



Written by [Thomas DiLorenzo](#) on June 6, 2023

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Can John C. Calhoun Save America?

In an essay titled “A Strategy for the Right,” the late economist and libertarian scholar Professor Murray N. Rothbard called John C. Calhoun’s *Disquisition on Government* “one of the most brilliant essays on political philosophy ever written.” Published in 1850, the year of his death, Calhoun’s *Disquisition* warned — and explained — how the American political system could devolve into tyranny, and how to stop that from happening. Americans are now living under the tyranny that Calhoun feared, proving once again the prescience and brilliance of his *Disquisition*.

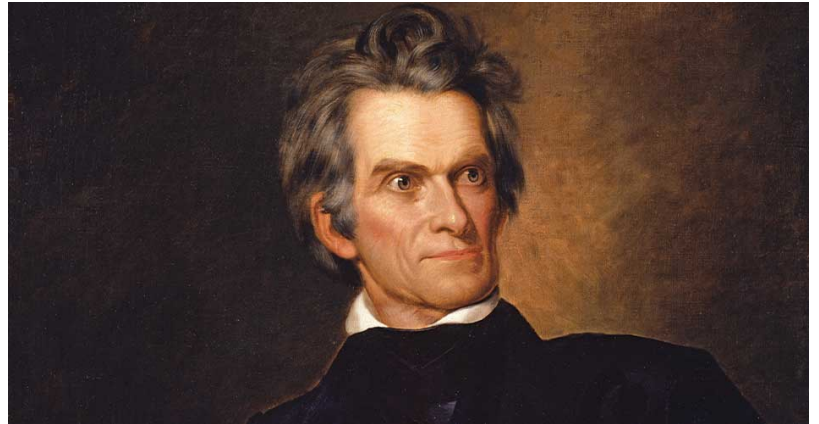
Calhoun’s 173-year-old treatise is not just a diagnosis of how we got here, but a roadmap for *escaping* from this tyranny and being rid of the “woke” totalitarian Marxists among us who are so hell-bent on destroying America.

Who Was John C. Calhoun?

John C. Calhoun was born into a family of Scots-Irish immigrants in the South Carolina upcountry in 1782. He had two uncles who were killed by British soldiers during the Revolution, and his father, Patrick, was a frontier scout. His early education included intimate knowledge of the American Revolution from his family history as well as his studies. He was mostly homeschooled, which prepared him to enter Yale University, where he was the 1804 class valedictorian. His mentor was Yale university president Timothy Dwight, a renowned expert on Lockean political philosophy.

Calhoun was a Jeffersonian philosophically. Professor Clyde Wilson, the editor of *The Collected Works of John C. Calhoun*, has written that Calhoun viewed all American issues through the lens of the great philosophical divide between Jefferson, the decentralist/states’ rights/strict constitutional construction advocate, and his political nemesis Alexander Hamilton, who championed centralized, monopolistic, and “energetic” government, including a “permanent president” elected for life. Hamilton denounced the Constitution after its ratification, calling it a “frail and worthless fabric” because of its limitations on state power. It was Hamilton who invented the “implied powers” (aka, not listed in the document) theory of constitutional interpretation; the perversion of the Contract and Commerce Clauses of the Constitution; and other subterfuges designed to turn the document into a de facto rubber stamp on *anything* the government wanted to do — as long as it was “properly” interpreted by people such as himself. That is why Jefferson and his political heirs, such as Calhoun, considered the brilliant and Machiavellian Hamilton to be a dangerous threat to American freedom.

Calhoun was the last of the Founding Fathers, philosophically speaking, and considered his *Disquisition*



George Peter Alexander Healy

Statesman: John Calhoun, often vilified by modern sophisticates for the Confederacy’s embrace of his political philosophy, was in fact one of the greatest and most articulate champions of states’ rights, limited government, and strict federalism subsequent to the Founding Fathers.



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on *Government* to be a statement of his “understanding of society and government” and his “bequest to posterity,” writes Clyde Wilson.

Calhoun was a member of “the great triumvirate” in American politics of the early 19th century, along with Daniel Webster and Henry Clay. In that capacity he served as a member of Congress from South Carolina, secretary of war under President James Monroe, U.S. senator from South Carolina, secretary of state under Presidents John Tyler and James Polk, and vice president of the United States during the administrations of John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson. It is these life experiences, along with his deep knowledge of the literature of liberty of the time — especially the Lockean tradition that fueled the Revolution — that he relied on in writing the *Disquisition*.

Calhoun on Government and Society

Calhoun was a brilliant expositor of the natural-rights philosophy that rights to life, liberty, and property are God-given; that the primary purpose of government is to secure these rights from domestic and foreign enemies of freedom; and the realization that there is always a danger that governments can be perverted in a way that they destroy rather than protect these God-given rights. In this, his writings are very much in sync with a French contemporary of his, Frédéric Bastiat, who articulated his views of the natural-rights philosophy in his famous book [The Law](#), published in 1850, the same year as the *Disquisition*. It is also the same year that both of these great men died.

To Calhoun, “society” is ordained by God for our benefit; government is created by men and its only legitimate purpose is to secure our natural rights to life, liberty, and property. That is the purpose of constitutions, he said. However, the powers invested in governments to prevent injustice and oppression, he wrote in the *Disquisition*, “will, if left unguarded, be by them converted into instruments to *oppress* the rest of the community.” (Emphasis added.) Government, after all, “has itself a strong tendency to disorder and abuse of its powers.” (As Yours Truly has written on numerous occasions, the purpose of government today is for those who run it to plunder those who do not.) This is reminiscent of Jefferson’s dictum that “a government big enough to give you everything you want is strong enough to take everything you have.”

By “society,” Calhoun meant the myriad local communities established by Americans without direction by any government. As Clyde Wilson writes in *Calhoun: A Statesman for the 21st Century*, the original colonists were not wards or employees of government but “people who conquered a wilderness with their own labor and capital and at the risk of their own life and limb.” Thus, the American Revolution was not a revolution in society, writes Wilson, but “the action of the existing societies of the 13 colonies to preserve themselves against the interference of a distant government ... the preservation of living societies from the schemes of rulers.”



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People's parchment: Even in Calhoun's day, the U.S. Constitution was already being expansively interpreted to consolidate power in the federal government at the expense of the states, and to downplay the states' authority to nullify or otherwise resist unconstitutional federal encroachments. (CastaldoStudio/iStock/Getty Images Plus)

This is the true meaning of "consent of the governed." "Consent" was given to ratify the Constitution by the separate political communities of the sovereign states, and they reserved the right to withdraw that consent should the government that *they created as their agent* interfere with their "happiness," as the ratification documents of New York, Virginia, and Rhode Island specifically declared. The Constitution was *not* ratified by a majority vote of the general population, but by separate political communities organized at the state level by the "free and independent" states, as they are called in the Declaration of Independence, at state political conventions. This was required by Article VII of the Constitution itself.

To the Jeffersonians, "consent" did not mean a mere majority of any popular vote, especially since elections and vote-counting could always be rigged — as they fully understood, being keen students of political history. A "leading error," Calhoun wrote, is to "confound the numerical majority with the people" and their consent. This will eventually destroy constitutional government, said Calhoun, for it implies that all that is needed for perfect government is "the right of suffrage — and the allotment to each division of the community a representation in the government, in proportion to numbers." In reality, majority rule is nothing more than one part of society coercing and plundering another part (the minority), the very "violence of faction" that James Madison warned of in *The Federalist*, No. 10, writing that, historically, it had destroyed popular governments everywhere by creating a pervasive sense of injustice. The whole purpose of the Constitution, said Madison, was to limit this "violence of faction" by electoral majorities.

Calhoun was battling the top Hamiltonian "nationalist" statist of his day, such as Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story and U.S. Senator Daniel Webster. In his famous 1833 *Commentaries on the Constitution of the United States*, Story wrote that "the majority must have a right to accomplish that object by the means, which they deem adequate for the end.... The will of the majority of the people is absolute and sovereign, limited only by its means and *power to make its will effectual.*" (Emphasis added.) This "power," of course, is the coercive power of a heavily armed government. "Trust in the efficacy of frequent elections," said Massachusetts Senator Daniel Webster in his 1830 Senate debate



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over protectionist tariffs and nullification with Senator Robert Hayne of South Carolina. History has proven that to be one of the most farcical statements ever made by an American politician.

What all of this means is that the Constitution was meant to be society's vehicle for controlling the state, not the state's vehicle for controlling society — as it is today, where the limits of everyone's freedoms are periodically decreed by five black-robed government lawyers with lifetime tenure.

The bigger error, Calhoun wrote, is “the prevalent opinion that a written constitution ... is sufficient, of itself, without the aid of any organism — except such as is necessary to separate its separate departments, and render them independent of each other — to counteract the tendency of the numerical majority to oppression and the abuse of power.” The separation of powers would never be sufficient to enforce the Constitution, in other words, contrary to Madison's theory on the subject. History has proven Calhoun to be right and Madison wrong on that point.

The party in power — whichever party — will be opposed to the constitutional restrictions intended to limit it. “As the major and dominant party, they will have no need of these restrictions.... The ballot-box ... would be ample protection to them.” (Especially if the party in power administered the elections!) “They would ... regard these limitations as unnecessary and improper restraints; and endeavor to elude them, with the view of increasing their power and influence.”

The “minor, or weaker party,” on the other hand, will make its strict construction arguments for actually enforcing the Constitution, but “the party in favor of the restrictions” will inevitably “be overpowered,” wrote Calhoun. It is folly, he said, to believe that “the party in power” and “in possession of the ballot box” and “the physical force of the country” could “be successfully resisted by an appeal to reason, truth, justice, or the obligations imposed by the constitution.”

The “end of the contest” would then be “the subversion of the constitution.”

This will occur, said Calhoun, because of a kind of class struggle in society, but not the Marxist class struggle between the capitalist and working “classes.” Instead, in a democracy, “Some one portion of the community must pay in taxes more than it receives back in disbursements; while another receives in disbursements more than it pays in taxes.” Society will be divided into two classes: net tax *payors* versus net tax *consumers*. “The necessary result ... is to divide the community into two great classes; one consisting of those who ... pay the taxes, and, of course, bear exclusively the burthen of supporting the government; and the other, of those who are the recipients of their proceeds.”

The right of suffrage *causes* this condition, and can in no way counteract it. It does not perfect government, but turns it into an authoritarian tyranny of “absolute government,” as Calhoun called it.

Echoing Calhoun, economist Hans-Hermann Hoppe described democracy as “a soft variant of communism” in his book *Democracy: The God That Failed*. After all, if one single “social plan” is imposed by force on all of society by government (i.e., communism), it makes no difference whether that is done by a dictator or by a legislature. Socialism is socialism.

In order to generate genuine consent, and not the phony “consent” of electioneering, each portion of the society must be given “a negative on the others,” said Calhoun. This “negative power” may be called “veto, interposition, nullification, check or balance of power,” and this is what makes a constitution a useful tool for societal control of its own government. It is what makes the people the masters rather than the servants of the state. He called this idea the “concurrent majority.”



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Calhoun was always a unionist, and viewed nullification of laws thought to be unconstitutional as an alternative to secession. In this he was following in the footsteps of Jefferson and Madison, authors of the Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions of 1798, respectively, which nullified the abolition of free speech invoked by the Adams administration's Sedition Act by declaring that it would not be enforced within their borders. (The Adams administration used its "Sedition Act" to imprison journalists sympathetic to Jefferson's Democratic-Republican Party, and even imprisoned an opposition member of Congress, Representative Matthew Lyon of Vermont, a member of Jefferson's party, for criticizing Adams in the House of Representatives. The Sedition Act declared "malicious" talk about the government to be illegal, with the government itself determining what is "malicious.")

Jefferson's Kentucky Resolution, for example, stated: "Resolved, that the several states composing the United States of America, are not united on the principles of unlimited submission to their General Government," and "Whosoever the General Government assumes undelegated powers, its acts are unauthoritative, void, and of no force." Madison's Virginia Resolution said virtually the same thing. New England, Ohio, Wisconsin, Delaware, and South Carolina would invoke Jeffersonian nullification on a variety of issues, from banking to immigration policy to trade policy, that they believed were unconstitutional during the antebellum era.

Calhoun also believed nullification would encourage the enforcement of constitutional limits on government by letting the powers that be know that unconstitutional legislation designed by one faction of the country only to plunder another faction could be ignored or nullified, rendering their plundering efforts useless. Compromise rather than plunder would then be encouraged, he argued. Moreover, with protections of a concurrent majority in place, the franchise could be *expanded*, wrote Calhoun.

Under simple majority rule, on the other hand, an expansion of the franchise would guarantee an expansion of political plunder by more and more enfranchised factions. The protections of a concurrent majority would encourage "patriotism, nationality, harmony, and ... promoting the common good" instead of "faction, strife, and struggle for party ascendancy," he wrote. As an added benefit, Calhoun argued, the type of people attracted to government would be less sleazy and corrupt, and more patriotic and public-spirited.

Calhoun's Economic Policies

In the 1820s, the South was largely an agricultural society that sold as much as three-fourths of its agricultural products overseas. Most manufacturing, such as it was, was in the Northern states, and they had been pursuing the Hamiltonian policy of high tariffs and a protectionist trade policy to shield themselves from competition and raise prices. They also championed what we today call "corporate welfare" or "crony capitalism." Their first political success was a tariff increase in 1824 that garnered only three of 107 "yes" votes in the House of Representatives from Southern states and two of 25 "yes" votes in the U.S. Senate.

The South was in agreement with modest "revenue tariffs" of 10-15 percent that would fund the constitutional functions of government, but believed that they were being plundered by high, protectionist tariffs. Protectionist tariffs forced them to pay significantly more for farm tools, clothing, shoes, and much more, with little benefit from the tariff revenue. Almost all of the benefit went to Northern manufacturers who, being isolated from international competition, raised their prices and profit levels. To make it worse for the South, protectionist tariffs impoverished their European trading



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partners, whose profits from American markets dried up. This made them less able to buy American exports — primarily cotton, rice, and tobacco grown in the South. This is why Bastiat labeled protectionist tariffs “legal plunder.”

Emboldened by their success with the 1824 tariff and their newfound dominance in Congress, the Northern states then passed the hated “Tariff of Abominations” in 1828 that raised the average tariff rate to nearly 50 percent. Some items, such as imported woolen blankets, had a 200-percent tariff attached. The price of woolen blankets and dozens of other items skyrocketed.

Led by Calhoun, South Carolina invoked the principle of Jeffersonian nullification. An ordinance of nullification was enacted at a political convention that declared the tariff act to be “unauthorized by the Constitution of the United States, and violated the true meaning and intent thereof.” It was therefore “null, void, no law.” All tariff enforcement in Charleston Harbor was suspended.

Jeffersonian ideals: Calhoun, like many Southerners, was a champion of Jefferson’s vision of a decentralized, agrarian republic, in opposition to the industrialized, centralized, urban model favored by Hamilton and his epigones. (GeorgiosArt/iStock/Getty Images Plus)



President Andrew Jackson threatened to enforce the tariff, but in the end a compromise was reached in 1833 — *and secession avoided* — with a lowering of tariffs over the next 10 years. Nullification had worked just the way Calhoun explained it should work as an alternative to secession that could keep the union together by encouraging regional compromise. By 1860, the average tariff rate was the lowest ever during the 19th century — 15 percent. (But it was raised to the 60-percent range by Lincoln and the Republican party, where it remained for the next half century.)

Calhoun made many speeches on the subject of free trade, with the clear intent of educating the public. In an 1842 speech, he hit the nail on the head regarding the true purpose of protectionism by asking, “Protection against what? Against violence, oppression, or fraud?... No.... It is against low prices.” He also pointed out that the tendency of protectionist tariffs is “to make the poor poorer and the rich richer.”

Do the protectionists “ask that a tax should be laid on the rest of the community, and the proceeds divided among them?” he asked. “No: that would be rather too open, oppressive, and indefensible.” Squelching competition with protectionist tariffs achieves the same result, but in a much more obfuscating way that makes it easy to pull the wool over the public’s eyes. It should rightly be called



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“monopoly” or “plunder,” he suggested.

In that same 1842 speech, Calhoun announced his economic ideas to be “Free Trade: Low Duties: No Debt: Separation from Banks: Economy: Retrenchment: and Strict Adherence to the Constitution.” Competition, no deficit spending in peacetime; no collusion between bankers and Big Government; cutting government spending; and spending only on the items listed as the legitimate constitutional functions of the federal government, in other words.

Free trade was literally “the cause of civilization and peace,” he said. By “cause of civilization,” he meant the benefits of the international division of labor, not today’s corrupt, socialistic “trade deals” with their thousands of pages of regulations written by corporate lobbyists and their political puppets. That is not free trade, but the opposite: socialist central planning. The latter point about peace was perhaps best expressed by Frédéric Bastiat when he said, “If goods can’t cross borders, armies will.” People who prosper together through trade and commerce, who become business associates and even friends, are less inclined to wage war on each other.

The Deep State of his day hated and despised Calhoun for these views, and to this day he is demonized and marginalized because of such ideas (as is Jefferson for that matter, especially by the “court historians” of the academic history profession).

Calhoun’s Foreign Policy

A onetime secretary of war, Calhoun believed that the purpose of national defense is to defend America and Americans from foreign adversaries, not forcing our version of “salvation” on other countries. He was an anti-imperialist, another reason why the Deep State of his time despised him. Diametrically opposed to Calhoun was John Adams, who wrote in his diary that he considered America to be “the opening of a grand scheme and design in Providence for the illumination of the ignorant, and the emancipation of the slavish part of mankind *all over the earth*.” (Emphasis added.) Adams can be thought of as the original “neocon.” Fast-forward several hundred years, and one hears his voice in President George W. Bush promising that his “war on terror” will eliminate evil from the world.

In a speech regarding the Mexican-American War (1846-1848), Calhoun disputed the idea “lately urged in a very respectable quarter” that “it is the mission of our country to spread civil and religious liberty all over the globe ... even by force, if necessary. It is a sad delusion.” At the end of the Mexican-American War, there were those in Congress who wanted to essentially conquer and occupy Mexico. To this Calhoun said, “I am at a loss to see how a free and independent republic can be established in Mexico under the protection and authority of its conquerors. I can readily understand how an aristocracy or a despotic government might be, but how a free republican government can be so established under such circumstances, is to me incomprehensible.” He could very well have been discussing the U.S. government’s 21st-century military adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan under the guise of “nation-building.”

Calhoun believed that the Mexican war was a Caesar-crossing-the-Rubicon moment. It was a “deed ... from which the country would not be able to recover for a long time if ever.” He wrote to his daughter Anna, “Our people have undergone a great change. Their inclination is for conquest and empire.” That, he believed, was a mortal threat to American prosperity and freedom.



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Imperial conquest: Calhoun staunchly opposed both the Mexican-American War and any attempt to annex Mexico in the war's aftermath. He pointed out that it was impossible to impose a republican form of government on a conquered people. (E.B. & E.C. Kellogg)

Calhoun's Roadmap for a New America?

America is already experiencing a soft secession movement, with conservative citizens leading the charge in moving away from the socialist disasters of New York, California, Illinois, and almost all of the big cities run by the hard-left Democratic Party political machines. They are moving to more conservative, or even libertarian, parts of the country such as Florida, Texas, South Carolina, Montana, Idaho, and elsewhere. (Of course, each of these states also has its islands of "woke" socialism, usually around the state capitals, university towns, and inner cities with large welfare populations.)

Peaceful American disunion is inevitable in the opinion of your author. It may not happen tomorrow or next week, but it will happen. We are at the end of the road of a country of some 330 million people ruled, essentially, by a few hundred (or perhaps a few dozen) political oligarchs who control one or the other of the two major political parties. The day will come when there will be a new America and new Americans. The old America will remain in the socialist hellholes of New York City, Chicago, Baltimore, San Francisco, etc., while the segment of the population that still values freedom and prosperity over tax slavery and imperialism will go elsewhere. They will take to heart the advice of the author of the Declaration of Independence that, when government becomes destructive of the consent of the governed, it is the people's right to alter or abolish it and institute a new government more conducive to their safety and happiness.

The ideas of John C. Calhoun, the inheritor of the Jeffersonian political tradition in America, provide a roadmap for these freedom-seeking Americans of the future. As for the role of government in the new American societies of the future, Calhoun would counsel peace and "a wise and masterful inactivity" that would give all Americans the greatest chance to enjoy prosperity and to live as free human beings.

Thomas Jefferson himself would most assuredly approve of a coming American disunion. In an August 12, 1803 letter to John C. Breckenridge regarding the New England secession movement (which culminated in the 1814 Hartford Secession Convention), Jefferson wrote that, should there be a "separation" into two confederacies, "God bless them both, & keep them in the union if it be for their



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good, but separate them, if it be better.”



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