

“We have never dreamt of incorporating into our Union any but the Caucasian race – the free white race . . . Ours, sir, is the government of a white race . . . The fatal error of placing these colored races on an equality with the white race . . . [has] destroyed the social arrangement which formed the basis of this society . . . None but people advanced to a very high state of moral and intellectual improvement are capable of maintaining free government.”

JOHN C. CALHOUN
SPEECH TO THE U.S. SENATE
JANUARY 4, 1848

JOHNS CALDWELL CALHOUN, YALE CLASS OF 1804, ROSE TO POLITICAL PROMINENCE IN 1811, WHEN HE WON A SEAT IN THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES. THERE, HE HELPED MANEUVER THE NATION INTO THE DEVASTATING WAR OF 1812. AFTER SERVING AS SECRETARY OF WAR UNDER PRESIDENT JAMES MONROE, CALHOUN WAS ELECTED VICE PRESIDENT UNDER JOHN ADAMS IN 1824. HE CONTINUED IN THE OFFICE DURING PRESIDENT ANDREW JACKSON’S FIRST TERM. IN 1833 CALHOUN JOINED THE SENATE, WHERE HE REPRESENTED SOUTH CAROLINA UNTIL 1849, ONE YEAR BEFORE HIS DEATH.

CALHOUN CHAMPIONED SLAVERY AS A NECESSARY AND PROPER AMERICAN INSTITUTION. AS THE NATION GREW AND ABOLITIONISM SPREAD, HE SPEARHEADED A DEFENSE OF SLAVERY, STATES’ RIGHTS, AND SOUTHERN AUTONOMY. A PROUD AND UNREPENTANT SLAVEHOLDER, HE ARGUED TO THE U.S. SENATE IN 1837, “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. IT CAME AMONG US IN A LOW, DEGRADED AND SAVAGE CONDITION, AND . . . IT HAS GROWN UP UNDER THE FOSTERING CARE OF OUR INSTITUTION.”

BY THE CLOSING YEARS OF HIS CAREER, CALHOUN HAD ALLOWED HIS CONVICTION IN THE RECTITUDE OF SLAVERY TO UNDERMINE EVEN HIS LOYALTY TO THE UNION. HIS SPEECHES AND WRITINGS DEEPENED THE DIVISIONS THAT LED THE NATION INTO CIVIL WAR.

AN ELOQUENT AND ZEALOUS STATESMAN, JOHN C. CALHOUN CENTERED HIS LIFE’S WORK ON THE DEFENSE AND EXPANSION OF BLACK ENSLAVEMENT. HE WAS A SELF-AVOWED WHITE SUPREMACIST, AND FEW IN OUR HISTORY HAVE DONE MORE TO PROMOTE PREJUDICE, VIOLENCE AND HUMAN SUFFERING WITHIN THE NATION. YET IN 1933 THE UNIVERSITY HONORED HIM IN NAMING THIS COLLEGE. GRACED AS THEY WERE WITH A BROAD GALLERY OF FAMED ALUMNI, YALE COULD NOT HAVE CONTRADICTED MORE FULLY THE ENLIGHTENED, DYNAMIC SPIRIT THAT IS THE PURPOSE, BEAUTY, AND CORE OF A LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION.

AS SCHOLARS AND CITIZENS WE MUST UPHOLD INTELLECTUAL VITALITY AND FREEDOM. JOHN C. CALHOUN, THROUGH HIS VEHEMENT DEVOTION TO WHITE SUPREMACY, TURNED HIS BACK ON THE LIGHT AND TRUTH THAT YALE STRIVES TO ADVANCE. IN NAMING THIS COLLEGE, THOSE WHO CHOSE TO HONOR CALHOUN CONDONED HIS RACISM, AND ALSO FAILED THE LOFTY AND OFTEN DAUNTING CALL OF LIBERAL EDUCATION.

AT YALE WE ARE OBLIGED THROUGH OUR SOCIAL AND INTELLECTUAL DISCOURSE TO CHALLENGE AND ACCEPT CHALLENGES. EVEN AS WE RESPECT THE NOTIONS OF THE PAST, WE MUST ASSESS OUR INTELLECTUAL HEIRLOOMS BEFORE PASSING THEM TO POSTERITY. THOUGH WE ACCEPT OUR COLLEGE’S NAMESAKE, WE DENOUNCE JOHN C. CALHOUN’S LEGACY OF BIGOTRY. AND WE HOPE THAT OUR CONFRONTATION OF AN ILL-CONSIDERED DECISION MAY EMBOLDEN AND EDIFY OTHERS AS THEY EXAMINE THEIR OWN INTELLECTUAL INHERITANCES, AND CHALLENGE THE PREVIOUSLY UNCHALLENGED.

**PRESENTED ON MAY 25, 1992 AS A GIFT TO CALHOUN COLLEGE BY
MEMBERS OF THE CLASS OF 1992**