**The Nullification crisis**

In response to the Tariff of 1828, vice president John C. Calhoun asserted that states had the right to nullify federal laws.

**Overview**

* The tariff of 1828 raised taxes on imported manufactures so as to reduce foreign competition with American manufacturing. Southerners, arguing that the tariff enhanced the interests of the Northern manufacturing industry at their expense, referred to it as the **Tariff of Abominations**.
* The tariff was so unpopular in the South that it generated threats of secession.
* John C. Calhoun, Andrew Jackson’s vice president and a native of South Carolina, proposed the theory of **nullification**, which declared the tariff unconstitutional and therefore unenforceable.

**The Tariff of Abominations**

After the [War of 1812](https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-history/the-early-republic/politics-society-early-19th-c/a/the-war-of-1812), a series of tariffs—taxes on imported goods—was enacted. The purpose of these tariffs was to protect American manufacturing from low-priced British manufactured goods. Because the domestic manufacturing industry was still in its infancy, it could not compete with the low prices of British manufactures. The first protective tariff was passed in 1816, followed by an increase in tariff rates in 1824. In 1828, during the presidency of [John Quincy Adams](https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-history/the-early-republic/politics-society-early-19th-c/a/the-presidency-of-john-quincy-adams), Congress passed legislation that included an even higher tariff designed to shelter the **burgeoning** American manufacturing industry from British competition.

The tariff became known to its Southern opponents as the **Tariff of Abominations.** Tariffs heightened sectional tensions because they raised prices on manufactured goods, which benefited the domestic manufacturing industry in the North but was bad for Southern slaveholders who had to pay higher prices for goods. Southerners also feared that foreign countries would enact higher tariffs on raw materials produced in the South. Moreover, because the British reduced their **exports** to the United States in response to the tariff, they had less money to pay for US imports, especially cotton from the South. As a result, the British imported less cotton, which further depressed the Southern economy.

**John C. Calhoun and the theory of nullification**

[Andrew Jackson](https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-history/the-early-republic/age-of-jackson/a/the-presidency-of-andrew-jackson) was elected president in 1828, partly due to the South’s belief that he would pursue policies more in line with the interests of Southern planters and slaveholders. Indeed, Jackson had chosen **John C. Calhoun**, a native of South Carolina, as his vice president. Many Southerners expected that Jackson would repeal or at least reduce the so-called Tariff of Abominations and protect their interests better than John Quincy Adams had.

However, Jackson’s failure to address the tariff issue opened a rift between the president and vice president. Calhoun authored a pamphlet titled “South Carolina Exposition and Protest,” which was published **anonymously** and put forward the theory of **nullification**—the declaration of a federal law as null and void within state borders. He argued that since the authority of the federal government derived from the consent of the states, states could nullify any federal law they considered unconstitutional. Calhoun contended that the US Constitution authorized tariffs only for the purpose of raising revenue and not for the purpose of discouraging foreign competition. The theory of nullification, in maintaining that South Carolina could refuse to enforce a federal law, ushered in a constitutional crisis.

**The Nullification Crisis**

Calhoun’s pamphlet sparked a national debate over the **doctrine** of nullification and its constitutionality. Former president [John Quincy Adams](https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-history/the-early-republic/politics-society-early-19th-c/a/the-presidency-of-john-quincy-adams) was one of the leading voices opposing Calhoun and nullification. He argued that it was the Supreme Court, not the states, that had the ultimate authority to declare federal legislation unconstitutional. And although Jackson was sympathetic to Southerners who complained that protective tariffs damaged their interests, he refused to listen to threats of nullification. Jackson supported states’ rights but viewed nullification as a prelude to secession, and he **vehemently** opposed any measure that could potentially break up the Union. In July 1832, in an effort to compromise, he signed a new tariff bill that lowered most import duties to their 1816 levels.

This compromise measure failed to satisfy Southern radicals who wished to see the tariff repealed, and in November 1832, a convention of Southern politicians and **proponents** of states’ rights met to discuss nullification. The convention declared the tariffs of 1828 and 1832 unconstitutional and therefore unenforceable in the state of South Carolina. The delegates to the convention threatened to secede if the federal government forcibly sought to collect import duties.

President Jackson again sought to compromise. In March 1833, he signed a new tariff bill that lowered tariffs even further, thereby appeasing the South. But he also signed the Force Bill, which authorized the compulsory collection of import duties from the South—by force of arms if necessary. It was a signal to Southerners that threats of nullification and secession would not be tolerated. Though this effectively brought the constitutional crisis to an end, it did not forestall the eventual outbreak of civil war.

Southern planters and slaveholders would continue to use the doctrine of states’ rights to protect the institution of slavery, and the nullification crisis set an important precedent. For some Southern radicals, the tariff issue had been a mere pretext for the threat of secession. These radicals continued to view the federal government with intense suspicion and threatened to secede every time a federal policy or law was perceived as antagonistic to the interests of the slaveholding South.

**Burgeoning – to grow and expand rapidly**

**Exports – something traded with another country**

**Nullification – to refuse to enforce a law**

**Anonymously – not identified by name**

**Doctrine – something that is taught**

**Vehemently – powerfully**

**Proponents – one who argues in favor of something**

**Unenforceable – not able to enforce**

**Compulsory – mandatory**

“The Nullification crisis.” *Khan Academy*, Kahn Academy, www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ap-us-history/period-4/apush-age-of-jackson/a/the-nullification-crisis. Accessed 8 Sept. 2017.