

ANDRÁS TARNÓC

THE POLITICS OF A CAST-IRON MAN
JOHN C. CALHOUN AND HIS VIEWS ON GOVERNMENT

I.

In 1763 Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon began working on the geographic description of the Eastern Seaboard of the North American Continent. One result of their five year project outlined the Pennsylvania-Maryland border.¹ The line bearing their name turned out to be more than an innocuous boundary. It divided the Atlantic Seaboard in two distinct sections setting the course for centuries of separate social, economic, political and cultural development. While commerce and industry flourished in the North, the South was more suitable for agriculture.

Dixie's semi-tropical climate favored cultivation of such exotic harvest items as tobacco, sugar, cotton and rice. Tobacco production tended to exhaust the soil and left no room to grow wheat, corn and other staples. Since European countries, especially England provided the best markets for American tobacco, prospective planters sought out vast territories near rivers with oceanic access. The need for large scale production and proximity of transatlantic shipping gave rise to a unique economic entity, the Southern plantation.²

¹ Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans: The National Experience* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), p. 161.

² *Ibid.*, p. 170.

The South's plantation based economy demanded a captive labor force leading to a burgeoning slave trade. A different economy contributed to the evolution of an unprecedented mindset, paving the way for the gentleman plantation owner's entry into American mythology. According to Boorstin, the South became an "island within the United States", a land part myth, part fact. Despite evidence to the contrary Southerners fervently believed in the area's cultural, political homogeneity and social harmony.³

While the plantation gentry saw only one South,⁴ the "peculiar institution" of slavery led to profound political differences that eventually shattered the myth and deposited the "Southern gentleman" on history's dust-heap. The subject of this essay is such a gentleman planter whose political career and personality development acutely reflected the crisis of conscience of the Pre-Civil War South.

John Caldwell Calhoun was born on March 18, 1782 in Abbeville, South Carolina.⁵ He was named after his maternal uncle who gave his life in the Revolutionary War. John's father, Patrick was an Irish immigrant who settled in Western Pennsylvania in 1733. Harassed by constant Indian attacks he moved southward, eventually reaching Long Canes Creek of the Carolina country in 1756. Patrick fought the British and hostile natives alike to keep the family farm. In 1769 he ran in a local election championing the cause of the backcountry gentry against encroachment by Charleston's planter aristocracy. Having been elected to the provincial assembly he became the voice of middle-class plantation owners throughout the state. Patrick's fiery individualism and political ingenuity were passed on to John, one of his five children.

Although John grew up on his father's farm, he was not formally taught until the age of thirteen. In 1795 he was enrolled in his paternal uncle's boys' academy. In the school's strict, disciplined atmosphere he discovered the joy of learning and the pleasure of reading. Patrick Calhoun's death in 1796 interrupted John's promising academic career, making him

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Merrill D. Peterson, *The Great Triumvirate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 18.

return to the family estate. In the next five years the young Calhoun became an accomplished farmer and avid planter. At his family's urging he resumed his studies, returning to Moses Waddel's boys' school. In 1804 he graduated from Yale University. Having obtained a Bachelor's Degree he read law in Litchfield, Connecticut and Charleston, South Carolina.

In 1807 he returned to Abbeville to open a law office and run the family farm. In the same year seething British-American hostilities exploded in the so-called Chesapeake Affair. A British frigate attacked an American merchant vessel, named the Chesapeake, in order to prevent U. S. ships from supplying Napoleon's Europe. London's blatant aggression and the loss of American lives aroused waves of frenetic national resentment. Calhoun's impassionate speech commemorating the event earned him his father's seat in the South Carolina Assembly, paving the way for his ascent in the national legislature.

John C. Calhoun entered the national political spotlight as an avid supporter of the second war against Britain, the War of 1812. He started in the House of Representatives' Foreign Relations Committee working his way up to majority floor leader. In 1817 he joined President James Monroe's cabinet as Secretary of War. In 1825 he became John Quincy Adams' Vice-President and remained in the same capacity during Andrew Jackson's first term. Seven years later he resigned citing irreconcilable political and personal differences. In 1833 he was elected to the Senate and with the exception of a brief interval as President Tyler's Secretary of State, he served in the upper house until his death. He left a formidable legislative and intellectual legacy. This essay will examine the main components of his political philosophy: the nullification principle, the Calhounian democracy and an unapologetic defense of slavery.

II.

The Theory of Nullification

Although the American colonies declared independence in 1776 and the Peace of Paris codified the existence of the United States, the nation

building process had not begun in earnest until the early 1800s. The War of 1812, or America's second war of independence, generated outbursts of patriotism unseen since the Revolution. The Treaty of Ghent confirmed America's economic autonomy and removed the obstacles from the development of efficient liberal capitalism. The nation's revival depended on the creation of banking and transportation networks and the implementation of protectionist policies. The expiration of the First National Bank's charter caused financial difficulties, cheap British imports threatened domestic industry and a chronic lack of adequate roadways hindered interstate commerce.⁶

Calhoun began his congressional career as an enthusiastic supporter of economic and political unity.⁷ He felt that the spirit of nationalism would greatly benefit the South, eventually leading it to domination of the Union. In order to stem the onslaught of low-priced British goods Congress passed the Tariff of 1816. This measure was the first piece of protective legislation in American history. It imposed an almost fifty percent tax on foreign wool, cotton, iron, paper, leather and sugar. Most Southern Congressmen, fearing increased costs of imported goods for their constituents, voted against the bill. Calhoun, on the other hand, enthusiastically supported the Tariff, hoping the law would promote manufacturing below the Mason-Dixon Line.

The Depression of 1819 shook postwar economic optimism, placing an additional burden on planters. The Tariff caused a drop in cotton prices making imported, mostly English goods unaffordable. Planter associations such as the Virginia Agricultural Society actively lobbied against the measure, branding it "an unequal tax that awarded exclusive privileges to oppressive monopolies and aimed to grind Southern farmers and their children into dust and ashes".⁸

Meanwhile Calhoun's nationalistic fervor gradually subsided giving way to sectionalist thoughts. As a Southern cotton grower he sought a way

⁶ George Brown Tindall and David E. Shi, *America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), p. 231.

⁷ Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1965), p. 91.

⁸ Mary Beth Norton et al., *A People and the Nation* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1986), p. 231.

to abolish the Tariff and preserve the fragile intersectional balance. He continued to serve as Andrew Jackson's Vice-President, but the passage of the 1828 Tariff made him reveal his true colors. He registered his grievances in a seminal essay, titled "The South Carolina Exposition and Protest".

Written anonymously, the Exposition reinforced the idea of states' rights and its progeny, the nullification principle. States' rightists argued that the United States Constitution was based on a political contract between the states and the federal government. This was contrary to the accepted view that derived the power of the national administration from the people. The state compact theory of government was first expressed by Thomas Jefferson and James Madison's "Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions". Responding to the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798, the authors condemned the Adams administration's suppression of civil liberties and emphasized a state's power to decide the constitutionality of the legislative branch's actions.⁹

Calhoun, seeking a way to preserve the Union and protect Southern interests, went beyond the Resolutions. He proposed a state convention for the purpose of adjudicating federal statutes. If an act of Congress was declared unconstitutional, a state had the power to pronounce it "null and void" and prevent its enforcement. The national administration could respond either by acceptance or by calling a constitutional convention. Should a three-fourths majority overrule a nullification proclamation, a state could have two options: acquiescence or secession.¹⁰

Calhoun viewed secession as the last possibility and felt his concept would in fact keep the Union intact. The nullification theory distinguished between two powers: constitution and law making authorities, leaving little doubt about the identity of each. The author considered the South's code writing ability the only guarantee against Northern tyranny and its dire consequence, the break up of the United States.¹¹

⁹ George Brown Tindall and David E. Shi, *America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), p. 200.

¹⁰ Alfred H. Kelly et al., *The American Constitution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 215.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

The Exposition became one of the most controversial political documents of its time. Senator Daniel Webster of Massachusetts impassionately declared that one state's ability to overturn a federal law could relegate the Union into a "rope of sand".¹² Calhoun also fell out of favor in Washington as Andrew Jackson selected a new running mate for the upcoming election.

Although Jackson shrewdly lowered tariff rates to cool nullificationist tempers, such Southern staples as cotton, wool and iron carried a fifty percent extra charge. In 1832 South Carolina called a convention to debate the constitutionality of the Tariffs of 1828 and 1832. The assembly issued the South Carolina Ordinance deeming both measures illegal and banning their collection effective February 1, 1833.

Dashing Charleston's hopes of a regional alliance, no other state joined the nullification drive. Georgia rejected it as "rash and revolutionary" and Alabama branded Calhoun's ideas "unsound and dangerous". Despite Jackson's private threats against Calhoun's life, the administration's response was relatively moderate.¹³

A presidential decree called on South Carolinians to disobey the state's misguided leaders and warned that any opposition to federal tax collection amounted to treason. When the Commander in Chief sent government troops to Charleston Harbor, South Carolina began to organize her defense. Fifty-six years after its inception the nation stood on the brink of civil war.

Having resigned from the Vice-Presidency Calhoun openly championed the nullificationist cause in the Senate. His motivation was threefold: after losing the President's confidence he had no other avenues for advancement, by taking the helm of the movement he hoped to prevent South Carolina's secession and he felt nullification was the only constitutional method of keeping the South in the Union and protecting it from Northern dominance.

Calhoun, along with Henry Clay of Kentucky, introduced a compromise tariff calling for a gradual reduction of import duties to twenty

¹² George Brown Tindall and David E. Shi, *America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), p. 258.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 261.

percent by 1842. Although South Carolina preferred even lower rates, Charleston withdrew the nullification ordinance. When the legislative stalemate was broken, the South declared victory and hailed Calhoun as the nation's savior.¹⁴

John C. Calhoun's political socialization process was instrumental in the formation of the nullification theory. Political socialization, an individual's preparation for participation in a given political culture, can be studied from several vantage points.

According to David Easton and Jack Dennis' systems' concept, political orientation develops in a generational framework. Politically socialized persons offer two types of support to their government: specific and diffuse allegiance. Specific support is given in return to a government's ability to satisfy one's economic and political needs. Diffuse support, on the other hand, is independent of private conviction. It is based on general loyalty to a nation.¹⁵

Calhoun extended specific support to his state and region. As a slave holder and plantation owner he could have realized his material goals exclusively below the Mason-Dixon Line. While he was immensely dissatisfied with the Union, he fervently fought for its integrity, offering diffuse support to the Constitution and to the United States.

Political socialization is based on the work of primary and secondary agents. The former group includes family background, school experiences, and peer relations.¹⁶

Patrick Calhoun played a dominant role in shaping his son's political philosophy. He was an Irish immigrant brought up in the Manichean perspective of Calvinistic Presbyterianism. He viewed life as a continuous battle of good against evil, limiting himself to a perpetually dualist mindset. He was never without enemies to fight or burdens to bear. The Western frontier with its constant Indian attacks and obligatory natural disasters

¹⁴ Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1965), p. 94.

¹⁵ Fred R. Harris, *America's Democracy* (Glenview: Scott-Foresman Co., 1986), p. 183.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

ominously resembled Hobbes' world.¹⁷ He escaped this "nasty, brutish and short" existence by moving to the South. After the French and Indian War he answered the call of civic duty to fight for the plantation gentry's political equality. Patrick Calhoun was also a slave master, an inveterate states' rightist and a bitter opponent of the Constitution. He stubbornly believed in a Jeffersonian limited government with its emphasis on individual freedom.

John C. Calhoun's family heritage included the self-reliance of a fierce pioneer, a habitual mistrust of government, a Manichean world view and an unshakeable belief in republicanism.

Patrick's legacy was evident in the nullification theory. Nullification was an extreme offspring of republicanism, the idea that government is based on the consent of the governed. The notion of a state's power to abolish a federal law adverse to its economic or political interests, was not only a radical interpretation of the social contract, but a reinforcement of the covenant theory of government. A Manichean perspective was apparent in John's regard of the South as a positive actor fighting a heroic battle against the undemocratic North. Although the elder Calhoun fought in the Revolutionary War, he rejected the Constitution as a blueprint of tyranny. John—like his father—believed in the Union, but saw the repository of popular sovereignty in the states, not in the people.

According to Merelman, one's level of political participation is proportional to the degree of egalitarianism he experienced as a child. Consequently, the more children get involved in family decision making, the more they value the power of the vote. Calhoun seems to be an exception, for he grew up in an extremely undemocratic environment. He was not only excluded from the inner circle of family government, but was denied education opportunities until the age of thirteen. Merelman's theory points toward an apolitical adult but Calhoun as an outstanding statesman and political scientist rejects the mold.¹⁸

Calhoun's political philosophy was considerably influenced by his school experiences. He started his educational career in the South. In the

¹⁷ Kenneth M. Dolbeare, *American Political Thought* (New Jersey: Chatham House Publishers, 1981), p. 17.

¹⁸ Fred R. Harris, *America's Democracy* (Glenview: Scott-Foresman Co., 1986), p. 185.

austere circumstances of Waddel's academy he got acquainted with the classics. Despite his youth and relative inexperience Calhoun became a voracious reader eagerly consuming such tomes as Rollin's *Ancient History*, Robertson's *Charles V*, Voltaire's *Charles XII* and Locke's *Treatises on Understanding*.¹⁹

Waddel's combination of intellectual endeavor and physical activity followed the classic Greco-Roman ideal leading John to submerge in the beauty of Homer while fending for himself in the surrounding woods. Calhoun's paragon of a warrior-statesman, a person of exceptional intellect and physique, became unattainable for his health failed under the rigorous pace of study.²⁰

Although he furthered his education in the North, he chose one of the more conservative institutions, Yale. Calhoun's early years laid the foundation of a conventionalist mindset. What followed was simply another step in the execution of a master plan.

Having taken Timothy Dwight's class on ethics he eagerly accepted the university president's traditionalist view of God and man's place in society. Furthermore John seemed to have made a definite career choice demonstrated by the title of his commencement address: "The qualifications necessary to constitute a perfect statesman".²¹

He left Yale with reinforced conservative convictions and a burning desire to become a politician. He fulfilled the last requirement, possession of a law degree, by attending law schools both in the North and the South.

Calhoun the politician was undoubtedly the product of his childhood and student years. He was influenced by the institutions he attended and by his classmates and his professors.

According to Harris, secondary factors also play a significant role in the formation of one's political opinion. Group identity, social setting, class status, occupation, age, gender, race and religion belong to this category.²²

¹⁹ Merrill D. Peterson, *The Great Triumvirate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 20.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

²² Fred R. Harris, *America's Democracy* (Glenview: Scott-Foresman Co., 1986), p. 183.

Calhoun was a member of a greater group, the South. As a plantation owner and slave holder he worked out a theory to ensure the survival of the region's social hierarchy. The Exposition was written by both a planter and a lawyer. Nullification favored the cash strapped gentry and the principle itself was uniquely deduced from the Constitution and from early works of the states' rights school. Calhoun's social standing, race and gender predetermined his political philosophy contributing to the development of an elitist and reactionary perspective. While he was given a strict Presbyterian upbringing, he belonged to no organized church as an adult. His view of the North as an evil entity aiming to destroy the innocent South was attributable to the dualist outlook of Calvinism.

The foundations of the nullification theory entailed Calhoun's political socialization, his interpretation of the Constitution and early Jeffersonian-Madisonian ideals. John C. Calhoun represented the frustration and anxiety of Southern planters over the region's gradual isolation. The Exposition was the brainchild of a remarkably prescient man understanding that opposing political and economic viewpoints within one country would eventually lead to a national catastrophe.

John C. Calhoun started his legislative career as a supporter of economic nationalism, but threats to his region's financial well-being compelled him to entertain sectionalist thoughts. While "The Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions" provided a logical point of departure, his derivation of the nullification principle from the Constitution begs further analysis.

Article VI of the United States Constitution contains the so-called Supremacy Clause, declaring: "This Constitution and the Laws of the United States ... shall be the supreme law of the land". Article I, Section 8 enumerating the powers of Congress, asserts that the latter has authority "to collect taxes, duties, imposts and excises to provide for the common welfare".

Consequently issuance of tariffs fell within the authority of Congress and South Carolina had no legal basis to overturn the import taxes of 1828 and 1832. Nevertheless, two other arguments remain. According to the Tenth Amendment: "The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the states, are reserved to the states

respectively". One could contend that the Constitution's omission of nullification automatically placed it among the reserved powers. This line of reasoning is fallacious, akin to basing God's existence on our inability to prove otherwise. Furthermore, Calhoun could have shown that the tariff's salutary effects in the North and damaging consequences in the South unconstitutionally benefited one region over an other.

He, however, proposed a concept that in fact violated one of the fundamental principles of the Constitution, the doctrine of separation of powers. Although not expressed in the document, Chief Justice John Marshall assigned the power of judicial review, in other words deciding whether an act of government is constitutional or not, exclusively to the court system.²³ Thus nullification usurped the authority of the third component of American government, the judicial branch.

While most historians condemned Calhoun for putting forth a divisive and "inherently disunionist" concept, Kelly found the author's intent praiseworthy. In his view nullification was only a different expression of Calhoun's nationalism, since the theory's main goal was to keep the South in the Union.²⁴ Regardless of original intent and his efforts in working out a compromise, after 1833 only one John C. Calhoun existed in the national psyche; a dogmatic sectionalist ready to defend the South to the bitter end.

²³ Geoffrey R. Stone et al., *Constitutional Law* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1986), p. 27.

²⁴ Alfred H. Kelly et al., *The American Constitution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 216.

The Calhounian Democracy

In 1845 John C. Calhoun published his political ars poetica, titled "A Disquisition on Government". The Disquisition was a systematic inquiry into the nature of government and the political process. In the essay the author pondered several questions offering his point of view on the "Republican Dilemma", the quandary of contending interests within a democracy.²⁵

Calhoun posits man at the foundation of all political structures. He recognizes that human beings live in the crossfire of direct and indirect effects. The former is felt by man himself, the latter impacts him through the experiences of others. Direct effects evoke individual feelings, indirect influences elicit societal or sympathetic emotions. Since individual feelings are stronger than societal motivations, a community must harness the former and nurture the latter. Man is born as a social being, associates with his own kind and always orients himself toward fellow humans. Since only the framework of society can provide the means for man's ascent from the animal kingdom, the former has to be formed.

While man organizes society to ensure the preservation of the race, governments secure societies' existence. Society's function to provide the means and conditions for individual personal development cannot be carried out without law and order.

Calhoun recognizes man's dual nature: the social animal and mysanthropic monster. Human beings operate in the confluence of opposing inner drives and governments are necessary to keep hostile instincts in check. But government is made up by men and if individual feelings remain unchecked, personal motives will set public policy eventually leading to tyranny.

Constitution, or limits on the power of government, offer protection against the development of a dictatorship. While man is predetermined to have some form of government, a constitution is not a spontaneous outcome of the human condition. Calhoun understands the complex nature of democracy as he writes: "the foundation of a perfect constitution that would

²⁵ Kenneth M. Dolbeare, *American Political Thought* (New Jersey: Chatham House, 1981), p. 271.

completely counteract the tendency of government to oppression and abuse has thus far exceeded human wisdom and possibly ever will".²⁶

Constitutions are based on suffrage, the power of the vote. Voting leads to popular sovereignty, making the ruler responsible to the ruled. Since the power of the ballot box effects a transfer of authority, removing it from the leaders and depositing it with the people, suffrage provides a guarantee against tyranny.

While voting leads to popular sovereignty, by itself it is insufficient to stop tyranny. It has an other, less beneficial effect. Voting can unleash a fierce struggle for the control of government and divide society in two antagonistic parts, a majority and a minority.

The hostilities between these two groups are based on a lack of equality. Each society produces a section that possesses a greater portion of the wealth and influence. Governmental policies, such as taxation, not only promote but institutionalize inequality. Tax collection creates two classes: tax consumers enjoying the fruit of tax payers' labor and tax producers financing public policies.

Elections yield two types of political preponderance: numerical and concurrent majorities. A numerical, or absolute majority emerges solely through voting results. The whole community is viewed as one and suffrage is equated with unanimous consent. When government is dominated by such a group that is representative of all competing interests, a concurrent, or constitutional majority is formed.

A constitutional democracy has two requirements: presence of a concurrent majority and the separation of powers. The numerical majority is not the true representative of the people, it is only a reflection of one section of the popular will. The concurrent majority acts as a counterbalance against absolute majorities. A constitutional government is based on a negative power, the people's ability to resist abuse of authority. Examples of negative power include the Roman tribunal system, the British parliamentary structure and the threepronged plan of the federal administration.

Calhoun, however, found neither of these sufficient to maintain American democracy. He created a new bulwark for constitutional

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

government, tailor-made to the current political situation. The identity of the latest safeguard was revealed in the Disquisition's companion essay, titled "A Discourse on the Constitution".²⁷

Recognizing that antagonistic sectional interests might eventually drive the Union apart, Calhoun designed a system of dual executives as a barrier against centrifugal influences. Just as man lives in the vortex of conflicting emotions, society is the product of competing forces too. Positive force is exerted in the form of governmental action such as law making. The embodiment of negative power is the popular veto. Constitutional democracies are based on the equilibrium of positive and negative forces. Since the guiding principles of the Constitution could not ensure this balance and protect the South from Northern domination, a new line of defense was needed. Each section had to have a president with mutual veto power.

Calhoun, similarly to the Founding Fathers expressed a pessimistic view of humanity and contemplated the "Republican Dilemma". Sixty years prior to Calhoun James Madison published his seminal analysis of democracy, "Federalist No. 10". Written in support of ratification of the Constitution the essay recognized democracy's fundamental weakness, its tendency to turn into a "tyranny of the majority".

Since in a democratic society public policy is based on interest group competition, a ruling faction might emerge violating minority concerns. In addition to a strong central government and a political system based on separation of powers, Madison proposed a "Republican Remedy". The political arena should be expanded to allow equal participation for all competing interests. The higher the number of factions, the lesser the likelihood of a tyrannical majority.²⁸

Calhoun came to a different conclusion. After examining the question of balancing the result of political participation with community

²⁷ Merrill D. Peterson, *The Great Triumvirate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 413.

²⁸ Kenneth M. Dolbeare, *American Political Thought* (New Jersey: Chatham House, 1981), p. 271.

interests, he rejected pluralism's guarantee and recommended a bisectonal government.

The Disquisition also expounded on the subject of liberty and equality. While he was familiar with the giants of the Enlightenment, his notion of freedom and fairness contradicted the Jeffersonian ideal.

The Declaration of Independence reaffirmed the trinity of natural rights; privileges human beings possess by birth. It pronounced equality in the eye of the law and promoted such general prerogatives as one's right to life, liberty and acquisition of property.

For Calhoun, liberty was not a right but a reward to be earned. He rejected the concept that based freedom on equality. The moving force behind progress was inequality. Humans were born with different skills and abilities and they had to realize their full potential without governmental constraints.

He rejected social engineering attempts with an acid tongue: "to force the front rank (of society) back to the rear or to attempt to push forward the rear into line with the front with the interposition of government, ... would effectually arrest the march of progress".²⁹

Easton and Dennis' model can be applied to Calhoun's theory of democracy. Both specific and diffuse support are present. He offers the former to the South, the embodiment of constitutional majority. Calhoun feels the ideal society exists below the Mason-Dixon Line, not in the tension infested North. The concept of dual executives and its apparent purpose of keeping the South in the Union, is evidence of Calhoun's diffuse allegiance to the United States.

His views on democracy are based on the work of political socialization's primary agents: the family, school experiences, and peer relations. Calhoun's dualist perception of the political process can be attributed to his father's Manichean mindset and the dominant religion of his childhood, Calvinistic Presbyterianism. John's respect of parliamentarism and the institutions of democracy originate in Patrick Calhoun's legislative activity. According to Hofstadter, the concurrent majority

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 282.

principle was in effect in South Carolina, dividing state law making powers between "upcountry farmers and seaboard planters".³⁰

Moses Waddel's academy and subsequent studies at Yale familiarized him with the works of prominent political theorists ranging from Plato to Adams. The influence of Timothy Dwight, Yale's president, was instrumental in the young Calhoun's personal and political development. His prediction of John reaching the Presidency, not only steered the latter toward a public career but the dual executive system indicated Calhoun's desire for the highest office. Calhoun's choice of educational institutions reflected an appreciation of rigorous discipline and challenging curriculum. Since he became an outstanding student on his own, he grew up to value individualism and forged a personal philosophy of self-reliance.

The results of his Presbyterian upbringing and arduous education were unbending mental toughness coupled with extreme moralistic purity. He did not believe in a "golden mean", becoming an incarnation of "Doric simplicity"³¹ and stubborn rigidity. He learned to value principle over emotion and esteem probity over humanity.

Calhoun's view of democracy can be attributed to secondary factors of political socialization as well. His class status as a prosperous planter along with racial and regional determinants led him to protect the interests of his own group. The 1830's and 40's were the time of increasing social and political tensions marking the dawn of the abolition movement. As the South became gradually isolated, Northern anti-slavery forces threatened Dixie's governmental and economic stability.

Since the United States government was the embodiment of absolute majority, Southern concurrent majority needed protection from the abolitionist spirit of the federal administration. A Southern president equipped with national veto power over the actions of his Northern counterpart offered the best defense.

³⁰ Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition*. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1965), p. 112.

³¹ Merill D. Peterson, *The Great Triumvirate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 27.

The fact that Calhoun was trained as a lawyer should not be overlooked. His legal education not only imparted formidable reasoning skills, but implanted a steady reverence of the Constitution. Calhoun recognized the dangers of sectional polarization and proposed a solution within the legal system.

Calhoun's pessimistic conservatism was based on the work of several thinkers including Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Thomas Hobbes, John Adams and Francis Lieber.

In the "Republic", Plato described man as a tyranny prone creature infested with greed and jealousy. He also described a dual political system warning: "Any ordinary city is in fact two cities, one the city of the poor, the other of the rich, each at war with the other—you would make a great mistake if you treated them as single states".³²

Aristotle rejected equality as a foundation of democracy and proposed a constitutional government as a buffer against tyranny.³³

Calhoun repudiated the spirit of the Declaration of Independence and discarded its original premise, the state of nature. Declaring "there was no such thing as a natural state where man was born equal and free"³⁴ he distinguished between the natural and political state. Since man was not born free and equal, the egalitarian natural state never existed. Man's dual nature places him in the political state where governmental interference keeps his opposing emotions under control.

Calhoun's rejection of the natural state placed him a step beyond Augustine and Thomas Hobbes, both well-known critics of this idea. Augustine asserted man's capability of understanding natural laws, thus abiding by them. Human self-indulgence and moral frailty however, necessitated the development of the political state. Hobbes deemed the

³² Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1926), p. 20.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

³⁴ Kenneth M. Dolbeare, *American Political Thought* (New Jersey: Chatham House, 1981), p. 282.

natural state "an egalitarian utopia" and based its failure on man's fear of death.³⁵

John C. Calhoun proved to be an astute reader of John Adams. The second president of the United States viewed humans as selfish creatures preferring individual goals to the common weal. Adams' society was based on the balance of orders, the equalizing ability of opposite classes. He realized that inequality was an innate human condition to be expressed in the nation's political structure. He recognized the threat of an oppressive majority and outlined the division of governmental powers and a strong executive veto for protection.³⁶

Calhoun not only shared Adam's pessimistic view of humanity, but regarded the balance of orders or the neutralizing effects of bipolar powers as the foundation of democracy. Both writers emphasized property rights as a basis of social order and condemned encroachment on the former for leading to the greatest evil, anarchy.

Calhoun's restricted view of liberty originated in his friend Francis Lieber's writings. Lieber distinguished between Anglican and Gallican liberty basing the former on natural laws, the latter on the right to vote and on majority rule. Calhoun rejected the Gallican version for its tendency to lead to tyranny.³⁷

In the final analysis, Calhoun's political philosophy suffers from the fallacy of false choice. While he viewed the North and South as principal elements of the national agenda, he ignored the West, a region which was on the verge of country-wide prominence. Neither politics, nor human relationships could be expressed as binary propositions.

His system of dual executives not only promoted sectionalism but institutionalized political fragmentation. Two executives with mutual veto powers were tantamount to political deadlock and governmental paralysis.

³⁵ John Locke, *Értekezés a Polgári Kormányzat Igazi Eredetéről, Hatásköréről és Céljairól* (Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 1986), p. 11.

³⁶ Kenneth M. Dolbeare, *American Political Thought* (New Jersey: Chatham House, 1981), p. 64.

³⁷ Merrill D. Peterson, *The Great Triumvirate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 410.

Calhoun's recognition of sectionalism's dire consequences were certainly praiseworthy, but his remedy, an unwavering reverence of the Founding Document notwithstanding, was unconstitutional. The Constitution expressly provided for one chief executive only. Two presidents would not only have led to a division of national powers, but following the first citizen's responsibility of Commander in Chief, two armed forces as well.

Calhoun's political theory was his answer to the "Republican Dilemma". While he recognized democracy's innate shortcomings, he placed the solution on the wrong premise. The American South with its racial, economic, and political stratification fell far below the standards of democracy.

Blinded by sectionalist zeal, the author committed such errors in reasoning as the fallacy of the slippery slope. In Calhoun's democracy, liberty was assigned to its own sphere and any expansion beyond a predetermined boundary would have led to anarchy. It was typical of the author to predict the gravest consequences of given actions, disregarding options in-between.

John C. Calhoun's theory of democracy contained a small number of positive elements. The writer displayed a thorough if misguided appreciation of the Constitution and employed the tools of democracy in his line of defense against tyranny, leading to a new understanding of the role interest groups play in the democratic process.

Whereas Calhoun regarded himself to be a champion of democracy, he hated the expression and always referred to himself as a republican.³⁸ His notoriously dualist perspective and obstinate conservatism forged a rigid, merciless personal philosophy and a political creed, that described by Hofstadter's words, "made him a minority spokesman in a democracy, a particularist in the age of nationalism, a slave holder in an age of advancing liberties and an agrarian in a furiously capitalistic country".³⁹

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 338.

³⁹ Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1965), p. 117.

Calhoun and "the peculiar institution"

No effort of analyzing Calhoun's intellectual and political legacy would be complete without a look at his opinion on slavery. The issue of slavery had been one of the most divisive elements of American public discourse. During the 1830's this Southern arrangement came under heavy fire from Northern abolitionists. One of the most enthusiastic leaders of the anti-slavery movement was William Lloyd Garrison, a newspaperman and publicist. He established a journal entitled "The Liberator". The publication became the abolition movement's mouthpiece, spreading Garrison's radical message all over the country.

When the magazine found its way to the South, Dixie became frightened. Southern fears reached record heights in 1831 following the aborted Nat Turner slave rebellion. The whole region was abound with rumors concerning Northern complicity and Garrison's paper was singled out as a prime instigator.⁴⁰

As a response to an apparent threat to the Southern "lifestyle", a bizarre school of thought developed with an express aim of defending slavery. One of the notable representatives of the pro-slavery movement was Thomas R. Dew.

Dew based his defense on the idea that slaves and their masters could not be separated. Since abolition was only possible through removal of blacks from America and Southern finances made cost of transportation prohibitive, furthermore because negroes were "unfit for freedom", slavery became a "necessary condition".

Slaves were considered to be "indelible immigrants", unable to assimilate into mainstream America. Slavery as an immigration dilemma gave rise to institutionalized separation within the region, contributing to the emergence of America's first ghettos.⁴¹

Dew discarded emancipation arguing the skin color of slaves would be an eternal reminder of their servitude. His words speak for themselves:

⁴⁰ George Brown Tindall and David E. Shi, *America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984) p. 366.

⁴¹ Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans. The National Experience.*(New York: Vintage Books, 1965), p. 188.

"The slave of Italy and France could be emancipated and soon all records of his former state would perish, but unfortunately the emancipated black carries a mark which no time can erase, he forever wears the mark of his inferior condition, the Ethiopian cannot change his skin, nor the leopard his spots".⁴²

Calhoun's argument was placed on economic foundations as well. Accepting Dew's interpretation of slavery within an American context (immigration), he viewed the "peculiar institution" as the underpinning of economic prosperity and political stability. In his estimation labor relations in the North were a form of wage slavery. Northern working conditions were more detrimental, for the factory extracted the employees' last drop of blood cruelly ignoring them in their later years. Southern slavery however, ensured a life time of care for black laborers, due to the owners' concern to protect their investment. Slavery represented the best relationship possible between master and servant. Since negroes were classified as property, planters had a financial stake in their humane and compassionate treatment.⁴³

Calhoun recognized that history moved forward as a result of social strife. A forerunner to Marx, he pointed out the antagonistic relationship between the ruler and the ruled. He distinguished between two classes, capitalists and operatives which would inevitably end up in a historic clash. Calhoun realized capital's tendency to destroy the instruments of labor leaving no alternative to workers but a violent uprising.

Southern society represented a counterbalance against worrisome Northern political tensions. In the South, a lack of antagonistic labor relationships coupled with an increased sense of community contributed to social and economic harmony. Calhoun viewed the South Atlantic Region as a totality of plantation communities where master and slave worked for a common purpose.⁴⁴

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 190.

⁴³ Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1965), p. 103.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

A Southern planter-Northern capitalist alliance could have forestalled the oncoming revolution. Since abolition struck at the heart of Southern stability—a guarantor of the Union’s precarious existence—slavery assumed a familiar role: a savior of the nation.

Although Calhoun recognized the importance of class struggle and the notion of permanent exploitation, his thought process was not based on personal identification with the oppressed. His chief motivation was protection of the survival of Southern slavery. Hofstadter called him “the Marx of the master class”,⁴⁵ a historical oxymoron, a sort of “elitist Marxist” starting from the opposite direction but producing the same result.

Calhoun spared no effort to prove that slavery was the best of all possible worlds. He cited census figures showing a higher ratio of mental and physical deficiency among people of the North. In 1837 he declared in the Senate that slavery “was, instead of an evil, a good—a positive good”.⁴⁶

When the country’s territorial growth exacerbated sectional tensions and the admission of new states threatened the fragile balance between slavery and freedom, Calhoun’s reaction was archetypal of Southern intransigence.

After Mexico recognized the independent state of Texas, a new dilemma arose concerning the latter’s admission in the Union. Calhoun lobbied for Congress’ authority to establish slavery in Texas. He put his argument in a geopolitical context.

In 1843, as Secretary of State in the Tyler administration, Calhoun completed a treaty outlining Texas’ annexation. Wary of British abolitionist influence in the territory Calhoun wrote a letter to the English minister, Sir Richard Pakenham. Calhoun warned that abolition in Texas would jeopardize slavery in the South, destroy the United States and destabilize the Western Hemisphere. After the Pakenham letter was revealed in the Senate Calhoun’s treaty went down in defeat.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

⁴⁷ Merrill D. Peterson, *The Great Triumvirate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 436—447.

Political socialization explains Calhoun's relentless support of slavery. His specific support to the "peculiar institution" was obvious, so was a diffuse allegiance to the Union. Calhoun was first and foremost a Southerner, and then an American.

He was exposed to slavery at an early age as his father owned several captive laborers. The young Calhoun often worked the field and played with slaves. Similarly to Southern boys of his age, most of his playmates were slaves.

Calhoun's education provided additional clues. He became an avid reader of Greco-Roman literature and history, cultures built on slavery. Aristotle's words were his main inspiration: "From the hour of birth some are marked out for subjection, and others for command. For he who can foresee with his mind is by nature intended to be lord and master and he who can only work with his body is by nature a slave".⁴⁸

A great contributor to the development of Calhoun's attitude was the Anglican church. According to Boorstin such practices as refusal of baptism and non-acceptance of slave marriages "allowed religion to confirm the absoluteness of Southern slavery".⁴⁹

Calhoun's class status, occupation, residence and race were also instrumental. He was a representative of the Southern planter elite with a chief aim of continuation of the "peculiar institution". Calhoun's behavior accurately fitted into Campbell's concept. According to the latter three-fourths of Americans vote based on the needs of the class they belong to.⁵⁰

John's occupation as a planter-lawyer generated respect and appreciation of farming coupled with unconditional reverence of the law. He viewed plantation life as an effective counterweight against the effeminate and decaying North. Calhoun, the lawyer-politician expressed the slavery issue in a geopolitical context and cast the "peculiar institution" in light of national salvation.

⁴⁸ Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1926), p. 82.

⁴⁹ Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans The National Experience* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), p. 203.

⁵⁰ Fred R. Harris, *America's Democracy* (Glenview: Scott-Foresman, 1986), p. 209.

III.

According to Harris, America stands for human rights, limited government and equal opportunity in political participation.⁵¹ The first ideal refers to the trinity of natural rights, the second tenet echoes the Jeffersonian definition of an authority "strong enough to protect people's natural rights, but too weak to take them away" and political participation is secured through a social contract.

Having examined three elements of Calhoun's political philosophy these conclusions can be drawn. The author discarded the first component of the American ideal. For Calhoun, equality and human rights were privileges of the Southern ruling elite. His definition of "liberty" was contrary to the Enlightenment's interpretation. It was the freedom of the slave master to continue the system of captive labor, and the right of the state assembly to negate federal laws at its convenience.

The Calhounian democracy as a solution to the Republican Dilemma corresponded to the outlines of limited government. Having grappled with the question of protecting a minority from a hostile majority, he found the elements of democracy, mainly a constitutional government, an adequate defense mechanism. His system of dual executives however, overstepped constitutional boundaries.

Calhoun's restrictive view of political participation and placement of slavery on shaky biological foundations and his promotion of white supremacy and negro inferiority violated one of America's most cherished principles, equality.

One of the Senator's best friends, Harriet Martineau characterized him as a "cast-iron man, who looks as if he had never been born or could never be extinguished".⁵² Although Calhoun's political philosophy seems to be devoid of feelings, he reared nine children. Despite Calhoun's vast

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁵² Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1965), p. 97.

contributions to the field of political science, he never realized that the most important ingredient of politics was the human factor.

The cast-iron man's greatest achievement was his gravest error as well. While recognizing the impending constitutional and political crisis and designing an elaborate system of safeguards, he failed to understand that neither states' rights conservatism, nor two presidents could stop the oncoming storm which would severely rattle Dixie, forcing slavery and the "Southern gentleman" into the abyss of history.