

John C. Calhoun Sees Slavery as a "Positive Good" (1837)

Senator John C. Calhoun made the following remarks in the United States Senate on February 6, 1837. As you read then, determine why Calhoun believed slavery was a "positive good."

I believe when two races come together which have different origins, colors, and physical and intellectual characteristics, that slavery is, instead of an evil, a good, a positive good. I must freely upon the subject, for the honor and interests of those I represent are involved. I maintain then, that a wealthy and civilized society has never existed in which one part of the community did not, in fact, live on the labor of others. Broad and general as this assertion is, history supports it. It would be easy to trace the various ways by which the wealth of all civilized communities has been divided unequally. It would also be easy to show how a small share has been allotted to those by whose labor it was produced and a large share given to the nonproducing classes. Innumerable methods have been used to distribute wealth unequally. In ancient times, brute force was used; in modern times, various financial contrivance (schemes) are used.

I will now compare the position of the African laborer in the South with that of the European worker. I may say with truth that in few countries has so much been left to the laborer's share, and so little expected from him, or where more kind attention is paid to him when he is sick or old. Compare the slaves' condition with that of the tenants of the poorhouse in the more civilized parts of Europe.

I will not dwell on this aspect of the question; rather I will turn to the political issue. Here I fearlessly assert that the existing relationship between the two races in the South, against which these blind fanatics (abolitionists) are waging war, forms the most solid and durable foundation on which to build free and stable political institutions. The fact cannot be disguised that there is

and always has been, in an advanced stage of wealth and civilization; a conflict between labor and capital. Slavery exempts Southern society from the disorders and dangers resulting from this conflict. This explains why the political condition of the slaveholding States has been so much more stable and quiet than that of the North.

Richard K. Cralle (ed.), Works of John C. Calhoun (1856). pp. 631-32