

from
**ADDRESS TO THE PEOPLE OF
THE UNITED STATES**

1832

John C. Calhoun

A tariff passed by the federal government in 1828 favored the economic interests of Northern manufacturers over those of Southern planters. In 1832, a convention in South Carolina declared the 1828 tariff null and void in that state and threatened to secede from the United States if the federal government attempted to enforce the tariff. John C. Calhoun, vice president under Andrew Jackson, delivered this speech to that convention in 1832 to detail South Carolina's complaints and the spirit of the Constitution in which it acted.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Analyzing Issues

What is Calhoun's argument on the use of federal power? Are the issues he discusses similar or dissimilar to the issues debated at the Constitutional Convention in 1787? Be specific in your answer.

To the People of Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, Vermont, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, Georgia, Kentucky, Tennessee, Ohio, Louisiana, Indiana, Mississippi, Illinois, Alabama and Missouri:

We, the people of South Carolina assembled in Convention in our sovereign capacity, as one of the parties to the compact, which formed the Constitution of the United States, have declared the act of Congress, approved the 14th of July, 1832...to be unconstitutional, and therefore null and void....

But, while we hold the rights and duties of the States to be such as we have stated, we are deeply impressed with the conviction...that the occasion to justify a State in interposing its authority, ought to be one of necessity; where all other peaceful remedies have been unsuccessfully tried; and where the only alternative is, interposition on one side, or oppression of its citizens, and imminent danger to the Constitution and liberty of the country on the other; and such we hold to be the present....

That the prohibitory, or protective system, which, as has been stated, is embraced in the acts which we have declared to be unconstitutional, and therefore null and void, is, in fact, unconstitutional, unequal, and oppressive in

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its operation on this, and the other staple and exporting States, and dangerous to the Constitution and liberty of the country,—and that (all other peaceful remedies having been tried without success) an occasion has occurred, where it becomes the right and duty of the State to interpose its authority to arrest the evil within its limits, we hold to be certain; and it is under this deep and solemn conviction, that we have acted.

For more than ten years, the system has been the object of continued, united, and strenuous opposition on the part both of the Government of the State and its representatives in Congress; and, we may add, of the other staple and exporting States. During this long period, all the ordinary means of opposition—discussion, resolution, petition, remonstrance, and protest—have been tried and exhausted, without effect. We have, during the whole time, waited with patience under the unequal and oppressive action of the system, hoping that the final payment of the public debt, when there would be no longer a pretext for its continuance, would bring it to a termination. That period, for all practical purposes, is now passed.... The system remains in full force;—its restrictive character established and openly avowed; the inequality of its action, between this and other sections, greatly increased; and the amount of its exertions vastly exceeding.—probably doubling, the just and constitutional wants of the Government....

We...hold it as unquestionable, that, on the separation from the Crown of Great Britain, the people of the several colonies became free and independent States, possessed of the full right of self-government;—and that no power can be rightfully exercised over them, but by the consent and authority of their respective States, expressed or implied. We also hold it as equally unquestionable, that the Constitution of the United States is a compact between the people of the several States, constituting free, independent, and sovereign communities;—that the Government it created was formed and appointed to execute, according to the provisions of the instrument, the powers therein granted, as the joint agent of the several States; that all its acts, transcending these powers, are simply and of themselves, null and void, and that in case of such infractions, it is the right of the States, in their sovereign capacity, each acting for itself and its citizens, in like manner as they adopted the Constitution, to judge thereof in the last resort, and to adopt such measures—not inconsistent with the compact—as may be deemed fit....

That something is wrong, all admit; and that the assumption, by Government, of a power so extensive and dangerous, and the control which it has thereby acquired, through its fiscal operations, over the wealth and labor of the country,—exacting, in the shape of high duties, a large portion of the annual income of our section, and bestowing it in the form of monopolies and appropriations on the other,—is the true cause of the existing disorder...we cannot entertain a doubt. To this unequal and excessive fiscal action of the Government, may be...clearly traced the growing discontent and alienation on

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the part of the oppressed portion of the community...—and with it, the increasing spirit of servility, subserviency, and corruption on the other;—which all must see and acknowledge, and which every lover of the country, and its institutions must deplore...

Such, we hold to be the general character of the system, viewed in its political connections, and its certain effects, if left to its natural operations;—to arrest the evils of which, within our limits, we have interposed the authority of the State as the only peaceful remedy that remains of defending the Constitution against its encroachments,—the citizens of the State against its oppression,—and the liberty of the country against its corrupting influence and danger....

Having thus taken, immovably, her stand, there remain,—to bring the controversy to a happy termination, but two possible courses. It may be effected, by the Government ceasing to exercise the unconstitutional power, through which, under the name of duties, it has assumed the control over the labor and wealth of the country, and substituting, for the present high rates, an average ad valorem duty,—or some other system of revenue equally just and fair;—or by obtaining a positive grant of the power, in the manner prescribed by the Constitution.

But, when we consider the great interests at stake, and the number and magnitude of the questions involved in the issue, directly and indirectly; and the necessity of a full understanding on all the points, in order to a satisfactory and permanent adjustment of the controversy; we hold it difficult, if not impracticable, to bring it to a final and satisfactory close, short of convening again, the body, to whose authority and wisdom we are indebted for the Constitution: and under this conviction we have made it the duty of the Legislature of the State to apply, in the manner prescribed by the Constitution, for a general convention of the States, as the most certain, prompt, and effectual, if not the only practicable mode of terminating the conflict, and restoring harmony and confidence to the country. If the other States of the Union be actuated by the same feelings which govern us;—if their desire to maintain the Constitution,—to preserve the Union,—and to transmit to posterity the blessings of liberty,—be as strong as ours (and we doubt not that it is), this most august of all assemblies,—provided by the Constitution to meet this and similar emergencies,—as a great moral substitute for revolution and force,—may be convened in a few months; when the present, and every other constitutional question, endangering the peace and harmony of the Union,—may be satisfactorily adjusted....

Source: Living Documents in American History, edited by John A. Scott (Trident Press, 1963), pp. 415-427.

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A CALL FOR A NEW CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION
TO HONOR/UPHOLD THE LAW OF THE LAND,
KEEP THE PEACE, AND PRESERVE THE UNION