

Webster-Hayne Debate (1830)

The Webster-Hayne debates were a series of debates that erupted over the nature in the relationship of power between the states and the federal governments. Hayne, representing South Carolina and John C. Calhoun, argued in favor of the states' rights position, specifically in reference to the Tariff Crisis and doctrine of nullification. Daniel Webster responds in defense of the Constitution.

Hayne on nullification:

If the federal government in all or any of its departments is to prescribe the limits of its own authority, and the states are bound to submit to the decision are not allowed to examine and decide for themselves when the barriers of the Constitution shall be overleaped, this is practically “a government without limitation of powers” the states are at once reduced to mere petty corporations and the people entirely at your mercy

In all the efforts that have been made by South Carolina to resist the unconstitutional tariff laws which Congress has extended over them, she has kept steadily the view of preservation of the Union by the only means by which she believes it can be preserve – a firm, manly, and steady resistance against usurpation.

But even this evil (tariff), great as it is, is not the chief ground of our complaints. It is the principle of the contest...we should still strive against usurpation. The South is acting on a principle she has always held sacred- resistance to unauthorized taxation.

Sir, if in acting on these high motives—if, animated by that ardent love of liberty which has always been the most prominent trait in the Southern character... You must pardon something to the spirit of liberty!

Daniel Webster responds:

Sir, let me recur to pleasing recollections; let me indulge in refreshing remembrance of the past; let me remind you that, in early times, no States cherished greater harmony, both of principle and feeling, than Massachusetts and South Carolina. Would to God that harmony might again return! Shoulder to shoulder they went through the Revolution, hand in hand they stood round the administration of Washington, and felt his own great arm lean on them for support.

If the government of the United States be the agent of the State governments, then they may control it, provided they can agree in the manner of controlling it; if it be the agent of the people, then the people alone can control it, restrain it, modify, or reform it. It is observable enough, that the doctrine for which the honorable gentleman contends leads him to the necessity of maintaining, not only that this general government is the creature of the States, but that it is the creature of each of the States severally, so that each may assert the power for itself of determining whether it acts within the limits of its authority. It is the servant of four-and-twenty masters, of different will and different purposes and yet bound to obey all. This absurdity (for it seems no less) arises from a misconception as to the origin of this government and its true

character. It is, Sir, the people's Constitution, the people's government, made for the people, made by the people, and answerable to the people. The people of the United States have declared that the Constitution shall be the supreme law. We must either admit the proposition, or dispute their authority.

I have not allowed myself, Sir, to look beyond the Union, to see what might lie hidden in the dark recess behind...I have not accustomed myself to hang over the precipice of disunion, to see whether, with my short sight, I can fathom the depth of the abyss below
behold the gorgeous flag of the republic, now known and honored throughout the earth, still full high advanced...not a stripe erased or polluted, not a single star obscured. Not those words of delusion and folly, "Liberty first and Union afterwards" but instead that other sentiment, dear to every true American heart, - Liberty and Union, now and forever, one and inseparable!

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