
The Angel of Nullification

Imagining Disunion in an Era Before Secession

BENJAMIN E. PARK

The early 1830s was a tumultuous period for South Carolina's politicians and intellectuals. Federal regulations from the past decade, passed to help northern manufacturing, threatened to slow the cotton industry that thrived in southern states. Citizens were split between "unionists," who believed the nation's interests superseded state concerns, and "nullifiers," who believed the state had a right to challenge federal laws. Many of South Carolina's most prominent thinkers believed there was both an expanding gulf between them and the northern states and, more importantly, that the national government was conspiring to override the state's economy and society. Those who took the charge in reconstructing a narrative of South Carolinian distinctiveness in the face of spreading federalism used all cultural tools at their disposal. John C. Calhoun wrote long political tracts exploring the possibilities of state sovereignty. Thomas Cooper inundated university students with tales of federal oppression. State politicians explored possible mechanisms to abrogate national regulations. And Algernon Sidney Johnston wrote a romantic novel that included a southern protagonist who made a pact with the devil, fell in love with a woman, witnessed carnivorous Yankees, traveled the galaxies, and ultimately triumphed through the help of an angel named Nullification.¹

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1. For overviews of the Nullification Crisis, see William W. Freehling, *Prelude to Civil War: The Nullification Controversy in South Carolina, 1816–1836* (New York, 1966); Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln*

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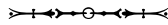
It is tempting to categorize the last example as distinct from the others, but they were all part of the same cultural project. In a moment when Americans wondered if there was enough connective tissue to hold an expanding empire together, Johnston's novel was an attempt to demonstrate and popularize both the imagined and necessary distance between South Carolinians and their northern neighbors. This was an important argument that is easily lost in the wave of the secessionist discourse that would follow in later decades. Prior to the 1830s, most Americans believed that for the nation to thrive it required a unified—or at least cooperative—national culture where its interests, values, and priorities were held in common. That is, the American government could succeed only if the American people were allied through civic values. But the Nullification crisis exposed fissures that were present in this imaginative federal structure since the beginning and only expanded with age. Southern intellectuals would later argue for a more explicitly Romantic notion of nationalism based on cultural and ethnic belonging, but they first had to establish a literary foundation. To assume that southerners were destined to understand themselves as “a people apart” from the North is to both underestimate the supposed necessity of cultural unity during the early republic as well as to succumb to the very regionalist argument that Johnston and others commenced.²

By fictionalizing the political debates of state sovereignty, northern corruption, and southern supremacy, *Memoirs of a Nullifier* was an example of how southerners constructed ideological possibilities for regional angst that in turn laid the groundwork for sectional conflict. Though the novel itself was never widely read or influential, it was indicative of a much more important and widespread anxiety. Johnston's work, then, is an apt lens through which to view the seeds of regional strife, the origins of southern nationalist discourse, and the vagaries of

(New York, 2005), 330–90; Richard E. Ellis, *The Union at Risk: Jacksonian Democracy, States' Rights, and the Nullification Crisis* (New York, 1987); Donald Ratcliffe, “The Nullification Crisis, Southern Discontents, and the American Political Process,” *American Nineteenth Century History* 1 (May 2000), 1–30; Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848* (New York, 2007), 367–73, 395–410.

2. For southerners' conceptions of more Romantic nationalism on the eve of the Civil War, see Paul Quigley, *Shifting Grounds: Nationalism and the American South* (New York, 2012).

American cultural politics in the decades leading up to sectional crisis. Unpacking the cultural layers of the narrative provides a productive entry point to understanding the issues of its time, especially how some southerners began to conceive of themselves as a different nationality from those in the North. To inaugurate a cultural climate in which a state or region could challenge the American government, there first had to be direct refutations of the very idea of a unified American “people.” Those who experimented with political and cultural nullification, like Johnston, introduced the project, even if the fire-eaters did not capitalize on it until decades later.³



The Nullification crisis was the result of a number of events, personalities, and assumptions that climaxed in the early 1830s. It was rooted not only in competing interpretations of the Constitution and state power but also in conflicting visions of the American nation itself. These political clashes can be identified in three related yet distinct conflicts: economic policies, cultural beliefs, and nationalist visions. The immediate economic causes for the crisis are easy enough to identify. Following the War of 1812, and especially the Panic of 1819, the American economy experienced a downturn. In hopes of bolstering manufacturing, and building upon the nationalist zeal that followed victory over Britain, the government passed tariffs in 1816 and 1824 that bolstered industrial development. Many in the South opposed these actions because they increased the price for imported goods as well as hurt the foreign commercial relationships upon which the cotton industry was based. They therefore began to argue that they were unconstitutional. The Tariff of 1828, which came to be known as the “Tariff of Abominations,” substantially increased these taxes and brought tensions to the surface. With Andrew Jackson’s election later that year, whose vice president was South Carolina’s own John C. Calhoun, it was expected that the tariffs would be reversed; yet when Jackson proved unwilling, many South Carolina politicians considered the constitutionality of the state legislature rendering the tariffs null and void.⁴

3. [Algernon Sidney Johnston], *Memoirs of a Nullifier; Written by Himself. By a Native of the South* (Columbia, SC, 1832).

4. For background to these tariffs, see Freehling, *Prelude to the Civil War*, 89–133. Forrest McDonald, *States’ Rights and the Union: Imperium in Imperio*,

The cultural roots for the conflict in South Carolina were more complex and subtle. The proud state that only decades earlier boasted its present power and future potential was perceived to be dwindling. During the 1820s, the state lost 56,000 whites to emigration, and another 76,000 in the following decade; they also witnessed the relocation of 30,000 and 50,000 slaves during the same decades, which depleted their standing as a slave power in the growing international cotton economy. While South Carolina's population continued to increase from births, it did not keep up with the other rapidly growing states throughout the South. The economic troubles of the period meant that many South Carolinians moved out of the state, but very few moved in. By 1860, nearly 97 percent of people who resided in South Carolina had been born in the state, a figure that was unmatched in the rest of the nation, and less than half of those who were native South Carolinians had ever lived outside its borders. The state balanced these parochial influences with cosmopolitan ambitions, and these tensions tinged their nationalist vision and engagement with federal policies.⁵

Further, a substantial portion of southern cultural anxiety was rooted in a creeping suspicion that northern states were plotting to abolish slavery. The Missouri Compromise both reaffirmed a geographic line between slave and free states as well as warned southerners that the practice upon which their economy was based required defense. The state's suspicions were seemingly confirmed after Charleston discovered a slave conspiracy in 1822 that heightened fears of a northern abolitionist conspiracy. The expansion of the American Colonization Society and, later, the rise of individual abolitionist efforts like William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator* made the slave institution appear even more embattled. The reaction to the tariffs was not just an opposition to those particular taxes, then, but also the expression of a deep fear that the federal government would one day interfere with their practice of slavery.

1776–1876 (Lawrence, KS, 2000), 71–96; Wilentz, *Rise of American Democracy*, 287–309.

5. For population numbers, see Tommy W. Rogers, "The Great Plantation Exodus from South Carolina, 1850–1860," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 68 (1967), 14–21; William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay, 1776–1854* (New York, 1991), 254–55. Michael O'Brien argues for a more expansive and outward-facing South Carolinian culture in O'Brien, *Conjectures of Order: Intellectual Life and the American South, 1810–1860*, 2 vols. (Chapel Hill, NC, 2004).

The foundations for the nationalist conflict were subtler still. For the first few decades of the country's existence, many in both the North and South believed that the government's survival depended on its ability to match the interests and character of the governed. One of the central conflicts with British rule, Thomas Jefferson argued in his *View of the Rights of British America*, was the "opposite interests" present within the empire that made it impossible for one legislature to govern them all. When James Madison pled for the necessity of a more vigorous national system, he claimed that the lack of a centralized federal government would lead to a "want of a due sense of national character," which implied that the sovereign states would fall further apart if they did not hold shared values and interests in common. This was a central issue during the Age of Revolutions. The French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for instance, noted that "the first rule" for any long-lasting nation was to identify a "national character . . . if it lacks one, we must start by endowing it with one." Montesquieu similarly wrote that the governments most prone to succeed were those that "best agrees with the humour and disposition of the people [by] whose favor it is established." This new evolutionary understanding of governance raised new problems, because it required determining the foundational principles and interests that were to undergird the nation. It also posed the possibility for dissolution when the government no longer represented shared values.⁶

Many southern citizens quickly adopted this new nationalist discourse. America's centralized power, which was framed to secure treaties and trade agreements with foreign nations, provided new avenues for commercial gain, especially with the growing cotton industry, and so it was in their best interests to perpetuate those federal practices. After the War of 1812, South Carolinian William Lane chastised the New Englanders behind the Hartford Convention for placing their "peculiar" interests over those of the nation's. "The *mere idea*," he denounced, of

6. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1744), in Merrill D. Peterson, *The Portable Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1975), 14. James Madison, "Federalist #63," in *The Federalist*, ed. Cass R. Sunstein (1788; repr. Cambridge, MA, 2009), 411. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract, or Principles of Political Right* (1762), quoted in Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (London, 1991), 75. Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws*, trans. Thomas Nugent (1748; repr. London, 1914), 6. See Eric Slauter, *The State as a Work of Art: The Cultural Origins of the Constitution* (Chicago, 2009).

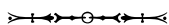
sectional divides that caused the “separation of these states, scandalized our fair name.” If the government were to stand, it must “stand alone,” united: “union is the brand on whose preservation depends the life of [the nation].” South Carolina College President Thomas Cooper, who would later become one of the most adamant nullifiers, argued in 1824 that “the great interests of the nation” should outpace those of any state, section, or faction. Southerners, including many in South Carolina, were adamant nationalists in the early republic, as long as they believed their true economic interests were adequately represented.⁷

Yet the trade tariffs dampened that zeal and challenged their commitment. These tariffs, many believed, marked a betrayal of the original national compact and represented a forfeiting of their state’s interests. Only four years after trumpeting the importance of federal over state interests, Cooper bellowed in 1827 that “we shall, before long, be compelled to calculate the value of our union,” due to the fact that “the South has always been the loser and the North always the gainer.” Congressman, and later governor, James Hamilton Jr. declared to South Carolinians that the American government had become “your task-master,” and would “would soon become a tyrant.” Robert James Turnbull, writing under the name “Brutus,” wrote that “the more *National*, and the less *Federal*, the Government becomes, the more certainly will the interest of the great majority of the States be promoted” and “the interests of the South be depressed and destroyed.” Indeed, Turnbull believed that the interests of the rest of the nation had become “diametrically opposed” to those of the South.⁸

7. William Lane, *An Oration, Delivered on the Fourth of July, 1816*, in *St. Michael’s Church, S.C. By Appointment of the ’76 Association* (Charleston, SC, 1816), 20–21. Thomas Cooper, *A Tract on the Alteration of the Tariff. Submitted for the Consideration of the Members from South Carolina in Congress* (New York, 1828), 17. For the connection of nationalism, federal power, and foreign trade, see Eliga H. Gould, *Among the Powers of the Earth: The American Revolution and the Making of a New World Empire* (Cambridge, MA, 2012). For the robust nationalism in South Carolina during the early republic, see Marc D. Kaplanoff, “Making the South Solid: Politics and the Structure of Society in South Carolina, 1790–1815,” PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 1980.

8. Thomas Cooper, Speech, July 2, 1827, in *The Nullification Era*, ed. Freehling, 21. Hamilton, quoted in Freehling, *Prelude to Civil War*, 152. Robert James Turnbull, *The Crisis: Or, Essays on the Usurpations of the Federal Government* (Charleston, SC, 1827), 9.

The result of these coalescing tensions was a state on the defensive with citizens worried about their domestic future and frustrated with a nation's priorities. Originally committed to the national pledge of shared governance, they now felt the federal government took their state's profits while simultaneously targeting its property. For many, it became increasingly difficult to offer allegiance to a nation while seemingly under siege. They therefore explored avenues through which they could remain committed to the nation's founding ideals while openly questioning the contemporary national body. In short, they envisioned themselves as culturally distinct from their northern neighbors and posited that their political and social body could not be governed under the same federal apparatus. As one observer noticed, the political crisis birthed "two political bodies," each of which "claim[ed] to be faithful to the Constitution." The Nullification debates, then, were not just conflicts over economic policies and federal power, but the very nature—and even the very existence—of an "American" people.⁹



The anxiety over disunion and national discord found immense cultural expression. Caroline Howard Gilman, a native Bostonian who relocated to Charleston and in 1832 began editing the juvenile weekly newspaper *Rosebud* (later named the *Southern Rose*), wrote to a friend that "our greatest apprehension is, that in the excited state of feeling which prevails, some inflammatory, though perhaps unintentional aggression, may cause the flame to burst out on either side." She was aghast at how a neighboring woman "would not own her son (a lad of 16) if he did not turn out against the Government forces." As the months wore on, the tension grew more palpable. "To think, Louisa," Gilman wrote another acquaintance, "that we should live to see a Civil War! Our nullifiers are just as determined & the mass are as conscientious as the Whigs of '76." She was worried about the vast differences displayed between the two cultures. Gilman herself expressed these anxieties through two memoirs, *Recollections of a New England Housekeeper* and *Recollections of a Southern Matron*, in which she blended an "exact a picture as possible of local

9. J. S. Richardson, *To the People. An Address in Five Numbers, Originally Published in the Camden Journal, by "Jefferson"* (Charleston, SC, 1830), 3.

habits and manners” with “imagination” in order to cultivate a coherent sense of domesticity across the regions.¹⁰

Perhaps the most potent example of literary sectionalism from the period was Algernon Sidney Johnston’s *Memoirs of a Nullifier*. Self-published anonymously in 1832, the novel epitomized the didacticism of southern literature, yet it was unique in format. The entire story was a grotesque if innovative satire of New England authors who were devoted to the literature of Dante, and much of *Memoirs* is a biting critique of the genre. For northerners, the immense and dramatic scope of Dante’s epic tale helped frame the grand cultural and national battle playing out before them. For Johnston, it provided a vehicle to antagonize northerners on their own turf. Further, the sheer ridiculous nature of the narrative drew from novelistic tools many proto-secessionist authors used that expanded conceptions of the “normal” and urged readers to consider new possibilities of American (dis)union. And finally, the gendered structure of the book—Johnston explained that he based the story around “a couple of constant lovers” so that he could “recommend his work to the more favorable regard of the gentler sex”—was meant to popularize the political message even more. By likening the American “union” to a marriage, the idea of nullification is no more radical than a divorce.¹¹

Johnston, a native of Virginia, edited Columbia’s influential newspaper *Telescope* from 1828 to 1830, served as printer for the state’s senate, and was the brother to future Confederate General Joseph Johnston. Yet while he had a background in print, he did not produce a literary masterpiece. The novel is redundant, pedantic, cloying, superficial, and lyrically choppy. It was virtually ignored for the first few years after publication, save for one parodied response from a northerner, though it did

10. Caroline Gilman to Mrs. A. M. White, Charleston, Jan. 15, 1833; Gilman to Louisa Loring, Charleston, Dec. 7, 1833, Carolina Gilman Collection, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, SC. Caroline Gilman, *Recollections of a New England Housekeeper* (New York, 1834); idem, *Recollections of a Southern Matron* (New York, 1838), vii.

11. For the northern preoccupation with Dante, see Joshua Matthews, “The Divine Comedy as an American Civil War Epic,” *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists* 1 (Fall 2013), 315–37. For the southern use of fantastic literature during the period, see Ian Binnington, *Confederate Visions: Nationalism, Symbolism, and the Imagined South in the Civil War* (Charlottesville, VA, 2013).

appear in a handful of libraries. When it was finally noticed by a number of newspapers, it only attracted attention due to its cultural and political commentary rather than any literary virtue; the *North American Review* accused the book of making fun of the “simpletons of New England,” to which the *Southern Literary Messenger* responded by claiming such a caricature was not off-base given that New England’s culture was based on “enthusiasm” and “fanaticism.” The novel was never serialized, never received a second printing, and the first time it received substantial attention was when the *Knickerbocker* in 1859 presented it as an old relic newly relevant for a nation on the verge of war. Johnston’s text, then, was more of a cultural artifact representative of its broader culture than it was a tool in fashioning a new cultural tradition. In other words, *Memoirs of a Nullifier* is important for the cultural context that created its narrative, rather than any cultural movement it inaugurated. And as it acutely embodied many of the tensions from this period, it deserves close attention.¹²

The plot follows an unnamed southerner—heavily implied to be a South Carolinian due to his later commitment to South Carolina politics—who represents the ideal southern citizen: a descendent of

12. “Misconceptions of the New England Character,” *North American Review*, Jan. 1837; “The New England Character,” *Southern Literary Messenger*, July 1837. Background on Johnston is sparse. See the notice of his death in *Palmetto State Banner* (Charleston, SC), Sept. 24, 1852, republished in *New York Daily Times*, Sept. 29, 1852. Some have mistakenly assumed the novel’s author was Thomas Cooper, Johnston’s friend. For its appearance in local libraries, see *A Second Supplemental Catalogue, Alphabetically Arranged of All the Books, Maps and Pamphlets, Procured by the Charleston Library Society* (Charleston, SC, 1835), no. 362 on 42; *Catalogue of the Mercantile Library in New York* (New York, 1850), 267. For the rediscovery of the text, see “‘Memoirs of a Nullifier’: A Story of the Past,” *The Knickerbocker*, Mar. 1859; “‘Memoirs of a Nullifier’: Past Second,” *The Knickerbocker*, Apr. 1859; “‘Memoirs of a Nullifier’: Part Third the Last,” *The Knickerbocker*, May 1859. The parodied response was Elnathan Elmwood, *A Yankee Among the Nullifiers: An Autobiography* (New York, 1833), and will be discussed below. *Memoirs of a Nullifier* never received a second printing, and was only available in archives until digital editions appeared in 2013. The book has not received much scholarly attention, save for brief engagements. See Avery Craven, *The Coming of the Civil War* (1942; rev. ed., Chicago, 1957), 175–76; Joshua Stevens Matthews, “The American Alighieri: Receptions of Dante in the United States, 1818–1867,” PhD diss., University of Iowa, 2012, 32–40; Matthews, “The Divine Comedy as an American Civil War Epic.”

proud heritage with considerable wealth, a romantic who is set to marry his local town's prettiest woman, a capitalist willing to invest in the state (and national) economy, and an aspiring politician running for office on the same principles for which his father (in the War of 1812) and great-grandfather (in the Revolutionary War) had fought. Though he was raised in a "remote district" and attached to the nation's agrarian roots, he gained a considerable "knowledge of mankind" through "the pages of history, romance, and poetry." He soon learns his faith in humanity is misplaced. After being (deceitfully) told that New England mercantilists were "meritorious" and possessed a "wonderful character," he invests a large sum of money to develop a "Hooker's Patent Self Animated Philanthropic Frying Pan," only to learn the merchant had taken the money and fled north. The lawyer whom he hires to sell his family home had similarly taken "the road to New England, bearing with him my sixty thousand, and various other small sums with which he had been entrusted." And finally, he receives word that he had lost both the election and his fiancée. News of the latter came in the form of a note that merely explained, "Fate has decided that we must part."¹³

Without money, love, or a future, the protagonist cries out, "If Old Nick could now appear, he might certainly get my soul cheap." At this, Satan arrives and offers a deal of riches: In exchange for power, knowledge, and a personal demon named Kalouf, the South Carolinian merely has to pledge that he will never marry. If the contract is broken, the devil could claim the young man's soul. The man agrees and lives an enjoyable few years until he meets a woman whom he wishes to betroth. His new fiancée, learning from Kalouf of the pact, then fakes her own death to spare his soul. In grief, the protagonist constructs a gun-powder mechanism that shoots him into space so that he can search for his lost love in the stars, only to miss heaven "by about fifteen inches" due to a microscopic miscalculation. He crashes into the universe's wall and is flung back to earth by an unidentified (and unexplained) giant, only to land in the northern section of the United States. He then tours the American landscape, interacts with the people of New England (by whom, he remorsefully recounts, he is measured "against a big bible" and is "found wanting"), attends a congressional session in Washington, DC (where he

13. Johnston, *Memoirs of a Nullifier*, 5, 8, 9, 13, 16.

listens to the nation's "patriarch," Noah Webster), and eventually discovers his fiancée's ruse. Upon this last joyous discovery, he unites with his long-lost lover and they decide to marry despite the devil's warning.¹⁴

Satan returns a few years later in the early 1830s. He produces the original writ of agreement, which was housed in a packet of documents that also includes contracts signed by the congressional committee "who drew up the tariff act of 1832," "three members from South Carolina who voted for said bill," as well as "the President of the United States, who threatened his native state with the bayonet, in case she attempted to defend her liberty." (He had apparently been busy and was well connected with the unionist circles.) However, the devil tells the man that he could be freed from the contract on one condition: if he found twenty-five people willing to sacrifice their souls in his stead. Once the protagonist publishes an advertisement in the local newspaper proclaiming his interest in buying souls, he quickly finds "several hundred persons" from New England eager to comply. When asked for a price, the Yankees gives lip service to "the worth of an immortal soul," the fact that "the blessed Saviour died to redeem it," and the importance of obtaining "joy in heaven," before concluding, "I will not take less than ten dollars in specie." The South Carolinian happily pays the requisite funds, gathers the twenty-five New Englanders into a room (where they persist in "trading with each other" until most were in debt), and waits for the devil to return so he can fulfill his revised deal.¹⁵

The devil, however, rejects the offering for two reasons: First, he explains he could not buy "that which is my own property already," which implies his longstanding ownership of New Englanders. And second, New Englanders simply had "no souls." This he demonstrates by dissecting one Yankee and listing his ingredients:

Parts in a Thousand

Cunning	125
Hypocrisy	125
Avarice.....	125
Falsehood.....	125
Sneakingness	125

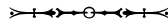
14. *Ibid.*, 17, 70, 73, 74.

15. *Ibid.*, 98, 101, 102.

Nameless and numberless small vices.....	140
Essence of Onions, New England Rum, Molasses, and Cod-Fish.....	235
	1000

Crestfallen, the man and his wife await their fates, only to be saved by the devil being informed that he is needed at a “Unionist meeting” taking place in Charleston. Satan leaves in a hurry but promises to return the following day. The protagonist races to find a diabolist who has the knowledge and ingredients to free him from his bondage. Mixing together a combination of spiritual and patriotic elements, the “Angel of Nullification” appears to “nullify” the treaty. The story’s hero is once again free.¹⁶

Thus ends Johnston’s quixotic tale. Yet while the scope of the novel was both geographically and chronologically broad, spanning galaxies and decades, its contextual relevance was intimately parochial. Much its message was a slightly masked metaphor for the day’s federal debates and sectional strife—and at times it wasn’t masked at all. But where the book lacked character development and plot suspense, it captured cultural angst at a moment of political vulnerability. What *Memoirs of a Nullifier* fails to accomplish literarily it makes up for in partisan expression. Johnston’s saga remains a rich artifact not only for understanding both the cultural tensions that had been building up in the years that preceded it, but also the sectional clashes that came next.



More than just a humorous text that lampooned Yankee culture, *Memoirs of a Nullifier* displays the tensions of cultural disunion. The protagonist embodied the traditional South—noble, politically conscious, and proud. Yet his downfall came at the hands of northern influence: The speculating New Englander, aptly named Increase Hooker, represented the manufacturing industry that was constantly in debt and sought to fix problems through robbing southern states; Mr. Phipps, the real estate lawyer who ran off with the South Carolinian’s money, represented the conniving speculators who made their money off the “industry and enterprise in the South”; and the protagonist’s loss at the polls came at the hands of a democratic zealot who promised “every man in the district

16. Ibid., 102, 103, 104, 105, 110.

. . . a gold mine on his land, and a rail-road by his door, and that constables and sheriffs should be totally abolished.” The threats to the story’s hero were the threats to southern society.¹⁷

At the heart of the narrative was an emphasis on a degraded mercantilist attitude of northerners who were attached to the acquisition of worldly goods through nefarious practices. At one point in the novel, the protagonist accompanies his demon servant to hell to attend a wedding. When forced to leave everything behind at the judgment gate, a Yankee peddler has a particularly difficult time forfeiting his small collection of merchandise. “The separation of him and his peddling cart,” the narrator explained, “was infinitely more painful than that which had previously occurred between his soul and his body.” Even while traveling on the treacherous river on the way to hell, the same Yankee jumps out of the water amidst a sea of monsters and creatures in order to grab “a large cooter” which he then whittles into “‘an elegant tortoise shell comb,’ and sold it, for a high price, to an old woman whom who had died of love.” According to the demon in charge of judging human souls declares these “Yankee merchants were hell’s most common inhabitants. Indeed, the only South Carolinian condemned to hell is the politician convicted “for taking part with the General Government against his own State.”¹⁸

This humorous lampooning of New England’s mercantilist spirit arose from a more serious conflict. Following the War of 1812, the southern states witnessed an influx of northern New England young men who partook in a peddling rage akin to the later California gold rush. One participant, Phineas T. Barnum (later famous for other cultural productions), recalled that his “disposition was of that speculative character which refused to be satisfied unless I was engaged in some business where my profits might be enhanced.” Another contemporary recalled that large groups of these New Englanders would “start off South, in the fall season, and spend the winter in some of the southern States, on trading expeditions, and return in the spring with the fruits of their

17. *Ibid.*, 13, 14.

18. *Ibid.*, 39, 40, 41. For the image of New England peddlers in the South, see Joseph T. Rainer, “The ‘Sharper’ Image: Yankee Peddlers, Southern Consumers, and the Market Revolution,” *Business and Economic History* 26 (Fall 1997), 27–44.

industry and enterprise.” More than just a consistent nuisance—the caricature “Damned Yankees” with their “tin-peddlars and wooden-nutmeg venders” were common staples in southern literature—the presence of these salesmen reminded southerners of the imbalanced trade between northern and southern states. These Yankee peddlers put a personal face on the nation’s economic instability and growing cultural divide. A memorial published by rural South Carolina citizens in opposition to federal tariffs bemoaned the continued presence of “the manufacturers” who attempted to harvest southern society for “their own benefit and emolument”; they feared the government was supporting northern commerce, though “in no part of the Constitution do we find the word manufacture used.” Thomas Cooper described them as a “scheming, petitioning, memorializing, complaining, statement-making, worrying, teasing, boring persevering class of men.” This cultural clash became a key staple of southern literature, as “the Worthy Southron,” who represented the traditional ideals of social and economic engagement, were ravaged by the “Demon Yankee” who sought to spoil their simple living through dangerous speculation.¹⁹

But beyond caricaturing northern mercantilists, *Memoirs of a Nullifier* jumped into the Nullification debate through its various northern characters. While touring hell with Kalouf—this voyage is another caricature of the Dante genre, as the protagonist witnesses demons devouring a great number of New England politicians—the readers are introduced to a renegade American army leader who declared, “of all the discoveries which have enlightened or benefited our race,” the greatest achievement was the nation’s “Political Economy” that emphasized northern manufacturing. This cut straight to the core of the political debate over the nation’s economic priorities. For those in the southern states, northern

19. P. T. Barnum, *Struggles and Triumphs or, Forty Years’ Recollections of P. T. Barnum* (Buffalo, NY, 1873), 48–49. Thomas Douglas, *Autobiography of Thomas Douglas, Late Judge of the Supreme Court of Florida* (New York, 1856), 25. *National Intelligencer* (Washington, DC), June 18, 1829. *Memorial of Citizens of Chesterfield, Marlborough, and Darlington* (Washington, DC, 1828), 3, 5; compare also to Asa Greene, *A Yankee Among the Nullifiers: An Auto-Biography* (New York, 1833). Cooper, Speech, July 2, 1827, in *The Nullification Era: A Documentary Record*, ed. William W. Freehling (New York, 1967), 21. The “worthy Southron” and “demon Yankee” types are explored in Binnington, *Confederate Visions*, ch. 3, 70–92.

politicians focused so much on manufacturing that it punished southern agriculture, which led to problematic policies like the tariffs. These policies, many South Carolinians believed, were based on a flawed science that privileged ideology over economy. The “sublime science” of mercantilist dominion, the hell-bound militia leader reasoned, is due to the “clearly established” truth that “two and two do not make four, but something else, I have not yet exactly ascertained what.” Policies that led to “the higher price of northern manufactures” and “the lower the price of cotton” are in the best interest of the nation, for it makes the northern states rich and the southern states “economical,” for “economy is one of the chief of the virtues.” How could two groups of people with such different priorities and interests remain united?²⁰

When the protagonist witnesses a congressional session highlighted by Noah Webster’s remarks, Johnston uses the opportunity to skewer the North’s cultural colonialism. Besides highlighting New England’s hypocrisy—the Webster character proclaims “lofty strains of patriotism in praise of the Hartford Convention” as well as a rebuke of “the foul spirit of Southern disaffection”—Johnston attached New England’s sense of cultural superiority to their political machinations. “It is easy to see that New England, always the chosen seat of the most spotless good faith, and of patriotism the most devoted and enlarged,” Webster declares, “must become the ‘magna parens’ of taste, of learning, and of politeness, to all the less favored regions of our land.” It was time for the “elegant and profound genius of new-England” to be “emancipated from the sordid occupations to which it is too often condemned” so that it could “enlighten the rest of the nation.” As a result, Webster introduces bills that enable New England scholars to educate the southern states, make it law that all American children must learn from Webster’s “American Spelling Book,” and mandate the spread of New England “physical handicrafts.” And, in an echo of the very threats that were in place while Johnston penned this story, Webster warns that the South’s failure to follow these codes will result in the conviction of “treason” and necessitate the president to use “the Army and the Navy of the United States [that] are placed at [his] disposal.”²¹

Requiring the purchase of Noah Webster’s spelling book through the

20. Johnston, *Memoirs of a Nullifier*, 50–52.

21. *Ibid.*, 75, 76, 77, 80, 84.

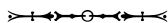
threat of military force aptly captured the cultural imperialism many believed was in play. Webster had long served as a cultural touchstone for such issues. Fueled by the desire to chart and codify America's dialect, Webster published his *Compendious Dictionary of the English Language* in 1806. While the dictionary sought to capture regional dialects and allow, as he put it, "mutual intercourse" through the "understanding [of] each other's terms," readers saw in it both an embodiment of cultural heterogeneity within the union as well as a healthy dose of New England smugness. Even before it was published, one critic proclaimed that if Webster went ahead and "furnish[ed] us with a dictionary we do not want," filled with "*foul* and *unclean*" terms thrust on the rest of the nation, it might as well be called "Noah's Ark." As the biblical reference made clear, many saw Webster's mindset as a cultural colonialism based in deluded fanaticism.²²

Webster's forays into defining and implementing an American language were such a potent topic because they struck at two key nerves in American culture. First, it was a reminder of cultural discontinuity within the nation: America was already a tenuous experiment that often seemed to teeter on the verge of failure, and even the mere presence of linguistic dissimilarity represented the fragility of their political experiment. One critic argued that, "if all the corruptions, perversions, barbarisms, provincial words and phrases which exist in the United States, are to be recognized by lexicographers, and treated as legitimate words of the language of the nation," America would "soon have dialects equal in number to those of that long catalogue which the name of Mohawk, Seneca, Chipeway and Choctaw, contribute to compose." The invocation of native tribes as an example for cultural disunity was not a neutral comparison. In an age when the federal government pushed Indian populations further west, and claimed their manifest destiny in part based on

22. Noah Webster to Thomas Dawes, Aug. 5, 1809, in Harry R. Warfel, *Letters of Noah Webster* (New York, 1953), 329. *Port Folio*, Nov. 21, 1801, quoted in Harold Milton Ellis, "Joseph Denner and His Circle: A Study in American Literature from 1792 to 1812," *Studies in English* 3 (July 15, 1915), 85. For Webster's nationalist project, see V. P. Bynack, "Noah Webster's Linguistic Thought and the Idea of an American National Culture," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 45 (Jan.-Mar. 1984), 99-114; Joshua Kendall, *The Forgotten Founder: Noah Webster's Obsession and the Creation of an American Culture* (New York, 2011). For the widespread discontent with Noah Webster, see Tim Cassedy, "'A Dictionary Which We Do Not Want': Defining America Against Noah Webster, 1783-1810," *William and Mary Quarterly* 71 (Apr. 2014), 229-54.

their advanced civilization and cultural superiority, Webster's critic implied that the perpetuation of regional dialects threatened America's credibility. Civilization was tethered to a unified citizenship that could break apart at the nearest disruptive force—in this case, lexicographical difference.²³

Yet at the same time that regional divergence worried many Americans, any attempt to bridge that divide was seen as an attempt at cultural imperialism. Especially in the South, Webster's attempts at codifying an American language were met with stern resistance—his actions were seen as simultaneously dogmatic and domineering. For Algernon Sidney Johnston, Webster represented a North that was not just content to define the words southerners were to use, but also the lives they were to live. Thus the connection between his spelling book and New England mercantilism: Southerners were expected to embrace both, and military force would make sure they did. To Johnston's northerners in congress, "treason" was a term that cast a broad net over cultural heterogeneity, economic practice, and political action. The cultural unity that many believed was necessary for national belonging seemed to be coming apart at the seams.



During the protagonist's visit to hell, the leader of the demonic army is given a chance to explain at length his reason for supporting the unionist cause. And while explicating his foolhardy "sublime science" of mercantilism at the expense of southern slave economy, the origins of his message becomes clear. All of these principles, he declares, are based on the writings of "the great Matthew [sic] Carey," whose pamphlets are bulging out of every militiaman's pockets.²⁴

Carey, of course, stood in for many other northern writers who were

23. C., "Webster's Dictionary," *Albany Centinel* (NY), July 29, 1806, in *Bibliography of the Writings of Noah Webster*, ed. Emily Ellsworth Ford Skeel (New York, 1958), 227. For the importance of language during this period, see David Simpson, *The Politics of American English, 1776–1850* (New York, 1986); Kenneth Cmiel, *Democratic Eloquence: The Fight Over Popular Speech in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1990); Thomas Gustafson, *Representative Words: Politics, Literature, and the American Language, 1776–1865* (Cambridge, UK, 1992); Christopher Looby, *Voicing America: Language, Literary Form, and the Origins of the United States* (Chicago, 1996).

24. Johnston, *Memoirs of a Nullifier*, 50–52.

skewered by the southern press, but he was an especially potent figure-head during the debates over nullification. A long-time Philadelphia resident and publisher, Carey was at the forefront of the northern attack on southern discontent in the 1830s. Further, his ideas represented much about how northerners interpreted South Carolinians' arguments and their concomitant dangers. Carey was not only a nationalist who took seriously any threat to what he perceived to be America's national character, but also a respected economist whose fiscal ideas embodied the principles behind northern manufacturing. He had previously been one of the most outspoken critics of the Hartford Convention in 1814, and was thus experienced in confronting dissenters who spoke against the federal nation. Indeed, he merely added "new" to the title of his 1814/1815 magazine, *The Olive Branch*, when publishing a magazine that represented his defense of nationalism in 1830/1831: *The New Olive Branch: A Solemn Warning on the Banks of the Rubicon*. He further claimed that he wrote the entirety of the essays, which totaled nearly three hundred pages, "in the midnight hours of about 7 weeks."²⁵

The title of Carey's essays invoked two potent metaphors. The "olive branch" was a symbol of peace that represented both the desired brotherhood between states as well as the hope that the crisis would not escalate to violence. Yet the second metaphor, "the banks of the Rubicon," implied that such a peaceful resolution was not the only potential outcome. The phrase originated with Julius Caesar's seizure of Rome, when he led his army across the Rubicon River that marked the border of Rome itself, into which a general was forbidden to bring his troops. While a common phrase used in multiple contexts throughout the antebellum era, Carey meant to invoke the dangerous implications of the argument: "you are now," he cajoled South Carolinians, "on the banks of the Rubicon," and if you follow "the course recommended to you by some of your leaders" it "will infallibly lead to a dissolution of the union, and to the civil war, with all its horrors." Early Americans had often invoked classical, and frequently Roman, metaphors for understanding their young nation, yet here was another framework in which they could

25. Mathew Carey Diary, 1830–1836, Volume 2, entry for Aug. 12, 1831, in the Mathew Carey Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. For Carey's background and importance, see Cathy Matson and James N. Green, eds., "Ireland, America, and Mathew Carey: Special Issue," *Early American Studies* 11 (Fall 2013).

conceptualize a republic's fall occasioned by the tyranny of dissenters: South Carolina's nullifiers were just like Caesar leading his men to a long and perpetual battle.²⁶

Carey based his arguments within a nationalist framework because it demonstrated the connection, in his mind, between competing interests and federal allegiance. "It behooves all those who feel an interest in the national honour, or in the security of the peace and happiness of our beloved country," he argued, "to contribute their efforts to ally the existing ferment." The nation's prosperity and success depended on the ability of states to sacrifice their own interests in favor of those that were federal in scope. "All insurrections and revolutions," Carey reasoned, "are effected by minorities, often by a tenth, a twentieth, or a hundredth part of the population of a country. What they want in numbers they compensate by zeal, ardour, energy, and industry." Carey believed the greatest threat to the nation was a minority that overwhelmed the nation with its own interests. These tyrants would lead America into being "divided into three or four confederacies, jealous of, and embittered against each other." The expression of divergent interests meant the fracturing of the union.²⁷

Carey claimed that South Carolina's refusal to embrace a nationalist mindset led not only to conflict with the rest of the country but also to the difficult financial conditions under which the South Carolinians operated. The problems afflicting the state were not the tariffs but South Carolina's attachment to and love for the international market. Carey reasoned that cotton culture had given the South a taste for the foreign that damaged domestic prosperity. Even those involved in agriculture "had been led to support this suicidal policy by the delusive hope, confidently held out to them by the new school of political economists, of deriving great advantage" from international connections through commerce and trade. The South's supposed "sound system of political economy" failed to take into consideration the federal pact between

26. *The New Olive Branch: A Solemn Warning on the Banks of the Rubicon*, July 24, 1830. For the classical context of early America, see Carl J. Richard, *The Founders and the Classics: Greece, Rome, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA, 1994); Caroline Winterer, *The Culture of Classicism: Ancient Greece and Rome in American Intellectual Life, 1780–1910* (Baltimore, 2001), 10–43.

27. *New Olive Branch*, July 24, 1830.

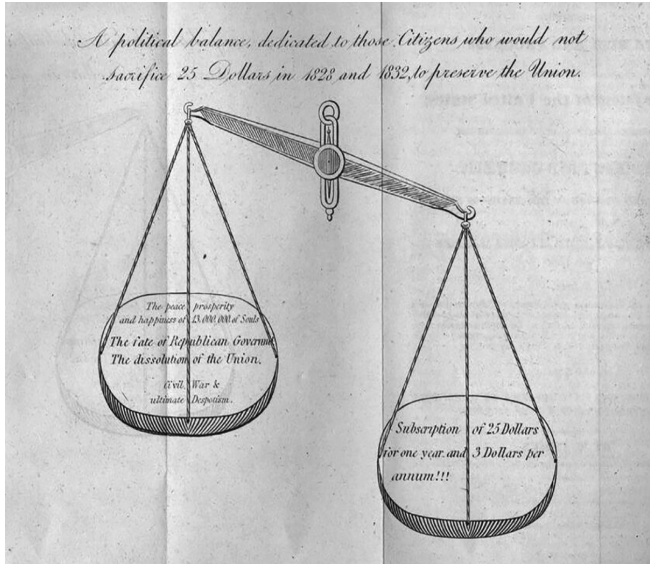


Figure 1: Mathew Carey, “The Political Balance” (1830), in Mathew Carey, *The New Olive Branch: A Solemn Warning on the Banks of the Rubicon*, no. 5 (Aug. 16, 1830), 3–4.

agriculturists and manufacturers, because as soon as they looked outside the country’s borders their political scaffolding collapsed. Just as South Carolinians heralded the international capitalistic marketplace that wholeheartedly welcomed their production of cotton, Carey declared that the rise of “cotton culture” was a pact with the devil that promised “a violent collision between your state and the United States.” The issue of political calculation and balanced interests is revealed in an image which Carey used in one of his essays: South Carolina’s balancing mechanism was displayed as tipped in favor of “25 Dollars for one year and 3 Dollars per annum” over “the peace, prosperity, and happiness of 13,000,000s of souls,” which equaled “the dissolution of the Nation, Civil War, & Ultimate despotism.” (See Figure 1.)²⁸

28. *New Olive Branch*, Aug. 16, 1830; Nov. 17, 1830; Aug. 11, 1831. For the growing international marketplace for the production of cotton, see Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA, 2013), esp. 280–302; Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York, 2014); Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York, 2014), 98–241.

Carey was far from alone in identifying a misplaced “calculation” at the heart of South Carolina’s discontent. A year after *Memoirs* was published, New Englander Elnathan Elmwood penned a parodied response, *A Yankee Among the Nullifiers*. Framed as a fictitious autobiography, Elmwood cast South Carolinians as greedy hotheads who replaced reason with passion. The men were especially so obsessed with “politics, State Rights, and Nullification,” that they lacked the fortitude to understand tradition or consider long-term implications. As one leader of the nullification party in the book argued, “the value of *Union* may be calculated as well as the value of an *onion*, or any other given commodity.” The commodification of something so foundational as constitutional belonging invited problems, and the book’s tale ended with discord and blood. This concern over underestimating the importance of union was also highlighted in a political cartoon at the time, “The Union Pie,” which placed the nullification debates within a context of international intrigue. South Carolina’s arguments were so dangerous, according to the artist, that they might well have resulted from Great Britain, depicted as John Bull ready to devour the American states. “In ’76 & ’13 tho’ thwarted in my pride,” Britain rhymed, “If I cannot eat all now, I’ll see it *divide*.” (See Figure 2.) To many in the North, South Carolina’s cold calculation, as systematically explained by Mathew Carey, spelled the doom for the American nation for it acknowledged a cultural discontinuity too great for political union.²⁹

Carey’s ideas thus served a useful purpose in Johnston’s tale. The fictional commander of a host of demons, supposedly drawing on the principles found in Carey’s writing, declares, “of all the discoveries which have enlightened or benefited our race, that of Political Economy has achieved the most wonderful results.” Yet while the beginnings of America’s economic power were found in southern development, northerners now “carried it to a height which they never supposed possible” by implementing new fiscal principles:

1. “That two and two do not make four, but something else, I have not yet exactly ascertained what.
2. “That the higher the tax upon articles of merchandise, the lower

29. Elmwood, *A Yankee Among the Nullifiers*, 14, 52. “The Union Pie,” Negative 35159, New-York Historical Society.



Figure 2: “The Union Pie,” Negative 35159, New-York Historical Society.

will be the price—the imagination can fix no limit to the cheapness to be thus obtained.

3. “That the higher the price of northern manufactures, the better for us, as it will make us rich.
4. “That the lower the price of cotton, and other Southern products, the better for those who raise them; as it will force them to be economical; and economy is one of the chief of the virtues.”

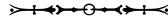
The commander encourages his listeners to look at his fine clothes that were provided by “the Pawtucket Manufacturing Company,” regalia he believes are “more glorious than the robes of an emperor.” This was because they represent the manufacturing and industrial “spirit” of the nation—the thread that held America together. He concludes by assuring that everything he spoke is proven in Mathew Carey’s “*The Rubicon*, No. 947”—a jab at Carey’s excessive publication rate.³⁰

30. Johnston, *Memoirs of a Nullifier*, 50–52.

Johnston's humorous swipes at Carey's mathematical abilities point to the novel's much more serious point: The debate over nullification was rooted, at least in part, over a disagreement over how to handle America's political economy. To southerners, the federal government was infringing upon their economic success in their naïve quest to stabilize northern mercantilism. The capitalistic interests of South Carolina were relegated below the floundering social desires of New England. Slave economy and its cotton production were supposed to be the paramount interest of American fiscal success, but their development was being curtailed by northerners who did not understand the modern economy, as demonstrated by the nickel-and-diming Yankees trotted out throughout *Memoirs of a Nullifier*. Too busy in celebrating their own moral superiority, chasing short-minded manufacturing deals, and growing envious of the South's expanding market, northerners were unable to understand the evolving global market that presented new opportunities for the cotton industry. America had overlooked its true interests, and was perhaps too divided for preservation.

The most explicit and systematic examination of the relationship between state and nation came from the vice president, John C. Calhoun. Invited by the South Carolina congressional delegation to prepare a report on the tariff, Calhoun produced a 35,000-word manuscript titled "Exposition" that argued that America was comprised of individual state sovereignties loosely joined through a compact based on shared economic principles. The majority of the manuscript dealt with economic matters and argued that the increasing number of federal tariffs demonstrated the federal government's inability to understand both the global market as well as the national agreement. Because of the North's proclivity to misinterpret and impede state interests, sovereignty must reside with "the people of the several States, who created" the government in the first place. He proposed a complex procedure through which states could nullify federal laws if they were proven to be hazardous to particular regions. Later, in his "Fort Hill Address," Calhoun identified a "dissimilarity of interests" as the root cause of national strife and the prime necessity for disentangling federal power from supposedly federal interests. Nullification, then, was a necessary measure to protect those states whose interests did not match those favored by the federal government—what he termed elsewhere as the "unlimited and despotic" power of nationalist intentions. What Johnston captured in his novel was merely the cultural equivalent of the political dissolution found in Calhoun's

political proposals; neither South Carolinian retained hope that a federal government could fairly represent the entirety of the nation and its dissimilar economic interests.³¹



Victory for the novel's protagonist came through means both supernatural and familiar. While the devil is distracted meeting with pro-Unionists, the story's hero races to find a conjurer as a last-ditch attempt to free himself from an unfair contract. Once found, the conjurer combines in a boiling pot "the writings of Jefferson—the Crisis, by Turnbull—the speeches of McDuffie, Hayne, &c—a parcel of bones gathered from the battlefields of the Revolution." Following a chant by a descendent of Thomas Jefferson, an imposing and angelic spirit appears and declares that its name "is NULLIFICATION!" The devil, "with a shriek of horror and consternation, instantly took to flight," never to be seen again. The protagonist's future is now secure: "should [the devil] ever hereafter attempt to molest me," the narrator declares, "he shall be again NULLIFIED."³²

While the supernatural elements of this narrative are plain, the familiar components deserve attention. Not only did it appeal to a nullification mechanism, but it implied that such a mechanism was both natural to and essential for America's survival. Many South Carolinians came to believe that such a provision was necessary. Francis Wilkinson Pickens, for instance, argued that the idea of nullification had always been part of the nation's political tradition, as America's finest political minds believed it to be a "Safety Valve, (if I may so say), of the growing *Usurpations* of our General Government." Pickens's pamphlet included lengthy quotation after lengthy quotation from famous American politicians proclaiming what the editor believed to be the "doctrine" of nullification, even if many of the passages were decontextualized and vague in application. This collection, framed as an encyclopedic argument, signified

31. John C. Calhoun, "Exposition," in *The Papers of John C. Calhoun*, ed. Robert L. Meriwether et al., 28 vols. (Columbia, SC, 1959–2003), 10: 490. See also O'Brien, *Conjectures of Order*, 827–29. Calhoun, "Fort Hill Address," in *John C. Calhoun: Selected Writings and Speeches*, ed. H. Lee Cheek, Jr. (Washington, DC, 2013), 338, 469. Calhoun to Frederick W. Symmes, July 26, 1831, in *Papers of John C. Calhoun*, ed. Meriwether et al., 11: 436–38.

32. Johnston, *Memoirs of a Nullifier*, 102, 103, 104, 105, 110.

more than the rhetorical potency of nationalist discourse as well as the malleability and inchoate nature of early America's political tradition, but also the dynamic practice of nationalism itself.³³

As a result of these debates, many in South Carolina began to conceive of themselves as a people apart from the rest of the nation. Langdon Cheves, who sympathized with the nullification argument yet worried about its practical implementation, attended a "state rights" dinner in Columbia in 1830 and noted that, in contrast to the many in the North who assumed a "common public sentiment embracing the whole union," the reality was that "the states are divided into western, eastern, middle, and southern sections." Further, "the south has thus a separate identity and a common public sentiment among themselves," which made cultural clashes inevitable. The people in his South Carolina "are one people—one in interest, in feeling, in suffering, in locality and in power." To avoid nullification, it was necessary for the government to acknowledge these fractured interests and handle the sections accordingly. That those who held more radical beliefs felt the Union was weak due to the proliferation of interests is instructive about what they envisioned a "nation" to be. Democracy in a large and multi-vocal collection of populations, in this instance, was a failed experiment.³⁴

These issues came to a climax during 1832 when the pro-nullification governor called a special legislative session, which in turn called a convention that declared the tariffs of 1828 and 1832 unconstitutional and thus nullified within the state of South Carolina. The governor established a 25,000-man infantry and 2,000 mounted minutemen in order to defend the state from possible federal intervention. The convention then attempted to explain their actions to the federal government and the people of South Carolina through a series of essays that were "ordered by the convention of the people of South Carolina, to be transmitted to the president of the United States, and to the governor of each State."

33. [Francis Wilkinson Pickens], *The Genuine Book of Nullification: Being a True—Not an Apochryphal—History, Chapter and Verse, of the Several Examples of the Recognition and Enforcement of that Sovereign State Remedy, By the Different States of This Confederacy, from 1798 Down to the Present Day* (Charleston, SC, 1831).

34. "The Nullifiers," *Niles' Weekly Register* (Baltimore), Oct. 16, 1830, annotated copy located in Langdon Cheves Papers, South Carolinian Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia.

Taken together, the essays boldly pronounced the failure of the American government system that was occasioned by the greed of the “manufacture” states and, importantly, the divergent cultural beliefs and a practice of the nation’s various regions.³⁵

In their “Report of the Committee,” the document that outlined the political reasons for nullification, the authors rejected the notion that the United States was even a “nation.” It is “an egregious folly” to understand the United States as “one great nation,” they reasoned, because such consolidation necessitated “a people engaged in similar pursuits” and “having homogeneous interests”; only when all the people share “great interests” could a fair and balanced set of taxes, tariffs, and legislation be introduced. Instead, the United States entailed a much more loosely connected set of sovereigns that embodied its multifaceted nature: “a CONFEDERACY of twenty-four Sovereign and Independent States. . . . inhabited by a people whose institutions and interests are in many respects diametrically opposed to each other,—with habits and pursuits, infinitely diversified. . . . Under such circumstances,” the document argued, a “consolidated Government” becomes “a scheme of the most intolerable oppression.” These tariffs, then, introduced “an entire change in the character of the Government.”³⁶

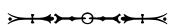
To its fellow South Carolina citizens, the convention sought to reframe their sense of political allegiance. Most especially, they argued that there was no such thing as American nationalism: Because America “is a Confederacy,” the essay declared, “it possesses not one single feature of *nationality*.” The United States was only a compact between “*States*, and not of individuals.” There was no such thing as “a political body as the People of the United States”—only “a citizen of South Carolina” connected to other states through a “*Social Compact*.” This rejection of federal nationalism rendered moot any patriotic attachment to American loyalty as the most important element in political discourse. By nullifying

35. *Documents. Ordered by the Convention of the People of South Carolina, to Be Transmitted to the President of the United States, and to the Governor of Each State* (Columbia, SC, 1832). For general background of the convention, see Freehling, *Prelude to the Civil War*, 224–60.

36. “Report of the Committee of Twenty One to The Convention of the People of South Carolina, on the Subject of the Several Acts of Congress, Imposing Duties for the Protection of Domestic Manufactures, with the Ordinance to Nullify the Same,” in *Documents*, 5–6, 14.

the priority of national over state citizenship, it forced South Carolinians to focus their attention on the interests of their state. “There is not, nor has there ever been any *direct* or *immediate* allegiance between the citizens of South Carolina and the Federal Government,” the address concluded. “The relation between them is through the State.”³⁷

To come to these radical conclusions, in which political separation from the federal compact was a genuine possibility, nullifiers had to conceptualize themselves as a different order of people from those who inhabited the rest of America. That is, they constructed an “Other” that justified the divorce. This was, of course, nothing new in American political rhetoric, as it had previously been done with Native and African Americans. Yet their arguments had to be more clever in order to justify separation from Anglo American Protestants. Unable to draw from racial tools, South Carolinians conceived of economic, social, and religious barriers that proved federal union impossible due to cultural distinctiveness; their interests were just too divergent to justify federalism. Works like *Memoirs of a Nullifier*, then, were aimed to contribute to this intellectual project that made nullification possible.³⁸



The resolution to the nullification debates paled in comparison to the protagonist’s victory *Memoirs of a Nullifier*. While many in South Carolina prepared for battle, both intellectually and militarily, congressmen worked swiftly in Washington to avoid conflict. Even while Calhoun continued to battle in the senate, he worked with Kentucky’s Henry Clay to come up with a settlement that would avert military crisis. The Compromise Tariff of 1833, which offered little short-term relief but more substantial long-term change, was passed by Congress on March 1 with little trouble, and each side felt it could declare victory: Unionists still believed the revised tariff favored domestic manufacturing, and nullifiers saw the compromise as a recognition by the federal government that it had overstepped its bounds. While President Andrew Jackson was

37. “Address to the People of South Carolina, by Their Delegates in Convention,” in *Documents*, 4, 14.

38. For the racial tools used in the construction of a political other, see Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *This Violent Empire: The Birth of an American National Identity* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2010).

relieved that “Nullification is dead,” he still feared that the southerners “intend to [now] blow up a storm of the subject on the slavery question.” He was aware of the tension that underwrote the whole affair. (Indeed, Elmwood’s *Yankee Among the Nullifiers* posited a race war with freed slaves as the end of the nullification controversy, rather than political compromise.)³⁹

If the outcome of the Nullification Crisis served as a temporary stop-gap, it failed to produce any permanent solutions, especially now that many South Carolinians began to conceive of “union” and “nation” in new ways. Langdon Cheves wrote privately to fellow South Carolinian David McCord that, though he believed “the oppression under which the South labours is one under which a free people ought not to suffer an hour longer than is necessary,” the circumstances were not quite ripe to support total nullification—at least not yet. “The metaphysics of *nullification*,” he explained, “is the worst shape in which the bad principle of separate action can be embodied.” His opposition was not based in theory—he agreed that the nation had failed to recognize and cultivate the interests of the south—but in practice: South Carolina lacked the requisite support of the neighboring states. “It ought first to be attempted and we should wait long and patiently before we separated from our sister states on the question,” he reasoned. Until Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, and other southern states forfeited their toxic and unnecessary allegiance to the American federal government, little progress could be achieved. In the future, however, there would be a “body of common sufferers” which could then form a true union with shared interests by seceding from a nation that had become an impediment to their success.⁴⁰

Just as the nullifiers lost—or at least, failed to win—their battle against Jackson, so too did *Memoirs of a Nullifier* lose its attempt at lasting influence, as the novel faded from memory soon after publication. It would be another southern novel, penned four years later, which gained

39. Andrew Jackson to John Crawford, Apr. 9, 1833, in *Correspondence of Andrew Jackson*, ed. John Spencer Bassett, 7 vols. (Washington, DC, 1969), 5: 56. Elmwood, *A Yankee Among the Nullifiers*, 120–37. For an overview of the Nullification Crisis’s conclusion, see Freehling, *Road to Disunion*, 279–86; Wilentz, *Rise of American Democracy*, 385–90.

40. Langdon Cheves to David J. McCord, Aug. 15, 1831, Langdon Cheves Papers, South Caroliniana Library. (Emphasis in original.)

broader prominence. In 1836 Virginia politician Nathaniel Beverley Tucker wrote *The Partisan Leader*, a book that envisioned a group of Virginia rebels breaking away from the North to join other states, including South Carolina, in a new confederacy. Once the Civil War commenced, the book was republished in both the North (with the subtitle, “A Key to the Southern Conspiracy”) as well as the south (with the subtitle, “A Novel, and an Apocalypse of the Origin and Struggles of the Southern Confederacy”). Tucker’s text became the much more famous secessionist novel. Where Americans were hesitant to adopt a vision of a single state nullifying the actions of the federal government through metaphysical means, they were more eager to consume a vision of competing regional sovereignties—the “body of common sufferers” predicted by Cheves—that made war inevitable. Tucker’s vision of secession and civil war that spread across the South carried much more currency than Johnston’s nullification that remained centered in South Carolina.⁴¹

Indeed, the debates over nullification in the early 1830s proved restricted in geography and limited in scope. While some states’ rights defenders from neighboring southern states offered meager support, South Carolina remained isolated in cultivating a revised understanding of nationalism. And lacking broader regional support, their complaints led to a temporary fix that left lingering issues unresolved. In the coming decades, however, their vision of a nationalism steeped in plantation economy, states’ rights, global capitalistic interests, and a slavery-based society became more prominently shared by neighboring states. And by projecting their nationalist principles, now freed from the federal union, onto a newly constructed “nation” of like-minded, slaveholding states, they constructed a nationalist vision that posed a more direct threat to the American union.

Algernon Sidney Johnston’s *Memoirs of a Nullifier* was a cultural byproduct of this much larger ideological project. In order to enact political change as drastic as nullification, or even secession, there first had to be an intellectual foundation that supported cultural separation between the seemingly “united” states. *Memoirs* captured this process,

41. Nathaniel Beverley Tucker, *The Partisan Leader: A Key to the Disunion Conspiracy* (1836; repr. New York, 1861); Tucker, *The Partisan Leader: A Novel, and an Apocalypse of the Origins and Struggles of the Southern Confederacy* (1836; repr. Richmond, VA, 1862). See Varon, *Disunion*, 120–21.

as it embodied the social angst that made political dissent possible. The protagonist—honorable, virtuous, and smart—stood in for the people of South Carolina, and his misfortune at the hands of conniving Yankees represented the growing distrust of northern states. Yet in the nonfiction world, the resolution was to be found not through the metaphysical intervention of an individual angel, but rather through the actual deaths of over 600,000 soldiers.



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