

The Calhoun Dispute: A Political Attack Turned Back by His Political Defense

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WASHINGTON, Sept. 26—It was late in December, 1826, and the political air in Washington was fouled with bitter feelings, power struggles and the contention that would one day lead to Civil War.

John C. Calhoun, the magnetic South Carolina planter, was Vice President under John Quincy Adams but had cut himself away from the Adams-Henry Clay forces that controlled the White House and Congress. He had gone over to the opposition—the forces of Andrew Jackson—and found himself under political attack because of it.

His enemies were busy, and on Dec. 28 a letter more than a year old was printed in *The Alexandria, Va., Gazette*, along with editorial comment by the newspaper, suggesting that Calhoun had profited from a contract for building a fort while he was Secretary of War.

It was old stuff that had been thoroughly aired in the newspapers and Congress in 1820, then re-investigated by Congress in 1822. It centered mostly on Mr. Calhoun's chief clerk at the War Department, who was censured.

When the charges reappeared in *The Gazette*, Mr. Calhoun fired off a letter that was delivered the next day to the Speaker of the House requesting a full and immediate investigation.

It had been a political attack on Mr. Calhoun and he replied with a political answer.

Precedent Dusted Off

The tall, dark-haired Vice President, who later took the lead in defending states rights and cotton interests of the Old South, was cleared by a hostile investigating committee and the matter was put to rest.

It was this Calhoun precedent of 146 years ago that was roused from its tiny niche in American history, dusted off carefully, for many antiques are fragile, and presented as a foundation in the defense of Vice President Agnew.

In his letter yesterday to the House of Representatives—itsself a document of historic dimensions—Mr. Agnew requested “a full inquiry into the charges which have apparently been made against me” by Federal investigators in Baltimore. He continued: “I cannot acquiesce in any

criminal proceeding being lodged against me in Maryland or elsewhere. And I cannot look to any such proceeding for vindication.

“In these circumstances, I believe, it is the right and duty of the Vice President to turn to the House. A closely parallel precedent so suggests.”

Mr. Agnew is under investigation by the United States Attorney's office in Baltimore for possible extortion, bribery and conspiracy in a matter scheduled to go before a Federal grand jury.

Among the allegations reportedly under investigation are that consulting engineers doing business with suburban Baltimore County and with the State of Maryland paid kickbacks on contracts. Mr. Agnew served as elected executive in Baltimore County and as Maryland Governor before his election as Vice President in 1968.

In Mr. Calhoun's case, Maj. Christopher Van Deventer, who was chief clerk of the War Department when Mr. Calhoun was Secretary of War, had a half-interest in an 1818 contract for stone for Army use at Old Point Comfort, off Hampton Roads, opposite Norfolk, Va.

Major Van Deventer's brother-in-law, Elijah Mix, held the contract, a fact unknown to Mr. Calhoun, according to Charles M. Wiltse, who retired last year as a history professor at Dartmouth College. He is regarded as one of the nation's leading authorities on Mr. Calhoun and is author of a three-volume biography of him.

The 1822 House report of the matter stated:

“Your committee, however, have not, in all the investigation which they have been able to make yet discovered any facts which clearly stamp the transaction with a fraudulent character, but they are compelled, from what they have discovered, to express their disapprobation of the conduct of the engineer department, in forming the contract.”

House Letter Cited

It recommended that Mix be given no more money under the contract.

When Calhoun's letter arrived at the House, Henry Clay, who was Secretary of State, hurried to the House and listened as it was read.

Vice President Agnew quoted extensively from the letter that asserted Calhoun's innocence, the “very serious” charges leveled against him and the attacks against him

that “assume the character of impeachable offenses.”

The charges against Calhoun were never investigated on a criminal basis but instead became the subject of humor and political attack, stirred partly by Mix's bitterness over loss of his government work.

It was Mix's year-old letter that appeared in *The Gazette* and it charged that Calhoun had profited from the Old Point Comfort contract along with Major Van Deventer.

The Mix letter was placed in the newspaper, Dr. Wiltse wrote, by a competing contractor who wanted to show that Mix was unfit to receive any government work.

Calhoun, in a letter to a friend, branded it “a deep-laid conspiracy to destroy forever my reputation” and said it had “burst upon me.”

“I saw the assassin aim and determined to repel it,” he said.

A frankly hostile seven-man investigating committee was appointed. Calhoun called it an “inquisition” and lasted 40 days.

No witnesses were called to defend him. The committee only listened to charges and then dismissed the matter unanimously, saying the Vice President was “innocent of the charge of having participated in any manner in any contract made with the War Department while he was Secretary of War.”

Dr. Wiltse, reached by telephone, called the Calhoun matter “a political attack and a political defense.” He said Calhoun knew the character of the House and was certain when he wrote the letter that there would be enough votes to clear him.

Asked about the present situation, Dr. Wiltse said, “It's hard to find a precedent for what's going on.”

Calhoun was elected Vice President in 1824 with support from both Presidential candidates, President Adams and Andrew Jackson, who lost the Presidency when it was thrown into the House of Representatives.

In 1828 he was again elected Vice President, this time under President Jackson, with whom he later broke as he had with President Adams.

Calhoun set one other precedent thus far unmatched by any Vice President in American history: on Dec. 28, 1832, he resigned as Vice President and entered the Senate. He had been elected by the State Legislature in South Carolina—the original way of electing Senators.