Jacksonian Nationalist: Joel R. Poinsett's Role in the Nullification Crisis

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The object of this thesis is to examine the role of Joel R. Poinsett’s role in the Nullification Crisis of 1832-1833 in South Carolina within the context of his previous experiences abroad. The work will analyze Poinsett’s occupations before his role as leader of the Unionists in South Carolina to better understand his actions during the crisis. The work will also examine how his experience in the Nullification Crisis affected his time as secretary of war under Martin Van Buren.

INDEX WORDS: Nullification, Poinsett
JACKSONIAN NATIONALIST: JOEL R. POINSETT’S ROLE IN THE
NULLIFICATION CRISIS

by

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JACKSONIAN NATIONALIST: JOEL R. POINSETT’S ROLE IN THE
NULLIFICATION CRISIS

by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my parents. They have always supported me, even when we disagreed. This thesis would not be possible without their support and understanding.

Thanks mom and dad.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I first heard of Joel R. Poinsett in the summer of 2007 from Dr. James Woods. Since then, he has been an amazing mentor and committee chairman for me. I’ll always be greatly appreciative of his guidance and confidence as I worked on this project. Dr. Alan Downs and Dr. Lisa Denmark also provided invaluable help and read several drafts of this thesis. I am very thankful for their patience. I also want to thank Dr. Craig Roell, Dr. Donald Rakestraw, and Dr. Vernon Egger for their kindness and support throughout my time at Georgia Southern. I want to recognize Dr. Mike Butler for showing me how wonderful history can be. Lastly to my many wonderful friends who helped keep me sane the past year and a half: Jason and Casey Hurst, Tre and Jessica Thompson, David Cyrus, Asa Akins, and Ross Weaver, thank you all.
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INTRODUCTION

Joel Roberts Poinsett is the most fascinating, yet forgotten figure of the Early Republic era. Many know that he is responsible for discovering the flower which bears his name, but this is the least of his accomplishments. As leader of the Unionists in South Carolina, his letters to President Andrew Jackson during the Nullification Crisis proved invaluable to the latter in formulating a strategy to end the crisis peacefully. Furthermore, as secretary of war, he was directly responsible for the advancement of John C. Fremont’s career, overseeing the Trial of Tears, and co-founding of the National Institute of Science, later renamed the Smithsonian Institution.

Noting these accomplishments, it seems strange that Poinsett’s life has not received further review than it has. Poinsett was not as prominent as Andrew Jackson, Henry Clay, or his rival in the Nullification Crisis, John C. Calhoun. Poinsett lacked the oratorical skills of these Americans, and perhaps the political skills of them as well. While the contemporary American public was familiar with these names due to the nature of their careers, Poinsett’s role in American affairs was less pronounced, but no less important. As a young man he desired military fame and notoriety, and his career as diplomat in South America and Mexico illustrate this. Yet, as leader of the Unionists in South Carolina, Poinsett finally found his niche as an informer and organizer in a somewhat military sense. He also received the chance to apply his military knowledge. This experience solidified Poinsett’s nationalism and gave him the connections and experience needed for a successful career as secretary of war.

For a man who had such a varied and interesting career, Poinsett has attracted few biographies. Charles J. Stille’s The Life and Services of Joel R. Poinsett, the Confidential
Agent in South Carolina of President Jackson during the Nullification Troubles of 1832 is the earliest narrative of Poinsett. Stille’s work first appeared in the Philadelphia Magazine of History and Biography in 1888. The work relies exclusively on the mass of Poinsett’s personal correspondence which was donated to the Philadelphia Historical Society at the time. While Stille’s stated interest is to shed light on Poinsett’s career, he ends his study with the Nullification Crisis.

In the early twentieth century, Poinsett’s career in Latin American affairs received the most attention. His role as first American minister to Mexico received an in depth treatment by William Ray Manning’s Poinsett’s Mission to Mexico, and is later expounded upon in Early Diplomatic Relations between the United States and Mexico, published in 1916. Manning details Poinsett’s maneuverings against British minister Henry George Ward, as well as how his association with the Freemasonry society affected his role as diplomat. Poinsett’s entire diplomatic career received a careful study in 1934 in Dorothy M. Parton’s dissertation, “The Diplomatic Career of Joel Poinsett.” Parton’s work reviews Poinsett’s deeds in South America, his 1822 trip to Mexico, and his later role as minister.

Poinsett’s whole career did receive a fuller treatment in 1935. In that year, two works were published, Herbert E. Putnam’s Joel R. Poinsett: A Political Biography, and J. Fred Rippy’s Joel R. Poinsett: Versatile American. Putnam’s was the first. It relies on the twenty-three volumes of Poinsett Papers at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, but is supplemented contemporary newspapers and secondary sources. Rippy’s interest in Poinsett stems from his earlier work, Rivalry of the United States and Great Britain over Latin America, in which Poinsett is discussed. These books are quite similar, both
detailing Poinsett’s life from birth to death. In his preface, Rippy states that he is indebted to Dr. Herbert Putnam for allowing him to examine his manuscript, “as well as for not a few ideas and, in some instances perhaps, for almost his very phrasing, which unwittingly I may have reproduced.”

Poinsett’s career did not receive a new study until 1972. George Anthony Hruneni Jr.’s “Palmetto Yankee: The Public Life and Times of Joel Roberts Poinsett: 1824-1851” begins with Poinsett’s career in Mexico and ends with his death in 1851. While Hruneni’s work seeks to illustrate the importance of Poinsett’s roles as minister to Mexico, Jacksonian Unionist, secretary of war, and lastly southern Unionist, he does not hesitate to write critically of Poinsett’s life.

Poinsett’s role as Unionist in the Nullification crisis is mentioned in some way in most books on the crisis. In Prelude to Civil War, William Freehling gives Poinsett a prominent role in the latter half of 1832, while before that Freehling sees him as having less of a role. Richard Ellis’s Union at Risk, which analyzes the constitutional issues of nullification, briefly recognizes Poinsett’s role in the crisis. Furthermore, most works focusing on Andrew Jackson mention Poinsett in the chapter detailing Jackson’s handling of the nullification crisis. The Life of Andrew Jackson, by Robert V. Remini, is one such work.

There are a few other works in which Poinsett is not the focus of the narrative, but nevertheless figures prominently. Tom Chaffin explains why and how Poinsett impacted the life of John C. Fremont in his biography Pathfinder: John C. Fremont and the Course of American Empire. Moreover, in So Far From God: The U.S. War with
Mexico, 1846-1848, John S.D. Eisenhower recognizes Poinsett’s role in developing light artillery units, many of which were highly distinguished in the Mexican-American war.

The most severe problems with the current works on Poinsett are their age, and scope. Rippy and Putnam’s works are the only two that treat Poinsett’s life fully. Unfortunately those books are mirror images of one another, and they leave important gaps, such as Poinsett’s thoughts on slavery. None of them adequately treat his role as a Unionist as it should be. Most give more attention to his time in Latin America or as secretary of war. Poinsett’s life abroad instilled in him a love of order, and thus the Union, leading him to the highlight of his career as the leader of the Unionist party during the Nullification crisis, and to be a successful secretary of war. The focus of this Master’s Thesis is to examine his role as leader of the Unionists in South Carolina during the Nullification Crisis. Joel R. Poinsett deserves a modern biography illustrating both his adventurous life and his contributions to public service.
CHAPTER 1

RESTLESS TRAVELER

Joel Roberts Poinsett was born on March 2, 1779 in Charleston, South Carolina. Only two years before, American colonists repelled a British invasion of the city. As an infant, Poinsett was present in 1780 when the British regained control of the city. The son of Dr. Elisha Poinsett and Ann Roberts Poinsett, his family was of Huguenot descent, thus his ancestors most likely migrated to America in search of religious freedom.\(^1\)

Elisha was not present at his son’s birth because he was in Savannah tending the wounds of American soldiers. While he supported the Revolution, his loyalties changed during the years after the British occupation of Charleston. He and other prominent Charlestonians, Colonel Charles Pinckney and Daniel Huger being the most notable, renewed their allegiance to the British Crown to protect their estates from confiscation. Because of this change in attitude, it was not safe for them to remain in Charleston. In 1782, Dr. Poinsett fled with his family to England, where they remained for six years. Poinsett’s mother, Ann, was English, which may have contributed to the family’s decision. Because of the circumstances regarding his family’s departure, Dr. Poinsett was not branded a Tory for his actions, and the family returned to Charleston in 1791.

Dr. Poinsett began his son’s formal education in England, yet upon the family’s return to Charleston, Joel received classical training from Reverend James H. Thompson. In 1794, at the age of fifteen, young Poinsett attended the academy of Doctor Timothy Dwight at Greenfield, Connecticut. Soon thereafter, Poinsett left this school due to ill health. Physically weak and predisposed to tuberculosis, young Poinsett was sent to

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Wandsworth, England, to attend a private school were his mother’s relative was headmaster. He was a good student and became proficient in several languages, including Spanish, French, Italian, and German.

Poinsett first wanted to be a doctor like his father; after a year at Wandsworth, he entered Edinburgh College to study medicine. In October of 1797, he was enrolled in chemistry, pharmacy, surgery, and anatomy. Once again his health began to fail, so he left the school in 1798, embarking on a journey to Lisbon, Portugal, to regain his health. The vessel he traveled on was required to sail in a merchant convoy as England was now at war with Napoleon Bonaparte of France.²

Perhaps as a consequence of his proximity to this martial conflict, Poinsett decided to abandon his quest to be a physician to study military affairs. Upon his return to England, he attempted to enroll in the Royal Military Academy in Woolwich. He was denied enrollment, but studied directly under M. Marbois, a retired professor at the academy. Poinsett received tutoring in many different areas including the operations of cavalry, marching, and counter-marching.³

Upon returning to Charleston in 1800, Poinsett became convinced he desired a military career. Dr. Poinsett did not welcome the news as he did not want his son to be a soldier. Hoping to entice his son to settle into the Charleston aristocracy, Dr. Poinsett persuaded Joel to study law. As a student of H.W. DeSaussure, a prominent lawyer of Charleston, it soon became clear that young Joel had little interest in becoming a lawyer. A restless Poinsett convinced his parents to allow him to go on an extended tour of Europe in 1801. DeSaussure sent with him a list of law books including Blackstone’s

³ Ibid.
Commentaries and Burn’s *Ecclesiastical Law*, just in case young Poinsett changed his mind regarding the practice of law.\(^4\)

In the winter of 1801, young Poinsett’s travels in Europe began. During this time, he stayed in Paris and observed Napoleon’s domestic reforms. In the spring of 1802, Poinsett set out for Italy traveling through the Alps and Switzerland. From there he visited the cities of Naples and hiked up Mount Etna on the island of Sicily. Poinsett finally returned to Switzerland in the spring of 1803. While there, Poinsett stayed at the home of Jacques Necker and his daughter, Madame de Stael. Necker, French Finance Minister from 1776 to 1781 under Louis XVI, had been driven into exile by Napoleon. On one occasion, Robert Livingston, the United States minister to France, was invited for a visit while he was touring Savoy, France, and Switzerland. Poinsett was compelled to assume the role of interpreter between the deaf Livingston and the aged Necker whose lack of teeth made him almost indiscernible. Fortunately, Madame de Stael tactfully assumed the duty of translation for her elderly father.\(^5\)

Poinsett left Switzerland for Vienna, Austria, in October 1803, and from there journeyed to Munich. In December, while still in Austria, he received word that his father was dead, and that his sister, Susan, was seriously ill. He immediately left Austria, and secured passage back to Charleston through Rotterdam. He arrived in Charleston early in 1804, months after his father had been laid to rest. Hoping to save his sister’s life, Poinsett took her on a voyage to New York, remembering how his earlier voyage to Lisbon had intensified his recovery. Yet, upon arriving in New York City, Susan

Poinsett died.⁶ As the sole remaining heir, Poinsett inherited a small fortune in town houses and lots, plantations, bank stock, and “English funds.” The entire Poinsett estate was valued at more than a hundred-thousand dollars or more, a princely sum of wealth for that time.⁷

On July 25, 1804, less than a week after his sister’s death, Poinsett journeyed up the Hudson River and then to Niagara Falls, which greatly impressed the already widely traveled southerner. He made his way back to the Atlantic coast via the Green Mountains in Vermont and arrived in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. After a short respite in Boston, Poinsett returned to Charleston in the fall of 1804 and remained there for the next two years. During that time he refused to settle into a profession. Having no one to keep him at home, he once again yearned to travel. Poinsett left for Russia in the fall of 1806.⁸

Russia in 1806 appeared to be on the verge of being invaded by Napoleon. French forces defeated the Prussians recently at Jena and were awaiting the following spring to renew the campaign. Poinsett arrived in the Russian capital of St. Petersburg in November of 1806. Levett Harris, consul of the United States at St. Petersburg, and the highest American official in the country, immediately sought to introduce Poinsett at court to Czar Alexander. The next morning at Parade, he was warmly received by his Russian hosts and Poinsett recorded in his journal that he was never without entertainment.⁹

On one occasion, the Empress mother asked Poinsett if he would inspect the cotton factories under her patronage. Poinsett and Consul Harris traveled by sleigh to

⁶ Rippy, Versatile American, 16.
⁷ Ibid., 6.
⁹ Stille, Life and Services, 12.
nearby Cronstadt to see the factories. Poinsett made some suggestions on improvement, which the Empress mother accepted. Most interestingly, Poinsett did not believe the cotton industry could be successful in Russia because of the necessity of employing serfs who received no compensation and therefore could have no interest in its prosperity. Poinsett also believed that the institution of serfdom made it difficult for Russia to have a merchant marine or industrialize in the future.10

In January, 1807, Czar Alexander invited Poinsett to dine at the Palace. Afterwards, he and the Czar had a confidential discussion in which Alexander asked the American if he would enter the Russian civil or military service. Czar Alexander had recruited many foreigners into his government. Poinsett was hesitant in his reply, which prompted Alexander to advise him to “see the Empire, acquire the language, study the people,” and then decide.11 Seeing the opportunity to travel yet again, Poinsett followed the advice and left St. Petersburg in March 1807 on a journey through southern Russia. He was accompanied by his English friend Lord Royston and eight others.

With letters recommending them to the special care of all Russian officials, Poinsett and Royston made their way to Moscow. They were among the last westerners to see Moscow in its oriental splendor, as many of the Greek churches they visited were burned by Napoleon’s forces in October 1812. From Moscow they traveled eastward, and then descended down the Volga River by boat arriving at Astrakhan, situated at the mouth of the river. Poinsett and Royston were entering a region recently acquired by Russia through conquests by Czars Peter the Great and Catherine the Great. Thus, the westerners were traveling into a region where Czar Alexander was not in full in control.

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10 Ibid., 15-16.  
This area, generally known as the Caucuses, was populated by Russians, Georgians, Armenians, and others who were in constant conflict which made travel very dangerous for outsiders. They were to be provided with a Cossack escort as they traveled between Tarki and Derbent, but when a Tarter dignitary claimed that this would only provoke danger, the escort was bypassed for the security of the Tarter chiefs. A larger party would also make Poinsett’s company less vulnerable to attack as it passed out of Russia proper. Thus, they were joined by a Persian merchant, who was transporting young girls he acquired in Circassia to Baku and harems in Turkey. With a strong Persian and Kopak guard, the party left Derbent and entered the realm of the Khan of Kuban.

While traveling through the Khanate, a tribal chief stole some of the horses in Poinsett’s party. Poinsett boldly decided to go out of his way to the court of the Khan in the town of Kuban to demand their return. As there were normally never any foreigners in this place, the Khan was greatly surprised. Of course, he had never heard of the United States, and Poinsett did the best he could to answer all the questions the Khan had. In order to convey the greatness of the U.S., Poinsett spoke at length on its geography. The Khan referred to President Thomas Jefferson as the Shah of America. Finally, Poinsett stated that the theft of his horses would reflect badly on the fair name of the Khanate. The Khan was impressed and told Poinsett that the head of the guilty chief was his for the asking. Moreover, he stated that since the thief had made it possible for him to accept such a distinguished visitor, perhaps a pardon might be in order, and Poinsett agreed.

Poinsett and Royston were later entertained with large quantities of food and wine. The festivities began at five in the afternoon, but it was after midnight before the guests finally retired to a piazza. The next morning, as Poinsett’s party prepared to
depart, the Khan presented them with two fine horses and begged them to mention him and his court in the foreign lands they were yet to visit.\textsuperscript{12}

Poinsett and Royston next stopped at Baku on the Caspian Sea. He noted that because of the petroleum pits in the region, it had long been a spot of pilgrimage for fire-worshipers.\textsuperscript{13} Attracted by the military movements in the Caucasus Mountains, Poinsett visited Erivan, which was then besieged by the Russian Army. After a time with the troops, Poinsett and company journeyed through the mountains of Armenia to the Black Sea. Having to avoid Constantinople because of the war between Russia and Turkey, they preceded to the Crimea, then through Ukraine, reaching Moscow late in 1807. The trip had been hazardous and Poinsett’s health was much impaired. Furthermore, of the nine who had set out on the journey the previous March, Poinsett and two others were the only survivors.\textsuperscript{14}

The political situation was quite different in St. Petersburg upon Poinsett’s return. After Russia’s defeat in Friedland in June, 1807, Czar Alexander signed the Peace of Tilsit, which made Russia an ally of France. However, Czar Alexander’s original offer to Poinsett was still available. Czar Alexander discussed the details of Poinsett’s trip with him and offered him a colonelcy in the Russian Army. However, news had reached Russia of the attack of the H.M.S. Leopard upon the Chesapeake and war between the United States and Great Britain seemed certain.\textsuperscript{15} Poinsett eagerly sought to return to his homeland.

\textsuperscript{12} Rippy, \textit{Versatile American}, 25-29.  
\textsuperscript{13} Putnam, \textit{A Political Biography}, 14.  
\textsuperscript{14} Stille, \textit{Life and Services}, 25.  
\textsuperscript{15} Putnam, \textit{A Political Biography}, 15.
Before leaving Russia, Poinsett met one last time with Czar Alexander, who expressed his approval of the energetic measures by the Congress of the United States to resist the maritime pretensions of Britain. The Czar declared that Russia and the United States should maintain the same policy of respect. Poinsett again met with Foreign Minister Count Romanzoff where the Russian disclosed to Poinsett that the Czar ardently desired to have a minister from the United States at the Russian Court.16

Poinsett arrived at the hot springs of Toeplitz, Bohemia in 1808 to hasten his recovery from his trip into southern Russia.17 Poinsett was eager to return home as was evidenced by a letter he wrote in March 1809 stating he believed that war with Britain was inevitable:

I shall go immediately to Washington, in the hope of being employed. I have picked up some military knowledge which may be useful to my country. I have also a large collection of books, among them the best authors on military tactics. My wish is to commence my military career, in case of war, as aide-de-camp to some general…As aide I should be useful and in the way of promotion. At all events, if war is declared, I shall serve, if I have to enter the ranks as a volunteer.18

When Poinsett finally arrived in the United States in 1809, the international situation had become much more complicated, especially regarding Spain. In 1808, Napoleon conquered Spain, and placed his brother Joseph on the throne. Napoleon then sent out agents to Spain’s colonies to alert them to the new chain of command. His agents were not welcome in many Spanish colonies, and some of them began to form revolutionary juntas to defend the rights of the Spanish monarch. These juntas opened

the ports of their respective colonies to all nations. For the United States, which was already being harassed on the high seas by the British and the French, the prospect of France obtaining Spanish lands bordering the United States was disturbing. The United States sought to take advantage of this new state of affairs.

Consequently, President James Madison appointed several commercial agents to be sent to Spanish America in 1810. He appointed Joel R. Poinsett as special agent to the southern portion of South America. Poinsett’s appointment to this position was a conciliatory gesture. Since his return from Europe, Poinsett had lobbied strongly for a position in the military. President Madison and Secretary of the Treasury Albert Gallatin had desired to appoint Poinsett Quartermaster General to the army; however, Secretary of War William Eustis opposed the appointment and Poinsett was denied this position. Reluctantly, he accepted the post in South America under the condition that President Madison recall him for military service in case of war.

Poinsett’s official orders came from Secretary of State Robert Smith, who instructed him to proceed immediately to Buenos Aires to ascertain the situation between Spain and her colonies. As the severing of ties between Spain and its colonies was eminent, Poinsett’s mission was, “to take such steps, not incompatible with the neutral character and honest policy of the United States, as the occasion renders proper.” He was also to convey the great friendship of the U.S. towards these new South American countries, regardless of their systems of government or their European relations. To enhance Poinsett’s prestige and safeguard the commerce of the United States in South America, Secretary Smith vested him with the status of “Agent for Seamen and

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19 Ibid., 35-36.
21 Ibid., 24.
Commerce in the aforesaid port of Buenos Aires, and such other ports as shall be nearer to it than to any other agent in the United States.” Poinsett was to discharge all the duties of a consul in so far as they concerned American citizens in the southern portion of South America.22

Poinsett departed from New York on the ship Niagara on October 15, 1810. He arrived in Buenos Aires on February 13, 1811, and was promptly presented to the Junta of Buenos Aires by Juan Larrea, one of its members.23 Poinsett believed Larrea and his colleagues, like other juntas in the region, feared and courted Great Britain. Great Britain was bound by international agreements with Spain and thus refused openly to recognize these movements for independence. England hoped to hold the peace until the current international agreements no longer existed.

Poinsett believed that if these new revolutionary states could be brought to act decisively for independence before the relations between Spain and Britain terminated, American influence might replace the British. In a letter dated February 16, 1811, Poinsett wrote to Secretary of State James Monroe for more open instructions with a letter of credence from the latter addressed to the governments of Buenos Aires, Chile, and Santa Fe de Bogota. Poinsett also wanted further clarification as to the extent of his own authority. Monroe declined to send further instructions and plainly refused any help, stating that “the destiny of these provinces must depend on themselves.” Poinsett found it difficult to maintain this degree of neutrality.

In February 1811, Poinsett discovered that the British minister in Buenos Aires sought to obtain a commercial advantage for shipping. Specifically, these proposed

23 Ibid., 6.
commercial regulations required the United States vessels to discharge cargo bound for Buenos Aires at the nearby port of Montevideo. Poinsett sent a letter to the Junta protesting any such action. As a consequence of his remonstrance, the proposed regulations were never adopted.24

Hoping to maintain vigilance against British maritime pretensions in Buenos Aires, Poinsett suggested that William G. Miller be appointed as the resident consul at Buenos Aires or Lima.25 He reiterated that the interests of the United States could be best served by a permanent consulate at one of these cities. Accordingly, Poinsett wrote to Secretary of the Treasury Albert Gallatin to use his influence to obtain this office for Miller. Because of his knowledge of the Spanish language, business experience, and honorable character, Poinsett believed Miller would be best suited for the job. The Madison administration ignored this request.

Poinsett settled down in Buenos Aires in March 1811 determined to convince the governing Junta of the Rio de la Plata to adopt liberal and stable commercial regulations. Poinsett contended with a strong presence of British merchants who had a stake in maintaining the current duties. Accordingly, Poinsett continued to urge the State Department to appoint a resident agent in Buenos Aires to block the British from acquiring exclusive commercial privileges. The Madison administration finally granted Poinsett more power on April 30, 1811, appointing him consul general of the southern South American Republics and named Luis Goddefroy to work under him.26 In September 1811, Poinsett desired to have someone permanently stationed in Buenos Aires.

24 Ibid., 15-17
Aires because he became aware that a revolution was brewing in Chile against the monarchists in control. Now that a permanent position was established in Buenos Airies, he departed for Chile.

In November 1811, Poinsett set out across the Andes for Chile. On December 29, 1811, he reached Santiago. Previous to Poinsett’s arrival, the Larrains and Carreras families had been rivals for power in Chile. When Poinsett arrived, the Carreras gained control under its leader, Jose Miguel Carrera. Carrera’s government was split on how to receive Poinsett. The tribunal del consulado, the organization with jurisdiction over commercial matters opposed his reception on the grounds that his nomination had not been confirmed by the U.S. Senate. Moreover, many of the members of this group were royalists. Nevertheless, Poinsett received recognition as a majority wanted to establish trade relations with the U.S.

The official reception finally occurred on February 24, 1812, and was a large event. Poinsett was the first accredited agent of a foreign government to reach Chile, and Carrera, well aware of the significance, made the occasion as grand as possible. In his speech, he assured Consul-General Poinsett of the sincere friendship of the Chilean people and of their desire for commercial relations with the United States. In Spanish, Poinsett replied: “The Americans of the North generally observe with the greatest of interest the success of these countries, and ardently wish for the prosperity and happiness of their brothers of the South.”

Poinsett’s main adversary in Chile was the junta of Peru. The Colonial Viceroy of Peru resented the Chileans’ disregard for Spanish authority. He declared the laws of the new Chilean government relative to free commerce null and void and sent privateers

to enforce the old colonial system. Seizure of ships and confiscation of cargoes soon followed, to the dismay of foreign traders, especially Americans. Poinsett learned of the seizure of an American whaler searching for supplies from an intercepted letter from the governor of San Carlos de Chiloe to the viceroy of Lima. Furthermore, he received intelligence that ten other American vessels were seized at Talcahuana in the Bay of Conception. With little guidance from the Madison administration, Poinsett decided that something had to be done to halt violations of American neutral rights.

Poinsett was performing his duties in spite of a severe lack of communication with the Madison administration. Because of this, he began to make decisions on his own, many of which went beyond his call of consul-in-general. These actions were clearly out of line, and specifically went against his instructions from President Madison. However, Poinsett was headstrong and he did not receive sufficient oversight from the administration.

Poinsett urged Chile to close its ports to Peru, but the authorities in Santiago did not feel they were strong enough to take such a step. Instead they urged Poinsett to aid them in obtaining arms and supplies from the United States. Although Poinsett furnished the names of certain dealers, many of them were already too involved with the conflict between the U.S. and Britain to give any attention to the Chileans. He also urged the Chileans to create a national constitution. A commission consisting of Camilo Henriquez and six others were named for the purpose of drawing up a constitution. The first meeting of the group was held at Poinsett’s residence on July 11, 1812. 

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28 Ibid.
30 Rippy, *Versatile American*, 44.
While these measures were positive, they did not stop the seizure of American ships by royalist Peru. Poinsett concluded that something had to be done to stop these violations of American neutral rights. His commission stated that he was to protect all American property and provide for American citizens. After a consultation with Carrera, Poinsett accepted a commission into the Chilean army to fight against the Spanish Royalists based in Peru. He finally found himself in a position to achieve the military glory he sought. Poinsett was later given the rank of general in Carrera’s army. He led a charge at the head of the Chilean cavalry in the Battle of San Carlos and secured a victory for Chile. From there, he went with a battery of flying artillery to the Bay of Conception, where ten American vessels had been seized. His small army arrived at dark near the seaport of Talcahuano and began firing on the town. At dawn he sent an emissary to demand the surrender of the bay to the Junta of Chile. The Peruvian royalists surrendered on May 29, 1813.

The growing unrest between Great Britain and the United States and his desire to achieve some military glory for his own country were always foremost in Poinsett’s mind. On August 18, 1812, he wrote to his cousin saying, “do not let them forget me at Washington, remember that my whole soul is wrapt [sic] up in the hope of fighting battles of my country before I die.”

In early September 1813, the United States Frigate Essex arrived in Chilean waters and cleared them of English whalers and cruisers. When Commodore David Porter of the U.S.S. Essex arrived in Santiago, Poinsett received the first authoritative news of the War of 1812. He now desired more than ever to return to his home. However, this could not happen until Commodore Porter completed his cruise of the

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Pacific. Finally, as the Essex set out with Poinsett aboard, the Phoebe and Cherub, British warships were spotted in the port of Valparaiso. Commodore Porter returned to Santiago to utilize the guns of the fort there. He also hoped the neutrality of the bay would discourage any British attack. Captain Hillyer attacked nonetheless, and Commodore Porter was defeated. The British decided to send their American prisoners back to the U.S. in a cartel.  

When Poinsett returned to Buenos Aires, he found a Junta that was very well established with a strong British influence. Just before he left, he negotiated a commercial agreement with the Junta by which American articles of general consumption were admitted free of duty. As American shipping had been driven from the South Atlantic, it took some time to find passage back to the United States. Poinsett finally secured passage aboard a vessel going to the Bahia, a state in the northeastern part of Brazil. From there he transferred to another ship bound for the Madeira Islands, located 535 miles from mainland Europe. Poinsett finally reached Charleston on May 28, 1815. The Treaty of Ghent ending the War of 1812 had been signed the previous December. The Battle of New Orleans catapulting General Andrew Jackson into eternity had also been over for many months. Poinsett had missed his chance at military glory.

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32 Ibid., 37.
33 Putnam, A Political Biography, 40-42.
CHAPTER 2  
CONGRESSMAN AND DIPLOMAT

Upon his return in 1815, Poinsett spent the first few months putting his personal affairs in order. It was during this time that he received a letter from Secretary of State Monroe commenting on his final report as general-in-consul to South America. The letter was very gracious, and Poinsett found the approval especially gratifying because of the neglect by the Madison administration to Poinsett’s mission. In 1816 as he was beginning to settle down in Charleston, Poinsett received a letter from his old friend General Jose Miguel Carrera.  Since Poinsett’s departure, the Chilean Royalists had consolidated their hold on Chile, and after spending a year in exile in the provinces of the Rio de la Plata (Argentina), Carrera came to the United States in January 1816 to stimulate interest for the revolution in Chile. In response to Carrera’s letter, Poinsett wrote the general stating that he intended to urge the U.S. government to develop decisive policy regarding the Spanish colonies. Moreover, Poinsett promised he would devote himself to the service of his old friend.  

President James Madison received General Carrera warmly, but never offered him any official encouragement because of the current instability of the international world and the ever watchful eye of Luis De Onis, the Spanish minister.  Looking to acquire Spanish Florida, Madison worried that seriously entertaining Carrera might jeopardize gaining that peninsula. Carrera’s only hope of help came from his former comrade.

\[34 \text{ Rippy, } \textit{Versatile American}, 61-62.\]
\[35 \text{ Putnam, } \textit{A Political Biography}, 43.\]
In July 1816, Poinsett traveled to New York to meet Carrera. While there, Poinsett attempted to interest John Jacob Astor, the wealthy owner of the American Fur Company, in supplying Carrera’s Chilean revolutionists with weapons; however, Astor declined to get involved. Poinsett’s initial failure aroused Carrera’s suspicion that the South Carolinian no longer cared about his cause. This impasse was soon forgotten by Carrera when, in August 1816, Poinsett was able to arrange some conferences in Philadelphia between the Chilean leader and some of Napoleon’s former officers. Among them were Marshal Emanuel Grouchy, who had commanded Napoleon’s body guards during the Russian Campaign. Poinsett also arranged a meeting between Carrera and General Bertrand Count Clauzel. Clauzel had distinguished himself in the Napoleonic Wars and was given the distinction of Peer of France by Napoleon in 1815. Although Carrera’s movement never benefited from the experience of these French officers, Poinsett did succeed in obtaining contracts with the firm D’Arcy and Didier of Philadelphia to supply arms for the expedition which Carrera was planning.36

On August 29, 1816, Poinsett, along with four young men and one slave from Charleston, set out from Philadelphia on a tour of the West. They made stops in Pittsburgh and Cincinnati, before stopping in Lexington, Kentucky. While in Lexington, the group stayed with Congressman Henry Clay. It is possible that in relating his experiences in Chile, Poinsett may have made quite an impression on Clay, who would distinguish himself as the biggest American supporter for Spanish American independence in the next few years. From Lexington, the travelers made their way to Louisville, and then on to Nashville, Tennessee. While in Nashville, Poinsett and his

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36Ibid.
companions had breakfast with Andrew Jackson. Poinsett, after traversing more than two thousand miles, finally returned to Charleston in early November 1816.  

While Poinsett had been touring, President-elect James Monroe was contemplating sending a public mission to South America. Because of his past experience, Poinsett would be a logical candidate to lead such a coalition. While in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, Poinsett wrote to his friend Dr. Joseph Johnston on September 2, 1816, regarding the rumors: “I can assure you I feel very indifferent about it. I had rather remain and make myself known. I am aware that influence to be permanent and honorable must flow from the people, and I should prefer to derive it from them, not from the executive.” Perhaps some of the youthful restlessness in Poinsett had finally subsided.

There was more to the decision than the ebbing of Poinsett’s characteristic restlessness. He was aware that his friends had nominated him to represent Charleston, South Carolina in the state legislature. In Greenville on his way back home, he learned that he had won the nomination and had a seat in the state house of representatives. As he was beginning his first term in April 1817, the rumored position of American envoy to South America became reality. On April 25, 1817, acting Secretary of State Robert Rush offered Poinsett the position of special commissioner to South America stating, “No one has better qualifications for this trust than yourself.” Rush also added that he would be

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37 Rippy, *Versatile American*, 63–64.
personally gratified by Poinsett’s acceptance. Nevertheless, Poinsett declined the honor.41

The reasoning behind Poinsett’s rejection of this offer is multifaceted. First, there were the actual goals of the mission to consider. Poinsett’s mission would be to cruise along the coast, communicating with the various governments of the continent.42 While such an expedition would be a triumph for a man who had left that same region secretly and traveled a roundabout route just two years before, Poinsett believed that such an open expedition had no real hope of discovering the actual conditions of South American countries. Furthermore, even if he completed the mission there were no assurances that the Monroe administration would grant recognition to any South American nation.

In May Poinsett explained to President Monroe that he had recently accepted a seat in the legislature of South Carolina and could not resign it “without some more important motive than this commission presents.”43 Poinsett perceived that the mission would not lead to any substantial decision for recognition and was unwilling to give up his seat in the House. In the same letter, Poinsett offered his knowledge of South America to the service of whomever the Monroe administration appointed. He then added:

Should the result of the inquires determine the Government to acknowledge the independence of these colonies, and to afford them effectual assistance, I hope you will give me an opportunity of serving my country in the field, and will redeem the pledge given to me by Mr. Madison, and which was my chief inducement to accept the commission.44

41 Ibid.
42 Ibid., 229-230.
43 Ibid., 231.
44 Rippy, Versatile American, 66.
This comment indicates that Poinsett’s declination of the commission cannot merely be explained by his being elected a state legislator or his lack of confidence in the outcome of the mission. In the statement above, Poinsett was referring to the arrangement with former President Madison by which he accepted the position of general-in-consul to the southern South American states only after he had been denied the quartermaster general position. Moreover, Poinsett had assurances from President Madison that in the event of war with England, he would be recalled to accept a position in the military. He was never recalled, and his chance to obtain military glory passed him by. The experience made Poinsett bitter, and now he was unwilling to do any more special work for the executive office. When this bitterness is placed in context of what Poinsett stated about the origin of power, his reasoning for rejecting the post is clear. In the letter of September 2, 1816, Poinsett states that he had come to the realization that permanent power can only come from the people, not the “executive.” Poinsett had given up on receiving any real recognition or power through special missions to the president.

While Poinsett’s diplomatic career was over for the moment, he still sought a position in the military, as his May 6, 1817, correspondence shows. This is evident in the November 4, 1818, report he submitted to Secretary of State John Quincy Adams on the current state of South America. Poinsett’s report is uncharacteristically pessimistic as he argues against recognition. He believed recognition would only provoke Spain’s wrath. Furthermore, Poinsett declared that in such a war the United States would be forced to spend money for arms and supplies for their South American allies as well as send military advisors to lead the armies. If Poinsett’s appeal on May 6 is placed in this context, it would seem that he was intimating he wanted a position in South America as

one of those American military advisors. Whatever the reasons, Poinsett was a state representative now and was ready to approach his new occupation with vigor.

In the letter to Dr. Joseph Johnston dated September 2, 1816, Poinsett stated that he wanted it understood that he was a Republican candidate, as opposed to a Federalist. Poinsett’s political values mirrored those of others at the time who considered themselves Jeffersonian Republicans. One of the most important measures supported by Jeffersonian Republicans following the War of 1812 was that of federally funded internal improvements. As a member of the state legislature, this was one of Poinsett’s passions. After being re-elected to the South Carolina House in 1818, he became a member of the Committee on Internal Improvements and Waterways.46

As with other states, South Carolina was appropriating money for internal improvements. In 1820, the South Carolina legislature established a Board of Public Works. The Board was composed of five members, with Poinsett serving as president. One of the main plans of this board was to link the interior of the state with the seaboard. Another important project was the construction of a highway from Charleston through Columbia, to the northwestern border of South Carolina. It was designed to promote interstate commerce as well as to draw commerce from eastern Tennessee and western North Carolina to Charleston.47 Poinsett, a seasoned traveler, knew better than anyone the importance of good roadways. Through his journeys in New England in 1804 and especially to the west in 1816, Poinsett understood that his country could benefit from transportation facilities.

46 Ibid., 73.
47 Putnam, A Political Biography, 52.
In 1820, Poinsett won a seat in the United States House of Representatives for the Charleston district. His term began on March 4, 1821. One of Poinsett’s first speeches was directed against an 1822 bill which proposed to reduce the size of the army. As a congressman, he advocated the maintenance of a strong army and navy. In December 1823, Poinsett submitted a resolution calling upon the Committee on Naval Affairs to inquire into the expediency of authorizing the construction of ten additional sloops of war. As a member of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, Poinsett took strong views on developments in South America.

Poinsett’s political views were aligned with such nationalists as Secretary of State John Quincy Adams and Secretary of War John C. Calhoun. Although they would later become political rivals over Nullification in 1823, the two men were in agreement on increasing the size of the military and federal funding of internal improvements. They also both bitterly opposed the Tariff of 1824. In February of that year Poinsett wrote Dr. Johnson in Philadelphia:

I do not know in what light you view it, but I would sooner vote for a war with the Holy Alliance than vote for this bill. I believe the operation of this law, if it becomes one, will be more injurious to the character of the people, the prosperity of the country and the durability of the Union, than a long expensive and bloody war.\(^{48}\)

Furthermore, on April 8, Congressman Poinsett denounced the bill as:

calculated to change the character of our institutions; to drive thousands of our fellow-citizens from the business and pursuits for which they were educated, and in which they have hitherto found wealth and happiness; to build up large fortunes among a favored class at the expense of the people and on the ruins of agricultural and commercial interests of the Union; to substitute the miserable population of manufacturing towns for our hardy race of husbandmen and sailors;...to plunge this country into all the corruption and immorality which are never failing consequences of a prohibitory system of duties; and by depriving Government of

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\(^{48}\) Rippy, *Versatile American*, 82.
the revenue now derived from duties on imports, to compel it to resort to internal taxation and excise…most odious to a free people.\textsuperscript{49}

According to Poinsett, the natural economic progression of the United States began with agriculture. From agricultural prosperity, commerce is created. Commerce creates capital, which can then be used to establish manufacturers. Poinsett believed speeding up this process by creating a protective tariff would destroy it.\textsuperscript{50} While Poinsett and Calhoun equally detested the tariff of 1824, both would seek to handle the situation in different ways.

While he was serving as congressman, Poinsett continued to be recognized for his knowledge of South America. The Monroe administration requested that he bring his special talents in regard to Spanish America to bear once more.\textsuperscript{51} He was to make a semi-official visit to Mexico to report on the conditions there before the United States created a final policy toward the new leadership of that country. Poinsett accepted the call graciously. It seems by this time Poinsett was ready to travel again, and any anger he still harbored from his past experiences was gone. He departed from Charleston on August 28, and after a stop in San Juan, arrived in Vera Cruz on October 19, 1822. He was welcomed by the governor of that province, Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna. From there Poinsett’s small party made its way to the city of Jalapa where he was received by another high official of the new government. On the morning of October 27, 1822, Poinsett arrived in Mexico City. During his two week stay, he had many interviews with Mexican officials, and met with Mexican Emperor Iturbide on November 3, 1822.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{50} Rippy, \textit{Versatile American}, 83.
Poinsett’s impressions of Iturbide were especially important as the Monroe administration was going to make a decision on whether to recognize the new Mexican monarchy based on his report.52

On November 10, Poinsett left the city and reached the port of Tampico on December 15. The U.S.S. John Adams was not in Tampico as it was supposed to be, so he was forced to spend some unwanted time in the sickly lowlands. Finally, he paid a pilot one-hundred and fifty dollars to take him out to sea on a “sixteen oared” boat in search of the corvette. Having found it, he set sail for the United States, making only one stop in Havana, Cuba.53

Once back in Washington, Poinsett wrote his official report to Monroe on the conditions in Mexico. He told Monroe, “Iturbide cannot maintain himself many months on the throne because of his violent dissolution of Congress had so stirred the indignation of the people.” If the United States recognized the Emperor, the latter would possess a distinct advantage over those who were unanimously in favor of a “constitutional form of government.”54 In other words, Poinsett cautioned that the United States should not recognize a monarch as it would discourage those who sought a republican form of government in Mexico. Soon after Poinsett left Mexico, Iturbide was deposed by Santa Anna and Guadalupe Victoria. Iturbide abdicated the throne on March 19, 1823.55

Poinsett’s observations were correct, and the United States withheld recognition for the time being.

54 Whitaker, The United States-Independence of Latin America, 391.
Victoria and Santa Anna established a republic in Mexico in 1823, with Victoria serving as the first president. The United States was the first country to recognize this new republic. The Monroe administration quickly sought to appoint a minister to Mexico to begin negotiations for commerce and boundaries. In January 1824, Senator Edward Ninian Edwards of Illinois was appointed Minister to Mexico. However, as he prepared to leave the country he was embroiled in a public controversy with Secretary of the Treasury William H. Crawford. As he was going to be called to testify in Washington, he resigned the commission so someone else could be appointed. The position was first offered to Poinsett through fellow South Carolinian John C. Calhoun on July 8, 1824. Calhoun, who was currently the secretary of war, anticipated a close presidential election in 1824, and advised Poinsett to deliberate carefully before acceptance as his ballot might decide the vote of South Carolina should the election of the president be thrown to the House of Representatives. Poinsett, following Calhoun’s suggestion, initially rejected the post.

President Monroe renewed the offer in January 1825. By this time, South Carolina had decided for Jackson in the presidential election. Yet Poinsett remained reluctant and urged the appointment of Thomas H. Benton of Missouri instead. Poinsett may have declined the offer because the Calhounites were hoping to make him secretary of state to the new Adams administration in an attempt to block the expected nomination of Henry Clay. The presidential election had gone to the House of Representatives, and Clay used his influence to give a majority of the electoral votes to

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John Quincy Adams. Many people expected that Clay might receive a nomination for services rendered. Only after Clay had been nominated the secretary of state did Poinsett accept the diplomatic office. It is also notable that before accepting the position, Poinsett sought the advice of Andrew Jackson, who had just lost the presidential election, and who had been offered the position of Minister to Mexico by Adams when he was secretary of state for Monroe.59

Poinsett’s instructions as Minister to Mexico were sent to him on March 26, 1825 by Secretary of State Henry Clay.60 Before he reached his destination, efforts were made to discredit him. Mexican Minister to the United States Pablo Obregon wrote to his government that the envoy was “not a person of great talents.”61 Also, an imperial official who had been close to Emperor Iturbide named Azcarate, wrote to President Victoria that in 1822 Poinsett had confided in him a desire to acquire for the United States a large portion of northern Mexico.62

Besides hearsay and rumors, Poinsett’s job was complicated because the United States had not appointed a minister to Mexico quickly enough. While the United States was the first to recognize the Republic of Mexico, the British were the first to have an official emissary in that country. Henry George Ward was the British Charge d’Affaires to Mexico, and had already taken advantage of the absence of an American representative. On April 6, 1825, British agents in Mexico concluded a commercial treaty with Mexico. While this treaty was rejected by British Foreign Secretary George Canning, it demonstrated that Poinsett had some catching up to do. Furthermore, Poinsett

59 Parton, The Diplomatic Career, 64.
60 Manning, Early Diplomatic Relations, 46.
61 Parton, The Diplomatic Career, 61.
62 Manning, Early Diplomatic Relations, 289.
was naturally suspicious of the British influence. He had witnessed such influence in Peru and Brazil, and he had contended with it in Chile and Argentina. On March 30, 1825, Poinsett’s friend C.C. Cambreleng advised him to “take care that John Bull” got “no advantage” of him. Poinsett of course needed no reminder.

One of Minister Poinsett’s most important missions was to acquire a part, or all of Texas. His instructions from Secretary of State Henry Clay included three deals: First, the line of 1819 established a community of navigation on the Red River and the Arkansas River which could eventually lead to collisions and misunderstandings; the cession of Texas would leave the Mexican capital nearer the center of its territories; and such a cession would transfer the troublesome Comanche Indians to the United States. Poinsett entered boundary negotiations with the Mexican government shortly after arriving in Mexico City on May 25, 1825. Over the next two years, Poinsett endeavored to reach an agreement based on the deals he was authorized to make. He failed as the Mexican government was unwilling to give up any of its territories.

In March 1827, he was authorized once again by Secretary Clay to broach the subject. He was to suggest two boundary lines. A line at the Rio Grande was preferable, but one at the Rio Colorado was also acceptable. He was also authorized to include the sum of a million dollars for the Rio Grande line, and twice that much for the one at the Colorado. This new attempt at negotiations was hampered by British interference and a revolt by American settlers in Texas. Ward had spent much time persuading the Mexican government that the Americans were untrustworthy. When American settlers in eastern Texas revolted in what is known as the Fredonian Revolt, Ward’s admonitions seemed correct. On January 12, 1828, Poinsett gave up and signed an agreement confirming the

boundary of 1819. In a letter from Poinsett to Clay dated February 7, 1828, Poinsett lamented Ward’s influence:

“This government and people have been kept purposely in a continual state of excitement upon this very delicate question. We have been represented by the agents of certain European powers as the natural enemies of Mexico; and our desire to make altercations in the treaty limits concluded with Spain, was constantly urged as proof of our bad faith and insatiable ambition.”

Poinsett did not take up boundary negotiations for the Adams administration again. President Andrew Jackson’s administration sent new instructions to Poinsett in 1829 advising him to offer a maximum of five million dollars for an area comprising most of Texas. At this point though, Mexico had become politically unstable and Poinsett made no attempt to present this new plan in his remaining weeks as Minister to Mexico.

As Minister, Poinsett had also been negotiating with the Mexican government for a treaty of commerce and navigation. Secretary Clay had authorized Poinsett to urge the Mexican government to recognize the principle of reciprocity with the United States. Once again, Ward was waiting in the wings to thwart his American counterpart. Ward protested this concession because it had not been granted to his country in the treaty Great Britain had concluded with Mexico the previous April. Poinsett was forced to forgo the principle of reciprocity for a proposal of most favored nation status.

Poinsett was not in Mexico City long before certain members of five newly founded York Rite Lodges requested him to obtain for them charters from the United States. As Poinsett was a York Mason himself, he complied. He also installed a grand

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64 Rippy, Versatile American, 113-114.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid., 115-116.
lodge of the York Rite in his own residence in Mexico. 67 Many of the men in these organizations were men of influence in the Mexican government. Members of the cabinet, congressmen, senators, and notable military figures such as General Vicente Guerrero and Santa Anna were York Rite Masons. The movement was so successful that within a few months, eighty-two lodges had been created. These new groups soon became the political opposition to the royalists in the Mexican government, who also happened to be Scottish Rite Masons. At this point, Poinsett wisely began to desist from attending their meetings. Yet, the damage was done as he was already associated with them and continued to rely on them for influence.

By the middle of September 1826, the Yorkistas had become strong enough to alarm President Victoria. To placate this new political power, Victoria reorganized his cabinet, placing Ramos Arispe and Sebastian Camacho, two prominent Yorkistas, in permanent positions. President Victoria, associating Poinsett with this group even made it a point to reassure Poinsett of his friendship. Victoria’s alarm was real, as the Yorkistas, as members of the York Rite Lodges were known as, won many of the elections in 1826. Poinsett regarded this as a victory for the U.S. as he wrote Secretary of State Henry Clay that the new party would elect General Guerrero to the presidency in 1828, who favored relations with United States over Great Britain. 68

Scottish Rite Masons, known as Escoseses, criticized Poinsett for his involvement with the Yorkistas directly following their defeat. They claimed he was following a course in Mexico similar to the one he followed in Chile. In June of 1827, the agitation expressed itself in petitions from the legislatures of Puebla and Vera Cruz demanding

67 Putnam, A Political Biography, 74.
68 Rippy, Versatile American, 122-123.
Poinsett’s recall. Upon hearing of this, Poinsett called on President Victoria for an explanation. Victoria refused to show him the memorials that had been addressed confidentially to the chief of the nation, but assured him of his “high consideration,” and offered to write President Adams a letter that would “leave no doubt” of the minister’s innocence. Poinsett threatened to ask his government to recall him, to which Victoria unsurprisingly had no objection. A few days after this meeting, the Vera Cruz legislature made public the manifesto Poinsett desired to see. It characterized Poinsett as a “sagacious and hypocritical foreign minister…zealous for the prosperity of his own country” and hostile to Mexico. It also stated its belief that all of Mexico’s misfortunes were attributed to the founding of the York lodges, which were declared to be far more dangerous than “twenty battalions” of the tyrant of Spain.

The Escoseses’ outcry did not deter Poinsett. He received word that General Guerrero had declared that he was going to join the movement, at the time becoming popular, for expelling from Mexico all remaining European Spaniards. The leaders of the party hoped Poinsett could restrain Guerrero from endangering himself. They wished to elect him president in the 1828 elections, and such an action would imperil Guerrero’s political future. Poinsett wrote Guerrero alerting him of his friend’s wishes, and the general did not participate.

The election of 1828 resulted in a narrow victory for Gomez Pedraza, and plunged the whole country into a state of violence. Discontented with the outcome, Guerrero’s faction refused to concede defeat, and initiated a violent struggle for political superiority.

69 Hruneni, *Palmetto Yankee*, 133.
71 Manning, *Early Diplomatic Relations*, 197.
72 Ibid.
73 Ibid., 351.
As Santa Anna led the fight on the Gulf Coast, Guerrero commanded forces in Mexico City. Pedraza was forced to renounce his presidential claims. Guerrero was officially inaugurated on April 1, 1829.

While Poinsett hailed Guerrero’s victory, the latter’s machinations in internal Mexican politics was at an end. The Mexican legation in the United States Jose Montoya commented to Secretary of State Martin Van Buren that public opinion had announced itself against Poinsett. The denouncement was not only from the opposition Montoya revealed, but had become a general outcry. On July 1, 1829, President Guerrero wrote President Andrew Jackson requesting that the American envoy be withdrawn from his post. Jackson reluctantly granted the request, but assured Poinsett of his firm confidence that his envoy had done nothing to merit the prejudices which had developed against him in Mexico.

Poinsett’s meddling in Mexican affairs was widely known. In a letter from Samuel Ingham to John C. Calhoun on August 28, 1829, Ingham explains that he had heard a rumor that Poinsett had been assassinated while in Mexico. Ingham expressed his fear that Poinsett had mingled in Mexican affairs too much. On December 9, Poinsett received his letter of recall and left Mexico City on Christmas Day. He arrived in Washington D.C. in late March 1830.

As U.S. minister to Mexico, Poinsett strived to help foster a constitutional form of government in that country, as he had done in Chile. In both instances he failed. As in Chile, Poinsett involved himself in situations that a diplomat had no business in. With

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74 Hruneni, *Palmetto Yankee*, 137.
76 Rippy, *Versatile American*, 128-129.
his diplomatic career over, Poinsett returned to the United States to begin a new career as a Jacksonian Democrat.
CHAPTER 3

UNIONIST ORGANIZER

In the early months of 1830, South Carolinian angst towards the recently passed Tariff of 1828 came to a boil. The “Tariff of Abominations,” as it was known, raised import duties from thirty three and a half percent to fifty percent, causing continued deterioration of South Carolina’s economy.77 Within this atmosphere Joel Poinsett returned home from Mexico. He found himself arrayed against many South Carolinian colleagues on the monumental issue of states’ rights.

Many of Poinsett’s fellow Carolinians believed that applying the doctrine of nullification was a suitable way to alleviate the pressures which afflicted the state. The South Carolina legislature created a special committee charged with the preparation of an exposition of wrongs and remedies on the tariff issue. This committee then asked Calhoun to undertake the task. The remedy Calhoun advocated was the doctrine of nullification. Calhoun’s proposal, entitled the South Carolina Exposition and Protest, was circulated around the state in an anonymously authored pamphlet.

As Poinsett traveled to the United States, a debate on nullification erupted in the Senate by a resolution calling for an inquiry into limiting the sale of public lands. Between January 19 and 27, the debate on this resolution turned into a referendum on nullification. South Carolina Senator Robert Y. Hayne, who in 1827 spoke out against giving federal funds to the American Colonization Society, stated that he opposed payments for public lands partly because the funds would give the government a “fund for corruption, fatal to the sovereignty and independence of the states.” Senator Daniel Webster of Massachusetts argued that federal appropriations were a source of

improvement, not “a fund of corruption.” Hayne defended the bill and labeled the Northeast as selfish and unprincipled for its support of protectionism and conservative land policies. Webster widened the debate by examining the Southern positions on states’ rights in general and nullification in particular.

On April 13, 1830, as Poinsett was on his way to Washington D.C., another event occurred at the Thomas Jefferson Birthday dinner that evidenced a coming confrontation between South Carolina and the federal government. Out of the twenty-four toasts proposed, all but six or seven mentioned Virginia and Jefferson and the great principles of states’ rights for which both stood. Senator Robert Y. Hayne, chairman of the Committee on Arrangements, spoke long and eloquently about how “great and glorious” victories had been won under the standard of states’ rights. He then proposed his toast: “The Union of the States, and the Sovereignty of the States.” When Jackson was asked to present a toast he stood and said “Our Union: It must be preserved.” As those words ricocheted around the room, John C. Calhoun rose to give his toast. “The Union, next to our Liberty, the most dear.” It was clear that there was a divergence of opinion between Jackson and Calhoun. Further evidence of Jackson’s feelings on disunion was summed up in a meeting he had with a South Carolinian congressman a few days after the dinner. On his way home, the congressman stopped by the White House to ask the president if there was anything he could convey to his friends back home. “No, I believe not,” Jackson immediately replied. He just as quickly changed his mind stating: “Yes I have; please give my compliments to my friends in your State, and say to them, that if a single

drop of blood shall be shed there in opposition to the laws of the United States, I will hang the first man I can lay my hand on engaged in such treasonable conduct, upon the first tree I can reach."80 Old Hickory, it appeared, would surely use military force in South Carolina to put down nullification if he had to.

It was in this volatile atmosphere that Poinsett finally met with President Jackson for the first time since arriving in Washington D.C. in March. In May of 1830, Poinsett told Jackson that he would proceed directly to South Carolina to oppose the “strange and pernicious” doctrines advocated by some of the “leading men of our state.”81 On February 11, 1829, while still in Mexico, Poinsett summed up his stance on the Union in a letter to his friend Dr. Johnson: “To advocate a dissolution of the Union or any act of resistance to the execution of the laws of Congress…I can never be brought to consent, but most assuredly, I am not base enough to regard with indifference any act of the general government.”82

By October 1830, Poinsett returned to his native state and proceeded to Columbia to ascertain the degree to which the “public mind” had absorbed the political ideas of Calhoun. While consulting with old associates, he discovered that while small numbers objected to nullification, a formidable contingent were decidedly in favor of it. He then went to Charleston where he found the situation was much the same. Poinsett soon created a Unionist society to combat the Nullifiers. Among the prominent members were William Drayton, a Senator of South Carolina; Hugh Legare, a prominent lawyer who had served in the state legislature and had become the editor of the *Southern Review*; James L. Petugru, a law graduate from Harvard, who had succeeded Hayne as state

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81 Stille, *Life and Services*, 57.
82 Ibid., 57.
attorney general; Christopher C. Memminger, who authored an anti-nullification volume and who later, ironically, became secretary of the treasury for the Confederate States of America; Richard Yeaton, who became the editor of the *Courier* and waged a vigorous campaign against the Nullifiers.83

On October 28, 1830, Poinsett wrote Jackson detailing how the Nullifiers had used his name during the state elections. At the same time, for reasons of secrecy, he sent another letter to Jackson through Robert Oliver, a friend in Baltimore, describing the conditions in South Carolina and declaring that a definite statement by the president would completely counteract the plans of the Nullifiers.84 The president’s response stated his opposition to nullification in no uncertain terms, and declared that his attitude should have been clear after the Jefferson Day toast. “The South Carolinians as a whole are too patriotic to adopt such mad projects.”85 He advised Poinsett to use this letter with extreme caution, if he used it at all.86 To keep his party together, Jackson walked a fine line between denouncing nullification and supporting states’ rights.

The October 1830 state elections were the first contest between the Nullifiers and Unionists. The Unionists won a resounding victory, electing eleven of sixteen candidates to the state House of Representatives from the parishes of St. Philip and St. Michael. Even the *Charleston Mercury*, a Nullifier paper, admitted that the Union party did very well.87 This was a fortunate victory, for at this point, Poinsett’s health deteriorated. As

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87 Charleston Mercury, October 25, 1830.
sea voyages had been beneficial to his health previously, he left for England in the spring of 1831.\textsuperscript{88}

Back in South Carolina, the Charleston Nullifiers met on July 12, 1831 at Fayolle’s Hall, created a statewide States Rights’ and Free Trade Association, and called on other districts in the state to create local chapters. The association hoped to unify the Nullifier’s campaign, distributing propaganda, and arrange meetings. As the Nullifier’s crusade grew, the pressure on Calhoun to state his position increased. Late in July, Calhoun issued a letter from his home at Fort Hill, announcing to the nation his belief in nullification.\textsuperscript{89}

Upon Poinsett’s return in November 1831, the position of the South Carolina Nullifiers had strengthened. James Hamilton Jr., a leading advocate of Calhoun’s philosophy, won the governorship.\textsuperscript{90} On November 27, 1831, Poinsett attended a conference with fellow Unionists to determine support for presidential candidates in the coming elections. Hostility prevailed, as Petigru presented a resolution calling for the re-election of the president. Jackson would be their candidate in 1832.

It was in this context that Poinsett received a letter from fellow Unionist William Drayton, who urged his party colleague to join him in Washington to discuss further strategy. While Drayton believed the protective tariff’s influence on the South Carolina economy to be inflated, he informed Poinsett that Martin Van Buren would lose southern support if the allies of the New Yorker did not support a compromise tariff.\textsuperscript{91} As Poinsett was preparing to leave, he was detained by a message from President Jackson which

\textsuperscript{88} Hruneni, \textit{Palmetto Yankee}, 170-172.  
\textsuperscript{89} Freehling, \textit{Prelude to Civil War}, 224-225.  
\textsuperscript{90} Hruneni, \textit{Palmetto Yankee}, 170-172.  
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 173-174.
expressed his intentions to order federal armaments at Poinsett’s disposal to the port of Charleston in anticipation of any outbreak of violence.92

At the nation’s capitol in February 1832, Poinsett ascertained who was willing to create a compromise tariff to placate the Nullifiers of his state. Poinsett spoke with Henry Clay and John Quincy Adams, both proponents of protectionism. Writing to his friend Dr. Johnson, in early February, Poinsett related the important points of his meetings with these two statesmen. In his meetings with Clay, Poinsett made it clear that all South Carolinians opposed the American System, however there was a divergence of opinion over the constitutionality of nullification. Poinsett stated that while both Clay and Adams favored a protective system, “the former has delivered two thirds of a speech in which he advocates his ruinous and absurd American System.” Because protectionism was central to the American System, Poinsett had very little faith in obtaining Clay’s assistance in any compromise tariff legislation. Poinsett characterized Adams as a supporter of southern concessions, yet cautioned that the ex-president believed the South was unwilling to accept any conciliatory position.93

Not surprisingly, Poinsett found both Clay and Adams obstinate in their stance on protectionism. The most important aspect of Poinsett’s communications with the two, particularly with Clay, is in the way he described the difference between Nullifiers and Unionists. He stated that while both the Unionists and the Nullifiers reject the American System, the Nullifiers were willing to take states’ rights to its ultimate conclusion, nullification and secession if necessary. Poinsett understood that the contest in South

92 Ibid.
Carolina was between those advocates for states’ rights, who believed in a perpetual Union and decentralization of power, and those who believed that states’ rights meant a constitutional right to withdraw from the Union to protect the rights of the minority from the tyranny of the majority. Poinsett’s grasp of this divergence of states’ rights ideology is integral to his relationship with President Andrew Jackson.

Early in 1832, two events inspired the Nullifiers within South Carolina. On March 3, 1832, the U.S. Supreme Court handed down its decision in the *Worcester v. Georgia* case. Arguably, the philosophy of nullification was first demonstrated by President Jackson himself concerning Georgia’s refusal to adhere to the Court’s decision. The case revolved around Georgia’s jurisdiction in the Cherokee Nation. Supreme Court Judge John Marshall declared a Georgia law that required all white men who lived in Cherokee territory to have a land-selling license unconstitutional, because the Cherokee Nation “is a distinct political community, and within its boundaries, the laws of Georgia can have no force.” Arguably, the philosophy of nullification was first demonstrated by President Jackson himself concerning Georgia’s refusal to adhere to the Court’s decision. The case revolved around Georgia’s jurisdiction in the Cherokee Nation. Supreme Court Judge John Marshall declared a Georgia law that required all white men who lived in Cherokee territory to have a land-selling license unconstitutional, because the Cherokee Nation “is a distinct political community, and within its boundaries, the laws of Georgia can have no force.” Georgia ignored the court’s decision by not changing any of its policies on the matter. President Jackson, an experienced Indian fighter, also ignored the court’s ruling and Georgia’s failure to adhere to it. A widely believed rumor was that after the decision Jackson claimed, “Well: John Marshall has made his decision: now let him enforce it!” Nullifiers in South Carolina believed this event was a prime example of nullification in action and the supremacy of states’ rights over federal law.

To South Carolinians, the crucial point was that Georgia had defied a federal law and Jackson had acquiesced. “Georgia on a very recent occasion, nullified a decision of the Supreme Court,” wrote one leading upcountry editor. “Do we see General Jackson

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taking any coercive measures to enforce that decision? Is not the principle precisely the same with South Carolina? Is the tariff act more of a Supreme law than a Supreme Court decision?"96 Some Unionists also wondered if Jackson could be depended on for “the old man seems to be more than half a nullifier himself.”97 Jackson himself may have inadvertently contributed to the diminishing fear of federal coercion and the increasing chance of nullification’s triumph during the campaign of 1831-1832. Combined with the Nullifier’s belief that President Jackson supported them, these events contributed to their victories at the polls in the fall of 1832.

The tariff of 1832 could not have come at a worse time for the Unionists in South Carolina. On July 14, 1832, Congress enacted a new tariff aimed at assuaging the South Carolinians. Without the support of President Jackson, this bill would not have become law. The tariff slashed some items substantially and abolished the system of minimum valuation, yet it retained rates on cotton, woolens, and iron at almost fifty percent. In effect it restored the tariff to what it had been in 1824 when the average rate on dutiable articles was about thirty-three percent. While it reduced numerous duties, it left the protective principle unimpaired.98 Protectionism was the very thing the Nullifiers were rebelling against. For Nullifiers, unless protectionism was repudiated, all hope of tariff reform was useless. Accordingly, Nullifiers told the people of South Carolina it was hopeless to look to the federal government for justice. Disgusted with the new tariff, Calhoun wrote to a friend in South Carolina: “The question is no longer one of free trade, but of liberty and despotism. The hope of the country now rests on our gallant

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96 Freehling, *Prelude to Civil War*, 234.
97 Ibid.
little state. Let every Carolinian do his duty.”99 The Nullifiers of South Carolina were ready to deploy the doctrine of nullification.

To combat the movement towards nullification, the Union Party convention assembled at Columbia in September 1832. Colonel Thomas Taylor, a Revolutionary war veteran presided. The convention appointed a committee of nine delegates to travel to the other Southern states to ascertain their views on the project of a general convention to secure revision of the tariff by Congress. If other states could be convinced of the need of a convention, the delegates would be elected by legislative districts. Poinsett and D.E. Huger were sent to Virginia and North Carolina.

On October 8, 1832, the anticipated Congressional elections were held. The Nullifiers swept the rural area of the tidewater, controlling thirteen of the seventeen parishes and winning seventy-six percent of the popular votes. Governor Hamilton called for a meeting of the new legislature on October 20, ostensibly to use nullification to destroy the tariff of 1832. While this victory seems overwhelming, the election was much closer than the numbers indicate. The Nullifiers won less than a two-thirds popular majority, garnering approximately 17,000 votes.100

At Seyle’s Hall in Charleston on October 15, 1832, Poinsett delivered an address intended to rally the Unionists. Poinsett denounced those who sought to dissolve the union in order to protect their interests. Moreover, he warned the opposition that those who would trample upon our rights, endanger the liberty of the nation, “violate that constitution which we venerate, and destroy the union”, would be confronted “at all

99 Peterson, The Triumvirate, 212.
100 Freehling, Prelude to Civil War, 254-255.
hazards.”

The Unionist paper, the *Charleston Courier*, characterized Poinsett as a “man in a thunderstorm” standing erect an unmoved, while more “solid hearts were shivered to atoms by the forked lightnings.”

The day after his speech, Poinsett wrote Jackson informing him of the Nullifier’s victory at the polls as well as warning him that a state convention calling for an act of nullification would soon follow. According to Poinsett, most Nullifiers believed that there was nothing congress or the president could do to stop them. Poinsett lamented if this was so, there was nothing to do but to “witness the triumph of Mr. Calhoun.”

Poinsett insisted that the Nullifiers intended to break open the customs houses if the collector refused to cooperate. Promising to send a list of Nullifiers working in the custom house to Secretary of State Louis McLane, Poinsett warned that even the post office was suspect as he had been advised to not send a letter to the president through the office at Charleston. Furthermore, Poinsett believed he and his fellow Unionists were going to have to defend themselves against “lawless violence, and we ought not to be left entirely defenceless [sic], I mean without arms and ammunition.”

Poinsett was anxious at the prospect of violence, and the Unionists looked to him for precautionary measures. Poinsett finally stated that he and the Unionists were depending on the “measures which will be adopted by the executive and an earnest desire to lend our aid to render them effectual.”

Poinsett’s report had quite an effect on Old Hickory. On October 29, 1832, Jackson sent a confidential dispatch to Secretary of War Lewis Cass ordering him to issue
orders to the officers in charge of the forts in the harbor of Charleston, South Carolina to
beware any attempt to seize the forts, warning them: “The attempt will be made to
surprise the forts and garrisons by the militia, and must be guarded against with vestal
vigilance and any attempt by force repelled with prompt and exemplary punishment.”105
Poinsett’s dire disposition and personal appeal to the authority of the executive office had
thoroughly convinced Jackson that the Nullifiers would resort to violence.

Accordingly, on November 7, 1832, Jackson authorized George Breathitt, brother
of the governor of Kentucky, to journey to Charleston, South Carolina, to ascertain the
situation.106 Significantly, the first two of Breathitt’s directives were to investigate issues
that Poinsett explicitly pointed out in his October 16 letter. First, Breathitt was to
determine whether there was a foundation for Poinsett’s allegations that the officers in
the revenue service were aiding the views of the Nullifiers. Breathitt was to collect
evidence and specify the individuals involved. Second, Breathitt was to investigate
whether the “Post Master of the city of Charleston and his clerks or deputies are aiding
the views of the same party.” Jackson was acting on Poinsett’s admonition that the
postmaster could not be trusted. Breathitt was to find out if letters intended for the
federal government were being examined before being mailed. Third, if there were any
other officers who held a commission with the federal government abetting the Nullifiers,
Breathitt was to ascertain their names and the nature of their misconduct. Lastly, in
conjunction with Drayton and Poinsett, he was to “obtain all such information as may be
useful to the Government to enable it to take timely steps towards the counteraction of

105 Ibid., 483. Jackson to Cass, October 29, 1832.
106 Remini, The Life of Jackson, 237.
the effort of the Nullifiers to render inoperative the laws of the Union.”

This last point was expounded on in a personal letter from Jackson to Breathitt that went along with his formal instructions. Jackson wanted him to discover how far the civil jurisdiction of South Carolina extended over the bay and harbor of Charleston. He was also to discover if South Carolina had established courts of admiralty before it ratified the federal constitution, or if it currently had courts of admiralty jurisdiction. He also instructed Breathitt to check the defenses of the Sullivan Islands, and the armament at Castle Pinckney.

A letter sent along with Breathitt to Poinsett further illuminated Breathitt’s mission. Breathitt was posing as an agent of the post office bearing instructions from the secretary of the treasury to the collector of Charleston. Under this guise, Poinsett was to show Breathitt the forts, revenue cutters, and the Sullivan’s Island. Jackson made it clear that Breathitt was to discover if the Nullifiers really intended to resort to violence and what federal employees were sympathetic to their cause.

By November 16, Breathitt had met Poinsett. Instead of inspecting the forts, Breathitt went straight to Columbia, South Carolina. Breathitt believed he could better determine the Nullifiers intentions by witnessing the convention that had been called. Poinsett assumed the job of examining the forts in Charleston harbor. He hoped to send his report just as Breathitt was returning to Washington. Subsequently, Poinsett reiterated his belief that the main goal of the Nullifiers was to “embarrass your administration and defeat your election; but they have led the people on so far under
other pretexts that they must proceed.”110 Further, Poinsett mused that after the collector of the customs house refused a writ of replevin from the Nullifiers, violence would ensue, “namely the breaking open of the public stores, which will rouse the indignation of the United States against them.”111 To prevent such an occurrence, Poinsett instructed that the customs house should be removed to one of the island forts.

Lastly, Poinsett insisted once more on having arms and ammunition sent to Charleston. It was important for the Union party to be armed against “lawless violence.”112 Specifically, Poinsett requested hand grenades and small rockets which he believed to be excellent weapons in a street fight. He also wanted United States rifles, claiming he could instruct his fellow Unionists in how to use them.113

Three days later, on November 19, the South Carolina legislature met. On November 24, by a vote of 136 to 26, the convention passed an Ordinance of Nullification, which declared the tariff laws of 1828 and 1832 unconstitutional, and null and void in South Carolina. After February 1, 1833, the ordinance continued, “it shall not be lawful to enforce the payment of duties within the limits of this state.”114 If force were used, then the people of South Carolina “will thenceforth hold themselves absolved from all further obligation to maintain or preserve their political connection with the people of the other states, and will forthwith proceed to organize a separate government.”115 The state courts were prohibited from questioning the authority of the Ordinance or of subsequent acts to make it effective. A test oath was to be prescribed by

110 Ibid., 486-488. Poinsett to Jackson, November 16, 1832.
111 Ibid.
112 Ibid., 487.
113 Ibid.
114 Freehling, Prelude to Civil War, 263.
the legislature which bound all officers of the state to obey, execute, and enforce the
Ordinance and Acts. In cases involving this oath which came to courts, the jurors were
compelled to take it. The legislature met as soon as the Convention adjourned. Governor
Hayne’s message recommended the raising of a State Guard of 12,000 and suggested a
bill of pains and penalties for those who disobeyed the Ordinance and an “act of treason”
for those who might resist the State in the defense of the Union.116 If the Federal
government attempted to coerce South Carolina, she would secede from the Union.

On November 29, 1832, Poinsett reiterated his allegiance and that of other
Unionists stating, “We would rather die, than to submit to the tyranny of such an
oligarchy as J.C. Calhoun, James Hamilton, Robt. [sic] Y. Hayne and McDuffie and we
implore our sister states and the federal govt. to rescue us from these lawless and reckless
men.”117 However, Poinsett believed that some of his fellow Unionists were intimidated
by these lawless and reckless men. He specifically mentioned the opinion of his friend
Drayton, who believed that letting South Carolina leave the Union was the only option
available to the United States Congress. According to Poinsett, if one state left, the
whole Union would dissolve, leaving the nation in an atmosphere in which domestic and
foreign wars would ensue. He appealed to Jackson’s vanity claiming that “if these bad
men are put down by the strong arm, the union will be cemented by their conduct and by
the vigour [sic] of the government, and you will earn the imperishable glory of having
preserved this great confederacy from destruction.”118

Responding to Poinsett’s description, Jackson reiterated that if “a posse comitatus
prove not strong enough to carry into effect the laws of the Union, you have a right to call

116 Putnam, Joel Roberts Poinsett, 130.
117 Ibid., 491. Poinsett to Jackson, November 29, 1832.
118 Ibid.
upon the Government for aid and the Executive will yield as far as he has been vested
with the power by the constitution and the laws made in pursuance thereof.” 119 There is
further evidence to support the idea that Jackson was seeking a moral authority. Jackson
informed Poinsett that they must proceed with a “firmness such as becomes those who
are conscious of being right and are assured of the support of public opinion, we must
perform our duties without suspecting that there are those around us desiring to tempt us
into the wrong.” 120 Furthermore, fearing an outbreak of violence before the message
from Secretary of War Cass arrived, Jackson permitted Poinsett to show this letter to the
commanding officer to receive whatever he needed to defend the Unionists.

Foreshadowing Jackson’s forthcoming response to South Carolina’s Ordinance, he states:
“Nullification therefore means insurrection and war; and other states have a right to put it
down.” 121

Throughout the fall of 1832, Joel R. Poinsett was President Jackson’s closest
informant in South Carolina. Poinsett first proposed many of the precautions that
Jackson took to prevent hostilities. Without Poinsett’s analysis of the situation, Jackson’s
decisions early on in the Nullification Crisis may not have been the right ones. Poinsett’s
correspondence also illustrate that he was sure conflict would come, and this assurance
would continue to be a theme in they early months of 1833.

119 Ibid., 494. Jackson to Poinsett, December 2, 1832.
120 Ibid.
121 Ibid.
CHAPTER 4

DEFEATING THE “MONSTER”

On December 10, 1832, Jackson issued what became known as the *Nullification Proclamation*. The document repudiated nullification and secession while endorsing a nationalist view of the Constitution. Jackson asserted:

“I consider then, the power to annul a law of the United States, assumed by one state, incompatible with the existence of the Union, contradicted expressly by the letter of the Constitution, unauthorized by its spirit, inconsistent with every principle on which it was founded, and destructive of the great object for which it was formed.”

His proclamation was paradoxical in that it posited nationalism vis-à-vis nullification, yet advocated states’ rights against the American system. If Nullifiers in South Carolina were dismayed by Jackson’s decree, they were shocked by the time they finished reading it. Towards the end, the president declared that disunion by armed force is treason, and warned that the first magistrate could not avoid the performance of his duty. Lastly, he made a personal appeal to South Carolinians by asking them to “snatch from the archives of your state the disorganizing edict.” Although his words were harsh, Jackson hoped his native state would renounce nullification, thus precluding the need to use force. The Nullifiers believed Jackson’s proclamation was the work of the South Carolina Unionists. Some of their newspapers even accused Poinsett of being its author.

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125 Putnam, *Joel Roberts Poinsett*, 134.
Regardless of authorship, the Nullifiers were not intimidated by Jackson’s decree. Their resolve was strengthened. The *Charleston Mercury* denounced the “sophistry of the Royal Proclamation” as a “monarchical usurpation” of the executive authority.\(^{126}\) The South Carolina legislature immediately responded by adopting a resolution declaring Jackson’s Nullification Proclamation unconstitutional, and Governor Robert Hayne issued his own counter-proclamation.\(^{127}\) On December 26, Hayne issued a proclamation which sought to build up the state militia; by the beginning of 1833, the governor and his district commanders were raising, equipping, and training an army to deter federal intervention. Soldiers constantly drilled in the streets and, for a short time, Carolina uniforms and blue cockades were standard fare in churches and at tea parties. Over 25,000 men, more than had voted for nullification in the first place, volunteered to defend South Carolina against Jackson’s armies. The army was more enthusiastic than efficient. It suffered from an obvious lack of officers, discipline, and arms. The governor’s agents searched the North for weapons, and Hayne even established a cannon ball factory in South Carolina; the Nullifiers bought over $100,000 worth of arms in less than three months. In their zeal, the Nullifiers eventually exhausted state funds before purchasing half of what they needed. Furthermore, Hayne’s lieutenants reported that they would have to use guerrilla tactics in the woods if federal troops marched into South Carolina.\(^{128}\)

The same day Jackson issued his proclamation, a Union Convention convened in Columbia, South Carolina. Poinsett became commander-in-chief of the Union Party for the entire state, with Robert Cunningham in charge of the western part and D.E. Huger

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\(^{126}\) *Charleston Mercury*, January 14, 1833.

\(^{127}\) Ibid., 134.

\(^{128}\) Freehling, *Prelude to Civil War*, 275.
Poinsett took the floor several times arguing that the Nullifiers were actuated in part by resentment against Jackson as he failed to appoint a South Carolinian to his cabinet. This point underscores Jackson’s own belief that the Nullifier cause was one of disappointed ambition. Poinsett assured the convention that President Jackson approved their plans for military organization, and that the arsenal in Augusta, Georgia, would be opened for the upper part of the state if they needed arms. He then read a letter from Jackson in which the president pledged himself to put down nullification with all the power he possessed. Many members cried “What have we to fear? We are right and God and Old Hickory are with us.”

Poinsett and Memminger authored a report and protest, which denounced the Ordinance of 1832, and condemned the test oath as proscribing nearly half the freemen of South Carolina and making it impossible for thousands of them to hold office. A complaint was also made against the proposal of the Nullifiers to raise a standing army. The Unionist convention declared that this could be done only by a “system of conscription” which would “force the citizens of the state from their firesides and their homes, to take up arms and incur the pains and penalties of treason.”

Poinsett’s army was numerous enough to cause the Nullifiers some concern. While Poinsett worked hard to recruit and equip Unionist volunteers, his efforts were frustrated by previous Unionist weaknesses: the petty jealousies of Charleston moderates, the expectation that the people would soon awaken from their delusion, and the reluctance to fight against a Carolinian crusade. Poinsett used the Committee of

129 Rippy, Versatile American, 153.
130 Bassett, Correspondence, 504. James O’Hanlon to Jackson, December 20, 1832.
Correspondence which the December Unionist convention established to create Washington Societies in many districts. This program was particularly helpful to Unionist organization in the yeoman farming areas near the North Carolina border.

Almost 8,000 unionists volunteered. The total compromised less than one-half of the Unionist voters and less than one-third of the Nullifiers’ army. Ironically, Nullifiers were short on weapons, but had the numbers; Unionists had enough weapons, yet not enough volunteers.

In Charleston, the Union men made their military preparations with utmost care. A code of signals was arranged with the federal army and navy officers. The Unionists were to first seize the Alarm Gun and the church bells, and then take possession of the Guard House. If they were unable to hold the city, they were to withdraw to the peninsula of Hempstead to the northeast and entrench themselves.132

On December 17, Congressman William Drayton, acting on the advice of fellow Unionist Daniel Huger, begged Jackson to “not interfere with our party by affording them the aid of federal troops under existing circumstances.”133 Jackson, now reluctant to send federal troops without Congressional approval, was happy to comply. The president could keep the federal troops at the island forts and could use a civilian marshal’s posse composed of South Carolina Unionists to enforce the laws. On December 23, 1832, Jackson wrote Van Buren: “The Union will be preserved and Treators [sic] punished, by a due execution of the laws, by the Posse comitatus.134 However much he believed it to be in his authority as executive to do so, Jackson could not act unilaterally; he knew doing so might split the delicate balance of the Democratic Party and confirm the belief

133 Stille, *Life and Services*, 79.
that he was a tyrant. President Jackson depended on Poinsett for advice on the
developing situation in South Carolina.

By the middle of December, five companies of federal artillery, numbering some
280 men reached Charleston with heavy guns and ammunition. Nevertheless, Poinsett
wanted a more formidable display of federal authority. Otherwise, he insisted, all hope
of “putting down nullification by moral force” would have to be abandoned.\footnote{Rippy, \textit{Versatile American}, 155.} The
small Unionist force at Charleston faced more than five thousand volunteer militia of the
Nullifiers as well as the Nullifier controlled artillery of Charleston.\footnote{Ibid.} Poinsett became
increasingly impatient. On January 8, 1833, he wrote Drayton: “I go for practical results
rather than metaphysical abstract rights.”\footnote{Stille, \textit{Life and Services}, 76.} While Poinsett supported Jackson’s
Nullification Proclamation, he believed that only a strong federal presence would prevent
hostilities. Fueling this belief was Poinsett’s firm conviction that if one state were
allowed to secede, the federal union would be at an end.

While waiting for the South Carolinians to come to their senses, President
Jackson took preventative steps to avoid a confrontation. On January 16, 1833, he sent
Congress a message describing conditions within South Carolina and requesting certain
powers to diffuse the precarious situation. In what became known as the Force Bill
message, Jackson requested power to close the custom houses at Beaufort and
Georgetown. He claimed they could not be adequately protected from South Carolina’s
replevin\footnote{Ellis, \textit{Union at Risk}, 94.} process in Charleston. Thus, the United States should
relocate them to “floating custom houses” on United States ships placed off each port.\footnote{Ellis, \textit{Union at Risk}, 94.}
The Charleston custom house would be moved to the federally controlled fortresses at Castle Pinckney and Fort Moultrie in the harbor. To stop the Nullifiers from procuring a tariff bond, Jackson asked for power to collect all duties in cash. He also requested jails to be established if the Nullifiers refused to house Carolinians imprisoned for violating federal laws. These measures made it impossible for the Nullifiers to implement their ordinance and laws. Adroitly, they recognized that it made it easier for Jackson to place blame on South Carolina for any conflict that might occur. If civil war were to occur, the Nullifiers would have to fire the first shot. Many of the steps Jackson called for, Poinsett first advocated.

On the very day Jackson sent his Force Bill message to Congress he wrote Poinsett: “You can rely on every aid that I can give, only advise me of the action of the Nullifiers. The moment they are in hostile array in opposition to the execution of the laws, let it be certified to me by the atty [attorney] for the district, or the judge, and I will forthwith order the leaders prosecuted and arrested, if the marshal is resisted by 12,000 bayonets I will have his posse 24,000…” Lastly, Jackson advised Poinsett to write him often, and to provide him with early warning of any armed force committing treason, and the individuals in charge. “We will strike at the head and demolish the monster, nullification and secession at the threshold by the power of the law.”

On January 16, Poinsett transmitted a letter to Jackson along with a copy of a circular letter addressed by Governor Hamilton to the officers of his staff, instructing them to make conditional contracts and other preparations for the transportation of troops from the interior to Charleston. Poinsett claimed that while no troops had been moved in

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139 Ibid.
140 Bassett, *Correspondence*, 5:5. Jackson to Poinsett, January 16, 1833.
141 Ibid.
accordance with this order, “the governor’s aids are already actively engaged in making
the necessary arrangements in conformity with the instructions contained in this
circular.”142 Poinsett’s fear of an invasion of Charleston now fueled a flurry of letters
between him and President Jackson as to how to respond.

Poinsett’s January 16 correspondence also informed Jackson that the Unionists
were unwilling to form a posse merely upon the authority of a federal marshal because
they feared if taken prisoner, they would be subject to prosecution under the laws of the
state. Rather than acting independently, they wanted Jackson to call out the state militia
so they would be acting directly upon a presidential order.143 Poinsett informed Jackson
that even if the Posse were called out by the U.S. Marshall, there was a “disinclination on
the part of the majority of the Union Party in Charleston to join in mortal conflict with
their adversaries as a part of the Posse.”144 Poinsett was hesitant because it was “certain
in such a contest that father would be arrayed against son and brother against brother.”145
Many Unionists also feared that if they acted unilaterally as the posse comitatus and lost,
they would be at the mercy of the Nullifiers. Although Poinsett wanted South Carolina
Unionists to put down the Nullifiers without federal aid, without a strong majority, he
could not “expose a few brave men to the certainty of defeat.”146

Poinsett was also aware that some Unionists, particularly Congressman William
Drayton, did not want the president to intervene militarily. Poinsett wrote the South
Carolinian congressman on January 16. He stated that he knew Drayton requested on
December 17, 1832, that President Jackson not interfere with the Unionist party by

142 Bassett, Correspondence, 6. Poinsett to Jackson, January 16, 1833.
143 Ibid.
144 Ibid.
145 Ibid.
146 Ibid.
supplementing them with Federal troops under existing circumstances. Poinsett asked Drayton what the Unionists would do if Nullifiers decided to take Charleston. He reminded Drayton of the Unionist party’s dire position, stating: “The artillery is in the hands of our opponents, and even if we had the ordnance we have no artillery men. Five thousand men have volunteered, and those from Richland and Sumter are anxious to be brought down to insult us.”\footnote{Stille, \textit{Life and Services}, 76.} Poinsett concluded by asking Drayton if he thought “embodying and marching men to oppose the laws of the United States was an overt act of treason.” Poinsett reiterated that such a situation required the intervention of the president. Lastly, he lamented that he saw no way in which the revenue laws could be “enforced by legal processes.”\footnote{Ibid.}

Since late adolescence, Poinsett had sought military fame. The Nullification Crisis would be as close as he would come to fulfilling that dream. As leader of the Unionist party in South Carolina, he did not want to lose to the Nullifiers, but he also wanted to be the one responsible for suppressing nullification. His life long dream of military glory is one of the reasons why he advocated military action so strongly. That Poinsett desired a conflict is indicative in a mid-January statement he wrote to the president: “There are it is true some rash and violent men, who desire to bring on a contest with us or with the general government. I almost wish they could be gratified.”\footnote{Bassett, \textit{Correspondence}, 7. Poinsett to Jackson, January 16, 1833.} Although not rash or violent, Poinsett seemed to welcome a military contest.

Poinsett kept up his frequent correspondence with President Jackson. On January 19, 1833, Poinsett declared to Jackson that nothing would prevent conflict “but the certainty on the part of the Nullifiers that we are prepared to meet them. And I will soon
be able to give them that assurance.”

Poinsett also revealed a fear of outside intervention. He cautioned Jackson that an order for arms from the arsenal in Augusta, Georgia “would be important for the protection of our party upon and near the Georgia frontier.” Poinsett lamented that revolutionists in Georgia and North Carolina had offered their services to the Nullifiers.

The next day Poinsett penned another letter to Jackson describing the conditions and his resolution to defend the state. Poinsett warned Jackson that Governor Hamilton was making preparations to move troops from the South Carolina interior to Charleston. Poinsett feared that if the Nullifiers were allowed to occupy Charleston “we shall be exposed to their insults, which I much doubt if with all the Christian forbearance we can exercise, we can long brook.” Poinsett believed that if the Nullifiers could create a confrontation with the federal government, sympathetic parties in neighboring states would come to the aid of the Nullifiers. While Poinsett stated he would “raise the standard instantly” before allowing South Carolina to secede from the Union, he reiterated that it could not be done without the “countenance of the federal government.”

Poinsett also asked Jackson to place U.S. General Winfield Scott in command of any military maneuvers.

Despite Poinsett’s rhetoric, Jackson pinned his hopes on Poinsett and the Unionists. Responding to Poinsett’s fear that the Nullifiers were getting ready to march on Charleston, the president wrote Poinsett to not fear any assemblage of force in Charleston. Jackson reassured Poinsett declaring: “I can if need be, which god [sic]

150 Ibid., 8. Poinsett to Jackson, January 19, 1833.
151 Ibid.
152 Ibid., 9-10. Poinsett to Jackson, January 20, 1833.
153 Ibid.
154 Ibid.
forbid, march two hundred thousand men in forty days to quell any and every
insurrection, or rebellion that might arise to threaten our glorious confederacy, a union,
upon which our liberty and prosperity and happiness rests.”

Jackson also consoled Poinsett’s fears of the involvement of other states in South
Carolina’s quest for nullification. He advised Poinsett to not be concerned with the
Nullifiers receiving aid from other states. While Jackson admitted that the Nullifiers had
been encouraged by some from Georgia and Virginia specifically, he remained confident
that the nation would support him. Jackson boasted that even if the governor of Virginia
attempted to prevent his armies from marching through that state to put down
insurrection in South Carolina, he would arrest him and hand him over to the civil
authorities.

Jackson was hesitant to comply with Poinsett’s desire to have federal troops in the
state because his own Democratic party and the National Republicans had made it clear
that he should not act without the support of the U.S. Congress. Jackson hoped Congress
would give its approval to his Force Bill quickly, and with a large majority. Even if the
bill did pass by a large majority, for Jackson to acquiesce to the Unionists apprehensions,
he would have to go against Congress, his own party, and the Nullifiers. He urged
Poinsett to continue to provide him with early intelligence of any armed force attempting
to “nullify and resist the revenue laws of the United States”, so that he could “relieve the
good citizens of that despotism and tyranny.” He repeated that his “pride and desire,”
was for the Union men themselves to “save my native state from that disgrace the

155 Ibid., 11. Jackson to Poinsett, January 24, 1833.
156 Ellis, Union at Risk, 100-101.
157 Bassett, Correspondence, 11. Jackson to Poinsett, January 24, 1833.
Nullifiers have brought upon her.”

Despite Poinsett’s admonitions, President Jackson still hoped that a *posse comitatus* could withstand any violent uprising.

Even though Jackson believed Governor Hayne’s creation of a Nullifier army was treasonous enough to warrant action, he recognized that some kind of overt act was necessary on the part of the nullifiers before they could be accused of subversive activities. On January 26, 1833, Jackson ordered Secretary of War Lewis Cass to instruct General Winfield Scott, commanding federal troops in Charleston Harbor, that “it is the most earnest wish of the president that the present unhappy difficulties in South Carolina should be terminated without any forcible collision”; or if this were not possible that there should be no question that “if such collision does occur it shall not be justly imputable to the United States.”

Poinsett continued to press Jackson for action. He wrote Jackson on January 30 stating: “So much anxiety is expressed by the members of the Union party on the subject of the advance of the States Rights forces from the interior, that you must pardon me for troubling you so often on the subject.”

Poinsett essentially asked Jackson to encamp a thousand regulars at the U.S. Arsenal. In his opinion, this would halt any Nullifier advance on Charleston. Furthermore, Poinsett saw no “constitutional objection to the measure.”

While Poinsett worried for the sake of the Unionists in Charleston, he received encouraging news from upstate. On February 5, Unionist organizer Simpson Bobo wrote Poinsett from Spartanburg describing that town’s Unionist movement. He informed

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158 Ibid.
159 Freehling, *Prelude to Civil War*, 280.
161 Ibid.
Poinsett that a Union Society comprised of fifteen hundred men, capable of bearing arms, was created. He claimed that his people were prepared to defend their rights, but they needed arms and ammunition. Bobo informed Poinsett that the efforts of the Nullifiers to gain volunteers had been slow. With only 150 to 200 members, Bobo assumed that the Nullifiers believed there would be no violence. Yet, like Poinsett, he remained apprehensive for his fellow Unionists in Charleston.162

On February 9, Poinsett wrote Jackson that he believed that even if the leaders of the Nullifiers called a halt to the movement, that they had “raised a storm beyond their control.”163 Poinsett believed the leading Nullifiers could not control the movement. Furthermore, Poinsett remained concerned that the Nullifiers might receive help from outside and even foreign forces. Rumors were circulating that the British Consul, Henry Ogilby, had assured Nullifiers the Commander of H.B.M. Squadron in the West Indies would send warships to the harbor of Charleston in order to protect the persons and property of H.B.M.’s subjects. Poinsett believed such an occurrence would embolden the Nullifiers, as “their leaders have all along led them to believe, that in a contest with the federal government they would receive the aid of Great Britain.”164

Before Poinsett’s warning of Ogilby’s leanings, Secretary of State Edward Livingston met with British charge d’affaires Charles Bankhead on the conduct of the British Consul in Charleston. As a result of this meeting, Bankhead wrote Ogilby that his exequatur would be revoked “on his first act of intemperance.”165 Jackson informed

163 Bassett, *Correspondence*, 16-17. Poinsett to Jackson, February 9, 1833.
164 Ibid.
165 Ibid., 18. Jackson to Poinsett, February 17, 1833.
Poinsett of this meeting and advised him to give the earliest possible notification that the
British squadron had been ordered to Charleston.\footnote{Ibid.}

On February 22, Poinsett’s perspective took a drastic change. For the first time,
Poinsett did not ask Jackson for some forceful measure. His own words sum up his new
position: “The party with which I have the honor to act would prefer encountering any
risk, rather than see the executive take measures for their protection, which are not
warranted by constitution and laws of the United States. I do not wish even to see
measures adopted, which might be calculated to irritate or provoke a conflict.”\footnote{Ibid., 21. Poinsett to Jackson, February 22, 1833.} It
seems the impetus for this change of heart was the amount of enlistment in Unionist
ranks. According to Poinsett, there were 7000 enrolled in his army, not counting the
forces concentrated in Charleston. He estimated that he had a force of a thousand within
Charleston.\footnote{Ibid.}

As Poinsett continued to build Unionist forces for any impending violence, there
were other forces at work attempting to end the crisis peacefully. Senator Henry Clay of
Kentucky, whom Poinsett believed would not budge on tariff reform, was putting
together a compromise bill. Hoping to keep Jackson from claiming any credit for
diffusing the situation, he quickly presented his compromise tariff on February 12, 1833.
His compromise guaranteed that no duty was to exceed twenty percent after a duration of
a decade.\footnote{Hruneni, \textit{Palmetto Yankee}, 206.} Aware of this measure, Poinsett wrote Jackson on February 28, explaining
that he believed it would be better for the country at the moment if a tariff bill did not
pass. While he did believe the tariff needed to be modified, to do so at that point would
have the appearance of yielding to the threats of the Nullifiers. Moreover, Poinsett was convinced that the Nullifiers were “determined to go on in their mad career.” While many Nullifiers were, their leader was ready for compromise.

Anxious to end the standoff, Senator John C. Calhoun of South Carolina, as well as other moderate Nullifiers were willing to listen to Clay’s proposal. It should also be noted that due to the perceived betrayal by Jackson, Nullifiers, like Calhoun, did not want the president to have any credit in the peaceful ending of the controversy. Clay the protectionist, and Calhoun the Nullifier had little regard for Jackson and enough in common to work together for the sake of compromise.

President Jackson also had a compromise bill being considered in Congress to end the crisis. However, due to Poinsett’s admonitions on tariff reform, Jackson did not labor as hard for its passage as he did for the Force Bill. Vice President-Elect Martin Van Buren had developed a compromise tariff with Senator Gulian Verplanck of New York. The bill actually conceded everything the South Carolina Nullifiers were demanding. For their respective reasons, Clay and Calhoun could not allow this bill to pass. Through his contacts in the House of Representatives, Clay had the Verplanck bill substituted with his own compromise tariff. While Clay and Calhoun’s opinions differed substantially, it is important to remember that Jackson was their shared political nemesis. Moreover, the Verplanck bill was unacceptable to Calhoun in part because it was a Jackson/Van Buren measure and because Calhoun was willing to provide some relief to manufactures, as long as the principle of protection was removed in the new tariff bill. Jackson was so preoccupied with the passage of the Force Bill that he overlooked Clay’s skillful

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machinations. Ultimately he did not devote the attention the equally important Verplanck Bill required.

Clay’s bill, known as the Compromise Tariff of 1833, passed both houses of Congress on March 1, 1833. The new tariff put many protected goods on the free list and provided that rates on protected products would be lowered in gradual stages to the 20 percent level by mid 1842. Nullifiers perceived the tariff as a victory due to their threats; however, they did not in principle, renounce nullification. Moreover, many northern states disagreed with the tariff because they believed it was not high enough. As a final act of defiance, South Carolina nullified the Force Bill on March 18, 1833. President Andrew Jackson decided to ignore this last act of defiance.

A major confrontation between South Carolina and the federal government was avoided due to Poinsett’s connection with Jackson which kept the latter informed of the actual state of affairs in South Carolina. Many of the decisions Jackson made were based on information he received from the South Carolina Unionist. Perhaps a toast in his honor at the annual banquet of Charleston’s Emerald Isle Society summed it up best: “To the honorable Joel R. Poinsett, his exertions in the holy cause of Union and Liberty, has obtained for him the love and confidence of every true Carolinian.”

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173 Charleston Courier, March 19, 1833.
CHAPTER 5
SECRETARY OF WAR POINSETT

The Nullification Crisis was over, but because leading Nullifiers in South Carolina portrayed the Compromise Tariff of 1833 as a victory, they remained in control of the state government. The Nullifier’s Fourth of July toasts of 1833 proclaimed victory and assailed the Unionist opposition. The Nullifiers volunteer militia remained in existence, and in April, it held a military festival in Charleston.

On March 21, Poinsett explained to President Jackson his strategy for the Unionists. He stated it was important to remain quiet because he believed that there was so much discord among the Nullifiers that they would break into pieces as soon as the opposition was removed. Moreover, he believed the largest threat facing the Union now were the factions in every state which supported Calhoun’s states’ rights views. Poinsett proposed creating a national party to preserve the Union in any state “where the Monster Disunion may show his head, whether in the form of Nullification or in any other hideous shape.” He admitted that some of his colleagues dismissed the idea because the leader of such an organization would be in a position to take unfair advantage of such a situation. Poinsett dismissed this accusation. The national party idea never gained any traction, but Jackson did concur with Poinsett that the Unionists should lay low for the next few months.

Following the Nullification Crisis, Poinsett held no position within the South Carolinian government, yet he continued to be regarded as the leader of the Unionist movement. On March 24, 1834, he organized a Unionist Convention to create a platform

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174 Bassett, *Correspondence*, 45. Poinsett to Jackson, March 21, 1833.
175 Ibid., 45.
for the coming years. The convention’s main objectives were to create a central
committee for the party and select candidates for the fall elections. The Georgetown
district offered him the nomination of congressman. He declined because he did not
believe he could serve his new surroundings adequately as he recently moved there from
Charleston. Overall, the Unionists were defeated in the state elections of 1834, and the
Nullifiers retained the state legislature.176

With Nullifiers retaining control of the state government, the legislature held the
majority needed to pass a law requiring state officials to swear allegiance to the state.
Poinsett and the Central Committee sent James Petigru and Colonel Abram Blanding as
delegates to Columbia to reach a compromise. In this they were successful. The oath
was written into the South Carolina constitution, yet the Joint Committee on Federal
Relations explained that the allegiance required by the amendment was merely “that
which every citizen owes to the state consistently with the constitution of the United
States.”177 Poinsett advised Unionist militia officers to take the new oath.178

Poinsett avoided the spotlight by again declining the nomination for Congress
from the Georgetown District in August 1836. At fifty-five years of age, he now enjoyed
working behind the scenes. Besides age and bad health, he declined because he believed
his presence divided South Carolina at a time when the state needed unity. Moreover,
Poinsett finally married on October 24, 1834, to Mary Pringle Izard, the widow of a
former associate, Judge Julius Pringle.179 Even as Poinsett tried to settle down, the
Unionist party continued to push him for public office. He eventually agreed to be elected

177 Ibid.
to represent Charleston in the state senate. He served only one session before being
nominated for an even greater position.  

Aspiring to military glory all his life, Poinsett was a military liaison for President
Jackson during the Nullification Crisis. In 1837, President Martin Van Buren appointed
the South Carolinian as secretary of war in his administration. Poinsett received this
position due to his services during the Nullification Crisis, yet it was also because of his
friendship with President Jackson. Even though he had sought reprieve from politics
after 1833, this was an opportunity Poinsett had waited for all of his life. His relationship
with President Van Buren was good, as the latter allowed Poinsett a free hand in the War
Department. Secretary of War Poinsett would leave a deep mark on that department.

Perhaps the largest task facing the new secretary of war was the removal of the
eastern tribes beyond the Mississippi River. The Indian Removal Act of 1830 finally
became reality under Poinsett’s tenure. In 1838 his first major task was the removal of
the Cherokee from Georgia. In October of 1835, a delegation of Cherokee signed the
Treaty of New Echota ceding all their lands east of the Mississippi to the U.S. for 4.5
million dollars. They also agreed to migrate two years from the date of ratification. In
1838, Poinsett received word that a Cherokee tribal council voided the treaty and refused
to relocate. In May 1837, he sent General Winfield Scott and a contingent of federal
troops to round up the Cherokee and escort them to “emigration camps” where they were
forcibly enrolled for removal. Poinsett directed Scott to protect the interests of the
Cherokee as much as possible and to begin the process of migration as soon as possible to

\[\text{\footnotesize References:}\]
\[180\] Rippy, Versatile American, 162.
\[181\] Putnam, A Political Biography, 149-150.
\[183\] Hruneni, Palmetto Yankee, 257.
\[184\] Putnam, A Political Biography, 154.
avoid disease. Having worked with Scott during the Nullification crisis, Poinsett knew how to deal with the man’s ego. “I submit these suggestions as such, and not instructions. You will in this, and in all matters relating to the Cherokees consult your own judgment, on which the Department places every reliance.”\textsuperscript{185} By December 1839, the emigration camps were emptied and the Trial of Tears began.

Poinsett’s experience with the Seminoles of northern Florida was quite different from the Cherokees, and the subsequent war took much more of his time. On the day that Poinsett’s nomination was confirmed by the senate in March 1837, General Thomas S. Jesup signed a preliminary armistice with Micanopy, the principal chief of the Seminoles, by which the latter agreed to migrate to the west in accordance with the terms of the former treaty. Micanopy’s followers were gathered at Tampa by early June for removal to Indian Territory. Upon arrival, white slave owners attempted to seize the tribe’s “African-American” allies, causing the Seminoles under the direction of Chief Osceola, to flee.\textsuperscript{186} General Jesup was embarrassed and offered to resign. Poinsett did not accept his resignation, as he believed Jesup’s prior experiences would be essential to the success of the coming campaign.\textsuperscript{187} On December 2, 1837, Poinsett lamented that an inferior force of Indians had completely avoided every attempt of the federal army to subdue their hostility. He also complained that there were too many volunteers in the army without the adequate training to carry out a successful campaign.\textsuperscript{188} During the following years, Micanopy and Osceola were both captured at the negotiation table.\textsuperscript{189} The war continued

\textsuperscript{185} Ibid., 155.
\textsuperscript{186} John and Mary Lou Missal, 	extit{The Seminole Wars: America’s Longest Indian Conflict} (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2004), 128-129.
\textsuperscript{187} Putnam, 	extit{A Political Biography}, 159.
\textsuperscript{188} Hruneni, 	extit{Palmetto Yankee}, 244.
\textsuperscript{189} Missal, 	extit{The Seminole Wars}, 134-141.
in their absence, and Poinsett could do nothing to end it. In his last report as secretary of
war, Poinsett conceded that every effort “to terminate the contest in Florida” had
failed.190

Overall, Poinsett’s role as an enforcer of Indian removal was successful. The
annual report of the Indian Commissioner for 1838 announced the removal of 29,453
Indians for the year. It estimated that there were 22,000 remaining on the east side of the
Mississippi which should be removed. Removal was continued throughout the Van
Buren administration. Poinsett’s final official statement on the matter asserted that
40,000 Indians in all had been settled upon their new lands with no disturbance.191

As Indian tribes from the east were moved to the west among other indigenous
tribes, it was believed the region would need greater security for white immigrants
moving through to the west coast. In January 1838, Poinsett urged Congress to adopt a
comprehensive plan for the security of the western frontier. He advocated the
construction of six or seven forts within the Indian Territory to keep the peace among the
tribes and function as a haven for those recently arrived Indians. Poinsett wanted a
secondary line of posts built in the west to be connected by a military road to facilitate
the movement of troops and supplies in case of incursion.192 Along with forts and roads,
Poinsett also advocated the organization of a volunteer force in each frontier state.
Volunteers could be mustered into service according to their specific state laws for a set
amount of time. During their service, they would receive military instruction for a certain

190 Hruneni, *Palmetto Yankee*, 246.
192 Ibid., 157.
amount of days in each year by regular officers of the United States army. Congress rejected the militia phase, but eventually accepted some parts of Poinsett’s plan.\(^{193}\)

As a consequence of Indian removal and the costly Seminole War, Poinsett recognized the need for drastic changes were needed in the American military. Specifically, the heavy expenses of the Seminole campaign demonstrated the necessity of increasing and organizing the army staff, as well as creating an overall expansion of the military. First, the infantry was to be increased by three regiments. One of those companies then needed to be added to each regiment of artillery. Furthermore, he called for an enlargement of the Quartermaster’s department, an assistant to the adjutant general for each division of the army, and an increase in the number of topographical engineers. Lastly, Poinsett streamlined communication by re-organizing the whole army staff under a single corps of officers to bring about better cooperation between the divisions and promote a more uniform military policy. On July 5, 1838, Congress passed an act incorporating Poinsett’s recommendations on the size of the army and its staff. The general staff was increased from 111 to 162. The engineering corps was doubled, and the ranks of the topographical engineers tripled.\(^{194}\) Poinsett’s suggestions of organization and enlargement helped modernize the military.

Poinsett began the process of improving equipment and techniques. In 1839, Poinsett obtained permission from the French government to send three cadets, W. Eustis, Philip Kearney, and H.S. Turner to study at the cavalry school of Saumur for a year. Kearney afterwards went to Algeria to witness French military operations there. From these experiences, he went on to distinguish himself in the Mexican War and as a

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commander of a cavalry division in the Army of the Potomac during the Civil War.
Poinsett also revamped the role of light artillery in the American military. He appointed
Captain Samuel Ringgold to form the first field battery. Ringgold selected suitable
officers, and Poinsett insured that every man was separately mounted. Though costly, it
was a wise decision, as Ringgold’s battery of light artillery, as well as similar units,
distinguished itself in the Mexican War.

The highlight of Poinsett’s modernization efforts was his elaborate plan for the
organization of citizen soldiers. With the exemption of certain individuals due to their
official positions, all free, able bodied white male citizens between the ages of twenty-
one and forty were to be enrolled. From this category, 100,000 were to be taken the first
year, and 25,000 each succeeding year. Each recruit would serve for four years in the
active militia, after which he would be in a reserve force for another four years. When
these eight years had passed, no further duty would be required, except in times of crisis.
If Poinsett’s proposals were put into effect, there would be an active force of 100,000, a
reserve force of 100,000, with another 25,000 going into the active force annually. The
territory of the United States was to be divided into ten militia districts, and each state
was allowed to appoint officers in its district. The expense of training these recruits
would be absorbed by the entire nation, and the president would have the power to call on
this active force in times of domestic disorder or foreign invasion.195 Congress rejected
these recommendations. Americans were just not ready for a peace time military.

Just as American inefficiencies during the Seminole War fueled Poinsett’s
retooling of the American military, so too did the specter of a third Anglo-American war.
During Poinsett’s tenure as secretary of war, the United States almost went to war twice

195 Rippy, Versatile American, 176.
with the British. The first crisis was due to the Canadian rebellions of 1837-1838. William Lyon Mackenzie and other Canadians rebelled against their British overlords. Invoking the revolutionary ideals of 1776, many Americans in New York relished the idea of incorporating Canada into the United States. While President Van Buren proclaimed American neutrality in the conflict in November 1837, many Americans enlisted in Mackenzie’s forces. A privately owned American steamer, the *Caroline*, was chartered to transport the American volunteers and supplies from Buffalo, New York to Navy Island in the Niagara River, the staging area for the volunteers. On December 29, a Canadian officer loyal to the British and fifty militiamen boarded the *Caroline* and captured it. One man was killed in the scuffle, and the vessel was set ablaze. Americans were outraged, yet the British termed the action as self defense.\(^{196}\) Poinsett called on General Winfield Scott once again. Despite the fact that Scott was a Whig who could potentially bring glory to Poinsett’s political opponents, the latter was not going to allow political considerations to be a factor.

On January 5, 1838, a few days after the *Caroline* incident, Poinsett ordered Scott to New York to assume formal military command along the border. Scott carried with him letters to the governors of New York and Vermont requesting they call out the militia; however Scott was to impress upon the governors the necessity of selecting troops from portions of their state that were distant from the border. There was no authority to employ military force in restraining American citizens from crossing the border, so Poinsett hoped Scott could use his influence to prevent such an occurrence.\(^{197}\)

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Lastly, he assured the general of his full support and added: “These hints are thrown out to you to be acted on as you see fit. Every confidence is felt…in your prudence as well as your courage, and with the aid of the Governor [of New York] to whom I pray to be remembered, you will be able no doubt to concert measures and to restore tranquility on the northern frontier.” As in the Cherokee Removal, Poinsett handled Scott’s delicate ego very well.

Richard Rush, the American minister to Britain, informed Secretary Poinsett that warships were being sent to the St. Lawrence River. In response, Poinsett sent the latest recruits to reinforce the eighth regiment, which was employed in manning the forts on the northeastern frontier.

Henry Fox, British Minister to the U.S., though wary of Secretary of State John Forsyth’s assurances of neutrality, approved of Poinsett’s efforts to discourage hostilities in the northeastern area for the preservation of peaceful relations between England and the United States. Furthermore, Fox informed British Foreign Secretary Lord Palmerston of Poinsett’s stalwart position in opposing the clandestine raids conducted by American citizens.198

In early 1839, a boundary dispute erupted between Maine and the Canadian province of New Brunswick. The New Brunswick provincial government extended jurisdiction over an area on the border that was in dispute. As Canadian lumberjacks moved into modern upper Maine, that state’s legislature authorized the governor to dispatch militiamen to repel the invaders. A small skirmish in the area led to the imprisonment of fifty Americans. Tensions escalated as New Brunswick sent troops to

198 Hruneni, Palmetto Yankee, 283-284.
the area, and the U.S. Congress allotted $10 million and empowered the president to call out 50,000 volunteers.  

Richard Rush, who had negotiated the Rush-Bagot agreement of 1817 which prevented the fortification of the American-Canadian frontier, was so alarmed that he became the leading advocate of preparedness in case of a third Anglo-American war. In frequent correspondence with Secretary of War Poinsett, Rush emphasized the dangers of being involved in a third Anglo-American conflict.  

Preparing for a conflict, Poinsett advocated increasing the size of the regular army and instituting his citizen soldier plan.  

Poinsett again sent Scott to handle this border dispute on the Maine boundary. Scott was to quell the populace if possible and restrain the state legislature, which was being urged to assert its sovereignty as a state. If the British refused to evacuate the disputed territory, Scott could call upon the army to assist the Maine and Massachusetts militias in removal. As Scott prepared to leave for Washington, he solemnly told President Van Buren and Poinsett that if they wanted war, “I need only look on in silence”; if they wanted peace, he could assure them of nothing.  

At this time, Poinsett took the opportunity to allay British fears by informing Fox that Scott was “punctilious, not improperly so, in all matters” concerning the honor of the United States. Fox later wrote to Palmerston that he had observed “more honesty and singleness of purpose in Mr. Poinsett than in any other of the American ministers.” Perhaps more than any other official in the Van Buren administration, Poinsett helped lay the foundation for the Anglo-American rapprochement of the 1840s.

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199 Jones, Prologue, 15.  
200 Rippy, Versatile American, 192.  
201 Jones, Prologue, 15-16.  
202 Hruneni, Palmetto Yankee, 288.  
203 Ibid., 289-290.
After the defeat of Van Buren in the 1840 presidential election, Poinsett retired from public life completely. For the remainder of Poinsett’s life, the greatest issue confronting the United States was the annexation of territory from Mexico, along with the eventual spread of slavery to these territories. When Texas gained its independence in 1836, Poinsett, unlike his colleagues, desired the immediate annexation of Texas. Poinsett was so adamant that B.F. Hunt, the Texan minister to the U.S., wrote to his secretary of state on August 10, 1837 that “in Mr. Poinsett we have a powerful advocate.” While Poinsett as well as President Van Buren himself favored Texas’s annexation, Poinsett did not strongly advocate this position, and the administration as a whole avoided the issue.

Poinsett’s nationalism as well as his experience in Mexico continued to make him a respectable source of advice. In 1842, James Hamilton, Jr., a former South Carolinian, now a politician of the Republic of Texas, wrote to Poinsett. Hamilton wanted Poinsett’s opinion on the forces necessary to lead a Texan conquest of Mexico. Poinsett urged Hamilton to abandon the idea because he believed Texas did not have sufficient resources. Poinsett advised Hamilton that the young Republic’s best course of action would be to strengthen its defenses and alliances abroad, specifically with the United States.

Unfortunately, conflict was destined to erupt between the United States and Mexico over Texas. On April 25, 1846, Mexican soldiers attacked a contingent of General Zachary Taylor’s troops north of the Rio Grande, killing eleven and taking the rest prisoner. On May 11, 1846, President James Polk asked congress for a declaration of war. As a former minister to Mexico, Poinsett was very familiar with the country and

believed that Mexico could not be easily conquered without capitalizing on the differing factions within the Mexican government. Moreover, Poinsett was highly critical of Polk’s brinksmanship diplomacy. His use of brute force alone to subdue a nation that possessed a multiplicity of natural defenses and a population of millions was a rash attempt to arouse support for his 54 40 or fight platform. Furthermore, Poinsett maintained “that in Washington D.C. there exists an extraordinary degree of ignorance and presumption” over Mexico’s military capabilities. Despite Poinsett’s anxiety over Polk’s strategy and the safety of American troops in the war, the war was generally a success ironically due to Poinsett’s improvements as secretary of war. Captain Benjamin Huger of the Ordinance Department wrote Poinsett a letter confiding that if not for the artillery companies that were created under Poinsett’s tenure, “we would not have gained the victories we have.”

As a result of the Mexican War over, the United States once again increased in size. Yet, at the close of this war, a new war began over the extension of slavery in the territories. Many in the South called for slavery’s expansion, while voices in the North called for the new territories to be free. Poinsett’s opinion was now called upon to support those intending to extend slavery and protect the South’s doctrine of states’ rights.

In June 1850, the South called together a convention in Nashville, Tennessee, to exert influence on congress in the region’s interests. Richard Yeaton, the editor of the Charleston Courier and a Unionist during the Nullification Crisis, asked Poinsett his views on the matter in the hope of sending him as a delegate. Knowing that Poinsett was

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205 Hruneni, Palmetto Yankee, 410.
206 Ibid.
still ardently Unionist, Yeadon explained that the purpose of the convention was the preservation of the Union, but that “the just rights and constitutional equality of the Southern States” must be maintained.\textsuperscript{207} Poinsett promptly responded that he believed the convention was a mistake in the current state of affairs. However, he claimed he would attend provided the convention’s goal was the defense of southern interests within the Union.\textsuperscript{208} Poinsett was still a nationalist, and could not proclaim the rights of the states over the federal government.

In 1850, Poinsett wrote in the \textit{Charleston Mercury} explaining why South Carolina should accept the Compromise of 1850. He explained that the admission of California as a free state was not an error of an unjust federal government, but the result of the majority of opinion of its citizens. Poinsett believed in Senator Stephan Douglas’s popular sovereignty, as he stated California had the right to determine the slave issue itself. The provision providing for the payment of ten million dollars to Texas for cession of part of that state to New Mexico was also just as it avoided a war between those two states. Poinsett broadened the scope of his letter claiming that secession existed under the Articles of Confederation but not under the Constitution of 1787. Secession and a confederacy of southern states would not bring peace, but chaos to the entire continent, similar to the “miserable aspect of the Spanish American states.”\textsuperscript{209} Furthermore, Poinsett claimed such a confederacy had no protection against the abolitionists of the North, or the hostility of Europe. Lastly, Poinsett exclaimed that it would be as absurd

\textsuperscript{207} Rippy, \textit{Versatile American}, 236.  
\textsuperscript{208} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{209} Ibid., 240.
for South Carolina to secede from the Union by itself as it would be “for one to throw himself from the precipice in the expectation of injuring his enemy in the fall.”

Joel Poinsett died on December 12, 1851. To his death, he continued to argue for a perpetual Union and against a southern confederacy. His entire life was devoted to protecting and spreading American principles. As a Jacksonian and a stout nationalist, his beliefs were as paradoxical as Andrew Jackson’s. Poinsett was perhaps the last statesmen of the Jeffersonian states’ rights attitude.

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210 Ibid.
CONCLUSION

Poinsett’s most remarkable attribute and what makes him stand out among his contemporaries is his conception of the Union. Poinsett clings to the Jeffersonian view of states rights’. He despised most federal intervention unless it was for the military or internal improvements, and he saw slavery as an evil that would slowly die out. Even before Jackson’s Nullification Proclamation, Poinsett understood as early as February 1832, that there was a divergence of states rights’ thinking taking place in South Carolina. Richard Ellis explained the constitutional debate surrounding nullification best in the preface to Union at Risk: The crisis “was between those advocates of states’ rights who believed in perpetual Union and decentralization of power as the best way to fulfill the democratic promise of the American Revolution and keep government responsible to the wishes of the people, and those who advocated that a state had a constitutional right to withdraw from the Union and believed the doctrine of states’ rights provided the best way to protect the rights of the minority from the tyranny of the majority.”211 Poinsett recognized this divergence before there was even a crisis. His astute observance of the situation at such an early point in the crisis is what makes him great.

Late in his life Poinsett stated that he believed John C. Calhoun would be remembered poorly by historians. Upon the death of Calhoun, Poinsett remarked, “He will no more be remembered than Daniel O’Connell among the Irish, except for the evil he had inflicted upon this state.”212 Calhoun, of course, has been remembered for much more than Poinsett believed. The author of nullification and the man most responsible for a states’ rights ideology that protects minority rights, specifically that of slave

211 Ellis, Union at Risk, ix.
212 Hruneni, Palmetto Yankee, 423.
holders, is the subject of numerous biographies and works. Ironically, while Poinsett worked to preserve Union, he remains historically obscure, and is mostly remembered for the flower named after him, the poinsettia.

Joel R. Poinsett deserves a modern biography worthy of his adventurous life. His role as Unionist organizer, his idea of the constitution, and his nationalism are all aspects of his life that deserve greater scrutiny. Certainly he did more for the cause of the Union than any other South Carolinian of his time.
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