John Randolph Biography

John Randolph

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Contents

John Randolph Biography.....1

Contents.....2

Biography.....3

Biography

John Randolph (1773-1833), half-mad, half-genius American statesman, foreshadowed John C. Calhoun, who developed Randolph's states'-rights premises into a political philosophy.

Scion of a great Virginia family, John Randolph was born on June 2, 1773, at his grandfather's plantation in Prince George County. Through his stepfather, St. George Tucker, he was indoctrinated with a worldly wisdom beyond his years. Before he was 12 he had read widely in Shakespeare and the Greek and Roman classics. His formal education was at Columbia and Princeton, and he read law in the office of his uncle, Edmund Randolph. As a schoolboy, he witnessed the inauguration of George Washington and early sessions of the first Congress, thus igniting his interest in politics.

At the age of 25, after a "great debate" with Patrick Henry, Randolph entered the U.S. House of Representatives. His genius was soon recognized. As floor leader for his cousin Thomas Jefferson and as chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, he cracked the whip over the House members. But his eccentricities soon caught up with him. He badly muffed the impeachment trial of Judge Samuel Chase (1804), and he disqualified himself as foreman of the Aaron Burr conspiracy trial (1807) because of his long-cherished prejudices against Burr.

Randolph broke openly with Jefferson in 1806 over the attempted Florida purchase, demanding a return to the principles of 1798 and emerging as founder of the first of America's "third" political parties, the Quids. Randolph was defeated for reelection in 1813 because of his opposition to the War of 1812. He served again in the House in 1815-1817, 1819-1825, and 1827-1829, and he also served a single term as U.S. senator from 1825 to 1827. During this time he was often ill and suffered from mental disorder.

Randolph's well-known opposition to the Missouri Compromise of 1820-1821 (though he hated slavery, he disapproved of interference with that institution), his fear of forced emancipation, and his brilliant defense of states' rights stirred the somber intellect of John C. Calhoun. Randolph was a delegate to the Virginia Convention of 1829-1830 and fiercely opposed any constitutional change. For a few months in 1830 he served as minister to Russia. He broke bitterly with Andrew Jackson over the nullification crisis of 1832 and wished that he could have his dying body strapped to his horse, Radical, and ride to the defense of South Carolina. On May 24, 1833, he died in Philadelphia.