

**James Madison to Edward Coles, August 29, 1834.  
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**TO EDWARD COLES. MAD. MSS.**

Aug. 29, 1834.

You have certainly presented your views of the subject with great skill & great force.<sup>1</sup> But you have not sufficiently adverted to the position I have assumed, and which has been accorded, or rather assigned to me by others, of being withdrawn from *party*

<sup>1</sup> August 17, 1834, from Albemarle County, Coles wrote to Madison urging him to express his views on the powers of the President, on the veto power, and on the spoils system.—*Chic. Hist. Soc. MSS.*

agitations, by the debilitating effects of age and disease.

And how could I say that the present exciting questions in which you expect me to engage, are not party questions? How could I say that the Senate was not a Party, because representing the States, and claiming the support of the people; or that the other House representing the people and confiding in their support, with the Executive at their head, was less than a Party? How could I say that the former is the Nation, and the latter but a faction.

What a difference again between my relation to the Resolutions of 98–99, charged on my individual responsibility, and my common relation only to the Constitutional questions now agitated, to which might be added the difference of my present condition, from what

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it was at the date of my published exposition of those Resolutions, and the habit now of invalidating opinions emanating from me by a reference to my age & infirmities?

Would not candour & consistency oblige me in denouncing the heresies of one side, not to pass in silence those of the other? For claims are made by the Senate in opposition to the principles & practice of every Administration, my own included, and varying materially, in some instances, the relations between the Great Departments of the Government. A want of impartiality in this respect, would enlist me into one of the parties, shut the ear of the other; and discredit me with those, if there be now such, who are wavering between them.

How, in justice or in truth, could I join in the charge agst. the P. of claiming a power over the public money, including a right to apply it to whatever purpose he pleased, even to his own? However unwarrantable the removal of the deposits, or culpable the mode of effectuating it, the act has been admitted by some of his leading opponents, to have been, not a usurpation as charged, but an abuse only of power. And however unconstitutional the denial of a Legislative power over the Custody of the Public money, as being an Executive Prerogative, there is no appearance of a denial to the Legislature of an absolute and exclusive right to appropriate the public money, or of a claim for the Executive of an appropriating power, the charge nevertheless, pressed with most effect against him. The distinction is so obvious, and so essential, between a Custody and an appropriation, that candor would not permit a condemnation of the wrongful claim of custody, without condemning at the same time, the wrongful charge of a claim of appropriation.

Candour would require from me also a notice of the disavowal by the President, doubtless real, tho' informal, of the obnoxious meaning put on some of his acts, particularly his Proclamation; a notice which would detract from my credit with those who carefully keep the disavowal out of view, in their strictures on the Proclamation. When I remarked to you my entire condemnation of the Proclamation, I added "in the sense wch. it bore, but which it appeared, had been disclaimed." In fact I have in conversations, from wch. I apprehended *no publicity*, frankly pointed at what, I regarded as heretical doctrines on

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every side, my wish to avoid publicity being prescribed by my professed as well as proper abstraction from the polemic scene. I have accordingly, in my unavoidable answers to dinner invitations received from quarters adverse to each other, but equally expressing the kindest regard for me, endeavored to avoid involving myself in their party views, by confining myself to subjects in which all parties profess to concur, and to the proceedings of Virga. generally referred to in the invitations, and with respect to which my adherence was well known.

You call my attention with much emphasis to “the principle openly avowed by the President & his friends, that offices & emoluments were the spoils of victory, the personal property of the successful candidate for the Presidency, to be given as rewards for electioneering services; and in general to be used as the means of rewarding those who support, and of Punishing those who do not support, the dispenser of the fund.” I fully Agree in all the odium you attach to such a rule of action. But I have not seen any avowal of such a principle by the President, and suspect that few if any of his friends would openly avow it. The first, I believe who openly proclaimed the right & policy in a successful candidate for the Presidency to reward friends & punish enemies, by removals and appointments is now the most vehement, in branding the practice. Indeed, the principle if avowed without the practice, or practised without the avowal, could not fail to degrade any Administration; both together completely so. The odium itself would be an antidote to the poison of the example, and a security agst. the permanent danger apprehended from it.

What you dwell on most is, that nullification is more on the decline, and less dangerous than the popularity of the President, with which his unconstitutional doctrines is armed. In this I cannot agree with you. His popularity is evidently and rapidly sinking under the unpopularity of his doctrines. Look at the entire States which have abandoned him. Look at the increasing minorities in States where they have not yet become majorities. Look at the leading partizans who have abandoned and turned against him; and at the reluctant and qualified support given by many who still profess to adhere to him. It cannot be doubted

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that the danger and even existence of the parties which have grown up under the auspices of his name, will expire with his natural or his official life, if not previously to either.

On the other hand what more dangerous than Nullification, or more evident than the progress it continues to make, either in its original shape or in the disguises it assumes. Nullification has the effect of putting powder under the Constitution & Union, and a match in the hand of every party, to blow them up at pleasure. And for its progress, hearken to the tone in which it is now preached; cast your eye on its increasing minorities in most of the S. States without a decrease in any one of them. Look at Virginia herself and read in the Gazettes, and in the proceedings of popular meetings, the figure which the anarchical principle now makes, in contrast with the scouting reception given to it but a short time ago.

It is not probable that this offspring of the discontents of S. Carolina, will ever approach success, in a majority of the States. But a susceptibility of the contagion in the Southern States is visible; and the danger is not to be concealed that the sympathies arising from known causes, and the inculcated impression of a permanent incompatibility of interests between the South & the North, may put it in the power of popular leaders aspiring to the highest stations, and despairing of success on the Federal theatre, to unite the South, on some critical occasion, in a course that will end in creating a new theatre of great tho' inferior extent. In pursuing this course, the first and most obvious step is nullification; the next secession; & the last, a farewell separation. How near was this course being lately exemplified? and the danger of its recurrence in the same, or some other quarter, may be increased by an increase of restless aspirants, and by the increasing impracticability of retaining in the Union a large & cemented section against its will. It may indeed happen that a return of danger from abroad, or a revived apprehension of danger at home, may aid in binding the States in one political system, or that the geographical and commercial ligatures, may have that effect; or that the present discord of interests between the North & the South, may give way to a less diversity in the applications of labour, or to the mutual advantage of a safe & constant interchange of the different products of labour in different

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sections. All this may happen, and with the exception of foreign hostilities, hoped for. But in the mean time local prejudices and ambitious leaders may be but too successful, in finding or creating occasions, for the nullifying experiment of breaking a more beautiful China vase<sup>1</sup> than the British Empire ever was, into parts which a miracle only could reunite.

<sup>1</sup> See Franklin's letter to Lord Howe in 1776.— *Madison's Note*. The letter is of July 20 and may be seen in the *Writings of Benjamin Franklin* (Smyth) vi., 458.

I have thought it due to the affectionate interest you take in what concerns me to submit the observations here sketched, crude as they are. The field they open for reflection I leave to yours, and to your opportunity which I hope will be a long one, of witnessing the developments & vicissitudes of the future.