

Primary Source

John C. Calhoun, Speech on Abolition Petitions, 1837



How did the principles of the Declaration of Independence contribute to the quest to end slavery from colonial times to the outbreak of the Civil War?

- ☐ I can interpret primary sources related to Founding principles of liberty, equality, and justice from the colonial era to the outbreak of the Civil War.
- ☐ I can explain how laws and policy, courts, and individuals and groups contributed to or pushed back against the quest to end slavery.
- ☐ I can create an argument using evidence from primary sources.
- ☐ I can analyze issues in history to help find solutions to present-day challenges.

Building Context

As the lucrative cotton economy and dependence on slave labor expanded in the lower South, abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison grew louder in their attacks on slavery and southern culture. In response, several white southerners produced a new defense of slavery. In his 1837 Speech on Abolition Petitions, John C. Calhoun, then a U.S. senator for South Carolina, defended the institution of slavery.

Speech on Abolition Petitions, 1837

Source: <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/speech-on-abolition-petitions/>

Abolition and the Union cannot coexist. . . We of the South will not, cannot, surrender our institutions. To maintain the existing relations between the two races, inhabiting that section of the Union, is indispensable to the peace and happiness of both. It cannot be subverted without drenching the country in blood, and extirpating [removing or exiling] one or the other of the races. Be it good or bad, [slavery] has grown up with our society and institutions,

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and is so interwoven with them that to destroy it would be to destroy us as a people. But let me not be understood as admitting, even by implication, that the existing relations between the two races in the slaveholding states is an evil: far otherwise; I hold it to be a good, as it has thus far proved itself to be to both...I appeal to facts. Never before has the black race of central Africa, from the dawn of history to the present day, attained a condition so civilized and so improved, not only physically, but morally and intellectually . . .

I hold that in the present state of civilization, where two races of different origin, and distinguished by color, and other physical differences, as well as intellectual, are brought together, the relation now existing in the slaveholding states between the two, is, instead of an evil, a good—a positive good. . . .

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

1. What reasons does Calhoun give for the impracticality of abolishing slavery?

2. How does Calhoun offer a reframing of the way slavery should be viewed?