

David W Fletcher, February 2002

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WILLIAM M. FREEHLING'S *PRELUDE TO CIVIL WAR:
THE NULLIFICATION CONTROVERSY IN SOUTH CAROLINA, 1816 - 1836*

In contrast to lively debates by historians about various points of interpretation of the American Civil War, William M. Freehling, in his book about South Carolina's nullification crisis,¹ observes that the "interpretation of the Nullification Crisis remains a center of calm . . . [a] familiar—and uninspiring—story" (ix). But Freehling tells this remarkably complex story of the Palmetto State's push toward sectionalism from 1816 through 1836 in a lucid and compelling way. This crisis, almost a quarter century before the Civil War, reflected more than just critical economic troubles aggravated by high federal tariffs. No doubt, the author certainly believes that "it would be a serious mistake to underestimate the economic causes of the Nullification Controversy" (ix). In fact, in his "revisionist" approach, Freehling proposes "to clarify the nature and extent of the acute pecuniary embarrassments which afflicted South Carolinians by the thousands in the 1820's and 1830's" (x). Based on careful research of South Carolina's social structures and unique political alignments, Freehling realizes that the nullification crusade of 1832 also represented an important attempt by radical as well as moderate South Carolinians to put a halt to abolitionists. At the very heart of the Nullification Crisis lay "the central importance of the slavery issue" so that "the nullification impulse was . . . a revealing expression of South Carolina's morbid sensitivity to the beginnings of the antislavery campaign" (x). This larger

¹*Prelude to Civil War: The Nullification Controversy in South Carolina, 1816 - 1836* (1965; reprint, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1992), 395 pages with footnotes, two maps, two appendices, bibliographical essay, and index.

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perspective on the Nullification Crisis shows that “the confrontation between Andrew Jackson and the Carolina nullifiers was the central occurrence in the broader transition of South Carolina from the enthusiastic nationalism of 1816 to the extreme sectionalism of 1836.” It likewise helps to explain “why South Carolina led the South in a suicidal assault on the federal Union a generation later” (xi). Rather than an isolated and relatively insignificant set of events, nullification typified one of the more dramatic and troublesome episodes of United States antebellum history.

Freehling sets the stage for the drama of nullification in an intriguing prologue about “the grim tension” that hovered over both Charleston and the state in February 1833. In an immensely helpful section of background material, he discusses antebellum Carolina’s geography, its social stratification, the evolution of its agrarian economy, and problems inherent in slavery as “a disturbing institution” (Part One). While subsidiary to his main thesis, he invariably relates this supplementary material to questions raised by nullification. For example, South Carolina nullifiers went beyond the typical southern protest against protective tariffs in Congress and in the courts. They were ready “to take their cause to the battlefields.” So why was antitariff sentiment so intense and so extreme in South Carolina (25)? The economy alone is an insufficient reason, according to Freehling, and he shows why the hypothesis of a “severe economic depression” is only a partial explanation (“A Spotty Economy”). Similarly, why did Carolina’s lowcountry gentry respond hysterically to the “relatively undeveloped abolitionist crusade in the 1820’s” (49)? Freehling argues that certain problems inherent in slavery in South

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Carolina made discussion of slavery taboo, i.e., its “necessity” for labor to cultivate the brutal swamplands, the difficulty of discipline by the genteel owners, the possibility of slave conspiracy and revolt, the dilemma of whether or not to educate or evangelize the slaves, and the unsettling moral and political issues. Slaveholders generally felt “too uneasy about slavery to tolerate the slightest signs of a growing abolitionist attack” (51). Freehling reasons that most slaveholders “distressed by slavery but seeing no way out, clung stubbornly to the untenable ‘necessary evil’ position. They did not widely discuss or accept the ‘positive good’ thesis until *after* South Carolina adopted nullification” (82). They naturally wanted to keep the subject quiet and out of the political sphere. Thus, “one of the crucial appeals of crusading for nullification on the tariff issue was that a weapon could be won to check the abolitionists without discussing slavery” (86). Freehling skillfully links his discussion of slavery in South Carolina to an important question about the meaning of nullification to the majority of South Carolinians (“A Disturbing Institution”).

In “Crisis: The Tariff and the Indirect Defense of Slavery, 1816 - 1833” (Part Two), Freehling subordinates the theme of nullification to the overriding issue—slavery. He handily surveys the emergence of a theory of nullification as qualified nationalism evolved into qualified sectionalism among South Carolina moderates like John C. Calhoun. He shows how nullifiers initially failed, how the radicals overcame unionist resistance, and how Congress through the Compromise Tariff of 1833 and President Jackson with his use of strict federal control of commerce in and out of Charleston squelched the radical threat and thereby nullified

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nullification. Throughout, Freehling's characterization of notable statesmen is superb, and his knowledge of the intricate nuances of legalities in the debates among political rivals is vast. Rarely does the reader tire of the continuous and seemingly endless disputation. But because nullification really masked the reluctance of the Carolinians to openly deal with the issues surrounding slavery, President Jackson's Force Bill convinced the southerners of the unavoidable reality of majority rule or federal control. This meant the proslavery minority in the South would have to deal with the perceptions and dictates of the majority in the North where abolitionists already stirred the smoking ambers of a potentially fiery antislavery movement.

This resulted in South Carolina's "Great Reaction" of "conservative philosophy" and "repressive policies" whereby "Carolina planters prepared to defend their peculiar institution [of slavery]" (327). Marked by outbreaks of civil unrest, heightened military preparations, and an intentional curtailing of free speech, the crux of the matter lay in a shift from an uneasy liaison with slavery, as per the old "necessary evil" arguments, to an aggressive proslavery stance. As a result, Freehling designates the period—"The Crisis Resolved: The Direct Defense of Slavery, 1833 - 1836" (Part Three). But for South Carolina, the die was already cast by the late 1830's. As Freehling observes: "Viewed in the longer perspective of subsequent sectional controversy, the nagging slavery disputes of the 1820-36 period illuminate that pattern of interaction between North and South which forms so important a theme in the history of the American nation. . . . This pattern of interaction between the two sections would continue throughout the pre-Civil War years—indeed, still continues in our own time. Again and again, the North, disturbed by its

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own racial problems and anxious to conciliate white southerners, has remained conservative on the Negro issue and largely indifferent to the agitation of radicals. And again and again, the South, partly because of its fear of Negro uprisings, partly because of its troubled conscience, partly because of its fear of what the North might eventually do, has raged at ‘outside agitation’ and forced racial issues to national consciousness” (357-358). In the author’s opinion, the Nullification Controversy gave South Carolinians a useful mechanism to circumvent, but only for a brief time, a larger scale outbreak of this typical North-South conflict.

Overall, Freehling’s *Prelude to Civil War* gives the reader a well-researched, well-reasoned argument about this consequential epoch of antebellum history in the United States.