A Reconsideration of John C. Calhoun's Transition from Nationalism to Nullification

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Like Washington and Lincoln, in the American legend John C. Calhoun is a symbol—a symbol of the Old South which was to be destroyed in the Great Rebellion that began a decade after his death. Unlike Washington and Lincoln, who recently at last have been portrayed as individuals, in the national tradition Calhoun remains a symbol, not a personality, largely because of the treatment he has persistently received from his biographers.

When the Carolinian announced his candidacy for the presidency in the last days of 1821, his intimate cabinet colleague, John Quincy Adams, regarded the move as deliberate and dishonest treachery. The New Englander had recently received, through a third party, what he considered positive assurance that the Secretary of War had no intention of entering the race. During the bitter months of the presidential contest which followed, he secretly poured out his venom on the unsuspecting Calhoun in his diary, and in its pages every action of his southern rival was recorded as that of a self-seeking, hypocritical, and scheming politician. This famous diary, published in the 1870's, was used by Hermann E. von Holst as the basis for his hostile biography of the southerner.¹ Thus in the Reconstruction era Calhoun, seen through Adams' biased eyes, became the personification of the unprincipled and wicked South that plotted rebellion years before she finally attempted it.

Most of his biographers, being southerners, have in retaliation por-

¹ Hermann E. von Holst, John C. Calhoun (Boston, 1882).
trayed him as the symbol of the purity of southern motives. In their eyes both Calhoun and the South are above reproach, never motivated but by the loftiest incentives. Calhoun the man has remained in the clouds, symbolic of the Lost Cause. As a natural consequence the fiction persists that his great contemporaries, Jackson, Clay, and Webster, were ambitious men who used every means within their power to attain the presidency. But the Carolinian, willing in his high patriotism to accept that office because he so conspicuously had the interests of the whole nation rather than his own at heart, never stooped to low personal ambition or to the sordid methods of his rivals.

It must be admitted that the letters and papers of Calhoun lend a superficial support to this thesis, but there is a stronger case for a contrary interpretation. Deistic in religion but, like Adams, puritanical in mental habit and temperament, it was a psychological necessity to Calhoun never to admit personal ambition and to rationalize his every political act exclusively in terms of national interest. Such rationalization was not only temperamentally necessary, but his shift in the middle of his career from extreme nationalism to an extreme state rights position made it all the more essential. Calhoun apparently was sincere in changing his opinion, and he conveniently used the arguments of his own rationalization in an effort to convince the nation of his intellectual integrity. Confident of his own logic, he regarded those who disagreed as totally in error and frequently considered them positively vicious. Webster made an identical shift in the opposite direction about the same time, yet he was not subject in any such degree to an urge for self-justification. Jackson and Clay, since their appeal was more to men’s hearts, never bothered themselves about the matter of consistency. While much of Calhoun’s rationalizing was unconscious, it satisfied his peculiar complex, and it has generally been accepted by his biographers at face value.²

² Besides von Holst’s work, the following are full-length biographies of Calhoun: John S. Jenkins, Life of John C. Calhoun (Auburn, 1850); Gustavus M. Pinckney, Life of John C. Calhoun (Charleston, 1903); Gaillard Hunt, John C. Calhoun (Philadelphia, 1908); William M. Meigs, Life of John C. Calhoun (2 vols., New York, 1917); Arthur Styron, The Cast-Iron Man: John C. Calhoun and American Democracy (New York, 1935); Charles M. Wiltse, John C. Calhoun, Nationalist, 1782-1828 (Indianapolis, 1944).
In view of the violent disagreement in every age among contemporaries about the character of many national figures, it is almost impossible to adduce universally acceptable evidence for any specific interpretation of a prominent statesman who has been dead a century, particularly of so complex a personality as Calhoun. But it is unreasonable not to expose him to the same critical philosophy of human behavior with which biographers have approached his distinguished contemporaries. To explain his career in terms of enlightened self-interest and to describe his defense of himself and his actions as rationalization can be regarded as condemnation only to those who persist in identifying the fleshless symbol with the man.

Clay, it is generally agreed, wanted all his life to become president and took practical steps to achieve that objective. His successful efforts at compromise in periods of crisis enhanced as much as they hindered his chances for that high office. Calhoun also wanted the presidency all his life and, within the limits of his own inhibitions, took what he regarded as practical measures toward that end. That he frequently disagreed with Clay on public matters by no means proved that he was any less desirous of preserving the Union, but rather that he considered his own proposals as the only sure method of preservation. At no stage in his career can it be clearly proven that he consciously placed his own fortunes above those of his nation or section, but Clay and Webster made such a charge against him in the great debate in the Senate in 1838 over the independent treasury bill. They based their charge principally upon his recent return to the Democrats after he had earlier broken with that party and had acted with the Whigs throughout Jackson's second term. Personally, he was always able to convince himself that the course most convenient to his own aspirations was also best suited to the general welfare, but his characteristic method of so doing was to begin in his own mind with his conclusion and then select an innocuous premise which would lead irrefutably to it. Those who unwarily accepted Calhoun's premises usually found themselves caught in a locked vise of logic.

As his personal traits differed from those of Clay, so did his methods.
Completely lacking the Kentuckian's ability to charm his fellows by warmth of personality, he was by contrast naïve in his views concerning the fundamentals of human conduct. Confident that all men were rational, he assumed that he could win them by the cold force of logic alone. This misconception alienated his contemporaries probably as much as any of his personal characteristics. With Calhoun in the presidency, said his colleague, Senator William H. Roane of Virginia, he would be in "constant terror, expecting from him some new-fangled scene or view." A certain Judge Prioleau, a new neighbor of Calhoun's in Pendleton, expressed the general sentiment bluntly when he stated that he never wished to see him again: "I hate a man who makes me think so much . . . and I hate a man who makes me feel my own inferiority."

Pertinent testimony as to Calhoun's belief in the power of reason, as well as to his egotism and his conscious opportunism, comes from the Carolinian himself. "The great ends in his system of life," he wrote in regard to himself in one of the many significant passages in the Autobiography of 1843, "whether public or private, he has ever held to be fixed by reason and general rules; but the time and method of obtaining them he regarded as questions of expediency. . . . Seeing clearly his own ends which . . . he judges with a rare sagacity . . . [he] advances forward and halts when he has taken as much ground as he can occupy, . . . without regard to the remonstrances of his followers, who take their counsels merely from zeal and do not properly ascertain the limits upon human power. . . . This it is which makes him the master-statesman of his age."

His entrance into the presidential contest in 1821 and his definite hope for the Democratic nomination as late as 1848 leave no doubt of the depth and persistence of his presidential ambitions. In this con-

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4 Gustavus M. Pinckney, "Calhoun from a Southern Stand-Point," in Lippincott's Magazine (Philadelphia, 1868-1915), LXII (1898), 84.
5 Anonymous Life of John C. Calhoun (New York, 1843), 52-53. See also the next note.
nection certain instances of his characteristic methods of indirection should be noted. A highly eulogistic but anonymous campaign biography, published by Harpers in 1843, was generally assumed at the time to have been written by Robert M. T. Hunter, a Virginia congressman. In 1854, however, Robert Barnwell Rhett wrote that Calhoun himself had written all of it but a page or two and had in vain urged him to accept the nominal authorship. Similarly, he kept secret his authorship of the "South Carolina Exposition" in 1828, at a time when the knowledge would have seriously injured his support from northern Democratic Republicans as heir apparent to Jackson, and he did not claim it as his own until several years later. As a member of Monroe's cabinet, he sought to use patronage in the same backhanded fashion as his colleague Adams to build up support for his anticipated candidacy as successor to the Virginian. The instances are not cited as evidence of unethical conduct, but they and other similar cases clearly reveal that Calhoun did not hesitate to use methods identical in spirit with those for which other public men of the day have been criticized.

Although he was to remain active in national politics until his death, which occurred shortly after his famous speech opposing the Compromise of 1850, actually the crisis of both his political and his intellectual life came in the decade between 1822 and 1832. This was the period

6 "There is but one thing written by Mr. Calhoun that you ought not to publish as his—and that is—'his life.' He wished me to Father it—but I told him that it was impossible for me directly or indirectly to allow any one to understand that I was the author of a publication which I had not written. Hunter and I read it over together in my house in Georgetown. He inserted about a page and a half, and became the putative author; and it has done more to lift him to his present position than any thing else in his public life." Robert Barnwell Rhett to Richard K. Crallé, October 25, 1854, in American Historical Review (New York, 1895- ), XIII (1907-1908), 311. See also Gaillard Hunt's note on this subject, ibid., 310-11; and for a contrary argument, Wiltse, Calhoun, Appendix A.

7 In the Charleston Courier of August 15, 1831, an anonymous "Civis" wrote that Calhoun had only recently acknowledged his authorship of the "Exposition." "It is believed," continued Civis, "that Mr. Calhoun was anxious he should be concealed. It has been frequently denied that he was the author, and both he and his friends indulged a hope that it could not be fastened upon him." John Quincy Adams was surprised when Joel R. Poinsett told him late in the summer of 1830 that Calhoun was at the bottom of the whole agitation. Charles F. Adams (ed.), Memoirs of John Quincy Adams (12 vols., Philadelphia, 1874-1878), VIII, 237.
of his gradual and reluctant transition from extreme nationalism to equally extreme sectionalism, ending in his open and eloquent defense of state sovereignty in the nullification crisis. It was also a period of an ardent, continuous, and optimistic quest for the presidency. His conversion to the southern particularism with which he is identified by posterity was long retarded both by his hopes for the presidency and his deep-seated nationalism. Not until his fatal break with Jackson in 1831 destroyed his prospects for a future nomination by the Democratic Republican party did he publicly announce his adherence to the doctrine of nullification.

When Calhoun entered the presidential race in 1821, he ran on a record for arch-nationalism unexcelled even by that of Henry Clay. As the Kentuckian’s lieutenant among the War Hawks, he had introduced the bill for the declaration of war in 1812, reporting it in his capacity as chairman of the Committee on Foreign Relations. His labors as leader of the administration forces in the war Congresses led Alexander J. Dallas to single him out as the “Young Hercules Who Had Carried the War on His Shoulders.” Striving for national self-sufficiency both to prevent defeat in the third war with England that he believed certain and to avoid the equal danger of disunion sentiment as manifested in the Hartford Convention, he took the lead in the enactment of the nationalistic legislation of the Era of Good Feeling which Clay later named and claimed as the American System. Specifically, he drew up and introduced in Congress both the bill chartering the Second Bank of the United States and the companion “Bonus Bill” providing federal funds for internal improvements. At a crucial point in the discussion of the Tariff of 1816, he was called in hastily to speak in its behalf, and he argued spiritedly for its protective features as a national necessity. Later, as Secretary of War, he advocated an expensive program of national defense, which the economy drive led by William H. Crawford during the Panic of 1819 eventually doomed to defeat.

His views on the Constitution at this time were as broad as the program which he advocated. "I am no advocate for refined arguments on the Constitution," he said in his speech on the Bonus Bill in 1817. "The instrument was not intended as a thesis for the logician to exercise his ingenuity on. It ought to be construed with plain, good sense." In 1823 he wrote that "the Supreme Court of the Union performs the highest functions under our system. It is the mediator between sovereigns, the State and General Governments, and [draws] the actual line, which separates their authority." A year later he told the son of Alexander Hamilton that he had a "clear conviction, after much reflection and an entire knowledge and familiarity with the history of our country and the working of our Government that his [the elder Hamilton's] policy as developed by the measures of Washington's administration, is the only true policy for this country."

In the same spirit he refused to take alarm at the Tallmadge amendment to exclude slavery from Missouri. He accepted the ensuing compromise with full satisfaction and threw all his influence against the efforts of the Crawford faction to answer the Tallmadge attack by forming a separate southern party. "We of the South ought not to assent easily to the belief," he argued, "that there is a conspiracy either against our property or just weight in the Union. . . . Nothing would lead more directly to disunion with all of its horrors. . . . If we, from such a belief, systematically oppose the North, they must from necessity resort to a similar opposition to us." This, then, was the younger Calhoun whom Adams characterized as "above all sectional and factional prejudices more than any other statesman of this Union with whom I have ever acted."

10 Calhoun to Virgil Maxcy, July 11, 1823, in Maxcy-Markoe Papers (Division of Manuscripts, Library of Congress).
11 James A. Hamilton, Reminiscences: or Men and Events at Home and Abroad (New York, 1869), 62.
12 Calhoun to Charles Tait, October 26, 1820, in "Tait Correspondence," Gulf States Historical Magazine (Montgomery, 1902-1904), I (1902), 98.
Yet within a decade Calhoun began a complete reversal of his earlier program and governmental philosophy. In his later years he incessantly attacked the protective tariff, the bank, and federal internal improvements as unconstitutional and detrimental to the national welfare. Never did a logician exercise his ingenuity more upon the Constitution. It became his dominant theme that only the sovereign states, and not the Supreme Court, could determine which powers had been delegated by that compact to their creature, the Federal Government. The major effort of his long career in politics after the nullification crisis was his unsuccessful attempt to unite the South in a separate political party.

In considering the circumstances of this amazing transition on his part, the evolution of Calhoun's plans for attaining the presidency must be kept in mind. When he entered the contest against Adams and Crawford in 1821, against the advice of many of his friends, he undoubtedly expected strong support from all sections in response to his conspicuous nationalism. Two years later a Pennsylvania convention gave a heavy vote to Jackson for president and to Calhoun for vice-president. Reluctantly he accepted this decision, and though most of his followers allied themselves with the Jackson forces, he kept himself uncommitted until the victorious Adams selected Clay as secretary of state. Since the Kentuckian presumably would receive the backing of the administration for the succession upon Adams' retirement, his Carolina rival had no choice but to join the Jackson opposition in order to become similarly the General's heir apparent. This meant a delay in Calhoun's elevation to the presidency until 1832 at the earliest, and then only if the aging Jackson should be elected in 1828 and should stick to his announced intention of retiring after one term. For eight years, meanwhile, he would have to maneuver from the vice-presidency, where there was considerable danger that he might be buried.

It was in self-interest, therefore, as well as from conviction, that he endeared himself to the Jackson party by vehement attacks upon the Adams administration. In order to preserve a convenient ambiguity for Old Hickory on the tariff, Calhoun, in co-operation with Van Buren, devised the strategy which backfired, to his acute embarrassment, in
The Tariff of Abominations. A primary purpose of his "Exposition" was to keep South Carolina and the rest of the South loyal to Jackson by holding out the prospect of tariff reduction should he be elected.

But in the end Calhoun's six years of devoted service to the General availed him nothing. Upon their initial success in 1828 the other two wings of the victorious coalition—the northern group under Van Buren and the Tennessee group led by Secretary of War John H. Eaton and Major William B. Lewis—used a variety of personal incidents, particularly the "Eaton Affair," to poison the President's mind against the proud Carolinian. That their conspiracy was successful as early as December, 1829, is evident from a private letter which Jackson wrote to his old Tennessee friend, John Overton. In this he stated in no uncertain terms his loss of confidence in Calhoun and designated Van Buren his choice as his successor in the presidency. The nation, however, knew nothing of this development until the summer of 1830, when the President used a letter from William H. Crawford, asserting that it was Calhoun who had advocated his court-martial in Monroe's cabinet because of his violation of orders in the Seminole War of 1818, as a convenient pretext for a formal break with his lieutenant. An involved attempt at reconciliation by the vice-president failed, and it was apparent early in 1831 that he had been read out of the party.

It is perfectly possible that Calhoun had already privately decided that the nationalistic legislation which he had earlier sponsored had subsequently proven injurious both to the nation and to the South.

14 George McDuffie, Calhoun's lieutenant in the House, confessed that "this is what is sometimes called 'fighting the devil with fire,' a policy which, though I did not altogether approve, I adopted in deference to the opinions of those with whom I acted." Congressional Globe, 28 Cong., 1 Sess., Part 2, p. 747 (May 30-31, 1844).

15 "Permit me to say here of Mr. Van Buren that I have found him everything that I can desire him to be, and believe him not only deserving of my confidence but the confidence of the Nation... I wish I could say as much for Mr. Calhoun. You know the confidence I once had in that gentleman. However, of him I desire not now to speak." Jackson to John Overton, December 31, 1829, in John S. Bassett (ed.), Correspondence of Andrew Jackson (7 vols., Washington, 1926-1935), IV, 108.

16 The pamphlet which Calhoun published in his defense in February, 1831, is reproduced in Niles' Weekly Register (Baltimore, 1811-1849), XL, 11-24 (March 5, 1831).

17 As early as 1824 Calhoun began to hedge on the question of the tariff and state rights, as his letter of July 3 to Robert S. Garnett of Virginia clearly reveals. See J. Franklin Jameson (ed.), Correspondence of John C. Calhoun (American Historical As-
He may also have become convinced that the state sovereignty theory, upon which nullification was based, was the proper interpretation of the Constitution. But the significant fact that he resisted strenuous pressure in his own state to commit himself openly to that doctrine until several months after his break with Jackson had destroyed his chances for the Democratic Republican nomination suggests that his presidential aspirations were a potent influence upon all his actions during the preceding decade.

Calhoun's opposition to Adams and Clay, in view of the ultra-nationalism of their program, necessitated a discreet retreat from his earlier position after 1825, but the growing opposition to the tariff throughout the South made such a retreat increasingly imperative. The greatly increased production of cotton in the 1820's brought a severe drop in the price of that staple. This, in turn, caused a decline in southern income that reached the proportions of an acute and continuing depression in the older areas along the seaboard, which suffered from competition of the rich new soils in the Southwest. Yet increased tariff rates were singled out as the sole cause of this economic distress. In the general indignation which followed the passage of the bill of 1828, most southern legislatures resolved that the protective tariff was unconstitutional, and in South Carolina there was wild talk of forcible resistance to the collection of duties.

It was this situation which led Calhoun secretly to write the "Exposition" in 1828. Surely he realized that the support of his state and his section were essential to his presidential ambitions and that some-

sociation, Annual Report, 1899, Vol. II. Washington, 1900), 219-23. John Taylor had already dismissed Calhoun's careful statement as a quibble, on the grounds that, despite all he said, he believed in "endowing the federal government with a supremacy over the state governments whenever they came in conflict." Taylor to James Monroe, April 29, 1823, in "Letters of John Taylor of Caroline, Virginia," John P. Branch Historical Papers (Richmond, 1901-1916), II (1905-1908), 348-53.

In 1825 Calhoun was still spiritedly defending his broad national program in South Carolina. Not until 1827, apparently, did he definitely form and act upon the conclusions which thereafter determined his policy. In that year, as president of the Senate, he cast the deciding vote against the Woolens Bill, and on August 26 he wrote a long, confidential letter to his brother-in-law, James E. Calhoun, in which he stated that the "great defect in our system" was the fact that "the separate geographical interests are not sufficiently guarded." Jameson (ed.), Correspondence of Calhoun, 247-51.
how he must induce the other wings of his party to reduce the tariff. In view of the fact that the heaviest vote for increased rates had come from the Middle Atlantic region and the Northwest, this was to prove an insuperable task. The vice-president's hold upon his own state, furthermore, had been precarious throughout the 1820's. Its legislature had originally nominated William Lowndes for the presidency in 1821, and only after his death the following May had it formally approved Calhoun's candidacy. Former Senator William Smith, who led a state rights faction in South Carolina which constantly attacked Calhoun as a Federalist, was elected again to the Senate in 1825. In the same year the legislature passed resolutions condemning the tariff and internal improvements as unconstitutional.

Younger Carolina politicos, George McDuffie, James Hamilton, Jr., and Robert Y. Hayne, previously disciples of Calhoun and his nationalism, were becoming ardent state righters. He was thus forced to follow their lead in opposing the tariff, and in 1827 he cast the deciding vote against the Woolens Bill when Van Buren had contrived a tie in the Senate to embarrass him. Had his tariff strategy in 1828 worked out as he expected, the Tariff of Abominations would never have been passed, and he could not have been unaware of the fact that it was the affirmative vote of the northern and western wings of his party for certain protective amendments which caused his plan to miscarry.

A primary purpose of the "Exposition," therefore, was to exert a subtle pressure upon his own party for tariff reduction. The threat of state interposition and the danger of alienating the South might induce his fellow Democratic Republicans, from motives of political expediency, to support a reduction of duties by Congress. Moreover, the same considerations might influence Jackson to veto the next tariff bill if protective rates were retained. Yet the tone of the document was moderate, and its immediate recommendation was that the state cast its vote for the General in confident expectation that he would restore "the pure principles of our government."18 Although it argued that

18 Crallé (ed.), Works of Calhoun, VI, 56.
nullification was the identical constitutional remedy advocated by Jefferson himself for the protection of a minority against legislation which violated the federal compact and that it was designed to preserve rather than to disrupt the Union, the "Exposition" suggested its use only in the improbable eventuality that more conventional methods should fail. Since Calhoun's authorship was unsuspected at the time outside the state, he in no way endangered his standing in the party, whose initial victory he was thereby assuring.

There can be no doubt that he also sought by the "Exposition" to assure Carolina leaders of his concurrence in their sentiments, and at the same time to avoid positive commitment until he was surer of the outcome of current developments, both in the state and in the nation. While it was not generally known that he favored nullification until his public letter of July 26, 1831, radical leaders in the state knew of his authorship of the "Exposition" from the outset. By this means he hoped, as Frederic Bancroft says, "to obtain secret and at least partial control of the radicals and to retain inconspicuous general leadership in South Carolina."\(^\text{19}\) If the tariff should be lowered, he could claim the credit, and particularist sentiment in the state would subside; but if not, he could still claim an early identification with the local movement should he decide in the future upon such a course.

As a matter of fact, both James Hamilton and an anonymous "Sydney," writing in the Charleston Mercury, formally outlined the general theory of nullification before Calhoun wrote his more elaborate essay for the committee of the legislature on federal relations. Actually, the legislature refused to adopt the "Exposition" as an official expression of its views, but to save the face of the committee, five thousand copies were ordered to be printed.\(^\text{20}\) Not until the election in the fall of 1830 was it evident that a majority of Carolinians favored formal state action, and even then the Nullifiers failed to control the two-thirds of the legislature necessary to call a convention. Whatever his private and devious

\(^{19}\) Frederic Bancroft, *Calhoun and the South Carolina Nullification Movement* (Baltimore, 1928), 49.

\(^{20}\) Meigs, *Calhoun*, I, 382.
relations with Carolina radicals, Calhoun did not become a leader of
the nullification movement until the summer of 1831.

In view of the complexity of the situation which he faced in 1828
and the ingenious political methods which he used, it is definitely
possible that in writing the "Exposition" Calhoun was also anticipating
the potential formation of a state rights party under his own leader-
ship. There was universal concern in the South over increasing pro-
posals for compensated emancipation and over indications of a growing
abolitionist sentiment, no less than over the injustice of the tariff. If
nullification could be established in advance as a certain defense against
a frontal attack upon slavery, a grateful and united South would surely
follow its author. By thus avoiding the necessity of secession, the
cherished Union would be preserved, and the doctrine might well
make converts in the West, which had its specific grievances against
an eastern majority. Calhoun appreciated the revolutionary nature of
contemporary politics, and while retaining his affiliation with Jackson
as his main chance, he seems to have privately encouraged the forma-
tion of a state rights party as an alternative upon which he could rely
in case of necessity. The circumstances of the Webster-Hayne debate
lend weight to this hypothesis. If this was Calhoun's game, then the
unfavorable response to Hayne's arguments for nullification in the
South and in the nation at large was an additional reason for his long
delay in committing himself formally to the doctrine.

The climax to Calhoun's plans for the next presidential election
came in 1831 when, despite his final break with Jackson in January,
he held high hopes of success. He revealed his aspirations during the
spring in a long conversation with James H. Hammond, one of the
several leaders of the Carolina radicals. Both Jackson and Clay, he
asserted, were rapidly losing followers, who were transferring their
support to himself. He outlined in detail to Hammond a plan of sec-
tional compromise which he intended to use as a platform. For the
West he would amend the Constitution to authorize internal improve-

21 See Hammond's Memorandum on the conversation, March 18, 1831, in American
Historical Review, VI (1900-1901), 741-45.
ments at federal expense, using the proceeds of land sales for that purpose. For the South he would lower the tariff by reducing purely revenue duties, but for the Northeast he would retain protectionist rates on certain key products manufactured in that region. At the end of May he enthusiastically wrote his friend, Major Christopher Van Deventer: "I will in the coming contest act second to none. . . . I will stand on my own ground, which I know to be strong in principle and in publick support. I do not fear to carry the whole South with me, acting as it becomes my duty, which I will take care to do. I never stood stronger."22

During these months Calhoun was pursuing a highly opportunistic policy, but he seems ultimately to have expected nomination by the Anti-Masonic convention, which was to meet in September. Before that date, however, the Carolina radicals forced him to wreck his chances by a public commitment to nullification. Both Hammond and Hamilton had objected strenuously to his compromise and had advised him strongly against entering the presidential race.23 To smoke him out, in

22 Calhoun to Christopher Van Deventer, May 25, 1831, in Jameson (ed.), Correspondence of Calhoun, 292. What would have been the reception of Calhoun’s compromise plan in the rest of the South had he resisted the Carolina Nullifiers is a matter of conjecture. It could be argued that his plan would have been popular, because the South then and later gave indication of its willingness to compromise. The section as a whole voted against nullification in 1833 and for the compromise tariff, which provided for no great immediate reduction. Later, the secession movements of both 1844 and 1850 were defeated, and a working compromise with the West was effected in the 1840’s. On the contrary, however, Clay’s distribution plan, which was similar to Calhoun’s proposals for sectional compromise, was defeated in Congress for ten years. In two instances it was passed, but in the first it was vetoed by Jackson, and in the second it contained an amendment which shortly rendered it inoperative.

23 When Calhoun told Hammond that he might become a candidate if “things went right,” the latter “told him candidly that such a step would be imprudent at this moment both at home and abroad, and should not be thought of at this time. He agreed with me. He said his object was to throw himself entirely upon the South and if possible to be more Southern if possible [sic]. . . . He is unquestionably quite feverish under the present excitement and his hopes.” Hammond Memorandum, March 18, 1831, in American Historical Review, VI, 744-45. Soon James Hamilton, whom Duff Green had approached on the same matter, wrote Hammond that he had replied to Green that “in no shape, lot or scot would we be included in the arrangement, that we would take no part in the presidential election, and that I was quite sure that Mr. C.’s prospects were as hopeless as his ruin would be certain, if he was brought to give his countenance to such a compact.” Hamilton to Hammond, June 11, 1831, ibid., 746-47.
May, 1831, they opened an intensive campaign in the state for nullification. Caught between demands from Nullifiers and Unionists in South Carolina that he express his sentiments, yet fearing to lose support outside the South essential to his nomination, he maintained his silence until July 26, when in a public letter he repeated without reservation the earlier arguments of his "Exposition."24 "But for the cry of Nullification," bemoaned his ardent lieutenant, Duff Green, "Mr. Calhoun would have been nominated by the anti-Masons."25

Thus Calhoun's involved strategy ended in complete failure. Jackson and Van Buren ousted him from the Democratic Republican party, and the formal rejection of nullification by all other southern states, when South Carolina took her precipitate action in 1832, destroyed all prospects for a southern party which might support his future candidacy. Worse still, his prolonged delay in joining the Carolina radicals in their campaign for positive state action had seriously endangered his local position. In the crisis produced by the passage of the nullification ordinance, he resigned the vice-presidency and went to Washington as senator to defend his native state against the wrath of Andrew Jackson. At the moment he was fighting a crucial battle for his own political future in South Carolina. In this he conspicuously succeeded, but by the same action he doomed himself to a position of isolation in the nation from which he never completely emerged.