

SPEECH ON THE RESOLUTION OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

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John Caldwell Calhoun

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ed note: On the 29th of November 1811 the Committee on Foreign Relations submitted a report to the House of Representatives with six resolutions concerning deteriorating relations between Britain and the United States. The debate that followed in the House centered primarily on the second resolution dealing with raising additional regular Army troops. John Randolph of Virginia was opposed to much of what the report recommended. In December of that year a young John C. Calhoun took the floor to refute Mr. Randolph's arguments. [1]

2: Resolved, That an additional force of ten thousand regular troops ought to be immediately raised to serve for three years; and that a bounty in lands ought to be given to encourage enlistments.

Mr. Speaker: I understood the opinion of the Committee on Foreign Relations differently from what the gentleman from Virginia (Mr. Randolph) has stated to be his impression. I certainly understood that the committee recommended the measures now before the House, as a preparation for war; and such, in fact, was its express resolve, agreed to, I believe, by every member, except that gentleman. I do not attribute any willful misstatement to him, but consider it the effect of inadvertency or mistake. Indeed, the Report could mean nothing but war or empty menace. I hope no member of this House is in favor of the latter. A bullying, menacing system, has everything to condemn and nothing to recommend it. In expense, it almost rivals war.

It excites contempt abroad, and destroys confidence at home. Menaces are serious things; and ought to be resorted to with as much caution and seriousness as war itself; and should, if not successful, be invariably followed by it. It was not the gentleman from Tennessee (Mr. Grundy) who made this a war question. The resolve contemplates an additional regular force; a measure confessedly improper but as a preparation for war, but undoubtedly necessary in that event.

Sir, I am not insensible to the weighty importance of the proposition, for the first time submitted to this House, to compel a redress of our long list of complaints against one of the belligerents. According to my mode of thinking on this subject, the more serious the question, the stronger and more unalterable ought to be our convictions before we give it our support.

War, in our country, ought never to be resorted to but when it is clearly justifiable and necessary; so much so, as not to require the aid of logic to convince our understandings, nor the ardor of eloquence to inflame our passions. There are many reasons why this country should never resort to war but for causes the most urgent and necessary. [2] It is sufficient that, under a government like ours, none but such will justify it in the eyes of the people; and were I not satisfied that such is the present case, I certainly would be no advocate of the proposition now before the House.

Sir, I might prove the war, should it ensue, justifiable, by the express admission of the gentleman from Virginia—and necessary, by facts undoubted, and universally admitted; such as he did not pretend to controvert. The extent, duration, and character of the injuries received; the failure of those peaceful means heretofore resorted to for the redress of our wrongs, my proof that it is necessary. Why should I mention the impressment of our seamen; depredations on every branch of our commerce, including the direct export trade, continued for years, and made under laws which professedly undertake to regulate our trade with other nations; negotiation resorted to, again and again, till it is become hopeless; the restrictive system persisted in to avoid war, and in the vain expectation of returning justice? The evil still grows, and, in each succeeding year, swells in extent and pretension beyond the preceding. The question, even in the opinion and by the admission of our opponents is reduced to this single point—Which shall we do, abandon or defend our own commercial and maritime rights, and the personal liberties of our citizens employed in exercising them? These rights are vitally attacked, and war is the only means of redress. The gentleman from Virginia has suggested none—unless we consider the whole of his speech as recommending patient and resigned submission as the best remedy. Sir, which alternative this House will embrace, it is not for me to say. I hope the decision is made already, by a higher authority than the voice of any man. It is not for the human tongue to instill the sense of independence and honor. This is the work of nature; a generous nature that disdains tame submission to wrongs.

This part of the subject is so imposing as to enforce silence even on the gentleman from Virginia. He dared not deny his country's wrongs or vindicate the conduct of her enemy. Only one part of that gentleman's argument had any, the most remote relation to this point. He would not say, we had not a good cause for war; but insisted, that it was our duty to define that cause. If he means that this House ought, at this stage of its proceedings, or any other, to specify any particular violation of our rights to the exclusion of all others, he prescribes a course, which neither good sense nor the usage of nations warrants. When we contend, let us contend for all our rights; the doubtful and the certain; the unimportant and essential. It is as easy to struggle, or even more so, for the whole as for a part. At the termination of the contest, secure all that our wisdom and valor and the fortune of the war will permit. This is the dictate of common sense; such also is the usage of nations. The single instance alluded to, the endeavor of Mr. Fox to compel Mr. Pitt to define the object of the war against France, will not support the gentleman from Virginia in his position. That was an extraordinary war for an extraordinary purpose, and could not be governed by the usual rules. It was not for conquest, or for redress of injury, but to impose a government on France, which she refused to receive; an object so detestable that an avowal dared not be made.

Sir, I might here rest the question. The affirmative of the proposition is established. I cannot but advert, however, to the complaint of the gentleman from Virginia when he was first up on this question. He said he found himself reduced to the necessity of supporting the negative side of the question, before the affirmative was established. Let me tell the gentleman, that there is no hardship in his case. It is not every affirmative that ought to be proved. Were I to affirm, that the House is now in session, would it be reasonable to ask for proof? He who would deny its truth, on him would be the proof of so extraordinary a negative. How then could the gentleman, after his admissions, with the facts before him and the country, complain? The causes are such as to warrant, or rather make it indispensable, in any nation not absolutely dependent, to defend its rights by force. Let him, then, show the reasons why we

ought not so to defend ourselves. On him lies the burden of proof. This he has attempted; he has endeavored to support his negative. Before I proceed to answer him particularly, let me call the attention of the House to one circumstance; that is—that almost the whole of his arguments consisted of an enumeration of evils always incident to war, however just and necessary; and which, if they have any force, are calculated to produce unqualified submission to every species of insult and injury. I do not feel myself bound to answer arguments of this description; and if I should touch on them, it will be only incidentally, and not for the purpose of serious refutation. The first argument of the gentleman which I shall notice, is the unprepared state of the country. Whatever weight this argument might have in a question of immediate war, it surely has little in that of preparation for it. If our country is unprepared, let us remedy the evil as soon as possible. Let the gentleman submit his plan; and if a reasonable one, I doubt not it will be supported by the House. But, Sir, let us admit the fact and the whole force of the argument. I ask whose is the fault? Who has been a member, for many years past, and seen the defenceless state of his country even near home, under his own eyes, without a single endeavor to remedy so serious an evil? Let him not say, “I have acted in a minority.” It is no less the duty of the minority than a majority to endeavor to defend the country. For that purpose we are sent here, and not for that of opposition.

We are next told of the expenses of the war; and that the people will not pay taxes. Why not? Is it from want of means? What, with 1,000,000, tons of shipping; a commerce of \$100,000,000 annually; manufactures yielding a yearly product of \$150,000,000; and agriculture of thrice that amount, shall we be told the country wants capacity to raise and support ten thousand or fifteen thousand additional regulars? No; it has the ability; that is admitted; and will it not have the disposition? Is not the cause a just and necessary one? Shall we then utter this libel on the people?

Where will proof be found of a fact so disgraceful? It is answered—in the history of the country twelve or fifteen years ago. The case is not parallel. The ability of the country is greatly increased since. The whiskey-tax was unpopular. But on this, as well as my memory serves me—the objection was not to the tax or its amount, but the mode of collection. The people were startled by the number of officers; their love of liberty shocked with the multiplicity of regulations. We, in the vile spirit of imitation, copied from the most oppressive part of European laws on the subject of taxes, and imposed on a young and virtuous people all the severe provisions made necessary by corruption and long-practised evasions. If taxes should become necessary, I do not hesitate to say the people will pay cheerfully. It is for their government and their cause, and it would be their interest and their duty to pay. But it may be, and I believe was said, that the people will not pay taxes, because the rights violated are not worth defending; or that the defence will cost more than the gain. Sir, I here enter my solemn protest against this low and “calculating avarice” entering this hall of legislation. It is only fit for shops and counting-houses; and ought not to disgrace the seat of sovereignty by its squalid and vile appearance. Whenever it touches sovereign power, the nation is ruined. It is too short-sighted to defend itself. It is a compromising spirit, always ready to yield a part to save the residue. It is too timid to have in itself the laws of self-preservation. It is never safe but under the shield of honor. There is, Sir, one principle necessary to make us a great people—to produce not the form, but real spirit of union—and that is, to protect every citizen in the lawful pursuit of his business. He will then feel that he is backed by the government—that its arm is his arms; and will rejoice in its increased strength and prosperity. Protection and patriotism are reciprocal. This is the way which has led nations to greatness. Sir, I am not versed in this calculating

policy; and will not, therefore, pretend to estimate in dollars and cents the value of national independence, or national affection. I cannot measure in shillings and pence the misery, the stripes, and the slavery of our impressed seamen; nor even the value of our shipping, commercial and agricultural losses, under the orders in council, and the British system of blockade. In thus expressing myself, I do not intend to condemn any prudent estimate of the means of a country, before it enters on a war. This is wisdom—the other folly.

The gentleman from Virginia has not failed to touch on the calamity of war, that fruitful source of declamation by which humanity is made the advocate of submission. If he desires to repress the gallant ardor of our countrymen by such topics, let me inform him, that true courage regards only the cause, that it is just and necessary; and that it contemns the sufferings and dangers of war. If he really wishes to promote the cause of humanity, let his eloquence be addressed to Lord Wellesley or Mr. Percival, and not the American Congress. Tell them if they persist in such daring insult and injury to a neutral nation, that, however inclined to peace, it will be bound in honor and safety to resist; that their patience and endurance, however great, will be exhausted; that the calamity of war will ensue, and that they, in the opinion of the world, will be answerable for all its devastation and misery. Let a regard to the interests of humanity stay the hand of injustice, and my life on it, the gentleman will not find it difficult to dissuade his country from rushing into the bloody scenes of war.

We are next told of the dangers of war. I believe we are all ready to acknowledge its hazards and misfortunes; but I cannot think we have any extraordinary danger to apprehend, at least none to warrant an acquiescence in the injuries we have received. On the contrary, I believe, no war can be less dangerous to the internal peace, or safety of the country. But we are told of the black population of the Southern States.

As far as the gentleman from Virginia speaks of his own personal knowledge, I shall not question the correctness of his statement. I only regret that such is the state of apprehension in his particular part of the country. Of the Southern section, I, too, have some personal knowledge; and can say, that in South Carolina no such fears in any part are felt. But, Sir, admit the gentleman's statement; will a war with Great Britain increase the danger? Will the country be less able to suppress insurrection? Had we anything to fear from that quarter (which I do not believe), in my opinion, the period of the greatest safety is during a war; unless, indeed, the enemy should make a lodgment in the country. Then the country is most on its guard; our militia the best prepared; and our standing army the greatest. Even in our revolution no attempts at insurrection were made by that portion of our population; and however the gentleman may alarm himself with the disorganizing effects of French principles, I cannot think our ignorant blacks have felt much of their baneful influence. I dare say more than one-half of them never heard of the French revolution.

But as great as he regards the danger from our slaves, the gentleman's fears end not there—the standing army is not less terrible to him. Sir, I think a regular force raised for a period of actual hostilities cannot properly be called a standing army. There is a just distinction between such a force, and one raised as a permanent peace establishment. Whatever would be the composition of the latter, I hope the former will consist of some of the best materials of the country. The ardent patriotism of our young men, and the reasonable bounty in land which is proposed to be given, will impel them to join their

country's standard and to fight her battles; they will not forget the citizen in the soldier, and in obeying their officers, learn to contemn their government and constitution. In our officers and soldiers we will find patriotism no less pure and ardent than in the private citizen; but if they should be depraved as represented, what have we to fear from twenty-five thousand or thirty thousand regulars? Where will be the boasted militia of the gentleman? Can one million of militia be overpowered by thirty thousand regulars? If so, how can we rely on them against a foe invading our country? Sir, I have no such contemptuous idea of our militia—their untaught bravery is sufficient to crush all foreign and internal attempts on their country's liberties. [3]

But we have not yet come to the end of the chapter of dangers. The gentleman's imagination, so fruitful on this subject, conceives that our constitution is not calculated for war, and that it cannot stand its rude shock. This is rather extraordinary. If true, we must then depend upon the commiseration or contempt of other nations for our existence. The constitution, then, it seems, has failed in an essential object, "to provide for the common defence." No, says the gentleman from Virginia, it is competent for a defensive, but not for an offensive war. It is not necessary for me to expose the error of this opinion. Why make the distinction in this instance? Will he pretend to say that this is an offensive war; a war of conquest? Yes, the gentleman has dared to make this assertion; and for reasons no less extraordinary than the assertion itself. He says our rights are violated on the ocean, and that these violations affect our shipping, and commercial rights, to which the Canadas have no relation. The doctrine of retaliation has been much abused of late by an unreasonable extension; we have now to witness a new abuse. The gentleman from Virginia has limited it down to a point. By his rule if you receive a blow on the breast, you dare not return it on the head; you are obliged to measure and return it on the precise point on which it was received. If you do not proceed with this mathematical accuracy, it ceases to be just self-defence; it becomes an unprovoked attack.

In speaking of Canada the gentleman from Virginia introduced the name of Montgomery with much feeling and interest. Sir, there is danger in that name to the gentleman's argument. It is sacred to heroism. It is indignant of submission! It calls our memory back to the time of our revolution, to the Congress of '74 and '75. Suppose a member of that day had risen and urged all the arguments which we have heard on this subject; had told that Congress—your contest is about the right of laying a tax; and that the attempt on Canada had nothing to do with it; that the war would be expensive; that danger and devastation would overspread our country; and that the power of Great Britain was irresistible. With what sentiment, think you, would such doctrines have been then received? Happy for us, they had no force at that period of our country's glory. Had such been then acted on, this hall would never have witnessed a great people convened to deliberate for the general good; a mighty empire, with prouder prospects than any nation the sun ever shone on, would not have risen in the west. No; we would have been base subjected colonies; governed by that imperious rod which Britain holds over her distant provinces.

The gentleman from Virginia attributes the preparation for war to everything but its true cause. He endeavored to find it in the probable rise in the price of hemp. He represents the people of the Western States as willing to plunge our country into war from such interested and base motives. I will not reason on this point. I see the cause of their ardor, not in such unworthy motives, but in their known patriotism and disinterestedness.

No less mercenary is the reason which he attributes to the Southern States. He says that the Non-Importation Act has reduced cotton to nothing, which has produced a feverish impatience. Sir, I acknowledge the cotton of our plantations is worth but little; but not for the cause assigned by the gentleman from Virginia. The people of that section do not reason as he does; they do not attribute it to the efforts of their government to maintain the peace and independence of their country. They see, in the low price of their produce, the hand of foreign injustice; they know well without the market to the continent, the deep and steady current of supply will glut that of Great Britain; they are not prepared for the colonial state to which again that power is endeavoring to reduce us, and the manly spirit of that section of our country will not submit to be regulated by any foreign power.

The love of France and the hatred of England have also been assigned as the cause of the present measures. France has not done us justice, says the gentleman from Virginia, and how can we, without partiality, resist the aggressions of England. I know, Sir, we have still causes of complaint against France; but they are of a different character from those against England. She professes now to respect our rights, and there cannot be a reasonable doubt but that the most objectionable parts of her decrees, as far as they respect us, are repealed. We have already formally acknowledged this to be a fact. But I protest against the principle from which his conclusion is drawn. It is a novel doctrine, and nowhere avowed out of this House, that you cannot select your antagonist without being guilty of partiality. Sir, when two invade your rights, you may resist both or either at your pleasure. It is regulated by prudence and not by right. The stale imputation of partiality for France is better calculated for the columns of a newspaper, than for the walls of this House.

The gentleman from Virginia is at a loss to account for what he calls our hatred to England. He asks how can we hate the country of Locke, of Newton, Hampden, and Chatham; a country having the same language and customs with ourselves, and descending from a common ancestry. Sir, the laws of human affections are steady and uniform. If we have so much to attach us to that country, potent indeed must be the cause which has overpowered it.

Yes, there is a cause strong enough; not in that occult courtly affection which he has supposed to be entertained for France; but it is to be found in continued and unprovoked insult and injury—a cause so manifest, that the gentleman from Virginia had to exert much ingenuity to overlook it. But, the gentleman, in his eager admiration of that country, has not been sufficiently guarded in his argument. Has he reflected on the cause of that admiration? Has he examined the reasons of our high regard for her Chatham? It is his ardent patriotism, the heroic courage of his mind, that could not brook the least insult or injury offered to his country, but thought that her interest and honor ought to be vindicated at every hazard and expense. I hope, when we are called upon to admire, we shall also be asked to imitate. I hope the gentleman does not wish a monopoly of those great virtues for England.

The balance of power has also been introduced, as an argument for submission. England is said to be a barrier against the military despotism of France. There is, Sir, one great error in our legislation. We are ready, it would seem from this argument, to watch over the interests of foreign nations, while we grossly neglect our own immediate concerns. [\[4\]](#) This argument of the balance of power is well calculated for the British Parliament, but not at all suited to the American Congress. Tell the former that

they have to contend with a mighty power, and that if they persist in insult and injury to the American people, they will compel them to throw their whole weight into the scale of their enemy. Paint the danger to them, and if they will desist from injuring us, we, I answer for it, will not disturb the balance of power.

But it is absurd for us to talk about the balance of power, while they, by their conduct, smile with contempt at what they regard our simple, good-natured policy. If, however, in the contest, it should be found that they underrate us—which I hope and believe—and that we can affect the balance of power, it will not be difficult for us to obtain such terms as our rights demand.

I, Sir, will now conclude by adverting to an argument of the gentleman from Virginia, used in debate on a preceding day. He asked, why not declare war immediately? The answer is obvious: because we are not yet prepared. But, says the gentleman, such language as is here held, will provoke Great Britain to commence hostilities. I have no such fears. She knows well that such a course would unite all parties here—a thing which, above all others, she most dreads. Besides, such has been our past conduct, that she will still calculate on our patience and submission, until war is actually commenced.

Commentary

John Caldwell Calhoun was only a year into his first term in Congress when he joined with Henry Clay and others to oppose both the bulk of the Democratic-Republican Party and the Federalist in advocating strong preparations for a potential war with Britain. History may judge the War of 1812 as either folly or a necessary answer to insults against sovereignty. I shall leave that discussion for others. It should be remembered, Calhoun was 29 years old when he made the above speech. He was still a very young man, and young men are often fired by passions. He did articulate three solid principles of political philosophy within this speech that are noteworthy:

- A nation should only make war with absolute justification.
- A well-armed citizenry (militia) was intended as a deterrence and a threat to foreign and internal aggressors.
- Foreign-policy should be based first upon the needs of the Nation.

The impact of the War of 1812 was significant. The border between the US became a peaceful demilitarized zone and has remained so since. Nationalism in the US surged. The first talks of secession occurred at the Hartford Convention. The Federalist Party collapsed in name, essentially to lie dormant until the late 1850's when it was reborn as the Republican Party. [5] It is impossible to say, with certainty, if either Calhoun or Randolph were correct. What would have been the result of either ignoring impressment and the embargo of the continent? What of the long-term ramifications of Britain maintaining a military force and forts on the northern border? What would have been the results of the US rejecting entirely the notion of a standing Army? These are questions for speculation, with no clear answers.

What is clear, is that John C. Calhoun, in his first term in Congress had a tremendous impact on the US and the shape of US foreign policy and what America became in the early 19th century through his efforts to champion preparedness for a war with Britain.

References, and Annotations

[1] Crallé, Richard Kenner, [Reports and Public Letters, Volume 5 of The Works of John C. Calhoun](#), D. Appleton, 1883.

[2] Here Calhoun articulates a position that was core to conservative philosophy until the mid-20th century. In short, this principle states that the United States should not engage in war unless the reasons are so compelling real debate is unnecessary.

[3] Written so early in the Republic's history this paragraph and the arguments it represents present a view of what was and was not meant by military and police powers the Federal government should wield. It is clear that Calhoun and many of his contemporaries had no concept that the power of the militia of citizens should ever be replaced by the power of military and para-military forces of the Government. Mr. Randolph feared a standing Army (and by extrapolation current para-military Federal agencies) because he feared it would threaten liberty. Calhoun envisioned that a strong citizen militia, as envisioned by the founders would always be able to keep such in check. Neither would have tolerated arguments to redefine or water-down the explicit meaning of the Second Amendment – they both saw and armed citizen militia as a real and necessary threat to forces of the Federal Government.

[4] Calhoun articulates here another fundamental conservative principle, at least until the mid-20th Century. He advocates that what is good for the world, Europe in this case, is not always positive for national self-interest and that foreign policy ought to be based upon national interest.

[5] I contend that the party of Lincoln (the Republican Party from 1858-1932) cannot also be the party of Jefferson, it was merely the rebirth of the Federalist Party and that modern conservatives that align with the Republican party cannot or should not look to what was Republican from that era as representative conservative thought.