

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

John Caldwell Calhoun remains an intriguing figure in United States history. Although most know him for his political theory of the concurrent majority, his political ideas remain distinct from much of the political thought that guided the United States in both the past and today. Born to a prominent family, raised in the low country of South Carolina and educated at Yale, Calhoun began his political career in 1808 when he was elected to the South Carolina House of Representatives. He distinguished himself throughout his career through the offices that he held, the political decisions that he made, and the political philosophy that he espoused. Although often noted as the states' rights proponent for the South, Calhoun's early political persona encompassed nationalist values. From his advocacy of the National Bank to his endorsement of various national internal improvement projects, Calhoun's political agenda during the early 1800s was filled with numerous national issues. However, in the 1820s, Calhoun's position apparently began to shift from an emphasis on national projects to a stress on the protection of the rights of the states. This change from a more nationalist to a more states' rights position, and what factors may be related to that shift, are the central concerns examined in this thesis; specifically, it explores the relationship between Calhoun's shift in position and the issues and events of the era

Following the War of 1812, the United States was overwhelmed with nationalism. Although the U.S. triumphed over Great Britain, the War had highlighted many of the apparent weaknesses of the nation: a weak national currency, poor roads and canals and an infant economy protected by embargo. Because the War of 1812 had highlighted these deficiencies, thereafter there was a general consensus among members of Congress that these shortcomings needed to be redressed in order to foster the economic and military strength of the nation. As a result, the re-chartering of the National Bank, internal improvements in the form of roads and canals, and the creation of a protective tariff were all national efforts instituted with the intent of strengthening the military and economic position of the United States.

However, as subsequent chapters will illustrate, although propelled by post-War nationalist zeal, each of the proposed “nationalist” projects also met substantial criticism over time. Some, as in the case of the National Bank, were criticized for their evident unconstitutionality, while others, like protective tariffs and internal improvement projects, dissolved into sectional debates. Similarly, as the status of such issues shifted, Calhoun’s positions also began to change. Just as the United States was vacillating between nationalism and sectionalism, Calhoun was beginning a political transformation of his own. The once War Hawk and advocate of various national projects was changing into one of the most prominent sectionals of the antebellum era. Moreover, certain consistencies among the national political currents, generally, and the political debate occurring in South Carolina, specifically, and Calhoun’s own political philosophy are apparent.

The brand of nationalism that Calhoun endorsed was closely linked to military and economic weaknesses highlighted by the War of 1812. As a result, the nationalism that Calhoun advocated was qualified in nature. That is, for Calhoun to endorse a project under the label of "national" interests, it needed to meet two specific criteria: (1) the proposed program or project needed to affect the whole nation, not singular interests or specific states; and (2) it needed to strengthen either national security or the economy. Both of these qualifications emphasized the proposed national project or program would ensure that those weaknesses made apparent by the War of 1812, would no longer jeopardize the economic and military position of the United States. Both of these criteria will be used to gauge any change in Calhoun's position over the time period examined.

The intent of this thesis is to examine the apparent shift in Calhoun’s political positions, using the issues of internal improvement projects, the National Bank, and protective tariffs as markers. While its aim is not to suggest causal explanations as to why Calhoun’s position on any given issue changed over time, it does seek to look carefully at the events and circumstances surrounding Calhoun’s political stances; that is, the study tries to put Calhoun’s positions on these particular issues into the context of the broader national debate. Foreshadowing what will unfold in the following chapters, it will be apparent that both Calhoun’s use of the U.S. Constitution as a sure source of support for

his political claims resonates in his opinions regarding each of the issues and that Calhoun's advocacy of national projects was always qualified. It will become clear as well that there are certain consistencies between Calhoun's views and those of other officials in the South and South Carolina. While Calhoun's position shifted from that of a nationalist to that of a sectionalist, it was not really Calhoun's form of qualified nationalism that changed, but rather the issues that changed. It became apparent to Calhoun as the years passed after the War of 1812 that the projects advocated as "nationalist" in nature were increasingly becoming shaped by sectional interests, therefore, no longer meeting his criteria of qualified nationalism. Moreover, the issues and events that defined the debate surrounding national projects, such as internal improvements and protective tariffs, increasingly highlighted the less than advantageous position in which the South was being placed compared to the rest of the nation. Therefore, as a politically savvy elected official and a representative of Southern interests, Calhoun's opinions increasingly began to reflect the position of the South, generally, and South Carolina, specifically.

Significance

This thesis allows for a new light to be shone on the nature of John C. Calhoun's shift in political position. Although his change in position is often noted by historians in accounts of the antebellum period or in biographies of Calhoun, and various explanations are provided, the following discussion gives a comprehensive overview of Calhoun's position separate from other historical commentaries. It attempts to place Calhoun's opinions within a historical context, but without seeing them as necessarily driven by deterministic historical factors. Such examination is not found within the chapters of a biography or of an antebellum account, and thus, allows for considerably more attention to be dedicated to Calhoun's change in position. Often, accounts link the change to one determining factor, or brush over it in the review of other events during the antebellum era.¹ In particular, the different influences that might have pulled Calhoun into shifting his

¹ Often, Calhoun's shift in position often is noted in biographical accounts and historical overviews of the time period. However, many times it is just noted as occurring, for example, in an historical overview of the antebellum era. In the case of biographies, it is frequently either not fully explained, or attributed as a "natural" progression in Calhoun's political career - necessary for him to keep in political favor.

opinion - whether they may have been political, social or economic - are often not fully explored.

Further examination of this shift is significant, especially because the political ideology of John C. Calhoun can be characterized as distinct from much of the political thought that guided the United States in both the past and present. Calhoun's later works often suggest an alternative to prevalent conceptions of both American federalism and democracy. Calhoun, during his shift from a more nationalist to a more states' rights position, distinguished himself from the early notions of Anti-Federalism by drawing upon those ideas, while also making his ideological perspective distinct. For example, a connection between Calhoun's South Carolina Exposition and Protest and the states' rights assertions found in the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions seems apparent. However, Calhoun expanded upon these ideas by including stronger assertions, such as nullification.² Yet, his ideas, except for certain windows in history, such as during the controversy over *Brown v. the Board of Education* in the 1950s, never attracted mainstream political popularity outside of the antebellum time frame. A careful examination of Calhoun's positions over time, along with exploration of the major issues that defined federal-state relations allow some insight into why his ideas were so distinctive and particularly relevant to the antebellum period.

Finally, the goal of this thesis is not to provide an explanation of *why* there was a shift in Calhoun's position on federal-state relations. Rather, the aim is to carefully explore Calhoun's writings in order to speculate about and comment on what happened over Calhoun's political career, specifically to gain insight into his shift in position regarding federal-state relations. Major policy issues such as internal improvements act as markers of change in Calhoun's views, further defining and illustrating the evolution in his political position. The end result is an in-depth examination of part of Calhoun's political career and writings that allows for further understanding of how he made the jump from nationalist to sectionalist.

² Ellis, Richard. The Union at Risk: Jacksonian Democracy, States' Rights and the Nullification Crisis. Oxford University Press, New York: 1987, p.8.

Overview

Chapter Two will outline the various methods employed during this research. Chapter Three, which is central to the study's discussion of the prevalent policy issues, outlines the growth of nationalism as well as the development of sectionalism in the United States. To be discussed first will be the issues of the National Bank, internal improvement projects, and protective tariffs, emphasizing the evolution of these issues, beginning with the years directly following the War of 1812. The years immediately following the War were chosen as the starting point because there appears to be a general consensus among historians that the “nationalism” in the United States truly began to take form during this period. Prior to the War, the United States was a distinctly non-militaristic country. During the War, however, because of the hostile British seizure of American ships and the savage battles waged on the American frontier, the United States soon felt the disadvantages of its weak military stance, and realized that economic independence could not be sacrificed in the name of neutrality. U.S. citizens recognized that they must unite in their actions to correct the weaknesses illustrated by the War, and to extend the economic and military strength of the nation. The result was the birth of a nationalist spirit within the United States. Recognizing this new nationalist spirit, legislators devoted their attention to various national projects that compensated for many of the shortcomings highlighted during the War.

Chapter Four will focus exclusively on the writings of John C. Calhoun as they relate to the growth of nationalism and the ensuing development of sectionalism within the country. Tracing the evolution of these issues, the discussion will emphasize Calhoun's writings on the National Bank, internal improvement projects, and protective tariffs. This chapter examines numerous writings by Calhoun, including various pieces of legislation he sponsored and several reports to Congress, personal correspondence as well as the South Carolina Exposition and Protest. The purpose of examining these texts is to get a sense of the evolution of Calhoun's political position. Any consistencies or inconsistencies with the national debate over these issues will be highlighted. From this comparison, conclusions regarding the transformation of Calhoun's political ideology over time can be made. Of

course, any such conclusions will remain speculative in nature, and can be limited only to the issues examined.

Finally, Chapter Five will present the conclusions drawn from the analysis of the information presented in the preceding chapters. Included will be an overview of the progress of the national debate surrounding the issues of the National Bank, internal improvement projects, and protective tariffs, as well as Calhoun's perspective on each issue. The concluding chapter will compare the status of each issue (both in the national arena and as accounted for in Calhoun's writings) in 1816 to its status in the 1830s, highlighting any notable developments transpiring during the years in between.

Regarding the shift in Calhoun's political position, it will be evident that Calhoun's own brand of qualified nationalism resounds in his opinions about each issue. It will also be evident that there are certain similarities between national political currents and Calhoun's political transformation, associations that suggest that Calhoun's decisions and opinions regarding these issues were not removed from either the national debate or the political climate of South Carolina. Although this will be examined in greater detail in subsequent chapters, for now it can be said that indeed Calhoun was not removed from the national discussion surrounding many issues.