I have, senators, believed from the first that the agitation (anxiety) of the subject of slavery would, if not prevented by some timely and effective measure, end in disunion. Entertaining this opinion, I have, on all proper occasions, endeavored to call the attention of both the two great parties which divided the country to adopt some measure to prevent so great a disaster, but without success. The agitation has been permitted to proceed with almost no attempt to resist it, until it has reached a point when it can no longer be disguised or denied that the Union is in danger. You have thus had forced upon you the greatest and gravest question that can ever come under your consideration: How can the Union be preserved?

One of the causes is, undoubtedly, to be traced to the long-continued agitation of the slave question on the part of the North, and the many aggressions which they have made on the rights of the South during the time...

The result of the whole is to give the Northern section a predominance in every department of the government, and thereby concentrate in it the two elements which constitute the federal government: a majority of States, and a majority of their population, estimated in federal numbers. Whatever section concentrates the two in itself possesses the control of the entire government...by the addition of new States… increasing the present number of [Northern] States from fifteen to twenty, and of its senators from thirty to forty.

On the contrary, there is not a single Territory in progress in the Southern section, and no certainty that any additional State will be added to it during the decade…This great increase of senators, added to the great increase of members of the House of Representatives and the Electoral College on the part of the North, which must take place under the next decade, will effectually and irretrievably destroy the equilibrium which existed when the government commenced…It was caused by the legislation of this government, which was appointed as the common agent of all and charged with the protection of the interests and security of all.

She [The South] would also, if she had retained her equal rights in new territories, have maintained an equality in the number of States with the North, and have preserved the equilibrium between the two sections that existed at the commencement of the government. The loss, then, of the equilibrium is to be attributed to the action of this government.

There is a question of vital importance to the Southern section, in reference to which the views and feelings of the two sections are as opposite and hostile as they can possibly be.
I refer to the relation between the two races in the Southern section, which constitutes a vital portion of her social organization. Every portion of the North entertains views and feelings more or less hostile to it. Those most opposed and hostile regard it as a sin, and consider themselves under the most sacred obligation to use every effort to destroy it.

Indeed, to the extent that they conceive that they have power, they regard themselves as implicated in the sin, and responsible for not suppressing it by the use of all and every means. Those less opposed and hostile regard it as a crime—an offense against humanity, as they call it…On the contrary, the Southern section regards the relation as one which can not be destroyed without subjecting the two races to the greatest calamity, and the section to poverty, desolation, and wretchedness; and accordingly they feel bound by every consideration of interest and safety to defend it.

Unless something decisive is done, I again ask, What is to stop this agitation before the great and final object at which it aims—the abolition of slavery in the States—is consummated? Is it, then, not certain that if something is not done to arrest it, the South will be forced to choose between abolition and secession?

…there is but one way by which it can be, and that is by adopting such measures as will satisfy the States belonging to the Southern section that they can remain in the Union consistently with their honor and their safety…The South asks for justice, simple justice, and less she ought not to take. She has no compromise to offer but the Constitution, and no concession or surrender to make. She has already surrendered so much that she has little left to surrender…Nothing else can, with any certainty, finally and for ever settle the question at issue, terminate agitation, and save the Union.

But can this be done? Yes, easily…The North has only to will it to accomplish it—to do justice by conceding to the South an equal right in the acquired territory, and to do her duty by causing the stipulations relative to fugitive slaves to be faithfully fulfilled—to cease the agitation of the slave question, and to provide for the insertion of a provision in the Constitution, by an amendment, which will restore to the South, in substance, the power she possessed of protecting herself before the equilibrium between the sections was destroyed by the action of this government.

But will the North agree to this?...The South can not save it by any act of hers, and the North may save it without any sacrifice whatever, unless to do justice and to perform her duties under the Constitution should be regarded by her as a sacrifice.
Reading Guide
1. John C. Calhoun on the Clay Compromise Measures, U.S. Senate, March 4, 1850

John C. Calhoun, a senator from South Carolina and the preeminent spokesperson for Southern exclusionism, was so ill at the time of this speech he had to ask someone else to deliver it. He died in Washington on March 31, 1850. Here he offers his version of “the nature and character of the cause by which the Union is endangered.” Calhoun asserts that the South’s long-standing “almost universal discontent” over the “agitation of the slavery question” is only one of the causes that have endangered the unity of the nation. The “great and primary cause” is a sort of Original Sin, the North’s deliberate destruction of the balance of power between the two regions enshrined in the Constitution at the nation’s birth. With that equilibrium gone, the South is left weak and vulnerable and cannot “with honor and safety” remain in the Union. Could be used with students. 5 pages.

Discussion questions
· What does Calhoun see as the choice before Americans?
· On what basis does he make his demands?
· What, in Calhoun’s view, holds the Union together?
· How suited is Calhoun’s vision of the Union to accommodate change?
· Is Calhoun optimistic or pessimistic about the Union’s prospects?

Reading highlights
· Compare Calhoun’s portrayal of the South with his portrayal of the North. What impression does he give of each section?
· Note his emphasis on the efforts of Southern leaders to keep the populace calm and quiet.

≫ Link

Topic Framing Questions
From the perspective of an American in 1850, either Northern or Southern (remember, you don’t know what’s going to happen over the next 15 years):
· How volatile is America in 1850?
· What holds the nation together? What is pulling it apart?
· How serious is the Southern threat to leave the Union?
· Is the Compromise of 1850 a triumph of nationalism or sectionalism?
· Will the Union survive?