

The Breakdown of Compromise

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JOHN C. CALHOUN, "The Clay Compromise Measures"

1850

Senator John C. Calhoun (1782–1850) a South Carolina Democrat, wrote this reaction to the "Clay Compromise Measures" of Henry Clay (1777–1852) (Whig, Kentucky) and Stephen A. Douglas (1813–1861) (Democrat, Illinois). Clay's compromise tried to resolve the debates over the future of slavery in the lands acquired at the end of the Mexican-American War (1846–1848). These measures eventually became the Compromise of 1850.

... How can the Union be saved? To this I answer, there is but one way by which it can be, and that is, by adopting such measures as will satisfy the States belonging to the southern section that they can remain in the Union consistently with their honor and their safety. There is, again, only one way by which that can be effected, and that is, by removing the causes by which this belief has been produced. Do *that*, and discontent will cease, harmony and kind feelings between the sections be restored, and every apprehension of danger to the Union removed. The question then is, By what can this be done? . . . There is but one way by which it can with any certainty; and that is, by a full and final settlement, on the principle of justice, of all the questions at issue between the two sections. . . .

But can this be done? Yes, easily; not by the weaker party, for it can of itself do nothing—not even protect itself—but by the stronger. The North has only to will it to accomplish it—to do justice by conceding to the South an equal right in the acquired territory, and to do her duty by causing the stipulations relative to fugitive slaves to be faithfully fulfilled—to cease the agitation of the slave question, and to provide for the insertion of a provision in the Constitution, by an amendment, which will restore to the South in substance the power she possessed of protecting herself, before the equilibrium between the sections was destroyed by the action of this Government. There will be no difficulty in devising such a provision—one that will protect the South, and which at the same time will improve and strengthen the Government, instead of impairing and weakening it.

The Congressional Globe, US Senate, 31st Congress, 1st Session, 1850, Library of Congress, "American Memory: A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation—U.S. Congressional Documents and Debates, 1874–1875," 453, 455, <http://memory.loc.gov>.

PRACTICING Historical Thinking

Identify: What is Calhoun's main argument?

Analyze: What does Calhoun mean by his use of the word "equilibrium"?

Evaluate: To what extent was the return of fugitive slaves to the South the main reason for Calhoun's argument?