



Excerpt of John C. Calhoun's Speech on Oregon Bill (Error of "All men are created equal" speech)

June 27, 1848

Source: Teaching American History <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/speech-on-the-oregon-bill-3/>

Introduction written by David Tucker of Teaching American History

Shortly before his death in 1850, John C. Calhoun (b. 1782) delivered one of his last major speeches in the U.S. Senate. The subject was the Oregon Bill, which organized the territory of Oregon on antislavery principles. Calhoun argued against the bill on the grounds that because the territories are the property of all the states, any attempt by a northern majority to deprive the southern minority of the right to emigrate, with their slaves, into the territory violated the rights of slaveholders. The argument was consistent with Calhoun's long-standing view that states were equal in sovereignty to the federal government and therefore had the right to nullify federal laws and leave the Union if a majority of states sought to deprive a state of any of its rights.

In this speech Calhoun, a Democrat, made clear how thoroughly he rejected the claim in the Declaration of Independence that all men are created equal. In doing so he also made clear how powerful the Declaration was as an antislavery document, and therefore how much of a problem it created for supporters of slavery. Its fundamental premise—human equality—and its corollaries—among them, the state of nature, individual liberty, and consent as the only legitimate basis for rule—were utterly destructive of slavery and all despotism. Calhoun asserted that the declaration of human equality was not necessary to claim independence

from Britain, which was true. But Lincoln spoke more truthfully when he wrote in 1859 “all honor to Jefferson—to the man who, in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence by a single people, had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times, and so to embalm it there, that today, and in all coming days, it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling-block to the very harbingers of reappearing tyranny and oppression.”

Calhoun represented not only South Carolina but an increasingly popular view in the South and among some pro-southern northerners. His defense of slavery and states’ rights rested uneasily, to say the least, alongside the Democratic Party’s support for equality and its attack on privilege. Prior to the Civil War, the Democratic Party was torn apart by such contradictions, as were the northern and southern wings of the Whig Party. The Democratic Party did not deal with this divided legacy for more than one hundred years after Calhoun’s death.

Now, let me say, senators, if our Union and system of government are doomed to perish, and we to share the fate of so many great people who have gone before us, the historian, who, in some future day may record the events ending in so calamitous a result, will devote his first chapter to the ordinance of 1787,¹ lauded as it and its authors have been, as the first of that series which led to it. His next chapter will be devoted to the Missouri Compromise,² and the next to the present agitation. Whether there will be another beyond, I know not. It will depend on what we may do.

If he should possess a philosophical turn of mind, and be disposed to look to more remote and recondite causes, he will trace it to a proposition which originated in a hypothetical truism, but which, as now expressed and now understood, is the most false and dangerous of all political errors. The proposition to which I allude, has become an axiom in the minds of a vast majority on both sides of the Atlantic, and is repeated daily from tongue to tongue, as an established and incontrovertible truth; it is, that “all men are born free and equal.”³ I am not afraid to attack error, however deeply it may be entrenched, or however widely extended, whenever it becomes my duty to do so, as I believe it to be on this subject and occasion.

Taking the proposition literally (it is in that sense it is understood), there is not a word of truth in it. It begins with “all men are born,” which is utterly untrue. Men are not born. Infants are born. They grow to be men. And concludes with asserting that they are born “free and equal,” which is not less false. They are not born free. While infants they are incapable of freedom, being destitute alike of the capacity of thinking and acting, without which there can be no freedom. Besides, they are necessarily born subject to their parents, and remain so among all people, savage and civilized, until the development of their intellect and physical capacity enables them to take care of themselves. They grow to all the freedom of which the condition in which they were born permits, by growing to be men. Nor is it less false that they are born “equal.” They are not so in any sense in which it can be regarded; and thus, as I have asserted, there is not a word of truth in the whole proposition, as expressed and generally understood.

If we trace it back, we shall find the proposition differently expressed in the Declaration of Independence. That asserts that “all men are created equal.” The form of expression, though less dangerous, is not less erroneous. All men are not created. According to the Bible, only two, a man and a woman, ever were, and of these one was pronounced subordinate to the other. All others have come into the world by being born, and in no sense, as I have shown, either free or equal. But this form of expression being less striking and popular, has given way to the present, and under the authority of a document put forth on so great an occasion, and leading to such important consequences, has spread far and wide, and fixed itself deeply in the public mind. It was inserted in our Declaration of Independence without any necessity. It made no necessary part of our justification in separating from the parent country, and declaring ourselves independent. Breach of our chartered privileges, and lawless encroachment on our acknowledged and well-established rights by the parent country, were the real causes, and of themselves sufficient, without resorting to any other, to justify the step. Nor had it any weight in constructing the governments which were substituted in the place of the colonial. They were formed of the old materials and on practical and well-established principles, borrowed for the most part from our own experience and that of the country from which we sprang.

If the proposition be traced still further back, it will be found to have been adopted from certain writers on government who had attained much celebrity in the early settlement of these states, and

with whose writings all the prominent actors in our revolution were familiar. Among these, [John] Locke and [Algernon] Sydney⁴ were prominent. But they expressed it very differently. According to their expression, “all men in the state of nature were free and equal.” . . .

. . . But it is equally clear, that man cannot exist in such a state; that he is by nature social, and that society is necessary, not only to the proper development of all his faculties, moral and intellectual, but to the very existence of his race. Such being the case, the state is a purely hypothetical one; and when we say all men are free and equal in it, we announce a mere hypothetical truism; that is, a truism resting on a mere supposition that cannot exist, and of course one of little or no practical value.

But to call it a state of nature was a great misnomer, and has led to dangerous errors; for that cannot justly be called a state of nature which is so opposed to the constitution of man as to be inconsistent with the existence of his race and the development of the high faculties, mental and moral, with which he is endowed by his Creator.

Nor is the social state of itself his natural state; for society can no more exist without government, in one form or another, than man without society. It is the political, then, which includes the social, that is his natural state. It is the one for which his Creator formed him, into which he is impelled irresistibly, and in which only his race can exist and all its faculties be fully developed.

Such being the case, it follows that any, the worst form of government, is better than anarchy; and that individual liberty, or freedom, must be subordinate to whatever power may be necessary to protect society against anarchy within or destruction from without; for the safety and well-being of society is as paramount to individual liberty as the safety and well-being of the race is to that of individuals; and in the same proportion, the power necessary for the safety of society is paramount to individual liberty. On the contrary, government has no right to control individual liberty beyond what is necessary to the safety and well-being of society. Such is the boundary which separates the power of government and the liberty of the citizen or subject in the political state, which, as I have shown, is the natural state of man—the only one in which his race can exist, and the one in which he is born, lives, and dies.

It follows from all this that the quantum of power on the part of the government, and of liberty on that of individuals, instead of being equal in all cases, must necessarily be very unequal among different people, according to their different conditions. For just in proportion as a people are ignorant, stupid, debased, corrupt, exposed to violence within and danger from without, the power necessary for government to possess, in order to preserve society against anarchy and destruction becomes greater and greater, and individual liberty less and less, until the lowest condition is reached, when absolute and despotic power becomes necessary on the part of the government, and individual liberty extinct. So, on the contrary, just as a people rise in the scale of intelligence, virtue, and patriotism, and the more perfectly they become acquainted with the nature of government, the ends for which it was ordered, and how it ought to be administered, and the less the tendency to violence and disorder within, and danger from abroad, the power necessary for government becomes less and less, and individual liberty greater and greater. Instead, then, of all men having the same right to liberty and equality, as is claimed by those who hold that they are all born free and equal, liberty is the noble and highest reward bestowed on mental and moral development, combined with favorable circumstances. Instead, then, of liberty and equality being born with man; instead of all men and all classes and descriptions being equally entitled to them, they are high prizes to be won, and are in their most perfect state, not only the highest reward that can be bestowed on our race, but the most difficult to be won—and when won, the most difficult to be preserved.

They have been made vastly more so by the dangerous error I have attempted to expose, that all men are born free and equal, as if those high qualities belonged to man without effort to acquire them, and to all equally alike, regardless of their intellectual and moral condition. The attempt to carry into practice this, the most dangerous of all political error, and to bestow on all, without regard to their fitness either to acquire or maintain liberty, that unbounded and individual liberty supposed to belong to man in the hypothetical and misnamed state of nature, has done more to retard the cause of liberty and civilization, and is doing more at present, than all other causes combined. While it is powerful to pull down governments, it is still more powerful to prevent their construction on proper principles. It is the leading cause among those which have placed Europe in its present anarchical condition, and which mainly stands in the way of reconstructing good

governments in the place of those which have been overthrown, threatening thereby the quarter of the globe most advanced in progress and civilization with hopeless anarchy, to be followed by military despotism. Nor are we exempt from its disorganizing effects. We now begin to experience the danger of admitting so great an error to have a place in the declaration of our independence. For a long time it lay dormant; but in the process of time it began to germinate, and produce its poisonous fruits. It had strong hold on the mind of Mr. Jefferson, the author of that document, which caused him to take an utterly false view of the subordinate relation of the black to the white race in the South; and to hold, in consequence, that the former, though utterly unqualified to possess liberty, were as fully entitled to both liberty and equality as the latter; and that to deprive them of it was unjust and immoral. To this error, his proposition to exclude slavery from the territory northwest of the Ohio may be traced, and to that the ordinance of '87, and through it the deep and dangerous agitation which now threatens to engulf, and will certainly engulf, if not speedily settled, our political institutions, and involve the country in countless woes.

FOOTNOTES

1. The Northwest Ordinance (Document 6), which prohibited slavery in the territory north and west of the Ohio River. The following states came from this territory: Ohio (1803), Indiana (1816), Illinois (1818), Michigan (1837), Wisconsin (1848), and Minnesota (1858).
2. Reached in 1820, the compromise maintained the balance of free and slave states by admitting Maine as a free state and Missouri as a slave state. The compromise also prohibited slavery north of the 36°30' parallel, except in Missouri. See Document 11.
3. Quoted from the Massachusetts Declaration of Rights (1780).
4. John Locke (1632–1704) was a philosopher. Algernon Sydney (1623–1683) was a politician and writer who defended republicanism. Jefferson cited Locke and Sydney, as well as Aristotle and Cicero, as expressing “the harmonizing sentiments” that he had captured in the Declaration of Independence. Jefferson to Henry Lee, May 8, 1825, <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/letter-to-henry-lee/>.