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The White-Supremacist Lineage of a Yale College

The elite university still honors the South Carolina senator best known for praising the morality of slavery.

Yale's Calhoun CollegeBob Child / AP

- By Lincoln Caplan
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Yale's Calhoun College, one of 12 residential colleges where undergraduates live, is named for John C. Calhoun, the South Carolina politician and an 1804 graduate. It's not the only memorial to Calhoun. In Charleston, an 80-foot-tall statue of him overlooks Calhoun Street. In the wake of the church murders in that city last June, students at Yale petitioned the university to change the college's name.

The students' petition recognizes that Calhoun "was respected during his time as an extraordinary American statesman," but stresses that he was "one of the most prolific defenders of slavery and white supremacy" in the history of the United States. It

declares, “The monumental task of eliminating the vestiges of racism must include all monuments and symbols dedicated to people and institutions that fought to preserve slavery and white supremacy.”

As the historian Sean Wilentz wrote recently, in that era “most white Americans presumed African inferiority.” But Calhoun went much further. He believed that the American dream depended on that presumed inferiority and the slavery that was built on it. To Calhoun, the historian John Niven observed, “freedom was based on slavery.” That central idea of his was profoundly divisive. It was a major cause of the Civil War. As others passed it forward, it was a significant cause of the racial segregation that lasted in law until the mid-20th century and that endures in reality, and of the reactionary element animated by racism that remains so explosive in American politics. Calhoun’s various ideas made him prominent on the national stage for 40 years, but that’s the one that came to obsess him and, in the end, to define him.

There have been calls at Yale for decades to change the college’s name, but this summer the university decided to consider them in earnest in a kind of extended town meeting. When the academic year began, Yale’s President, Peter Salovey, and the Dean of Yale College, Jonathan Holloway, greeted the incoming freshman class with a call for the university community to engage in “an open conversation.” In Salovey’s words, it’s about “how best to address the undeniable challenges associated with the fact that Calhoun’s name graces a residential community in Yale College, an institution where, above all, we prize both the spirit and reality of full inclusion.”

Holloway, who is a professor of history, American studies, and African American studies, was the Master of Calhoun College for eight years until 2014. In that role, he told a group of Yale-Calhoun alumni last year, he favored retaining the college’s name “as an open sore, frankly, for the very purpose of having conversations about this.” He went on, “I want to hold Yale accountable for the decisions it made.”

To John C. Calhoun, “freedom was based on slavery.”

Recently, however, he suggested that he might have changed his mind. After the Charleston murders, he told *The New York Times* last month, “I found myself disillusioned.” At a discussion about “Charleston and Its Aftermath,” he said that taking the name off the college would be the easy part. The hard part would be deciding what Yale should do to help address American problems of racial inequality tracing back to slavery, but also stemming from how the United States chose to distort the nation’s memory of the Civil War, greatly perpetuating those problems.

The Yale historian David Blight is an expert about that choice. In *Race and Reunion*, his prize-winning 2001 account of the Civil War in American memory during the half-century following the war, he recounted that the reunion of his book’s title—reconciliation is the formal term—was between the North and the South, not between the races. In the constructed history that prevailed, the war was remembered as a quarrel that got out of hand between white Americans on either side of the Mason-Dixon Line, and not as a war fought over whites’ enslavement of blacks. Each side acknowledged the valor of the other in fighting for its convictions, without facing up to the irreconcilable differences in those beliefs and conducting themselves as if the North had won.

Reconciliation triumphed over emancipation, because it brought relief and was a predicate for rebuilding the country, but also because it allowed for the continued embrace of white supremacy. Beneath the cover of reconciliation, white supremacy pushed hard to keep blacks and whites segregated—at odds, apart, and unequal, in much of the North as well as the South.

In 1910, when the U.S. Senate accepted a gift of a statue of Calhoun from South Carolina, it did so under the spell of reconciliation. Senator Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts, a former Harvard history professor who opposed Calhoun's views on slavery, gave a speech in which he sketched the Southerner's lengthy and influential service—as a representative, secretary of war, vice president under John Quincy Adams and then under Andrew Jackson, senator, secretary of state, and then senator once more. Together with Massachusetts's Senator Daniel Webster and Kentucky's Senator Henry Clay, Calhoun made up a trio known as the Great Triumvirate because of their eminence and power. Sometimes regarded as more important than any president during their careers, these senators dominated American politics for two generations.

"There is no need to discuss either the soundness or the validity of the opinions he held," Lodge said about Calhoun. "That is a question which has long since passed before the tribunal of history." Lodge surmised that Calhoun "must have known" he was losing the debate about slavery, that the "world of civilized man was demanding a larger freedom." To Lodge, it was fitting nonetheless that Calhoun's statue join the circle of honor in the U.S. Capitol. The stern likeness preserved "untouched and unimpaired for after ages to admire" what Lodge described as Calhoun's "unyielding courage" and "splendid intellect": "He was a really great man," Lodge said unequivocally, "one of the great figures of our history."

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Two decades later, when Yale announced its plan to name one of its new residential colleges after Calhoun, the decision was similarly made under reconciliation's spell. Judith Schiff, Yale's Chief Archivist, told the Calhoun alumni last year, "They decided they wanted to name a college after the most famous statesman that Yale had produced. No one seemed surprised." Lodge's speech about Calhoun and Yale's naming of a residential college after him were of a piece with what Blight catalogued—"a kind of Southern victory in the long struggle over Civil War memory."

That victory largely persists in popular opinion. For years, there have been calls for removing the names of Confederate generals from ten United States Army bases, like Fort Lee, in Virginia, named for Robert E. Lee, the general in chief of the Confederate army. These generals led their men in war against U.S. soldiers; the Army now asks African Americans, who compose roughly one-fifth of its ranks, to serve on bases named for defenders of a racist slavocracy.

After the church murders, these calls were renewed and joined by calls to rename many other institutions, especially public schools. The Army said it has no plans to rename the ten bases. Brigadier General Malcolm B. Frost, then the Army's chief of

public affairs, defended the Confederate names of the bases. “Every Army installation is named for a soldier who holds a place in our military history,” he said. “Accordingly, these historic names represent individuals, not causes or ideologies. It should be noted that the naming occurred in the spirit of reconciliation, not division.”

So far, public events at Yale carrying on the conversation have not paid a lot of attention to Calhoun—who he was, what he did, and why it was unsurprising that the university named a college after him when it did. Instead, he is regularly spoken of around the university as a criminal caught in the act of an offense so egregious that he deserves no defense. His record of public service is important, however, because it explains why Yale honored him in the 1930s—and why it should honor him no longer in this way.

In an essay in *The Review of Politics* in 1948, Peter Drucker argued that Calhoun’s basic insights about politics are of major and lasting importance. (Drucker, a management guru, had a Ph.D. in international law and wrote about politics and economics as well as business.) Calhoun, “perhaps alone,” Drucker wrote, understood that sectional and interest-group compromise, which perennially makes American governance difficult, is “a basic principle of free government.” Calhoun argued that the Constitution should be amended to recognize this principle, by giving each major interest in the nation the power to veto national legislation. “By giving to each interest, or portion, the power of self-protection,” he avowed, “all strife and struggle between them for ascendancy is prevented.”

To Drucker in the middle of the 20th century, the American political system worked almost as Calhoun said it should, through methods that were “unofficial and extra-constitutional.” But it lacked a means to force compromise, so Drucker wondered whether the system in his time was “as much in crisis as it was in the last years of Calhoun’s life.”

Calhoun’s idea about legislative veto power for states and other interest groups rested on the doctrine of nullification. He believed a state, as a sovereign entity, could declare null and void federal laws that it considered unconstitutional. The idea came from Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, who, in the early years of the United States, had proposed a more moderate version in response to Congress’s passage of the short-lived Alien and Sedition Acts. That law made it a crime to criticize the government, among other seemingly un-American restrictions. States, they suggested, could declare their opposition to a statute and then figure out what to do about it. Most states, except for Virginia and Kentucky, rejected the proposal.

In his biography of Calhoun, Irving H. Bartlett wrote, “Considering Calhoun’s reputation as the most celebrated defender of southern institutions before 1850, it is remarkable how little mention there is of slavery in his private and public papers before 1830,” when Calhoun had already been on the national stage for almost 20 years. In 1832, however, after he persuaded South Carolina to pass an Ordinance of Nullification prohibiting the collection of federal tariffs in the state, it was clear the real-world end of the theoretical means he proposed was defending plantation life, and the system of slavery on which it depended.

President Andrew Jackson issued a proclamation heatedly rejecting the doctrine and calling it an "impractical absurdity." He declared that a state's assertion of the power to annul a national law was "*incompatible with the existence of the Union*." (The italics are his.) But Calhoun insisted that nullification was a moderate alternative to secession and that its availability as he proposed it would spur compromise. The idea would sustain the Union, he asserted, rather than ripping it part, and would lead to "patriotism, nationality, harmony, and a struggle only for supremacy in promoting the common good of the whole."

His last major speech, which another senator delivered because Calhoun was very ill, was offered in opposition to an elaborate series of federal statutes known as the Compromise of 1850. In exchange for letting California be admitted to the Union as a so-called free state without slavery, for example, which would create an imbalance between the number of states permitting and not permitting slavery, there was the Fugitive Slave Act. The bill made it easier for slave-owners to make claims about escaped slaves and required all free Americans to help capture and return them.

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Henry Clay proposed the compromise to maintain the balance of interests between the sections, to keep the South from seceding. In his oration about the proposal, Clay said, "It has been objected against this measure that it is a compromise. It has been said that it is a compromise of principle, or of a principle. Mr. President, what is a compromise? It is a work of mutual concession" and "a measure of mutual sacrifice." Daniel Webster supported the compromise in what he considered his finest speech, called "The Constitution and the Union." Famously, he began, "Mr. President, I wish to speak today, not as a Massachusetts man, nor as a northern man, but as an American, and a member of the Senate of the United States."

Contesting the compromise, Calhoun said that it imperiled the Union, already badly frayed. He could support the compromise, he said, only if the North would "cease the agitation of the slave question" and if Congress would "provide for the insertion of a provision in the Constitution, by an amendment, which will restore to the South, in substance, the power she possessed of protecting herself before the equilibrium between the sections was destroyed by the action of this government." He didn't spell out the amendment's substance, but the impression he gave was that the change he sought would make the South an almost autonomous section of the Union.

Congress passed the compromise, staving off the Civil War for a decade. But Congress didn't cease agitating about slavery. The Fugitive Slave Act, which Calhoun adamantly backed, introduced a reign of terror against blacks. The compromise's other trade-offs made slavery a national crisis and made the War inevitable. Calhoun wrote in a letter not long before he died, "disunion is the only alternative." He died in March of 1850, John Niven wrote, "in almost feudal fashion," "a great man" with a "constant stream of visitors" to his beside, to "catch the last bit of wisdom he might impart."

Richard Hofstadter, in his classic book *The American Political Tradition*, called Calhoun "The Marx of the Master Class" because he recognized there were other ways that capital exploited labor besides slavery. In the North, Calhoun was

convinced, men of supposed substance had to hustle for success and ended up with sharp elbows and without character, treating those who worked for them wretchedly. In the South, the institution of slavery and the plantations it sustained were passed from fathers to sons, producing gentlemen, a biographer summarized Calhoun's outlook, "who put honor above profit."

His fundamental view of government—that it was essential to establish order in a very disorderly society, yet it needed heavy-duty checks on itself so a majority could not use government power to indulge its self-interest and tyrannize minorities—was meant to transcend his time and place, and it did. Hofstadter wrote, "Calhoun's analysis of American political tensions certainly ranks among the most impressive intellectual achievements of American statesmen."

After the Civil War, he became an inspiration of the Lost Cause, a powerful movement in the South that rejected or downplayed slavery as a major cause of the War, insisting instead that the South fought to preserve its antebellum virtues. In 1887, the Confederacy's former president, Jefferson Davis, wrote, "No public man has been more misunderstood and misrepresented than Mr. Calhoun," as a "sectionist" and a "disunionist." To the contrary, Davis avowed that Calhoun's public record proved "he was ardently devoted to the Union of the Constitution as our fathers made and construed it."

The Lost Cause, through its poems, songs, novels, and memorials, became an integral element of reconciliation. It laid the groundwork for Lodge's admiring elegy and for Yale's bestowal of honor—for the memory of the South Carolinian cloaked in propriety, "John Caldwell Calhoun, class of 1804, statesman."

The petition to rename Calhoun College is a rejection of the narrative of reconciliation and, more importantly, a rejection of blindness to the way past injustice continues to shape the present. It says, "Seeing the world through other people's eyes is a necessary condition for social progress. Respect for history in the eyes of some is the tolerance of white supremacy in the eyes of others." The petition goes on about the Calhoun name, "It represents an indifference to centuries of pain and suffering among the black population. It conveys disrespect toward black perspectives," and is an obstacle to "racial inclusiveness."

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The most pungent evidence the petition presents against Calhoun is an 1837 speech he gave in the Senate called "The 'Positive Good' of Slavery." To Hofstadter, the speech was important because "Calhoun was the first Southern statesman of primary eminence to say openly in Congress what almost all the white South had come to feel." Nonetheless, as the petition summarizes, "His legacy is built on his vociferous defense of a state's right to enslave blacks." Read from the perspective of the present, the speech is filled with condescending phrases, racist views, and fantastic claims.

Calhoun said in that speech, "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 in the course of a few generations it has grown up under the fostering care of our institutions, reviled as they have been, to its present comparatively civilized condition."

Other defenders of slavery, the petition emphasizes, regarded it as "a necessary evil." Calhoun's defense was worse because, "instead of an evil," he insisted it was "a positive good." (In another speech, he called it "the most safe and stable basis for free institutions in the world.") Margaret L. Coit, whose book about Calhoun won the Pulitzer Prize for biography in 1951, said that shift "involved a revolution in Southern thinking" because it gave no hope for slavery's "ultimate extinction," which most of the founding fathers had expected. It turned Calhoun into a bigot, creating "the stain on his otherwise brilliant career."

The stain is large and indelible. That's why the Calhoun name is in a category of one at Yale, though 10 of its 12 colleges are named for white males, four of them slave owners besides Calhoun, another who wrote pro-slavery tracts, and still another who gave Yale a plantation that likely used slave labor.* The Lost Cause had its sentimental side that softened reconciliation, but the cause was also virulent—animated by a fervent belief in white supremacy.

Calhoun was a polemicist for slavery in his own lifetime, but an enduring symbol of the Lost Cause long after his death. He helped sow fundamental division in the United States while he lived, as a principal architect of the ideas that led to the Civil War. He helped sustain and justify deep inequality and raw racial prejudice because of his belief in slavery and in the inferiority of blacks. In addition, as a result of the toxic alchemy of reconciliation and white supremacy, his ideas incited Jim Crow and the triumphant, reactionary politics that pulled the South to the right for generations after the War.

"Over a century after his death," the historian William W. Freehling wrote in 1965, Calhoun was "still considered one of America's outstanding political theorists" and stood out "as an entrenched defender of minority rights"—though the minorities he championed were regional, not racial. His writings still provide a touchstone for conservatives who have an extreme view of states' rights. Sam Tanenhaus, a chronicler of conservatism, wrote two years ago in *The New Republic*:

> When the intellectual authors of the modern right created its doctrines in the 1950s, they drew on nineteenth-century political thought, borrowing explicitly from the great apologists for slavery, above all, the intellectually fierce South Carolinian John C. Calhoun. This is not to say conservatives today share Calhoun's ideas about race. It is to say instead that the Calhoun revival, based on his complex theories of constitutional democracy, became the justification for conservative politicians to resist, ignore, or even overturn the will of the electoral majority.
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> This is the politics of nullification, the doctrine, nearly as old as the republic itself, which holds that the states, singly or in concert, can defy federal actions by declaring them invalid or simply ignoring them.

When David Blight documented that many memorials about the Civil War were intended to fuel deceptive myths of reconciliation between the North and South at the expense of racial justice, he underscored what he recently told the Yale community: The purpose of commemorating the past is not to engender good feelings. If the past does not trouble us in some ways, Blight said, we have not looked seriously enough at its many twists and traumas.

"Memorialization, representing the past, needs to cause pain," Blight advised last month during a talk at Calhoun College. It needs to reflect history in its glory and its sorrow. Blight has declined so far to take a public position about whether Yale should keep or remove Calhoun's name, but has said he is worried about "erasure"—that Yale could remove the name from the college and, in doing that, take away both history and a primary impetus for addressing a host of related issues, including the low percentage of minorities on Yale's faculty. Under that principle, arguably, the college should keep its divisive name, because keeping the name will trouble more and more people and removing it will not make the pain or complexity of history go away. That's what Jonathan Holloway meant when, last year, he said he favored retaining the college's name "as an open sore."

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Take Down the Confederate Flag—Now

But more recently, he has said that history is always with us; how we choose to understand the past reflects how we choose to live now. The church murders in Charleston became the occasion for removing the Confederate flag from South Carolina's capitol. That was "one step in an honest accounting of America's history," as President Obama put it at the funeral of Reverend Clementa Pinckney, the church

pastor killed with eight others. It was "a modest but meaningful balm for so many unhealed wounds" because the flag is "a reminder of systemic oppression and racial subjugation"—including "the imposition of Jim Crow after the Civil War" and "the resistance to civil rights for all people."

For similar reasons, Yale has the opportunity to undo deliberately a decision the university made unwittingly almost a century ago under the spell of reconciliation. In renaming Calhoun College, Yale can cast off that spell. It can reinvigorate the vision of emancipation that rightfully should have prevailed but reconciliation eclipsed. In that sense, removing Calhoun's name would be the opposite of an erasure: It would be a form of restoration.

Emancipation is what Abraham Lincoln spoke about in his Gettysburg Address, with his prophecy of the "new birth of freedom" that would follow the North's victory. It's what almost all historians now regard as the crucial purpose of the Civil War. Yale can help the country to remember properly at last this central event in American history. By rectifying a profound distortion of that history in the past, the university can offer an honest accounting for the future and help make it easier for the country to understand and address its challenges in the present. They include unceasing problems of racial injustice in all its tenacious manifestations.

The Calhoun name is Yale's Confederate flag. It's time the flag came down.