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It's Not About the Bank: Religious Republicanism in John C. Calhoun's Speech on the Veto Power, February 28, 1842

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In the second generation of the U.S. government's leadership, at a time when the number of states in the union had more than doubled that of 1787, more territories were under consideration for statehood, and the founding fathers were no longer living to clarify the intentions of the Constitutional Convention's attendees, there persisted a question of the extent to which the federal government should establish and maintain economic enterprises. Efforts of Democrats (the political party that touted itself as speaking for the Common Man) to "limit federal intervention in the economy"¹ contravened the work of Whigs (the party of business and of economic stability)² to reestablish a national bank for the third time in the young nation's history.

Amidst this upheaval, an attempt by Henry Clay to limit the presidential veto power threatened to fundamentally alter the law enactment process. The Constitutional amendments Clay proposed were not viewed lightly by members of the Senate, particularly not by John C. Calhoun of South Carolina, who challenged Clay's resolution with a masterful oration before the Senate on February 28, 1842. Calhoun's speech, comprehensive in its analysis of the functions of each of the three government branches, served to turn the focus of the Senate away from the special interests of each of its factions to a broader consideration of the overall role fulfilled by the veto power. By championing an interpretation of the Constitution that claimed the representative system of government to be an ongoing negotiation between democracy and mixed government, Calhoun evoked what I term "religious republicanism," a political philosophy that borrows ideas from traditions of both Christian and classical republican thought. In the following analysis, I will first provide a brief history of the events that spurred Calhoun's speech in order to interrogate the rhetorical situation. I will then define religious republicanism and explore its construction throughout the speech, paying particular attention to Calhoun's inductive reasoning strategy. Finally, I will conclude with a discussion of the speech's impact. By analyzing Calhoun's particular rhetorical turn to religious republicanism, we get a sense for the general ways in which political ideals can be used to both expand and limit democracy and democratic discourse. The abstractness of an ideal like religious republicanism offers opportunities for the development of a more robust democracy; however, as Calhoun demonstrates, the same ideal can also be used to limit progress—indeed, to effect a return to a former era.

¹David P. Currie, *The Constitution in Congress: Democrats and Whigs, 1829-1861* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), xiv, xii.

²Charles M. Wiltse, *John C. Calhoun: Sectionalist, 1840-1850*, (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1951), 14.

The Election of 1840 and the Tyler Bank Debates – Self-Destruction of the Whig Party

The issue of whether a Bank of the United States was a constitutional means for executing the Congressional powers to levy taxes, regulate commerce, or coin and borrow money dates back to the U.S. government's earliest administration. Differing views about the Bank and other economic policy debates, which directly influenced Clay's amendments to restrict the presidential veto power, resurfaced in the election of 1840, the first of only two presidential campaigns from which the Whigs emerged victorious.³ This victory quickly began to look like self-destruction, however, when the victor, elderly war hero William Henry Harrison, died after only one month in office and his presidential duties devolved upon Vice-President John Tyler.

Tyler was a marginal Whig at best, proclaimed by David Currie to actually be a "Democrat in Whig clothing."⁴ Nevertheless, most Whigs were convinced that Tyler, when called to the presidency, would ultimately support the platform of the party that elected him. Democrats, however, clung to the hope that Tyler would hold to his long-held beliefs.⁵ The Democrats were not disappointed. For although Clay, the uncontested leader of the Whig party, thought of Tyler as weak-willed, Tyler was proud, principled, and stubborn.⁶

Tyler certainly maintained his principles in the economic reform discussions that followed his ascension to the highest office in the land, twice vetoing bills to incorporate national fiscal entities that appeared to him to function like banks. He acknowledged the need for a "suitable fiscal agent" to collect, safeguard, and distribute public funds, but did not believe a national bank met the criteria of such a "suitable" agent, a conviction his fellow Whigs knew he had sustained for twenty five years.⁷ Thus, Tyler vetoed not one but two bills calling for the establishment of national fiscal institutions.⁸ He attempted a compromise

³ Currie, *The Constitution in Congress*, xiv.

⁴ (a): Currie, *The Constitution in Congress*, 163. (b): Tyler's adamant disfavor towards the Bank of the United States, abolitionism, and centralized power clashed with traditional Whig views, but, despite his dissent, the party selected him to be Harrison's running mate so as to curb Southern fears. Wiltse, *John C. Calhoun*, 18.

⁵ Wiltse, *John C. Calhoun*, 35-36.

⁶ David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler, *Henry Clay: The Essential American* (New York: Random House, 2010), 342.

⁷ Currie, *The Constitution in Congress*, 84. Also Wiltse, *John C. Calhoun*, 38, 44.

⁸ Tyler vetoed the first bill based on his stance that the "purely private business" of loan-making fell outside of Congressional authority. The second bill, devoid of the word "bank," instead called for a "fiscal corporation" and limited the power to issue private loans; however, Tyler vetoed it as well, claiming unconstitutional the investment of a local Washington D.C. institution (how the corporation was set up in the proposal) with unchecked national powers. Currie, *The Constitution in Congress*, 85-86.

by proposing his own alternative to a national bank: a Board of Exchequer that would retain independent powers beneath the Secretary of the Treasury “to manage the currency and to employ banks and other institutions as agents.”⁹ The Exchequer received very little popular support, leaving the business of public revenues hostage to the intraparty dispute between the Whig-controlled legislative and executive branches of the Federal government.

Calhoun remained uncharacteristically inconspicuous throughout much of the ongoing consideration of the bank question, though not entirely absent. Having long since recanted his support of a national bank, Calhoun fought unsuccessfully to prevent Clay from securing a repeal of the Independent Treasury that he (Calhoun) had helped establish beneath Martin Van Buren’s presidency, and he fixedly opposed Clay’s attempts to reestablish a bank in its place. Beyond the bank, Calhoun continued to oppose Clay’s *every* effort to push parts of his American System through the Senate, as he believed that winning the bank battle was but half a victory over the Whigs.¹⁰

Frustrated over Tyler’s two bank vetoes and wishing to suppress Tyler’s potential influence on the protective system, Clay drafted two constitutional amendments to limit the presidential veto power.¹¹ In the first, he proposed to the Senate that the constitutional stipulation which requires a two-thirds majority vote in both houses of congress in order to override a presidential veto be changed to require only a simple majority among both houses; in the second, he proposed an abolition of the “pocket veto” by suggesting that the President be given an additional three days for deliberation should Congress adjourn during the President’s ten day consideration period.¹²

⁹ Wiltse, *John C. Calhoun*, 75.

¹⁰ (a): Irving H. Bartlett, *John C. Calhoun: A Biography* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1993), 291-292, 295. (b): One key to achieving the second half of the victory against the Whigs was to ensure that the terms of the tariff compromise of 1833 were either extended or renegotiated before the compromise expired in June of 1842. Though views differed as to what would happen to the rates established by the compromise if it was allowed to elapse, Clay believed that the duties would simply cease, leaving the manufactures they were applied to completely unprotected. In the event that this occurred, Clay supposed a crisis would ensue that would force President Tyler to approve the reinstatement of protective tariffs. Wiltse, *John C. Calhoun*, 76.

¹¹ Clay proposed two fundamental changes to the presidential veto power, although sources differ as to whether they were submitted as two separate amendments or as one amendment with two parts.

¹² Currie, *The Constitution in Congress*, 165.

“An Assemblage of Nations” – the Groundwork for Religious Republicanism

Taking the floor more than one month into the debate, on February 28, 1842, Calhoun presented his refutation as a tripartite argument.¹³ First, he endeavored to prove false Clay’s assertion that the people of the several states make up a nation whose will is represented by a simple numerical majority, drawing from his argument the first of two broad principles. Second, he sought to justify this first principle through an analysis of the structure of each of the three government branches. Third, Calhoun concluded the speech by addressing contentions that the President’s power had become overbearing. In each of these, Calhoun tried to ground an abstract devotion to republican theory—a devotion not unlike religious piety—in very particular examples and practical reasoning.

Calhoun began by contradicting one implication of Clay’s notion of nationhood—that, “the President is not chosen by the voice of numerical majority, and does not, therefore, according to his principle, represent truly the will of the nation.”¹⁴ In the first of several statistical demonstrations, Calhoun effectively showed how, largely due to the boost in influence given to the small states by the addition of the two electoral votes representative of their senate seats, the nineteen smallest states combined could achieve a majority in the electoral college whereas the seven largest states, with a collective population of a million-and-a-half greater than that of the other states, could fall short of the same end.¹⁵ This demonstration presaged Calhoun’s method throughout the speech: inducting from specific examples (some factual and others hypothetical like that of the Electoral College) broad principles about the nature of the United States government. Calhoun’s strategy closely aligns with a traditional inductive approach, which relies on rhetorical examples (from the Latin *exemplum*) to “connect particular cases to a general rule.”¹⁶

Having established this mode of argument, Calhoun appealed to the Constitution as authoritatively disproving Clay’s assertion that the people’s will is expressed by a mere numerical majority. If Clay’s point were true, Calhoun says, “we may fairly expect to find that will, pronounced through the absolute majority, pervading every part of that instrument.”¹⁷ Calhoun showed that Clay’s contention falls short of this reasonable expectation, again drawing upon two specific lines of evidence: first, that the manner in which the Constitution was adopted—requiring

¹³ Wiltse, *John C. Calhoun*, 77.

¹⁴ John C. Calhoun, “Speech on the Veto Power, February 28, 1842,” in *Union and Liberty: The Political Philosophy of John C. Calhoun*, ed. Ross M. Lence (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1992), 488.

¹⁵ Calhoun, “Speech on the Veto Power,” 488-489.

¹⁶ John D. Lyons, “Exemplum,” in *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, ed. Thomas O. Sloane (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), Retrieved via Web 18 Nov. 2012.

¹⁷ Calhoun, “Speech on the Veto Power,” 490.

the ratification of only nine out of the twelve states—gave any four states, regardless of their populations, the power to inhibit the document from becoming supreme law; and second, that both of the constitutionally-prescribed methods for proposing amendments command the agreement of only three-quarters of the states, again without regard to their populations.¹⁸

The use of these two evidentiary claims serves a broader purpose than to simply exhibit the Constitution's disregard for the numerical majority; Calhoun used them as proofs of a wide-reaching proposition:

Instead of a nation, we are in reality an assemblage of nations, or peoples (if the plural noun may be used where the language affords none), united in their sovereign character immediately and directly by their own act, but without losing their separate and independent existence.¹⁹

The assembled “nations” were the states, which in Calhoun’s view maintained sovereignty over the Constitution as the entities from which it derives its authority. This stance of Calhoun’s, for which he is remembered today, would have been increasingly familiar to his fellow Senators; Calhoun spread his concurrent majority theory during this final decade of his life, beginning work on his famous *Disquisition on Government* in 1841.²⁰ Even if familiar, Calhoun’s highly theoretical ideas had to be made popular by his ethos as a statesman and by his offering long lists of specific examples. Calhoun focused on the electoral college, constitutional ratification, and amendment proposals to demonstrate practical reasoning for his abstract principles. Furthermore, the examples chosen, each related to the Constitution, lay the groundwork for an eventual call to his fellow Senators to likewise look upon the government as a divine covenant between the founders and the American people.

Calhoun carried this careful, example-laden appeal into an absolute logical binary. Either the will of the numerical majority is *not* the organ of the entire people, said Calhoun, or “our political system is throughout a profound and radical error.” Using the argument from absurdity (*ad ridiculum*) he recommended the only remedy of the second case: to completely demolish the system. “Is the Senator prepared to commence the work of demolition?” asked Calhoun.²¹ Clay would have to shoulder the complete dismantling of the United States government’s complex organization, or else concede to Calhoun’s inductive case.²²

¹⁸ Calhoun, “Speech on the Veto Power,” 491-492. Calhoun furthered both of these examples with statistical demonstrations, using numbers from the first national census for the first and numbers from the then-current census for the second.

¹⁹ Calhoun, “Speech on the Veto Power,” 492.

²⁰ Bartlett, *John C. Calhoun*, 287-288.

²¹ Calhoun, “Speech on the Veto Power,” 493.

²² Calhoun, “Speech on the Veto Power,” 493-494.

Calhoun's question is the first in a lengthy series of rhetorical questions that function collectively to transition from the work of establishing Calhoun's theory of concurrent majority to the work of justifying it by the Constitution.²³ The South Carolinian framed the questions in such a way as to invoke fear of tyranny in the form of simple majority. As such, the questions embody what a critic today might call "religious republicanism"—a nineteenth century political ideal that extolled the government outlined in the Constitution as a "covenant" with the founders. The subtle blending of religious imagery and traditional republican principles that classifies religious republicanism exemplifies a tendency in early American discourse to borrow language and ideas from multiple thought traditions.²⁴ In this speech, as in much of his discourse, Calhoun is primarily concerned with protecting common interest from erosion by corrupt government, a central aim of classical republicanism. But he conveys the urgency of this concern by framing its consequences in religious terms. Hence, Calhoun is not making an argument on religious grounds; rather he uses religious depiction to frame and fortify a classic republican argument.

In the specific case of his question of Clay, Calhoun used religious imagery to depict a governmental hell avoided only by a rejection of simple numerical majority. Within that dominant paradigm of religious republicanism, Calhoun could effectively call for a return to simple government, contra the very simple idea of majority rule, even as his reading of the constitutional covenant could be quite complex. He fortified his argument by phrasing it interrogatively, which would have driven the attending Senators to conclude on their own terms this "simple truth": that the Constitution's complexity and its origin in complex state-based negotiations formed a covenant divinely logical and sanctified.

"What then is to be done?" – the Covenant Moved Forward

In the second part of his address, Calhoun analyzed the constitutional structure for each of the departments of government. Calhoun's premise throughout this entire portion of the speech was that the Constitution was already designed to support his idea that the more the voices in government concur in the enactment of a law, the more perfect that law will be as a representation of the people's will. Calhoun's call was thus not to rewrite or rethink the Constitution, but to return to it in its original form in concurrent majorities, a doctrine he would

²³ Calhoun likewise employed rhetorical questions to effect transitions from his journey through the Constitution to his assessment of its effectiveness at shielding from majority tyranny, as well as from analyzing the alleged expansion of presidential powers to weighing whether or not an elimination of the veto would truly counteract that expansion.

²⁴ James T. Kloppenberg, "The Virtues of Liberalism: Christianity, Republicanism, and Ethics in Early American Political Discourse," *The Journal of American History* 74, no. 1 (1987): 11-12, Retrieved via Web 9 May 2014.

expand throughout his career far beyond literal Constitutional interpretation. He drew once more on rhetorical examples to accomplish this goal.

Beginning his journey through the branches of government in the legislature, Calhoun quickly reiterated that to confer power exclusively to the House of Representatives would lead to repressive rule over nearly half of the total population, but that to grant the Senate unshared power would conversely lead to the absolute control of the majority by states in the population minority. It followed that one of the strengths of the Constitution was that it required “the concurrence of the two” houses; their combined assent represented a “more full and perfect expression of the voice of the people.”²⁵ Calhoun finished by addressing the function of the judicial branch, reminding his fellow senators that, should the Supreme Court declare unconstitutional a law under their examination, their ruling acts effectually as a “permanent veto.”²⁶ He implied yet again that such a power, if unbridled, would be detrimental to the constitutional system, which required the judiciary to be checked in its own power even as it served as a check on the lawmaking powers of the legislative and executive branches.

Appropriately, Calhoun made his most substantial case for a constitutionally-justified concurrent majority in reviewing the role of the presidential veto within the overall structure of government. The executive veto, Calhoun insisted, acts as the surest safeguard to protect the division of powers; more importantly, it “[increases] the number of voices necessary to [the government’s] action;” and it is rightly entrusted to the President, who, unlike members of the legislature, is elected by and responsible to all of the states, causing him to “look more to *the interest of the whole*” (emphasis in original).²⁷

Calhoun consequently concluded from his analysis that each of the three branches of government:

...acting through their appropriate organs, are intended to widen its basis and render it more popular, instead of less, by increasing the number necessary to put it in action—and having for their object to prevent one portion of the community from aggrandizing or enriching itself at the expense of the other, and to restrict the whole to the sphere intended by the framers of the constitution.²⁸

This conclusion also relied heavily on examples to form a second inverted principle—that less simple-majority governance built a more direct and powerful democracy. Even as the founders had been very suspicious of and almost completely avoided the term “democracy,” Calhoun had to make the case that

²⁵ Calhoun, “Speech on the Veto Power,” 497.

²⁶ Calhoun, “Speech on the Veto Power,” 500.

²⁷ Calhoun, “Speech on the Veto Power,” 497-499.

²⁸ Calhoun, “Speech on the Veto Power,” 500.

they did in fact have representative democracy at the heart of their thinking, knowing that democracy needs “appropriate organs” to refine and sort popular opinion.

This second principle invited a potential counterargument—that while the Constitution provides some checks against usurpation of power by a single faction or interest in all branches of government, it in no way prevents it absolutely.²⁹ Calhoun recognized this lack of protection against the preponderance of a single interest, but again utilized inductive generalization to show the effect historically. The Constitution halted the abuse of power on many occasions, but had not eliminated such abuse altogether.³⁰ Calhoun attributed this shortfall to the functionaries of the government rather than to the composition and structure of the Constitution itself.³¹ By shifting the blame from the Constitution to active government representatives, Calhoun sought to purify the nation’s founders of not trusting democracy and majority decision-making—a blot on the founders that Clay’s veto revision proposal suggested. This happened in the same way that church leaders would desire to purify the life of Jesus of Nazareth in order to emphasize his sinless nature. James H. Read, in his book on the political thought of Calhoun, contends that “Calhoun argued that a consolidation of all three branches in the hands of the same majority was certain to occur over time unless prevented—and the Constitution itself did not prevent it.”³² Even if the Bible did not prevent sin from happening, by returning to a central covenant, the “people of the Book” could cleanse themselves of wrongdoing. Prophets like Calhoun were needed to correct this backsliding away from an original constitutional faith.

Of course, the founders were not without faults or self-interests. Calhoun’s maneuver is, at best, effective as an appeal to the founder’s greater wisdom, as if it were “divinely inspired.” However, the appeal lacked sufficient constitutional evidence to prove his case that the departments of government all exist to increase the popular voice. More reliance on the words and documents of the drafters of the Constitution as to their own views on democratic majorities, rather than deifying their wisdom and reputations, would have helped bridge the gap between Calhoun’s analysis of the government structure and his conclusion.

²⁹ James H. Read, *Majority Rule versus Consensus: The Political Thought of John C. Calhoun* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 86.

³⁰ In the speech, Calhoun said “[‘The many instances of violation of the constitution’] furnish proof conclusive that the principle of plunder, so deeply implanted in all governments, has not been eradicated in ours, by all the precautions taken by its framers against it.” Calhoun, “Speech on the Veto Power,” 501.

³¹ Even after conceding that power abuse had not been eliminated from the federal government, Calhoun appealed to the Constitution as the “full and perfect expression” of the people’s will. Calhoun, “Speech on the Veto Power,” 504.

³² Read, *Majority Rule versus Consensus*, 86.

Calhoun reinforced his second, weaker principle through further appeal to religious republicanism, depicting the inevitable hell at the end of the present path:

As the Government approaches nearer and nearer to the one absolute and single power—the will of the greater number—its action will become more and more disturbed and irregular; faction, corruption, and anarchy, will more and more abound; patriotism will daily decay, and affection and reverence for the Government grow weaker and weaker—until the final shock occurs, when the system will rush into ruin; and the sword take the place of law and constitution.³³

Calhoun's language here again reflects a fear of corruption common to his era of government. He evoked the spirit of republicanism to warn against a persistent disordering of the government and increasing chaos among the people. Epitomizing this call to "republican faith," Calhoun made vivid the hellish consequence that would result from the government's sin of numerical majority, unless repentance led his peers back to the Constitution).

"The Fault is Not in the Constitution" – Calhoun's Final Defense

As he neared the close of the speech, Calhoun emphasized the overuse of power by government officeholders in a return to Clay's specific amendment to limit the presidential veto. Senator William Archer of Virginia supported the amendment on the presumption that the executive power had ceased to be a prudent check on the legislature and become instead a forward attack mechanism—that it had been "converted into a sword to attack, instead of a shield to defend, as was originally intended."³⁴ Clay too believed that the president could "hamper and usually kill congressional initiatives merely by intimating that he would veto them."³⁵ Calhoun, without confirming or denying that the executive power had become too authoritative, exhibited that, as the executive branch possesses no lawmaking powers, the President can only exercise powers that are either enumerated in the Constitution or granted to him by the legislation of Congress. If the executive power had been elevated beyond its intended sphere and posed any sort of threat to the workings of the government or to the liberty of people, Calhoun argued, "the fault is not in the constitution, but in Congress," whose "acts and omissions" effected the change.³⁶ This capacity to condemn himself and his peers in Congress stands in contrast to most prudent

³³ Calhoun, "Speech on the Veto Power," 503.

³⁴ Calhoun, "Speech on the Veto Power," 504-505.

³⁵ Heidler and Heidler, *Henry Clay*, 359.

³⁶ Calhoun, "Speech on the Veto Power," 509.

communication, which instead invites orators to praise their audience. Yet, in an analogy to the church, Calhoun stood as sinner amongst sinners declaiming the Word, no matter the harshness of his invective.

As indicated by the general way in which Calhoun discussed his principles and the various functions of the government branches, the majority of the speech aimed at examining the role of the veto power outside of the specific context of the bank vetoes and impending compromise of 1833 expiration. As I will discuss in the next section, this global approach to the debate is one of the elements of the speech which made it successful; however, the speech was still a direct refutation of Clay's proposed amendments, which, despite Clay's arguments otherwise, were products of the current political unrest.³⁷ Calhoun would have been remiss if he had failed to address the specific issues that had given rise to the occasion before concluding his speech.

Hence he attributed the engorgement of the executive power (earlier attributed to the acts and omissions of Congress generally) specifically to the passage of—and therefore nonuse of the veto on—“the original bank, the connection with the banking system, the tariffs of 1824 and 1828, and the numerous acts appropriating money for roads, canals, harbors, and a long list of other measures not less unconstitutional.”³⁸ In other words, Calhoun claimed that Congress' carelessness regarding Hamilton's Bank and Clay's American System were the “original sin” that created the issues Clay was now setting out to destroy.³⁹

We see Calhoun's own interests shining through this portion of his conclusion. Expressing his disapproval of the bank, protective tariffs, and internal improvement projects served mostly as a personal attack on Clay, for whom Calhoun openly voiced his dislike.⁴⁰ Yet it also revealed Calhoun's tendency to change his viewpoint on issues whenever they ceased to serve his ideology. For example, earlier in his career, Calhoun supported internal improvement projects, and he did not directly oppose the establishment of a national bank; however, upon reaching the conclusion that all government-bank connections were opposed to states' rights because they promoted consolidated government, he began to deny outright the constitutionality of a national bank.⁴¹ Although unable to admit his own sins at this occasion, Calhoun stood ready to lead the group back to the founders' covenant.

³⁷ Clay claimed that Tyler's actions did not prompt his resistance to the veto, but rather, “sound principles of republican govt. led him to do so.” Heidler and Heidler, *Henry Clay*, 359.

³⁸ Calhoun, “Speech on the Veto Power,” 509.

³⁹ Bartlett summarizes this claim well, writing that Calhoun equated the danger of executive tyranny with the actions of Congress to legislate Clay's American System “which could only lead to more bloated government at the federal level and increased patronage powers for the President.” Bartlett, *John C. Calhoun*, 296.

⁴⁰ Heidler and Heidler, *Henry Clay*, 291-292.

⁴¹ Bartlett, *John C. Calhoun*, 238.

The Nationalist Nullifier – the Impact of Calhoun’s Speech

The first impacts of Calhoun’s defense of the executive veto were immediately observable within the walls of the U.S. Senate chamber. Calhoun biographer Charles Wiltse writes that “[Calhoun’s] speech was so concise and compact as to defy abridgement, yet so clearly reasoned that in the course of a little over an hour he altered the whole tenor of the debate.”⁴² Wiltse also recounts that the speech was widely endorsed by Senators across partisan divisions,⁴³ a sentiment echoed by *The Congressional Globe*, which said of the speech that it was “justly esteemed one of the ablest, most luminous, and unanswerable, ever delivered on the nature of this Government.”⁴⁴ Outside of the Senate, “the speech received unprecedented circulation,” with 46,000 copies of a pamphlet edition distributed from Washington and full-text reproductions printed in newspapers across the country.⁴⁵

The unanswerable nature of Calhoun’s speech may have derived from a conviction that regardless of what side one took in the bank and tariff debates, no one could claim that any of the intricacies of the U.S. constitutional system, of which the veto was but one, were put into place accidentally—another appeal to the wisdom of the founders as being far greater than that of the present leadership. This argument, in combination with a direct attack on Clay’s motives by Pennsylvania Senator James Buchanan, provides a clear indication as to why Clay’s amendments never came to a vote.⁴⁶ Calhoun, unlike Clay, was not as intimately involved in the Tyler bank controversy, another contributing factor to the success of his oration, which spoke so broadly of the nature of the U.S. government as to transcend the immediate debate. As such, it represented a sort of reversal in the ethos of the leading political men of the time, in which the most sectional issues in Congress were aggravated by nationalists like Clay and John Quincy Adams, while Calhoun, the famous Nullifier, made an analysis “that put in proper proportions the sectional conflict of interest, and showed it to be not irreconcilable within the constitutional framework.”⁴⁷ Calhoun’s speech

⁴² Wiltse, *John C. Calhoun*, 77.

⁴³ Wiltse, *John C. Calhoun*, 79.

⁴⁴ *Congressional Globe*, Twenty-seventh Congress, Second Session, 266. Also Bartlett, *John C. Calhoun*, 296. Also Wiltse, *John C. Calhoun*, 79-80.

⁴⁵ Little if any of this newspaper coverage has been digitized and made available on the Web. A multi-database search yielded no results beyond the coverage of the speech in *The Congressional Globe*. Wiltse, *John C. Calhoun*, 79-80.

⁴⁶ Buchanan also gave a speech to refute Clay’s amendment proposal in which he said that the presidential veto, a principle universally accepted among the members of the Constitutional convention, “ought never to be rashly assailed under the excitement of disappointed feelings occasioned by the veto of two favorite measures at the extra session, on which Senators had fixed their hearts.” Currie, *The Constitution in Congress*, 166.

⁴⁷ Wiltse, *John C. Calhoun*, 80.

accomplished this by imploring his fellow Senators to shift their concern from specific, sectional issues to broad principles—from whether this or that fiscal entity was a better government investment to whether it was the government’s place to incorporate banks in the first place. For Calhoun, defending the veto power was, on the one hand, not about the Bank or about any other execution or abstention of the veto, but about the preservation of principle—about the paramount importance of the greater good.⁴⁸

On the other hand, it was indeed a sectional conflict of interest Calhoun intended to advance by giving this address. At the time, he was vigorously attempting to achieve a renegotiation of the tariff compromise of 1833 so as to effect lower tariffs on Southern goods.⁴⁹ Based on Tyler’s actions up to this point, it is likely that he would have vetoed any increase in the tariff rate established by the compromise (he helped draft the compromise)—a use of the veto Calhoun would have very much supported as it would have meant more wealth for his constituents—had the Treasury not been wholly depleted.⁵⁰ Similarly, despite Calhoun denouncing in an 1841 speech given in Montgomery “that ‘the all absorbing question’ among the people ‘was not whether great fundamental principles should be established or overthrown, but who should be President,’”⁵¹ his speech on the veto power “was consciously advancing the platform on which he meant to seek the Democratic nomination” for President in 1844.⁵²

Calhoun ultimately aimed to protect against uninhibited popular sovereignty, and his call for an unwavering faith in the republicanism of the founders served as the principle means for doing so. His use of religious imagery is perhaps not surprising when we consider that such imagery also pervaded Calhoun’s view of “man’s” political function: “Constitution is the contrivance of man, while government is of Divine ordination. Man is left to perfect what the wisdom of the Infinite ordained, as necessary to preserve the race.”⁵³ The Second Great Awakening had a huge effect on the nation’s discourse, as itinerant pastors made their way through even backcountry South Carolina, with church enrollments soaring. Calhoun was certainly no religious zealot, but a kind of civic religion circulated widely in his time, grounding his theories of sovereignty,

⁴⁸ Indeed, this is evident in Calhoun’s concluding few lines, in which he said: “The veto, of itself, as important as it is, sinks into nothing compared to the principle involved.” Calhoun, “Speech on the Veto Power,” 509.

⁴⁹ See note 15.

⁵⁰ Due to the depletion of the Treasury, Tyler “reluctantly [recommended] that tariff duties be raised above the 20 percent level as the only way to provide funds needed for operating the government.” Even so, he vetoed additional proposed legislation which cleverly sought to circumvent existing and as yet unexpired tariff and distribution laws. Wiltse, *John C. Calhoun*, 80-83.

⁵¹ Bartlett, *John C. Calhoun*, 289-920.

⁵² Wiltse, *John C. Calhoun*, 77.

⁵³ John C. Calhoun, *A Disquisition on Government*, 1851, Retrieved via Web 9 May 2014.

majority rule, and race as divinely sanctioned. Despite being a holy mission, any government-produced constitution, compromise, or law was inherently flawed for Calhoun, as “the Creator” had endowed mankind with both great purpose and dignity but also unholy passion and self-interest. Because of this, Calhoun maintained reluctance to vest ultimate sovereignty in a people who lack “the wisdom of the Infinite,” or to think of any product of governance as absolutely pure.

This view seems inconsonant with the rhetoric in this speech, which suggests that the Constitution and not government is divinely inspired. But Calhoun’s rhetorical glorification of the founders and the Constitution would have appealed to citizens of the era. Calhoun’s willingness to complicate his ethos by reversing his own ideas speaks to the rhetorical lengths to which he would go to protect regional interests, proving Calhoun to be no less self-interested than many of those whom he feared would corrupt the government. Not necessarily *opposed* to the popular voice, Calhoun relied upon it only as far as would be essential to protect “principle” against expanding suffrage and equality. Calhoun’s view of “principle” nonetheless served his own interests, which included protecting his states’ rights agenda; preserving rule by the elite, whom he presumed had better knowledge and more vested interests in the nation; and defending slavery and renegotiating tariffs whenever population growth in the North outpaced population growth in the South. Constructing his argument in a way that revealed this careful negotiation between popular sovereignty and particular interests, Calhoun renewed a sacred covenant with the founders that outstripped all debate and blighted any change with apostasy.

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