

The Growth of Southern Nationalism

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Annotation:

Beginning in the 1830s, the South developed a new and aggressive sense of "nationalism" rooted in its sense of regional distinctiveness and its perception that it was ringed by enemies. More and more, the South began to conceive itself as the true custodian of America's revolutionary heritage.

At the same time, slaveowners became more outspoken in their defense of slavery. On the Senate floor in 1837, Calhoun pronounced slavery "a good--a positive good" and set the tone for future southern proslavery arguments. White Southerners argued that slavery was a beneficial institution that created a hierarchical society superior to the leveling democracy of the North. The defense of slavery led to a hostility toward all social reforms. The South, said one South Carolina scientist, "was the breakwater which is to stay that furious tide of social and political heresies now setting toward us from the shores of the old world."

Shortly after the War of 1812, John Quincy Adams described John C. Calhoun as being "above all sectional and factious prejudices more than any other statesman of this Union." But by the late 1830s, the "sentinel of the South" was the country's leading exponent of states' rights. In 1816, when he was an American nationalist and relatively unconcerned about threats to slavery, Calhoun had introduced a proposal for federal aid for road and canal construction. "Let us," he exclaimed, "bind the republic together with a perfect system of roads and canals. Let us conquer space."

Before the introduction of railroads, most western commerce flowed southward along the Mississippi River. The growth of rail transportation shifted western trade in an eastward direction--strengthening ties between the West and the Northeast. In the following letter, Calhoun advocates southern railroad construction as a way to unite the slaveholding states.

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I have long seen the vast superiority of the [railroad] route through Georgia to the Tennessee, over the one...to the Ohio; and at an early period, I proposed, with all my might, the very one that you so strongly recommended, and for similar reasons, but in vain. I however, should not despair, and by continually urging the Georgia route, have so far succeeded, that the Charleston & Cincinnati rail road company have purchased out the Charleston...railway, with the view of uniting with the Augusta & Athens; and finally of uniting with the Tennessee River through that line.... I suppose you know that Georgia has undertaken to make a rail road from the Chattahoochie to the

Tennessee River.... A resolution has already proposed for a careful survey of the Tennessee river, with the view to its improvement.

I take the deepest interest in the work, not only in a commercial but a practical point of view. It will do more to unite...the slaveholding states than can be effected by anything else; this will change not only the commercial [affairs] but the politics of the Union.

Source: Gilder Lehrman Institute

Additional information: John C. Calhoun to David Hubbard

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