

[Calhoun's - SPEECH ON THE TARIFF BILL](#)

April 4, 1816, [John C. Calhoun](#)

[The Calhoun Institute](#)

Ed note: Fresh from the victories against Britain in the War of 1812 the US entered the Era of Good Feelings. Pride, nationalism and optimism were in the air and many were caught up in the atmosphere of boundless possibilities. In a very real sense, the young John C. Calhoun was no different. He was a nationalist, he always was a nationalist, even in later years when he turned his nationalist loyalties and toward the defense of the Southern States and her people. Calhoun's support for the Tariff Bill in 1816 must be viewed in this context.

Calhoun articulates a conservative principle that endures in this speech

He attributes Britain's problem of poverty and urban unemployment of government interference with the free market – in his words “her poor laws, and statutes regulating the price of labor, with heavy taxes, were the real causes.”

The debate heretofore on this subject has been on the degree of protection which ought to be afforded to our cotton and woollen manufactures: all professing to be friendly to those infant establishments, and to be willing to extend to them adequate encouragement. The present motion assumes a new aspect. It is introduced professedly on the ground that manufactures ought not to receive any encouragement; and will, in its operation, leave our cotton establishments exposed to the competition of the cotton goods of the East Indies, which, it is acknowledged on all sides, they are not capable of meeting with success, without the proviso proposed to be stricken out by the motion now under discussion. Till the debate assumed this new form, he had determined to be silent; participating, as he largely did, in that general anxiety which is felt, after so long and laborious a session, to return to the bosom of our families.

But, on a subject of such vital importance, touching, as it does, the security and permanent prosperity of our country, he hoped that the House would indulge him in a few observations. He regretted much his want of preparation; he meant not a verbal preparation, for he had ever despised such, but that due and mature meditation and arrangement of thought which the House is entitled to on the part of those who occupy any portion of their time. But, whatever his arguments might want on that account in weight, he hoped might be made up in the disinterestedness of his situation. He was no manufacturer; he was not from that portion of our country supposed to be peculiarly interested. Coming, as he did, from the South; having, in common with his immediate constituents, no interest, but in the cultivation of the soil, in selling its products high, and buying cheap the wants and conveniences of life, no motives could be attributed to him but such as were disinterested. He had asserted that the subject before them was connected with the security of the country. It would, doubtless, by some be considered a rash assertion; but he conceived it to be susceptible of the clearest proof; and he hoped, with due attention, to establish it to the satisfaction of the House.

The security of a country mainly depends on its spirit and its means; and the latter principally on its moneyed resources. Modified as the industry of this country now is, combined with our peculiar

situation and want of a naval ascendancy, whenever we have the misfortune to be involved in a war with a nation dominant on the ocean—and it is almost only with such we can at present be—the moneyed resources of the country to a great extent must fail. He took it for granted that it was the duty of this body to adopt those measures of prudent foresight which the event of war made necessary. We cannot, he presumed, be indifferent to dangers from abroad, unless, indeed, the House is prepared to indulge in the phantom of eternal peace, which seems to possess the dream of some of its members. Could such a state exist, no foresight or fortitude would be necessary to conduct the affairs of the republic; but as it is the mere illusion of the imagination, as every people that ever has or ever will exist, are subjected to the vicissitudes of peace and war, it must ever be considered as the plain dictate of wisdom, in peace to prepare for war. What, then, let us consider, constitute the resources of this country, and what are the effects of war on them? Commerce and agriculture, till lately almost the only, still constitute the principal sources of our wealth. So long as these remain uninterrupted, the country prospers; but war, as we are now circumstanced, is equally destructive to both. They both depend on foreign markets; and our country is placed, as it regards them, in a situation strictly insular; a wide ocean rolls between. Our commerce neither is nor can be protected by the present means of the country. What, then, are the effects of a war with a maritime power—with England? Our commerce annihilated, spreading individual misery and producing national poverty; our agriculture cut off from its accustomed markets, the surplus product of the farmer perishes on his hands, and he ceases to produce, because he cannot sell. His resources are dried up, while his expenses are greatly increased; as all manufactured articles, the necessaries as well as the conveniences of life, rise to an extravagant price. The recent war fell with peculiar pressure on the growers of cotton and tobacco, and other great staples of the country; and the same state of things will recur in the event of another, unless prevented by the foresight of this body. If the mere statement of facts did not carry conviction to every mind, as he conceives it is calculated to do, additional arguments might be drawn from the general nature of wealth. Neither agriculture, manufactures, nor commerce, taken separately, is the cause of wealth; it flows from the three combined, and cannot exist without each. The wealth of any single nation or an individual, it is true, may not immediately depend on the three, but such wealth always presupposes their existence. He viewed the words in the most enlarged sense. Without commerce, industry would have no stimulus; without manufactures, it would be without the means of production; and without agriculture neither of the others can subsist. When separated entirely and permanently, they perish. War in this country produces, to a great extent, that effect; and hence the great embarrassment which follows in its train. The failure of the wealth and resources of the nation necessarily involved the ruin of its finances and its currency. It is admitted by the most strenuous advocates, on the other side, that no country ought to be dependent on another for its means of defence; that, at least, our musket and bayonet, our cannon and ball, ought to be of domestic manufacture. But what, he asked, is more necessary to the defence of a country than its currency and finance? Circumstanced as our country is, can these stand the shock of war?

Behold the effect of the late war on them. When our manufactures are grown to a certain perfection, as they soon will under the fostering care of Government, we will no longer experience these evils. The farmer will find a ready market for his surplus produce; and, what is almost of equal consequence, a certain and cheap supply of all his wants. His prosperity will diffuse itself to every class in the community; and, instead of that languor of industry and individual distress now incident to a state of war and suspended commerce, the wealth and vigor of the community will not be materially impaired.

The arm of Government will be nerved; and taxes in the hour of danger, when essential to the independence of the nation, may be greatly increased; loans, so uncertain and hazardous, may be less relied on; thus situated, the storm may beat without, but within all will be quiet and safe.

To give perfection to this state of things, it will be necessary to add, as soon as possible, a system of internal improvements, and at least such an extension of our navy as will prevent the cutting off our coasting trade. The advantage of each is so striking as not to require illustration, especially after the experience of the recent war.

It is thus the resources of this Government and people would be placed beyond the power of a foreign war materially to impair. But it may be said that the derangement then experienced, resulted, not from the cause assigned, but from the errors of the weakness of the Government. He admitted that many financial blunders were committed, for the subject was new to us; that the taxes were not laid sufficiently early, or to as great an extent as they ought to have been; and that the loans were in some instances injudiciously made; but he ventured to affirm that, had the greatest foresight and fortitude been exerted, the embarrassment would have been still very great; and that even under the best management, the total derangement which was actually felt would not have been postponed eighteen months, had the war so long continued. How could it be otherwise? A war, such as this country was then involved in, in a great measure dries up the resources of individuals, as he had already proved; and the resources of the Government are no more than the aggregate of the surplus incomes of individuals called into action by a system of taxation. It is certainly a great political evil, incident to the character of the industry of this country, that, however prosperous our situation when at peace, with an uninterrupted commerce—and nothing then could exceed it—the moment that we were involved in war the whole is reversed. When resources are most needed; when indispensable to maintain the honor; yes, the very existence of the nation, then they desert us. Our currency is also sure to experience the shock, and become so deranged as to prevent us from calling out fairly whatever of means is left to the country. The result of a war in the present state of our naval power, is the blockade of our coast, and consequent destruction of our trade.

The wants and habits of the country, founded on the use of foreign articles, must be gratified; importation to a certain extent continues, through the policy of the enemy, or unlawful traffic; the exportation of our bulky articles is prevented, too; the specie of the country is drawn to pay the balance perpetually accumulating against us; and the final result is, a total derangement of our currency.

To this distressing state of things there were two remedies—and only two; one in our power immediately, the other requiring much time and exertion; but both constituting, in his opinion, the essential policy of this country: he meant the navy and domestic manufactures. By the former, we could open the way to our markets; by the latter, we bring them from beyond the ocean, and naturalize them. Had we the means of attaining an immediate naval ascendancy, he acknowledged that the policy recommended by this bill would be very questionable; but as that is not the fact—as it is a period remote, with any exertion, and will be probably more so from that relaxation of exertion so natural in peace, when necessity is not felt, it becomes the duty of this House to resort, to a considerable extent, at least as far as is proposed, to the only remaining remedy.

But to this it has been objected that the country is not prepared, and that the result of our premature exertion would be to bring distress on it without effecting the intended object. Were it so, however urgent the reasons in its favor, we ought to desist, as it is folly to oppose the laws of necessity. But he could not for a moment yield to the assertion; on the contrary, he firmly believed that the country is prepared, even to maturity, for the introduction of manufactures. We have abundance of resources, and things naturally tend at this moment in that direction. A prosperous commerce has poured an immense amount of commercial capital into this country. This capital has, till lately, found occupation in commerce; but that state of the world which transferred it to this country, and gave it active employment, has passed away, never to return.

Where shall we now find full employment for our prodigious amount of tonnage; where markets for the numerous and abundant products of our country? This great body of active capital, which for the moment has found sufficient employment in supplying our markets, exhausted by the war and measures preceding it, must find a new direction; it will not be idle. What channel can it take but that of manufactures?

This, if things continue as they are, will be its direction. It will introduce a new era in our affairs, in many respects highly advantageous, and ought to be countenanced by the Government. Besides, we have already surmounted the greatest difficulty that has ever been found in undertakings of this kind. The cotton and woollen manufactures are not to be introduced—they are already introduced to a great extent; freeing us entirely from the hazards, and, in a great measure, the sacrifices experienced in giving the capital of the country a new direction. The restrictive measures and the war, though not intended for that purpose, have, by the necessary operation of things, turned a large amount of capital to this new branch of industry. He had often heard it said, both in and out of Congress, that this effect alone would indemnify the country for all of its losses. So high was this tone of feeling when the want of these establishments was practically felt, that he remembered, during the war, when some question was agitated respecting the introduction of foreign goods, that many then opposed it on the grounds of injuring our manufactures. He then said that war alone furnished sufficient stimulus, and perhaps too much, as it would make their growth unnaturally rapid; but that, on the return of peace, it would then be time for us to show our affection for them. He at that time did not expect an apathy and aversion to the extent which is now seen. But it will no doubt be said, if they are so far established, and if the situation of the country is so favorable to their growth, where is the necessity of affording them protection? It is to put them beyond the reach of contingency. Besides, capital is not yet, and cannot for some time be, adjusted to the new state of things. There is, in fact, from the operation of temporary causes, a great pressure on these establishments. They had extended so rapidly during the late war, that many, he feared, were without the requisite surplus capital or skill to meet the present crisis. Should such prove to be the fact, it would give a back set, and might, to a great extent, endanger their ultimate success. Should the present owners be ruined, and the workmen dispersed and turned to other pursuits, the country would sustain a great loss. Such would, no doubt, be the fact to a considerable extent, if not protected.

Besides, circumstances, if we act with wisdom, are favorable to attract to our country much skill and industry. The country in Europe having the most skilful workmen is broken up. It is to us, if wisely used, more valuable than the repeal of the Edict of Nantz was to England. She had the prudence to profit by it:

let us not discover less political sagacity. Afford to ingenuity and industry immediate and ample protection, and they will not fail to give a preference to this free and happy country.

It has been objected to this bill, that it will injure our marine, and consequently impair our naval strength. How far it is fairly liable to this charge, he was not prepared to say. He hoped and believed it would not, at least to any alarming extent, have that effect immediately; and he firmly believed that its lasting operation would be highly beneficial to our commerce. The trade to the East Indies would certainly be much affected; but it was stated in debate that the whole of that trade employed but six hundred sailors. But, whatever might be the loss in this, or other branches of our foreign commerce, he trusted it would be amply compensated in our coasting trade, a branch of navigation wholly in our own hands. It has at all times employed a great amount of tonnage; something more, he believed, than one-third of the whole: nor is it liable to the imputation thrown out by a member from North Carolina (Mr. Gaston), that it produced inferior sailors. It required long and dangerous voyages; and, if his information was correct, no branch of trade made better or more skilful seamen. The fact that it is wholly in our own hands is a very important one, while every branch of our foreign trade must suffer from competition with other nations.

Other objections of a political character were made to the encouragement of manufactures. It is said they destroy the moral and physical power of the people. This might formerly have been true, to a considerable extent, before the perfection of machinery, and when the success of the manufactures depended on the minute subdivision of labor. At that time it required a large portion of the population of a country to be engaged in them; and every minute subdivision of labor is undoubtedly unfavorable to the intellect; but the great perfection of machinery has in a considerable degree obviated these objections. In fact, it has been stated that the manufacturing districts in England furnish the greatest number of recruits to her army; and that, as soldiers, they are not materially inferior to the rest of her population. It has been further asserted that manufactures are the fruitful cause of pauperism; and England has been referred to as furnishing conclusive evidence of its truth. For his part, he could perceive no such tendency in them, but the exact contrary, as they furnished new stimulus and means of subsistence to the laboring classes of the community. We ought not to look to the cotton and woolen establishments of Great Britain for the prodigious numbers of poor with which her population was disgraced.

Causes much more efficient exist. Her poor laws, and statutes regulating the price of labor, with heavy taxes, were the real causes. But, if it must be so—if the mere fact that England manufactured more than any other country, explained the cause of her having more beggars, it is just as reasonable to refer to it her courage, spirit, and all her masculine virtues, in which she excels all other nations, with a single exception—he meant our own—in which we might, without vanity, challenge a preeminence.

Another objection had been made, which, he must acknowledge, was better founded: that capital employed in manufacturing produced a greater dependence on the part of the employed, than in commerce, navigation, or agriculture. It is certainly an evil, and to be regretted; but he did not think it a decisive objection to the system; especially when it had incidental political advantages which, in his opinion, more than counterpoised it. It produced an interest strictly American—as much so as agriculture; in which it had the decided advantage of commerce or navigation. The country will from this

derive much advantage. Again, it is calculated to bind together more closely our widely spread republic. It will greatly increase our mutual dependence and intercourse; and will, as a necessary consequence, excite an increased attention to Internal Improvements, a subject every way so intimately connected with the ultimate attainment of national strength and the perfection of our political institutions. He regarded the fact that it would make the parts adhere more closely; that it would form a new and most powerful cement, far outweighing any political objections that might be urged against the system. In his opinion the liberty and the union of this country were inseparably united. That, as the destruction of the latter would most certainly involve the former, so its maintenance will, with equal certainty, preserve it.

He did not speak lightly. He had often and long revolved it in his mind, and he had critically examined into the causes that destroyed the liberty of other states. There are none that apply to us, or apply with a force to alarm. The basis of our republic is too broad, and its structure too strong, to be shaken by them. Its extension and organization will be found to afford effectual security against their operation; but let it be deeply impressed on the heart of this House and country, that, while they guarded against the old, they exposed us to a new and terrible danger—disunion. This single word comprehended almost the sum of our political dangers; and against it we ought to be perpetually guarded.

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