

## Andrew Jackson and the Nullification Crisis

**Grade Level:** 9-12

**Time Required:** One or two 50-minute class periods

**Historical Thinking Skills:** Analysis, Contextualization, Synthesis

**Objective:** Students will analyze a political cartoon and the theory of nullification.

### **Required Materials:**

1. [Nullification...Despotism \(NYPL, 1833\)](#)
2. [“The Birthday Dinner” \(American Arc Blog Post\)](#)

**Background:** President Andrew Jackson fought many intense battles throughout his life, and the Nullification crisis of 1832-1833 was no exception. By 1832, many southerners considered two recent tariffs on European goods as favoring northern manufacturers to the detriment of their cotton economy, which required imports from Europe. South Carolina felt particularly slighted by these tariffs, and with the help of Vice President John C. Calhoun (then Jackson's Vice President), argued for the doctrine of ‘nullification,’ which declared that individual states had the right to protect their citizens and therefore, the right to cancel or “nullify” federal laws they viewed as unconstitutional.

Jackson would have none of it, stating in a proclamation that South Carolina’s views on nullification brought the state “to the brink of insurrection and treason.” Thankfully, cooler heads prevailed in the spring of 1833, when Jackson's allies and moderate politicians in Congress negotiated a less burdensome tariff.

However, Jackson stood his ground and pushed through Congress the so-called “Force Bill,” which would allow him to send troops to South Carolina to collect customs duties, i.e., the money from the goods South Carolina received from Europe. Both the compromise tariff and Jackson’s bills were passed by Congress on the same day, assuaging South Carolina’s resentment and killing the doctrine of nullification. Unfortunately, as nullification proved surmountable in the short term, South Carolinians barely a generation later argued for an even more disruptive way of canceling federal law: secession.

### **In the Classroom:**

1. After students view the cartoon below, ask students to define the terms on each level of the pyramid. Students should identify and explain how these terms have been utilized throughout American history.

2. Ask students to identify and explain the argument being made by the lithograph. Organize a class debate in which the students analyze the following question: To what extent would nullification inevitably lead to disunion?
3. Assign students (or let them choose their own) a figure from the cartoon and ask them to adopt the perspective of one of the figures in the lithograph. Students should explain the quotation from each perspective and write a letter to Andrew Jackson and/or John C. Calhoun that argues why their adopted perspective would or would not support nullification.

**Research Activities:**

1. Ask students to research the [Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions](#), and discuss how the authors defended the doctrines of nullification and interposition.
2. Ask students to read excerpts from John C. Calhoun's [South Carolina Exposition](#) and Andrew Jackson's [Proclamation Regarding Nullification](#). Students should then compare and contrast the author's arguments as well as identify and explain the evidence used by each author.



### Nullification...Despotism (1833)

<https://digitalcollections.nysl.org/items/8f4ae1d3-b464-3973-e040-e00a180607fe>

