

# Analysis of a the disquisition of government by jo



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John Calhoun's *The Disquisition of Government* was written as a document to primarily defend the ideologies of the South. It was a work that elaborated on John Calhoun's Political Theory, which mentions the idea of a concurrent majority, which is that a concurrent majority on an issue is one composed of an agreement of the most important minority interests in a society. He believed that a constitution having a majority behind it would protect people against the numerical majority. Calhoun tries to show in the *Disquisition of Government*, that a majority rule by equal and competent individuals counterbalances a minority rule for a society that has a balance of liberty, rights and power. There are three main parts of his argument. The first part of his argument delves into the nature of man and government. This part investigates the role of natural vs. implied rights and its role in the creation of a government. The second part of his argument deals with the concurrent vs. numerical majority, which deals with the ideals of a majority against the ideals of a minority and a numerical faction. The third part of his argument deals with liberty, rights, power and security. I believe this part is most crucial because not everyone is implied to be free, but rather people need to deserve their freedom. This can't be true, because people in American history because of their race and gender were not allowed to live by some of the theories granted in the *Disquisition of Government*.

Calhoun saw himself as the heir of Thomas Jefferson and the Republican tradition, but he was a reactionary Republican that rejected both the liberal philosophy of natural rights and the Enlightenment's positivist view of human nature and human societies. According to Calhoun, man is by nature selfish, arrogant, jealous, vengeful and these tendencies must be controlled by the

state (275). There are no natural rights; liberty is a reward and, inevitably, based upon the slavery of others (Eibling 315-319).

The Disquisition on Government, rejects the Federalist Papers (#1) assumption that institutions can be a product of reflection and reason; #10's theory of the compound republic; #22's doctrine of the numerical majority; and #51's separation of power (Eibling 315-319) . According to Calhoun, numerical majorities were as selfish and greedy as individual men when it came to trampling on minority interests—thus, his solution: the concurrent majority. (Eibling 315-319, Jameson vi-vii).

Calhoun begins his argument by going to into the nature of man and the origin of government. Much of his argument has much of enlightened, Roman-Aristotle like tone. Calhoun goes into a new concept of how man and government interrelates with one another. Calhoun says that, man is so constituted as to be a social being his inclinations and wants, physical and moral, irresistibly of his moral and intellectual faculties or raise himself, in the state of being, much above the level of brute creation (Calhoun 270).

Calhoun basically asserts that man is above all things on earth. According to Calhoun, since man has the ability to think, reason and roam the earth, man rules supreme in nature. Calhoun builds up this portion of his argument by noting that man needs government and social order for the species to survive. He notes, but this social state cannot exist without government and in no age or country has any society or community ever been found, whether enlightened or savage, without government of some description (270).

Calhoun implies that all governments, whether they were the Romans or the American Indians needed some kind of structure, rules and some sort of

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government tribune or political party to survive and revolutionize. Calhoun also believes that government and social order controls feeling and impulses and also promotes man to live for the good of his society, not necessarily for the good of himself. He notes: The answer will be found in the fact that while man is created for the social state and is accordingly so formed as to feel more intensely what affects him directly than what affects him indirectly through others I intentionally avoid the expression selfish feelings because, as commonly used, it implies an unusual excess of the individual over the social feelings in the person to whom it is applied (270).

Calhoun believes although personal opinions are good for the community, the important thing is that the individual should have a role in the community if they are able to. He says that society is primary and says, it is the first in the order of things and in the dignity of its object; that of society being primary to preserve and perfect our race and that of government secondary and subordinate to preserve and perfect society (270). Calhoun believes that man should take the initiative to better and promote the race. He believes that maintaining society is paramount in the success of humanity than the role of government. The essay also notes that government should be according to Calhoun, administered by men in whom, like others, the individual are stronger than the social feelings (271).

Basically, strong men are needed in the administration of a government and their feeling should be paramount of those in society.

Calhoun next goes into the role of the Constitution. He believes that it is in place to ensure that the goals one of leader do not compromise the goals of society. Consequently, Calhoun feels that the danger exists that the powers

that be will convert into instruments to oppress the rest of the community (271). He notes that it is prevented because, that by which is prevented is what is meant by constitution, in its most comprehensive sense, when applied to government (271). A Disquisition on Government also deals with the concept of natural vs. human law. Calhoun says, Constitution is the contrivance of man, while government while government is of divine ordination. Man is left to perfect what the wisdom of the infinite ordained as necessary to preserve the race (271). He believes that although government and social order is inherent to maintain the order of a society, it is up to man himself to perfect the government, and this is done by rules or in a modern sense, implemented by the Constitution. Calhoun's next argument is centered on the framework of the Constitution and rules, most notably the argument between concurrent and numerical majorities. Calhoun asks, how can those who are invested with the powers of government be prevented from employing them as the means of aggrandizing themselves instead of using them to protect and preserve society (271-272). This serves as his key dilemma in the whole debate. Calhoun notes that the people must have the means to resist tyrants who abuse their authority by saying, the ruled must possess the means of resisting successfully this tendency on the part of rulers to oppression and abuse. Power can only be resisted by power and tendency-by-tendency. Those who exercise power and those subject to its exercise stand in antagonistic relations to each other. (272). He believes the people are key to maintaining order and rules. Calhoun believes that people should elect those in the best of interests of society. Calhoun notes this is key by saying, right of suffrage, ensuring the responsibility of the rulers to the ruled . . . is the indispensable and primary principle in the foundation of a

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constitutional government (272). Basically, he is saying that Government is made up by the people and is maintained by the people. Calhoun alludes to this when he asserts: The sum total . . . of its effects, when most successful, is to make those elected the true and faithful representatives of those who elected them . . . , but in doing so, it only changes the seat of authority without counteracting, in the least, the tendency of government to oppression and abuse of its powers (272).

But Calhoun also notes that people think differently from one another. As in nature, I think that people will always differ in nature. He implies that because people think different and have widening opinions and life experiences, there is a class and society structure difference. Because of this Calhoun believes that, Instead, society consists of diversified interests, and nothing is more easy than to pervert its powers into instruments to aggrandize and enrich one or more interests by oppressing them and impoverishing the others (273). According to Calhoun, this could not happen because since peoples interest are so different and diverse, tyranny and rule by a oligarchy could still happen if a majority supports ideals that compromise the minority. This contradicts what Madison and may asserted in the Federalist Papers of the late 1780s. Calhoun implies that by saying, And the more extensive and populous the country, the more diversified the condition and pursuits of its population; and the richer, more luxurious, and dissimilar the people, the more difficult it is to equalize the action of the government, and the more easy for one portion of the community to pervert its powers to oppress and plunder the other (273).

Calhoun believes because society is so different, different parties and factions would be created. He thinks because the voting and representation gives people an opinion, people gravitate between issues and answers that would help themselves as an individual and a society. He believes the right of suffrage engenders a struggle between the various interests to obtain a majority in order to control the government. As a result, When once formed, the political community will be divided into two great parties . . . between which there will be incessant struggles . . . (273). Calhoun makes it known the government is like prize or a privilege to those who can get control of it. He believes through parties, the interests of a group are together and with support and numbers of people, it can go against the feelings of another party or group and with effort can claim the government. He also notes, suffrage helps to collect the sense of the greater number; that is, of the stronger interests of combination of interests, and to assume this to be the sense of the community (276). He introduces the concept of the theory of majority tyranny, where simply majority rules. Basically, the interest of the people counteracts the beliefs of the few. Calhoun also notes, there is, again, but one mode in which this can be effected, and that is . . . to require the consent of each interest either to put or to keep the government in action . . ., through either a concurrent voice in making and executing the laws or a veto on their execution. Calhoun refers this as being the proper organism, which basically implies that basically a representative chosen by the people act will act as their delegate in government and will make the best decision for them. Calhoun notes that a large government is needed to control not only society, but also threats against ideals, rights and more importantly the people within it. He notes that government, to fulfill the ends

for which it is ordained, and more especially that of protection against external dangers must have powers sufficient to call forth the resources of the community and be prepared at all times to command them promptly in every emergency which may possible arise (274). In essence, he is saying a bureaucracy is needed to support a structure of a society and government in general. All this makes control of government attractive to the ambitious and avaricious. He also notes that government cannot possibly equalize costs and benefits. Government is in place so society can run and people must always play a role in the maintenance of society, and people must play a role in building it. He notes, Its honors and emoluments, however great, can fall to the lot of but a few, compared to the entire number of the community and the multitude who will seek to participate in them. As a result, one portion of the community must pay in taxes more than it receives back in disbursements, while another receives in disbursements more than it pays in taxes (274). On balance, then, only the first group mentioned a really burdened by the taxes they pay. Thus we have tax-payers and tax-consumers (274). In essence, those in control of government can and will systematically pervert the power of taxation unless prevented from doing so. Some people may pay more cause of their class standing and some will more pay more because of their holding, position, etc. In his essay, Calhoun seeks to expose the fiction of a single national interest while assuming the internal commonality of the distinct interests within the nation and the clear affiliation of each person/citizen with on or another such interest. He notes, the dominant majority, for the time, would have the same tendency to oppression and abuse of power which, without the right of suffrage, irresponsible rulers would have (275). Next Calhoun goes into the numerical <https://assignbuster.com/analysis-of-a-the-disquisition-of-government-by-jo/>



versus the concurrent majority. This is important because it is an argument between majority rule vs. beliefs of a community. Calhoun notes, when one regards numbers only and considers the whole community as a unit having but one common interest throughout, and collects the sense of the greater number of the whole as that of the community (276). In effect, the greater part of the people is taken as the whole and the government acts upon their beliefs, rather than the beliefs of everyone. This leads to the conclusion that voting is needed and the allotment to each division of the community a representation in the government should be in proportion to the number of people, much like what happens with the United States House of Representatives.

Calhoun notes that those who dont agree with the majority and takes feeling only into their own account, fall into these errors regard the restrictions which organism concurrent majority imposes on the will of the numerical majority as restrictions on the will of the people and, therefore, as not only useless but wrongful and mischievous (278). The quote means that if a representative does not agree with the majority of his consistency, he is doing a disservice to his community and is wrong. The essay believes that representatives should work for the people, not their interests.

Next, Calhoun goes into the concurrent majority. Calhoun starts off by saying, It is this mutual negative among its various conflicting interests which invests each with the power of protecting itself, and places the rights and safety of each where only they can be securely placed, under its own guardianship. . . . It is, indeed, the negative power which makes the constitution, and the positive which makes the government (278). Calhoun

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states that the negative association with a government (i. e., tyranny, takeover, factions) is counterbalanced with the Constitution and rules.

Because there are a wide amount of interests, Calhoun notes the concurrent majority rules because representation and government protect the beliefs of many. In essence, because this is so the majority of people who believe in the same ideals and laws will always rule over those of the powerful individual.

He takes notice that the numerical majority divides a society in two, because as Calhoun believes the principle of numerical majority, tends to unite the most opposite and conflicting interests and to blend the whole in one common attachment to the country (279-280). This is so because many different interests in government destroy society. The beliefs of one group should not overcome the beliefs of a majority. Calhoun believes that this is the way that government works best and society improves itself. He feels this way because, each sees and feels that it can best promote its own prosperity by conciliating the good will and promoting the prosperity of the others (280).

Calhoun also notes some objections to the concurrent majority. He points at two main thoughts. one is that it is difficult of construction, which has already been sufficiently noticed; and the other that it would be impracticable to obtain the concurrence of conflicting interests where they were numerous and diversified, or, if not, that the process for this purpose would be too tardy to meet with sufficient promptness the many and dangerous emergencies to which all communities are exposed (283).

Calhoun responds that while it is often difficult to bring those who differ

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together when there is no urgent necessity, When something must be done — and when it can be done only by the united consent of all — the necessity of the case will force a compromise. . . Furthermore, the need to conciliate would promote the common interests of the whole, and it is thus that concession would cease to be considered a sacrifice (284). The final part of Calhoun's argument is based on liberty and freedom versus the security of a society. Calhoun notes, to perfect society, it is necessary to develop the faculties, intellectual and moral, with which man is endowed. . . . For this purpose liberty and security are indispensable. Basically, Calhoun is saying with freedom comes rules and restraint. Utter freedom would ultimately destroy a society, because rules are in society to maintain order. Much like other thinkers like Aristotle and John Locke believe, without order anarchy will happen. Calhoun then defines liberty as the individual free to pursue the course he deems best as far as it may be compatible with the primary end for which government is ordained (280). Again, freedom gives people the ability to contribute to society, but people must act in accordance of the rules. He also adds the concept of security. Calhoun asserts, there must ever be allotted, under all circumstances, a sphere sufficiently large to protect the community against danger from without and violence and anarchy within. The residuum belongs to liberty. More cannot be safely or rightly allotted to it (280). More important, this argument is what many argued in the defense of slavery. Calhoun in the prior statement spoke like a leader of the slaveholding South that remained fearful of slave revolt. But the larger point should not be missed, that liberty is jeopardized for all when it is withheld from some. Calhoun notes that liberty must have restrictions. He asserts that of all factors, it is moral qualifications which most determine how must

liberty is appropriate to (and possible for) a community. He believes that excessive liberty only leads to anarchy the greatest of all curses, and thence probably to something approaching tyranny. No people, indeed, can long enjoy more liberty than that to which their situation and advanced intelligence and morals fairly entitle them (281). Calhoun believes that liberty is a reward to be earned, not a blessing to be given to everyone. He believes it is a reward reserved for the intelligent, the patriotic, the virtuous and deserving. He notes: Liberty . . . though among the greatest of blessings, is not so great as that of protection, in as much as the end of the former is the progress and improvement of the race, while that of the latter is its preservation and perpetuation. And hence, when the two come into conflict, liberty must, and ever ought, to yield to protection, as the existence of the race is of greater moment than its improvement (281).

Calhoun believes that being a good citizen; obeying the laws and contributing to a society earn freedom and rights for those in a society. Another assertion that that Calhoun makes is that error is the opinion that liberty and equality are so intimately united that liberty cannot be perfect without perfect equality (282). Calhoun grants that this is true of equality before the law, but he goes further and makes equality a condition essential to liberty. This, I feel would help to destroy both the idea of liberty and progress because many people such as women and African-Americans were left out. Calhoun notes: the mainspring to progress is the desire of individuals to better their condition . . . , and the necessary effect of leaving all free to exert themselves to better their condition must be a corresponding inequality between those who may possess these qualities and advantages

in a high degree and those who may be deficient in them. . . . But to impose such restrictions on them would be destructive of liberty, while to deprive them of the fruits of their exertions would be to destroy the desire of bettering their condition (282). Personally, I believe freedom and state of nature is purely supposed. In a society, it never did nor can exist, as it is inconsistent with the preservation and perpetuation of the race, simply for the fact that society and government needs rules. Calhoun notes that men, instead of being born free and equal, are born subject, not only to parental authority, but to the laws and institutions of the country where born and under whose protection they draw their first breath (283). In essence, I think is a two-pronged fallacy, because those who are protected by the freedom were white males with standing, while women, slaves and the poor were left out. The Disquisition of Government and his ideas of a concurrent majority, and numerical majority more than valid because it is the prime example, in my opinion on how a government would work best. It is important that the interests of the majority counteract the beliefs of the few. I think however, he misses the ball when he tries to mention the balance of liberty, rights and power because simply all people did not have the chance to participate in a society because of race and gender. While the Disquisition of Government, is seen as a great work in American politics, his views, political theory and ideology are off base to certain segments of the American population, and his thoughts would help to maintain slavery.

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