
DOCUMENT 7.2**JOHN C. CALHOUN, Address to the Southern States**

1831

In this address, John C. Calhoun (1782–1850), former vice president and senator from South Carolina, argues that states can “nullify” (and therefore make void within their borders) federal laws that are deemed dangerous to a state’s interest.

The great and leading principle is, that the General Government emanated from the people of the several states, forming distinct political communities, and acting in their separate and sovereign capacity, and not from all the people forming one aggregate political community; that the Constitution of the United States is, in fact, a compact, to which each state is a Party, . . . and that the several states, or parties, have the right to judge of its infractions; . . . be it called what it may—State-right, veto, nullification, or by any other name—I conceive to be the fundamental principle of our system, resting on facts as certain as our revolution itself,

... and I firmly believe that on its recognition depend the stability and safety of our political institutions. . . .

... Whenever separate and dissimilar interests have been separately represented in government; whenever the sovereign power has been divided in its exercise, the experience and wisdom of ages have devised but one mode by which such political organization can be preserved—the mode adopted in England, and by all governments, ancient and modern, blessed with constitutions deserving to be called free—to give each co-estate the right to judge of its powers, with a negative or veto on the acts of the others, in order to protect against encroachments the interests it particularly represents. . . . So essential is the principle, that to withhold this right from either, where the sovereign power is divided, is, in fact, to annul the division itself, and to consolidate in the one left in the exclusive possession of the right *all* powers of government. . . .

John C. Calhoun, *Speeches of John C. Calhoun: Delivered in the Congress of the United States from 1811 to the Present* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1848), 28, 30–31.

PRACTICING Historical Thinking

Identify: Paraphrase Calhoun's message.

Analyze: Calhoun uses the word *compact* to mean the union of states under the Constitution. In what ways does Calhoun's understanding of the word *compact* differ from James Monroe's in his Second Inaugural Address?

Evaluate: To what extent does Calhoun's message invoke Thomas Jefferson's concept of "unalienable rights" (Doc. 5.6)?