

The American Alcibiades?

The Papers of John C. Calhoun, 1829-1832, edited by Clyde N. Wilson, Columbia, S. C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1978. Volume XI. xlii + 728 pp. \$27.50.

A NOW QUITE elderly law school teacher of mine, who served with defense counsel when frantic officials succeeded in their disgraceful efforts (in 1953) to expedite the Rosenberg atomic espionage executions, recently recalled, "It was an episode of governmental insanity." I am inclined, whenever I am reminded of the decades which led up to the American Civil War, to make a similar assessment of the conduct of the extremists of that period, abolitionists and secessionists alike.

This volume of the papers of John C. Calhoun—issued midpoint in the projected twenty-volume collection—shows Calhoun moving from the position of a respected national politician to the role he would perform for the last twenty years of his life as the idolized spokesman for the South. The public turning point in his career was his resignation as Vice-President (in December 1832) to become a Senator from South Carolina.

Calhoun had by that time developed for his State the doctrine of Nullification (or, as he preferred to call it, Interposition). Only one refinement was needed to complete the intellectual armory of Southern extremists, and that was an insistence upon the “positive good” of slavery. This proposition Calhoun set forth in 1848, two years before his death (at age 68).

II

THE COLLECTION OF which this volume is a part represents an impressive effort to publish everything reduced to writing by Calhoun. It is supplemented by many of the letters written to him, as well as by transcripts of congressional exchanges involving Calhoun and by other materials.

This particular volume is so edited and annotated as to permit the reader easily to keep track of the hundreds of documents laid before him. Anyone with the dimmest recollection of the history of the period should be able, from this volume alone, to get a reliable introduction to what happened at this critical stage in the life of the Republic.

The quality of this collection is fairly indicated by the appraisal of an early volume by the *Times Literary Supplement* (as reproduced on the dust jacket of this volume): “The great enterprise of publishing the Calhoun papers moves majestically on and the standards of near perfection achieved in the first three volumes...are maintained in the current instalment.” This work, except for supplementary volumes in the event new materials are discovered, should “never” have to be done again.

My principal reservation here is with the liberal use by the editors of the designations, “*sic*,” “*canceled*,” and “*interlined*.” Calhoun’s quite erratic spelling could have been noticed at the beginning of each volume. Thereupon we (like his original readers) could have been left (without the benefit of *sics*) to shift for ourselves. That is, I prefer to see almost all his letters presented as he allowed them to leave his hand.

If cancellations and interlineations “must” be preserved for posterity, and in the text rather than indicated in an appendix, this could better have been done by the use of discreet symbols placed immediately before and after the words to be removed or inserted. In this way, the practised reader could read straight through, incorporating whatever is necessary to complete each sentence. As it is now, many passages are exasperatingly difficult to read.

III

CALHOUN HAS BEEN called “surely one of the most intelligent men who ever lived.”¹ The more one reads of this driven man, however, the more his passion becomes evident and the less his intelligence.

His passion was enlisted in the most extreme advocacy of the cause of State Rights, but only after he had been tripped up on his way to the presidency. Calhoun’s political enemies (including, it seems, Martin Van Buren) were able to take advantage of his (and President Andrew Jackson’s) sometimes exaggerated sense of honor to divert Calhoun from the succession.

Having lost the presidency, for which he (as a prominent national figure since the War of 1812) had earned the right seriously to be considered, Calhoun became the foremost theoretician of South Carolinian fanaticism. It was either this, he came to feel, or reconcile his beloved State to the eventual repudiation of life grounded upon slavery. In this rationalization of one’s own as “sacred,” Calhoun (as a modern) can be understood to have been a forerunner of

Martin Heidegger, the Macbeth of philosophy.

The public arguments (at least in these critical years, 1829-1832, when the final direction of Calhoun's career was set) were put in terms of constitutional rights, not in terms of a defense of slavery. The Tariff Acts provided the occasion for the position taken by South Carolina: a protective tariff was seen to place burdens on the exporting staple States (of the South) primarily for the benefit of the more prosperous manufacturing States (of the North). The oppressiveness and even despotism of majority rule were condemned; repeated invocations of the minority's right to liberty were heard.

And yet there is hardly an argument (whether social, moral-political, or economic) made by Calhoun and his associates on behalf of Southern grievances that did not apply with even greater force to what had been done for decades, if not centuries, to the Negro minority in the South. Should not these eloquent, often self-righteous if not obsessed, Southern whites have seen that the principles they paraded to justify their resistance to congressional "tyranny" made shambles of any justification for their own continued domination of slaves, who could no longer be considered simply uncivilized?

Many of John Calhoun's protestations could have easily been adapted to anti-slavery purposes by the gifted Frederick Douglass—and this, as much as anything else, suggests the ultimate futility of Calhoun's position. Abraham Lincoln, for one, realized well before the Civil War the profound inconsistency upon which the defense of slavery rested, just as he realized the irresponsibility of demands for immediate abolition.

IV

AMERICAN SLAVERY, it can be said, was doomed at least from the time of the national dedication in 1776 to the "self-evident" truth that "all men are created equal." But did slavery have to be destroyed by means of war? Certainly, that

had not been the expectation of the men of 1776 or of 1787.

But mistakes were made. One of these mistakes was by President Jackson in not having arranged for Calhoun to succeed him. This particularly gifted South Carolinian should have been obliged, as he would have been as a national leader, to moderate his sectional passions and "principles." He should not have been left available to provide the cause of slavery the legitimation he did. Or, as the Athenians were advised about Alcibiades, "Best it is never to rear a lion in the city; but if he has been reared, it is best to humour him."

A related mistake was made by presidents and congresses in exploiting protective tariffs without much regard for the pocketbooks and sensibilities of the South. Southerners again and again voiced the grievance that the interests of one section were being cynically sacrificed to those of another. Once the public debt had been virtually discharged, it seemed to many in the South obvious bad faith for Congress to continue a tariff which would produce so much revenue that it would become a critical question how to dispose of the surplus. A generation of complaints about a discriminatory tariff accustomed the South (except in the face of a foreign enemy) to consider its interests distinct from those of the country at large.

Should not Calhoun, as perhaps the most intelligent politician of his generation, have realized the limitations of President Jackson as well as of the various spokesmen for sectional interests—and done their thinking for them? This would have meant, among other things, different responses by him to the challenges to his honor and different approaches to the tariff grievances, to what stood behind those grievances, and to what lay ahead.

V

THAT THE SLAVERY ISSUE was indeed what stood behind the tariff grievances, giving them the staying power and corrosiveness they had, can be discerned here and there even in this volume.

Articulate Southerners, in celebrating their way of life, "naturally" resorted to euphemisms (at least in this period) whenever they were obliged to refer to the institution upon which that way of life so much depended. Cannot it be argued that this reticence reflected a commendable uneasiness (rooted perhaps in a residual sense of natural right) about the institution they were saddled with?

In only one of the documents in this volume—in a letter of September 11, 1830, to a political intimate in Maryland—did Calhoun devote a few sentences to the underlying slavery issue of the period:

...The eye of the State [South Carolina] has thus been turned for relief [with respect to the Tariff] from the general to the State Government, and to the call of a [State] convention, as the best means, of devising a remedy, & which from present appearance, will be called by a large majority.

If I really believed, that civil discord, revolution, or disunion would follow from the measures contemplated, I would not hesitate, devoted to our system of government as I am, to throw myself in the current with the view to arrest it at any hazard, but believing that the State, while she is struggling to preserve her reserved powers, is acting with devoted loyalty to the Union, no earthly consideration would induce me to do an act, or utter a sentiment, which would cast an imputation on her motives. Should the State ever look beyond her present object, to prevent a consolidation of all power in the General Government & thereby the loss of our liberty and Union, I trust no good citizen would better understand his duty to the Union or be more prompt to perform it, than myself; but of this there is not the least fear, unless the general government should undertake to oppose force to Constitutional and peaceful remedies.

I consider the Tariff act as the occasion, rather than the real cause of the present unhappy state of things. The truth can

no longer be disguised, that the peculiar domestick institution of the Southern States, and the consequent direction, which that and her soil and climate have given to her industry, has placed them in regard to taxation and appropriations in opposite relation to the majority of the Union, against the danger of which, if there be no protective power in the reserved rights of the States, they must in the end be forced to rebel, or submit it to have their paramount interests sacraficed, their domestick institutions subordinated by Colonization and other schemes, and themselves & children reduced to wretchedness. Thus situated, the denial of the right of the State to interpose constitutionally in the last resort, more alarms the thinking, than all other causes; and however strange it may appear, the more universally the State is condemned, and her right denied, the more resolute she is to assert her constitutional powers lest the neglect to assert should be considered a practical abandonment of them, under such circumstances.

I have written you fully, trusting to your discretion and tried friendship...

VI

ON SLAVERY ITSELF, Calhoun simply did not think clearly enough, if he was truly able to think at all. He confined himself to protecting interests which not only resulted from the use of slaves but which also were dedicated to the indefinite continuation (if not even extension) of slavery. Unless slavery can be shown to have been justified, if not even a continuing "positive good," he was clearly wrong.

This is not to deny there were serious difficulties in the way of outright abolition of slavery during his lifetime, difficulties which we today are not likely to appreciate. But difficult as it no doubt was to eliminate slavery immediately, it should have been evident that it would be even more difficult (if not monstrous) to plan to continue it indefinitely. For one thing, the

South would have become hopelessly callous on this issue. The somewhat opportunistic Henry Clay, with his compromises and reforms, may have had the sounder approach.

Vital to any serious attempt to deal properly with American slavery had to be the recognition that it was evil. It was this recognition that Calhoun, unlike Clay, seems never to have been willing to make publicly—and, however intelligent Calhoun was, his course was not sensible. He thereby blinded himself to moral judgments that were obvious to a steadily growing number of decent men in his own time—and had been obvious as well to the leading Southerners of earlier generations, whom he invoked for other purposes.

Whatever white Southerners were obliged to do about the Negro race after 1865, could not they have done those things better before the devastation and bitterness of war—if they had been properly led? This, and the realization that something had to be done, should have been apparent to Calhoun. If it should be said that he would have destroyed himself politically and would have been ineffectual as well, if he had tried to moderate the Southern passion for the indefinite perpetuation (and indeed expansion) of slavery, it should be replied that what he did do can hardly be respected as “effective.”

If Calhoun was truly incapable of changing the opinion of his countrymen, or of arresting their destructive course, then he would have been wiser to perceive the futility of politics and devote himself to other pursuits. Instead, he betrayed his trust by permitting his considerable skills to be enlisted in support of a terrible injustice that his impassioned countrymen were permitted to believe they need never face up to. Thus, he brought them to the brink of secession for the sake of slavery, in the name of State Rights, all the time protesting his loyalty to the Union and its Constitution.

However much one appreciates the contributions that State Rights have made, and continue to make, to the common good in this country, it is difficult to find

much merit in Calhoun's Interposition. This doctrine, which treats the Constitution as if it were no more than a solemn treaty, permits any determined State to exercise, with respect to anything it happens to take seriously, a constitutional veto power over the legislative power of the majority. Thus, South Carolina in 1832 voted to suspend the operations of the tariff laws within that State (unless overruled by three-fourths of the States)—but President Jackson would have none of that!

Does not the Interposition doctrine assume that the unjust is necessarily unconstitutional? This would mean, as a practical matter, that government has no legitimate power to do either good or bad. In this and in other respects, Calhoun's Interposition doctrine is to be distinguished, on the one hand, from the Freedom of Speech guaranteed by the First Amendment and, on the other hand, from the Right of Revolution invoked by the Declaration of Independence. Indeed, the Southern recourse in 1861 to secession made more sense than Calhoun's Interposition, even though that recourse was rendered dubious by the cause to which it was ultimately dedicated.

VII

MAGNANIMITY IS VITAL in these matters. This virtue is consistent with sound moral judgment, as may be seen in General U. S. Grant's appraisal of his defeated enemy: “I felt like anything rather than rejoicing at the downfall of a foe who had fought so long and valiantly, and had suffered so much for a cause, though that cause was, I believe, one of the worst for which a people ever fought, and one for which there was the least excuse.”

Still another magnanimous, and yet just, assessment of Calhoun and his colleagues has been made in the sixth chapter of Lord Charnwood's life of Lincoln:

In no other contest of history are those elements in human affairs on which tragic dramatists are prone to dwell so clearly marked as in the American Civil War. No unsophisticated person now,

except in ignorance as to the cause of the war, can hesitate as to which side enlists his sympathy, or can regard the victory of the North otherwise than as the costly and imperfect triumph of the right.... The responsibility for the actual secession does not rest in an especial degree on any individual [Southern] leader. Secession began rather with the spontaneous movement of the whole community of South Carolina, and in the States which followed leading politicians expressed rather than inspired the general will. The guilt which any of us can venture to attribute for this action of a whole deluded society must rest on men like Calhoun, who in a previous generation, *while opinion in the South was still to some extent unformed*, stifled all thought of reform and gave the semblance of moral and intellectual justification to a system only susceptible of a historical excuse. [Emphasis added.]

An appropriate magnanimity may be seen as well in the remarks of Alan Paton, upon reviewing a recent novel which predicts the grim life that white South Africans will be obliged to endure if their harsh regime should continue to resist reform and therefore "have" to be overthrown: "Could cataclysm have been avoided by deeds of love and generosity and courage and wisdom? Or is it beyond reason to expect rulers to do such deeds?"

It is a prudent magnanimity—quite different from "governmental insanity"—that John C. Calhoun seems to have been incapable of. And, partly because of him, so were the proud, often generous but yet crippled people he "led" to the brink of disaster.

Reviewed by GEORGE ANASTAPLO

¹Harry V. Jaffa, *How to Think About the American Revolution* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 1978), p. 18. See, also, Ralph Lerner, "Calhoun's New Science of Politics," *57 American Political Science Rev.* 918 (1963). Mr. Jaffa's sequel to his remarkable treatise, *The Crisis of the House Divided: An Interpretation of the Issues in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates* (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1959), should provide a valuable restatement of Calhoun's arguments. See, on Mr. Jaffa's always challenging work, Anastaplo, *Human Being and Citizen: Essays on Virtue, Freedom and the Common Good* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1975), Essay No. 5; "Prophets and Heretics," *Modern Age*, Summer 1979.

See, for developments of points touched upon in this review, Anastaplo, *The Constitutionalist: Notes on the First Amendment* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1971), pp. 112, 171-201, 239-253, 519, 728, 632-639, 672, 721, 738-739; "American Constitutionalism and the Virtue of Prudence," in L. P. de Alvarez, ed., *Abraham Lincoln, The Gettysburg Address and American Constitutionalism* (Irving, Texas: University of Dallas Press, 1976); "Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation," in R. K. L. Collins, ed., *Constitutional Government in America* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 1980); "Slavery and the Constitution: A Conversation Between M. E. Bradford and G. Anastaplo," *The Newsletter*, Politics Department, The University of Dallas, Spring 1977; Book Review, *Chicago Sun-Times*, *Book Week*, August 14, 1977, p. 8.

Corrigendum

In the Fall Issue of *Modern Age*, in the review entitled "Presenting Mr. Marx," on page 411, first column, lines 24-26, the phrase: "...underscores Schurz's belief that Marx distrusted the latter's authoritarian and centralist ideas..." should be corrected to read: "...underscores Schurz's belief that Marx was intractably dogmatic and supercilious. Proudhon, as an unforgiving Marx knew, distrusted the latter's authoritarian and centralist ideas..."