

Primary Source

John C. Calhoun Statement on Nullification

In late 1832 John C. Calhoun resigned the vice-presidency, months before his term was set to expire, in order to accept a seat in the U. S. Senate representing his home state of South Carolina. For the next two decades, Calhoun would use his voice and vote in the Senate to advocate for states' rights, in particular for the right of Southern states to regulate slavery (their "peculiar domestick institution") free from outside interference. The following excerpt is drawn from a September 11, 1830, letter that Calhoun wrote to Virgil Maxcy, a political ally from Maryland. In it, Calhoun explains, with a remarkable degree of candor, that the doctrine of nullification aimed, above all else, at protecting the institution of slavery.

I consider the Tariff, but as the occasion, rather than the real cause of the present unhappy state of things. The truth can no longer be disguised, that the peculiar domestick institution of the Southern States, and the consequent direction, which that and her soil and climate have given to her industry, have placed them in regard to taxation and appropriations in opposite relation to the majority of the Union; against the danger of which, if there be no protective power in the reserved rights of the States, they must in the end be forced to rebel, or submit to have their permanent interests sacrificed, their domestick institutions subverted by Colonization and other schemes, and themselves & children reduced to wretchedness. Thus situated, the denial of the right of the State to interfere constitutionally in the last resort, more alarms the thinking, than all other causes.

Source: John C. Calhoun to Virgil Maxcy, September 11, 1830. Galloway-Maxcy-Markoe Papers, volume 35, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.