

Letter of Advisory Group on the Renaming of Calhoun College

January 13, 2017

Dear President Salovey,

We convey herewith the report you asked us to prepare last month on the possible renaming of Calhoun College in the light of standards set by the Committee to Establish Principles on Renaming, chaired by Professor John Fabian Witt.

That committee was careful to say in its report that “there is a strong presumption against renaming” (p. 18), that “renaming will typically prove warranted only when more than one principle listed here points toward renaming” (p. 19), and that “even when more than one principle supports renaming, renaming may not be required if other principles weigh heavily in the balance” (p. 19).

We find with respect to Calhoun College, however, **no** Witt Committee principles that weigh heavily against renaming. We find **three** committee principles that weigh heavily toward renaming, and a fourth that suggests the need to rename. For the reasons that follow, therefore, we unanimously recommend that the name of Calhoun College be changed.

Respectfully submitted,

G. Leonard Baker, Jr.
Calhoun College, Yale, '64

Jacqueline Goldsby
Yale Graduate School, Ph.D., '98
Chair, Department of African American Studies
Professor, Departments of English & African American Studies

John Lewis Gaddis (convener)
Robert A. Lovett Professor of Military and Naval History
Founding Director, Brady-Johnson Grand Strategy Program

**Report of the Presidential Advisory Group
on Renaming Calhoun College
January 13, 2017**

On December 2, 2016, President Salovey asked us to advise him on whether, in accordance with standards set forth by the Committee to Establish Principles on Renaming, Yale University should change the name of Calhoun College. We gratefully acknowledge the thoroughness and thoughtfulness of the committee's report,¹ submitted on November 21 and available online at http://president.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/CEPR_FINAL_12-2-16.pdf. It has clarified our thinking considerably and will, we trust, that of others in the future should new renaming requests arise. Our task now is to apply the report's principles specifically to Calhoun. Our unanimous conclusion is that **the name should change**.

In recommending this we respect – indeed strongly endorse – the Witt Committee's presumption that **name changes, when made on the basis of values held by the namesake, should be exceptional events**. History is, in large part, a chronicle of changing values. It requires us to understand how those of one era can differ from those of others. It teaches empathy: what values would *we* have held if we had lived then? And it encourages humility: how will the future regard *our* values?

But empathy need not be sympathy. History asks us to know the past, not to approve all that's in it. Historical scholarship draws on sources available now that might not have been earlier. Historical awareness allows questions to be asked that would not have been earlier. What results is a dialogue between past and present for the benefit of the future, but the conversation would benefit no one if it only conveyed, across time, uncritical commendations or unvarying condemnations.

It's in that spirit that we proceed to the first of the Witt standards: **is a principal legacy of the namesake fundamentally at odds with the mission of the University?** Yale's mission statement, updated in 2016, is as follows:

Yale is committed to improving the world today and for future generations through outstanding research and scholarship, education, preservation, and practice. Yale educates aspiring leaders worldwide who serve all sectors of society. We carry out this mission through the free exchange of ideas in an ethical, interdependent, and diverse community of faculty, staff, students, and alumni.²

¹Hereafter referred to as the "Witt Report," for the committee's chair, Professor John Fabian Witt of the Yale Law School. We recommend, as guides to further reading, the section on "John C. Calhoun: The Man and the Legacy" in the [report's appendix](#), "Bibliography on Committee Materials," together with the additional sources we cite in this report.

²<http://www.yale.edu/about-yale/mission-statement>.

The Witt Committee defines a principal legacy as “the lasting effects that cause a namesake to be remembered.” It notes that a “scholarly consensus about principal legacies is a powerful measure” of whether a name should change, but that “even significant parts of a namesake’s life and career may not constitute a principal legacy.” It also reminds us that although “interpretations of legacies” change, they don’t do so frequently or easily. Finally, the committee calls for considering “principal legacies . . . in combination with the other principles set forth . . . in this report.” It adds:

A principal legacy would be fundamentally at odds with the mission of the University if, for example, it contradicted the University’s avowed goal of making the world a better place through, among other things, the education of future leaders in an ‘ethical, interdependent, and diverse community.’ A principal legacy of racism and bigotry would contradict this goal.

These standards set a high bar, ensuring that value-based name changes are indeed “exceptional events.” We turn, then, to John C. Calhoun’s principal legacy, and to the question of whether it meets this standard.

Calhoun was a South Carolinian, a Yale graduate, a lawyer, a member of the House of Representatives and later the Senate, secretary of war, vice-president of the United States, secretary of state and, in the eyes of admirers at the time and some still, the most original American constitutional theorist of his era. The *Encyclopedia Britannica*, however, begins its entry on Calhoun as follows: “He championed states’ rights and slavery and was a symbol of the Old South.”³

Calhoun’s most recent academic biographer balances all of these legacies judiciously.⁴ Calhoun himself, though, when he knew he was dying, set his own balance. He left no funeral instructions and prepared no will, but instead dictated a 42-page valedictory, read for him in the Senate by a colleague on March 4, 1850, while Calhoun sat slumped at his desk, wrapped in a black cloak, listening intently. He made this last public statement his most dramatic, and he meant it to convey, to the future, what *he* wanted it to remember. He died three weeks later.⁵

The Southern states, he insisted, “cannot remain, as things are now, consistently with honor and safety, in the Union.” The reason was “the long-continued agitation of the slave question on the part of the North.” The Constitution had assumed a balance between the free and slave states, but now the North’s rapidly expanding population, together with its insistence on excluding slavery from new territories, had upset the equilibrium. If continued, the trend would leave the South no choice but to secede. “What was once a constitutional federal republic, is now converted, in reality, into one as despotic as that of the Autocrat of Russia, and as despotic in its tendency as any absolute government that ever existed.”

³*The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th edition, volume 1, pp. 741-42.

⁴Irving H. Bartlett, *John C. Calhoun: A Biography* (New York: Norton, 1993), especially pp. 380-83. A new biography is long overdue.

⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 371-75.

Calhoun denied seeking disunion, but demanded as the price of union the North's total suppression, in its words and its deeds, of all opposition to slavery. If it could not accept this, "say so; and let the States we both represent agree to separate and part in peace. If you are unwilling [that] we should part in peace, tell us so, and we shall know what to do." He framed this position as a defense of the Constitution, but said nothing about the Declaration of Independence. Calhoun had previously dismissed its claim that "all men are created equal" as the "most dangerous of political errors."

"Having faithfully done my duty to the best of my ability, both to the Union and my section," Calhoun concluded, "I shall have the consolation, let what will come, that I am free from all responsibility."⁶

It is clear to us, then, that Calhoun himself defined a principal legacy – his defense of racial inequality as integral to national development – fundamentally at odds with Yale's mission of educating future leaders within "an ethical, interdependent, and diverse community." He'd devoted much of his career in the vice-presidency, in the Cabinet, in the Congress, and in his own state, to perpetuating that legacy. It's hard to see how it can be understood today other than as a legacy of "racism and bigotry." **It therefore meets the first Witt Committee renaming standard.**

What then, though, of the second Witt Committee standard: **was the relevant principal legacy significantly contested in the time and place in which the namesake lived?** The Witt report values *context*, and so do we: it does not advance the purpose of education, or even fairness, to wrench the dead from the environments in which they lived. Our responsibility with respect to Calhoun is to distinguish between views he held that *reflected* the values of his era, on the one hand, and, on the other, views he held that sought to *reject or reformulate* those values. Only the latter meet the second Witt standard, and even then only if they elicited significant contestation.

Like many of his contemporaries, Calhoun believed strongly in white supremacy, in the relative non-existence of women's rights, and in the forcible relocation of native Americans from their ancestral lands: such views are strongly contested now, but Calhoun was by no means alone in holding them then. Other Calhoun positions – his opposition to protective tariffs and his support for the "gag rule" forbidding debates on slavery in the House of Representatives – were contested in the North at the time, but much less so in the South. Calhoun was not distinctive in holding them either.

It is the *trajectory* of Calhoun's thinking, we believe, that sets him apart from his contemporaries. Few public figures of his era went as conspicuously as he from a nationalist perspective as secretary of war, to a regionally based insistence that the states had the right to "nullify" federal legislation, to a personal characterization of slavery as a

⁶Calhoun's March 4, 1850, valedictory is in the [appendix to the Witt Committee report](#). His dismissal of the Declaration of Independence took place in a June 27, 1848 speech on the Oregon question, quoted in Merrill D. Peterson, *The Great Triumvirate: Webster, Clay, and Calhoun* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 444.

“positive good,” for only under slavery had “the negro race ever attained so high an elevation in morals, intelligence, or civilization.” These positions – each of which led to the next – deserve further elaboration.

Calhoun in the War Department rearmed the nation after the War of 1812, but as vice-president fought an epic battle over nullification with Andrew Jackson, the second president under whom, in that position, he’d served.⁷ The avowed reason was tariff protection, which helped Northern manufacturers while hurting Southern cotton exporters. Calhoun himself, however, acknowledged a deeper purpose: the protection of slavery from the possibility that federal authority might someday abolish it.⁸ That was still a remote prospect in May, 1830, when, at a Washington dinner, Jackson pointedly toasted “The Union: It Must be Preserved.” Calhoun responded, equally pointedly, with “The Union: Next to Our Liberty the Most Dear.” The disagreement, though sharp, was not to Calhoun’s advantage. From that moment, support for nullification faded, for few of Calhoun’s contemporaries, northern or southern, were prepared then to place slavery’s preservation above that of the Union.⁹

The “positive good” doctrine emerged from Calhoun’s emphatic defense, in 1837, of the Congressional “gag rule.” Even to discuss slavery in the House of Representatives, he insisted, would endanger the Union, because “the existing relation between the two races in the South, against which these blind fanatics are waging war, forms the most solid and durable foundation on which to rear free and stable political institutions.” Slavery was for that reason “instead of an evil, a good – a positive good.”¹⁰ Calhoun lost that battle too thanks to the persistent efforts of former president John Quincy Adams, then serving in the House, who deployed principles of equality and free speech against the “gag.” It was finally repealed in 1844.¹¹

Calhoun, in the meantime, had become secretary of state, and it fell to him in that capacity to warn the British, who’d recently abolished slavery throughout their empire, not to try to extend their rule over the independent republic of Texas, whose American settlers had brought slavery with them. For not only would a slavery-free British Texas “disturb the internal tranquility” of the southern United States: slavery also advanced the morals, intelligence, and civilization, he argued, of those subjected to it. Calhoun published this unconventional diplomatic note¹² – whether through inexperience or

⁷He’d also been vice-president under John Quincy Adams.

⁸William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay, 1776-1854* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 259.

⁹Freehling discusses the nullification crisis thoroughly in *ibid.*, pp. 253-86.

¹⁰Speech of February 6, 1837, in the [appendix to the Witt Committee report](#).

¹¹Freehling, *The Road to Disunion*, pp. 308-52. See also James Traub, *John Quincy Adams: Militant Spirit* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), pp. 506-9; and William Lee Miller, *Arguing about Slavery: John Quincy Adams and the Great Battle in the United States Congress* (New York: Vintage, 1998), pp. 115-30. The committee thanks alumnus David Hoffman for bringing Calhoun’s role in supporting this procedure to our attention.

¹²Which was also self-contradictory, for if slavery was beneficial, why would slaves want to revolt?

design is still debated – and the resulting furor delayed the American annexation of Texas by almost a year. It may also have facilitated the emergence of James K. Polk, the Democratic Party’s “dark horse” in the 1844 presidential campaign, whose victory at the polls in November would lead, a year and a half later, to the Mexican War.¹³

All of which suggest a *narrowing* in Calhoun’s priorities as he got older. Most leaders widen perspectives as their eminence grows, but not Calhoun, whose tendency to reduce all issues to a defense of slavery met growing resistance. His final speech in the Senate in 1850, the historian Merrill D. Peterson writes, got “a grimly negative response. The most hardened disunionists, even as they uttered amen to Calhoun’s judgments and prophecies, realized that it drove every wavering southerner from the cause.”¹⁴ **We conclude, then, that Calhoun’s career meets the second Witt report standard of a principal legacy contested in the namesake’s lifetime.**

The third Witt standard asks: **did the University, at the time of a naming, honor a namesake for reasons that are fundamentally at odds with the mission of the University?** “Mission,” the report explains, can mean then or now. The report also notes that the University had no formal mission statement until 1992, but that statements of purpose, formal and informal, stretch back at least a century, and “share a connecting thread” with those made explicit in recent years.

Here the committee had less to work with, and so does our advisory group. This much, however, is clear: first, that the University named nothing for Calhoun for the first eight decades following his death; second, that when it did name Calhoun College in 1931, historians of the Civil War were giving much less weight to slavery’s role in its origins than they do now; and third, that despite this, the name generated mild uneasiness even at the time of the naming – hence the Leonard Bacon poem cited in the Witt report¹⁵ – which over the next eight decades has exponentially grown.

We conclude, therefore, that **the University *may*, at the time of the naming, have honored a namesake for reasons fundamentally at odds with its *implied* mission – case unproven – but that, for the reasons given above, the honor today is fundamentally at odds with Yale University’s *stated* mission.**

The Witt Committee’s fourth standard is this: **does a building whose namesake has a principal legacy fundamentally at odds with the University’s mission, or which was named for reasons fundamentally at odds with the University’s mission, play a substantial role in forming community at the University?** The committee further explains:

¹³Calhoun’s April 18, 1844, “note” to the British minister in Washington, Richard Pakenham, is available at <http://econospeak.blogspot.com/p/mr.html>. For an assessment, see Peterson, *The Great Triumvirate*, pp. 408-10.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 461.

¹⁵At p. 14. We base this paragraph on the Witt Committee’s findings.

(a) That “when a building with a long-standing name has helped form bonds and connections among generations of community members, the fact of those bonds and connections offers a reason to keep the name.”

(b) That “it is difficult to encourage the formation of community around a namesake with a principal legacy fundamentally at odds with the mission of the University.”

(c) That “assigning students without their choice to a particular building or residential college whose namesake has a principal legacy fundamentally at odds with the mission of the University essentially requires students to form their University communities around such a name.”

The committee notes, finally, that the first consideration “offers a reason to keep the name,” but that the latter two “offer strong reasons to alter a name.”

No one who knows Yale will doubt the central role of its residential colleges in forming community. As its students often point out, their colleges are their homes for four years. The University, the Witt report adds, “encourages them to identify with college names in everything from the shirts they wear to the songs they sing and the intramural athletic teams on which they play.” And as future alumni, their identities will include their college, just as current alumni have told us their identities do. So the history that informs naming shapes community in important ways.

But, as a current Calhoun student has reminded us, “there is a difference between remembering history and living in it.”¹⁶ The Witt Committee had this distinction in mind, we suspect, when it identified the “special problem [that] arises when the offense given by a particular name is not evenly distributed across the demographic diversity of the campus.” That demographic has changed dramatically since Calhoun College was named: so, for that matter, has the demography of the nation. This makes it difficult, as the Witt Committee also points out, “to encourage the formation of community around a namesake with a principal legacy fundamentally at odds with the mission of the University.”

We conclude by briefly considering one other Witt Committee presumption: that the case **against renaming is at its strongest when a building has been named for someone who made major contributions to the University.**

We confirm the committee’s conclusion that although Calhoun distinguished himself as a student at Yale,¹⁷ he made no further major contributions to the University. He never taught in Yale College, he founded no academic discipline or method or

¹⁶Sofia Laguarda ’20 to the Advisory Group, December 5, 2016. Our advisory group received approximately 175 other comments from alumni, parents, students, and others unaffiliated with Yale, all of which we read, and for which we thank the contributors. These are in addition to the 300+ comments received by the Witt Committee.

¹⁷See Bartlett, *John C. Calhoun*, pp. 44-48.

community specifically associated with Yale, and there is no record of financial support from him for its development.

We therefore believe, for all of the reasons cited in our report, that the name of Calhoun College should change, just as the names of other Yale facilities have in the past changed.¹⁸ That should not happen, however, without keeping in mind a final Witt report reminder: **When a name is altered, there are obligations on the University to ensure that the removal does not have the effect of erasing history.**

It is part of a history that, for 86 years, a Yale college was named for John C. Calhoun. The Witt report notes that for many of those years most students identified with it for reasons having little to do with the racial connotations, or indeed any other historical connotations associated with Calhoun himself. The report suggests acknowledging this reality by creating – and where they already exist retaining – “conspicuous museum-like exhibits; architecturally thoughtful installations, plaques, and signs; [and] public art,” so that the single act of renaming the college does not erase Yale’s history with respect to Calhoun. We agree, and respectfully add one other possibility: that of also acknowledging the right of Calhoun College alumni whatever their generation, if the name of their college does change, to continue *if they so choose* to identify themselves proudly as having belonged, while at Yale, to the college named for Calhoun.

¹⁸See “Building Name Changes on the Yale Campus” in the [appendix to the Witt Committee report](#).