THE AMERICAN TRIUMVIRATE
John C. Calhoun: First Part

FIVE

The genius of John C. Calhoun has been compared to cold, clear, frosty starlight. His intellect was calm and his logic pitiless and cold. He had an unswerving belief in the innate righteousness and justice of slavery. John Caldwell Calhoun was born in the Abbeville district in South Carolina, on March 18, 1782.

His father died when John was only thirteen years old. The boy studied under a tutor until he was ready to enter Yale in 1802. He graduated in 1804 with honors.

He then studied law at the famous school in Litchfield, Connecticut, and in South Carolina, being admitted to the bar in 1807. The first mutterings of the War of 1812 with Great Britain were just beginning to be heard. Calhoun was an ardent patriot, and he was one of the committee of citizens of South Carolina to draw up an indignant protest denouncing the British outrage on the American frigate Chesapeake in 1807.

Calhoun was soon elected to the Legislature and then to Congress. He entered the House of Representatives in November, 1811, and was a member of this House until 1817. Henry Clay, Speaker of the House, being eager for war and feeling Calhoun’s hostility to Great Britain, placed him on the Committee of Foreign Affairs, of which he soon became the actual head. Calhoun drew up resolutions recommending preparations for a war with England, and also submitted a report urging a formal declaration of war. Both sets of resolutions were adopted.

President Monroe made Calhoun Secretary of War in 1817, a position which he filled until 1825. He reorganized the Military Academy at West Point, and it is said that the impress of his genius is felt to this day. Calhoun was elected Vice-President in 1824, and served during the administration of John Quincy Adams, and during most of the first administration of Andrew Jackson. A biographer describes him at this time: “His countenance at rest was strikingly marked by decision and firmness; in conversation, or when speaking, it became highly animated and expressive. His large, dark, brilliant, penetrating eyes strongly impressed all who encountered their glances. When addressing the Senate he stood firm, erect, acco npanyng his delivery with an angular gesticulation. His manner of speaking was energetic, ardent, and rapid, and marked by a solemn earnestness which inspired a strong belief in his sincerity and deep conviction. He very rarely indulged in figures of speech, and seldom left any doubt as to his meaning.”

In the meantime, one of the most important events of Calhoun’s life had taken place. A part of the North was in favor of a protective tariff, because of the manufacturing in that section. The Southern States, however, which were strictly agricultural, felt the burden of an increased tariff without deriving any of its benefits.

The South, therefore, was discontented with the tariff bill of 1828, called “The Bill of Abomination.” He represented this sentiment, urged the doctrine of nullification. Briefly, this amounted to the theory that one State, by a majority vote of its citizens, could nullify within its borders any act passed by the federal government. In other words, Calhoun and his followers believed that South Carolina need not submit to the protective tariff. The South believed that the Union was a league of States, each State being sovereign and independent.

Calhoun, as a member of the Cabinet when Jackson, as general in the United States army, was operating against the Seminole Indians, had criticized his conduct as reckless. This criticism was revealed to Jackson in April, 1830. In addition to this, Calhoun and his wife, among other members of Washington society, had refused to recognize Mrs. Eaton, the wife of Senator Eaton, whose conduct had brought scandal upon herself and her husband. Jackson attempted to force the members of his Cabinet and Vice-President Calhoun to receive Mrs. Eaton on terms of favor. He regarded as his enemy every man who would not accept her. Calhoun was one of these, and Jackson thenceforth was his bitterest foe. Every particle of influence that he had was thrown against Calhoun and in favor, later, of Martin Van Buren, who was Secretary of State and became President in 1836.

Calhoun resigned as Vice-President, and took his seat in the Senate to fight the question there. The result was the Compromise Tariff of 1833, which satisfied South Carolina.

Both for reasons of state and for personal reasons, Calhoun was ready to head a movement against the tariff. In 1828 he wrote a famous argument called The South Carolina Exposition. In 1832 he urged a State Convention in South Carolina which declared the tariff acts to be null and void.

Southern leaders were now beginning to see that there was to be a permanent conflict between the North and the South. This came to turn finally on the institution of slavery. Calhoun was the leader of the Southern interests, and he saw that if enough free States were admitted into the Union, the balance of power would be destroyed. The North already had a majority in the House of Representatives, and they would then have a majority in the Senate also. It was his duty, Calhoun thought, to prevent this at all costs.