

Primary Source Activity

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The Jackson Era

Nullification

John C. Calhoun served as vice president to both John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson. Although Calhoun had once supported a strong national government, over the years his views changed. He was alarmed by what he saw as unconstitutional power in the hands of the federal government at the expense of the states.

The issue was the tariff, or taxes on imported goods. Tariffs were generally popular in the Northeast but hated in the South. The Tariff of 1828 passed Congress and was signed into law by President Adams. When Jackson became president, many people thought that he would act to change the law to lower the tariff. However, Jackson ignored the issue, and Calhoun was particularly upset by his inaction. Calhoun, who came from South Carolina and had served in the state legislature, agreed to draft a document called the South Carolina Exposition and Protest. In it he wrote:

"Those who claim to exercise power under the Constitution are bound to show that it is expressly granted, or that it is necessary and proper as a means of the granted powers. The advocates of the Tariff have offered no such proof. . . . If it be conceded . . . that the sovereign powers delegated are divided between the General and State Governments, . . . it would seem impossible to deny to the States the right of deciding on the infractions of their powers, and the proper remedy to be applied for their correction. . . . To the States respectively each in its sovereign capacity is reserved the power, by its veto, to arrest the encroachment [advances] of the federal government."

—South Carolina Exposition and Protest, John C. Calhoun, 1828

The Exposition document was given to the South Carolina legislature and later Calhoun was identified as its author. The president and vice president continued to argue while the idea of nullification was debated. The anger in South Carolina reached a peak with the passage of the Nullification Act in 1832. In December, President Jackson responded:

"I consider, then, the power to annul a law of the United States, assumed by one State, incompatible with the existence of the Union, contradicted expressly by the letter of the Constitution, unauthorized by its spirit, inconsistent with every principle on which it was founded, and destructive of the great object for which it was formed."

—President Jackson's Proclamation Regarding Nullification,
December 10, 1832

Reader's Dictionary

advocates supporters
sovereign ruling
infractions violations
encroachments advances
annul legally cancel

Directions Answer the following questions.

Analyzing Primary Sources

1. Naming What document do both men claim supports their positions?

2. Identifying Points of View Why is Calhoun sure that the tariff supporters are wrong?

3. Analyzing What is Jackson's argument in response to Calhoun's position?

4. Explaining What is Jackson afraid will happen if states can nullify federal laws?

5. Summarizing Describe Calhoun's defense of states' rights.

Critical Thinking

6. Making Connections How might Calhoun's document have contributed to South Carolina's passage of the Nullification Act?
