
60. John C. Calhoun, the Concurrent Majority
(ca. 1845)

Source: "A Disquisition on Government," in Richard K. Crallé, ed., The Works of John C. Calhoun (New York, 1854–57), Vol. 1, pp. 28–29.

The Nullification Crisis of the early 1830s pitted South Carolina, which claimed the right to nullify a national tariff law of which it disapproved, against President Andrew Jackson. John C. Calhoun, once a strong nationalist, emerged as the leading theorist of nullification. The national government, he insisted, had been created by an agreement between sovereign states, each of which retained the right to prevent the enforcement within its borders of acts of Congress that exceeded the powers spelled out in the Constitution.

In the aftermath of the crisis, Calhoun began thinking about other constitutional mechanisms that could preserve both the Union and the South's rights within a nation in which it was becoming a distinct minority. He developed the theory of the "concurrent majority." Rather than relying on a simple numerical majority to ascertain the popular will, Calhoun argued, the only way to ensure the stability of a large, diverse nation was for each major interest (including slaveowners) to have the right to veto all measures that affected it. Calhoun began writing his *Disquisition on Government*, from which the excerpt below is taken, during the 1840s, but it was not published until after his death in 1850.

THERE ARE TWO different modes in which the sense of the community may be taken; one, simply by the right of suffrage, unaided; the other, by the right through a proper organism. Each collects the sense of the majority. But one regards numbers only, and considers the whole community as a unit, having but one common interest throughout; and collects the sense of the greater number of the whole, as that of the community. The other, on the contrary, regards interests as well as numbers;—considering the community as made up of different and conflicting interests, as far as the action of the government is concerned; and takes the sense of each, through its majority or appropriate organ, and the united sense of all, as the sense of the entire community. The former of these I shall call the numerical, or absolute majority; and the latter, the concurrent, or constitutional majority. I call it the constitutional majority, because it is an essential element in every constitutional government,—be

its form what it may. So great is the difference, politically speaking, between the two majorities, that they cannot be confounded, without leading to great and fatal errors; and yet the distinction between them has been so entirely overlooked, that when the term *majority* is used in political discussions, it is applied exclusively to designate the numerical,—as if there were no other. Until this distinction is recognized, the better understood, there will continue to be great liability to error in properly constructing constitutional governments, especially of the popular form, and of preserving them when properly constructed. Until then, the latter will have a strong tendency to slide, first, into the government of the numerical majority, and finally, into absolute government of some other form. To show that such must be the case, and at the same time to mark more strongly the difference between the two, in order to guard against the danger of overlooking it, I propose to consider the subject more at length.

The first and leading error which naturally arises from overlooking the distinction referred to, is, to confound the numerical majority with the people; and this so completely as to regard them as identical. This is a consequence that necessarily results from considering the numerical as the only majority. All admit, that a popular government, or democracy, is the government of the people; for the terms imply this. A perfect government of the kind would be one which would embrace the consent of every citizen or member of the community; but as this is impracticable, in the opinion of those who regard the numerical as the only majority, and who can perceive no other way by which the sense of the people can be taken,—they are compelled to adopt this as the only true basis of popular government, in contradistinction to governments of the aristocratical or monarchical form. Being thus constrained, they are, in the next place, forced to regard the numerical majority, as, in effect, the entire people....

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The necessary consequence of taking the sense of the community by the concurrent majority is, as has been explained, to give to each

interest or portion of the community a negative on the others. It is this mutual negative among its various conflicting interests, which invests each with the power of protecting itself;—and places the rights and safety of each, where only they can be securely placed, under its own guardianship. Without this there can be no systematic, peaceful, or effective resistance to the natural tendency of each to come into conflict with the others: and without this there can be no constitution. It is this negative power,—the power of preventing or arresting the action of the government,—be it called by what term it may,—veto, interposition, nullification, check, or balance of power,—which, in fact, forms the constitution. They are all but different names for the negative power.

Questions

1. How does Calhoun distinguish between the “numerical” and “concurrent” majorities?
 2. Which Americans would be most likely to object to Calhoun’s proposed constitutional system?
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would be safe for me to escape. I was too young to think of doing so immediately; besides, I wished to learn how to write, as I might have occasion to write my own pass. I consoled myself with the hope that I should one day find a good chance. Meanwhile, I would learn to write.

Questions

1. To whom is Douglass addressing his book, and how does the intended audience affect his argument?
2. Why does Douglass so strongly link education with freedom?

65. Rise of the Cotton Kingdom (1836)

Source: Fredrick Norcom to James C. Johnston, January 24, 1836. From Ira Parkers to John Sharpe, 12 August 1928, Folder 26, in the John Sharpe Papers #3592, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Reprinted with permission.

In some ways, the most dynamic feature of the American economy in the first forty years of the nineteenth century was the rise of the Cotton Kingdom. The early industrial revolution, which began in England and soon spread to parts of the North, generated an immense demand for cotton, a crop the Deep South was particularly suited to growing because of climate and soil fertility. Slavery, which many Americans had expected to die out because its major crop, tobacco, exhausted the soil, now embarked on a remarkable period of expansion. Settlers from the older southern states flooded into Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana.

The letter that follows was written by Fredrick Norcom, who migrated from North Carolina to Vicksburg, Mississippi, to a planter in Edenton, North Carolina. Norcom describes the feverish speculation in cotton, land, and slaves.

I HAVE MET with I suppose from 50 to 100 men who (many of them are entirely destitute of a common education) five years since could not get credit for a pair of shoes, now worth 100,000 to a million of dollars—I have seen a great number who came here rich, and now immensely rich; I have not seen but one single soul, nor have I heard of three, who have failed—and these were all merchants, who without much Capital went to speculating in Cotton—. It is in truth the only country I ever read or heard of, where a poor man could in two or three years without any aid, become wealthy—A few days of labour and lying out in the woods enabled them to find out a good body of land, and not having the money to enter it for themselves, they would sell their information to those who were too idle, or too rich to undergo the fatigue of hunting for it; by this means they would obtain money enough to enter one section, then two, and so on; soon sell that for ten or twenty times as much as they gave for it, and sometimes would absolutely make what is considered in the old States a fortune in five or six months. . . .

At Pontotoc in the Chickasaw Nation, there was 4 to 5 millions of dollars lying last summer to be employed in land; at the sales in December at Columbus, there was more than 5 millions, how much at the other land offices I have not heard.

All the lands obtained from the Choctaw Indians in 1832 have now been offered for sale; the greater part of the choice land of course was taken up the first year or two, and that now sells from \$50–75 to 100 per acre, according to location—the second rate is selling from 20 to 40 per acre, and the third rate of which there is much yet remaining, is selling from 8 to 20 per acre—you can thus see how easy it was to get rich here—a little labour would raise \$800—that will enter a section of land, to sell that for 10, to \$20,000, and lay that out again and get in return 10 or 20 for one, is an easy and rapid mode of getting rich. . . . The demand for all species of property here is great, constant and increasing—I cannot ascertain what amount of property has been sold in any one county. More than 6,000 Negroes and 10,000 horses and mules have been sold in Yazoo County alone, and from 1st

Sept. up to this time (and I am told it so continues until April) there are Negroes by the hundred in every little Log-Village for sale. . . .

I know of no point in the world with four times its population which sells so many goods, Negroes and provisions &c and if things go on at this rate long, we must soon have 20,000 population; goods are lying here in store in quantities, waiting for stores to be built, and all species of houses are going up as if by Magic weekly: property bought in the edge of Town twelve months since for \$200 per acre sold for \$4,000 per acre last week—. All species of labour here cost three times as much as at Edenton, and as a general rule most every thing costs about four times as much as in the old States, except Negroes—prime man and woman together sell for \$2,000—the ordinary mode of selling here is man and wife.

Questions

1. How does Norcom's letter suggest the interconnection between the fate of Native Americans and the opportunities open to white migrants to Mississippi?
2. What were likely to have been the effect on slaves of the speculative process described in the letter?

66. J. D. B. De Bow, "The Non-Slaveholders of the South" (1860)

Source: J. D. B. De Bow, "The Non-Slaveholders of the South: Their Interests in the Present Sectional Controversy Identical with That of the Slaveholders," *De Bow's Review*, 30 (January 1861), 67-77.

The most important business publication in the South before the Civil War was *De Bow's Review*, edited by James De Bow. De Bow avidly defended the

institution of slavery, while at the same time advocating a diversification of the southern economy to rely less fully on plantation agriculture. As the sectional controversy intensified, De Bow was well aware that a majority of white families in the South did not own slaves. Many, he feared, did not share the same commitment to the institution as planters and cotton merchants.

In 1860, De Bow delivered a speech in Nashville, reprinted the following January in his magazine, in which he outlined the benefits he claimed non-slaveholders derived from the system of slavery and attempted to convince them that they shared a common interest in defending the institution.

I WILL PROCEED to present several general considerations, which must be found powerful enough to influence the non-slaveholders, if the claims of patriotism were inadequate to resist any attempt to overthrow the institutions and industry of the section to which they belong.

1. *The non-slaveholder of the South is assured that the remuneration afforded by his labor, over and above the expense of living, is larger than that which is afforded by the same labor in the free States.* To be convinced of this, he has only to compare the value of labor in the Southern cities with those of the North, and to take note annually of the large number of laborers who are represented to be out of employment there, and who migrate to our shores, as well as to other sections. No white laborer, in return, has been forced to leave our midst, or remain without employment. . . .

2. *The non-slaveholders, as a class, are not reduced by the necessity of our condition, as is the case in the free States, to find employment in crowded cities, and come into competition in close and sickly workshops and factories, with remorseless and untiring machinery.* They have but to compare their condition, in this particular, with the mining and manufacturing operatives of the North and Europe, to be thankful that God has reserved them for a better fate. Tender women, aged men, delicate children, toil and labor there from early dawn until after candle-light,

from one year to another, for a miserable pittance, scarcely above the starvation point; and without hope of amelioration. . . .

3. *The non-slaveholder is not subjected to that competition with foreign pauper labor which has degraded the free labor of the North, and demoralized it to an extent which perhaps can never be estimated. . . .*

4. *The non-slaveholder of the South preserves the status of the white man, and is not regarded as an inferior or a dependant. He is not told that the Declaration of Independence, when it says that all men are born free and equal, refers to the negro equally with himself. It is not proposed to him that the free negro's vote shall weigh equally with his own at the ballot-box, and that the little children of both colors shall be mixed in the classes and benches of the schoolhouse, and embrace each other filially in its outside sports. . . . No white man at the South serves another as a body-servant, to clean his boots, wait on his table, and perform the menial services of his household! His blood revolts against this, and his necessities never drive him to it. He is a companion and an equal. . . . The poor white laborer at the North is at the bottom of the social ladder, while his brother here has ascended several steps, and can look down upon those who are beneath him at an infinite remove!*

5. *The non-slaveholder knows that as soon as his savings will admit, he can become a slaveholder, and thus relieve his wife from the necessities of the kitchen and the laundry, and his children from the labors of the field. This, with ordinary frugality, can in general be accomplished in a few years, and is a process continually going on. . . .*

6. *The large slaveholders and proprietors of the South begin life in great part as non-slaveholders. . . . Cheap lands, abundant harvests, high prices, give the poor man soon a negro. His ten bales of cotton bring him another, a second crop increases his purchases, and so he goes on, opening land and adding labor, until in a few years his draft for \$20,000 upon his merchant becomes a very marketable commodity.*

7. *But should such fortune not be in reserve for the non-slaveholder, he will understand that by honesty and industry it may be realized to his children. . . .*

8. *The sons of the non-slaveholder are and have always been among the leading and ruling spirits of the South, in industry as well as in politics. . . . Nowhere else have intelligence and virtue, disconnected from ancestral estates, the same opportunities for advancement, and nowhere else is their triumph more speedy and signal.*

9. *Without the institution of slavery the great staple products of the South would cease to be grown, and the immense annual results which are distributed among every class of the community, and which give life to every branch of industry, would cease. The world furnishes no instances of these products being grown upon a large scale by free labor. . . .*

10. *If emancipation be brought about, as will, undoubtedly be the case, unless the encroachments of the fanatical majorities of the North are resisted now, the slaveholders, in the main, will escape the degrading equality which must result, by emigration, for which they have the means, by disposing of their personal chattels, while the non-slaveholders, without these resources, would be compelled to remain and endure the degradation. This is a startling consideration. In Northern communities, where the free negro is one in a hundred of the total population, he is recognized and acknowledged often as a pest, and in many cases even his presence is prohibited by law. What would be the case in many of our States, where every other inhabitant is a negro, or in many of our communities, . . . where there are from twenty to one hundred negroes to each white inhabitant? Low as would this class of people sink by emancipation in idleness, superstition, and vice, the white man compelled to live among them would, by the power exerted over him, sink even lower. . . .*

. . . They [southern non-slaveholders] fully understand the momentous questions which now agitate the land in all their relations. They perceive the inevitable drift of Northern aggression, and know that if necessity impel to it, as I verily believe it does at this moment, the establishment of a Southern confederation will be a sure refuge from the storm. In such a confederation our rights and possessions would be secure, and the wealth being retained at

home, to build up our towns and cities, to extend our railroads, and increase our shipping, which now goes in tariffs or other involuntary or voluntary tributes to other sections, opulence would be diffused throughout all classes, and we should become the freest, the happiest, and the most prosperous and powerful nation upon earth.

Questions

1. What economic benefits does De Bow claim non-slaveholders derive from slavery?
2. Why should non-slaveholders, according to De Bow, fear the consequences of the emancipation of the slaves?

67. George Fitzhugh and the Proslavery Argument (1854)

Source: George Fitzhugh, Sociology for the South, or the Failure of Free Society (Richmond, Va., 1854), pp. 225–55.

In the thirty years before the outbreak of the Civil War, proslavery thought came to dominate southern public life. Racism—the belief that blacks were innately inferior to whites and unsuited for life in any condition other than slavery—formed one pillar of the proslavery ideology. Most slaveholders also found legitimation for slavery in biblical passages such as the injunction that servants should obey their masters. Still other defenders of slavery insisted that the institution guaranteed equality for whites. Some proslavery writers began to question the ideals of liberty, equality, and democracy so widely shared elsewhere in the nation. The Virginia writer George Fitzhugh took the argument to its most radical conclusion, explicitly repudiating Jeffersonian ideals of liberty and equality as proper foundations for a good society. Indeed, wrote Fitzhugh, slaveowners and slaves shared a

community of interest unknown in “free society.” All workers, white and black, North and South, according to Fitzhugh, would fare better having individual owners, rather than living as “slaves” of the economic marketplace.

TEN YEARS AGO [I] became satisfied that slavery, *black or white*, was right and necessary. . . . Liberty and equality are new things under the sun. The free states of antiquity abounded with slaves. The feudal system that supplanted Roman institutions changed the form of slavery, but brought with it neither liberty nor equality. France and the Northern States of our Union have alone fully and fairly tried the experiment of a social organization founded upon universal liberty and equality of rights. . . . The experiment has already failed, if we are to form our opinions from the discontent of the masses. . . . Liberty and equality have not conduced to enhance the comfort or the happiness of the people. . . . The struggle to better one's condition, to pull others down or supplant them is the great organic law of free society. All men being equal, all aspire to the highest honors and the largest possessions. . . . None but the selfish virtues are encouraged, because none other aid a man in the race of free competition. . . . The bestowing upon men of equality of rights, is but giving license to the strong to oppress the weak. . . .

There is no rivalry, no competition to get employment among slaves, as among free laborers. Nor is there a war between master and slave. The master's interest prevents his reducing the slave's allowance or wages in infancy or sickness, for he might lose the slave by so doing. His feeling for his slave never permits him to stint him in old age. The slaves are all well fed, well clad, have plenty of fuel, and are happy. They have no dread of the future—no fear of want. A state of dependence is the only condition in which reciprocal affection can exist among human beings—the only situation in which the war of competition ceases, and peace, amity and good will arise. A state of independence always begets more or less of

jealous rivalry and hostility. A man loves his children because they are weak, helpless and dependent; he loves his wife for similar reasons....

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At the slaveholding South all is peace, quiet, plenty and contentment. We have no mobs, no trades unions, no strikes for higher wages, no armed resistance to the law, but little jealousy of the rich by the poor. We have but few in our jails, and fewer in our poor houses. We produce enough of the comforts and necessities of life for a population three or four times as numerous as ours. We are wholly exempt from the torrent of pauperism, crime, agrarianism, and infidelity which Europe is pouring from her jails and alms houses on the already crowded North. Population increases slowly, wealth rapidly. In the tide water region of Eastern Virginia, as far as our experience extends, the crops have doubled in fifteen years, whilst the population has been almost stationary. In the same period the lands, owing to improvements of the soil and the many fine houses erected in the country, have nearly doubled in value. This ratio of improvement has been approximated or exceeded wherever in the South slaves are numerous.... Wealth is more equally distributed than at the North, where a few millionaires own most of the property of the country. (These millionaires are men of cold hearts and weak minds; they know how to make money, but not how to use it, either for the benefit of themselves or of others.) High intellectual and moral attainments, refinement of head and heart, give standing to a man in the South, however poor he may be. Money is, with few exceptions, the only thing that ennobles at the North. We have poor among us, but none who are over-worked and under-fed. We do not crowd cities because lands are abundant and their owners kind, merciful and hospitable. The poor are as hospitable as the rich, the negro as the white man. Nobody dreams of turning a friend, a relative, or a stranger from his door. The very negro who deems it no crime to steal, would scorn to sell his hospitality. We have no loafers, because

the poor relative or friend who borrows our horse, or spends a week under our roof, is a welcome guest. The loose economy, the wasteful mode of living at the South, is a blessing when rightly considered; it keeps want, scarcity and famine at a distance, because it leaves room for retrenchment. The nice, accurate economy of France, England and New England, keeps society always on the verge of famine, because it leaves no room to retrench, that is to live on a part only of what they now consume. Our society exhibits no appearance of precocity, no symptoms of decay. A long course of continuing improvement is in prospect before us, with no limits which human foresight can descry. Actual liberty and equality with our white population has been approached much nearer than in the free States. Few of our whites ever work as day laborers, none as cooks, scullions, ostlers, body servants, or in other menial capacities. One free citizen does not lord it over another; hence that feeling of independence and equality that distinguishes us; hence that pride of character, that self-respect, that give us ascendancy when we come in contact with Northerners. It is a distinction to be a Southerner, as it was once to be a Roman citizen....

Questions

1. What are Fitzhugh's main criticisms of "free society"?
2. Why does he present an analogy between the condition of slaves and that of women?

68. Solomon Northup, *The New Orleans Slave Market* (1853).

Source: *Solomon Northup, Twelve Years a Slave (Auburn, N.Y., 1853), pp. 78-82.*