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Address of Senator Strom Thurmond (D-SC) on the selection of John C. Calhoun as one of five outstanding Senators whose portraits shall be placed in the Senate reception room, 1957 May 1

Strom Thurmond

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MR. PRESIDENT, the selection of South Carolina's beloved John C. Calhoun as one of five outstanding Senators whose portraits are to be placed in the Senate Reception Room prompts me to comment on the contributions he made to the nation. The Committee charged with the responsibility of selecting five outstanding Senators, not living today, was assigned a difficult task.

No five persons selected would have pleased everybody. But that was not the assignment. It was to select outstanding men. Often outstanding men do not meet with general approval.
Nevertheless, the Committee has performed the job for which it was chosen in such a manner as to prove that it sought first to do its duty, second to please.

I had the honor to nominate John C. Calhoun for this recognition which comes to him more than 100 years after his death in 1850.

Calhoun lived and made himself famous in an era of titans. He did not gain his fame by seeking the popular course or aligning himself with the most popular men in public life. He was a leader, not a follower.

Had he placed public approbation ahead of personal probity, John C. Calhoun very likely would have been President.

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Instead of ingratiating himself with his associates in political matters, he often chose the lonely way of advocating or defending unpopular issues. Calhoun roused the ire of opposing colleagues in the Senate, but he was a favorite of the pages. It has been said that "he was as polite to a page as to the President of the Senate."

Nearly a half century ago, in March 1910, a statue of Calhoun was placed in Statuary Hall of this Capitol. A number of addresses were made in connection with the ceremonies. I want to quote from the address of Senator Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts who was requested to participate in the ceremonies by Senator Tillman of South Carolina.
This is the closing paragraph of his speech on Calhoun:

"He was the greatest man South Carolina has given to the Nation. That in itself is no slight praise, for from the days of the Laurences, the Pinckneys, the Rutledges, from the time of Moultrie and Sumter and Marion to the present day, South Carolina has always been conspicuous in peace and war for the force, the ability, and the character of the men who have served her and given to her name its high distinction in our history. But Calhoun was much more even than this. He was one of the most remarkable men, one of the greatest minds that American public life can show. It matters not that before the last tribunal the verdict went against him, that the extreme doctrine to which his imperious logic carried him have been banned and barred, the man remains greatly placed in our history. The
unyielding courage, the splendid intellect, the long devotion to the public service, the pure, unspotted private life are all there, are all here with us now, untouched and unimpaired for after ages to admire."

Calhoun served first in the Legislature of South Carolina, but after only two years/ his remarkable ability caused his election to the Congress/where he served from 1811 to 1817.

As Calhoun entered the House of Representatives, Henry Clay was elected Speaker. Clay immediately appointed the members to Committees/with complete disregard for seniority. Calhoun was named to the Foreign Relations Committee. A few months later, he was elected acting chairman when the chairman left the Congress.
At the next session, John Smilie of Pennsylvania was elected chairman of the Committee, but, at the first meeting, Smilie moved that Calhoun be made chairman instead of himself. This was done unanimously over Calhoun's protests. That was 1812, and England was using high-handed methods to destroy American shipping and threatening the very life of the young nation. Calhoun and Clay were the leaders of a group in the House known as the "war hawks" because they advocated war on England to stop the aggression to which this country was submitting.

President Madison strongly opposed the young leaders.

Calhoun's war report from the Foreign Relations Committee was finally presented
to the House on June 3, 1812. The South Carolinian's logic and his long, hard efforts prevailed over the determined battle of President Madison and his adherents. The report was adopted by a vote of 79 to 49, and the Senate later adopted it by a margin of 19 to 13.

It had been a hard and bitter fight, but Calhoun had won his first victory on an unpopular issue -- one which beneficially altered the course of this nation's history.

In 1816 Calhoun voted for the tariff bill of that year. That vote was cited when he opposed later tariff bills to show him to be inconsistent. But two years before voting for the Tariff of 1816, Calhoun had stated his definition of inconsistency.
In 1814 in the House he had stated:

"Men can not go straight forward/ but must regard the obstacles which impede their course. Inconsistency consists in a change of conduct/ when there is no change of circumstances which justify it."

His service in the House and his subsequent service as Secretary of War from 1817 to 1825, in the cabinet of President Monroe, proved Calhoun's strong feeling of nationalism. To doubt that he loved the Union, in view of his unusual contributions on behalf of expanding and strengthening it, would be almost as difficult as to doubt that he loved his native State.

When he became Secretary of War, unsettled accounts of the Department amounted to 50 million dollars. Old
officers had little taste for taking orders from a young and inexperienced Secretary. Nevertheless, Calhoun plunged into his assignment with vigor and tact.

Calhoun remembered the defeats of 1812 caused by the weaknesses of the War Department and he determined to eliminate them. It was perhaps the happiest period of his life because he made steady progress toward attaining his goal of creating an efficient department.

Calhoun took a personal interest in the development of the Military Academy at West Point. He interviewed each prospective cadet.

When Congress reduced his budget, he effected economies necessary while, at the same time, reorganizing and improving the department in spite of the reduced funds.
He left the department with its debts nearly paid and in a vastly improved state of preparedness. Calhoun had driven himself almost to physical collapse. He had suffered several illnesses during his service as Secretary of War, but refused to limit his efforts.

In 1823, South Carolina nominated Calhoun for President, but events developing conflicts between nationalism and sectionalism relegated him to second place.

He became Vice-President in 1825 when John Quincy Adams became President. Calhoun was assiduous in attendance as presiding officer of the Senate, although such had not been the practice.

During these years, Calhoun enjoyed great popularity, not only in the South, but also throughout the North. Perhaps his
destiny was decided on the last day of February 1827 by an action which he might have avoided and which lesser men sought to persuade him to avoid.

The question was that of the wool tariff. By avoiding the issue in the Senate, he might finally have reached the White House. Calhoun disregarded the consequences and the vote he had cast for the revenue tariff of 1816.

Although his friends begged him to stay out of the chair that day, the South Carolinian resolutely faced the issue. As President of the Senate, he cast the deciding vote against the wool tariff.

During this period, Calhoun struggled with the question of nationalism versus sectionalism. The evidence is that he deplored the necessity for sectionalism.
He did not seek advantages for his section or for his State at the expense of other sections or States. Neither did he give his approval to other States profiting at the expense of his beloved South.

Again in 1828, when Calhoun was running-mate for Jackson, who was to be the next President, the South Carolinian faced the future without regard for his own ambitions. In May of that year the so-called Tariff of Abominations was passed by the House and sent to the Senate.

It was reported that a tie was being arranged so as to force Calhoun again to cast the deciding vote, and to embarrass Jackson as well as Calhoun. The Vice-President let it be known that he would vote against the bill, if a tie forced him
to vote. He further stated that he would then withdraw as a candidate for the Vice Presidency/so as not to injure Jackson.

The tie was not arranged, but passage of the tariff bill greatly upset him/as he saw the growing prospect of division between the States.

Although he was always a restraining force against the ardent secessionists, Calhoun labored hard with the problem while he was being criticised by some for his inaction. His authorship of the Exposition of the Constitution in 1828, in which the nullification thesis was propounded, was not known until 1831. The South Carolina Convention passed the Ordinance of Nullification in November 1832, following the action of the Legislature in adopting the exposition Calhoun had drafted.
He also expressed his conception of nullification in a letter to Governor James Hamilton on August 28, 1832.

He declared that the Constitution preserved "the ascendancy of the constitution-making authority over the law-making -- the concurring over the absolute majority."

Soon Jackson and Calhoun were moving farther and farther apart. Finally, the Vice President resigned on December 28, 1832, to accept a seat as Senator from South Carolina.

Hopes burned strong among Calhoun's friends that he would yet reach the White House and in 1843 a biography was published for the campaign of 1844. An Alabama newspaper put Calhoun's name in its masthead, pointing out that his opinion was known on
the three great issues of the day -- the tariff, the annexation of Texas, and abolition.

Calhoun was a realist, however. He had written a friend as early as 1837/ acknowledging that his qualities which were most admired were also the qualities which would cause the most serious objections to his candidacy.

In April 1844, he requested that his name _not_ be presented to the convention.

But Calhoun was to be called again to serve as a representative of the Federal Government. As early as 1836, he had stated in the Senate/that he favored the eventual annexation of Texas to the United States. When Tyler became President, one of his most ardent desires was to bring about the annexation. Tyler offered the post of
Secretary of State to Calhoun in 1843 for him to work toward bringing Texas into the Union, but Calhoun declined, saying the time was not propitious.

Fate had a hand in what followed. An explosion on a ship in the Potomac in 1844 killed Secretary Upshur who had been chosen when Calhoun refused. Urged by a friend, President Tyler again called on Calhoun to take the cabinet post. The South Carolinian was confirmed unanimously by the Senate on March 6 without even having his name sent to a committee.

Calhoun was reluctant to return to Washington, but he could not resist the challenge of adding Texas to the Union. He viewed the annexation as a part of the manifest destiny of the young nation, as well as a chance to strengthen the position
of the South, and, in so doing, increase the likelihood of preserving the Union.

Even with Jackson helping in this project, the opposing forces were too strong. England and France fought the expansion of the United States. The slavery issue enraged the North, and even in the South the fear of war restrained support for annexation.

When Calhoun sent the treaty with Texas to the Senate for confirmation, only 16 Senators voted for ratification.

In spite of becoming seriously ill in February 1845, Calhoun continued to work toward bringing Texas into the Union. Realizing that it would be impossible to secure the necessary two-thirds in the Senate to ratify the treaty with Texas, he set about accomplishing his objective by another method.
He had a joint resolution introduced in the Congress and it was approved on March 1, 1845. With this mandate, President Tyler secured the agreement of his cabinet the next day. In the waning hours of the Tyler administration on March 3, 1845, the President and Secretary of State dispatched a message to Texas, officially inviting the Lone Star Republic to join the Union.

Again Calhoun had beneficially altered the course of American history.

He went home to South Carolina, proud of the result of his fight to annex Texas and eager to take up and enjoy country life at his home at Fort Hill, now a part of the Clemson College campus.

For six months his life was that of a father and plantation owner. Fort Hill was the stopping place of many famous persons.
of the day as they sought to learn Calhoun's views or to secure his advice.

The South Carolinian had no desire to return to public life. He wrote a friend that he would never have considered going back into the Senate except that he feared there might be war with England and that he might do something to stop it. His friends still nursed the hope that he could be a presidential candidate in 1848, acceptable to all sections.

Calhoun's interests encompassed the nation—peace, free trade, and a lower tariff for the South; raw materials out of the West for the North, and new land; and railroads, good ports, and union for the West. Unfortunately, his interest in all of the sections caused each to charge him
with having his interests inspired by presidential ambitions.

He opposed the war with Mexico/which raised the question of what the status would be of any new territory added/as a result of the war. Although the Wilmot Proviso was defeated in the Senate, Calhoun saw that its theme of preventing the further spread of slavery had won the country.

During 1847 and 1848, he preached the doctrines of moderatism and restraint in his Senate speeches. Bitterly he was attacked by enemies as the one responsible for the Mexican War/because he had brought about the annexation of Texas.

As the champion of States Rights, his appearance in those disturbed years created a sensation. Even a reference to him at a
public gathering in the South would set off wild applause in an audience.

As the conflict grew over the issues of the States versus the Federal Government, the end of an era was approaching for perhaps the greatest triumvirate in American political history. Calhoun, Clay, and Webster, all were growing old. As far apart as they were in their positions, they did seek a common objective: That was preservation of the Union.

Calhoun's health was failing fast. One contemporary said that "he lives in his mind with no thought of the body." He collapsed on the floor of the Senate on January 18, 1849, but insisted on being present again the next day.

Finally, on March 4, 1850, his last speech was read by Senator James Mason of
Virginia because Calhoun was too weak to read. He sat for two hours as Mason read. The questions he asked in that speech and the answers he gave were prophetic:

"How, then, can the Union be saved?" he asked. "...The North has only to will to accomplish it -- to do justice by conceding to the South an equal right in the acquired territory...to cease the agitation of the slavery question, and to provide...in the Constitution, by an amendment, which will restore to the South...the power she possessed of protecting herself, before the equilibrium between the sections was destroyed...If you who represent the stronger portion, cannot agree to settle them on the broad principle of justice and duty, say so, and let the States we both represent/agree to separate/and part in peace. If you are unwilling/we should part in peace, tell us so, and we shall know what to do, when you reduce the question to submission or resistance."
It was his final warning. Even then he was convinced that firmness on the part of the South would solve the question, either by Northern acceptance or by peaceful separation.

As the speech was finished, Webster and then Clay stepped to the side of Calhoun to show their respect. A few days later Calhoun forced himself from his death bed to be present when Webster delivered his Seventh of March speech. Calhoun even replied briefly, but his strength was gone and he died on March 31.

Calhoun formulated and voiced the views of his people. He led them and, at the same time, restrained them. His clarity of logic was matched only by his determination to do that which he believed he must do.
Many of his contributions to the nation have been forgotten, or passed over lightly. That is the reason I referred to them here. Calhoun should be remembered, first of all, for his force of character, even above intellectual power. As Senator Lodge put it: "He flinched from no conclusion."

As we today honor five of the men who have been outstanding in the history of our nation, let me quote Calhoun's expression of faith in our political system:

"I solemnly believe that our political system is, in its purity, not only the best that was ever formed, but the best possible that can be devised for us."

The fact that our system produced the five men selected by the Committee proves that Calhoun's estimate of our system is correct. - END -