

Excerpt from the Webster–Hayne Debates

Robert Hayne, 1830

“Thus it will be seen, Mr. President, that the South Carolina doctrine [of nullification] is the [Jeffersonian] Republican doctrine of 1798; that it was first promulgated by the Fathers of the Faith; that it was maintained by Virginia and Kentucky in the worst of times; that it constituted the very pivot on which the political **revolution** of that day turned; that it embraces the very principles, the

revolution: a forcible overthrow of a government in favor of a new system

triumph of which, at that time, saved the constitution at its last gasp, and which New England statesmen were not unwilling to adopt, when they believed themselves to be the victims of unconstitutional legislation.

Sir, as to the doctrine that the Federal Government is the exclusive judge of the extent, as well as the limitations, of its powers, it seems to me to be utterly disruptive of the **sovereignty** and independence of the States. It makes but little difference, in my estimation, whether Congress or the Supreme Court are invested with this power. If the Federal Government, in all or any of its departments, is to prescribe the limits of its own authority, and the States are bound to submit to the decision, and are not to be allowed to examine and decide for themselves, when the barriers of the Constitution shall be overleaped, this is practically "a Government without limitation of powers." The states are at once reduced to mere petty corporations and the people are entirely at your mercy.

sovereignty: supreme power or authority

I have but one word more to add. In all the efforts that have been made by South Carolina to resist the unconstitutional laws which Congress has extended over them, she has kept steadily in view the preservation of the Union by the only means by which she believes it can be long preserved - a firm and steady resistance against **usurpation**. The measures of the Federal

usurpation: take something illegally or by force

Government, have, it is true, worn out her interests and will soon involve the whole South in **irretrievable** ruin. But even this evil, great as it is, is not the chief ground of our complaints. It is the principle involved in the contest - a principle which brings the States and the people to the feet of the Federal Government and leaves them nothing that they can call their own.

irretrievable: unable to be retrieved or put right

Sir, if the measures of the Federal Government were less oppressive, we should still strive against this usurpation. The South is acting on a principle she has always held sacred - resistance to unauthorized taxation. These, sir, are the principles which induced the **immortal** Hampden to resist the payment of a tax of twenty shillings. Would twenty shillings have ruined his fortune? No; but the payment of half twenty shillings, on the principle on which it was demanded, would have made him a slave.”

immortal: living forever; never dying or decaying

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Daniel Webster, 1830

“We are here to administer a Constitution emanating immediately from the people. This government, sir, is the independent **offspring** of the popular will. It is not the creature of State Legislatures; nay, more, if the whole truth must be told, the people brought it into existence, established it, and have hitherto supported it, for the very purpose, among others, of imposing certain restraints on State power. The States cannot make war; they cannot contract alliances; they cannot, each for itself, coin money.

offspring: the product or result of something

If anything be found in the national Constitution, either by original provision or subsequent interpretation, which ought not to be in it, the people know how to get rid of it. If any construction, unacceptable to them, be established, so as to become practically a part of the Constitution, the people will amend it. But while the people choose to maintain it as it is, while they are satisfied with it and refuse to change it, who has given to the states a right to interfere with the Constitution? It is not for the States to defy national order, but rather for the people, through the proper and correct proceedings to institute the change they so desire.

I profess, sir, in my career hitherto, to have kept steadily in view the prosperity and honor of the whole country, and the preservation of our federal Union. It is to that Union we owe our safety at home, and our consideration and dignity abroad. It is to that Union that we are chiefly indebted for whatever makes us most proud of our country. And although our territory has stretched out wider and wider, and our population spread farther and farther, they have not outrun its protection or its benefits. Our union has been to us all a great fountain of national, social, and personal happiness.

I have not allowed myself, sir, to look beyond the Union, to see what might lie hidden in the dark recess behind. I have not weighed the chances of preserving liberty when the bonds that unite us together shall be broken asunder. I have not accustomed myself to hang over the **precipice** of disunion, to see whether, with my short sight, I can fathom the depth of the abyss below...I seek not to penetrate the veil. God grant that in my day, at least, that curtain may not rise! For if it does, we may witness a land of states **dissevered**, discordant, belligerent; on a land filled with civil feuds, or drenched in **fraternal** blood!

precipice: a very steep rock face or cliff

dissever: to divide or sever (cut) something

fraternal: of or like a brother; an organization of people, especially men

Let our last glance rather behold the gorgeous flag of the republic, now known and honored throughout the earth, still full high advanced, its arms and trophies streaming in their original luster, not a stripe erased or polluted, nor a single star obscured, bearing for its motto, no such miserable question as "What is all this worth?" nor those other words of **delusion** and folly, "Liberty first and Union afterwards"; but everywhere, spread all over in characters of living light, blazing on all its ample folds, as they float over the sea and over the land, and in every wind under the whole heavens, that other sentiment, dear to every true American heart, "Liberty and Union, now and forever, one and inseparable!"

delusion: a belief that is firmly maintained despite being contradicted