Antebellum Southern Exceptionalism:
A New Look at an Old Question

JAMES M. MCPHERSON

The notion of American Exceptionalism has received quite a drubbing since the heyday of the exceptionalist thesis among the consensus school of historians in the 1950s. Interpreters of the American experience then argued that something special about the American experience—whether it was abundance, free land on the frontier, the absence of a feudal past, exceptional mobility and the relative lack of class conflict, or the pragmatic and consensual liberalism of our politics—set the American people apart from the rest of mankind. Historians writing since the 1950s, by contrast, have demonstrated the existence of class and class conflict, ideological politics, land speculation, and patterns of economic and industrial development similar to those of Western Europe that placed the United States in the mainstream of modern North Atlantic history, not on a special and privileged fringe.[1]

If the theme of American Exceptionalism has suffered heavy and perhaps irreparable damage, the idea of Southern Exceptionalism still flourishes—though also subjected to repeated challenges. In this essay, "Southern Exceptionalism" refers to the belief that the South has "possessed a separate and

1. For an excellent analysis of the historiography of American exceptionalism, see Laurence Veysey, "The Autonomy of American History Reconsidered," *American Quarterly* 31 (Fall 1979): 455–77.

unique identity ... which appeared to be out of the mainstream of American experience."[2] Or as Quentin Compson (in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*) expressed it in a reply to his Canadian-born college roommate's question about what made Southerners tick: "You can't understand it. You would have to be born there."

The questions of whether the South was indeed out of the mainstream and if so, whether it has recently been swept into it, continue to be vital issues in Southern historiography. The clash of viewpoints can be illustrated by a sampling of titles or subtitles of books that have appeared in recent years. On one side we have: *The Enduring South; The Everlasting South; The Idea of the South; The Lasting South;* and *The Continuity of Southern Distinctiveness*—all arguing, in one way or another, that the South was and continues to be different. On the other side we have: *The Southerner as American; The Americanization of Dixie; Epitaph for Dixie; Southerners and Other Americans; The Vanishing South;* and *Into the Mainstream.* Some of these books insist that "the traditional emphasis on the South's differentness ... is wrong historically."[3] Others concede that while the South may once have been different, it has ceased to be or is ceasing to be so. There is no unanimity among this latter group of scholars about precisely when or how the South joined the mainstream. Some emphasize the civil rights revolution of the 1960s; others the bulldozer revolution of the 1950s; still others the Chamber of Commerce Babbittry of the 1920s; and some the New South crusade of the 1880s. As far back as 1869 the Yankee novelist John William De Forest wrote of the South: "We shall do well to study this peculiar people, which will soon lose its peculiarities." As George Tindall has wryly remarked, the Vanishing South has "staged one of the most prolonged disappearing acts since the decline and fall of Rome."[4]

Some historians, however, would quarrel with the concept of a Vanishing South because they believe that the South as a separate, exceptional entity never existed—with of course the ephemeral exception of the Confederacy. But a good many other historians insist that not only did a unique "South" exist before the Civil War, but also that its sense of a separate identity that was being threatened by the North was the underlying cause of secession. A few paired quotations will illustrate these conflicting interpretations.

2. Monroe L. Billington, ed., *The South: A Central Theme?* (Huntington, N.Y.: Krieger, 1978), 1.

3. Charles Grier Sellers, ed., *The Southerner as American* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1960), v–vi.

4. George Brown Tindall, *The Ethnic Southerners* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1976), ix.

In 1960 one Southern historian maintained that "no picture of the Old South as a section confident and united in its dedication to a neo-feudal social order, and no explanation of the Civil War as a conflict between 'two civilizations,' can encompass the complexity and pathos of the antebellum reality." But later in the decade another historian insisted that slavery created "a ruling class with economic interests, political ideals, and moral sentiments" that included an "aristocratic, antibourgeois spirit with values and mores emphasizing family and status, a strong code of honor, and aspirations to luxury, ease, and accomplishment" that "set it apart from the mainstream of·capitalist development." This ruling class possessed "the political and economic power to impose their values on [Southern] society as a whole." Since submission to the hegemony of Northern free-soilers would have meant "moral and political suicide" for this "special civilization" of the South, a "final struggle [was] so probable that we may safely call it inevitable." The first historian was Charles Sellers; the second, Eugene Genovese.[5]

Or let us examine another pair of quotations, the first published in 1973 by a Southern historian who asserted that the thesis of a "basically divergent and antagonistic" North and South in 1861 is "one of the great myths of American history." Almost as if in reply, a historian wrote a few years later that such an assertion "belies common sense and the nearly universal observation of contemporaries. We submit a single figure that . . . attests to the irrelevance of all [statistical manipulations] purporting to show similarities between North and South. The figure is 600,000—the number of Civil War graves." The first of these quotations is from Grady McWhiney. The second is from—Grady McWhiney.[6]

Finally, let us look at another pair of statements, the first from one of the South's most eminent historians writing in 1958: "The South was American a long time before it was Southern in any self-conscious or distinctive way. It remains more American by far than anything else, and has all along." The second is from an equally eminent historian writing in 1969: "A great slave society . . . had grown up and miraculously flourished in the heart of a thoroughly bourgeois and partly puritanical republic. It had renounced its bourgeois origins and elaborated and painfully rationalized its institutional, legal, metaphysical, and religious defenses. . . . When the crisis came [it] chose

5. Charles Grier Sellers, "The Travail of Slavery," in Sellers, ed., The Southerner as American, 40; Eugene D. Genovese, The Political Economy of Slavery (New York: Pantheon, 1965), 7–8, 28–29, 247, 270; Genovese, The World the Slaveholders Made (New York: Pantheon, 1969), 33.

6. Grady McWhiney, Southerners and Other Americans (New York: Basic, 1973), 3; McWhiney and Forrest McDonald, "Communication," American Historical Review 86 (Feb. 1981): 244.

to fight. It proved to be the death struggle of a society, which went down in ruins." The first historian was C. Vann Woodward; the second—it should come as no surprise by now—was C. Vann Woodward.[7]

If given the opportunity, McWhiney and Woodward might be able to reconcile the apparent inconsistencies in these statements. Or perhaps they really changed their minds. After all, as Ralph Waldo Emerson told us more than a century ago, "a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds." In any case, the more recent vintage of both McWhiney and Woodward has a fuller, more robust, and truer flavor.

Many antebellum Americans certainly thought that North and South had evolved separate societies with institutions, interests, values, and ideologies so incompatible, so much in deadly conflict that they could no longer live together in the same nation. Traveling through the South in the spring of 1861, *London Times* correspondent William Howard Russell encountered this Conflict of Civilizations theme everywhere he went. "The tone in which [Southerners] alluded to the whole of the Northern people indicated the clear conviction that trade, commerce, the pursuit of gain, manufacture, and the base mechanical arts, had so degraded the whole race" that Southerners could no longer tolerate association with them, wrote Russell. "There is a degree of something like ferocity in the Southern mind [especially] toward New England which exceeds belief." A South Carolinian told Russell: "We are an agricultural people, pursuing our own system, and working out our own destiny, breeding up women and men with some other purpose than to make them vulgar, fanatical, cheating Yankees." Louis Wigfall of Texas, a former U.S. senator, told Russell: "We are a peculiar people, sir! . . . We are an agricultural people. . . . We have no cities—we don't want them. . . . We want no manufactures: we desire no trading, no mechanical or manufacturing classes. . . . As long as we have our rice, our sugar, our tobacco, and our cotton, we can command wealth to purchase all we want. . . . But with the Yankees we will never trade—never. Not one pound of cotton shall ever go from the South to their accursed cities."[8]

Such opinions were not universal in the South, of course, but in the fevered atmosphere of the late 1850s they were widely shared. "Free Society!" exclaimed a Georgia newspaper. "We sicken at the name. What is it but a conglomeration of greasy mechanics, filthy operatives, small-fisted farmers, and moon-struck

7. C. Vann Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1960), 25; Woodward, *American Counterpoint: Slavery and Racism in the North-South Dialogue* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), 281.

8. William Howard Russell, *My Diary North and South,* ed. Fletcher Pratt (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954), 38, 78, 99.

theorists ... hardly fit for association with a southern gentleman's body servant." In 1861 the *Southern Literary Messenger* explained to its readers: "It is not a question of slavery alone that we are called upon to decide. It is free society which we must shun or embrace." In the same year Charles Colcock Jones Jr.—no fire-eater, for after all he had graduated from Princeton and from Harvard Law School—spoke of the development of antagonistic cultures in North and South: "In this country have arisen two races [i.e., Northerners and Southerners] which, although claiming a common parentage, have been so entirely separated by climate, by morals, by religion, and by estimates so totally opposite to all that constitutes honor, truth, and manliness, that they cannot longer exist under the same government."[9]

Spokesmen for the free-labor ideology—which had become the dominant political force in the North by 1860—reciprocated these sentiments. The South, said Theodore Parker, was "the foe to Northern Industry—to our mines, our manufactures, and our commerce. . . . She is the foe to our institutions—to our democratic politics in the State, our democratic culture in the school, our democratic work in the community, our democratic equality in the family."[10] Slavery, said William H. Seward, undermined "intelligence, vigor, and energy" in both blacks and whites. It produced "an exhausted soil, old and decaying towns, wretchedly-neglected roads, ... an absence of enterprise and improvement." Slavery was therefore "incompatible with all ... the elements of the security, welfare, and greatness of nations." The struggle between free labor and slavery, between North and South, said Seward in his most famous speech, was "an irrepressible conflict between two opposing and enduring forces." The United States was therefore two nations, but it could not remain forever so: it "must and will, sooner or later, become either entirely a slaveholding nation, or entirely a free-labor nation." Abraham Lincoln expressed exactly the same theme in his House Divided speech. Many other Republicans echoed this argument that the struggle, in the words of an Ohio congressman, was "between systems, between civilizations."[11]

These sentiments were no more confined to fire-breathing Northern radicals than were Southern exceptionalist viewpoints confined to fire-eaters. Lin-

9. Arthur C. Cole, *The Irrepressible Conflict, 1850–1865* (New York: Macmillan, 1934), viii; *Southern Literary Messenger* 32 (Feb. 1861): 152; Robert Manson Myers, ed., *Children of Pride: A True Story of Georgia and the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1972), 648.

10. John L. Thomas, ed., *Slavery Attacked: The Abolitionist Crusade* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965), 149.

11. Quoted in Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), 41, 68–70.

coln represented the mainstream of his party, which commanded a majority of votes in the North by 1860. The dominant elements in the North and in the lower South believed the United States to be composed of two incompatible civilizations. Southerners believed that survival of their special civilization could be assured only in a separate nation. The creation of the Confederacy was merely a political ratification of an irrevocable separation that had already taken place in the hearts and minds of the people.

The proponents of an assimilationist rather than exceptionalist interpretation of Southern history might object that this concept of a separate and unique South existed only in hearts and minds. It was a subjective reality, they might argue, not an objective one. Objectively, they would insist, North and South were one people. They shared the same language, the same Constitution, the same legal system, the same commitment to republican political institutions, an interconnected economy, the same predominantly Protestant religion and British ethnic heritage, the same history, the same shared memories of a common struggle for nationhood.

Two recent proponents of the objective similarity thesis are Edward Pessen and the late David Potter. In a long article entitled "How Different from Each Other Were the Antebellum North and South?" Pessen concludes that they "were far more alike than the conventional scholarly wisdom has led us to believe."[12] His evidence for this conclusion consists mainly of quantitative measures of the distribution of wealth and of the socioeconomic status of political officeholders in North and South. He finds that wealth was distributed in a similarly unequal fashion in both sections, that voting requirements were similar, and that voters in both sections elected a similarly disproportionate number of men from the upper economic strata to office. The problem with this argument, of course, is that it could be used to prove many obviously different societies to be similar. France and Germany in 1914 and in 1932 had about the same distribution of wealth and similar habits of electing men from the upper strata to the Assembly or the Reichstag. England and France had a comparable distribution of wealth during most of the eighteenth century. Turkey and Russia were not dissimilar in these respects in the nineteenth century. And so on.

David Potter's contention that commonalities of language, religion, law, and political system outweighed differences in other areas is more convincing than the Pessen argument. But the Potter thesis nevertheless begs some important questions. The same similarities prevailed between England and

12. *American Historical Review* 85 (Dec. 1980): 1119–49; quotation from 1147.

her North American colonies in 1776, but they did not prevent the development of a separate nationalism in the latter. It is not language or law alone that are important, but the uses to which they are put. In the United States of the 1850s, Northerners and Southerners spoke the same language, to be sure, but they were increasingly using this language to revile each other. Language became an instrument of division, not unity. The same was true of the political system. So also of the law: Northern states passed personal liberty laws to defy a national Fugitive Slave Law supported by the South; a Southern-dominated Supreme Court denied the right of Congress to exclude slavery from the territories, a ruling that most Northerners considered an infamous distortion of the Constitution. As for a shared commitment to Protestantism, this too had become a divisive rather than unifying factor, with the two largest denominations—Methodist and Baptist—having split into hostile Southern and Northern churches over the question of slavery, and the third largest—Presbyterian—having split partly along sectional lines and partly on the question of slavery. As for a shared historical commitment to republicanism, by the 1850s this too was more divisive than unifying. Northern Republicans interpreted this commitment in a free-soil context, while most Southerners continued to insist that one of the most cherished tenets of republican liberty was the right of property—including property in slaves.

There is another dimension of the Potter thesis—or perhaps it would be more accurate to call it a separate Potter thesis—that might put us on the right track to solving the puzzle of Southern exceptionalism. After challenging most notions of Southern distinctiveness, Potter concluded that the principal characteristic distinguishing the South from the rest of the country was the persistence of a "folk culture" in the South.[13] This gemeinschaft society, with its emphasis on tradition, rural life, close kinship ties, a hierarchical social structure, ascribed status, patterns of deference, and masculine codes of honor and chivalry, persisted in the South long after the North began

13. This brief summary of and gloss upon Potter's writings inevitably oversimplifies arguments that are complex, subtle, and at times ambivalent. Potter's emphasis on the commonalities of Northern and Southern culture can be found in his essay "The Historian's Use of Nationalism and Vice Versa," in Potter, *The South and the Sectional Conflict* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1968), 68–78, and Potter, *The Impending Crisis 1858–1861* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), 8–14, 29–34, 449–50, 469–74. The brief explication of his Folk Culture argument can be found in ibid., 451, 456–57, and in *The South and the Sectional Conflict*, 15–16. The notion of a persistent folk culture in the South is associated mainly with the work of the Southern sociologist Howard Odum; for an analysis of this concept in the context of Odum's work, see Daniel T. Rodgers, "Regionalism and the Burdens of Progress," in J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson, eds., *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1982), 3–26.

moving toward a gesellschaft society with its impersonal, bureaucratic meritocratic, urbanizing, commercial, industrializing, mobile, and rootless characteristics. Above all, the South's folk culture valued tradition and stability and felt threatened by change; the North's modernizing culture enshrined change as progress and condemned the South as backward.

A critic of this gemeinschaft-gesellschaft dichotomy might contend that it was more myth than reality. One might respond to such criticism by pointing out that human behavior is often governed more by myth—that is, by people's perceptions of the world—than by objective reality. Moreover, there were real and important differences between North and South by the mid-nineteenth century, differences that might support the gemeinschaft-gesellschaft contrast.

The North was more urban than the South and was urbanizing at a faster rate. In 1820, 10 percent of the free-state residents lived in urban areas compared with 5 percent in the slave states; by 1860 the figures were 26 percent and 10 percent respectively.[14] Even more striking was the growing contrast between farm and non-farm occupations in the two sections. In 1800, 82 percent of the Southern labor force worked in agriculture compared with 68 percent in the free states. By 1860 the Northern share had dropped to 40 percent while the Southern proportion had actually increased slightly to 84 percent.[15] Southern agriculture remained traditionally labor-intensive while Northern agriculture became increasingly capital-intensive and mechanized. By 1860 the free states had nearly twice the value of farm machinery per acre and per farm worker as the slave states. And the pace of industrialization in the North far outstripped that in the South. In 1810 the slave states had an estimated 31 percent of the capital invested in manufacturing in the United States; by 1840 this had declined to 20 percent and by 1860 to 16 percent. In 1810 the North had two and a half times the amount per capita invested in manufacturing as the South; by 1860 this had increased to three and a half times as much.

A critic of the inferences drawn from these data might point out that in many respects the differences between the free states east and west of the Appalachians were nearly or virtually as great as those between North and South, yet these differences did not produce a sense of separate nationality in East and West. This point is true—as far as it goes. While the western free states at midcentury did have a higher proportion of workers employed in non-farm

14. Unless otherwise specified, the data presented here and in following paragraphs are from the published tables of the U.S. census.

15. Stanley Lebergott, "Labor Force and Employment, 1800–1960," in *Output, Employment, and Productivity in the United States After 1800, Studies in Income and Wealth,* vol. 30 (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1966), 131.

occupations than the South, they had about the same percentage of urban population and the same amount per capita invested in manufacturing. But the crucial factor was *the rate of change*. The West was urbanizing and industrializing more rapidly than either the Northeast or the South. Therefore while North and South as a whole were growing relatively farther apart, the eastern and western free states were drawing closer together. This frustrated Southern hopes for an alliance with the Old Northwest on grounds of similarity of agrarian interests. From 1840 to 1860 the rate of urbanization in the West was three times greater than in the Northeast and four times greater than in the South. The amount of capital invested in manufacturing grew twice as fast in the West as in the Northeast and nearly three times as fast as in the South. The same was true of employment in non-farm occupations. The railroad-building boom of the 1850s tied the Northwest to the Northeast with links of iron and shifted the dominant pattern of inland trade from a North-South to an East-West orientation. The remarkable growth of cities such as Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, and Detroit with their farm-machinery, food-processing, machine-tool, and railroad-equipment industries foreshadowed the emergence of the industrial Midwest and helped to assure that when the crisis of the Union came in 1861 the West joined the East instead of the South.

According to the most recent study of antebellum Southern industry, the Southern lag in this category of development resulted not from any inherent economic disadvantages—not shortage of capital, nor low rates of return, nor non-adaptability of slave labor—but from the choices of Southerners who had money to invest it in agriculture and slaves rather than in manufacturing.[16] In the 1780s Thomas Jefferson had praised farmers as the "peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue" and warned against the industrial classes in cities as sores on the body politic. In 1860 many Southern leaders still felt the same way; as Louis Wigfall put it in the passage quoted earlier, "we want no manufactures; we desire no trading, no mechanical or manufacturing classes."

Partly as a consequence of this attitude, the South received only a trickle of the great antebellum stream of immigration. Fewer than one-eighth of the immigrants settled in slave states, where the foreign-born percentage of the population was less than a fourth of the North's percentage. The South's white population was ethnically more homogeneous and less cosmopolitan

16. Fred Bateman and Thomas Weiss, *A Deplorable Scarcity: The Failure of Industrialization in the Slave Economy* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1981), esp. 15, 103, 121, 127, 160–62.

than the North's. The traditional patriarchal family and tight kinship networks typical of gemeinschaft societies, reinforced in the South by a relatively high rate of cousin marriages, also persisted much more strongly in the nineteenth-century South than in the North.[17]

The greater volume of immigration to the free states contributed to the faster rate of population growth there than in the South. Another factor in this differential growth rate was out-migration from the South. During the middle decades of the nineteenth century, twice as many whites left the South for the North as vice versa. These facts did not go unnoticed at the time; indeed, they formed the topic of much public comment. Northerners cited the differential in population growth as evidence for the superiority of the free-labor system; Southerners perceived it with alarm as evidence of their declining minority status in the nation. These perceptions became important factors in the growing sectional self-consciousness that led to secession.

The most crucial demographic difference between North and South, of course, resulted from slavery. Ninety-five percent of the country's black people lived in the slave states, where blacks constituted one-third of the population in contrast to their one percent of the Northern population. The implications of this for the economy and social structure of the two sections, not to mention their ideologies and politics, are obvious and require little elaboration here. Two brief points are worth emphasizing, however. First, historians in recent years have discovered the viability of African American culture under slavery. They have noted that black music, folklore, speech patterns, religion, and other manifestations of this culture influenced white society in the South. Since the African American culture was preeminently a folk culture with an emphasis on oral tradition and other non-literate forms of ritual and communication, it reinforced the persistence of a traditional, gemeinschaft, folk-oriented society in the South.

Second, a number of recent historians have maintained that Northerners were as committed to white supremacy as Southerners. This may have been true, but the scale of concern with this matter in the South was so much greater as to constitute a different order of magnitude and to contribute more than any other factor to the difference between North and South. And of course slavery was more than an institution of racial control. Its centrality to many aspects of life focused Southern politics almost exclusively on defense of the institution—to the point that, in the words of the *Charleston*

17. Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1982), esp. chap. 5.

Mercury in 1858, "on the subject of slavery ... the North and South ... are not only two Peoples, but they are rival, hostile Peoples."[18]

The fear that slavery was being hemmed in and threatened with destruction contributed to the defensive-aggressive style of Southern political behavior. This aggressiveness sometimes took physical form. Southern whites were more likely to carry weapons and to use them against other human beings than Northerners were. The homicide rate was higher in the South. The phenomenon of dueling persisted longer there. Bertram Wyatt-Brown attributes this to the unique Southern code of honor based on traditional patriarchal values of courtesy, status, courage, family, and the symbiosis of shame and pride.[19] The enforcement of order through the threat and practice of violence also resulted from the felt need to control a large slave population.

Martial values and practices were more pervasive in the South than in the North. Marcus Cunliffe has argued to the contrary, but the evidence confutes him. Cunliffe's argument is based mainly on two sets of data: the prevalence of militia and volunteer military companies in the free as well as in the slave states; and the proportion of West Pointers and regular army officers from the two sections. Yet the first set of data do not support his thesis, and the second contradict it. Cunliffe does present evidence on the popularity of military companies in Northern cities, but nowhere does he estimate the comparative numbers of such companies in North and South or the number of men in proportion to population who belonged to them. If such comparative evidence could be assembled, it would probably support the traditional view of a higher concentration of such companies in the South. What Northern city, for example, could compare with Charleston, which had no fewer than twenty-two military companies in the late 1850s—one for every two hundred white men of military age? Another important quasi-military institution in the South with no Northern counterpart escaped Cunliffe's attention—the slave patrol, which gave tens of thousands of Southerners a more practical form of military experience than the often ceremonial functions of volunteer drill companies could do.[20]

As for the West Point alumni and regular army officers it is true, as Cunliffe

18. Quoted in John McCardell, *The Idea of a Southern Nation* (New York: Norton, 1979), 270–71.

19. Dickson D. Bruce, *Violence and Culture in the Antebellum South* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1979); Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor,* pt. 3.

20. Marcus Cunliffe, *Soldiers and Civilians: The Martial Spirit in America 1775–1865* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1968), esp. chap. 10; Rollin G. Osterweis, *Romanticism and Nationalism in the Old South* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1949), 127. For other evidence of Southern bellicosity, see John Hope Franklin, *The Militant South 1800–1861* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1956).

points out, that about 60 percent of these were from the North and only 40 percent from the South in the late antebellum decades. What he fails to note is that the South had only about 30 percent of the nation's white population during this era, so that on a proportional basis the South was overrepresented in these categories. Moreover, from 1849 to 1861 all of the secretaries of war were Southerners, as were the general in chief of the army, two of the three brigadier generals, all but one commander of the army's geographical departments on the eve of the Civil War, the authors of the two manuals on infantry tactics and of the artillery manual used at West Point, and the professor who taught tactics and strategy at the military academy.

Other evidence supports the thesis of a significant martial tradition in the South contrasted with a concentration in different professions in the North. More than three-fifths of the volunteer soldiers in the Mexican War came from the slave states—on a per capita basis, four times the proportion of free-state volunteers. Seven of the eight military "colleges" (not including West Point and Annapolis) listed in the 1860 census were in the slave states. A study of the occupations of antebellum men chronicled in the *Dictionary of American Biography* found that the military profession claimed twice the percentage of Southerners as of Northerners, while this ratio was reversed for men distinguished in literature, art, medicine, and education. In business the per capita proportion of Yankees was three times as great, and among engineers and inventors it was six times as large.[21] When Southerners labeled themselves a nation of warriors and Yankees a nation of shopkeepers—a common comparison in 1860—or when Jefferson Davis told a *London Times* correspondent in 1861 that "we are a military people," they were not just whistling Dixie.[22]

One final comparison of objective differences is in order—a comparison of education and literacy in North and South. Contemporaries perceived this as a matter of importance. The South's alleged backwardness in schooling and its large numbers of illiterates framed one of the principal free-soil indictments of slavery. This was one area in which a good many Southerners admitted inferiority and tried to do something about it. But in 1860, after a decade of school reform in the South, the slave states still had only half the North's proportion of white children enrolled in public and private schools, and the length of the annual school term in the South was only a little more

21. Rupert B. Vance, "The Geography of Distinction: The Nation and Its Regions, 1790–1927," *Social Forces* 18 (Dec. 1939): 175–76.

22. Osterweis, *Romanticism and Nationalism*, esp. 90–91,105; Grady McWhiney and Perry D. Jamieson, *Attack and Die: Civil War Military Tactics and the Southern Heritage* (University: Univ. of Alabama Press, 1982), esp. 171; Russell, *My Diary North and South*, 94.

than half as long as in the North.[23] Of course education did not take place solely in school. But other forms of education—in the home, at church, through lyceums and public lectures, by apprenticeship, and so on—were also more active in North than South. According to the census of 1860, per capita newspaper circulation was three times greater in the North, and the number of library volumes per white person was nearly twice as large.

The proportion of illiterate white people was three times greater in the South than in the North; if the black population is included, as indeed it should be, the percentage of illiterates was seven or eight times as high in the South. In the free states, what two recent historians have termed an "ideology of literacy" prevailed—a commitment to education as an instrument of social mobility, economic prosperity, progress, and freedom.[24] While this ideology also existed in the South, especially in the 1850s, it was much weaker there and made slow headway against the inertia of a rural folk culture. "The Creator did not intend that every individual human being should be highly cultivated," wrote William Harper of South Carolina. "It is better that a part should be fully and highly educated and the rest utterly ignorant." Commenting on a demand by Northern workingmen for universal public education, the *Southern Review* asked: "Is this the way to produce producers? To make every child in the state a literary character would not be a good qualification for those who must live by manual labor."[25]

The ideology of literacy in the North was part of a larger ferment which produced an astonishing number of reform movements that aroused both contempt and fear in the South. Southern whites viewed the most dynamic of these movements—abolitionism—as a threat to their very existence. Southerners came to distrust the whole concept of "progress" as it seemed to be understood in the North. *De Bow's Review* declared in 1851: "Southern life, habits, thoughts, and aims, are so essentially different from those of the North, that here a different character of books ... and training is required." A Richmond newspaper warned in 1855 that Southerners must stop reading Northern newspapers and books and stop sending their sons to colleges in the North, where "every village has its press and its lecture room, and each lecturer and editor, unchecked by a healthy public opinion, opens up for

23. Albert Fishlow, "The Common School Revival: Fact or Fancy," in Henry Rosovsky, ed., *Industrialization in Two Systems* (New York: Krieger, 1968), esp. 82.

24. Lee Soltow and Edward Stevens, *The Rise of Literacy and the Common School in the United States: A Socioeconomic Analysis to 1870* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981), esp. 61.

25. Quoted in Karl Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schooling and American Society, 1780–1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), 206–7.

discussion all the received dogmas of faith," where unwary youth are "exposed to the danger of imbibing doctrines subversive of all old institutions." Young men should be educated instead in the South "where their training would be moral, religious, and conservative, and they would never learn, or read a word in school or out of school, inconsistent with orthodox Christianity, pure morality, the right of property, and sacredness of marriage."[26]

In all of the areas discussed above—urbanization, industrialization, labor force, demographic structure, violence and martial values, education, and attitudes toward change—contemporaries accurately perceived significant differences between North and South, differences that in most respects were increasing over time. The question remains: were these diffferences crucial enough to make the South an exception to generalizations about antebellum America?

This essay concludes by suggesting a tentative answer to the question: perhaps it was the *North* that was "different," the North that departed from the mainstream of historical development; and perhaps therefore we should speak not of Southern exceptionalism but of Northern exceptionalism. This idea is borrowed shamelessly from C. Vann Woodward, who applied it, however, to the post–Civil War United States. In essays written during the 1950s on "The Irony of Southern History" and "The Search for Southern Identity," Woodward suggested that, unlike other Americans but like most people in the rest of the world, Southerners had experienced poverty, failure, defeat, and had a skepticism about "progress" that grows out of such experiences. The South thus shared a bond with the rest of humankind that other Americans did not share.[27] This theme of Northern exceptionalism might well be applied also to the antebellum United States—not for Woodward's categories of defeat, poverty, and failure, but for the categories of a persistent folk culture discussed in this essay.

At the beginning of the republic the North and South were less different in most of these categories than they became later. Nearly all Northern states had slavery in 1776, and the institution persisted in some of them for decades thereafter. The ethnic homogeneity of Northern and Southern whites was quite similar before 1830. The proportion of urban dwellers was similarly small and the percentage of the labor force employed in agriculture similarly large in 1800. The Northern predominance in commerce and manufacturing was

26. *DeBow's Review* quoted in McCardell, *The Idea of a Southern Nation,* 205; Richmond newspaper quoted in Avery Craven, *The Coming of the Civil War* (New York: Scribner's, 1942), 301–2.

27. Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History,* 3–26, 167–91.

not so great as it later became. Nor was the contrast in education and literacy as great as it subsequently became. A belief in progress and commitments to reform or radicalism were no more prevalent in the North than in the South in 1800—indeed, they may have been less so. In 1776, in 1800, even as late as 1820, similarity in values and institutions was the salient fact. Within the next generation, difference and conflict became prominent. This happened primarily because of developments in the North. The South changed relatively little, and because so many Northern changes seemed threatening, the South developed a defensive ideology that resisted change.

In most of these respects the South resembled a majority of the societies in the world more than the changing North did. Despite the abolition of legal slavery or serfdom throughout much of the western hemisphere and western Europe, much of the world—like the South—had an unfree or quasi-free labor force. Most societies in the world remained predominantly rural, agricultural, and labor intensive; most, including even several European countries, had illiteracy rates as high or higher than the South's 45 percent; most like the South remained bound by traditional values and networks of family, kinship, hierarchy, and patriarchy. The North—along with a few countries in northwestern Europe—hurtled forward eagerly toward a future that many Southerners found distasteful if not frightening; the South remained proudly and even defiantly rooted in the past.

Thus when secessionists protested in 1861 that they were acting to preserve traditional rights and values, they were correct. They fought to protect their constitutional liberties against the perceived Northern threat to overthrow them. The South's concept of republicanism had not changed in three-quarters of a century; the North's had. With complete sincerity the South fought to preserve its version of the republic of the founding fathers—a government of limited powers that protected the rights of property and whose constituency comprised an independent gentry and yeomanry of the white race undisturbed by large cities, heartless factories, restless free workers, and class conflict. The accession to power of the Republican Party, with its ideology of competitive, egalitarian, free-labor capitalism, was a signal to the South that the Northern majority had turned irrevocably toward this frightening, revolutionary future. Indeed, the black Republican Party appeared to the eyes of many Southerners as "essentially a revolutionary party" composed of "a motley throng of Sans culottes ... Infidels and freelovers, interspersed by Bloomer women, fugitive slaves, and amalgamationists."[28] Therefore se-

28. *New Orleans Daily Delta,* Nov. 3, 1860; Steven A. Channing, *Crisis of Fear: Secession in South Carolina* (New York: Norton, 1970), 287.

cession was a preemptive counterrevolution to prevent the black Republican revolution from engulfing the South. "We are not revolutionists," insisted James B. D. De Bow and Jefferson Davis during the Civil War. "We are resisting revolution. . . . We are not engaged in a Quixotic fight for the rights of man; our struggle is for inherited rights. . . . We are upholding the true doctrines of the Federal Constitution. We are conservative."[29]

Union victory in the war destroyed the Southern vision of America and insured that the Northern vision would become the American vision. Until 1861, however, it was the North that was out of the mainstream, not the South. Of course the Northern states, along with Britain and a few countries in northwestern Europe, were cutting a new channel in world history that would doubtless have become the mainstream even if the American Civil War had not happened. But it did happen, and for Americans it marked the turning point. A Louisiana planter who returned home sadly after the war wrote in 1865: "Society has been completely changed by the war. The [French] revolution of '89 did not produce a greater change in the 'Ancien Regime' than has this in our social life." And four years later George Ticknor, a retired Harvard professor, concluded that the Civil War had created a "great gulf between what happened before in our century and what has happened since, or what is likely to happen hereafter. It does not seem to me as if I were living in the country in which I was born."[30] From the war sprang the great flood that wrenched the stream of American history into a new channel and transferred the burden of exceptionalism from North to South.

29. *De Bow's Review* 33 (1862): 44; Dunbar Rowland, ed., *Jefferson Davis, Constitutionalist: His Letters, Papers, and Speeches*, 10 vols. (Jackson: Mississippi Dept. of Archives and History, 1923), 6:357.

30. Richard Taylor to Samuel L. M. Barlow, Dec. 13, 1865, Barlow Papers, Henry E. Huntington Library; Ticknor quoted in Morton Keller, *Affairs of State: Public Life in Late Nineteenth Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1977), 2.