



Contents

Acknowledgments vii

Introduction: John C. Calhoun and Classical
Republicanism i

1. The Republicanism of the *Disquisition* and
the *Discourse* 17

2. Calhoun's Early Republicanism 58

3. Power, Patronage, and Party Discipline:
Calhoun's Turn 79

4. A Conservative Reform: Calhoun and
Nullification 92

5. More Than Eulogies: Calhoun and the Preservation
of the Union 124

6. "A Southern Man and a Slaveholder": Calhoun's
Political Philosophy and Slavery 157

Conclusion: An Internal Critique 176



<i>Notes</i>	183
<i>Bibliography</i>	199
<i>Index</i>	205



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JOHN C. CALHOUN'S
THEORY OF REPUBLICANISM



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INTRODUCTION



John C. Calhoun and Classical Republicanism

During his lifetime, John C. Calhoun was recognized as a genuine American genius. The only major American statesman to write a purely theoretical treatise on government, his career was to some defined by a reliance on his rigorously logical and precise mind. So great was his reputation that upon his death, his fierce rival, Daniel Webster, spoke of the great power of his mind: “He was a man of undoubted genius and of commanding talent. All the country and all the world admit that. His mind was both perceptive and vigorous. It was clear, quick and strong . . . and when the time shall come that we ourselves shall go, one after another, in succession, to our graves, we shall carry with us a deep sense of his genius and character, his honor and integrity, his amiable deportment in private life, and the purity of his exalted patriotism.”¹

Yet many who study American political theory have seen Calhoun’s thought as confused and contradictory, and his career as dedicated to destroying the American Union. He is often dismissed as nothing more than a self-serving mouthpiece of elites or of the slave interest. His constitutional thought is often ridiculed, and he is sometimes, against all evidence, even considered to be the father of secession or a theorist of scientific racism. He is rarely considered alongside Madison, Hamilton, Jefferson, and Lincoln in the upper echelon of American statesmen-thinkers.²

This study aims to show that Calhoun's political thought represents an impressive attempt to revive a classical republican conception of politics and to place the American political system within that theoretical context. Understood in such a context, Calhoun comes to be seen as the "man of undoubted genius and commanding talent" described by Webster. Throughout his career, Calhoun analyzed the pressing political issues of the day with the purpose of recognizing the permanent and fundamental principles of politics. His understanding of those issues led him to reject the liberal understanding of the character and purpose of government so prominent in America and to return to an older, classical conception. Understanding Calhoun's classical outlook demonstrates a coherence in his political thinking and highlights his considerable contributions to understanding both the American polity and modern politics in classical republican terms.

Republicanism in American Political Thought

In the study of American political thought, few concepts are as vague and indefinite as republicanism. In the American context, republicanism is most associated with a group of pathbreaking twentieth-century historians. These historians, including Gordon Wood, Bernard Bailyn, J. G. A. Pocock, and Lance Banning, challenged the reigning consensus that the ideas of the American founding were almost exclusively a part of a modern liberal strain of thought originating with John Locke. This liberal consensus was epitomized by Louis Hartz and Carl Becker, who declared Locke to be a political gospel to America's founders. Without denying the presence of natural rights and social contract language, the republican scholars nevertheless found other elements that point to a broader tradition of political thought, which they termed classical republicanism. Classical republicanism, they argued, was formulated most precisely by English Whigs, including Harrington, Sidney, and Trenchard and Gordon—the latter the authors of *Cato's Letters* (1720–1723). But the Whigs drew on a tradition stretching back at least to Machiavelli, and indirectly as far back as Aristotle. Classical republicanism stressed the importance of cohesion within the body politic, the necessity of public virtue, and a salutary fear of factionalism and corruption. Lockean liberalism, at least insofar as it was interpreted as a form of possessive individualism, was a minor element of Revolutionary-era thought, dwarfed by the influence of Whig republicanism.³

The classical republican perspective has been challenged by many political theorists who have put forward a new liberal interpretation of the

founding, asserting that the earlier liberal view was largely correct: Lockean liberalism was in fact the most relevant and powerful political perspective of the Revolutionary era. These new liberals acknowledged that there were republican elements present at the founding, but they claimed that those elements were largely reinterpreted within a liberal framework and were used rhetorically for liberal purposes. In contrast to the republican historians, who typically studied the pervasive ideology and symbolism of the society, these new liberal theorists focused their attention primarily on the few great minds of the founding and on the more developed works of political theory. Thomas Pangle encapsulates the approach of many political theorists, especially of the Straussian variety, when he argues that the founding was “dominated by a small minority of geniuses who seized the initiative not merely by conciliating and reflecting common opinion, but also by spearheading new or uncommon opinion.” To understand the founding, therefore, one must look primarily to these few exceptional men and their more coherent and developed political thought. When one examines these developed works of political theory, moreover, one finds little evidence of classical republicanism.⁴

Leo Strauss set the stage for this critique of the republican synthesis in his review of Zera Fink’s 1945 *The Classical Republicans*, in which Strauss criticized Fink’s association of James Harrington and the English Whigs with classical political thought: “Harrington believed that the proper institutions would by themselves secure the state against dissolution from any internal causes. He could believe this because he held the opinion that the perfect character of the commonwealth is independent of the moral qualities of the citizens. He thereby rejected the view of the classical thinkers, who defined the constitution not only in terms of institutions, but primarily in terms of the aims actually pursued by the community.” In other words, the English Whigs and the American founders replaced classical republicanism’s emphasis on the moral virtue of citizenry with a new liberal republican vision of a collection of individuals held together by institutional arrangements. As the classical republican paradigm was applied to the American founding, students of Strauss offered similar criticisms of the synthesis.⁵

Elaborating on this perspective, Alan Gibson points to three broad theoretical differences between classical political theorists and English Whig republicans: human nature, the character of government, and the purpose of government. The ancient conception saw man as inherently political, reaching his full potential only as a part of a polis. The new republicans rejected this characterization, fully embracing the view of man put forward by

Locke and Hobbes as naturally independent of political bonds. Government was therefore created by contract for the purpose of protecting personal, independent rights. It was not, as the ancients held, a natural outgrowth of man's nature. This is not to suggest that English Whigs or American founders did not continue to use the rhetorical language of republicanism. Michael Zuckert in particular has convincingly demonstrated the ways in which the language of liberty, virtue, and the public good was utilized but reinterpreted to fit a basically liberal model of political life. While they maintained classical fears of political corruption and standing armies, and while they continued to value a kind of public virtue, these modern republicans broke completely from the ancients in their basic outlook on the purpose of government. Given this radical change, it is deceptive to suggest that the social contract liberals were just one iteration of classical republicanism, or that the language of virtue, liberty, and self-government meant the same thing to Whigs and Americans as it did to Aristotle or Cicero. They entirely redirected the language of republicanism to thoroughly individualist ends.⁶

A few scholars have attempted to demonstrate a more direct connection between the ancients and early America. In two separate works, Carl J. Richard has argued, against this liberal interpretation, that the classics exerted regular influence on both the founders and the second generation of American statesmen. Pointing to the common education requirements of the time as well as to the citations of founding statesmen, he sees the classics as a source of symbolism, examples, and theoretical insight for the most prominent American statesmen. Similarly, Mortimer Sellers argues that the American Constitution and its founders were meaningfully influenced by Roman republican ideals. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese likewise demonstrate the extent to which the classics remained an important source of knowledge and symbolism throughout the South through much of the nineteenth century. However, such views are a minority of the scholarly literature, and they do not adequately refute the arguments of Zuckert and the other new liberals who continue to focus not on pervasive ideology or common understanding but rather on developed works of political theory, which seem to have little or no theoretical kinship to ancient political thought. However, such a demonstration of Americans' reliance on ancient influences raises a valid question: do the liberal innovations of the few leading founders entirely define the bounds of American political thought? The founders themselves did not necessarily see such a conscious divide between liberalism and republicanism as twentieth- and twenty-first-century scholars. Most scholars recognize that some forms of both liberalism and clas-

sical republicanism were pervasive in the language of the founding. While many of the founders may have reinterpreted classical republican language, they nevertheless felt the need to continue to use it, indicating that such classical concepts continued to be a part of the inherited American political tradition. This leads to a further question: were the classical themes that were obviously present in the ideology, education, and standards of early America ever formulated into a more comprehensive and rigorous political theory?⁷

In the chapters that follow, we will engage John C. Calhoun's theory of the concurrent majority as a unique and powerful attempt to elaborate on the republican themes that were thoroughly engrained in early American political consciousness but that were rarely developed by serious political thinkers. While the founders generally reinterpreted these ideas, or relegated them to rhetorical use within their political thought, Calhoun developed his political theory on an essentially classical republican basis. In doing so, he not only utilized the language and ideology of Whig republicanism but also attempted to revive a genuinely classical perspective on the origin and purpose of government, on human nature, on statesmanship, and on constitutionalism. Just as the founders incorporated some republican concepts into a larger liberal framework, so Calhoun utilized some liberal ideas, including the language of minority rights and a federal compact, in his thought. This language is fully incorporated into an overarching theory based on classical republican principles.

It is of considerable importance for this study, then, to clearly define how the term "classical republicanism" should be used. As has been noted, while the scholars of classical republicanism claimed to trace the roots of the ideology to ancient political theorists, they rarely made any direct connections to Aristotle, Cicero, Polybius, or other ancient thinkers. As we have further seen, this connection to the ancients has been challenged by many political theorists questioning just how "classical" classical republicanism is. For the purposes of this work, we shall take as a given the new liberal political theorists' position that to meaningfully use the phrase, one must not merely show that a work makes use of republican language like virtue, corruption, and harmony, but must also show that there is a theoretical underpinning that is genuinely classical. In using the term "classical republicanism," therefore, we will insist on a narrow definition. It must reflect the broad outlook of ancient political theory on the origin and purpose of politics and its relationship to human nature. Thus, in arguing that the concurrent majority was an iteration of classical republicanism, we suggest that it not

only reflected many themes of Whig and early American republicanism but also sprang from an understanding of the origin and purpose of politics that is definitively classical.

When speaking of Calhoun's political thought as part of the classical republican tradition, then, we refer to the basic character of the principles upon which his political theory is based, not merely his casual rhetoric. There is no absolute conception of classical republicanism, but it consists of at least some basic qualities and rejects the innovations of the new, modern republicanism outlined by Zuckert and others. First, classical republicanism considers the political state to be natural in some essential way. Political right is determined not by considering man in his individual capacity but in his role as a citizen of a particular community. The political community is considered to be man's natural condition and in some essential way takes precedence over purely individual desires or interests. Meaningful participation in politics by as many citizens as possible is therefore desirable if it is safe, and tyranny, which prevents any kind of popular participation, is the least desirable form of government. Because the individual is not taken as an autonomous, independent entity, he possesses no absolute right to individual liberty or autonomy, but rather is bound to and by the community into which he is born.

Second, classical republican political thought concerns itself with civic virtue and the prerequisites for free government. While both positive and negative liberty are desirable, they are not always safe to be implemented in all contexts. If the people do not possess the requisite moral and intellectual virtue, popular government will fail and will likely devolve into tyranny. Citizens must be capable of ruling themselves and acting in the best interests of the entire community. This point also applies to the character of political leaders. Institutions alone are incapable of making up for the absence of virtuous and capable statesmen. Third, republican political thought is cognizant of the danger that accompanies significant cleavages within a society. The primary goal of republican constitutionalism, therefore, is to structure society and law in such a way that harmony can prevail in a society that contains potentially rival elements and rival claims, particularly through the idea of mixed government. It is in this sense that a republican political theorist may speak of the health of the political community.

These three points are only a basic outline. From the first point comes the common republican fear of corruption among representatives, which characterizes the work of Bailyn and Wood in reference to Whig republicanism. From the second point comes Jeffersonian pastoralism and the concern for

a virtuous citizenry. From the third point come the famous teachings on mixed government. These points should be uncontroversial; they permeate the writings of the Greeks and Romans and would exert some influence on Florentine, British Whig, and aspects of American political thought even as these later iterations deemphasized some elements and added new ones. Chapter 1 will consider these elements in more detail within the context of Calhoun's political theory and will demonstrate the ways in which Calhoun was emulating ancient republican thinkers.

Calhoun and Classical Republicanism

Just before the publication of the *Disquisition on Government*, James Henry Hammond, the former governor of South Carolina, wrote to Calhoun in anticipation of the forthcoming work. His expectation was that Calhoun would take an essentially liberal view:

I am extremely anxious to see your Book on Government. I trust you have taken the ground that the fundamental object of Government is to secure the fruits of labour and skill—that is to say property, and that its forms must be moulded upon the social organization . . . “Free Government” and all that sort of thing has been I think a fatal delusion and humbug from the time of Moses. Freedom does not spring from Government.

While Hammond anticipated correctly on certain points (Calhoun would argue that the forms of government must “be moulded upon the social organization” and that government was obligated to secure property rights), he would likely have been disappointed by the basis of Calhoun's political theory. Calhoun argued vigorously for the “humbug” of free government; he argued that government was natural to man's condition and that well-constructed republican governments make better citizens and foster human virtue. Orestes A. Brownson, another (and perhaps more insightful) friend and frequent interlocutor of Calhoun, actually credited Calhoun with purging him of any remaining belief that “all government is an evil.”⁸

However, while Calhoun defended free government as natural and good, he understood the tendency of republican government to decline into absolute government—an evil surpassed only by that of anarchy. As he was formulating his theory of state interposition, he wrote to his ally, Micah Sterling, warning of the corruption seeping into the American political system:

“The richest body becomes the most putrid in a decayed state, so the best system, if the vital principle departs, becomes the most corrupt.” Clearly echoing the republican concerns of public corruption, Calhoun encapsulated what his political thought would amount to: an attempt to understand and reinvigorate the “vital principle” of the American constitutional system. His political theory is best viewed as an attempt to understand and improve the American political community in conceptual terms derived from the classical republican tradition.⁹

By linking Calhoun to the republican tradition, we do not intend to demonstrate that he actively sought to imitate any particular thinker. Such a claim would be almost impossible to verify for any thinker, but especially for Calhoun, who spoke so sparingly of his philosophic influences. We only seek to demonstrate that Calhoun’s political theory belongs within a certain category, that it reflects the themes of classical republicanism, and that it begins with similar assumptions about the human condition. The classical elements that many scholars have demonstrated are missing from the Whig republicanism of the founding era are present in Calhoun’s thought. We will argue that Calhoun’s thought reflects a republican teaching that can be distilled into five broad themes, as follows.

1. *Mankind’s natural sociality*.—Man is by nature social. His highest moral and intellectual fulfillment comes about only in a common life with others, and God has implanted in him natural inclinations toward society.
2. *Civic virtue*.—Free governments require a morally and intellectually virtuous citizenry as well as virtuous statesmen. Because man’s individual sentiments incline him to look only to his own interests, the great problem of politics is the question of how to inculcate this necessary virtue. This should be seen as the ultimate end of Calhoun’s political theory.
3. *The problem of heterogeneity*.—For society to fulfill its role, there must be a degree of harmony within it. Heterogeneity of interests and sentiments is the primary barrier to such harmony because it leads to unequal actions of government.
4. *The concurrent majority*.—To achieve the high and difficult aims of republican government, a diverse community must be made more harmonious by giving to each major section a concurrent role in the action of government or a veto upon its action. With such a defense in place, virtue is habituated and vice is prevented. Man’s social sentiments

may flourish, and no section of the community can pervert the powers of government for its own end.

5. *Organic development*.—Constitutions are not generally made but must “spring from the bosom of the community” through an organic process. There is a degree of individual choice and deliberation when it comes to the establishment of a constitution, but any prudent human action is constrained by history and circumstance. Thus, constitutions reflect the social orders and interests within the society they serve. Such constitutional development is typically the result of a wise and prudent statesman managing and redirecting a constitutional crisis.¹⁰

Points 1 and 2 correspond to the first two elements of classical republicanism outlined above. Points 3 to 5 are all extrapolations from the third element of classical republicanism—the problem of factionalism. Finding these themes in Calhoun’s major works makes it clear that he is best seen as a classical republican; he sees man as naturally social and political, and he is primarily concerned with the development of civic virtue and the harmony of the body politic.

The content of Calhoun’s library is unknown, so it cannot be precisely known whom he had and had not read. Reasonable speculations can be made, however, on the basis of his education, correspondence, and citations. From this evidence it is clear that he read and respected the classics of political thought, especially Aristotle, and was well versed in classical history. He was classically educated, though his formal, systematic education began late in his youth. In preparation for his studies at Yale, he attended Moses Wad- del’s preparatory school, which produced countless Southern leaders. The school, according to Calhoun biographer William Meigs, was “a classical school, and quite devoid of the modern multiplicity of studies.” Here he was introduced to Latin and Greek, “memorizing thousands upon thousands of lines of Virgil, Horace, and Cicero.” At Yale, Calhoun studied “Rhetoric, Ethics, Logic, Metaphysics, history of Civil Society and Theology.” It is well documented that he honed his political thinking under (and against) Federalist Timothy Dwight. Though severe illness prevented him from participating, he was selected to read an oration at his commencement on the topic of “the qualifications necessary to constitute an ideal statesman.”¹¹

The *Disquisition on Government* and *Discourse on the Constitution* noticeably make almost no references to previous political thinkers, and Calhoun’s speeches are likewise sparse. He clearly preferred to rely on his own analytical skills and to cite historical examples. At various times in

his speeches, Calhoun cites Cicero, Demosthenes, Polybius, and Plutarch. In a letter, he recommends Aristotle as among the best political thinkers. He clearly valued Burke—perhaps the most classically oriented of modern Whigs—as one of the greatest political thinkers of modern times and cited him consistently throughout his career. Aside from his regular citations of classical history, his continuing respect for the classics is also evidenced by his strong desire to see his grandchildren succeed in and enjoy their Latin and Greek studies.¹²

Calhoun's political thought is not generally situated by scholars within the republican tradition. Many scholars view it through the lens of liberal institutionalism. They see the concurrent majority as a system of government to be implemented for the protection of particular rights. These scholars generally acknowledge that Calhoun is difficult to label, but his emphasis on rights and the constitutional compact led them to hold that he is best approached as a part of the liberal tradition. Baskin, for instance, argues that "Calhoun may deny a state of individuality as existing . . . prior to man's political obligation, but he proceeds to argue nonetheless along the lines of natural right and possessive individuality." This approach leads to several problems. First, Calhoun vocally rejected many aspects of the liberal tradition, including the natural equality of man, the state of nature, and the idea that society and government come about by free choice. As such, many scholars approaching Calhoun as a liberal must treat him as irredeemably confused. Louis Hartz is the most striking example of this. Hartz holds that Calhoun desperately wished to be a conservative but was trapped by his liberal American context. As such, he embraced liberal ideas about balancing government and a constitutional compact while rejecting the liberal basis for his theories. Harry Jaffa presents a similarly confused Calhoun who bases his political theory on a powerful individualism, yet insists that individuals have absolute duties to the state. His arguments for limited government are theoretically empty, Jaffa argues, because he denies the existence of a state of nature and thereby natural rights.¹³

Another problem that arises from viewing Calhoun through a liberal paradigm is a tendency to place an inordinate emphasis on the constitutional mechanisms that support the concurrent majority. According to some of these scholars, for instance, Calhoun's political thought is based simply on the individual right of slaveholders to be secure in their property. As such, it boils down to little more than the creation of constitutional mechanisms that obstruct the national government to such a great extent that no threat to slavery could ever be feared. Taken out of their republican context, these

defensive mechanisms are seen as a hindrance to popular government. This view not only denies that the republican paradigm is the best for studying Calhoun but also holds that Calhoun was decidedly antirepublican because he actively sought to inhibit popular rule by making government so limited as to be ineffective. A more moderate version of this argument acknowledges that Calhoun saw the concurrent majority as more than simply constitutional checks, but it nevertheless claims that his pretensions to republicanism fall flat, leaving nothing but a mechanistic balance of interests.¹⁴

Almost all scholars from the liberal camp of Calhoun scholarship make the same key mistake when interpreting the *Disquisition on Government*. Calhoun bases his work on the observation that man is at the same time naturally social (he requires society with others for his moral, intellectual, and material perfection) and naturally selfish (he has a tendency to favor his own well-being over that of others). The liberal scholars focus inordinately on the second of these propositions. Calhoun presents man's selfishness as the cause of political problems. It is why society requires government, and it is why the people cannot trust a government to fulfill its duties impartially. Much of Calhoun's reasoning, therefore, is devoted to overcoming the problems that arise from this natural selfishness. However, all of these remedies must be viewed in light of the fact that they are an attempt to encourage man's feeble yet all-important social inclinations. By ignoring or dismissing Calhoun's position on the primacy of mankind's natural sociality, the liberal camp can easily paint him as an individualist who operates under the same assumption as Hobbes or Locke.

A final problem with the liberal approach is a tendency to view Calhoun's political thought as a model for government—that is, as a blueprint for constitutions that could be applied to any society. However, in the vein of Aristotle or Cicero, Calhoun did not attempt such a model but rather elaborated on the basic elements and characteristics of free governments in the *Disquisition*, then considered how they were reflected, in some ways imperfectly, within the American constitutional system in the *Discourse*. Critiques centered on the impracticality of Calhoun's system, therefore, have only limited applicability. Calhoun is open with the fact that concurrent regimes are rare, difficult to form, and prone to corruption. However, he claimed, such was the nature of free governments. By reading Calhoun as if he were putting forward a constitutional blueprint that would solve the eternal problems of governance, liberal interpreters inevitably conclude that the concurrent majority is too impractical to be worthy of genuine consideration.¹⁵

A second group of scholars prefers to view Calhoun as neither a liberal

nor a republican but rather as a class theorist. This is perhaps the least convincing paradigm. These scholars, most notably Hofstadter and Current, often ignore essential aspects of Calhoun's thought, focusing on just a few lines from practical speeches that tend to support this thesis and bypassing most of the arguments made in his two systematic works. Hofstadter and Current both assert that class warfare was central to Calhoun's political theory—that the ultimate aim of his political thought was the domination of blacks and poor whites by a coalition of the elite planter aristocracy and Northern capitalists. This leads Hofstadter to famously dub Calhoun “the Marx of the master class.” While Calhoun did highlight economic interests at times, it was but one cleavage among many that he saw as a threat to republican government. It is of note that economics does not play a major role in the *Disquisition*—a fact overlooked by those who label Calhoun as a class theorist.¹⁶

A common theme of the liberal and class theorist explanations is their tendency to view Calhoun's political thought as little more than an historical curiosity. Jaffa, for instance, studies Calhoun merely to understand the political ideas refuted by Lincoln. Hartz, because he sees Calhoun as incoherent and inconsistent with the American tradition, sees little of value in his political theory. James Read recognizes the considerable theoretical depth of Calhoun's political thought, but he ultimately concludes that it is unworkable and in some ways dependent on arbitrary distinctions, and therefore has limited relevance. Hofstadter and Current, though they praise Calhoun for being ahead of his time in terms of class analysis, nevertheless treat him as out of step with the American tradition and in many ways a reactionary; they claim his class analysis was largely designed for the suppression of the lower classes, both free and slave. Because these paradigms, to a greater or lesser extent, distort Calhoun's teaching, they do not fully appreciate his insight and contribution to republican theory and the American political tradition.¹⁷

A third way in which Calhoun is often studied is as an organic conservative. This approach is valid but does not provide as thorough a picture of Calhoun's thought as the republican paradigm. Kirk, Viereck, and Rossiter are the most representative of this approach. Their approach emphasizes Calhoun's rejection of the state of nature, reliance on prescribed rights, and the importance of history and circumstance. These points are a necessary corrective to the liberal approach to Calhoun, but they do not do justice to the whole of Calhoun's theory. Calhoun's teachings on civic virtue, representation, homogeneity, and the purpose of government are all appreciated

best when viewed primarily from a republican perspective. Calhoun's political theory undoubtedly has an essentially conservative element, but that element is best explored as one aspect of a broader understanding.¹⁸

The republican perspective has not been ignored by many Calhoun scholars. August O. Spain offers a worthwhile overview of Calhoun's political thought, but he often fails to examine many of the contentious issues within Calhoun scholarship. J. William Harris and Zoltan Vajda place Calhoun within a republican paradigm defined by J. G. A. Pocock. Pauline Maier treats Calhoun in the context of America's opposition ideology and focuses on the way in which Calhoun's nullification sought to strengthen, not destroy, the Union. Lacy K. Ford Jr. treats the concurrent majority as a thoughtful, republican corrective to the political theory of Madison. Clyde N. Wilson, the compiler of Calhoun's papers, generally treats Calhoun as a statesman acting on the basis of classical republican ideas of statesmanship. Cheek offers the most valuable book-length analysis of the *Disquisition* and *Discourse*, challenging the received view that Calhoun was an opponent of popular rule. Cheek presents the concurrent majority not as a mechanistic tool intended to stifle discourse and thwart majority rule but rather as one that encourages popular rule. Cheek's work, however, focuses primarily on the mature Calhoun of the *Disquisition* and *Discourse*; although he does address many other writings, he does not devote equivalent attention to earlier writings. This work will examine the way in which this mature political thought developed throughout Calhoun's public life.¹⁹

Nearly all the scholars who treat Calhoun as a republican take their bearing in some way from the historians of the republican synthesis. Cheek, echoing Pocock, speaks of a South Atlantic republican tradition centered on popular rule. Wilson and Ford both take a similar approach to Cheek. Harris and Vajda explicitly place Calhoun in a Pocockean paradigm. While these are all useful approaches, one significant problem arises. Aside from Burke, Calhoun almost never cites the theorists of the English Whig tradition that informs the republican synthesis literature. As such, it is reasonable to suggest that Calhoun is best viewed as part of a classical republican tradition stretching to the ancients, whom he cited more regularly. Not all scholars ignore his classical influences. Spain, Cheek, and Meier in particular point to classical themes in Calhoun's work, and Vernon Parrington, in a short treatment, provides a classical interpretation of Calhoun: "The Greeks, [Calhoun] pointed out, understood [democracy's] essential nature better than the moderns. Democracy assumes a co-partnership among equals. Its only rational foundation is good will, and it can function only

through compromise.” While Parrington somewhat misapplies this insight in his analysis, it nevertheless is a succinct statement of the basic classical republican interpretation. This work will build on these treatments by analyzing the republican themes as they developed throughout Calhoun’s life.²⁰

These latter two categories often treat Calhoun’s political thought more seriously. When viewed as conservative and as republican, Calhoun’s theory comes to light as the work of a serious thinker, not simply as a rationalization of slaveholding or the product of personal ambition. By taking its place in this last category, this work will seek to demonstrate throughout that Calhoun was a legitimate political thinker of a high order. His personal experience as a Southern statesman undoubtedly played a major role in the development of his thought, but that thought represents a genuine attempt to extract from the tumultuous circumstances in which he operated meaningful theoretical insights on political life more broadly. Unlike most of the previous studies of Calhoun’s republicanism, however, this study will pay special attention to many writings that are often overlooked, highlighting the unity and development of his thought over time, and will explicitly elaborate on its classical character.

The ultimate purpose of the work is twofold. First, it will better explicate Calhoun’s political theory by placing it within the classical republican context. This leads to a better appreciation of the unity and coherence of his thought, and it demonstrates the ways in which his political thought was a powerful critique of and corrective to the individualism that pervaded most of American political theory. Second, the work will demonstrate the way in which his thought developed from an inherited republican ideology to a comprehensive theory of politics as he learned from the turbulent political issues of his time. Calhoun will emerge as a thinker who meaningfully questioned the dominant strains of American political theory but who applied his understanding of politics to a constitutional structure inherited from the American political experience.

In outlining a more complete and accurate account of Calhoun’s political theory, the work will serve, to a certain extent, as a defense of Calhoun as a political thinker. It will demonstrate that Calhoun’s thought was not incoherent, deluded, or generally hypocritical, and that he was an impressive political theorist, worthy of being considered in the pantheon of American political thinkers alongside Madison, Hamilton, Lincoln, and others. However, although the work will serve as a kind of defense, it is not an unqualified one. Calhoun sometimes used his impressive mind for causes that were worthy, but he also used this talent to vigorously defend slavery. In this

respect, Calhoun cannot be defended. It is foolish, however, to dismiss his considerable insights into political life and community because of his connection with slavery unless it can be demonstrated that slavery was not just an object of his attention but a centerpiece of his political thought. As this work traces the development of Calhoun's thought, we will see that the idea of the concurrent majority was developed well before slavery dominated the national agenda. We will also consider how one ought to go about assessing the relationship between Calhoun qua political philosopher and Calhoun qua practical statesman. As we shall see, Calhoun's political theory placed heavy emphasis on the need for high-quality statesmanship capable of using practical judgment to discern the way in which basic principles apply to a specific time, place, and circumstance. The political theorist could never make sweeping declarations of laws or policies that are right and correct in all times and all places. There was no single constitutional structure that would fit all circumstances; there was no absolute or natural limit to the powers of government; and there were no absolute natural rights unconnected to historical circumstance. All these things must be determined by the prudent statesmanship of individuals operating within a definite historical horizon. It is only natural, therefore, that an interpreter ought to make a similar division when assessing Calhoun, who strove to be both a political theorist and a statesman. The specific political and constitutional positions he took in his career—whether it be state nullification, the balance between the legislature and presidency, or his attack on abolitionism—may be examples of how Calhoun the statesman applied his general principles, but they should not be mistaken for the principles themselves. Further, while Calhoun often displayed considerable ability in statecraft, his moral vision was clearly limited in many respects. As such, this work examines his political rhetoric on such issues not to defend the rectitude of any specific practical arguments but rather as an example of the way in which he attempted to apply general principles to specific issues.

The first chapter analyzes the teaching of the *Disquisition on Government* and the *Discourse on the Constitution and Government of the United States*. It defends the claim that Calhoun's developed thought was within the classical republican tradition and addresses how one ought to examine Calhoun's examination of the American Constitution found in the *Discourse* in relation to the political philosophy found in the *Disquisition*. Chapter 2 examines Calhoun's time in the House of Representatives at the beginning of his career in national politics. These speeches show a basic republican ideology that had not yet been formulated into a coherent and deep political

theory. Chapter 3 explores the origins of Calhoun's turn to the states' rights position during the 1820s, focusing on an analysis of the "Patrick Henry"–"Onslow" debate. This chapter demonstrates that Calhoun abandoned his qualified nationalist positions not out of a concern for slavery but as he witnessed the rise of organized political parties and the competition, hatred, and corruption necessarily spawned by their existence. Chapter 4 examines Calhoun's doctrine of nullification, emphasizing the ways in which it was intended to restore what he believed to be the foundational principles of the Union. Chapter 5 explores the ways in which Calhoun applied his political theory to the various issues he faced during his political career, including questions of constitutional structure (at both the national and state levels), the national bank, protectionism, and the constitutional arguments surrounding abolitionism and slavery in the federal territories. Finally, Chapter 6 examines Calhoun's defense of slavery and the relationship between slavery and his political theory. Throughout these chapters, we will see the development of a political theory at odds with the typical classical liberalism of most American political thinkers of the age. Yet in its practical application, Calhoun attempted to embed his principles into American history, ideas, and institutions.

