pressure on his native South caused primarily by chronically low cotton prices, but aggravated by a protective tariff. Originally a modest tariff supporter, Calhoun now believed that import taxes unfairly helped northern industry while hurting southern agriculture. This, he reasoned, would eventually make the South little more than a colonial hinterland. The first public sign of Calhoun's emerging sectionalism came in 1827, when, as vice president, he broke a tie in the Senate sending the protective Woolens Bill down to defeat. A year later the Tariff of Abominations was signed by President Adams initiating the highest tariff rates in antebellum American history, and setting off a firestorm of protest in Calhoun's home

state. Wanting to both fight the tariff and head off the firebrands threatening secession, Calhoun anonymously wrote the *South Carolina Exposition and Protest*, a document combining condemnation of the high tariff with a solution known as nullification. Based on the compact view of the Union in which states retained their sovereignty and ultimate right of legal secession, nullification was, in its simplest form, a state veto of federal laws deemed unconstitutional. In secretly advocating this doctrine, Calhoun hoped to avoid the disastrous consequences of disunion while providing constitutional protection not only for South Carolina, but for the entire South which was increasingly becoming a minority within the Union.

The South Carolina legislature adopted Calhoun's *Exposition*, and late in 1832 put it into action calling a state convention and nullifying the tariff. By this time Calhoun had broken publicly with his ally, President Jackson, thanks in part to behind the scenes maneuvering by Martin Van Buren, who thereafter replaced Calhoun as Jackson's favored successor. The President's forceful leadership and harsh denunciation of nullification as a doctrine helped convince Calhoun that Jackson, who despite his states rights position, had become an executive tyrant and, therefore, a threat to state sovereignty. With his Jacksonian ties cut, the Vice President felt free to publicly assume leadership of the South Carolina Nullifiers, and in doing so, brought about the severest test of his career.

Calhoun found himself in the middle of the Nullification Crisis of 1832-1833. While South Carolina armed itself and President Jackson threatened military action, the state legislature elected Calhoun to defend the state in the U.S. Senate. He then became the first vice president to resign his office, and under rumored threats of arrest and execution for treason, he traveled to Washington. There he defiantly battled the administration, challenged the forceful and eloquent Daniel Webster in debate, and united with the Great Compromiser, Henry Clay, in supporting a tariff compromise. Calhoun and

the Nullifiers would afterwards proclaim victory — and with good reason, for it appeared that nullification had indeed worked: the federal government was successfully challenged and the tariff reduced. Yet, the victory rang hollow, for the same congressional session saw the President's allies pass a measure known as the Force Bill, an act giving the federal government power to collect tariff duties in South Carolina, or in any other state, by military force. Although the South Carolina firebrands defiantly nullified the Force Bill itself before disbanding, the action was largely ignored. Furthermore, Calhoun's logic, which had defeated Webster's emotional patriotism in debate, was quickly forgotten, for Webster represented a growing majority view of the nation which no amount of reason or logic could overcome. The events of 1832-1833 changed Calhoun's life forever. Seen thereafter as a southern stalwart, he became in the public mind the defender of an agricultural minority within an industrializing and expanding nation, a man resisting the tide of history. Indeed, for the remainder of his life Calhoun would battle government centralization, defend state sovereignty, and fight to preserve slavery, an institution he proclaimed to be a positive good and necessary to southern survival. Yet he probably sensed that this increasingly explosive issue would eventually lead to a dissolution of the Union he had loved for so long; it may have been this tortured realization that caused him to defend his minority section while endlessly seeking to forestall the inevitable.

Calhoun's powerful intellect, persistent logic, and constant sense of crisis made him a formidable adversary in the Senate, where he spent most of the remainder of his career. For a time, primarily for the purpose of resisting President Jackson, he allied with the Whigs in Congress, forming with Clay and Webster an effective opposition. Yet, Calhoun's natural home was the Democracy, to which he returned after Jackson left office. Besides resisting Jackson's Bank War, Calhoun in the 1830s also played a leading

role in the banning of abolitionist materials in Congress, and backed President Van Buren's independent treasury plan and failed re-election bid.

The 1840s brought Calhoun renewed political power as a leader of Senate Democrats, while his hopes for the presidency, an office he had first pursued twenty years earlier, revived. Conceding a likely defeat, however, he dropped out of the 1844 contest early, but was quickly thrust into the position of secretary of state when President John Tyler selected him for the post without notice — a nomination the Senate quickly and unanimously approved. Occupying this office for the remainder of the Tyler administration, a period of slightly less than a year, Calhoun proved to be an active and efficient administrator, personally negotiating an annexation treaty for Texas, and, when this failed, producing a joint resolution that successfully brought the independent republic into the Union. In addition, he resisted British intrusion into the slavery issue while also working with that nation toward settling the Oregon country dispute.

Upon returning to the Senate late in 1845, where he remained until his death, Calhoun found himself in the midst of increasing sectional conflict. He disapproved of the war with Mexico, correctly anticipating fights over the extension of slavery into the newly conquered territories, while also objecting to President James Polk's aggressive method of initiating a war which to Calhoun seemed reckless. He answered the Wilmot Proviso of 1846, which would forbid slavery in any territory won during the war, by asserting that slave owners could legally bring their property with them anywhere, including the territories. Also in the late 1840s, Calhoun called for unity among southern states, rejected the proposed Compromise of 1850 as a non-solution, and sadly predicted civil war within a decade. In his final years, while increasingly ill from the tuberculosis which eventually ended his life, Calhoun finished, albeit in rough form, his two political works, *A Disquisition on Government* and *A Discourse on the Constitution and Government of the*

United States. In these detailed essays Calhoun laid out his political theories, including his intriguing concept of the concurrent majority. Shortly before his death in March 1850, he delivered his last speech in the Senate, warning of the dangers ahead and demanding a constitutional solution to the sectional conflict. Too weak to deliver the speech himself, it was read for him by a fellow senator, James Mason of Virginia.

In the end, despite his constant and often Herculean efforts, Calhoun died sensing the Union would not survive; indeed, the Union as he saw it did not. This southern statesman, who during his lifetime was often labeled a metaphysician due to the deep logic he employed, would later be blamed for the Civil War and permanently scarred with slavery's legacy. Yet, he would also win respect as a brilliant constitutional theorist, and, a century after his death, be voted by the U.S. Senate as one of the five greatest senators in United States history.⁴

The purpose of this work is to analyze the major Calhoun studies published in the century and a half since his death. While each work will be examined individually and in general chronological order, an attempt will be made to define the various schools of historical thought which have formed regarding Calhoun. As an introduction to the thought of Calhoun, chapter one briefly addresses the Carolinian's own late-in-life works, *A Disquisition on Government*, and *A Discourse on the Constitution and Government of the United States*, while also looking into the sizable collection of published primary source material.

In addition to the numerous biographies and scholarly articles, Calhoun is discussed in countless theses and dissertations, biographies of his contemporaries, works

⁴Coit, ed., *John C. Calhoun*, 165-166. In 1957, a special Senate committee chaired by John F. Kennedy, along with a 150-member advisory panel of scholars, selected Calhoun as one of the five greatest senators of all time. Calhoun, said Kennedy, was "the most notable political thinker ever to sit in the Senate."

addressing various political and constitutional topics, and histories of the antebellum period — far more material than may be covered in an historiographical analysis of the scope attempted here. By necessity, only the most important published works focusing on Calhoun will be examined.

CHAPTER 1

THE PRIMARY SOURCES: CALHOUN'S *DISQUISITION* AND *DISCOURSE* AND COLLECTIONS OF CALHOUN'S PAPERS

There is no dearth of Calhoun primary source material. His major works were collected and published shortly after his 1850 death, and over the following century and a half, Calhoun's speeches, writings, reports, and correspondence became increasingly available. Of the earliest Calhoun materials to be published following his death, and probably the most important, were his two late-in-life treatises, *A Disquisition on Government* and *A Discourse on the Constitution and Government of the United States*.¹ Written intermittently from 1843 until just prior to his death and left in unedited form, the works are a collection of Calhoun's thoughts on government, matured over a lifetime. The first book, *A Disquisition*, is more finalized than the second and deals with his core ideas on government without application to the American system. It may, therefore, be more useful for understanding the Carolinian and consequently receives more attention here. The two works together provide a blueprint from which to measure him against the numerous schools of historical thought which have formed regarding Calhoun since 1850.

In the *Disquisition*, Calhoun laid out his idea of the concurrent majority. He began by setting up a four-tiered structure consisting of man, society, government and constitution. Man, he noted, is essentially a "social being" and therefore lives in a society, but his own interests, or "individual affections," outweigh his "social feelings," or concern

¹Richard K. Cralle, ed., *The Works of John C. Calhoun*, 6 vols. (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1853-1856). The *Disquisition* and *Discourse* together make up volume one of the set.

for others — a situation Calhoun saw as positive, pointing out the probable chaos that would result should the opposite be true. Nevertheless, this state of society naturally brings conflict, leading to a need for the “controlling power” of government. Calhoun argued that this situation had existed for as long as man had lived, thereby denying that the “so-called state of nature,” or pre-state period of freedom and equality, had ever existed. Because of man’s “natural” need of societal order for “the preservation and perpetuation of the race,” government had always existed.²

Both society and its government are, according to Calhoun, “equally of Divine ordination,” while the fourth element in his structure — constitution — is man-made. Despite its protective nature, government has a natural inclination toward oppression. The reason, Calhoun explained, is that man runs government, and individual want naturally precedes social concern; hence, the fourth element in the structure. In short, constitution checks government which orders society which is essential to man’s preservation and continuance. Because government is of “Divine ordination” while constitution is not, Calhoun saw the difficulty in the situation, asserting that “[m]an is left to perfect what the wisdom of the Infinite ordained.”³ His question was how?

A constitution, Calhoun explained, is an “interior structure” of government — or as he termed it, an “organism” — which, if successful, checks the inclination towards oppression. For Calhoun, the presence of such a structure marked the difference between constitutional and absolute government. However constructed, this structure must empower “the ruled” in their opposition to “the rulers,” or as Calhoun phrased it, “[p]ower can only be resisted by power.” Given this premise, he revealed his first

²Cralle, ed., *Works*, 1:1-6, 58.

³*Ibid.*, 5, 7-8.

“foundation” for constitutional government: the right of suffrage.⁴ Yet, this represented only a start for Calhoun, for while suffrage shifts the base of power to the people, it fails to eliminate the government’s inclination toward domination, since a majority, no matter how slight, would tend to oppress a minority. His answer to this problem was a “concurrent” majority giving equal voice to all major interests or sections of the country, which may themselves, through their individual majorities, “put or keep the government in action.” This would be accomplished through an interior structure or “organism” dividing governmental power by giving each section “either a concurrent voice in making and executing the laws, or a veto on their execution.” For Calhoun, this structure, joined with the right of suffrage, was adequate for checking the government’s inclination toward oppression.⁵

Calhoun contrasted the concurrent with the outright, or numerical majority. The numerical majority, he pointed out, is based on simple numbers, while the concurrent — which he also labeled “constitutional majority” for its necessity in constitutional government — regards the “whole community as a unit,” including both numbers and sections, or interests. Calhoun emphasized these distinctions, asserting that unless the difference is known, the concurrent risks falling into the numerical, and at length into monarchy or worse. In fact, he argued that the numerical majority when used alone ultimately results in absolute government “in all cases.”⁶ The concurrent majority applies a “mutual negative” by providing a veto to all sections or interests, and therefore an orderly, nonviolent method for canceling the “natural tendency” toward sectional conflict. The

⁴Ibid., 11-12.

⁵Ibid., 25-26.

⁶Ibid., 28-29, 35.

absence of the negative, a term Calhoun also labeled “interposition, nullification, check, or balance of power,” is, he argued, the absence of a constitution; indeed, for Calhoun it “forms the constitution.” He asserted that by any title, the source of the negative is the concurrent majority. In short, no concurrent majority, no negative, no constitution. Therefore, where the numerical majority exists without the concurrent majority, there is no constitution, since “constitution implies limitation or restriction.” Consequently, the numerical majority alone ultimately results in an absolute form of government — “in all cases.”⁷

Calhoun contended that besides inclining the government toward oppression, the numerical majority pollutes a country politically, and therefore morally, which in turn corrupts even its best citizens, something that, according to Calhoun, “[n]either religion nor education” could check. In such a situation moral and intellectual regeneration would be required. The route to this reformation, he asserted, was man’s own hunger for improving his circumstance, and in this, liberty was essential. But Calhoun contended that not all people were fit for liberty, for some, in fact, it would “be a curse.” Worse yet, for society, universal liberty would bring “anarchy, — the greatest of all curses.” The unfit, he added, did not deserve this “reward reserved for the intelligent, the patriotic, the virtuous and deserving.” For Calhoun, it was something “to be earned.” Furthermore, he denied the connection between liberty and equality of condition, arguing that to make the two equal would “destroy both liberty and progress,” for men were not equal. In fact, he strongly rejected the notion that “all men are born free and equal,” labeling that famous idea “destitute of all sound reason.” The continual push, he argued, by those in the “rear ranks” for self-betterment coupled with the desire of those in the “front rank” to remain there,

⁷Ibid., 35-36.

“gives to progress its greatest impulse.” For this, liberty was essential, and the best security for liberty, Calhoun asserted, was the concurrent majority.⁸

As to any advantages of the numerical over the concurrent majority, Calhoun admitted to only one: the “simplicity and facility of construction.” It is nothing more than the largest number, he pointed out, requiring only universal manhood suffrage. Here, however, his admissions ended, for he also noted that absolute governments share this simplicity. In fact, he pointed out that governments tend to move from complex to simple, and lastly, to monarchy in its absolute form, “the most simple of all.”⁹ Calhoun ended his *Disquisition* briefly examining “the two most remarkable and perfect . . . forms of constitutional government,” those of Rome and Britain. He pointed out that both constitutions began with compromise, each employing a structure giving their classes a say in government, and each requiring “the concurring voice of all.” Interestingly, as he turned from Romans and English, he looked to a government much “less understood,” that of the United States.¹⁰

In his far lengthier *Discourse*, Calhoun put forth his ideas on the American system of government while applying the fundamental principles laid out in his *Disquisition*. Most important are his thoughts about the Constitution and the nature of the federal system. He distinguished the governments of the “several States” from the “one common government” of the United States, emphasizing that the states had preceded the general government. Pointing out that the “rulers” are accountable to the “ruled,” he made a careful point on sovereignty, asserting that “the people are the source of all power,” and

⁸Ibid., 51-52, 54-58.

⁹Ibid., 77.

¹⁰Ibid., 91-92, 104, 107.

alone created both the state and general governments. This, he stressed, was the “great cardinal maxim.” The instruction was less elementary than it appeared, for Calhoun was declaring the permanent oneness of sovereignty; “to divide” it, he proclaimed, “is, — to destroy it.”¹¹ Only governmental powers, not sovereignty, were divided between the state and general governments. Furthermore, the powers given these bodies were “not surrendered, but delegated.” They were, he explained, “held in trust” only — “and not absolutely.”¹²

The American system of government was, therefore, federal, Calhoun pointed out, because it was a political rather than a social union, “a community of states” bound by compact. He contrasted the federal model with, on the one hand, a mere confederacy or simple agreement between independent governments, and on the other with a national or unified “single state or nation.”¹³ The government was a compact, he asserted, because the states, “as distinct sovereign communities,” created and ratified the Constitution which united them, and the creator is always above the creation. In addition, he noted that ratification, as stated in the seventh article of the Constitution, was an act “between” the states, and therefore a contract, or compact. Consequently, the Constitution could not be “*over* them” if it was a contract “*between* them.”¹⁴ The government of the United States

¹¹Ibid., 111-112, 146. It should be noted that Calhoun’s concept of indivisible sovereignty contrasted with the constitutional generation’s adherence to divided sovereignty. Andrew C. McLaughlin referred to the Founders’ ideas on sovereignty as “the social compact political philosophy,” which “conceives of divided sovereignty, of the binding effect of compact, and of the founding of a body politic by compact and consent.” See Andrew C. McLaughlin, *A Constitutional History of the United States* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1935), 355n.

¹²Cralle, ed., *Works*, 1:112.

¹³Ibid., 112-113, 122.

¹⁴Ibid., 130-131.

could not be a party to the compact which created it, since it was instituted by the sovereign people who both established and sanctioned it with delegated powers through the Constitution. All remaining powers were reserved to the states, which for Calhoun meant the sovereign people of those states.¹⁵

Calhoun also rejected the notion of an “American people.” No such people existed, he argued, only the “people of the several States.” The government of the United States, with its delegated powers, stood equal with the states and their reserved powers — each “in their respective spheres.” According to Calhoun, the people owed “allegiance” to their individual states, which continued as “separate and independent communities” through which the people exercised sovereignty. This, asserted Calhoun, was “the true relation between the two governments.”¹⁶ Here was the compact theory of government, a political philosophy which provided a basis for the concurrent majority, nullification, and ultimately, the right of secession.

Throughout the *Discourse*, Calhoun, in lengthy but at times lucid fashion, followed the entire history of the United States’ constitutional and governmental system, applying his ideas of the concurrent majority and warning of dangers to the Constitution, such as executive tyranny, each step of the way. At one point late in the work, and therefore near the end of his life, he even suggested a dual executive as an answer to what he saw as a grave crisis.¹⁷ Although somewhat redundant, Calhoun’s *Discourse* presented a detailed look into his thoughts on the American federal system and Constitution from the perspective of his theories as originally laid out in the *Disquisition*.

¹⁵Ibid., 119.

¹⁶Ibid., 122, 146-147.

¹⁷Ibid., 392-393.

Calhoun's two essays became widely available shortly after his 1850 death in the first collection of his works, Richard K. Cralle's six-volume *Works of John C. Calhoun*, in which the *Disquisition* and *Discourse* together filled the first volume. Cralle, Calhoun's devoted friend and hand-picked editor for his two essays, printed the manuscripts in the same form the dying man had left them, explaining in the introduction his intention to retain the Carolinian's "peculiar modes of expression," leaving, as Calhoun had requested, the "truth, plainly announced, to battle its own way." The manuscript for the *Discourse*, second of the two essays, came to Cralle written on loose paper in Calhoun's own hand, and according to the editor, bore "evident marks of interrupted and hurried composition."¹⁸ The remaining five volumes contain speeches running back to 1811, reports and public letters, including many important documents from Calhoun's time as secretary of war, and papers such as the *Exposition*, which together Cralle loosely classified as "political essays."¹⁹ Although criticized by some historians as incomplete, the set, outside of private correspondence, is reasonably sound. Cralle's *Works* remained the chief source of Calhoun material for over a century.

Any holes in Cralle's *Works* were partly filled nearly fifty years later when J. Franklin Jameson collected and published Calhoun's political as well as private correspondence.²⁰ The project, first conceived by Jameson while a professor of history at Johns Hopkins in 1895, was called for at the initial meeting of the American Historical Association's Historical Manuscripts Commission that same year. With virtually no private

¹⁸Ibid., vii-viii.

¹⁹Cralle, ed., *Works*, 6:v.

²⁰J. Franklin Jameson, ed., *Correspondence of John C. Calhoun*, vol. 2, *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1899* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1900).

Calhoun correspondence published, Jameson lamented the fact that the personal Calhoun remained unknown to the public a half century after his death. He managed to secure from Calhoun's estate access to a massive collection of private correspondence, including some 430 letters from Calhoun and roughly 2,300 — from nine hundred different authors — addressed to him. Through relatives and other collections, Jameson managed to increase the total number of letters in the collection written by Calhoun to eight hundred, five hundred of which he ultimately presented in his *Correspondence of John C. Calhoun*. Of the large number of letters written to Calhoun, the bulk dated from the last decade of his life. “[W]ith a view to illustrating from as various points of view as possible the career of Calhoun,” his section, and the nation in the 1840s, Jameson made a judicious selection of some two hundred of these letters for incorporation into his work. Perhaps by no small coincidence, his preface was finished and dated on the fiftieth anniversary of Calhoun's death, March 31, 1900. This massive and well-organized single volume running over 1,200 pages, also contains as “a fitting introduction” a twenty-five-page early history of the Carolinian prior to his entering public life written by Col. William Pinkney Starke, “a native of the Calhoun region.” Calhoun's son-in-law, Thomas Green Clemson, had invited the aged South Carolina attorney to come to Fort Hill and write Calhoun's biography in 1883. Although Starke died three years later leaving the work unfinished, Jameson considered his account “well worthy of permanent preservation.”²¹ A chronology, a calendar of previously printed letters, and simple indexed lists of all correspondence utilized are also included in this fine work.

Three decades later, available Calhoun source material was further improved with the *Correspondence Addressed to John C. Calhoun, 1837-1849*, edited by Chauncey S.

²¹Ibid., 17-18.

Boucher and Robert P. Brooks and printed in the same publication as Jameson's work thirty years earlier, the *Annual Report of the American Historical Association*.²² Designed as a supplement, the editors encouraged simultaneous use of the two collections. Boucher and Brooks referred readers to both Jameson's preface and to Col. Starke's sketch of the young Calhoun. The new set, which included only letters written to Calhoun, reprinted Jameson's chronology, and included an excellent annotated calendar of the over three hundred letters printed in the collection, which generally dated from Calhoun's final decade. The editors stressed the variety of sources from which the letters originate and the wide range of subjects addressed; in fact, no less than thirty-six topics are specifically named in the preface. While much smaller than Jameson's bulky 1900 work, the 1930 *Correspondence* nevertheless consumed over four hundred of the nearly six hundred pages of that year's *Annual Report*. Taken together, Cralle, Jameson, and Boucher and Brooks provided students of the *Carolinian* a relatively solid source of Calhoun materials.

These separate collections are becoming increasingly obsolete, however, with the superb and ever-expanding *Papers of John C. Calhoun* initiated under the editorship of Robert L. Meriwether, who unfortunately did not live to see the first volume of his project published in 1959.²³ With the latest edition published in 1998, this very complete collection, originally projected at fifteen volumes, has reached twenty-four covering all of the *Carolinian*'s speeches, writings, letters, and reports to nearly the end of 1847. In the project's three decades of work, all of which has been published by the University of

²²Chauncey S. Boucher and Robert P. Brooks, eds., *Correspondence Addressed to John C. Calhoun, 1837-1849, Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1929* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1930).

²³Robert L. Meriwether, W. Edwin Hemphill, and Clyde N. Wilson, eds., *The Papers of John C. Calhoun*, 24 vols. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1959-).

South Carolina Press, the names of only three chief editors have appeared on the cover pages: Robert L. Meriwether, W. Edwin Hemphill, and Clyde N. Wilson — thereby demonstrating an enormous amount of editorial stability, something easily seen in the work. Each of these meticulously-edited volumes contains both a preface explaining the volume's place in the series, and an introduction examining the period to be covered in the particular volume. Despite the *Papers'* thoroughness, other government publications and key newspapers found listed in most Calhoun biographies are helpful as supplemental and background information.²⁴

While the wealth of available primary source information has made studying Calhoun convenient, his theories as laid out in the *Disquisition* and *Discourse* have remained as challenging sources of controversy. It is here that Calhoun continues to provide a background for understanding the debate which has raged around him for one hundred and fifty years.

²⁴John Niven, *John C. Calhoun and the Price of Union: A Biography*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 350. Niven's fine bibliographical essay provides a complete list: "the *Register of Debates*, the *Annals of Congress*, the *Congressional Globe*, and *American State Papers: Documents, Legislative and Executive, of the Congress of the United States* (38 vols.; Washington, D. C., 1832-61)." Pertinent newspapers include "*Niles' Register*, the *Washington Daily Intelligencer*, the *Richmond Enquirer*, the *Pendleton Messenger*, the *Charleston Courier*, and the *Charleston Mercury*, and Calhoun's short-lived Washington journals, the *Washington Republican and Congressional Examiner*, the *Spectator*, and the *Constitution*."

CHAPTER 2

THE LONG DEBATE BEGINS

While the extensive collections of Calhoun's writings are vital to research and study, they tell little of how historians have viewed the South Carolinian in the nearly one hundred and fifty years since his death. The pendulum of historical opinion has swung far and wide during this time, yet curiously, it moved little at all during the first two postbellum decades. When the shift began, however, the result was quite different from the early tributes published before the Civil War.

The earliest biographical work, the *Life of John C. Calhoun, Presenting a Condensed History of Political Events From 1811 to 1843*, actually preceded his death, and was in reality little more than seventy-four pages of campaign publicity for his unsuccessful 1844 presidential bid.¹ Written anonymously, the book provides the best and earliest information on his formative years "in a rude frontier state," which may be the work's greatest asset since it is the source used by most later biographers when addressing this period. Typical was the story of the young adolescent Calhoun being isolated for a time on his brother-in-law's Georgia plantation. Finding a small library in the house, Calhoun reportedly "read the whole of the small stock of historical works," becoming so "pallid and . . . emaciated" from his three-month effort that his frightened mother sent for him, eventually reviving his health with outdoor activity.² The book also traced Calhoun's

¹*Life of John C. Calhoun, Presenting a Condensed History of Political Events From 1811 to 1843* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1843); reproduced in its entirety in Wilson, ed., *Papers*, 17:3-112.

²*Ibid.*, 4, 7-8.

political career, lending insight into the Carolinian's view of his apparent political reversal in moving from nationalist to states rights nullifier. It divides his career "into two grand epochs," the first focusing on the defense of the nation "against foreign aggression," while his later years were spent liberating the country's laws from "devices by which one was enabled to prey upon another." In either period, however, Calhoun was "the man of his time."³ The *Life*, therefore, is significant not only as a political narration and subtle presentation of constitutional ideas, but also as a representation of Calhoun's own political thought, for many historians consider the *Life* an autobiography.⁴

The charge that Calhoun himself authored the *Life* stemmed from Robert B. Rhett's 1854 accusation against former House Speaker and one-time leader of the Virginia Calhoun forces, Robert M. T. Hunter — to whom Calhoun credited the work — alleging that he added only one or two pages to a manuscript actually written by the Carolinian. Whether made out of jealousy, poor memory or misinformation, the charge set a century-and-a-half-long controversy into motion. The work's anonymity and use of "our" and "we" in the narrative add to the confusion. W. Edwin Hemphill, an editor of Calhoun's *Papers*, and University of Georgia historian James L. Anderson attempted to put the matter to rest in 1972, explaining that Calhoun sought out Hunter to write the book in order to spark his presidential campaign, personally providing the necessary materials which his daughter, Anna Maria, first copied into "an orderly draft." In private correspondence, Calhoun referred to the book as Hunter's own, informing Anna Maria that his friend had reworked the draft enough to warrant sole claim to the work. In fact,

³Ibid., 105-106.

⁴Harold S. Schultz, "A Century of Calhoun Biographies," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 50 (April 1951): 251.

Hemphill and Anderson contend the book was Calhoun's "Christmas gift of 1842," citing letters written by Hunter to his wife explaining his part in converting the Calhoun-provided materials "into a readable, persuasive campaign biography." Hunter added, however, that the work was "[n]ot all or quite half of it mine."⁵ Clyde N. Wilson, the editor of volume seventeen of the *Calhoun Papers*, explained it best, noting that much of the book repeats nearly word-for-word the short 1830 "Biographical Memoir of John Caldwell Calhoun" by Virgil Maxcy.⁶ Provided that Hunter incorporated this work while writing "[n]ot all or quite half of it" himself, little room would remain for any direct Calhoun contributions. The book, it is argued, was likely written by Hunter using Maxcy's work along with Calhoun's materials and guidance.⁷ While this presents the most logical explanation, it matters little whether Calhoun wrote all or any of the *Life*, for its continuing importance lies in the original descriptions of his early life and the Carolinian's own interpretation of his political career.

It took Calhoun's death in 1850 to bring about new major writings, anchored by John S. Jenkins's popular biography, *The Life of John Caldwell Calhoun*.⁸ Published the year of the southern leader's death, Jenkins's work probably exploited the public outpouring of emotion which followed that event, and therefore cannot be considered a serious scholarly work.⁹ Yet, the book is significant if for no other reason than for its place

⁵James L. Anderson and W. Edwin Hemphill, "The 1843 Biography of John C. Calhoun: Was R. M. T. Hunter Its Author?," *The Journal of Southern History* 38, no. 3 (1972): 470-473.

⁶Wilson, ed., *Papers*, 17:3.

⁷Wilson, ed., *Papers*, 17:3-4; quotation from Anderson and Hemphill, "The 1843 Biography," 472.

⁸John S. Jenkins, *The Life of John Caldwell Calhoun* (Auburn: James M. Alden, 1850; reprint, Auburn: Alden, Beardsley & Co., 1852).

⁹Niven, *Calhoun and the Price of Union*, 347.

as the only major biographical work on the Carolinian to appear during the first thirty years following his passing. The book, despite its almost complete lack of analysis, is nevertheless useful as an informative history, for it thoroughly follows Calhoun's life and career from start to finish. Clearly uncritical, Jenkins nonetheless was first to note Calhoun's "morbid melancholy" regarding human nature.¹⁰ Jenkins, who had written popular histories on James Polk, Silas Wright, and the Mexican War, relied heavily on Hunter's 1843 campaign biography as a source and also incorporated several of Calhoun's speeches into the text.¹¹ The work's essence may be summarized in the opening lines when Jenkins, dedicating the book to the people of South Carolina, eulogized the fallen Carolinian as "one of those who visit us, like angels, 'few and far between.'"¹²

A year after Jenkins's biography, a short article by Mary Bates on the *Private Life of John C. Calhoun* appeared in a New York publication.¹³ The author was a young New England girl hired to live with and tutor Calhoun's children, who years later felt moved at his death to write her "recollections of this illustrious statesman."¹⁴ While brief, its impact was far-reaching, for as Pulitzer Prize-winning Calhoun biographer Margaret Coit pointed out a century later, this hero-worshipping piece "darkened Calhoun's name for seventy years," doing to the Carolinian what Parson Weems did to George Washington, wrapping

¹⁰Jenkins, *The Life of John Caldwell Calhoun*, 453.

¹¹Schultz, "A Century of Calhoun Biographies," 251.

¹²Jenkins, *The Life of John Caldwell Calhoun*, v, viii.

¹³Mary Bates, "Private Life of John C. Calhoun," *The International Magazine of Literature, Art, and Science* 4, no. 2 (1851): 173-180.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 173.

him in “layers of priggish perfection.”¹⁵ Bates’s assertion that Calhoun possessed “an unwavering dignity and gravity in his manner,” coming just one year after Jenkins had reminded readers of Harriet Martineau’s observation of Calhoun as “the cast-iron man, ‘who looked as if he had never been born,’” almost certainly contributed to his dehumanization in the public mind.¹⁶ Beyond her constant praise of a man with “a rare combination of mental and moral qualities,” Bates made several interesting observations concerning Calhoun and slavery, noting his belief that slaves were happiest, “and useful,” when being directed by whites. She recalled the story of a freed slave who, after nearly starving and freezing in a northern city, had sought Calhoun in Washington “begging him to intercede for his return” to slavery. This experience only served to reinforce the Carolinian’s already firm conviction that to free the slaves, “at least at present,” would destroy them, leaving Africans to “the doom of the Indians.”¹⁷ Despite the idolization, this brief work provided insight as to Calhoun’s manner, habits, activities, and beliefs, providing a valuable and rare glimpse into his private life.

The homage continued in 1857 when congressional and South Carolinian tributes were collected and published by J. P. Thomas as *The Carolina Tribute to Calhoun*.¹⁸ While this collection represented no original contribution to scholarship, its mere existence demonstrated the continuing reverence for the deceased southern leader exhibited in the decade between his death and the Civil War. In addition, the work provided a convenient concentration of sermons, eulogies, reports, and other detailed information associated with

¹⁵Coit, *John C. Calhoun: American Portrait*, 382.

¹⁶Bates, “Private Life of John C. Calhoun,” 173; Jenkins, *The Life of John Caldwell Calhoun*, 445.

¹⁷Bates, “Private Life of John C. Calhoun,” 176-177, 179.

¹⁸J. P. Thomas, ed., *The Carolina Tribute to Calhoun* (Columbia: Richard L. Bryan, 1857).

his 1850 death in Washington. Of particular interest are the proceedings in the Senate for April 1, which include the death announcement, biographical information, and the comments of longtime Calhoun associates, Henry Clay and Daniel Webster. Numbering over four hundred pages, *The Carolina Tribute* was considered a “literary monument” by its editor; a fitting description, for it capped the numerous eulogistic accounts that followed the Carolinian’s death, a trend that ended with the sounds of war.¹⁹

It was not until 1882 that the first serious study of the southern leader appeared with constitutional historian Herman Von Holst’s *John C. Calhoun*, twenty-second of the successful thirty-two volume American Statesmen series edited by John T. Morse.²⁰ Written without the benefit of Calhoun’s private correspondence, this scholarly but severe work helped to solidify the image of Calhoun as an unfeeling leader of a doomed cause, a man wishing only to dissolve the Union and spread human bondage. The book’s opening pages set the tone, stating that the Carolinian was interested “in nothing outside of slavery”; in fact, Von Holst argued that his life “expressed nothing else.” The author not only attacked Calhoun, but also labeled the South itself “[m]orally . . . wrong.”²¹ An unrelenting argument against slavery, the work harshly condemned Calhoun as the mastermind behind an anti-Union southern conspiracy, a theory outlined a decade earlier in Henry Wilson’s *Rise and Fall of the Slave Power*.²² Virtually ignoring his personal life,

¹⁹Ibid., 411.

²⁰Herman Von Holst, *John C. Calhoun* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1882). Von Holst authored this work after publishing the first three volumes of his nationalistic *Constitutional and Political History of the United States*, 8 vols. (Chicago: Callaghan and Company, 1876-1892).

²¹Von Holst, *John C. Calhoun*, v-vi.

²²Niven, *Calhoun and the Price of Union*, 347-348; Henry Wilson, *The Rise and Fall of the Slave Power*, 2 vols. (Boston: J. R. Osgood, 1872-1877).

Von Holst traced Calhoun's political career. But just as Jenkins had consistently praised his subject, Von Holst constantly criticized him, connecting nearly every aspect of Calhoun's life, particularly his last two decades, to slavery, labeling him its "very impersonation."²³

Yet his criticism also moved beyond the dominant topic of slavery. The Carolinian, for instance, was said to be infected with "presidential fever, which . . . permeated the very marrow of his bones." Although crediting Calhoun with "a powerful brain" and "sound" heart, Von Holst attacked his political theories, calling nullification "madness . . . the systematization of anarchy." Furthermore, he asserted that Calhoun advocated the right of secession only with an awareness that should the event occur, "two geographical sections" would be created along the lines of slavery, and not just random chaos. The author was somewhat softer regarding Calhoun's early years, however, noting his limited constitutional concerns in national matters, arguing that his interest in that document emerged only with his later engrossment in slaveholder interests.²⁴ Von Holst's study contributed nothing new to the information available on Calhoun, but it did provide a classic illustration of the profound resentment held by the late nineteenth-century nationalists for the South and its spokesmen. It also pointed toward a school of thought in sharp contrast to the early eulogies.

While Von Holst's work fed northern nationalism, a counter movement developed in the former Confederate states known as the Lost Cause, a romantic, yet defiant line of pro-southern thought that brought the pendulum back to Calhoun's side.²⁵ One of the

²³Von Holst, *John C. Calhoun*, 7.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 58, 94, 99-102.

²⁵A recalcitrant and proud southern outlook, the Lost Cause provided postbellum southern whites with a mental mechanism for dealing with their war-time defeat. This line of thought eventually took on

earliest writings reflecting the change was attorney Jabez L. M. Curry's *Principles, Acts, and Utterances of John C. Calhoun, Promotive of the True Union of the States* (1898) which contended that the Carolinian "was preeminently, almost idolatrously, a friend of the Union."²⁶ Curry made clear, however, that his conception of the Union was one "of co-equal states."²⁷ Originating as a Fourth of July address at the University of Chicago, Curry's essay set out to show that Calhoun's ideas still represented "the best guarantee of constitutional liberty" for the nation.²⁸ He praised the Carolinian while restating from a turn-of-the-century viewpoint his theories as laid out in the *Disquisition and Discourse*, which, he claimed, established Calhoun "as a publicist on a plane with Aristotle." Curry was obviously using Calhoun to grind an ax. He condemned the growth of federal power since the Civil War and the virtual disregard of the tenth amendment. Curry praised Calhoun's fight to restore the Constitution to its proper place of "original supremacy over the Congress and the executive."²⁹ Conceding the permanency of the Civil War's political effects, however, and therefore the absence of the "disturbing influence of sectionalism" and slavery, Curry urged a "broad, patriotic view" in restoring "free, representative, and responsible government" — probably the best approach for a pro-Calhoun speech

religious and political overtones, as many southerners gloried in memories of the Confederacy and a sense of moral superiority over northern society. The Lost Cause, which defiantly defended states rights, was reflected in the numerous Confederate monuments and cemeteries across the South, as well as in organizations such as the United Daughters of the Confederacy. For a brief summary of the Lost Cause see William J. Cooper, Jr. and Thomas E. Terrill, *The American South: A History*, 2d ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill Companies, 1996), 432-435.

²⁶Jabez L. M. Curry, *Principles, Acts, and Utterances of John C. Calhoun, Promotive of the True Union of the States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1898), 11.

²⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸*Ibid.*, 2.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 11-13.

delivered on Independence Day during the height of the nationally popular Spanish-American War.³⁰

The pro-Calhoun writings continued that same year when Charles Cotesworth Pinckney presented the Carolinian "From a Southern Standpoint."³¹ Having known Calhoun as a youth, Pinckney, in a short article reminiscent of Mary Bates's sketch a half century earlier, attempted to introduce a personal Calhoun as remembered from his childhood in Pendleton, South Carolina near the statesman's plantation. Professedly leaving evaluation of his political career "to others," Pinckney held to his goal for most of the article, praising the intelligence, honesty, and integrity of the "Roman Senator" with a "Grecian intellect."³² The temptation to discuss Calhoun's politics, however, was apparently too great, for Pinckney concluded his brief work by defending the Carolinian's theories on nullification, states rights, and slavery, pointing out northern misunderstanding of his motives, and, echoing Curry, proclaiming Calhoun's patriotic love for the Union. Pinckney also attacked antebellum southern politicians unsympathetic to the Carolinian's states rights views, who he claimed "were wandering in cloud-land" as Calhoun stood "on the rock of actuality." Declaring "no regrets for the extinction of slavery," Pinckney nevertheless railed against "the arbitrary decrees of a fanatical age" of abolitionism in which "philanthropy and misguided zeal" had forced Calhoun to defend his section. Despite such reasoning, Pinckney put forth the traditional pro-slavery arguments regarding

³⁰Ibid., 26, 30.

³¹Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, "John C. Calhoun, From a Southern Standpoint," *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* 62 (July-December 1898).

³²Ibid., 81, 85.

the civilizing and christianizing of millions of “lazy” slaves, even while admitting that the institution had existed beyond its time and was destined for a natural death.³³

Harkening back to the early tributes even more than C. C. Pinckney’s short piece, was the work of another Pinckney, South Carolina attorney Gustavus M. Pinckney. An inadequately-detailed narrative and excessively eulogistic treatment of Calhoun’s political career, his *Life of John C. Calhoun* (1903) nevertheless made a strong argument in favor of his ideas on government by making use of a large number of quotations from Calhoun’s speeches.³⁴ Pinckney aggressively confronted northern nationalism, arguing that the Civil War settled nothing regarding Calhoun’s constitutional theories and that the matter would “remain open until it is settled right.” Without the protection of nullification, Pinckney contended, there could be no liberty, and therefore no peace. In fact, he challenged those who questioned nullification to call a constitutional convention and make their doubts “certain.”³⁵ While this study cannot be taken seriously as a scholarly biography, it demonstrated the strongly pro-Calhoun southern sentiment paralleling the Lost Cause and contributed to the general argument against an unchecked numerical majority and the dangers to liberty Calhoun attached to that concept.³⁶

Five years later, in a continuing effort to counter Von Holst’s condemnatory view of the Carolinian, historian Gaillard Hunt, already the author of several works including a 1902 study of James Madison and an 1893 history of the U.S. State Department,

³³*Ibid.*, 88-89.

³⁴Gustavus M. Pinckney, *Life of John C. Calhoun* (Charleston: Walker, Evans & Cogswell Co., 1903).

³⁵*Ibid.*, 67-68.

³⁶Schultz, “A Century of Calhoun Biographies,” 250.

published a scholarly but kind biography of the leader of the Lost Cause entitled *John C. Calhoun*.³⁷ By far the best treatment of Calhoun to that time, Hunt, who worked for the Library of Congress Manuscript Division, investigated the Carolinian's political theories in detail while providing a general narrative of his career. To his credit, he went beneath the surface of Calhoun's ideas, citing precedents for nullification such as the 1793 Supreme Court case of *Chisolm vs. Georgia* and the resulting eleventh amendment to the Constitution, the Massachusetts and Connecticut repudiation of the Embargo Act, Ohio's restriction of the National Bank, the Hartford Convention, and above all, the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions.³⁸ Hunt's study of Calhoun's "record of honor" also offered plenty of objective analysis and even some gentle criticism — elements sorely lacking in previous Calhoun biographies. Nor did the author fail to view his subject's private side, acknowledging, for instance, Calhoun's "personal dislike for" his senatorial antagonist, Thomas Hart Benton, and his "deepest" aversion to Andrew Jackson.³⁹

Interestingly, Hunt refused to absolve the Carolinian of responsibility for disunion, thereby differing noticeably from Curry's assessment of Calhoun as the Union's best friend. While addressing the sectional crisis of the late 1840s, Hunt pointed out a Calhoun-authored manifesto designed to inspire southern unity, which echoed the Declaration of Independence and was adopted by several southern congressional members. Despite its scant support, Hunt argued that the document "marked a point onward in the march of secession which Calhoun was leading."⁴⁰ Hunt, however,

³⁷Gaillard Hunt, *John C. Calhoun* (Philadelphia: George W. Jacobs & Company, 1908).

³⁸*Ibid.*, 81-82.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 216-217.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 306-307.

sympathized with Calhoun's position, explaining that if southern society — “the only South he had ever known” — faced certain extinction, the Carolinian's ultimate duty was to rescue it, “and if necessary to sacrifice the Union” he loved. Nevertheless, Hunt added that Calhoun's first desire was for Union “while there existed even a shadow of hope” for saving it.⁴¹

Stressing Calhoun's status as his state's “uncrowned king,” as well as his leadership of the slaveholder interest, Hunt asserted that the Carolinian eventually “became the slavery cause incarnate.”⁴² He stopped short of condemning this distinction, however, noting that the southern leader's section faced destruction in sudden emancipation. Calhoun, Hunt pointed out, saw that even a gradual release of the slaves would have been impossible without southern public backing which was unattainable. He had no choice, therefore, but to advance his doctrines of state sovereignty and all that went with it to protect his section within the Union.⁴³ Generally, however, Hunt emphasized Calhoun's political and constitutional ideas over his part in the slavery issue, while making a fine overall analysis of his career, and therefore, a significant contribution to Calhoun historiography.

These favorable studies paralleled the larger pattern of southern pro-slavery academic thought which emerged with the early twentieth-century professionalization of history. This school was eventually typified by Ulrich B. Phillips's long standard, *American Negro Slavery*.⁴⁴ In the progressive era, historians tended to explain away

⁴¹Ibid., 314, 321.

⁴²Ibid., 306, 317.

⁴³Ibid., 318-319.

⁴⁴Ulrich B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment and Control of Negro Labor* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1918).

slavery as an economic concern and did little to challenge southern pro-slavery academic thought. Likewise, Calhoun's role in the slavery issue took a back seat to his political and constitutional virtues.⁴⁵ This was demonstrated in progressive-era historian William E. Dodd's *Statesmen of the Old South, Or From Radicalism to Conservative Revolt* (1911).⁴⁶

A professor of American history at the University of Chicago, and generally sympathetic to Calhoun, Dodd attempted to portray the Carolinian as a bridge between the original republican idealism of Thomas Jefferson and the subsequent party of wealth and privilege personified in Jefferson Davis.⁴⁷ Dodd addressed Calhoun's early nationalism by arguing that he was in fact, "a nationalist at heart to the day of his death." He emphasized the Carolinian's fight during the Nullification Crisis to establish a "reasonable tariff" which would satisfy the South while insulating northern industry. This would bring Calhoun national leadership, allowing him to go forward in doing "the great nationalizing work" of uniting the traditional Jeffersonian alliance of West and South.⁴⁸ Similarly, he compared Calhoun's attempted course of uniting "a 'solid' South" based on the "economic interest" of slavery, with Henry Clay's similar grab at national leadership through forming "a 'solid' North on the basis of a high tariff."⁴⁹ Even nullification was put in a nationalist light by

⁴⁵Gaines M. Foster, "Guilt Over Slavery: A Historiographical Analysis," *The Journal of Southern History* 56, no. 4 (1990): 665-694.

⁴⁶William E. Dodd, *Statesmen of the Old South, Or From Radicalism to Conservative Revolt* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1911; reprint, 1929).

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 232-235.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 117-118, 133.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 133-134.

arguing that it allowed the “ardent nationalist” Calhoun to “reconcile nationality with particularism,” instantly making him the protector of southern economic interests. This position, Dodd contended, caused the Carolinian to place the institution of slavery above the ideals of his party’s founder, Thomas Jefferson. He concluded, therefore, that Calhoun “died, the greatest reactionary of his time.”⁵⁰ Although an interesting interpretation, portraying Calhoun as a life-long nationalist seems hardly credible. The Carolinian himself claimed that his states rights view of the nation had always been his primary position, despite having strayed for a time.⁵¹

Another early twentieth-century work typical of the focus on Calhoun’s political and constitutional attributes rather than his role in the slavery issue was an in-depth study of opposing theories of the Union by Andrew C. McLaughlin.⁵² One of the “Deans” of American constitutional history, McLaughlin provided a constitutional supplement to the favorable Calhoun works emerging at that time. In his 1900 study, McLaughlin turned to the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions and Calhoun, lending insight into the Carolinian’s adaptation of the Resolutions so as to lay a foundation for his concept of state sovereignty. Key was the divisibility of sovereignty. Noting the founders’ belief that the nation was united by the people’s consent to the Constitution “in their collective and national capacity,” McLaughlin explained that sovereignty existed in both “the people of the nation and . . . of each state.” When applied to the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions — from which Calhoun drew much authority — this division of sovereignty prevented a

⁵⁰Ibid., 166-167.

⁵¹Merrill D. Peterson, *The Great Triumvirate: Webster, Clay, and Calhoun* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 278.

⁵²Andrew C. McLaughlin, “Social Compact and Constitutional Construction,” *The American Historical Review* 5, no. 3 (1900): 467-490.

state from exercising true independence, for if it was shared with the people of the nation collectively, then nullification and secession would be impossible.⁵³ McLaughlin made the point that Calhoun's concept of state sovereignty was based on that sovereignty's indivisibility, where already-independent states consented to the Constitution by compact, while retaining their sovereignty, which could not by its nature be divided. For Calhoun, the agreement was just that — a compact between separate, indivisible sovereign entities. McLaughlin thus isolated the key component of Calhoun's thought and the central issue that distinguished his ideas from those of Madison, Jefferson and others of the constitutional generation. The Framers saw little problem in dividing sovereignty between state and nation. To Calhoun, this was an impossibility. As he declared in his *Discourse*, to divide sovereignty "is, — to destroy it."⁵⁴

In spite of the several major biographies, it was nearly seventy years after Calhoun's death before a complete scholarly study finally emerged. Historian William M. Meigs's indexed and well documented, two-volume *Life of John Caldwell Calhoun* put a wealth of information into a lengthy narrative that remained the basic Calhoun biography for three decades.⁵⁵ Despite the scholarly trappings and moderate tone, the work was clearly sympathetic toward Calhoun and his ideas. Meigs took issue with Von Holst, attacking his nationalistic approach and calling his "lack of comprehension of fundamental points . . . quite inexcusable." In defending Calhoun's states rights arguments which he labeled "absolutely unanswerable," he accused Von Holst of blindly following Webster's

⁵³Ibid., 481-482.

⁵⁴McLaughlin, "Social Compact," 484-486; Cralle, ed., *Works*, 1:146.

⁵⁵William M. Meigs, *The Life of John Caldwell Calhoun*, 2 vols. (New York: The Neale Publishing Company, 1917; reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 1970).

“barefaced assertions and . . . splendid oratory.” To Meigs, assertions and oratory were the only means available to the embattled New Englander since he was unable to “meet the facts and crystal clear deductions of Calhoun’s logic.”⁵⁶ Meigs, who had authored historical works on the Constitution, Thomas H. Benton, and his own grandfather, Charles J. Ingersoll, praised Hunt’s work of a decade earlier “so far as it goes,” but considered his own study a completion of the mere “sketch” Hunt had produced.⁵⁷

Meigs downplayed Calhoun’s role in the slavery debate. He contended that while southerners were eventually willing to divide the country to save the institution of slavery, many of them — Calhoun included — “loved the Union deeply,” and agonized over “the terrible problem” with “profound sorrow” as their once youthful and seemingly limitless nation moved toward destruction.⁵⁸ Meigs thus sympathized with both the South and Calhoun. Aside from this obvious slant, the bulk of his narrative is relatively noncontroversial and complete. This work generates no real excitement today but remains useful as a source. Chiefly a political biography, it provided a detailed, informative, and somewhat bland Calhoun resource that remained the standard for thirty years.⁵⁹

Meigs’s work marks roughly the midway point in the century-and-a-half Calhoun historiography. That it took seventy years for a complete and at least partially balanced study to appear tells something of the enduring levels of passion Calhoun stirred. From the early eulogies through the equally biased denunciation by Von Holst, Calhoun’s name

⁵⁶Ibid., 1:12-13, 15. Meigs might have done well to understand the times in which Von Holst wrote, and, more importantly, the fact that in 1882 he did not have access to Calhoun’s correspondence, a luxury Meigs enjoyed thirty-five years later.

⁵⁷Ibid., 1:12.

⁵⁸Ibid., 2:168-169.

⁵⁹Richard N. Current, *John C. Calhoun* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1963), 157.

never quite left the American landscape. When the notion of the Lost Cause arose, Calhoun rose with it, a continuing icon fifty years after his departure. As the progressive era dawned, historians brought the controversial southern leader into constitutional discussion, while analyzing him in an increasingly professional manner. Following Meigs's standard work, Calhoun entered yet another era, where his ideas received a fresh look in an expanding debate.

CHAPTER 3

NEO-CALHOUNISM

While Meigs remained the standard biography, the Calhoun debate continued uninterrupted. Out of the progressive era emerged a school of thought described by Richard N. Current as neo-Calhounism, a revival of favorable works on the southern leader that would reach high tide by the 1950s. This view's chief thrust was the applicability of Calhoun's concurrent majority to modern America, and began with University of Washington historian Vernon L. Parrington's "John C. Calhoun: Realist" (1927).¹

Parrington's essay, a milestone in the study of Calhoun, was part of his well received *Main Currents in American Thought*, a broad study of American literature as an expression of the nation's economic, religious, and political consciousness. Brushing aside Jefferson's "romantic idealism . . . led astray by French humanitarianism," the realist Calhoun, he argued, placed "class economics" above Jeffersonian abstractions. Parrington also tied Calhoun decisively to slavery, calling him the champion of "southern imperialism." Indeed, he asserted that his political ideas were developed in defense of that institution. Yet, he sympathetically placed the Carolinian's theories, in particular his concept of the concurrent majority, into a category of necessary reaction, thereby moving Calhoun beyond the image of slavery, and giving him "a distinguished place among

¹Vernon L. Parrington, "John C. Calhoun: Realist," in *The Romantic Revolution in America*, vol. 2, *Main Currents in American Thought: An Interpretation of American Literature From the Beginnings to 1920* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1927), 69-82.

American thinkers.”² Parrington pointed out that Calhoun’s fears of a “hostile economy” were realized in the postbellum “middle-class ideals” of political “consolidation” and societal “standardization” — for Calhoun, he asserted, had built only a “paper defense against economic forces.”³ Yet, with his theory of the concurrent majority, the Carolinian had skillfully answered a key problem of democracy: the potential “tyranny of the stronger over the weaker interests.” Parrington noted that by dividing up democracy into absolute and constitutional majorities, one based solely on numbers and viewing society as a single unit, and another based on both numbers and interests, Calhoun was able to offer his solution of protecting numerical minorities “by superimposing upon the consolidated, indiscriminate numerical majority the will of a geographical majority.” Although chiefly a defense of the South, Calhoun’s concurrent majority proposed a type of “proportional economic representation” which Parrington labeled “revolutionary” in the sense that it afforded a way for “economic sectionalism” to find “expression through political agencies.”⁴

This idea, Parrington argued, made Calhoun “the intellectual descendent of John Adams,” asserting that both men saw property as the “fundamental principle” upon which power rests. More importantly, he noted that Adams and Calhoun, both of whom rejected the French idealism of Jefferson, understood a government of checks and balances to be the best assurance of “political justice.” Despite these basic similarities, Calhoun had to adjust to a sectional economy in which “a supplementary veto” seemed increasingly necessary in order to maintain constitutionally balanced government. Consequently,

²Ibid., 70, 72.

³Ibid., 81.

⁴Ibid., 76-77.

Parrington argued that Calhoun, although “revolutionary,” was also the final “spokesman of the great school of the eighteenth century.”⁵

Interestingly, in the same year that Parrington resurrected the concurrent majority, British historian Christopher Hollis also depicted the Carolinian as a final bulwark against industrial capitalism and political consolidation. Originally published in England, his *American Heresy* (1927) provided an engaging outside perspective on American political and economic history in which Calhoun, for his defense of agrarian society and political decentralization, became “the personification of an idea.”⁶ Hollis examined the role of Calhoun, along with that of Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Woodrow Wilson, in the shaping of America’s political mind. Important is his contention that the agricultural and states rights-oriented Jeffersonian republic died in the Civil War at the hands of centralized Hamiltonian federalism, leaving the United States thereafter “only a name.” Calhoun’s defense of the Jeffersonian state, which according to Hollis no longer existed in the postbellum era, therefore loomed large as part of “[t]he United States, which were previously a reality.”⁷

⁵Ibid., 81-82.

⁶Christopher Hollis, *The American Heresy* (London: Sheed and Row, 1927), 99.

⁷Ibid., 11, 13. Beyond the triumph of industrialization over agrarianism, the Civil War changed American’s somewhat ambiguous perception of the Union. In the understanding of the constitutional generation, for instance, “[t]he federal Union was part confederation, part unitary government,” while under the compact theory of government later defended by Calhoun, the Union was a decentralized nation of sovereign states. Regardless of perspective, the term “United States” was understood as plural in the antebellum period, as in, for example, the United States *are* a powerful nation. The war, however, established a sovereign federal Union; therefore, in the postbellum era the nation was viewed as a single political entity, as in, the United States *is* a powerful nation. For more on the Civil War’s effect on the nature of the Union, see Alfred H. Kelly, Winfred A. Harbison, and Herman Belz, *The American Constitution: Its Origins and Development*, 7th ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), 1:317-318.

Hollis was no apologist for Calhoun's defense of slavery as an institution; in fact, he declared that while the southern statesman fought for liberty, he "held these truths to be self-evident — that all men were born equal and that negroes were not men."⁸ Nevertheless, he excused the Carolinian's opposition to "an abolition . . . imposed by the North upon the South." According to Hollis, Calhoun justly feared the precedent of one section forcing its will upon another, and was, therefore, "right to go out and meet every attack upon slavery."⁹

Hollis stressed the uphill nature of Calhoun's struggle against industrial capitalism — "the new spirit of the age" — contending that Calhoun saw catastrophe in an industrial economy that regarded "wealth" over "happiness as the end of man." Furthermore, he noted the Carolinian's belief that industrialization ultimately ended in wage slavery. Calhoun, therefore, viewed the new spirit "as a whole" and attacked it as such.¹⁰ In short, Hollis argued that once southerner leaders saw control of the country passing from "landed classes" to northern industrialists, Calhoun, as the South's chief political theorist, had to defend her against all dangers, above all, industrialization and abolitionism.¹¹ Hollis faulted the Carolinian for his defense of "slavery 'as a positive good,'" even as he justified his battles against section-based abolitionism. Nonetheless, he denied that Calhoun's fight against northern industrial dominance was a political smoke screen to protect slavery. It

⁸Hollis, *American Heresy*, 169.

⁹*Ibid.*, 130-131.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 168.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 117, 130.

was instead, Hollis argued, primarily a defense of liberty. Calhoun, therefore, was not only “the personification of an idea,” but a name “in the first rank of American statesmen.”¹²

The romanticizing of Calhoun and the antebellum South may have reflected a wider literary reaction against America’s industrial culture. In the 1920s, popular writers reviled the greed of large corporations and the crass materialism of a consumer economy. Many Americans mourned a loss of national innocence and longed for a simpler agrarian society represented by a highly idealized Old South.¹³ Literary intellectuals found an underlying friction between “civilization,” embodied in urbanization, industrialism, and “impersonal human relationships,” and “culture,” typified by small agricultural and rural communities with an “‘instinctive’ democracy, and faith in nature.” Conservative southern intellectuals attacked “the modern worship of science, machinery, and economic achievement as an end in itself” while praising the “wholeness, harmony,” and “integrated personalities” of agrarian life. Even intellectuals on the left cautiously acknowledged the “certain advantages” of slavery over an abused modern industrial workforce; the antebellum planter, for instance, “at least accepted responsibility for his acts.”¹⁴ With the coming of the Depression, meanwhile, many Americans turned to history in seeking “inspiration and guidance from the lives of great men.”¹⁵ For many southerners, Calhoun made an ideal subject.

¹²Ibid., 99, 168.

¹³George D. Moss, *The Rise of Modern America: A History of the American People, 1890-1945* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1995), 172-175.

¹⁴Richard H. Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 102-105. For further treatment of intellectual thought in the 1920s, see Roderick Nash, *The Nervous Generation: American Thought, 1917-1930* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1970).

¹⁵Moss, *Rise of Modern America*, 264.

Not every Calhoun study, however, followed the favorable trend initiated by Parrington and Hollis. A year after their influential works, another analysis of Calhoun appeared with historian Frederic Bancroft's short *Calhoun and the South Carolina Nullification Movement*.¹⁶ While Bancroft's political narrative gave an accurate account of the Nullification Crisis, his analysis was anything but neo-Calhounite, for the Columbia University-trained Bancroft was both a friend and life-time defender of Hermann Von Holst. His 1928 study, in fact, nearly matched Von Holst's severity forty-six years earlier.¹⁷

Bancroft credits Calhoun with leading South Carolina in its independent battle against a growing northern nationalism, but is highly critical of both his motives and his constitutional theories. Calhoun's sincerity, allegedly blinded by political desire, is questioned throughout the work. The Carolinian, for instance, "lusted for the presidency," believing himself alone to be fit for the office, while his "avowed love for the Union" was dismissed as a requirement of presidential hopefuls.¹⁸ While conceding to the Carolinian an unrivaled place among debaters, he claimed that his underlying constitutional logic relied "on false premises." Calhoun's chief mistake, Bancroft explained, was his belief that the Constitution was essentially an extension of the Articles of Confederation. From here, the Carolinian had created "an imaginary super-constitution" to facilitate the doctrines of state sovereignty, nullification, and secession. Had Calhoun studied the writings of the "wise and lucid Madison," Bancroft asserted, such errors in fundamental thought would never

¹⁶Frederic Bancroft, *Calhoun and the South Carolina Nullification Movement* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1928; reprint, Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1966).

¹⁷Jacob E. Cooke, *Frederic Bancroft, Historian* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1957), 30, 118.

¹⁸Bancroft, *Calhoun and the South Carolina Nullification Movement*, 103, 183.

have been made.¹⁹ In all, Bancroft's work provided an excellent factual account of the Nullification Crisis, but his assessment of Calhoun's thought and motives was too heavily reliant on Von Holst. As a result, recent scholars have largely dismissed the work as outdated, and Bancroft's own biographer admits that his study displays "an unfortunate tendency to consider the Constitution as meaning in 1830 what it meant in 1928." The book, therefore, holds limited value as an informative source.²⁰

Far more interesting and much less critical was Arthur Styron's *The Cast-Iron Man* (1935).²¹ Styron, an Episcopal minister and native southerner, wrote this sympathetic biography of Calhoun from "a strong Catholic or High Episcopal" — and southern — perspective, severely rebuking both northern economic nationalism and fervent social reform movements.²² Perhaps reacting to the mounting northern criticism of southern race relations that accompanied the Scottsboro cases, Styron reserved special contempt for self-righteous Puritan reformers. He asserted that "[t]here is no cult so vulgar as that which is based on the belief that God will help those who forcibly help others."²³ His sympathetic attitude toward slavery and endorsement of a peaceful and gradual emancipation, as well as his attacks on northern abolitionism, are, therefore, of little surprise. Slaveholders, he argued, were concerned with their slaves' souls, whereas

¹⁹Ibid., 162-163, 180.

²⁰Clyde N. Wilson, *John C. Calhoun: A Bibliography* (Westport, CT: Meckler, 1990), 88; quotation from Cooke, *Frederic Bancroft, Historian*, 118.

²¹Arthur Styron, *The Cast-Iron Man: John C. Calhoun and American Democracy* (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1935).

²²Schultz, "A Century of Calhoun Biographies," 250.

²³Styron, *Cast-Iron Man*, 378. On the Scottsboro cases (1931-1935), see Dan T. Carter, *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969).

northern industrialists viewed employees “as mere tools.” Styron further noted that “though it deprived the black man of his freedom,” slavery was a legal institution so deeply ingrained in southern society, that its immediate end was disastrous. He pardoned the South’s interest in the profitability of cotton-based slavery, but expressed regret over the nineteenth-century southern view of the institution “as an absolute good,” preferring instead the eighteenth-century perspective of slavery as a necessary evil.²⁴

Styron was clearly influenced by Parrington’s essay of a decade earlier, for he repeated much of his analysis nearly word-for-word. Over all, Styron’s work reflected extreme neo-Calhounism. He presented the southern leader as a final barrier against northern industrial capitalism, a system he believed representative of “the descendency of the Modern Age.”²⁵ The book presents a colorful, unique and perhaps excessively sympathetic defense of Calhoun and the antebellum South, and reveals as much about southern thought in the 1930s as it does about Calhoun.²⁶

Meanwhile, San Francisco native Charles M. Wiltse refined neo-Calhounism when he broadened Parrington’s interpretation of the Carolinian, giving the concurrent majority concrete economic and political application in his “Calhoun and the Modern State” (1937).²⁷ Five years after completing his studies in philosophy at Cornell University, Wiltse, who would later become Calhoun’s leading biographer, took a central role in neo-Calhounism. He sharpened its focus, labeling the Carolinian’s concept of state

²⁴Ibid., 370, 376-377.

²⁵Ibid., 3.

²⁶Schultz, “A Century of Calhoun Biographies,” 250.

²⁷Charles M. Wiltse, “Calhoun and the Modern State,” *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 13, no. 3 (1937): 396-408.

sovereignty “economic pluralism.” In substituting “interest group” for “state,” and “economic content” for “political,” he made Calhoun’s ideas instantly germane for the twentieth century.²⁸ Wiltse saw the concurrent majority as “practical economic realism” in what he argued was essentially “an economic analysis . . . of sovereignty.” This perspective did not, however, represent a fundamental change in the theory, for Wiltse showed that Calhoun himself saw his doctrine primarily in economic rather than political or geographical terms. In support, he cited the Carolinian’s frequent references in the Senate “to ‘those who represent the manufacturing interest on this floor,’ or ‘we who stand for the staple states.’” Such terminology, Wiltse argued, demonstrated Calhoun’s “realistic” perception of economically-based senatorial representation.²⁹

Wiltse referred to modern-day examples of the concurrent majority, noting for example, that while the negative power or nullification in the antebellum period found expression in a state veto, it appeared in the twentieth century as “strikes, lockouts, injunctions, and boycotts,” as well as in “the political activities of pressure groups.” Because society was more localized in Calhoun’s time, economic interests generally matched state boundaries putting political focus on the states. Lines blurred in the twentieth century, however, as groups such as those representing agriculture, manufacturing, capital, and labor formed broad interests. Wiltse argued that whether or not the various economic interests were recognized and given political power, their “actual sovereignty” continued nonetheless. Each major economic group, he asserted, must be given a voice in the formation of federal legislation in order to maintain a stable, balanced state, “the historic purpose of constitutional government.” Without official

²⁸Ibid., 396-937.

²⁹Ibid., 400, 402.

representation, modern-day interests would continue to be unofficially represented through lobbying, strikes, and boycotts, “negative” manifestations of the concurrent majority.³⁰ Thus with his stimulating essay, Wiltse put forth a clear and forceful argument in favor of proportional economic representation, greatly strengthening the neo-Calhounite view. Yet before the decade was over, his interesting work would be followed by a far different, if not unrelated perspective.

Historian Gerald W. Johnson, previously the biographer of John Randolph of Roanoke, delivered his analysis of Calhoun as one of the Great Triumvirate in *America's Silver Age* (1939).³¹ An energetic writing style makes Johnson's book enjoyable reading, redeeming what is essentially a straightforward and somewhat outdated political narrative. Unsympathetic toward Calhoun, the author nevertheless noted his virtue, respectability, and sound reasoning. Johnson, however, also wrote that he was “highly argumentative,” “authoritarian,” and “probably was an intellectual snob.” In addition, he turned Calhoun's well-known personal morality on its head, contending that the “humorless” Carolinian was likely “convinced of his own righteousness,” and therefore unconcerned with forgiveness. Such a man, he explained, is “splendidly equipped to lead a nation to ruin.”³²

Politically, Johnson contended that Calhoun's career was destroyed in his challenge to Jackson, thereby driving the Carolinian into the role of sectional leader. “[R]emorseless logic,” he claimed, thereafter forced Calhoun to adopt a sectional outlook in order to fit the part.³³ Here Johnson reversed fact, for Calhoun's 1827 tie-breaking vote

³⁰Ibid., 403, 406-408.

³¹Gerald W. Johnson, *America's Silver Age: The Statecraft of Clay - Webster - Calhoun* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1939).

³²Ibid., 42, 46.

³³Ibid., 205.

against protection, followed one year later by his anonymous *South Carolina Exposition and Protest*, clearly indicated a change in perspective long before his open break with Jackson. Similarly, Johnson may have misjudged Calhoun's motives in the sectional crisis of the late 1840s. He correctly noted the Carolinian's belief that the South was doomed to "economic bondage" within the Union unless it kept political pace with the North. In fact, he argued that Calhoun favored southern control of the Union — even over secession, his alternate choice. But Johnson also equated that desire for supremacy with the Carolinian's lifelong affection for the Union, asserting that "he preferred dominance and called that preference love of the Union." Calhoun's mistake, Johnson contended, was his assumption that the South was capable of dominating an industrializing North within the Union, or of surviving independently as an eighteenth century agrarian society.³⁴

Johnson's Calhoun held no place in the arguments of his neo-Calhounite contemporaries finding modern-day applications for the Carolinian's ideas. For Johnson, Calhoun's significance ended with the antebellum South and its "wasteful" slave-based agricultural system. A progressive southerner, Johnson clearly disapproved of twentieth-century southern segregation, and in the end, summarized the southern leader's legacy with an analysis of the South he had left behind. "She has been perverse, and froward," he asserted, "indomitable, foul and magnificent," and "[i]n the matter of Negro enfranchisement . . . has defied the Constitution" while giving "lessons in lynching and courtesy."³⁵ His point is not missed, for Calhoun remained the embodiment of the South.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 258-261.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 259, 270.

Johnson's work made no new contribution to scholarship, and his often harsh attitude toward the Carolinian seemed at times to echo Von Holst. Calhoun is accused of a self-righteousness that negatively affected his political course, and hence, the nation, while his constitutional theories are scarcely touched. That this work appeared in the midst of a rising neo-Calhounism without joining or even acknowledging the debate only increases the book's anachronistic feel. Nevertheless, it is a treatment of three statesmen, not one; Johnson, therefore, can perhaps be excused for not responding. Over all, his work, despite its shortcomings, provides a fairly complete and lively narrative of the Triumvirate's forty-year presence on America's political stage.

One year later, as the nation approached war, and dictatorships seemed to be everywhere advancing, Yale historian Ralph H. Gabriel made a somewhat unique contribution to neo-Calhounism. Included in his *Course of American Democratic Thought* (1940) was "A Footnote on John C. Calhoun," a short chapter in which he discarded the common sectionalist image of the Carolinian for that of a liberty-loving nationalist.³⁶ In order to show the concurrent majority's importance in maintaining a harmonious nationalism, Gabriel examined Calhoun "in terms of the American democratic faith." He began with the Carolinian's adherence to that faith's four nineteenth-century tenets starting with his belief in both the natural and moral elements of the fundamental law. Calhoun's agreement with the second tenet, an Enlightenment-like faith in progress, was somewhat conservative, but he exceeded his generation's belief in individual freedom or liberty — the third doctrine of democratic faith. Lastly, Calhoun advocated the idea of American destiny, although as Gabriel made clear, through peaceful example only.

³⁶Ralph H. Gabriel, "A Footnote on John C. Calhoun," in *The Course of American Democratic Thought: An Intellectual History Since 1815* (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1940), 103-110.

Calhoun's approval of "the American democratic faith in all its doctrines," he asserted, revealed the realist Carolinian's underlying idealism.³⁷

Gabriel contended that the final element of the democratic creed — destiny — represented "the spirit of American nationalism," but also pointed out its reliance upon citizen loyalty. When one section becomes politically or economically threatened by a tyrannical majority, he asserted, as seen in the southern reaction to northern abolitionism, loyalty breaks down, endangering not only the sense of unity that nationalism provides, but the very security of the nation itself. The fight was against an unchecked numerical majority. Gabriel, therefore, made the concurrent majority and its negative veto, nullification, the solution to the inherent problem of nationalism in a democratic society. His brief essay expanded neo-Calhounism beyond economics into the arena of nationalism, as Calhoun's section-oriented theory became a tool "in promoting the common good of the whole."³⁸

The advent of neo-Calhounism marked a significant turning point in Calhoun historiography, bringing the Carolinian's ideas permanently into modern historical debate. From this period to the present, nearly all major Calhoun studies, whether friendly or critical, biography or narrowly-specialized work, addressed in one form or another his relevance in the twentieth-century. Just as Vernon L. Parrington's landmark essay signaled the dawn of a new era, Gerald W. Johnson's work symbolized the end of the earlier period, a time in which Calhoun's significance never moved beyond Appomattox Courthouse. In the end, Johnson did not have to answer the neo-Calhounites, for the

³⁷Ibid., 103-105, 108, 110.

³⁸Ibid., 108-109.

response would begin with force in the next decade, even as neo-Calhounism reached high tide.

CHAPTER 4

MID-CENTURY HIGH TIDE

The 1940s and early 1950s saw Calhoun's star ascend to new heights as the neo-Calhounite school exploded in a flurry of favorable new works, including a definitive three-volume biography that remains the standard fifty years later. As the Carolinian's theories were revived, analyzed, and expanded, a counter-argument to the surging neo-Calhounism also emerged. Viewed positively or otherwise, Calhoun was no longer a mere symbol of slavery whose relevance died with the Confederacy.

Sixteen years after Parrington ushered in an era, thirty-year-old Richard N. Current delivered a bristling attack on the neo-Calhounite view in his "John C. Calhoun, Philosopher of Reaction" (1943).¹ Educated at the University of Wisconsin, Current made Calhoun the embodiment of reaction, asserting that his ghost still "haunts" the Solid South, and "hovers" over any meetings of "contemporary Bourbons."² The heart of Current's conception of Calhoun was class conflict. He criticized the neo-Calhounites for portraying the southern leader as a final barrier to industrialization, arguing instead that Calhoun sought an alliance with northern capitalists in order to head off social revolution, something he was sure would come to industrialized society. Moving beyond Calhoun as "the planter champion," Current contended that the Carolinian not only shared the same interests with northern industrialists, but envisioned himself as head "of a combined

¹Richard N. Current, "John C. Calhoun, Philosopher of Reaction," *The Antioch Review* 3, no. 2 (1943): 223-234.

²*Ibid.*, 223.

conservatism” of southern and northern elites. Fear of social conflict provided the mutual attraction, for while Current acknowledged Calhoun’s distaste for industrial politics, he argued that the Carolinian saw a “danger far greater” in the growing industrial “proletariat.”³

Current strengthened his argument by noting Calhoun’s anticipation of several Marxian principles, which the Carolinian viewed from the opposite perspective. First, the ultimate polarization of society into capitalist and proletarian extremes; next, the eventual dispossession of all land; and lastly, the reduction of people to mere subsistence survival. Nor did Current leave slavery out of the argument. The Carolinian, he asserted, tried to convince northern capitalists that slavery made the South a “great conservative power” whose stabilizing influence would prevent social conflict in the North. Current, therefore, contended that Calhoun — “the great reactionary” — clearly understood what Marx — “the great revolutionary” — also knew, that the end of slavery must precede the end of capitalism.⁴

No distinct Calhoun writings addressing his ideas on class exist. Current, who had first studied the subject seven years earlier, admitted as much, conceding that at best, Calhoun “gave fragmentary expression to these ideas” in various reports, speeches, and private correspondence. These pieces of evidence, he explained, “must be extracted and rearranged . . . to make a systematic whole.”⁵ That Calhoun offered occasional class warnings to northern capitalists, while making no more than “fragmentary expressions” on the matter, does not convincingly support a thesis as drastically different from the

³Ibid., 224-225.

⁴Ibid., 230-231.

⁵Ibid., 229.

prevailing views as Current's. His argument is also weakened by the downplaying of Calhoun's return to the agrarian and states rights-oriented Democracy following Jackson's second term and the resulting alliance against northern industrialists. Current's explanation of political expediency is ill-supported and represents a reversal of the more likely scenario of Calhoun's occasional class warnings representing either a secondary concern, or a convenient tool in his larger, and well-documented, interest in the preservation of slavery. Current himself stressed Calhoun's contention that slavery was beneficial in preventing class conflict. Nevertheless, Current's harsh, but intriguing essay stands out as the first major assault on Calhoun's image as a last defense against advancing northern industrialism, and may rightly be considered a very early prelude to what would become two decades later a virtual counterassault on the neo-Calhounite school.

Harvard-educated Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. took an opposite view in his classic *Age of Jackson* (1945), winner of the Pulitzer Prize for History.⁶ While not specific to Calhoun, the work superbly analyzed his political beliefs and motives. Schlesinger agreed with the neo-Calhounites, explaining that the Carolinian allied with northern agrarian and worker-oriented Democrats in his opposition to industrial capitalists, and not the other way around as Current had argued. He did, however, concede the Carolinian's distaste for the northern working class, asserting that "his fear of radical democracy" and its belief in the numerical majority was exceeded only by "his fear of capitalism itself." Calhoun, he argued, understood that an alliance with northern capitalists would likely demand consent to their program of broad constitutional construction and expanded central government — a dangerous agenda for states rights southerners. To give up "its economic and constitutional bastions" would mean an agrarian South surviving "only on the sufferance

⁶Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1945).

of the North.” Calhoun, therefore, in seeing northern industrialists as a bigger threat to southern landed interests than propertyless workers, “showed how profoundly he inherited the Jeffersonian tradition.”⁷ Schlesinger asserted that Calhoun was right in his understanding of the fundamental conflict between capitalistic and slave-based societies, but mistaken in believing industrialists to be the prime movers in the attack against slavery. As Schlesinger pointed out, Free Soilers revealed the real force to be radical democrats.⁸

Schlesinger also noted Calhoun’s continuing importance in protecting minority interests, and in doing so, gave a nice presentation of the concurrent majority. He emphasized Calhoun’s “honesty and realism,” recalling, for instance, his belief that “[p]ower can only be resisted by power.” Conceding the concurrent majority’s primary use as a defense of slavery, he nevertheless praised “the measure of his intellectual accomplishment.” More than “a lawyer’s brief,” Calhoun’s theory was “a brilliant and penetrating study of modern society, whose insights remain vital for any minority.”⁹

Peter F. Drucker expanded the neo-Calhounite theory in his “Key to American Politics: Calhoun’s Pluralism” (1948).¹⁰ What Parrington introduced and Wiltse refined, Drucker polished. A Political scientist and management consultant, Drucker believed the southern leader’s notion of “sectional and interest pluralism” to be vital in comprehending modern U.S. politics. The idea that Calhoun’s relevance died with the Civil War, Drucker argued, was little more than “a partisan vote of the Reconstruction Period.” Indeed, he

⁷Ibid., 244-247.

⁸Ibid., 488.

⁹Ibid., 404-405.

¹⁰Peter F. Drucker, “A Key to American Politics: Calhoun’s Pluralism,” *The Review of Politics* 10, no. 4 (1948): 412-426.

claimed the southern leader “has become triumphant since.”¹¹ Drucker pointed out that Calhoun sought compromise between sections or interests through nullification, a principle which lives on with far more power and flexibility in the modern-day negative veto. According to Drucker, the best example of this power exists in the various “blocs” in Congress, such as the modern Farm Bloc, which in effect possesses veto power over agricultural legislation. These “entirely unofficial and extra-constitutional” manifestations of the concurrent majority transcend party lines and grant special interests “limited self-determination.” Their power, he explained, is best illustrated in the “senatorial ‘filibuster.’”¹² Beyond Congress, Drucker also noted Calhoun’s theory at work in other areas such as presidential cabinets and political parties. As he explained, the American political party, naturally neutral since its only purpose is to draw support from groups in its quest for power, has replaced the states as “the instrument to realize Calhoun’s ‘rule of the concurrent majority.’”¹³ Drucker’s essay brought neo-Calhounite thought to its highest plateau, proclaiming the idea of interest group veto power “the organizing principle of American politics.”¹⁴ While Drucker was giving neo-Calhounism its best modern application, however, another young but talented historian was disputing it.

Columbia University historian Richard Hofstadter saw class conflict behind the Carolinian’s logic. In his essay, “John C. Calhoun: The Marx of the Master Class,” part of his *American Political Tradition* (1948), he expanded on Current’s class theme of five years before, arguing that Calhoun, like Marx, realized the potential for revolution in the

¹¹Ibid., 413, 418.

¹²Ibid., 413-415.

¹³Ibid., 417.

¹⁴Ibid., 413.

industrial North.¹⁵ Possessing “the most striking mind” while lacking “the most elementary moral consistency,” Calhoun, Hofstadter contended, was one of America’s leading political thinkers. This distinction, however, was due to something other than his “antiquarian” concurrent majority, for Hofstadter was no neo-Calhounite. It was the Carolinian’s “keen sense for social structure” that drew Hofstadter’s attention.¹⁶

As in Current’s essay, Hofstadter exposed striking parallels in the “pessimism” of Calhoun and the “optimism” of Marx. Anti-Marx may have been a more accurate title for his study, however, for as Hofstadter pointed out, Calhoun was alarmed at the prospect of revolution, while Marx pursued it. His main idea was that Calhoun sought an alliance with northern industrialists in opposition to propertyless classes. The South, as Current had also emphasized, would serve as a dominant conservative, and therefore stabilizing force, while the North would suppress abolitionism in exchange. Hofstadter took the matter further, however, contending that such an alliance had indeed later developed. It continues to exist, he argued, in a surviving southern caste system, while conservative northern capital, although less stable than southern “[c]aste prejudice,” continues repressing labor. But Hofstadter also asserted that Calhoun erred in his calculations, primarily in believing that capital-labor tension would erupt before capital-planter conflict. The Carolinian, he asserted, like Marx, “overestimated the revolutionary potential of the working class.” In addition, he argued that Calhoun underestimated capitalism’s staying power, while also mistaking Jacksonian “mass discontent” for the start of revolution, an interpretation, Hofstadter noted, to be expected from “an intense reactionary.”¹⁷

¹⁵Richard Hofstadter, “John C. Calhoun: The Marx of the Master Class,” in *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), 67-91.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 67-68, 89.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 86-87.

Calhoun the statesman, meanwhile, made the mistake of seeking “a static solution” to “a dynamic problem” by insisting on a balance of new free and slave states, an impossibility, Hofstadter argued, with regard to population. He also challenged the image of Calhoun as the protector of minority rights, asserting that the Carolinian was wholly unconcerned with such “rights” as perceived in “the modern liberal mind.” Calhoun’s sole interest, he argued, was in “a propertied minority,” while his concurrent majority was exclusively a defense of slavery. In sum, Hofstadter labeled the Carolinian a man stubbornly fighting the tide of history: “a minority spokesman in a democracy, a particularist in an age of nationalism, a slaveholder in an age of advancing liberties, and an agrarian in a furiously capitalistic country.” Yet despite standing on the wrong side of history, this man with a “perversity of mind” had a remarkable ability to anticipate political and class directions.¹⁸ Although with added insight, Hofstadter basically repeated Current’s class-focused analysis of Calhoun, using the same inconclusive evidence. The same criticism regarding Calhoun’s incomplete writings on class and, more importantly, his alliance with northern Democrats, therefore applies. All told, Hofstadter did not prove his case as much as he failed to disprove the neo-Calhounite view of the Carolinian and class.

The following year, Hofstadter sustained his class-oriented view of Calhoun in an absorbing analysis of the political crisis surrounding the 1948 Dixiecrat revolt. His essay, “From Calhoun to the Dixiecrats” (1949), allowed him to reiterate in summary fashion the seven fundamental assumptions that he contended Calhoun used as a basis in designing his political defense of the South.¹⁹ First was the industrial North’s potential for social

¹⁸Ibid., 88-90.

¹⁹Richard Hofstadter, “From Calhoun to the Dixiecrats,” *Social Research, An International Quarterly of Political and Social Science* 16, no. 2 (1949): 135-150.

conflict. Next, the South's position as a stabilizing conservative element in the Union was followed by the belief that the North would repress abolitionism in exchange for southern stability. Fourth was a southern planter-northern capitalist alliance. Next came a warning that demagoguery aimed at southern institutions may quickly turn against northern capital. The mutual benefit of free trade to both northern industry and southern planters followed, while the assuredly disastrous results of emancipation made up the final point.²⁰ Hofstadter also recalled Calhoun's errors, such as his misinterpretation of early capital-labor dissatisfaction, while making brief summaries of Calhoun's various ideas including Mexico as "the forbidden fruit," the concept of "a dual executive," and the "one important respect" in which the Carolinian was proved "right" — his assertion that parties would grow sectional. In examining the southern political landscape since Calhoun, Hofstadter pointed out that while secession signaled the end of the Carolinian's long-time hope for southern equality in the Union, military defeat ironically produced the "southern solidarity" he had sought.²¹

The bulk of this work, however, was a contemporary examination of the Dixiecrat revolt and the problems faced by the Democratic party in the late 1940s. Hofstadter pointed out that one of the suggested solutions to southern isolation was Calhoun's class-based idea of an alliance with conservative northern capital. In a significant conclusion, he also noted contemporary southern Democratic Senators' practical use of "a concurrent veto" to compel compromise in the Senate "by bolting and voting with conservative Republicans."²² Thus, through his contemporary analysis of the Dixiecrat

²⁰Ibid., 136-138.

²¹Ibid., 138-140.

²²Ibid., 150.

revolt, Hofstadter demonstrated Calhoun's continuing influence in modern-day affairs. It is a fine work, but one at times strangely similar in tone, if not content, to neo-Calhounism. Meanwhile, Meigs's work of three decades earlier finally had its successor.

In a scholarly three-volume series, Charles M. Wiltse produced a comprehensive biography of the southern statesman which to this day remains the standard Calhoun work. Wiltse divided Calhoun's long career into three periods: *Nationalist, 1782-1828* (1944), *Nullifier, 1829-1839* (1949), and *Sectionalist, 1840-1850* (1951).²³ In a later reprint, he admitted the perhaps "over detailed" nature of his work, but no apologies were needed. The series provided exhaustive coverage of the Carolinian's political career, while doing an equally thorough job of addressing his constitutional theories and underlying premises. Nor did this detailed work neglect Calhoun's personal life, which included an examination of financial and other private family matters. The greatest delight of Wiltse's well-written narrative, however, may well be its superb overall presentation of the antebellum political scene, including insightful analysis and criticism of the Carolinian's contemporaries.

Wiltse's ideas for this work first formed in the tense atmosphere of the 1930s when the problem of easing the economic stress of depression was countered by growing fears of a too-powerful federal government as seen in the New Deal, and even more so in the various dictatorships then flourishing in Europe and Asia. Wiltse had discovered the Carolinian's *Disquisition on Government* and was taken by his idea of the concurrent majority, which by the Depression years, he explained, was known as "functional

²³Charles M. Wiltse, *John C. Calhoun*, 3 vols.: *Nationalist, 1782-1828*; *Nullifier, 1829-1839*; *Sectionalist, 1840-1850* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1944-1951; reprint, New York: Russell & Russell, 1968).

federalism — an internal balance of interests that would forever preclude by its own structure the centralization of power in the hands of any one of its constituent parts.”²⁴ The precise and sympathetic interpretation of the Carolinian’s theory that Wiltse presented in his 1937 essay “Calhoun and the Modern State,” a product of his early biographical research, provided the political and economic viewpoint adopted for this much larger work.

In a key interpretation explaining Calhoun’s transformation into a states rights nullifier, such a critical and often misunderstood point in his career, Wiltse asserted that the former nationalist had finally realized the selfish nature of man. He argued that with all “illusions” regarding his economic nationalism gone, the Carolinian realized that a numerical majority could “be the worst of tyrants.” Wiltse concluded that thereafter, the southern leader became “the supreme champion of minority rights and interests everywhere.”²⁵ In all, Wiltse gave a clear and compelling analysis of the concurrent majority and its “timeless” applicability. Indeed, he closed the entire work asserting that “[a]s a political theorist” Calhoun “showed more clearly than any other American has ever done how the political process works.”²⁶ Accordingly, nullification received extensive attention. Beyond a highly-detailed account of the 1832-1833 crisis, Wiltse provided a satisfying look at the overall political situation surrounding that event. He tied the doctrine of nullification directly to the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions of 1798-1799 via Calhoun and his *Exposition and Protest*, while making clear its purpose as “a conservative” alternative to “the extremes of rebellion or submission.” Wiltse also

²⁴Wiltse, *Nationalist*, v.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 397-398.

²⁶Wiltse, *Sectionalist*, 484.

removed Calhoun from direct connection to the South Carolina Nullifiers' forceful actions of 1832, noting that as vice president he had sought tariff reduction before turning to "the safety valve" of nullification. As Wiltse explained it, Calhoun had always tried to avoid "the shock of sudden or violent change"; his youthful objection to the embargo "by legal means," for example, was merely "a consistent forerunner" to his later nonviolent opposition to the tariff. Yet Calhoun understood the larger situation, for as Wiltse pointed out, it was slavery, and not the tariff, which would ultimately decide the South's fate.²⁷

Wiltse followed the evolution of Calhoun's thought concerning slavery, as detailed analysis of the topic followed broad themes. During the Missouri crisis, for instance, while acknowledging the "nobility" of John Quincy Adams's belief in "the moral impossibility of justifying slavery," the Carolinian could find no alternative to the southern labor situation in light of the region's established "social structure" and large number of Africans.²⁸ This position, however, became "frank realism" in the face of later abolitionist agitation, for he recognized that should the nationalist perspective of the Union become dominant, slavery would become "equally the responsibility of the North." Consequently, Calhoun thereafter saw states rights doctrine as the key to keeping slavery a "local institution."²⁹ Finally, the Carolinian's mature thought enlarged to become "Southern unity in defense of a way of life."³⁰ Slavery provided the dominant topic for the series' final volume, but while Wiltse demonstrated the central role its defense played in the Carolinian's thought and career, he avoided the moral overtones often associated with the subject. He conceded that the

²⁷Wiltse, *Nullifier*, 86-88.

²⁸Wiltse, *Nationalist*, 196.

²⁹Wiltse, *Nullifier*, 268, 275.

³⁰Wiltse, *Sectionalist*, 336.

Carolinian's defense of slavery as a positive good had the effect of increasing abolitionist agitation, but contended that Calhoun had little choice, for the slightest admission of evil would doom the institution to eventual extinction. Wiltse also noted, however, that such a defense in the face of a growing abolitionist movement made "conflict . . . inevitable."³¹ As Wiltse pointed out, abolitionism had the effect of drawing the South together, and just as the Nullification Crisis had put South Carolina in Calhoun's back pocket, his senatorial leadership in resisting abolitionism eventually made him "master of the South."³²

Wiltse's broad discussion of Calhoun's slavery defense brought readers much closer than former biographers to understanding the Carolinian as a man of his times and of his section. Calhoun was in large measure a man shaped by those forces that drove the South. Northern abolitionism, for example, raised southern fears not only of economic bondage, but of the violent reality of slave rebellion. It also provoked resentment of outside interference, driving a "separatist spirit never . . . far beneath the surface." As Wiltse explained, Calhoun had lost his early equalitarian idealism by the 1830s, to be "driven" thereafter "by his environment, his purposes," and above all, "the inner compulsion of his own logic." Calhoun's defense of slavery, Wiltse pointed out, may also have reflected his rigid Calvinist perspective in which redemption was "for the chosen few," and good and evil were clearly defined. Furthermore, southern society and slavery were "ordained by God" and must, therefore, be a positive good. Whatever the explanation, Calhoun "was sure of his course." He was "an intellectual," Wiltse asserted, and fought his battles as such.³³ During debate over the Wilmot Proviso, for instance,

³¹Ibid., 334-335.

³²Wiltse, *Nullifier*, 364-365, 394.

³³Ibid., 364-365, 369.

Calhoun's senatorial antagonist Thomas Hart Benton had attacked the Carolinian with "obvious rancor." Yet the "calm, confident manner" of Calhoun's response was, according to Wiltse, "striking in contrast to the bombastic style of his opponent."³⁴

In addressing Calhoun's 1837 Senate resolutions on the Constitution and slavery, Wiltse noted the triumphant difference from 1833 when the Carolinian had stood alone on similar resolutions. This time, however, his mastery of the moment was complete. The Senate endorsed the key elements of his states rights theory: that the states had joined the Union as independent and sovereign entities retaining sole control over their domestic institutions; that the federal government was simply an agent of those states created by the Constitution to help protect those institutions; that slavery was an important part of the institutions of the southern states which the federal government was bound to protect; and that attacks on slavery violated the "solemn pledge" of mutual support implicit in the Constitution. "How Andrew Jackson would have thundered if he had been there!" Wiltse asserted, noting the irony in that body, which had voted for the Force Bill just five years before, "now solemnly affirming in effect that the Nullifiers had all along been right!"³⁵ Likewise, Wiltse noted the Carolinian's forceful and effective logic in addressing slavery in the territories. By the late 1840s, Calhoun, he asserted, was speaking as the South's chief representative. Wiltse emphasized the clearly defined economic as well as political differences between the sections by that time. Pro-slavery and anti-tariff ideology were, for instance, as natural for the agrarian South as were the opposite positions for the

³⁴Wiltse, *Sectionalist*, 306-307.

³⁵Wiltse, *Nullifier*, 372.

industrial North. As Wiltse explained, Calhoun's 1847 call "for Southern unity" was little more than formal expression of "an accomplished fact."³⁶

Southern political cooperation was crucial in Calhoun's strategy for defending slavery in the late 1840s. Ironically, his plans received a boost when the Wilmot Proviso "shocked" southern Whigs and Democrats alike "in the face of a common danger." Yet the Carolinian, Wiltse pointed out, had recognized that measure's mere symbolism. For Calhoun, the fight was a decisive battle "for the preservation of a way of life . . . a culture."³⁷ He asserted that as Calhoun railed against the Proviso, "the hand of prophecy was on him." Indeed, a reader can almost hear the southern leader's words as he warned, "wo! wo! I say, to this Union." The "rock" of Calhoun's argument, however, was the Constitution, for unlike congressional compromise, it was "stable." Here, Wiltse noted, was the Carolinian's safety net from which he argued that the territories were "joint possessions of" all the equal and sovereign states. Congressional measures barring slavery in those territories therefore had no place.³⁸

This "most articulate and clear-headed of Southern spokesmen," Wiltse concluded, had throughout his career faithfully supported the Union and nonviolent answers to sectional discord. Calhoun, he added, also understood well that the underlying reason for conflict within that Union lay in two opposing economic structures. According to Wiltse, the Carolinian's legacy rests largely upon "his long and patient effort to . . . make a peaceable solution possible." Interests, he argued, should be balanced in both "the burdens and bounties of government." While Wiltse seemed to recognize the Carolinian's inability

³⁶Wiltse, *Sectionalist*, 336.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 289, 291, 293.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 304-305.

to either fully accept democracy or understand the moral aspects of abolitionism, he largely dismissed these flaws as a product of Calhoun's "mechanistic theory of society." At the same time he insisted that Calhoun's concept of the concurrent veto was "timeless in its application," and that his belief in the continual monitoring of government was "a universal condition of human freedom."³⁹ In sum, Wiltse kept readers close to Calhoun's lifelong political struggles throughout this lengthy but very readable work. It is in all, the most detailed, thorough, and well-researched of the Calhoun biographies — a near universal assessment.

Wiltse's politically- and constitutionally-focused work was followed by Margaret L. Coit's Pulitzer Prize-winning *John C. Calhoun: American portrait* (1950).⁴⁰ The twenty-eight-year-old Coit, later a professor of English and social sciences at Farleigh Dickinson University, presented the "Cast-Iron" Carolinian in a human light while tracing his public career, as well as personal and family life, in an energetic style.⁴¹ In this way, she made up for the only possible deficiency of Wiltse's series — a heavy political focus. Coit did, nevertheless, fully address Calhoun's long political career. Noteworthy is her disagreement with Wiltse over the categorizing of that career into neat sections, arguing that the Carolinian "was at once a nationalist and a sectionalist" throughout his career. She defended this conclusion by pointing out that, like Daniel Webster, "Calhoun was always to demand first protection for his immediate constituency."⁴²

³⁹Ibid., 482-484.

⁴⁰Margaret L. Coit, *John C. Calhoun: American Portrait* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1950; reprint, Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1961).

⁴¹Styron, *Cast-Iron Man*, iii.

⁴²Coit, *American Portrait*, 104.

In general, however, Coit agreed with Wiltse's neo-Calhounite view and acknowledged her debt to Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. for his "enlightenment . . . on the modern significance of Calhoun's philosophy."⁴³ For Coit, Calhoun was a liberty-loving minority champion who resisted "the forces of history," a brilliant constitutional theorist not only relevant to, but necessary for a nation which no longer possessed a truly federal form of government. That system, she explained, had died with the Civil War.⁴⁴ In a clear and understandable fashion, Coit analyzed the Carolinian's constitutional ideas through his *Disquisition on Government* and *Discourse on the Constitution and Government of the United States*, declaring these works to be "perhaps the most powerful defense of minority rights in a democracy ever written." In particular, she praised the idea of a concurrent majority checking the tyrannical potential of a numerical majority. The Carolinian, she asserted, was a constitutional champion, for "[n]o man was a more sleepless guardian against its violation."⁴⁵ In fact, Coit concluded that history has placed him "in the first rank of men America has produced," for as a theorist, his importance reached well beyond his own day.⁴⁶

As with constitutional theories, Coit devoted a chapter to understanding Calhoun's "state of mind" regarding slavery, taking a generally kind and apologetic approach. In explaining his lifelong association with the institution, Coit pointed out the Carolinian's strong disapproval of the slave trade, and well-known reputation as a kind master, even

⁴³Ibid., vii.

⁴⁴Ibid., 521-522, 532.

⁴⁵Ibid., 518, 524.

⁴⁶Ibid., 531.

while noting his undisturbed attitude toward slave-owning itself.⁴⁷ In his defense of slavery, Calhoun saw the need to move beyond the “necessary evil” understanding of Jefferson’s day, for as Coit pointed out, any “admission of evil,” even a necessary one, “was a concession of justice in the Northern point of view.” The Carolinian reasoned that a united South viewing slavery as a necessary bastion of southern society would reveal to the North the hopelessness of abolitionism. As Coit explained, “[t]here would be no surrender.” Such an achievement required a radical change in southern thought — a job that fell to the South’s leading theorist, Calhoun. Yet his success in tying the South’s survival to slavery “was the tragic contradiction” in his life, and for the accepting South, “an emotional error.” As Coit explained, “his feelings blinded him to the facts.” Yet she asserted that Calhoun, for all his passionate defense of slavery, saw the larger threat in advancing industrialism. That he was battling the tide of history meant nothing, for as Coit pointed out, Calhoun steadfastly fulfilled his obligations, “be the consequences what they may.”⁴⁸ Coit acknowledged the temptation to denounce this “stain” on a distinguished career, but stopped short of condemnation. She reasoned that if the realist Calhoun could not solve the southern dilemma in the face of an abolitionist movement — which ended any consideration of southern moderation — neither could the idealist Jefferson before him, who despite seeing the approaching problem, faced no such pressure.⁴⁹ In short, Coit’s observation reflected the neo-Calhounite view that tended to blame abolitionists for forcing the South into its “positive good” defense of slavery.

⁴⁷Ibid., 285, 308n.

⁴⁸Ibid., 306-307.

⁴⁹Ibid., 314-315.

Over all, beyond her lively writing style and humanizing portrayal of the southern leader, Coit's study is a fine political narrative that, like Wiltse's work, provides not only an interesting look into the Carolinian's career, but into the era in which he lived. In addition, her discussion of Calhoun's constitutional theories is nicely done and pleasantly understandable. While Wiltse's biography remains the Calhoun standard, Coit's refreshing work has been called "the best one-volume treatment."⁵⁰

The human Calhoun became pure metaphysics just one year later with *The Political Theory of John C. Calhoun* (1951), a slightly changed version of August O. Spain's 1937 doctoral dissertation completed at Yale University.⁵¹ Favorable toward the "unusually able and high-minded" Calhoun, and sympathetic toward states rights, Spain's sweeping study attempted a complete re-examination of the Carolinian's political theories and their historical roots.⁵² While relying upon Calhoun's various speeches, reports, and correspondence, as well as numerous secondary sources, Spain maintained that the key to his theories lay in the *Disquisition on Government* and *Discourse on the Constitution and Government of the United States*. These two works, he asserted, together assaulted egalitarian natural rights ideas, upheld slavery, and explained the Carolinian's concept of sovereignty and the nature of the Union.⁵³ In addition to Calhoun's "mind of extraordinary keenness and toughness," Spain noted the Carolinian's effective method of argument, essentially the constructing of "an inverted pyramid upon a single premise." Spain

⁵⁰Wilson, *John C. Calhoun: A Bibliography*, 57.

⁵¹August O. Spain, *The Political Theory of John C. Calhoun* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1951; reprint, New York: Octagon Books, 1968).

⁵²*Ibid.*, 7, 32.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 29-30.

examined all major areas of the Carolinian's central ideas, such as the conflict between liberty and authority, the nature of the Union, sovereignty, and the defense of slavery, which he argued stemmed from the Aristotelian concept of man's "natural inequality."⁵⁴

The study's overall theme, however, was decentralization with a focus on his idea of the concurrent majority. Spain acknowledged this theory's suitability as a defense of his section, pointing out Calhoun's devotion in his last two decades to "a solid South." He argued further that if Calhoun, the former nationalist, could have separated "nationalism" from its common understanding of a centralized political whole, he would have considered himself "a Southern nationalist." Yet, he asserted that the Carolinian was also driven by a sincere concern for minority defense and faith in decentralized government. A key to understanding these ideas lies in Calhoun's underlying belief in the indivisibility of sovereignty, something Spain pointed out was later accepted as correct in legal theory. He devoted an entire chapter to this fundamental Calhoun premise, arguing that the Founders' division of sovereignty was merely an extension of their evasiveness regarding its location. For Calhoun, sovereignty was a simple concept — "the highest law-making power," its division, "clearly impossible."⁵⁵

The "remarkably ingenious" concurrent majority received detailed examination in Spain's study. He pointed out the idea's origins in representative government and the liberty-protecting system of checks and balances which, when applied to economic forces, demonstrated the advantages of political decentralization. Calhoun's theory, he added, applied this distribution of power and systematic equilibrium "territorially as well as functionally." Here again, Spain acknowledged Calhoun's debt to Aristotle, noting in his

⁵⁴Ibid., 33, 256-257.

⁵⁵Ibid., 173, 259-260.

experimental viewpoint, a rejection of the then popular “*a priori* rationalism,” and his organic view of individual-state relations. Other influences included the English utilitarians, seen in his understanding of political power’s economic footing, and Edmund Burke through his “sense of historical continuity,” dismissal of “radical social innovation,” and thought regarding “the proof of worth in the survival of existing institutions.” Calhoun, Spain added, especially appreciated Burke’s Tory sensibility to “*noblesse oblige*.”⁵⁶ Reflecting a neo-Calhounite perspective, Spain noted the Carolinian’s importance to those concerned with preserving “the democratic ideal of consent of the governed.” He also pointed out the need “for some decentralization for the sake of efficiency” in a modern world ever moving toward political and economic consolidation.⁵⁷

Spain’s work has been criticized as incomplete for ignoring the political environment in which the southern leader’s ideas developed.⁵⁸ Although not without validity, such criticism seems unfair since the work focused on the theories themselves, and not on the political battles described in most biographies. Spain’s work was meant to be a concentrated study of Calhoun’s political theories, and as such, provides an excellent resource. To include the context in which they developed would greatly lengthen the book, and more importantly, alter its intention. Spain admitted Calhoun’s need of a slavery defense and its effect on his thought, but also credited him with higher ideas “of universal and enduring validity.” Furthermore, he provided introductory summary chapters of both Calhoun’s life and the entire states rights history, sufficiently preparing for the book’s focus on theory. Over all, Spain’s study achieved its stated objective of providing “a

⁵⁶Ibid., 105, 259, 262-264.

⁵⁷Ibid., 266-267.

⁵⁸See Niven, *Calhoun and the Price of Union*, 349-350; and Current, *John C. Calhoun*, 159.

comprehensive exposition,” and remains the most complete analysis of Calhoun’s political theories available.⁵⁹

At the height of Calhoun’s twentieth-century popularity, a period crowded with new looks at the famous statesman, it is of little surprise that select portions of his original writings and speeches found their way back into print. In 1952, Penn State University historian John M. Anderson’s *Calhoun: Basic Documents* appeared.⁶⁰ This work, however, was more than just a collection of primary source material. Coming on the heels of the studies by Wiltse, Coit, and Spain, Anderson selectively reproduced Calhoun’s speeches suited to the new interest in the southern leader. The book’s main feature was a full reprint of the Carolinian’s *Disquisition on Government*, which had not been published in complete form since its appearance in Cralle’s *Works* a century before. By including the *Disquisition*, Anderson hoped “to recover a seminal work and give it the place it deserves upon the contemporary scene.”⁶¹ These words accurately describe the importance of Anderson’s book in Calhoun historiography, for it served as a fine supplement to the numerous Calhoun works then appearing. Besides the *Disquisition*, Anderson judiciously selected eleven of the Carolinian’s speeches in an effort to demonstrate the evolution of thought which occurred over his long career. Ranging from early war hawk speeches, to his final gloomy warnings during the 1850 sectional debate, the choices made an interesting study. Anderson did not leave readers at the mercy of Calhoun’s writings, however, as a lengthy introduction thoroughly discussed the statesman and his philosophy

⁵⁹Spain, *Political Theory of John C. Calhoun*, 7.

⁶⁰John M. Anderson, ed., *Calhoun: Basic Documents* (State College, PA: Bald Eagle Press, 1952).

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 5.

dealing with “the perennial issues of human life.” Although denying the concurrent majority a specific place in the twentieth century, Anderson nevertheless revealed a neo-Calhounite influence, acknowledging for instance, merit in the Carolinian’s idea of “realistic protection of both individual and minority rights” as a prerequisite to “ideal political unity.” Anderson found particular contemporary value in his ideas on political order and class conflict.⁶² Conceived in direct response to the mid-century flood of Calhoun studies, this volume complements the other works by examining the Carolinian’s progression of thought.⁶³

The rush of Calhoun studies continued when Margaret Coit returned with a most intriguing title: “Calhoun and the Downfall of States’ Rights” (1952).⁶⁴ Coit’s essay made a compelling argument regarding Calhoun’s shift away from a reliance upon states rights, asserting that by the time of his death in 1850, and probably earlier, he had fully discarded the idea “in practice, if not in theory.”⁶⁵ Furthermore, she noted the assertion in his *Discourse on the Constitution and Government of the United States* of states rights’ impotence in checking centralized political power. But rather than a rejection of states rights as a constitutional basis for decentralized power, his changed outlook represented an awareness of its ineffectiveness as a minority defense. As she pointed out, the southern leader realized that as the nation grew, minorities were becoming increasingly identified

⁶²Ibid., 9, 26.

⁶³Ibid., 6.

⁶⁴Margaret L. Coit, “Calhoun and the Downfall of States’ Rights,” *The Virginia Quarterly Review: A National Journal of Literature and Discussion* 28, no. 2 (1952): 191-208.

⁶⁵Ibid., 192.

with economic regions oblivious to state boundaries.⁶⁶ Subsequently, his thinking became increasingly sectional.

While this shift in Calhoun's thought was little noticed by historians, Coit noted that Von Holst had alluded to the change early on in his assertion that Calhoun had rejected the federal system of government. Von Holst, however, was too broad in his claim, for as Coit explained, Calhoun did not forsake the federal system, but rather "the states rights device." Yet, as the Carolinian became sectional, his location of sovereign power remained unchanged, continuing to reside in the people. Coit explained that for Calhoun, the sovereign power which formed both the states and central government may establish "new groupings" based upon "regions . . . or clearly defined economic units," all possessing concurrent veto power. In short, Calhoun's fundamental beliefs regarding sovereignty and political organization based upon the concurrent majority remained unaltered. Only the structure, or "organism" had changed.⁶⁷

Calhoun continued to respect the states as both important "historical entities" and legal units of sovereignty. Yet these distinctions, Coit explained, complicated his struggle to protect the South based upon his broader understanding of economic regionalism. She asserted that even as he continued heeding states rights, "no man was more bitterly aware" of its realistic weakness. Coit noted that some historians have traced Calhoun's transformation to sectionalism back to his 1828 *Exposition and Protest* which they argue was more sectional than states-oriented. Certainly that document's agrarian-focused economic argument does nothing to disqualify such a contention. She also pointed out that in 1835 the Carolinian considered a "grand design of uniting" South and West, which,

⁶⁶Ibid., 191, 194.

⁶⁷Ibid., 192-193.

although based upon states rights, anticipated the strength of an economically united region. By the late 1830s Calhoun was calling “a Southern Convention ‘indispensable.’” Later, in the mid-1840s, his correspondence underwent a noticeable and permanent change in focus from the states and South Carolina, to “the South.” Finally, Coit contended that Calhoun’s late-in-life idea of a dual executive, although “[c]ondemned as visionary and unworkable,” was in fact a realistic acknowledgment of a nation which was in 1850 already “spiritually, politically, and economically” divided.⁶⁸

Coit’s essay makes an interesting study, although she perhaps made too sharp of a distinction between Calhoun’s thought on states rights and broader economic regionalism. Coit herself noted that even while adhering to states rights, Calhoun simply realized the need for a more effective overall defense of minority interests. His sectionalism, therefore, rather than a repudiation of states rights, may just as well be considered an extension of his minority defense based upon economic realities. Indeed, Calhoun’s writings show the concurrent majority able to fit formal state lines as easily as economic or large geographic regions. Coit’s stimulating work nevertheless made a strong argument which included a favorable examination of Calhoun’s writings with application to world events and modern institutions such as the United Nations.

At about the same time, political scientist Louis Hartz of Harvard University engaged in a critical analysis of nullification, an idea that he claimed was “as antique as the florid language and the swallowtail coats of the Southern orators who defended it.”⁶⁹ Hartz was a key figure in the emerging consensus school of the 1950s which criticized the

⁶⁸Ibid., 192-194.

⁶⁹Louis Hartz, “South Carolina vs. the United States,” in *America in Crisis*, ed. Daniel Aaron (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952), 72-89. Quotation from 88.

“anti-intellectual” economic approach of the early twentieth-century progressive historians. Dominating Jacksonian historiography for several decades, consensus scholars took “the rhetoric and ideas of the period seriously,” carefully examining the “symbolic importance” of historical issues.⁷⁰ They also tended to condemn the pre-Civil War generation — from abolitionists to southern firebrands — for its failure to find compromise. Such a perspective is evident in Hartz’s “South Carolina vs. the United States” (1952) in which he viewed nullification as a failed solution to a misunderstood and exaggerated economic problem.

Hartz agreed with Calhoun’s view of nullification as “conservative” in theory, but only in light of the drastic political events of 1860-1861, for it was secession which transformed nullification from a radical into a conservative idea. He took issue with Calhoun’s contradictory attempt to blend secession and nullification even while considering the doctrines “totally dissimilar.” The two concepts, Hartz argued, were nearly identical, for according to Calhoun, a state retains its sovereignty and ultimate right of secession throughout the nullification process — a procedure Hartz considered nothing more than an “elaborate ritual of legalisms.” He also criticized Calhoun’s theoretical isolation of the South and subsequent application of his “legally illogical” and “practically impossible” concurrent majority and its sidearm, nullification.⁷¹ Besides faulting the Nullifiers for ignoring the South Carolina Unionists, “the minority within the minority,” Hartz’s chief complaint was Calhoun’s substitution of a “mechanical device,” nullification, for the “social unity” upon which society rests. He pointed out, for example, that even if

⁷⁰Richard E. Ellis, *The Union At Risk: Jacksonian Democracy, States’ Rights, and the Nullification Crisis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), vii-viii.

⁷¹Hartz, “South Carolina vs. the United States,” 75, 77.

Calhoun's plan of the concurrent majority, and indeed his later accompanying idea of a dual executive, had been applied, the North almost certainly "would have found it intolerable."⁷² He argued that in the end, Calhoun attempted to place legal science before compromise, which, Hartz pointed out, was impossible without concessions. In other words, the concurrent majority was dependent upon "a spirit of compromise," and not the other way around as Calhoun had contended.⁷³

Ultimately, Hartz moved beyond the immediate surface issue of South Carolina's sovereignty to the fundamental underlying question "of law and force, of war and circumstance." Here again Calhoun failed, he contended, by putting "the premises of force" before "the conclusions of law," thereby showing him to be "a crusader as well as a conservative." Interestingly, such a distinction was for Hartz both honest and understandable considering the Carolinian's sincere "sense of oppression" and "love of peace." For while Calhoun and the Nullifiers had acted forcefully, they stopped short of the drastic remedy of secession.⁷⁴ In fact, Hartz refused to cast a final condemning judgment on either Calhoun or the Nullifiers, concluding that "[p]erhaps it is right that men should prepare to fight when they find their freedoms at stake, and right also that they should cherish the dream of peace that their preparation destroys."⁷⁵

⁷²Ibid., 79-82.

⁷³Ibid., 81.

⁷⁴Ibid., 88-89. Hartz expanded this point three years later in his *Liberal Tradition in America*, asserting that Calhoun would likely have responded to later romantic southern nationalism by denying any desire for either independence or war. As Hartz explained, Calhoun "wanted to defend the South against the North," but also "wanted them both to live together." In short, "[h]e was caught in the classic agony of the brink-of-war philosopher." See Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1955), 165-166.

⁷⁵Hartz, "South Carolina vs. the United States," 89.

Ironically, Hartz's essay ended the mid-century flood of Calhoun works in much the same way it began, with a negative assessment of the Carolinian's theories. In between, the school of thought which began over two decades earlier hit a high tide of momentum bringing with it a rapid succession of favorable works, including Wiltse's three-volume standard and Coit's Pulitzer Prize winner. It ended suddenly, however, for following the rush of publications in the early 1950s, no other major works on Calhoun emerged until the largest project of all — the *Calhoun Papers* — got underway at decade's end. The 1960s, meanwhile, brought a harsh reaction to the neo-Calhounite school.

CHAPTER 5

1960s COUNTER-SURGE

It was perhaps inevitable that a negative reaction would follow a long succession of favorable Calhoun works. Flattering books and essays had appeared since the turn of the century, but Calhoun study reached a new level with the neo-Calhounite school's modern-day applicability of the concurrent majority. Although several negative assessments had also appeared during this period, it was Louis Hartz's critical 1952 analysis of nullification that signaled neo-Calhounism's sudden end. This study also provided an early clue to a new trend in Calhoun historiography, for during the first half of the 1960s, three critical but different works attacked the neo-Calhounite view. In each case, these works seem to be shaped in part by mounting frustration over southern intransigence on the issue of civil rights. The South's response to the Warren Court's 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* drew heavily on antebellum states rights theory and featured numerous threats of nullification through interposition resolutions denouncing the ruling as unconstitutional and attempts at obstructing implementation.¹ In this context, it is hardly surprising that northern academics would assess the ideas of Calhoun more critically.

In an excessively harsh treatment, Yale University-trained historian Gerald M. Capers countered the favorable Wiltse, Coit, and Spain assessments of the Carolinian in

¹For more on *Brown v. Board of Education* and the resulting southern resistance see Kelly, Harbison, and Belz, *The American Constitution: Its Origins and Development*, 2:586-591.

his *John C. Calhoun, Opportunist: A Re-appraisal* (1960).² Rejecting the neo-Calhounite image of Calhoun as a brilliant political theorist, Capers presented instead a cunning, selfish, and opportunistic politician who was not only misunderstood “by his contemporaries,” but who failed even to “understand himself.”³ Calhoun was for Capers a strategist controlled by presidential desire, a man self-deluded in his belief “that by becoming President he could permanently save” both the Union and the South. The conniving Calhoun, he asserted, “would not have hesitated to use any means or method he thought would contribute to that end.” Furthermore, Calhoun refused to acknowledge either to himself or his friends his consuming desire for the presidency, even as he “schemed, dreamed, and worked” toward that goal.⁴ In what is essentially a political biography, Capers reduced his subject to simple political motive at every turn. “It is foolish,” for example, to consider the Carolinian a great theorist, since “[w]ith him political considerations were foremost.” His constitutional ideas, although fabricated with great skill, were merely manifestations of his self-delusion. Slavery, meanwhile, was simply another political topic. He recognized Calhoun’s ability in argumentation, but warned that an “unguarded soul” conceding any of his underlying assumptions would become trapped “in a locked vice of logic.”⁵ Capers strengthened his thesis through a heavy use of quotations — his admitted procedure of allowing Calhoun to “speak for himself.” He may have been selective in giving “the reader . . . a basis for his own conclusions,” however,

²Gerald M. Capers, *John C. Calhoun, Opportunist: A Re-appraisal* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1960).

³*Ibid.*, vi.

⁴*Ibid.*, 209, 256.

⁵*Ibid.*, 109, 132.

for he invariably showed Calhoun to be shrewd, selfish, and politically motivated — quite a consistent pattern for someone who failed even to “understand himself.”⁶

Such a constricted thesis of pure political motivation casts a shadow on this work’s believability. Even Capers admitted the book’s “hypothetical nature.” Although in the making for twenty years, Capers’s study reads like a desperate reaction to the celebrated biographies of ten years before. In a forthright manner, he attacked Wiltse’s “irrational bias in favor of Calhoun and the South,” labeling that work a vote “for a coalition of Dixiecrats and the American Liberty League.” Capers also contended that Coit’s human look at Calhoun “manufactured far more color than the facts warrant.” Indeed, he wrote off the Pulitzer Prize-winning study as “written down . . . to the level of the readers of the *Ladies’ Home Journal*.”⁷ Richard Current, who had first challenged neo-Calhounism nearly two decades earlier, proclaimed Capers’s work to be a “refreshingly critical. . . . antidote” to the Wiltse and Coit “eulogistic passages,” while Clyde N. Wilson, the most recent editor of the *Calhoun Papers*, considered it “[r]elentlessly hostile and superficial.”⁸ Whether or not Capers’s study provided an antidote to the earlier flood of favorable works, such a harsh and narrowly-focused remedy was at best a weak cure.

A far superior rebuttal followed three years later with Richard N. Current’s brief, but penetrating *John C. Calhoun* (1963). In scarcely one-hundred-fifty pages, Current swept through the Carolinian’s career, constitutional theories, and relevance in the

⁶Ibid., vi.

⁷Ibid., v-vi.

⁸Richard N. Current, *John C. Calhoun* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1963), 158; Wilson, *John C. Calhoun: A Bibliography*, 57.

twentieth century with amazing clarity and insight. While Current adopted Wiltse's three-part division of the Carolinian's career, he utterly rejected the neo-Calhounite view of the statesman "as a defender of minority rights and an inventor of democratic techniques." Echoing Capers, albeit in a gentler manner, he contended that Calhoun "wrote and spoke as a politician" while keeping one eye ever on the presidency. Current nevertheless conceded that the Carolinian possessed "much of the scholar or philosopher in him."⁹ In addressing class struggle — "the most serious and most important of all the group conflicts in civilized societies" — Current essentially repeated his argument of twenty years earlier, that Calhoun had sought an alliance with northern capitalists in order to head off a social revolution that he, like Marx, was certain would come to industrialized society.¹⁰

As to the Carolinian's relevance in the twentieth century, Current added criticism to perceptive analysis, contending that "the true spirit of Calhoun" may be found in the present-day ideas and actions of southern conservatives.¹¹ In challenging the neo-Calhounite version of modern political pluralism, he made the interesting point that congressional blocs, factions, and lobby groups had already existed in the antebellum period, and that both parties had been vulnerable to tariff, abolitionist, and other interest pressures. The pluralist Calhoun, he argued, was in fact "a dualist," considering only North and South, free and slave — the true majority and minority of Calhoun's thought. As Current pointed out, Calhoun "made no attempt" at recognizing "racial or religious minorities, or the working class, as deserving of the veto power." In short, the Carolinian

⁹Current, *John C. Calhoun*, 3-4.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 105.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 148.

placed sectional over all other concerns.¹² Current's well-written and insightful analysis of Calhoun's thought shows the influence of the Civil Rights movement, clearly seen in his complaints regarding a resurgent interest in nullification and interposition. In fact, Current took a parting shot at the "die-hard defenders of segregation" — Calhoun's "successors and inheritors" — challenging them to "succeed any better than" the South Carolina Nullifier did "in making state rights a barrier to human rights."¹³

Current's willingness to confront southern segregation reflected not only the influence of civil rights, but also a coinciding broader change in academic thought. The favorable southern view of slavery as a kind and civilizing institution, epitomized in Ulrich B. Phillips's *American Negro Slavery* (1918), had been at last seriously questioned in the early 1950s, just as the neo-Calhounism reached its peak. Signaling the change was the replacement of Phillips's standard with Kenneth M. Stampp's *The Peculiar Institution* (1956), which presented slavery as a cruel and degrading system.¹⁴ This new line of thought regarding slavery made Calhoun as constitutional theorist vulnerable due to his undeniable role as that institution's defender. Yet neo-Calhounism had focused primarily on the southern leader's ideas, and while these theories had essentially defended slavery, the reaction against them remained constitutionally and politically focused.

An exception to the anti-Calhoun reaction appeared in 1963 with Ralph Lerner's "Calhoun's New Science of Politics."¹⁵ A professor of social sciences at the University of

¹²Ibid., 144, 147.

¹³Ibid., 152.

¹⁴Foster, "Guilt Over Slavery," 670; Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956).

¹⁵Ralph Lerner, "Calhoun's New Science of Politics," *The American Political Science Review* 57, no. 4 (1963): 918-932.

Chicago, Lerner saw Calhoun's theories as significant innovations in American democratic thought. Through close examination of the *Disquisition on Government*, "a theoretical study of politics," Lerner discovered the key to understanding Calhoun as both abstract theorist and practical statesman. He argued that when analyzing the *Disquisition* as pure political theory, while supplementing its study with the Carolinian's practical political premises, Calhoun emerges virtually alone as an American political theorist. Calhoun, Lerner explained, strove to surpass both practice and theory in creating a fact-based political science. Astronomy provided the model, for "some fundamental law, standing in relation to human nature as gravitation does to the material world," must serve as a firm basis for the "science of politics." Calhoun found it in man's innate selfishness. In government, legislators must accept this fundamental premise and be directed by a realistic "perception" of human motives rather than any preconceived ideals.¹⁶ He contended that Calhoun stood his own "test of a theorist" by moving past "insulated facts" to "a theory that directs itself to political practice." As Lerner explained, the Carolinian's political science was based on man's selfishness, but its end purpose was "enlisting 'the individual on the side of the social feelings to promote the good of the whole.'" For Calhoun, this represented the finest accomplishment "of the science of government."¹⁷

Despite the apparent contradiction, Lerner contended that Calhoun more closely paralleled twentieth-century political understanding than did the traditional expert, James Madison. Calhoun, like Madison, built a political science based on man's selfish nature. But Madison, he pointed out, relied on the common good's natural promotion through "the habits of a commercial people in a land of great extent." Calhoun, on the other hand,

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 918.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 918-919.

had sought a surer guarantee, one induced by “dread of stalemate and anarchy”; it was found in the concurrent majority. In promoting compromise, since perpetual deadlock was the only alternative, this system would move men beyond “immediate self-interest” to a greater “patriotism.” Remarkably, Calhoun saw no “contradiction or confusion” in joining the paradoxical assumptions of selfish nature and public spirit. As Lerner put it, Calhoun’s “new science of politics” attempted to link “to the narrow premises of a behavioral social science that barely looks beyond the fact of self-interest, the ends held in esteem by a man ‘of enlarged philosophical views, and of ardent patriotism.’”¹⁸ The only defect Lerner found throughout his detailed analysis was in Calhoun’s making “a process of government” — the rule of the concurrent majority — “in itself the common good.”¹⁹

While Lerner engraved Calhoun’s name in American political theory, University of Michigan historian William W. Freehling found the Carolinian inconsistent in his “Spoilsmen and Interests in the Thought and Career of John C. Calhoun” (1965).²⁰ Just thirty years old at the time, Freehling recognized Calhoun’s realism in understanding economic interests, but noted the “contradiction” in his theory resulting from a parallel concern with Jacksonian spoils. Calhoun, he pointed out, had moved away from pure economic determinism, first by recognizing an idea, in this case abolitionism, as a “decisive force in politics,” and secondly, through his belief that dishonest spoilsmen could deceive the masses and thereby control the political process.²¹ For Calhoun, however, the

¹⁸Ibid., 932.

¹⁹John L. Thomas, ed., *John C. Calhoun: A Profile* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968), xx-xxi; quotations from Lerner, “Calhoun’s New Science,” 932.

²⁰William W. Freehling, “Spoilsmen and Interests in the Thought and Career of John C. Calhoun,” *The Journal of American History* 52, no. 1 (1965), 25-42.

²¹Ibid., 26.

concurrent majority would provide a two-fold solution. First, a concurrent veto would allow minorities to block new taxes, which would lower government revenue and therefore patronage. Next, government by the concurrent majority would require compromise in order to avoid deadlock; consequently, the various interests would out of necessity seek as representatives, “disinterested statesmen” over “scheming politicians.”²²

Calhoun’s formula, Freehling contended, was a failed contradiction. The concurrent majority held that interests command those in government, yet as Freehling explained, Calhoun, like the Founders, also knew that “corrupt demagogues” would always seek public office regardless of interests. Once there, they could overrule their constituents in pursuit of personal or political gain, producing political “deadlock and social anarchy.”²³ Although the concurrent majority’s success ultimately depended on compromise, it would fail in its inability to check the spoils system, for as long as dishonest politicians ran government, compromise between interests or sections would be impossible. The problem, Freehling contended, was Calhoun’s inability “to decide whether pressure groups or politicians caused historical events.” Spoilsmen would control political parties until the system was ended, yet patronage would cease only when spoilsmen were removed from party leadership. Should interests be balanced, spoils would end, but spoilsmen themselves “must disappear before interests could be neutralized.”²⁴

In examining the Carolinian’s theories, Freehling had turned to his *Disquisition on Government*. What he discovered, however, was “one of the more confused political philosophers in the American tradition.” Freehling conceded that interest struggles and

²²Ibid., 32.

²³Ibid., 33-34.

²⁴Ibid., 40.

spoils may disrupt a government's smooth operation, but he also argued that Calhoun greatly overstated the difficulty. The "exaggerated" problems of both interest control and spoilsmen ultimately proved to be more than his concurrent majority and "discredited" nullification could manage. Calhoun's "inconsistencies," Freehling argued, put his "reputation as America's most rigorous political logician" in doubt, for ultimately, "a consistent democratic theory" eluded him. Calhoun, Freehling asserted, was in the end "[a]n eighteenth-century elitist" who "no longer quite believed in American democracy."²⁵

In 1969, University of California-educated Darryl Baskin, a political scientist, questioned the conservatism of Calhoun's thought in his "Pluralist Vision of John C. Calhoun," arguing that the Carolinian's ideas were in fact "fundamentally liberal," at least at their "philosophical base."²⁶ The thirty-two-year-old Baskin's pluralist vision represented a viewpoint compatible with Peter Drucker's 1948 perception of the Carolinian as a pluralist. But where the neo-Calhounite Drucker had praised his theory of the concurrent majority, Baskin rejected it "as a mechanical and inadequate idea."²⁷

Baskin used Calhoun's *Disquisition on Government* to demonstrate the liberal basis of his ideas, tying the Carolinian's thoughts on citizenship and the public interest to three perspectives which together give shape to the pluralist vision of a "political society."²⁸ First, Calhoun's recognition of self interest related to a "possessive individualism" in which man "is a self-contained fact in a natural universe." According to

²⁵Ibid., 41-42. See also William W. Freehling, *Prelude to Civil War: The Nullification Controversy in South Carolina, 1816-1836* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).

²⁶Darryl Baskin, "The Pluralist Vision of John C. Calhoun," *Polity* 2 (Fall 1969): 49-65. Quotation from 49.

²⁷Wilson, *John C. Calhoun: A Bibliography*, 143.

²⁸Baskin, "The Pluralist Vision of John C. Calhoun," 51.

Calhoun, however, the possessive individualist's focus on self-improvement requires liberty, bringing to light the fundamental issue of "order." This in turn leads to the second perspective of pluralism: "the psychology of man." Here Baskin noted Calhoun's assertion that while man was "created for the social state," his individual wants outweigh his "sympathetic or social feelings." To gain order, however, one must turn to the "problem of power."²⁹

To Calhoun, Baskin explained, liberty and the natural inequality of man was necessary "as a prod to progress." Yet liberty also brings "conflict and disorder" to society, which itself hinders the individual desire for self improvement. As a result, the order necessary for progress is dependent upon power. The problem comes full circle as the necessary "exercise of power" threatens the very liberty and inequality required for progress. Yet "this progress is alone capable of justifying the utility of liberty and the power of government!" Calhoun's answer, Baskin pointed out, was "mechanistic balance," the third perspective of his pluralist vision.³⁰ In this, Calhoun turned to "the laws of nature." Baskin noted his use of astronomy as a model in arguing that man, like the universe around him, "is subject to a law of his own nature." Calhoun saw in government a purpose of bringing man's "stronger individual feelings" in line with his "social feelings," thereby joining these unequal and conflicting natures "in promoting the interest of the whole as the best way to promote the separate interest of each." The result, which Baskin contended placed Calhoun "without any doubt . . . in the mainstream of the American pluralist tradition," was a "balance of tension."³¹ The concurrent majority, he added, was

²⁹Ibid., 51-53.

³⁰Ibid., 55-56.

³¹Ibid., 57-58.

Calhoun's mechanism to achieve this end. He criticized Calhoun, however, for attempting "to mask as conservative what is a liberal point of view." While pointing out Calhoun's conservative reasoning that man's reliance on society for security and therefore progress, made government essential for the maintenance of order, Baskin argued that this "pretended traditionalism" conflicted with the Carolinian's obvious "rationalist faith and . . . mechanistic ethos" found throughout his political ideas.³²

Despite the Carolinian's conservative rhetoric, Baskin claimed that "a closer view" showed his perceptions of the public interest and citizenship to mirror "the liberal tradition." He based his argument on Calhoun's assumptions that government should preserve liberty and therefore progress, that society is made up of conflicting interests, and that the best route to order is through private or individual interests — all "strange premises upon which to found a conservative philosophy!"³³ For Calhoun the public interest was simply "the summing of private interests, . . . a mechanistically-guided process of negotiation and compromise," and not, Baskin added, a result "of education or leadership," patriotism or "civic virtue." Likewise, as the public interest was simply the sum of private interests, citizenship was little more than "a mode of self-justifying pressure group activity." Indeed, it was for the pluralist, merely "selfishness masquerading as civic virtue." The curious outcome of Calhoun's pluralist vision, therefore, was private participation in society becoming invariably linked to division within that society. In other words, rather than leading to community spirit as Calhoun envisioned, his "balance of tension" actually encouraged individuals' "relations as strangers and potential rivals." As Baskin concluded, Calhoun's cloudy view of citizenship and the public interest, which was

³²Ibid., 60.

³³Ibid., 62.

a product of the “possessive individualist, psychological, and mechanistic perspectives” of his pluralist vision, promoted division in society, and established “the pursuit of private advantage . . . as the foundation of good citizenship.”³⁴

Despite the vigorous criticism of this period, interest in the controversial southern leader showed continued vitality as two collections of scholarly essays appeared by decade’s end. The first was John L. Thomas’s *John C. Calhoun: A Profile* (1968).³⁵ Thomas, a professor of history at Brown University, his alma mater, presented selections from twelve works on Calhoun dating from his lifetime to the 1960s, beginning with R. M. T. Hunter’s 1843 campaign biography. The majority of the essays, however, were taken from twentieth-century works bearing the names of well-known Calhoun historians such as Charles Wiltse and Richard Current. He also included a brief synopsis of Calhoun’s career, an analysis of his theories, and historiographical commentary introducing the essays. Thomas made a judicious selection of works displaying an interesting cross section of historical opinion ranging from condemnation to adulation. To his credit, he left judgment of the Carolinian to his readers, but asserted that in the final analysis, Calhoun, viewed negatively or otherwise, met difficulties with unrivaled “theoretical intensity.” He concluded that “[n]o one who seeks to understand American politics before the Civil War or, on a deeper level, to assess the qualities of statesmanship, can afford to ignore his record.”³⁶

The second collection came in 1970, when Margaret Coit again produced a Calhoun study, this time as editor of *John C. Calhoun*, part of the Great Lives Observed

³⁴Ibid., 58, 63-65.

³⁵John L. Thomas, ed., *John C. Calhoun: A Profile* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968).

³⁶Ibid., xxi.

series.³⁷ Included are excerpts from nineteen works neatly divided into three sections: Calhoun's own writings, views of his contemporaries, and essays by twentieth-century historians important in Calhoun historiography. Names ranging from William Dodd to William Freehling make this final section a particularly convenient collection of scholarly opinion. Over all, Coit's short but useful work, which includes a life summary, Calhoun chronology, and bibliographical essay, provides a valuable study source. Yet the larger importance of both Coit's and Thomas's collections lie in the continuing interest in Calhoun they represent. As Coit so aptly put it, "[w]hat matters is that the man is so startlingly alive today."³⁸

Indeed, from hero worship to condemnation, and modern-day relevance to reaction, the pendulum of historical opinion has more than once carried Calhoun's name between extremes. That a somewhat harsh response to a fifty-year succession of favorable Calhoun works had appeared, particularly in an age of Civil Rights and southern resistance, is of little surprise. Yet the Carolinian and his theories emerged from the 1960s with continuing significance, for in the century's final decades, a refreshingly new approach to the study of Calhoun, one resembling none of the previous schools, was about to dawn.

³⁷Margaret L. Coit, ed., *John C. Calhoun* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1970).

³⁸*Ibid.*, 170.

CHAPTER 6

OBJECTIVE DEBATE

Following a decade of virtual silence, debate on the controversial southern leader reemerged in the 1980s with an air of objectivity previously unseen. Gone were biting attacks and choruses of praise. In this most recent period of Calhoun historiography, special topics received a new look as the Carolinian's thought, family, and political influence, as well as his role in the Nullification Crisis and Mexican War, were reexamined. Likewise, three new biographies offered fresh perspectives. While these works revealed lingering traces of neo-Calhounism and its reaction, the overall theme in this period was impartial analysis.

The 1980s began with an intriguing investigation of Calhoun's stance in the U.S. Senate and influence in his home state during the Mexican War contained in Clemson University historian Ernest Lander's *Reluctant Imperialists* (1980).¹ While following "the patriotic, but tragic role" of the South Carolina Palmetto regiment in its high-casualty march to Mexico City and back, Lander explored Calhoun's caution regarding the U.S. role in the war and the seeming agreement his state gave him despite the natural patriotism felt during a major conflict. He emphasized the political difficulties the war, and in particular the Wilmot Proviso, raised for Calhoun regarding slavery and new territory.² In

¹Ernest McPherson Lander, Jr., *Reluctant Imperialists: Calhoun, the South Carolinians, and the Mexican War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980).

²*Ibid.*, xi-xii, 173. The Palmettos' war-time death rate of over 42% was drastic next to the entire U.S. army's 15% rate.

his investigation, Lander made extensive use of all major South Carolina newspapers to show the state's varied reaction to the conflict.³

While viewing state and national political events surrounding the war, Lander provided extensive coverage of the Palmetto's actions from formation to return home. Examination of Calhoun, meanwhile, focused primarily on his time in the tumultuous second session of the 29th Congress. Lander noted that Calhoun had initially abstained from voting on what he considered an avoidable war, privately criticized President Polk for provoking it, and worried over possible British involvement. The Carolinian also acknowledged his "weakened" position within the Democracy as a result. South Carolina newspapers' response to war ranged from criticism of Polk to a strong push for military victory. Yet, as the pro-Calhoun Charleston *Mercury* admitted, "[w]e have the war and must fight it out."⁴ As General Zachary Taylor met with success on the Rio Grande, pro-war sentiment increased in the state press, but Calhoun, although vulnerable, was nowhere censured for his abstention. Indeed, he was hailed across the state during Independence Day celebrations as "our Country's great master spirit," and "the statesman that weathered the storm," even as "General Taylor and his army" were applauded as "great heroes." Calhoun, grateful for the statewide support, announced his backing of the war once fighting had commenced. To do otherwise, Lander pointed out, would have been politically unthinkable.⁵

When Congress met in December of 1846, President Polk delivered a message defending the war as justifiable. Unlike the South Carolina press however, Calhoun quietly

³Ibid., 173.

⁴Ibid., 10-13.

⁵Ibid., 22-24.

disagreed. Calhoun, Lander suggested, may have been considering his presidential prospects, for his friends were at that time promoting the idea while urging him to support the administration. The South Carolina senator, meanwhile, foresaw a lengthy war since the President wanted a cession of land as part of any peace treaty. In addition, he was concerned that a long conflict risked interference from a European power. But his primary concern was the slavery issue, for as Lander pointed out, Calhoun knew that northern states would oppose any treaty “silent on the subject,” while southerners would resist any deal forbidding the institution in conquered territories. He quickly announced his intention “to incur any responsibility and to make any sacrifice” in bringing about a quick conclusion to the conflict. Lander noted that Polk then sought Calhoun’s support, and indeed received it regarding money for negotiations and annexation of Upper California and New Mexico. His support, however, was accompanied with a warning against any slavery restrictions. Calhoun agreed with the President that the institution presumably would never spread to the area, but nevertheless opposed any limitations on principle.⁶

According to Lander, Calhoun became increasingly negative over the likely prospects of a heavy debt, an increased tariff, and a likely Whig victory in 1848 as the result of a long war. More than any of these, however, he was troubled by the Wilmot Proviso, for as Lander explained, the Carolinian believed that northerners of both parties had resolved “to exclude the South from the benefit of any Mexican cession.” When in December the President again called Calhoun to the White House seeking support, the Carolinian opposed new plans for an operation against the Mexican capital, suggesting instead a “defensive-line policy,” a strategy he would soon reveal to the Senate. Lander noted that as Polk’s plans bogged down in Congress and most of his cabinet agreed with a

⁶Ibid., 58, 61-62.

defensive approach, the frustrated President labeled Calhoun “the most mischievous man in the Senate.”⁷ The Carolinian’s Senate speech of February 9, 1847 introducing his “line policy,” which called for a series of fortifications “along the Rio Grande to the 32nd parallel and on to the Gulf of California,” brought a chorus of praise from his own state. As Lander pointed out, Calhoun had found “a middle course between the Whig policy of withdrawal and the Democratic policy of conquest.” Any South Carolina doubters, he added, hesitated to oppose him while “the dreaded Wilmot Proviso was looming on the horizon.”⁸

In the month following the speech, riding this secure base of support, Calhoun played a leading role in defeating the Wilmot Proviso, introduced resolutions supporting the rights of slave owners, and clashed with Thomas Hart Benton and Texas Senator Sam Houston, giving a performance one northern Whig newspaper labeled “electric.” Arriving back in Charleston to “deafening cheers,” Calhoun issued a call for southern unity transcending party lines. It was a rousing speech that received statewide support; in fact, Lander emphasized its effect in noting one Charleston businessman’s hopeful proclamation that “[m]ay God in mercy grant that the voice of the Prophet may not be raised in vain.”⁹ Yet overall southern reaction varied. As Lander pointed out, some administration supporters saw presidential ambition in Calhoun’s course regarding the war, despite his public disavowals. But he also noted that the Carolinian’s opposition to Polk’s policy, as openly declared in his speech of February 9, had effectively ended any White House hopes. In fact, Calhoun and his Senate “‘balance of power’ clique” were “read out of the party”

⁷Ibid., xiii, 63-66.

⁸Ibid., xii, 68-70

⁹Ibid., 71-74.

after teaming up with a group of Whigs in censuring administration ally, Thomas Ritchie, editor of the powerful Washington *Union*.¹⁰

In attempting to understand the Carolinian's motives in opposing the administration and its aggressive military plans, Lander suggested that Polk was correct, at least in part, in believing that Calhoun was seeking the presidency through uniting the South on slavery. But he also pointed out that the Carolinian knew territory would be a concession of war, making conflict over slavery inevitable. His break with Polk was, therefore, "not because of presidential aspirations, but despite them," for Calhoun, he asserted, was also looking to the very survival of the South.¹¹ In the end, Lander noted that Calhoun successfully resisted the "all-Mexico" annexation movement, but in order to maintain "unity within his own state" and to avoid a prolonged conflict, ultimately "subscribed to an imperialist grab" that closely matched his "defensive-line plan." Here, Lander concluded, the U.S. had been "fortunate" in eluding guerrilla war, a hazard to which Calhoun was alert. But such "lessons that might have been learned" in the Mexican War, he added, were unfortunately lost in the much larger conflict that followed.¹²

Lander kept busy as his *Calhoun Family and Thomas Green Clemson: The Decline of a Southern Patriarchy* was published just three years later.¹³ Here was an intensely personal story of hopes, dreams, and tragedies in which political and constitutional matters were scarcely if ever mentioned. In fact, the Carolinian's political career served as little more than a backdrop to the story. Yet this gripping work deserves

¹⁰Ibid., 74-75.

¹¹Ibid., 77-79.

¹²Ibid., 168, 175-176.

¹³Ernest McPherson Lander, Jr., *The Calhoun Family and Thomas Green Clemson: The Decline of a Southern Patriarchy* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1983).

mention for its in-depth look at Calhoun's family based almost exclusively upon personal letters and writings. In this, Lander admitted his bibliographical debt to Charles M. Wiltse for his three-volume work's thorough primary source references. While focusing on the Senator and even more so on his son-in-law, Thomas Clemson, Lander essentially examined personalities and relationships. Calhoun's part in the story, however, occupied only half the book, while addressing just the last twelve years of his private life — the period following Clemson's 1838 marriage into the family. Personal, marital, and business concerns all received Lander's attention as did each principal family member. Frequent quotations enriched his attempt at breathing life and feeling into the personalities.

Of the major figures addressed, Calhoun's wife Floride is portrayed as a home-loving plantation matron and mother completely disinterested in political matters. She was also, Lander adds, "suspicious, inflammable, and petulant, yet a person of great resilience, inner strength, and strong religious faith." Nearest Calhoun in both disposition and ingenuity was his favorite daughter, Anna Maria; she was, Lander asserted, "the jewel in the family." Her husband Thomas Clemson was a "well-read . . . intellectual," but also a frequently depressed financial "worrier" with a "mercurial temperament." As to Calhoun, so often depicted as an unfeeling, cold logician, Lander found "a self-denying, indulgent, loving, and patient father," adding, however, that he was always "serious about his duty."¹⁴ In all, Margaret Coit's 1950 flesh and bones look into Calhoun's private family life had finally gained a rival with this emotional work.

Beyond Lander's specialized studies, the early 1980s saw the Carolinian return as "not merely a statesman, but a political theorist" in Peter J. Steinberger's "Calhoun's

¹⁴Ibid., vii-x.

Concept of the Public Interest: A Clarification” (1981).¹⁵ An associate professor of political science at Reed College in Portland Oregon, Steinberger dismissed both the traditional view of Calhoun as a conservative, and the pluralist reasoning of the neo-Calhounites, seeking instead to understand the Carolinian by examining his seemingly contradictory conception of man’s selfish nature and the public interest. In doing so, he attempted to discover “the theoretical context that prompts and informs Calhoun’s formulation regarding egoism.” In an effort to “get a fresh look” at Calhoun’s thought, Steinberger avoided any slavery or section-related matters in this study, addressing general principles and theories of government only. In this, he both admitted and accepted the risk of dealing with his subject “in artificial and abstract terms.”¹⁶

Steinberger tied the Carolinian to the Founders’ belief in the necessity of government based on man’s selfish nature, which, he pointed out, denotes the standard perspective of Calhoun. But he also separated him from the American tradition due to his assertion that self interest was also a necessary element in society since anarchy and chaos would result from a selfless world. According to Calhoun, man in such a world “would ‘forget himself’ and devote himself to meddling in the lives of others, something which because of his ‘limited reason and faculties’ he would be ill-equipped to do.” Self interest, therefore, would be needed to restore order. As Steinberger put it, the very greed and self-regard that distressed the constitutional generation “became for Calhoun political virtues.” Nevertheless, Steinberger also placed Calhoun within mainstream American thought since, although fearful of anarchy, he considered man’s selfishness to be the greater political threat. The question regarding Calhoun, therefore, was how selfishness

¹⁵Peter J. Steinberger, “Calhoun’s Concept of the Public Interest: A Clarification,” *Polity* 13 (Spring 1981): 410-424. Quotation from 413n.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 410, 412-413, 413n.

could represent “both a political problem and a political virtue” even as the goal of American political theory was “to overcome and neutralize egoism’s effects.” For Calhoun, the Founders’ response to man’s nature was inadequate, and as Steinberger pointed out, he used his *Discourse on the Constitution and Government of the United States* in part to demonstrate that assertion. Calhoun, Steinberger explained, understood what Hamilton and Madison failed to see: “that men do have sympathetic tendencies.” He nevertheless believed that man naturally looked to his own interests before those of others. But Steinberger argued that Calhoun’s defense of selfishness moved beyond a simple check on altruism. Reminiscent of Ralph Lerner’s “New Science of Politics,” Steinberger saw in Calhoun’s approach to the problem of the public interest “and how it is reconciled with the fact of selfishness,” the key to understanding his larger political thought.¹⁷

Rousseau’s philosophy separating the public interest or “general will,” from the private, or “particular will,” provided Steinberger with a comparative model for Calhoun. For Rousseau, the “general will” promoted the good of the community, and was consequently “politically legitimate,” whereas the private will was “subversive” and had “no place in government.” In fact, in Rousseau’s thought, government must rise above “particularism” in serving “the common good.” The “general will,” therefore, is what remains after the “particular wills ‘cancel one another,’” and is in no way “merely the ‘sum of particular wills.’” Steinberger pointed out that because Calhoun saw selfishness as natural in all, while also considering it necessary in preventing chaos, his perception of the public interest necessarily included “particular interests.” He is, therefore, seemingly the opposite of Rousseau. Indeed, Steinberger noted Darryl Baskin’s contention of a decade

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 412-415.

earlier that Calhoun considered the public interest “a sum of particular interests.”¹⁸ Yet Steinberger used the Carolinian’s view of compromise to challenge such an interpretation, even while admitting its usefulness in refuting the conventional view “of Calhoun as a theorist of conservatism whose main concern was to revive the notion of traditional, organic community.” Calhoun saw compromise as an alternative to anarchy. But Steinberger argued that compromise itself required consideration of others’ interests, even while promoting one’s own, thereby bringing “conciliation.” The public interest, therefore, was for Calhoun a “function of” rather than a “sum of private interests,” a result of public concern or “patriotism.” In short, he linked Calhoun to Rousseau by stressing his separation of the particular from the public will, albeit by way of compromise, and therefore “conciliation.” Hence, “the great virtue of selfishness” — “the dynamic element” in Calhoun’s philosophy of the public interest — was its use as a route to unselfishness.¹⁹

Steinberger therefore refuted the view of Calhoun as a conservative by contrasting the continuing importance of private interest’s place as a “basis of the common good” in his theory, with the conservative understanding of society as “‘natural’ and metaphysically prior to the individual.” He also rejected the pluralist interpretation of the Carolinian through his contention that the public interest was a “function of” rather than “a sum of private interests.” It was, in fact, a “product of genuinely social feelings, . . . a sense of public spirit that differs qualitatively from the selfish spirit of particularism.”²⁰ Rather than simply placing him somewhere between conservatives and interest pluralists, however, Steinberger tied him to the nineteenth-century “basic liberal premise” of man’s innate

¹⁸Ibid., 415-416.

¹⁹Ibid., 416-417, 419.

²⁰Ibid., 419, 421-422.

selfishness and the concern for improved “civic virtue.” To strengthen his point, he found a relationship between Calhoun’s focus upon individual interest “and the common good,” and the anarchism of Proudhon, although he conceded that two more different theorists could hardly be imagined. The central theme of Proudhon’s anarchism was “cooperation between free individuals” rather than “coercion and force” — the same core principle of Calhoun’s concurrent majority. Calhoun, therefore, although viewing man as an “economic creature,” was moved “with re-establishing genuine community and civic virtue in the face of — and without denying — the priority of the individual.” In this, Steinberger concluded, Calhoun strayed “significantly from the American political tradition.”²¹

A key to Calhoun’s constitutional thought lay in his concept of state sovereignty, a central issue in University of South Carolina historian Lacy K. Ford Jr.’s “Inventing the Concurrent Majority” (1994).²² In examining the nature and location of sovereignty, Ford reopened the antebellum controversy over its divisibility, and in particular, the differences between Madison and Calhoun. He strove in part to explain why the concept of popular sovereignty, or the right of self-government, an ideal “virtually all Confederates were as committed to . . . as Abraham Lincoln was,” led to Civil War. The problem, he asserted, was “in the details.” For example, did sovereignty lie with a national people or those of the several states, and could those people be safeguarded against a potentially tyrannical “centralized government” and “hostile majority?” He noted Edmund S. Morgan’s claim that Madison’s division of sovereignty and creation of an American people had both “solved the riddle of American sovereignty” and effectively checked “runaway state-level

²¹Ibid., 422-424.

²²Lacy K. Ford Jr., “Inventing the Concurrent Majority: Madison, Calhoun, and the Problem of Majoritarianism in American Political Thought,” *The Journal of Southern History* 60, no. 1 (1994): 19-58.

majorities.” Such an assertion, Ford explained, revealed Madison’s “theoretical and political genius,” but also made an examination of Calhoun’s criticism and creation of the concurrent majority as an alternative both “appropriate and timely.”²³

Ford reviewed Madison’s constitutional ideas of an expansive republic and divided sovereignty. According to Madison, “majoritarian tyranny” would be checked in a large republic through the natural tendency to factionalism, while “the best and brightest of the continental elite” would be attracted into the national government thereby preventing corruption. Liberty, therefore, was best preserved in national rather than state government. In fact, Ford asserted that Madison was “[t]errified by the tyranny of state and local majorities.” To prevent their domination, he divided sovereignty between the national and state governments, but “had to do nothing less than invent the American, or national people” to accomplish it.²⁴

Calhoun, however, who Ford called “the most original post-Madisonian political theorist,” did some inventing of his own. In reviewing his arguments against divided sovereignty and the concept of an American people, Ford stressed that Calhoun, like Madison, advocated popular sovereignty, pointing out his contention that sovereignty resides in the people and not the government. Calhoun and Madison, Ford contended, were also similar in their theoretical approach to a “threatened republican liberty,” but differed as the Carolinian came to regard a large republic as inadequate protection against numerical majorities. The Founders, he reasoned, simply could not foresee the transportation and market revolutions of the years following the second war with Britain. According to Calhoun, these changes, combined with “the rise of partisan politics” and

²³Ibid., 20-21.

²⁴Ibid., 32-33.

spoils, made Madison's theory "obsolete." As Ford effectively pointed out, Calhoun had by the time of the Nullification Crisis faced "what Madison believed impossible: a well-organized" and entrenched "national majority." He realized, Ford added, that relying on large republics and broad electorates to ensure liberty "was a 'mere delusion'" shifting control from the sovereign people "to 'irresponsible cliques and political managers.'" The sovereign power, Calhoun argued, "was best exercised at the local level." In short, the large republic solution to tyrannical majorities "had failed . . . the test of time."²⁵ Rather than turn to the traditional "theory of small republics" for an answer, however, which the Carolinian argued would themselves have conflicting interests, Calhoun sought protection of liberty within the existing structure. He found it in the concurrent majority. As Ford put it, where Madison envisioned "a constitutional arrangement" to utilize a large republic in restraining "provincial majorities," Calhoun advocated a "constitutional check on a national majority."²⁶

Madison's outspoken late-in-life opposition to nullification was based on his idea that divided sovereignty was "the key to the republican experiment." Indeed, Ford contended that his original purpose at the constitutional convention was to prevent any one element of government from possessing "ultimate authority" in constitutional matters. Compromise, therefore, must be the result. Despite Madison's status as the Father of the Constitution, Ford pointed out that Calhoun stood unmoved. He argued before the Senate during the Nullification Crisis, for instance, that "[i]n spite of all that has been said, . . . I

²⁵Ibid., 21, 43-44, 51.

²⁶Ibid., 45-46.

maintain that sovereignty is by its nature indivisible.” As the Carolinian explained it, “we might just as well speak of half a square, or half of a triangle, as of half a sovereignty.”²⁷

Ford noted that Jackson, “the politically decisive opposition” of the crisis, although a states rights southerner, had accepted Madison’s concept of a national people. Yet when creating an American people as a check on state majorities, Madison, like Calhoun, had also opposed “stable national majorities,” but unlike Calhoun, did so through believing such majorities to be “impossible” in a large republic. Jackson therefore, in his embrace of a national majority that had twice made him president through its use of popular sovereignty, differed from Madison as well as Calhoun, for as Ford pointed out, the General “did not fear majorities; he reveled in them.”²⁸ Ford noted that nullification, and ultimately the concept of a concurrent majority, failed during Calhoun’s lifetime in its inability to gain widespread southern support. During the Nullification Crisis in particular, Calhoun was unable “to present a viable alternative to either Jackson’s unionist majoritarianism or the traditional states’ rights defense strategy of strict construction.” This later changed as a free soil northern majority emerged dominant after Calhoun’s death, alarming southerners and leading eventually to Civil War. The controversy over the nature and location of sovereignty, he noted, had resurfaced during these critical years “but without Calhoun’s hand to shape it.” He also reminded readers that the question was “settled once and for all,” not by reasoning or debate, but by military might. The stark reality, Ford concluded, was that “[t]he invention of the American people required their sacrifice of over six hundred thousand lives.”²⁹

²⁷Ibid., 54-55.

²⁸Ibid., 55-57.

²⁹Ibid., 57-58.

This latest period in Calhoun historiography included three major biographical treatments within a six-year period, each offering fresh perspectives on the Carolinian. Together, these works embodied the objectivity typical in the recent study of Calhoun. First of the three was Merrill D. Peterson's straightforward *The Great Triumvirate: Webster, Clay, and Calhoun* (1987), which served as three biographies in one.³⁰ Peterson, a Jefferson professor of history at the University of Virginia, avoided much of the individual bias often encountered in single life histories, while examining all the major events of an intriguing era. Primarily a political narrative, Peterson's well-written work recounted the "tall, stiff, and earnest" Carolinian's career, particularly in relation to that of his famous contemporaries, Webster and Clay. Peterson noted that the independent Calhoun had gained his love of individual liberty and suspicion of government "at his father's knee."³¹ This is an important observation considering the apparent flip-flop Calhoun later made, moving from ardent nationalist to states rights champion. As Peterson pointed out, the Carolinian later admitted that following the War of 1812 he "had deviated from the old Virginia school of politics," thereby confirming states rights as his original posture. The proud Nullifier nevertheless offered it as a lesson for youth, writing, "avoid as you would the greatest evil, the least departure from principle, however harmless it may appear to be."³²

Peterson gave ample attention to Nullification and the resulting Crisis of 1832-1833 — a critical moment in Calhoun's life and convenient point for dividing his

³⁰Merrill D. Peterson, *The Great Triumvirate: Webster, Clay, and Calhoun* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

³¹*Ibid.*, 18, 26.

³²*Ibid.*, 278.

career. In doing so, Peterson analyzed the anonymously authored *South Carolina Exposition and Protest* which, although based on the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions, differed from those documents by defending a minority with an idea originally designed “to secure the rule of the majority.” The *Exposition*, Peterson argued, also strayed from Jefferson and Madison in advocating a concept that “invoked the constitution-making authority of three-fourths of the states to grant by amendment a power disputed by a single state.” Peterson contended that over all, the *Exposition* was “the authoritative statement of the ‘Calhoun doctrine,’” adding that with the Carolinian’s “Fort Hill address,” the public endorsement of nullification written openly three years later, “it was generally agreed that, ‘Calhoun crossed the Rubicon.’”³³

As to why he crossed, however, Peterson offered three explanations. First, his alliance with Jackson, and therefore his presidential succession, was already broken; second, he sought to both restrain and control the nullification movement within South Carolina in order to head off any destabilizing actions there and to protect both his state and national leadership; and lastly, his sincere belief in both the threat of northern oppression and nullification’s strength as a solution.³⁴ The Nullification Crisis and the formation of a Webster-Clay-Calhoun opposition to Andrew Jackson gave birth to the historical concept of “The Great Triumvirate”; it is, therefore, of little surprise that Peterson so thoroughly examined and used it as a defining event for all three of his famous subjects.³⁵ The crisis and the stormy second session of the 22nd Congress brought

³³Ibid., 169, 193.

³⁴Ibid., 193.

³⁵Ibid., 5. Peterson was well qualified in this area. In 1980 he gave a series of lectures at Louisiana State University on the Nullification Crisis and Compromise of 1833 that resulted in publication of a short, specialized study of the subject. Although hardly specific to Calhoun, the work was “a by-product” of his preparation for this much broader biographical work. In this earlier study, Peterson

Calhoun's intellectual abilities to the fore. Peterson conceded the Carolinian's skill, for instance, in discussing the effectiveness of his resolutions on the nature of the Union in debate with Webster. As he put it, "[g]rant Calhoun the rock — more accurately his metaphysical premise — and he could build his church."³⁶

Peterson seemed to admire Calhoun's political thought. He asserted, for example, that Calhoun's *Disquisition on Government* and *Discourse on the Constitution and Government of the United States*, although offering no surprises, cemented his reputation "as an original thinker and philosophical statesman of universal interest." Politically, all of the Triumvirate were conservative, although in different ways. But Peterson noted that while Webster and Clay were able to step out of their naturally defensive conservatism, Calhoun alone remained "profoundly pessimistic," seeking only "to prevent disaster." In the end, Calhoun had transformed states rights from Jeffersonian natural rights and self government, to reaction against political and economic centralization and expanding democracy. This, Peterson argued, made him heir, not of Jefferson, but of John Randolph and John Taylor.³⁷

Over all, this work provided an interesting look at early national and Jacksonian era politics. Peterson knew his subjects well, but while he largely avoided the individual favoritism often found in biographies, he did not necessarily hide his preference regarding the Triumvirate as a whole. Had they joined as "the famed Roman triumvirs" that followed

denied that the Compromise was a cause in the Civil War's inevitability. Instead, he argued that it simply defused the immediate crisis and pushed aside the tariff issue for a decade. As to Calhoun, he contended that the Crisis and its settlement put South Carolina under his firm control. See Merrill D. Peterson, *Olive Branch and Sword: The Compromise of 1833* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), xi, 90, 125.

³⁶Peterson, *Great Triumvirate*, 224.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 409-410.

Caesar, Peterson exclaimed, “what worlds they might of conquered!”³⁸ Such declarations may perhaps be excused, however, in light of the nearly sixty pages of small-type notes confirming the well-researched nature of this clear, concise, and enjoyable book.

The following year, Claremont Graduate School historian John Niven finished a full-length award-winning biography of Calhoun for the Southern Biography Series entitled *John C. Calhoun and the Price of Union*.³⁹ “As a Yankee,” Niven conceded his natural distaste for the southern leader’s view of slavery and the Union. In fact, his reviewing of Calhoun’s papers in preparation for this book only reinforced such sentiment. He nevertheless agreed to the work since his study of Calhoun’s speeches and writings had also provided him with a new perspective regarding the Carolinian. What he found, and the frame of reference from which he wrote the book, was a man “more consistent in his political career” than previously acknowledged.⁴⁰

Niven believed the Carolinian to be “deeply insecure,” the result, he claimed, of a rough upcountry childhood of “blood feuds” and Indian trouble, as well as the deaths of both parents before he reached manhood. Such insecurity, Niven argued, manifested itself through his increasingly “defensive posture on public policy” following the War of 1812 — a near disaster of which he himself was a “thoughtless advocate.” Calhoun’s vigorous post-war promotion of manufacturing and internal improvements were a search for security, as were his plans as secretary of war for a western defense. His tariff battles, highlighted by the Nullification Crisis, and later defense of a slave-based southern society merely fit the overall pattern. He was indeed, Niven explained, “a driven and a tragic

³⁸*Ibid.*, 5.

³⁹John Niven, *John C. Calhoun and the Price of Union: A Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988). Niven’s work won the Jules and Frances Landry Award for 1987.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, xv.

figure.” Although ignoring the obvious, Niven denied that his study was a “psychic analysis” of either Calhoun or the antebellum southern mind, instead claiming it to be a conventional “biography based largely on primary sources.”⁴¹

Indeed, Niven’s work, despite its focus on Calhoun’s “inferiority complex,” gave a thorough and reasonably objective account of the Carolinian’s life and career.⁴² He noted, for instance, that Calhoun, although traditionally seen as having reversed his political course midway through his career, considered himself a model of consistency. The ever-defensive and insecure Carolinian, Niven pointed out, insisted that he was a lifelong advocate of South Carolina, the planter class, and the southern way of life. Tariffs and internal improvements after the War of 1812, for example, had served his state and section as well as the rest of the country by encouraging industrial development everywhere. Yet when that development centered in the North while a slave-based cotton economy took hold in the South, such policies no longer served his state or section; hence, his fight against them. His earlier advocacy of a tariff, therefore, had promoted the best interests of South Carolina as much as his later fight against it. For Calhoun, agrarian life was the moral basis of society, “first . . . ‘in the natural order of things.’” Industry’s increasing dominance, however, upset this order. Economic policies such as a protective tariff encouraged an unnatural dominance, and worse yet, “threatened to bend all to its value system.”⁴³ Furthermore, as industrial wage labor threatened to make the southern institution of slavery “an immoral anachronism,” the defensive Calhoun reacted by denying the moral “evidence of his own senses.” Yet as Niven pointed out, slavery had always

⁴¹Ibid., xv-xvi, 5-6.

⁴²Wilson, *John C. Calhoun: A Bibliography*, 58.

⁴³Niven, *John C. Calhoun and the Price of Union*, 4-5.

been for Calhoun nothing more than “a practical application of labor” naturally suited to southern agriculture. His later defense of slavery as a positive good, Niven explained, was a reaction to abolitionism — “abstract rationalizations of a status quo” reflective of his “desperate quest for social stability.”⁴⁴

Calhoun’s slavery defense was based largely upon the Constitution’s “balance of state power,” which safeguarded property, and indeed, “social, political, and economic minorities everywhere.” Yet in Niven’s view, Calhoun “lost sight of this objective when he came to . . . writing.” He argued, in fact, that the Carolinian’s *Disquisition on Government* and *Discourse on the Constitution and Government of the United States* were merely “contemporary political documents, almost in a pamphleteering sense” — an assessment contrasting markedly from the traditional view of the works “as treatises in political philosophy.”⁴⁵ Here Niven delivered his harshest criticism, for the *Disquisition* was written as a universal scientific treatise on government without specific application to America’s political system. Yet Niven argued forcefully that the work was permeated with the Carolinian’s observations on American politics along with “his frustrations after a lifetime of disappointments . . . and especially of fears for the future of his class, his society, and his region.” It was, in other words, “a rationale for his political and social position and a defense of a lifetime of uncertainty.” Interestingly, Niven attempted to show that in the *Disquisition*, Calhoun was actually making Martin Van Buren into a man behind virtually all evil in the land. He wrote, for instance, that in his “condemnation of the numerical majority, the example of Van Buren is everywhere implied and deprecated.” The Little Magician was also allegedly “the epitome of the spoilsman, the manipulator who would

⁴⁴Ibid., 4, 336.

⁴⁵ibid., xv, 336.

betray the promise of the founders for personal power, profit, and prestige.” Such attacks, Niven argued, fit the defensive and insecure Carolinian’s “state of mind and guided his pen.”⁴⁶ That Niven should see and defend Van Buren is, however, of little surprise, for he had written a full-length biography of the New Yorker just five years before.⁴⁷ The *Discourse*, meanwhile, was described as a lengthy but simple recounting of Calhoun’s various arguments matured over the course of his career, with “[t]he only novel aspect” being his concept of a dual executive. Despite the criticism, Niven contended that the two works “bespeak an originality in American political thought that remains unequalled.” He asserted that in particular, Calhoun’s thought on the risks of the numerical majority “has never been refuted in practice or in theoretical explanation.”⁴⁸

Niven contended that overall, the Carolinian’s thought involved two perspectives, “one deeply rooted in eighteenth-century thought,” another, “modern” well beyond his own nineteenth-century existence. For example, regarding politics and economic interests, Calhoun “was in the vanguard of modern thinkers,” and his analysis of class “predated Marx.” His solutions, however, “were single-minded and reactionary.”⁴⁹ Yet, throughout the work, Niven did not judge the Carolinian as much as he attributed all of his motives to a disappointing need for security. Even the *Exposition and Protest* was reportedly a reflection of his “sense of personal isolation and alienation from what the Union of his youth and young manhood had become.” According to Niven, the stability and sense of

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 328-330.

⁴⁷See John Niven, *Martin Van Buren: The Romantic Age of American Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

⁴⁸Niven, *John C. Calhoun and the Price of Union*, 333-334.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 3.

security that the southern way of life provided him in the midst of a hostile and changing world was “beyond price.” He would, therefore, battle all threats to the South and its institutions. But Calhoun, Niven argued, “would overcompensate,” thereby doing more than anyone else “to destroy the culture he sought to preserve, perpetuating for several generations the very insecurity that shaped his public career.”⁵⁰

This latest period of Calhoun historiography was not without criticism. In 1990, when long-time Calhoun *Papers* editor Clyde N. Wilson complained bitterly of the “unthinking stereotypes” still found in Calhoun studies, Niven’s work topped the list. Wilson objected to his treatment of the Carolinian “as a warped personality and with no recognition of the part he played in his times.” He argued that the work was not so much “hostile” as it was “superficial,” asserting that even Von Holst’s severe work of a century before had dealt “more seriously” in antebellum issues than did Niven’s. In demonstrating the continuing level of prejudiced assumptions regarding Calhoun, Wilson argued that Niven’s work failed even to show “why so deluded and failed a figure is worthy of yet another biography.”⁵¹ That such harsh and effective criticism would come from a man as experienced in Calhoun historiography as Wilson, indicates the continuing levels of passion surrounding the ever-controversial southern leader, even in this latest period of relatively objective works.

The most recent biographical treatment of Calhoun is Irving H. Bartlett’s *John C. Calhoun: A Biography* (1993).⁵² In preparation for this very readable study, Bartlett, a

⁵⁰Ibid., 6, 161.

⁵¹Wilson, *John C. Calhoun: A Bibliography*, 4.

⁵²Irving H. Bartlett, *John C. Calhoun: A Biography* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1993).

Kennedy professor of American social and intellectual history at the University of Massachusetts, had the beneficial use of unpublished materials from the Calhoun *Papers* project and the advice of its editor, Clyde N. Wilson. Like Niven, it was his “first serious scholarly excursion into the Old South,” but he differed from his fellow Calhoun biographer in several ways. Where Niven had tended toward criticism while centering his study on a narrow thesis of emotional insecurity, Bartlett was kind, but refreshingly broad and fair. In addition, although making far less of the matter than Niven, Bartlett attributed much to the Carolinian’s childhood. But rather than insecurity, his focus was the sturdy and lasting influence of his fiercely independent and liberty-loving father. According to Bartlett, the Carolinian’s firm convictions, Jeffersonian ideals, and even his concept of a concurrent majority all stemmed from the elder Calhoun.⁵³

Calhoun, Bartlett contended, was far more than Harriet Martineau’s famous “cast-iron man.” He was, in fact, “a three-track person.” First in “politics,” which, differing from the modern understanding of the word, was for Calhoun “political science and morality.” He was also, however, an attentive family man with farming in his blood, the other two tracks. But in politics or otherwise, “he was, like many high achievers, remarkably focused.”⁵⁴ For instance, Bartlett argued that the Nullification Crisis clearly showed the concurrent majority to be unworkable short of the system’s formal application. Yet Calhoun “could never accept that,” insisting that nullification was a crucial element in republican government “because it was based on natural laws of human behavior.” In any event, Calhoun had good reason to be encouraged, for his stand during the crisis had solidified his grip on South Carolina, and gave him a new commanding role in Washington

⁵³Ibid., 11, 33-34.

⁵⁴Ibid., 250-251.

as “an independent leader with a loyal following” and “decisive role.”⁵⁵ Here, as throughout the work, Bartlett demonstrated his solid understanding of political realities, and seemed to admire the Carolinian’s perseverance and intellectual prowess.

Such an approach is evident in his analysis of the Carolinian’s *Disquisition on Government* and *Discourse on the Constitution and Government of the United States*. In the first work, which one could hardly read “without being impressed,” Calhoun sought to demonstrate the necessity of the concurrent majority in securing liberty. Bartlett admitted that through “stripped-down elegance and power,” Calhoun was highly convincing. “Accept his assumptions,” he explained, and one may be easily “swept along to his conclusions.” Yet the Carolinian’s premises, he contended, were “far from irresistible.” For instance, Calhoun failed to clearly define “an ‘interest.’” Although agriculture and industry, and free and slave states were for Calhoun the obvious considerations, Bartlett argued that he seemed to ignore the possibilities of “language, religion, ethnicity, and ideology.” He also pointed out the Carolinian’s tendency “to universalize,” noting, for example, his contention that a two-party system was a standard development of any republic, and that Zachary Taylor’s election was a demonstration of democracies customarily turning to military chieftains following war. On a more positive note, Bartlett argued that Calhoun faced the potential difficulties of applying his theories to practical government. Understanding the near impossibility of creating “a perfect constitution,” for instance, the Carolinian was confident that the concurrent majority could work effectively even with a partial application involving “only ‘a few and great interests.’”⁵⁶ The *Discourse*, on the other hand, “lacks the logical rigor” of the first work, and was

⁵⁵Ibid., 201.

⁵⁶Ibid., 353-354.

essentially a matured summary of his numerous Senate speeches. Yet he pointed out that for historians, it represents the best “image of American history and politics which propelled Calhoun” in his final years. Although Calhoun was hopeful that his *Discourse* contained solutions to the crises of the late 1840s, his *Disquisition*, Bartlett contended, ironically contained “premises,” which made their application unlikely. As he explained, Calhoun’s sole chance to prevent the numerically superior North from forcing its will on the South was through evoking the “self-interest of the rest of the states by threatening them with the specter of disunion.” This, however, would eliminate “the spirit of conciliation” central in his more “theoretical” *Disquisition*.⁵⁷

Bartlett also addressed Calhoun’s early indifference to slavery. It was, in fact, a natural phenomenon to which the Carolinian gave little thought before his “positive good” defense of the 1830s. He pointed out that for the young Calhoun, slavery had brought economic and political stability to the Carolina back country while giving his father “prestige” and “prosperity.” Furthermore, “slavery was still a visible institution” in the New England of his college years, and an accepted element of progress in Western thought at the time. Regarding liberty, the Carolinian simply did not consider a “society which valued both slavery and freedom” to be inconsistent. For the South slavery was essential to liberty. In any event, his later defense of the institution was, Bartlett argued, merely an expression of what “he had always believed.” He also noted Calhoun’s belief in the racial inferiority of blacks and their natural adaptability to slavery. This, Bartlett contended, ignored the early basis of his own state’s prosperity: the African importation of “the complex technology of rice cultivation.” Perhaps more importantly, such beliefs also disregarded the 2,400 African slaves in South Carolina owned by black masters, men who,

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 356, 359.

Bartlett pointed out, dealt with the same “problems of productivity and discipline just as Calhoun did.” Despite his fundamental beliefs regarding blacks and slavery, Bartlett argued that Calhoun held no racial hatred and was essentially a kind master.⁵⁸

In the end, while acknowledging the postbellum irrelevance of his arguments regarding slavery, Bartlett sympathetically pointed out that Calhoun, “like the rest of us,” was “shaped by his culture.” He noted that as an unmoving defender of slavery, Calhoun had defiantly opposed the “Western world” trend towards “liberty and equality.” Yet his constitutional ideas concerning government remain “as fresh and significant” in the 1990s as they were in the 1840s. Indeed, in arguing that modern America has “not outlived the wisdom of the leaders who framed the Constitution,” he labeled the Carolinian “one of the last in that distinguished lineage.” The fact that Calhoun, like many of the Framers, was a slaveowner did not, therefore, diminish his contributions to constitutional thought and government. The concurrent majority’s potential application to areas around the globe with conflicting internal interests such as Northern Ireland or the former Soviet Union, he asserted, could be as beneficial as its use in America for dealing with “multicultural, multiracial,” and “multilingual . . . diversity.” Yet, Bartlett discounted the neo-Calhounite’s focus on modern political and economic pluralism. Such diversity and “willingness to compromise,” he contended, would have troubled “a man who had demanded near unanimity in his own state.” The Carolinian also would have opposed the “informal application” of his theory found in modern lobby groups, for the idea of lobbying hardly fits the Carolinian’s fundamental belief that “[p]ower can only be resisted by power.”⁵⁹ Likewise, he dismissed the historical connection of Calhoun to Marx,

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 217-220.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 382-383; Cralle, ed., *Works*, 1:12.

asserting that to focus on “his belief in the inevitability of class struggle” is to misconstrue his experience in the South Carolina upcountry. As Bartlett explained, the spread of slavery to the area had erased the earlier “conflict and disorder,” as well as the domination and “exploitation” of the tidewater planters. In other words, slavery had eliminated class struggle, and “[w]hat slavery had done for Carolina it could do for the Union.”⁶⁰ Over all, Bartlett’s balanced study achieved its stated purpose of serving the larger ongoing “attempt to understand how the political culture of this country has been expressed and shaped by leaders” of various political stripes.⁶¹

The nearly back-to-back biographical treatments by Peterson, Niven, and Bartlett symbolized the objectivity found in this most recent period of Calhoun historiography, for none of these well-written works neared either the praise found in the early 1950s or the reproach of a decade later. Nevertheless, the occasional criticism of Niven and kindness of Bartlett revealed lingering traces of the past, while Peterson’s somewhat unsympathetic, but fair approach may well represent a center. Overall, however, it seems the pendulum of historical opinion on Calhoun has found, at least for the moment, a middle ground.

⁶⁰Bartlett, *John C. Calhoun: A Biography*, 227.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 11.

CONCLUSION

In the one hundred and fifty years since his death, Calhoun has been the subject of an almost continual flow of historical writing, with levels of passion seldom evidenced in the profession. That historians have rarely been objective in their treatment of the southern leader is hardly surprising, for while Calhoun was one of the country's foremost constitutional theorists, his principal legacy was the ever-controversial doctrine of state sovereignty. Tied to slavery before the Civil War and to southern freedom from federal interference in the century that followed, the doctrine of state sovereignty and Calhoun's defense of it came to symbolize, for many, both the shame of slavery and the twentieth-century repression of African-Americans in the South. For others, Calhoun's creativity and especially his pursuit of a constitutional means to preserve minority rights within an increasingly democratic society were worthy of unflinching praise.

Beginning with a series of eulogistic treatments in the decade between his death and the Civil War, the pendulum of historical opinion on Calhoun has swung far and wide. It moved little at all, however, in the first two postbellum decades, and when it finally did, the result was dramatically different from the early tributes. In this period, Herman Von Holst's scholarly but severe work stood alone in Calhoun historiography, but reflected the nationalism of late nineteenth century northern thought. Throughout this period of extremes, Calhoun's name never quite left the American landscape. When the notion of the southern Lost Cause arose in reaction to the dominant nationalism of the North, Calhoun rose with it as a symbol of defiance. With the coming of the Progressive era, meanwhile, professional historians largely explained away slavery as an economic concern

while bringing the controversial southern leader into constitutional debate. This period eventually culminated in William Meigs's somewhat dry, but reasonably thorough two-volume biography marking roughly the midway point in the century-and-a-half Calhoun historiography. That it took seventy years for a complete and at least partially balanced study to appear tells something of the enduring levels of passion the Carolinian stirred.

Out of this era emerged a school of thought described by Richard Current as neo-Calhounism, a quarter-century-long revival of favorable works on the southern leader. This influential view's chief thrust was the applicability of Calhoun's concurrent majority to twentieth-century America, and may have been at least partially reflective of a wider literary reaction against the nation's industrial culture in the 1920s. This line of thought marked a significant turning point in Calhoun historiography, bringing the Carolinian's ideas permanently into modern debate. Indeed, from this period to the present, nearly all major Calhoun studies have addressed in one form or another his relevance in the twentieth century. The neo-Calhounite school reached high tide by the early 1950s as Charles Wiltse's definitive three-volume biography became the standard, and Margaret Coit's single-volume treatment won a Pulitzer Prize, even as a counter-argument to neo-Calhounism emerged. This new school of thought, which rose to become a harsh reaction by the 1960s, attacked the neo-Calhounite perspective, while giving the Carolinian at least some credit for his anticipation of class struggle. Yet it is hardly surprising, particularly in an age of civil rights and southern resistance, that a negative reaction would follow a long succession of favorable Calhoun works, particularly in light of the neo-Calhounites' arguments regarding the concurrent majority's modern-day applicability. The controversial southern leader and his theories came out of this era with continuing significance, however, as debate reemerged in the 1980s with an air of

objectivity previously unknown in Calhoun historiography. In this most recent period, specialized topics received fresh analysis while three biographies provided new perspectives on the Carolinian. Although traces of past bias remained, the general theme was impartial analysis; in fact, Merrill Peterson's somewhat unsympathetic, but fair treatment may well represent a center approach to the study of Calhoun.

When Charles Wiltse pondered "what manner of man this was who aroused such abiding passions," he may have accurately summarized Calhoun's historiography, for it is in large measure a story of extremes.¹ From hero-worshipping eulogies to equally-biased denunciations, the pendulum of historical opinion on Calhoun has swung widely in the century and a half since his death. That Irving Bartlett's 1993 work, the most recent biographical study of Calhoun, presented a reasonably balanced and thoughtful analysis is no guarantee that an equilibrium of historical opinion has been reached. Indeed, with the Carolinian's final years yet to be covered in the expanding but nearly complete Calhoun *Papers*, fresh interpretations on the controversial figure seem as certain to appear as they are eagerly awaited.

¹Wiltse, *Sectionalist*, 481.

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