

Abner Lacock to Andrew Jackson, June 25, 1832, from Correspondence of Andrew Jackson. Edited by John Spencer Bassett.

ABNER LACOCK TO JACKSON.1

1 Copy, in Lewis's handwriting. This letter is in *Niles' Register*, XLIII. 79, and in other papers of the day.

Freedom, Beaver County, Pa., June 25, 1832.

Sir, Some days since, through the medium of a mutual friend, I received your letter enclosing a number of interrogatories, that I am requested to answer, in relation to the knowledge I have of the course pursued by John C Calhoun, Vice P. U. States, and his conduct towards you, in regard to your conduct in the Seminola war.

By the same mail I recd. a line from Mr Calhoun, in which he states, that he had received a list of interrogatories, and that he had declined putting any questions to me, or what he terms "joining issue" but had no objection I should answer whatever questions you should put, requesting however as a matter of justice, to be furnish,d with a copy of my answers; to a compliance with this request I could see no valid objection and have accordingly furnish,d him with a copy.

Interogatories put by Andrew Jackson, president of the U. States, to Abner Lacock of Penna.

"Did Mr John C Calhoun at any time during the Session of Congress in the winter of 1818—1819 or at any other time, mention to you my confidential letter, to Mr Monroe dated 6 of Jan,y 1818, relative to Florida and the Seminola war; shew you that letter, a copy thereof,

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or speak of its contents, did he ever tell you that letter had been answered, if nay, did he give any reasons why an answer was not given? and what: what did you understand to be Mr Calhoun,s object in speaking to you of that letter?

Answer. Mr Calhoun never did at any time or upon any occasion, communicate to me, either verbally or in writing, his knowledge of the existence of such a letter. although at the time alluded to, I had a knowledge of the contents of the letter, I did not derive that knowledge from Mr. Calhoun; nor have I ever made a suggestion, to any person that would justify such a belief.

2 “Did Mr Calhoun at any time, and when, communicate to you the views express,d or the course pursued by him in Mr Monroe,s cabinet, in relation to my conduct in the Seminola war? if yea, what were those views and that course? what opinion, if any, did Mr Calhoun express to you, as at the time of your conversation, entertaind by him relative to my orders and the manner in which I had executed them?

Answer. Some time in January 1819, I think towards the latter end of the month, Mr Calhoun calld upon me in the Senate Chamber, and asked me into a committee room, and when there said he wishd to converse with me in regard to your operations in Florida, as that subject was before a committee, of which he understood I was chairman. He then stated the subject had embarrass,d the administration, and presented many dificulties at first, but a course had been finally agreed upon, that he had flattered himself would have been generally acquiescd in, or approved, and he was sorry to find himself mistaken, or words to this effect. We then went [on to] compare opinions, and discuss the subject. Among other things I stated expressly, that from the facts disclosed, it was my opinion, you had in the prosecution of the seminola war, exercised cruel and unprecedented severity, in putting to death captive Indians and British traders, That by the forceable seizure of the Spanish posts you had transcended your orders, and Usurped the power of Congress, and consequently violated the Constitution of the U States. Mr Calhoun replied that he agreed with me that captureing the spanish posts was unauthorised and illegal, and he

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said when the subject was first presented by the President, he had been for taking pretty strong [action] and instituting an enquiry into your conduct, but after mature consideration the Cabinet had made a different decision, and he had acquiesced and he observed he had yielded his opinion with less reluctance, finding the President strongly inclined to adopt a different course, and he added that while he was a member of the Cabinet, he should consider it his duty to sustain the measures of the President if it could be done with any propriety. To a suggestion by me that we only differed in opinion, as to whether you were or were not reprehensible for your conduct: he replied to decide this question regard must be had to your motives. Those he believed had been pure and patriotic, that from mistaken zeal in the service of your country, you had exceeded the powers given you, or any the President had a right to bestow. At the same time he observed, that Spain deserved from us the treatment she had received, and a surrender of the posts was all she had a right to look for, that whether you were culpable or not was a concern of our own, and not hers. He spoke of the acquisition of Florida, then a subject of negotiation with the Spanish Minister Don Osy [Onís] and the prospect of a favourable result, that he was apprehensive might be defeated or endangered by a vote of censure or the disapproval of your conduct.

I told Mr Calhoun in reply, that his views on the subject, or those of a similar nature had been previously presented to me by the President but he had failed to convince me that there were either consistency or safety in the course adopted by the administration. That if the seizure of the Spanish post by you, was lawful, constitutional and in obedience to orders given, they should not have been surrendered, and on the other hand if their capture was illegal unconstitutional and in violation of your orders, you were highly reprehensible. and to pass over such conduct without censure or animadversion, was to sanction it, and acting upon, and fortified, by this precedent every land or naval officer in our service might in future involve the nation in war at their discretion or caprice. Such I told him were my views, and having been charged by the senate with the investigation, I should not shrink from the responsibility of faithfully discharging my duty.

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Mr Calhoun then said he would not wish to be understood as objecting to the enquiry, it was rather the spirit with which it was carried on that had given him surprize. he had understood that Governor Mitchel of Georgia who had just arrived in the City had been sent for to give evidence. That his testimony should be recivd with allowance, as he was the personal enemy of Genl Gaines, and he believed equally so of Genl Jackson. That Mitchel was an Indian agent, and charges had been or would be preferd against him as he understood, that would, if establishd, seriously affect his character, and he wishd to put me on my guard. I assured him Governor Mitchel had not been sent for by order of the committee, nor to my knowledge by any member of it. That after his arrival I was told by Mr Forsyth that he, Mitchel, was in possession of many facts connected with the Seminola war, and this I had mentioned to the Committee and by their orders he was subpoena,d.

In repeating the above conversation between Mr Calhoun and myself I do not pretend that I have used the precise words spoken by us, but I am certain I have not been mistaken in their general import and meaning.

This conversation was not considered by me as confidential, nor was it enjoind upon me as such.

3 "Was your object in consulting Mr Calhoun to procure information to aid you in forming your report upon my conduct in the Seminola war, made to the senate on the [24th] day of Feb,y 1819? did Mr Calhoun understand that to be your object?

Answer. I never did consult Mr Calhoun or any other member of Mr Monroe,s cabinet with a view of obtaining information, or aid, in forming the report, unless the circumstances and facts, I am about to mention may be so considerd

Previous to Mr Forsyth,s appointment as Spanish Minister, and when he was a member of the committee, he had more than once, stated to me his belief, that you had after the close of the Semenola war, issued orders to Genl Gaines, directing him to capture St.

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Augustine the Capital of East Florida, and that those orders had been countermanded by the President. But, as the documents furnishd by the war department containd no evidence of the fact, we were left in the dark, untill I was informd by Mr Eaton, one of the committee, long afterwards that orders to that effect had been issued by you, and that the place would have been taken, had not the orders been countermanded, and this he gave as an evidence of your firmness and decision, and the absence of those qualities in the administration. This information induced me soon afterwards to call upon Mr Calhoun at the war office, my college [colleague] Mr Roberts was in company. Upon enquiry, Mr Calhoun told me that such orders had been issued by you, and were immediately countermanded. I enquird why this correspondence had not been furnishd. He said it had never been calld for. I replied that the call was in general terms, and comprehended all the information on the subject of the Seminola war, that it was safe and proper for the Executive to communicate, or words to this effect.

Here Mr Calhoun in the most bland and conciliatory manner observed (I remember his words and manner distinctly) "Had you not better try Genl Jackson for what he has done, and not for what he designd to do". I assured Mr Calhoun that I was not governed by personal hostility to you nor was any member of the committee, we wishd to the country, ourselves, and you strict justice, and for that purpose we wishd all the information that could be rightfully obtaind. If the correspondence was of a private or confidential nature, I did not ask it. If of a public nature we had a right to receive it. Mr Calhoun then said he would be glad I would consult the President, and if he had no objection he would send in the documents, if I would call for them as chairman of the committee. I immediately calld on the President, and when informd of the object of my visit, he said he had not examined the seminola documents since their publication, nor did he know that the correspondence in question had been withheld, or words to this purpose, but if it were so, he was perfectly satisfied it should be furnishd. I gave this information to Mr Calhoun, and he soon afterwards sent to the committee a copy of the correspondence.

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4 “Did Mr Calhoun see your report or any part of it before it was made? did he before it was made or afterwards, in direct allusion to the report, or otherwise, express to you his concurrence in the views therein expressed? What other views or opinions or facts, if any, relative to my conduct or his, in the affair of the Seminola war, did Mr Calhoun communicate to you, at that or any other time?”

Answer. Mr Calhoun never did see the report, or any part of it before it was made, nor has he at any time before or since the report was made expressed to me his concurrence in the views taken therein, other than what passed in the committee room, as stated already by me in my answer to the second interrogatory. Nor has Mr Calhoun in any manner or upon any occasion since I called upon him, as stated above, in the war office, communicated to me his sentiments or opinions, on the subject of the Seminola war, or your conduct in Florida.

5 “Has any thing passed between you and Mr Calhoun since the Session of Congress in 1818, 19, explanatory of his conduct or mine, in relation to the Seminola war, and the incidents that grew out of it? if yea, what?”

Answer. After the unhappy dispute (I mean for the honour of the country) had taken place between you and Mr Calhoun and the publication of his pamphlet, he sent me one of them, with his name and compliments written on the title page. On reading the book, and finding my name gratuitously introduced, with the name of Mr Crawford, in a way not very honourable to either, I was at a loss to decide whether Mr Calhoun had sent the book, as an act of civility, to an old acquaintance (with whom all intercourse had been suspended for ten years) or an insult, and in this state of uncertainty I acknowledged the receipt of it; and in my letter, made some animadversions upon the impropriety of dragging me from retirement before the public, Endeavoured to repel the insinuation that I had acted under the influence of Mr Crawford in framing the report, reminded Mr Calhoun of our conversation in the committee room, and his endeavours to justify your motives in the Florida operations. I recurred to your confidential or Johnny Rhea letter, and its new version

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as given in his pamphlet, as proof irrefragable of your having committed an unlawful act with a perfect consciousness of its being so, Inasmuch as you had proposed, confidentially, to the president, to take the Floridas, or make war upon Spain if the President would guarantee to you an indemnity by signifying his approbation to a confidential friend, Thus if successful securing the honour of a triumph, and at all events escapeing with impunity, by shifting the responsibility and throwing it upon the President. In this view of the case I stated that your deliberate intentions, and the motives by which you had been governed could not be mistaken. I express,d likewise to Mr Calhoun my regret to find by his pamphlet facts disclosed and opinions express,d by him and others high in authority in relation to your conduct, that had been carefully suppress,d at the time of the investigation, That for his part he was about to receive his reward, and would fall a victim to his own policy, nor would he in my opinion although the first on the list, be the last victim.

The purport or substance of my letter to Mr Calhoun I have given you, my papers were so deranged and distroyd by the spring flood that I could not find the copy, of course I have to write from recollection. This letter was not written in confidence, I did not request, nor did it require an answer, nor did I ever receive an answer from Mr Calhoun. I have only to repeat that other than what I have already stated, I have had no information from Mr Calhoun “relative to the Seminola war, and the incidents growing out of it.”

Having closed my answers to your interrogatories you will permit me to observe, that such of the foregoing questions, as by fair and necessary inference were calculated to make me the passive instrument in the hands of Mr Calhoun to criminate you, I should have refused to Answer in a court of justice, and should have repeld, as an attempt to make me impugn my own character, and dishonour myself, and that too in the discharge of an important public duty. and notwithstanding you seem to consider me as the victim of Mr Calhoun,s superior duplicity and skill, still your appeal to me, in a case where you suppose me conce[r]nd in inflicting the injury, evinces such confidence in my sincerity and candour, on your part, that it has not faild to be duly appreciated, on mine, and hence it is I have answered all your questions, however objectionable, with unreserved frankness. Finding

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by your letters before me that you design my statement “for future and historical use” and that, “ *your object and sole object is the establishment of truth, and to do justice to all men* ” permit me in conclusion to assure you, that it will afford me sincere pleasure to learn, that I have contributed in any degree, to the accomplishment of an object so laudable. and should the information I have given be the means of producing harmony, or restoreing a good understanding, and amicable relations between the two first officers of the goverment, it will be to me a source of much additional pleasure, and cannot fail to be highly gratifying to every man who regards the reputation and honour of his country.

I am sir, your obedient Humble servant