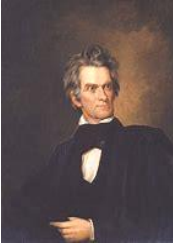


John C. Calhoun



John C. Calhoun (1782-1850) of South Carolina was one of the most influential politicians in the United States and a leading voice for the South during the antebellum era. He served as a U.S. representative, secretary of war, vice president and secretary of state, and had a long career in the U.S. Senate, during which he emerged as an outspoken defender of states' rights and the institution of slavery.

Early Life and Career

John Caldwell Calhoun was born into a large Scots-Irish family on a plantation in rural South Carolina on March 18, 1782. His father, Patrick Calhoun, fought in the Revolutionary War and was elected to the South Carolina legislature after it ended. Patrick died when John was 13, and his three older brothers helped pay for his education. Calhoun eventually attended Yale University in Connecticut, graduating in 1804. He studied briefly at Litchfield Law School in Connecticut before returning to South Carolina, where he settled in Abbeville.

In 1808, not long after taking the bar examination, Calhoun was elected to the South Carolina legislature from his new district. He won election to the U.S House of Representatives two years later and took his place among a group of congressmen known as “War Hawks,” who denounced British aggression against American ships and supported measures that would lead to the War of 1812. With his 1811 marriage to Floride Bonneau Colhoun, a cousin of his father and a member of one of South Carolina’s most prominent families, Calhoun joined the state's elite planter class.

From Nationalist to States' Rights Defender

After the Treaty of Ghent in 1815, Calhoun played an important role in the ambitious nation-building efforts led by his fellow congressman Henry Clay. These included the establishment of the Second Bank of the United States, federally funded internal improvements and high protective tariffs to encourage the growth of American manufacturing.

Calhoun left Congress in 1817 to become U.S. secretary of war in the administration of James Monroe. In that role, he strengthened the nation’s military, reorganizing the armed forces as well as the new U.S. Military Academy at West Point. An early presidential candidate in 1824, he easily won election as vice presidential after supporters of both Andrew Jackson and John Quincy Adams backed him. (At the time, presidential and vice presidential candidates did not run on a single ticket.) The presidential race was decided in the House of Representatives, which controversially voted in favor of Adams despite Jackson's victory in the popular vote.

Outraged by this “corrupt bargain,” Calhoun increasingly opposed Adams' staunch federalist policies. With Jackson's presidential victory as leader of the new Democratic Party in 1828, Calhoun was again elected as vice president. That same year, passage of a high protective tariff—known in the South as the Tariff of Abominations—sparked fierce resistance in South Carolina. At the urging of the state legislature, Calhoun wrote an anonymously published pamphlet called “Exposition and Protest” which argued that states had the right to nullify any action by the federal government they considered unconstitutional, and even to secede from the Union if necessary.

Early in Jackson’s first term, a social scandal rocked Washington and drove a wedge between Calhoun and Jackson. Floride Calhoun (Calhoun's wife) played a leading role in ostracizing Peggy O’Neal Timberlake Eaton, the new wife of Jackson’s new secretary of war John Eaton, due to

rumors about her questionable morals and shady past. While Jackson—whose late wife, Rachel, had been the victim of similar attacks—supported the Eatons, Calhoun backed his wife, causing growing tensions within the cabinet.

The Nullification Crisis and Defense of Slavery

After Congress adopted another high tariff in 1832, South Carolina's legislature used Calhoun's arguments to declare the tariff null and void. Jackson refused to accept this threat to the sovereignty of the Union, asking Congress to pass a Force Bill to empower federal troops to collect tariffs in South Carolina. Calhoun's relationship with Jackson—already strained due to the Peggy Eaton scandal, also known as the "Petticoat Affair"—deteriorated completely during this Nullification Crisis, and Calhoun resigned in late December 1832 to take a seat in the U.S. Senate, where he would serve for the next nine years.

Calhoun remained officially a Democrat, but he strongly opposed the party's policies under Jackson and Jackson's successors. He argued that it didn't do enough to protect states' rights or slavery, both of which he championed in the Senate. Calhoun was a slaveholder himself and a strong defender of the institution against attack by abolitionists, calling it "a positive good" during a Senate debate in 1837. In 1843, Calhoun resigned his Senate seat and returned to South Carolina to mount a final run for the presidency. But his campaign never gained momentum, and in early 1844 he accepted the post of secretary of state in John Tyler's cabinet.

Later Career in Senate and Death in 1850

In 1845, Calhoun was again elected to the Senate, where he became a member of the influential "Great Triumvirate," along with Clay and Daniel Webster. As sectional tensions continued to heat up in the antebellum era, Calhoun led efforts to maintain the balance of power between free and slave-holding states and protect the rights of Southern slave-owners. Calhoun opposed the U.S. war with Mexico in 1846, as well as the Wilmot Proviso, the unsuccessful effort to ban slavery in the lands acquired in the Mexican-American War.

By January 1850, when Clay introduced compromise measures designed to settle the sectional dispute over slavery, Calhoun was gravely ill with tuberculosis. In his last Senate speech, which another senator had to read aloud, Calhoun attacked the compromise measures, arguing that the nation was heading for disunion due to the continued domination of Northern over Southern interests.

Before the Compromise of 1850 was concluded, Calhoun died on March 31, 1850 at the age of 68. With the Civil War barely a decade away, a rising group of radical Southern politicians known as "fire-eaters" continued to embrace and build on Calhoun's views on nullification, states' rights and slavery, pushing the South ever closer to secession.

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