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The Great Confrontation: The South and the Problem of Change

By JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN

THE VISION OF THE NEW WORLD AS THE UTOPIA OF THEIR dreams—or as the challenge to create one—seized all Europeans who decided to cast their lot with what was, perhaps, the most remarkable overseas venture in the history of mankind.¹ Not every New World settler came of his own volition, of course. There were the kidnapped orphans and derelicts from Britain's streets and tippling houses, the debtors from scores of Europe's jails, and the hapless Africans whose "most sacred rights of life & liberty" were violated by a "cruel war against human nature itself."² Regardless of their background or antecedents, all who came were soon caught up, in one way or another, in the relentless drive to find or create an Eden that would completely satisfy the aspirations of its people. Indeed, many would project "visions of liberation and perfection in the vacant spaces of the New World."³

The search for the perfect society was everywhere. New Englanders believed that they were approaching utopia as they developed a set of religious and economic institutions whose centralized control tolerated neither variations nor aberrations. Those in the Middle Atlantic area saw in their very diversity the key to a prosperous and peaceful future. In the South the remarkable success of a staple economy built on a reliable and

¹ The view of the New World as a liberating and regenerating force has been discussed by many writers. See the summary statement in David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca, 1966), 4–7.

² This was among the indictments against the king that did not appear in the final draft of the Declaration of Independence. Carl L. Becker, *The Declaration of Independence: A Study in the History of Political Ideas* (New York, 1942), 180–81.

³ Davis, *Problem of Slavery*, 4.

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durable labor system gave white settlers the opportunity to establish and maintain a social order free of the anxieties that plagued some of their neighbors to the North. It appeared to most of those in authority and leadership that only the refinements were necessary to forge a state of existence that would be lasting and satisfying.

But utopia was not quickly or easily attained—not for everybody or, indeed, for anybody. Soon, religious misfits were challenging authority in New England, stimulating in due course a whole body of restless souls who would expand into new areas to attempt what they had failed to accomplish in their first New World homes. Pennsylvanians and New Yorkers soon discovered that their vaunted pluralism was not entirely satisfactory; and they also began the westward trek. Even residents in the South, unhappy with limited profits or unable to compete in a slave economy, looked beyond the mountains to the new Southwest for new worlds to conquer. Those remaining behind seemed no happier after the dissidents departed than before. They continued to seek some new arrangement in their economy, some modification in their religious practices or in their relationships with their fellows that would be more satisfying. In some areas they began to industrialize, to embrace or at least witness the emergence of new religions, and even to free their slaves.

These new arrangements created as many problems as they solved. Industrialization required capital that was not always available. The former slaves of the “free” states, although not overwhelming in numbers, were new competitors in the free labor markets and their troublesome presence raised questions about their place in the social order. The new religions and the modernization of the old religions caused anxious moments of soul-searching and raised doubts regarding the stability of human and even divine institutions. The quest for the perfect society seemed never ending.

There was, however, one region—the South—where, thirty years before the Civil War, the search for utopia came to a grinding halt. If the quest of southerners for perfection had been less vigorous, it was nevertheless more fortuitous; for they had discovered what they regarded as the components of a perfect civilization. In due course they became the zealous guardians of what they had discovered.

It was in the context of the sectional controversy that white southerners sharpened their conception of the perfect society;

and by the time they defined it they discovered that they had achieved it. In the North the Transcendentalists advanced the idea of the perfectibility of man, but the emphasis was on how imperfect the social order was. In the South there was rather general agreement on the depravity of man, but the real emphasis was on how perfect the social order was. In a dozen areas the northern reformers sought to bring about change. They called for equal rights for women, the recognition of labor as an equal partner with management or capital in the economy, democratization of the schools, and above all, the abolition of slavery. Some were quite specific about such things as prison reform, pacifism, and religious pluralism, while others registered no confidence in the social order by retreating into communitarian settlements such as Icaria in Iowa or Zoar in Ohio.

In the South things could hardly have been better. The economic system was, for all practical purposes, perfect. As one writer claimed, slavery was the force that "beautifully blends, harmonizes, and makes them [capital and labor] as one. . . . This union of labour and capital in the same hands, counteracts . . . all those social, moral, material, and political evils which afflict the North and Western Europe."⁴ Observed from any angle—whether it be the perfect distribution of labor by means of the slave system or the inevitable cooperation of the indolent with the industrious or the most effective utilization of the soil and other resources—the South's economic system was as close to perfection as one could hope for or even want.

The South's political system was, in the eyes of white southerners, a remarkable achievement. White men, relieved of the cares and the drudgery of manual toil, were free to give their attention to the problem of governance. It was, as James Henry Hammond put it, a harmony of the South's political and social institutions. "This harmony gives her a frame of society, the best in the world, and an extent of political freedom, combined with entire security, such as no other people ever enjoyed upon the face of the earth."⁵ It was sheer folly, the slavocracy insisted, to argue that the essential element of a republic was the perfect political equality of all persons. On the contrary, Representative Thomas L. Clingman insisted, inequality was a significant

⁴ "American Slavery in 1857," *Southern Literary Messenger*, XXV (August 1857), 85.

⁵ *Congressional Globe*, 35 Cong., 1 Sess., 961–62 (March 4, 1858).

element of the constitutional republican form.⁶ As far as slavery was concerned, the Constitution itself recognized slavery and the inequality of persons. That fact was extremely important to the southern position. As William Pinkney pointedly asked in 1820, "if it be true that all the men in a republican Government must help to wield its power, and be equal in rights . . . why not all the *women*?"⁷ No, the South's political system was the ideal system, even if it did not, and perhaps *because* it did not, extend equality to blacks or to women!

The role of the white woman in southern life was defined with a precision that made it almost legal. There were, of course, some legal restrictions on women such as their inability to sue or be sued alone or to own property separate from their husbands or to dispose of property they owned before marriage without the permission of their husbands.⁸ But the southern woman's role as defined by custom and tradition was one infinitely more exacting than the requirements of the law. For she had to fulfill the queenly role in what Anne Firor Scott has called "The Image," while having to perform the dozens of tasks in the rather unattractive everyday life that was "The Reality." Thus, "She was timid and modest, beautiful and graceful," she was "the most fascinating being in creation . . . the delight and charm of every circle she moves in." But she was also a submissive creature "whose reason for being was to love, honor, obey, and occasionally amuse her husband, to bring up his children and manage his household."⁹ It could be a grim and drab business, especially when isolation from friends and insulation from many of her husband's activities doomed her to an accommodation that made the image supremely difficult to live up to.

One facet of the insulation must have been extremely painful; and that was the manner in which her lord and master, by his own conduct, defined the role of the black woman. The nocturnal visit—or, for that matter, the emboldened daytime visit—to the slave cabin, the regular trips to Charleston or Mobile or New Orleans when it was "not convenient" to have other members of the family accompany him, and the regular appearance of mulatto

⁶ *Ibid.*, 30 Cong., 1 Sess., Appendix, 43–44 (December 22, 1847).

⁷ *Annals of Congress*, 16 Cong., 1 Sess., 414 (February 15, 1820).

⁸ Guion Griffis Johnson, "The Changing Status of the Southern Woman," in John C. McKinney and Edgar T. Thompson, eds., *The South in Continuity and Change* (Durham, 1965), 421.

⁹ Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830–1930* (Chicago and London, 1970), 4.

babies on the plantation took their toll in the capacity of the mistress to live up to expectations. But the other woman's lot must have been at least as difficult. "When she is fourteen or fifteen," one of them said, "her owner, or his sons, or the overseer, or perhaps all of them, begin to bribe her with presents. If these fail to accomplish their purpose, she is whipped or starved into submission to their will."¹⁰

When Frederick Law Olmsted visited Richmond in the autumn of 1855 he was "surprised at the number of fine-looking mulattoes, or nearly white colored persons" that he saw. "Many of the colored ladies were dressed not only expensively, but with good taste and effect, after the latest Parisian mode." About a fourth of those whom Olmsted observed "seemed . . . to have lost all distinguishingly African peculiarity of feature, and to have acquired, in place of it, a good deal of that voluptuousness of expression which characterizes many of the women of the south of Europe."¹¹ The wife of one planter "found it impossible to long keep a maid . . . for none could escape the licentious passions of her husband, who was the father of about one-fourth of the slaves on his plantation, by his slave women."¹² Another "watched her husband with unceasing vigilance; but he was well practised in means to evade it."¹³ Small wonder one mistress was beside herself with rage, when a visitor mistook one of the girl servants for a member of the slaveholder's family and addressed her with appropriate familiarity.¹⁴ But the half million mulattoes in the United States by 1860 were an integral part of the perfect society to which the white southerner had become so attached and committed.¹⁵

The white southerner's social order was one in which his own sense of superiority was constantly nurtured by the subordination to which he subjected all blacks. It mattered not whether the blacks were slave or free—although their natural lot was, of course, as slaves—they existed for the sole purpose of gratifying the needs, desires, even the ego, of the whites. It was so im-

¹⁰ [Harriet B. Jacobs], *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, edited by Lydia Maria Child (Boston, 1861), 79.

¹¹ Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States* (New York, 1856), 18, 28.

¹² John Thompson, *The Life of John Thompson, a Fugitive Slave* (Worcester, 1856), 31.

¹³ [Jacobs], *Incidents*, 49.

¹⁴ Lewis and Milton Clarke, *Narratives of the Sufferings of Lewis and Milton Clarke* (Boston, 1846), 20.

¹⁵ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Negro Population, 1790–1915* (Washington, 1918), 208.

portant to the white elite to maintain the southern social order that they enlisted every white, regardless of economic or social status, in its support.¹⁶ Color became the badge of distinction, and every white man could be proud of his own racial distinction. "We have among us," Judge Abel P. Upshur declared, "but one great class, and all who belong to it have a necessary sympathy with one another; we have but one great interest, and all who possess it are equally ready to maintain and protect it."¹⁷

A sense of racial superiority became at once a principal defense of slavery and an obsession with it as the "cornerstone" of southern civilization. "[P]ublic liberty and domestic slavery were cradled together," Robert Toombs declared.¹⁸ This view complemented James Henry Hammond's argument that Africans had the requisite vigor, docility, and fidelity to perform the "drudgery of life" while the whites preoccupied themselves with "progress, civilization, and refinement."¹⁹ Others, in large numbers, lent their philosophical speculations and their scientific "findings" to further justification of the inevitable lot of Negroes as slaves. Physiologically they were inferior, emotionally they were juvenile, and intellectually they were hopelessly retarded. Fortunately for them, the argument went, they were the chattel of an aristocracy characterized by talent, virtue, generosity, and courage.²⁰

The fact that more than one-tenth of all Negroes in the United States were free and that some of them were most accomplished in the economic and intellectual spheres did not shake the confidence of white southerners in their perfect society that refused to recognize blacks as persons worthy of any respectable social status. Free Negroes were pariahs, and the whites enacted laws to confirm it. The fact that the annual crop of runaways was regularly increasing created an apprehension that whites successfully concealed. A slave who ran away was afflicted with a disease called "drapetomania," which could be cured by flogging; or he was the victim of the evil designs of abolitionists, which could be dispelled by more stringent laws and direct action.²¹

¹⁶ See, for example, James D. B. De Bow, *The Interest in Slavery of the Southern Non-Slaveholder* (Charleston, 1860).

¹⁷ Upshur, "Domestic Slavery," *Southern Literary Messenger*, V (October 1839), 685.

¹⁸ Quoted in William S. Jenkins, *Pro-Slavery Thought in the Old South* (Chapel Hill, 1935), 291.

¹⁹ *Cong. Globe*, 35 Cong., 1 Sess., Appendix, 71 (March 4, 1858).

²⁰ William Stanton, *The Leopard's Spots: Scientific Attitudes Toward Race in America, 1815-59* (Chicago, 1960); and Jenkins, *Pro-Slavery Thought*.

²¹ S. A. Cartwright, "Diseases and Peculiarities of the Negro," in James D. B.

The fact that there were slave revolts and rumors of them merely confirmed the demented and immoral character of some of the slaves which could best be dealt with by constant surveillance. In any case, slavery was a great missionary institution, "one arranged by God." As Bishop Stephen Elliott of Georgia put it, "we are working out God's purposes, whose consummation we are quite willing to leave in his hands."²²

White southerners did not leave such matters altogether in God's hands. If their religious institutions were ordained by God, they were, in turn, built and managed by man and with a view toward refining and sustaining the perfect society. In forging what one observer has called "a southern religion" the whites made certain that the orthodoxy of their churches, regardless of denomination, was in perfect harmony with the southern social order.²³ The churches condemned all signs of social instability such as intemperance, gambling, divorce, and dancing. Indeed, some religious groups objected to any and all programs of reform, holding to the view that their mission was to save souls rather than rehabilitate society.

Under the circumstances this was a better stance, even if some idealists preferred to advocate social change. As the leading politicians and planters would look with suspicion if not scorn on those who criticized things as they were, it was scarcely prudent to challenge them. Better still, it proved to be the better part of wisdom to speak out for the status quo. Thus, the leading clergymen not only rationalized slavery as an institution whose severity was mitigated by the influence of Christianity, but some of them defended it with incomparable zeal. Slavery was not a sin, they told its critics, for it conformed to the highest code known to man and was based on divine revelation.²⁴ Indeed, it was the abolitionists who were sinful, for they refused to recognize the explicit sanctions of slavery in the Scriptures.²⁵ In the course of the slave controversy the southern clergy did not fail to provide their po-

De Bow, ed., *The Industrial Resources, etc., of the Southern and Western States* (3 vols., New Orleans and Washington, 1853-1856), II, 322.

²² Quoted in Jenkins, *Pro-Slavery Thought*, 217-18.

²³ Joseph H. Fichter and George L. Maddox, "Religion in the South, Old and New," in McKinney and Thompson, eds., *The South in Continuity and Change*, 359-60.

²⁴ A classic statement of the case is in Thornton Stringfellow, "The Bible Argument: or, Slavery in the Light of Divine Revelation," in E. N. Elliott, ed., *Cotton Is King, and Pro-Slavery Arguments* (Augusta, Ga., 1860), 459-521.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 461, 496-97.

litical leaders with every conceivable moral and religious defense of the institution that they could possibly use.

Thus, southerners, believing that their social system was the best that had evolved, must have been immensely pleased by the actions of their religious leaders in breaking off from their northern brethren. By 1845, when southern Baptists followed the example of the Presbyterians and Methodists in setting up their own sectional denominations, slavery had become as much a part of the religious orthodoxy of the South as the Creation in the Book of Genesis or Armageddon in the Book of Revelations. The work of promoting and defending slavery, when entrusted to the southern clergy, could not have been in safer hands. It was left for James Henley Thornwell, the brilliant Presbyterian minister and philosopher, to put the matter succinctly when he said that slavery was "one of the conditions in which God is conducting the moral probation of man—a condition not incompatible with the highest moral freedom, the true glory of the race, and, therefore, not unfit for the moral and spiritual discipline which Christianity has instituted."²⁶

By 1860 it was sheer folly to criticize the social order that the white southerners had developed. They had succeeded where others had failed; and they were unwilling to countenance any suggestion for change. They insisted that it was the North that needed to change. Yet, it was the North that was pressing for change in the South. With his characteristic sneer, George Fitzhugh observed that the "invention and use of the word Sociology in free society, and of the science of which it treats, and the absence of such word and science in slave society, shows that the former is afflicted with disease, the latter healthy."²⁷ The North's radical movements, such as communism, socialism, and anarchism, were a clear indication of its failure. If slavery was more widely accepted, man would not need to resort "to the unnatural remedies of woman's rights, limited marriages, voluntary divorces, and free love, as proposed by the abolitionists."²⁸

If the South was unwilling to make any significant concessions toward change during the antebellum years, it saw no reason why defeat at the hands of the North during a bloody Civil War should justify or provide any reason for change. To be sure, the

²⁶ Thornwell, *The Rights and the Duties of Masters* (Charleston, 1850), 43–44.

²⁷ Fitzhugh, *Sociology for the South, or the Failure of Free Society* (Richmond, 1854), 222.

²⁸ Fitzhugh, *Cannibals All or, Slaves Without Masters* (Richmond, 1857), 97–99.

slaves had been set free, the Confederacy had collapsed, and southern agrarianism had proved no match for the northern industrial juggernaut. But that was sheer might, which was not necessarily right. "They say *right* always triumphs," Emma LeConte wailed in 1865, "but what cause could have been more just than ours?"²⁹ Such southerners were not prepared to accept the changes that came in the wake of the Civil War.

Emma LeConte apparently spoke for many. While white southerners were compelled to recognize the most obvious results of the war, such as the end of the legalized institution of slavery, they were willing to make few concessions regarding the place of blacks in the social order or, indeed, the existence of a new social and political order. The attempts to nullify the effects of the Reconstruction amendments and the moves at the first opportunity—in 1865 and again at the time of the overthrow—are clear indications that they would resist change with all the resources at their command. The hue and cry over the importance of preserving the integrity of the South's political institutions was never so loud as when whites were vowing to keep blacks from holding office, regardless of ability, training, or experience. By the end of the century the virtually total disfranchisement of blacks indicated how successfully southern whites had resisted change.

That the postwar readjustments were essentially a realignment to prevent revolutionary or even significant change can be seen in the superficial adjustments that white southerners made to the "new order." They would accept the former slaves as free agricultural workers, but only on terms that made a mockery of freedom. Sharecropping and peonage made it possible for the leaders of the old order to subject masses of poor whites to a new form of degradation and to keep most Negroes in a state of involuntary servitude.³⁰ They would accept industrialization, but only on their own terms. This would assure them that the new industry would operate along lines that were strikingly similar to the plantation system. The new factories were largely if not exclusively for whites; and when blacks were employed, they would have their "place" on the lowest rung on the employment ladder, with no

²⁹ LeConte, *When the World Ended: The Diary of Emma LeConte*, edited by Earl S. Miers (New York, 1957), 90.

³⁰ The convict lease system and peonage are among the forms of involuntary servitude discussed in C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* ([Baton Rouge], 1951), 212-15; George B. Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South, 1913-1945* ([Baton Rouge], 1967), 212-13; and Stetson Kennedy, *Southern Exposure* (Garden City, N.Y., 1946), 48-77.

hope of climbing up. The Negro factory worker, who could not even approach the pay window to receive his inferior wage until all whites had been paid, knew that whites would stop at nothing in their determination to degrade him.³¹

We now know that the romantic picture of woman's role in the antebellum South was more imaginary than real. In the years following the war more southern white women everywhere openly played the role that many had covertly played before the war.³² The census continued to describe them as "keeping home" while, in fact, they were managing farms and plantations, teaching in the local schools, working in factories, and entering numerous service occupations.³³ Meanwhile, their black counterparts shared the lot consigned to all former slaves, happily with some lessening in the exploitation of them as mistresses or concubines.

Regardless of race or color, the gallant men of the South did not greet the changing role of women with enthusiasm. Some regarded it as an affront to their own masculinity, while others were certain that it was an advance herald of the doom of their way of life. If women persisted in their quest for equality, they would undermine some of the most important foundations of civilization. Only men, said Georgia's Senator Joseph E. Brown, could deal with "the active and sterner duties of life," such as farming, road building, attending public assemblages, and voting.³⁴ Leave such matters as voting to men, and the future of society would be in safe hands. Furthermore, if white women gained the franchise, black women voters would follow in their wake, and such a calamity was too terrible to contemplate. Surely, this must have been in the minds of some of the women who themselves opposed their own enfranchisement.³⁵

And during the antebellum years the southern churches had learned their role well, so well in fact that they continued to function as principal bulwarks against change in the postwar years. Southern clergymen remained vigorous and vocal proponents of the Confederate cause, while their "churches became centers of conservative political sentiment and of resistance both to the invasion of northern culture and to the doctrine of the New

³¹ J. C. Wood to J. O. Wilson, secretary, American Colonization Society, February 9, 1903, American Colonization Society Records, Series I, Vol. 292 (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.).

³² Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 226-27.

³³ Scott, *Southern Lady*, 106-33.

³⁴ *Congressional Record*, 49 Cong., 2 Sess., 980 (January 25, 1887).

³⁵ Scott, *Southern Lady*, 169-70.

South."³⁶ They did much to insulate the South from social as well as religious change by opposing church unity, a liberal theology, and a new role for religious institutions in the social order.

Southern churches could differ, almost violently, over such matters as immersion as opposed to other forms of religious induction, but they were not in conflict over the prime role of the church in preparing its children of God for the next world. Not only should its members be content with the world as it was, but they should be aggressive defenders of the social order as God ordained it. "Organized religion in the South became," as Hodding Carter put it, "the mighty fortress of the *status quo* . . ."³⁷ It seems fruitless to argue that the churches merely reflected the views of their communicants or even that they shaped the views of their communicants. What is important is that the conflict between the position of the church on religious and social questions was indistinguishable from the position of other southern institutions. It stood against change as firmly as any other.

It was in the area of race relations that the South of the post-war years was more committed to stability—a euphemism for the *status quo*—than in any other area. And since the threat of change appeared to be greater, what with Radicals enfranchising the freedmen and enacting civil rights laws, the active, vehement resistance to change was greater. That is why southern whites became active in 1865 in defining the place of Negroes in southern life and continued to do so until the definition had extended to every conceivable aspect of life. The way to make absolutely certain that the status of blacks would not change was to institutionalize and legalize their subordinate and degraded place in southern life.

If the place of blacks was to be subordinate, whites argued, they must not be permitted to participate in the affairs of government. The move that began in 1865, only to be rather mildly interrupted for a few years during Reconstruction, was resumed in the 1870s and virtually completed by the end of the century.³⁸ If their place was to be degraded, whites reasoned, they must be separated on all means of transportation, in all places of public

³⁶ Fichter and Maddox, "Religion in the South," 360.

³⁷ Carter, *Southern Legacy* (Baton Rouge, 1950), 30.

³⁸ William A. Mabry, *Studies in the Disfranchisement of the Negro in the South* (Durham, 1938); Vernon L. Wharton, *The Negro in Mississippi, 1865-1890* (Chapel Hill, 1947); and Paul Lewinson, *Race, Class, & Party* (London, New York, and other cities, 1932) are among the many works that deal with the new legal status of Negroes in the postwar years.

accommodation, in schools, churches, hospitals, orphanages, poor-houses, jails, penitentiaries, and cemeteries.³⁹ They were to receive no address of courtesy but were always to extend it to whites of any age or status. Their oath in the court was to be taken on a separate Bible, and they were never to challenge the claims or assertions of whites.⁴⁰ The enforcement of these laws and customs was the responsibility of all whites, who could resort to violence with impunity to prevent any breach whatsoever.

As the South entered the twentieth century it was as deeply committed to its social order as it had ever been; and it was as determined to resist change as it had been a half century earlier. But the resistance would be more difficult, for the forces of change were everywhere, and they seemed to be sweeping everything before them. If the forces were all powerful and all pervasive, then the South would perhaps be forced to adopt what Wilbur J. Cash called a "revolution in tactics," without yielding significant ground on important matters.⁴¹ It would thus be in a position to force the new dispensation to accommodate itself to the South's social order, rather than the other way around.

When progressivism called for a greater role for government in the regulation of many aspects of life, the South's leaders responded with their own special brand of progressivism. Indeed they took the initiative in the promotion of direct primary elections, but they made certain that the increased democracy would be for whites only.⁴² The great movement to extend education swept over most of the South, but the widespread practice of discriminating against Negroes in the expenditure of public funds detracted from the movement as a truly progressive one.⁴³ In more than one state the reform movement was carried forward on a wave of race-baiting and race-hating, with the clear understanding that the benefits of reform, whether they were political or economic, would not breach the line that separated the races.

One of the most effective obstacles to the success of women's suffrage was the specter of race. There were, of course, the ex-

³⁹ John Hope Franklin, "History of Racial Segregation in the United States," American Academy of Political and Social Science, *Annals*, CCCIV (March 1956), 1-9; and Charles S. Johnson, *Patterns of Negro Segregation* (New York and London, 1943).

⁴⁰ Bertram W. Doyle, *The Etiquette of Race Relations in the South: A Study in Social Control* (Chicago, 1937).

⁴¹ Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York, 1941), 183.

⁴² Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 372-73.

⁴³ Louis R. Harlan, *Separate and Unequal: Public School Campaigns and Racism in the Southern Seaboard States, 1901-1915* (Chapel Hill, 1958), 248-69.

pected arguments in 1917 and 1918 that the proposed constitutional amendment permitting women to vote was "against the civilization of the South."⁴⁴ And there were some courageous southern suffragettes who *demand*ed the vote. But by 1917 no leading southern member of the House of Representatives and no southern member of the Senate had declared for women's suffrage.

There persisted the argument, developed in the previous century, that the suffrage amendment would open the door to voting by Negro women and, perhaps, even Negro men. "REMEMBER that *woman suffrage*," one southerner cried, "means a reopening of the entire *negro suffrage* question, loss of State rights, and another period of reconstruction horrors, which will introduce a set of female carpetbaggers as bad as their male prototypes of the sixties."⁴⁵ Indeed, the connection in the minds of many southerners between race and women's suffrage was so strong that the suffragists themselves devoted much attention to the task of dispelling the connection. They did so by assuring southern whites that if they enfranchised women they could continue to disfranchise blacks!⁴⁶

Despite fierce opposition by many southerners, including some women, to the changing role of women, the march toward freeing southern women from some of the trammels of the nineteenth century seemed inexorable. In time they would sit in a few seats of power such as the governor's chair in Texas, in one Arkansas seat in the United States Senate, and on the North Carolina Supreme Court. Some of them would reject the tired and largely false claim that blacks had been lynched to protect their virtue and would call for civilized conduct to replace the barbarism of the rope and faggot.⁴⁷ But as the status of southern women improved, there remained the lag between blacks and whites of the so-called weaker sex; and few raised their voices in the effort to close the gap in wages, in educational opportunities, and in the general esteem of southern chivalry.

⁴⁴ See the communication from Caroline Patterson, president of the Georgia Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage, to Frank Clark, January 4, 1918, U. S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Woman Suffrage, 65 Cong., 2 Sess., *Extending the Right of Suffrage to Women: Hearings on H. J. Res. 200, Jan. 3-7, 1918* (Washington, 1918), 327.

⁴⁵ Quoted in A. Elizabeth Taylor, *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Tennessee* (New York, 1957), 112.

⁴⁶ Elizabeth C. Stanton *et al.*, eds., *History of Woman Suffrage* (6 vols., New York and other cities, 1881-1922), V, 463.

⁴⁷ Wilma Dykeman and James Stokely, *Seeds of Southern Change: The Life of Will Alexander* (Chicago, 1962), 143-52.

The secularization of life in general tended to undermine the effectiveness of southern organized religion and to challenge age-old orthodoxies and fundamentalist doctrines. It would be incorrect, however, to assume that the conservative character of southern religion disappeared altogether or that southern churches were easily adjusting to social and economic change. All too often Protestant churches in the South became centers of refuge for the most conservative social and political forces and, as in earlier years, led the resistance to change.⁴⁸

Nowhere was the resistance to change more pronounced than in the opposition of southern religious groups to theories that challenged the literal interpretation of the Holy Scriptures. They vigorously opposed the teaching of what they called atheism, agnosticism, and Darwinism.⁴⁹ In Texas Governor Miriam A. Ferguson, in denouncing Darwinism, said that she would not let "that kind of rot go into Texas text-books."⁵⁰ In Tennessee a young high school teacher was found guilty of teaching evolution and was saved from punishment only by a technicality. In several states in the 1920s the Bible Crusaders put up a vigorous, if unsuccessful, fight to eliminate Darwinism from the public schools.⁵¹ In all these efforts southern religious groups manifested a fierce and fearsome hostility to change.

In the antebellum years the fight for the freedom of the slaves was spearheaded by northern white abolitionists, although both slaves and free Negroes did much more for freedom than has generally been conceded.⁵² In the post-Reconstruction years the fight for racial equality and human dignity was waged largely by blacks, with only an infrequent assist by whites. In the twentieth century the struggle to destroy every vestige of racial distinction passed through several stages, with whites—largely in the North—giving greater assistance on some occasions than on others.

In their struggle for complete equality blacks, whether in the South or in the North, could be fairly certain to receive northern

⁴⁸ The conservative character of southern churches is discussed in Kenneth K. Bailey, *Southern White Protestantism in the Twentieth Century* (New York, Evanston, and London, 1964), 1–24. For a discussion of the southern churches and race see David M. Reimers, *White Protestantism and the Negro* (New York, 1965), 25–50.

⁴⁹ Tindall, *Emergence of the New South*, 204.

⁵⁰ Quoted in Maynard Shipley, *The War on Modern Science: A Short History of the Fundamentalist Attacks on Evolution and Modernism* (New York and London, 1927), 174.

⁵¹ The fight is summarized in Bailey, *Southern White Protestantism*, 72–91.

⁵² Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (London, Oxford, and New York, 1969).

white assistance in matters of transportation, voting, education in general, and in the enjoyment of places of public accommodation. They could not be nearly as certain of such support in matters of employment, housing, security in their persons, and equal education in the urban ghetto. In that sense the resistance to significant change in race relations could be as vigorous in the North as in the South.⁵³

But if northern whites could react crudely and even violently to the pressures of the new masses of blacks in the urban ghettos, they were merely catching up with a problem that southerners had faced for centuries. They were less prepared to meet it, for although they had always consigned Negroes to an inferior place in their society, they had been smug in their satisfaction that the numbers were insignificant and the "problem" correspondingly minor.⁵⁴ They had much to learn, and they became apt, even eager students of the southern method of dealing with the problem of race.

Even as Negroes left the South in increasing numbers between 1910 and 1950 white southerners discovered that the nationalizing of the race problem did not relieve them of having to confront the significantly changing status of those blacks who remained. Negroes wanted better jobs and equal pay. They wanted to vote and hold office. They wanted to desegregate public transportation and the schools. They wanted to eradicate every vestige of second-class citizenship, and they insisted that there could be no compromise with the high principles that were the birthright of *all* Americans.⁵⁵

For white southerners this was the most serious challenge to their social order since the Civil War. They had always conceived of their "perfect society" in terms of the subordination of Negroes. Now that it was once again challenged, they would respond characteristically by that remarkable combination of praising things as they were and resisting the change that they abhorred. The South had devoted centuries to building its civilization, they insisted. Except for a few malcontents and those exposed to outside subversive influences, Negroes in the South were not only better

⁵³ Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto: Negro New York, 1890-1930* (New York, 1966) and Allan H. Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920* (Chicago and London, 1967) deal with white resistance to change in two northern cities.

⁵⁴ Gilbert Osofsky, "The Enduring Ghetto," *Journal of American History*, LV (September 1968), 243-55.

⁵⁵ Rayford W. Logan, ed., *What the Negro Wants* (Chapel Hill, 1944). See also the "Publisher's Introduction" by W. T. Couch, in which he expressed disagreement with most of the contributors to the volume.

off then elsewhere but were happy with their condition. "Go down South where I live," John E. Rankin told the House of Representatives in 1948. That is "where more Negroes are employed than anywhere else in the country, where they enjoy more happiness, more peace, more prosperity, more security and protection than they ever enjoyed in all history."⁵⁶

But change was taking place so rapidly that there was scarcely time to celebrate the old order. Two world wars and a New Deal had facilitated the South's industrial revolution. Government, federal and state, had introduced social controls and social programs that poverty and privation forced the South to accept. The successful drive of southern women to liberate themselves from their long entrapment was greatly accelerated by changes and reforms in the political and economic spheres. Even religious institutions felt the winds of change and responded with various forms of accommodation. And in all these changes white southerners asked the age-old question, "How will it affect the blacks?" It was an affirmation of V. O. Key's assertion that "Whatever phase of the southern . . . process one seeks to understand, sooner or later the trail of inquiry leads to the Negro."⁵⁷

Not only were these numerous developments affecting the blacks in a dozen different ways, but specific developments in the area of race relations overshadowed other disquieting events. Some southern white leaders observed what was happening on the racial front in utter disbelief, while others regarded it as their greatest challenge that must be confronted and combated. In the process some of their responses were as graceless as they were reprehensible.

When President Harry S. Truman issued executive orders and recommended legislation to protect Negroes in their enjoyment of civil rights, Senator Richard B. Russell, Jr., of Georgia condemned the moves as steering this country toward a "police state" and threatened to introduce legislation looking toward the removal of blacks from the South.⁵⁸ In 1947 a federal district court judge, J. Waties Waring, ruled that the Democratic primary of South Carolina could not exclude Negroes from participating in its elections. Immediately, a South Carolina member of the House of Representatives, W. J. Bryan Dorn, wailed that it opened the way for Communists to vote in the Democratic primary.⁵⁹ Another

⁵⁶ *Cong. Record*, 80 Cong., 2 Sess., 4543 (April 15, 1948).

⁵⁷ V. O. Key, Jr., *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (New York, 1949), 5.

⁵⁸ *Atlanta Constitution*, July 27, 1948; *Charleston News and Courier*, July 28, 1948.

⁵⁹ *Cong. Record*, 80 Cong., 2 Sess., Appendix, 4654-55 (July 27, 1948).

representative from South Carolina, L. Mendel Rivers, predicted that the decision would cause bloodshed, and he seriously considered the possibility of instituting impeachment proceedings against Judge Waring.⁶⁰ The return of Harry Truman to the White House in 1948 and the refusal of the United States Supreme Court to review the Waring decision effectively subdued the confrontation that Russell and Rivers and company sought to bring about.

White southerners all across the region attempted to meet the changes that blacks sought in the field of education by launching a massive program to equalize the facilities and programs in white and Negro schools. If they approached success in this ploy, it was effectively undermined by the Supreme Court decision in 1954 that declared legally segregated schools unconstitutional. The South's response was varied, but the major response was rejection of the law of the land. Its leading members of the United States Congress—more than one hundred of them—signed a manifesto that praised the “separate but equal” decision of 1896 as “founded on elemental humanity and commonsense” and condemned the 1954 decision as an “unwarranted exercise of power by the Court” that “planted hatred and suspicion where there has been heretofore friendship and understanding.”⁶¹

The signatories of this “Declaration of Constitutional Principles” were among the South's most respected and influential leaders. In declaring that they would “use all lawful means to bring about a reversal” of the decision, they vowed to “refrain from disorders and lawless acts.” But Senator Harry F. Byrd, Sr., was already developing a plan of “massive resistance” that in due course would compromise the principles of law and order to which he and his colleagues claimed to be committed.⁶²

While it is not possible to assess the impact of the southern manifesto on subsequent developments, there can be no gainsaying that it set the stage and tone for the resistance that followed during the next decade or so. The search for alternatives to desegregated schools led to a veritable spate of maneuvers ranging from pupil placement to the closing of some public schools and the establishment of private all-white schools. The path of massive resistance led to the establishment of white citizens' councils and violent confrontations with blacks who had resorted to various forms of protest and demonstration against noncompliance with the decisions in their communities.

⁶⁰ *Charleston News and Courier*, August 5, 6, 1948.

⁶¹ *Cong. Record*, 84 Cong., 2 Sess., 4515–16 (March 12, 1956).

⁶² J. Harvie Wilkinson III, *Harry Byrd and the Changing Face of Virginia Politics, 1945–1966* (Charlottesville, 1968), 113–54.

It is not the interracial confrontations, important and tragic as they were, that are of prime significance in this discussion. It is the South's confrontation with change, its response in defending what it regarded as a perfect society, that is instructive. The massive resistance, the fire hoses, police dogs, and the electronic cattle prods were, in a real sense, a desperate but futile confrontation with the inexorable forces of change. It all added up to the hopeless defense of a position that, in terms of the nation's laws and its expressed social philosophy, was illogical and indefensible.

The futility of this defense lay in the failure to take into account the myths and fallacies that were the basis of the white South's conception of its perfect society. It failed to recognize the inherent inconsistencies and contradictions in its argument that it could enjoy a social order that was founded on the exploitation of a group that was an integral part of that social order. It failed to see that in arrogating to a few the privileges and rights that belonged to the many, it was depriving itself of the resources that could do so much to create the social order that had, for so long, proved elusive. Its inflexibility had resulted in driving out much of its best talents, white as well as black, that could not flourish or even survive where confrontation with change meant unreasoned and unreasonable resistance to free expression and experimentation. It had also resulted in the development of techniques to defy and circumvent both law and custom. Its obsession was to maintain a government, an economy, an arrangement of the sexes, a relationship of the races, and a social system that had never existed, as Paul M. Gaston has suggested, except in the fertile imagination of those who would not confront either the reality that existed or the change that would bring them closer to reality.⁶³

One would hope that a region whose experience and talents had proved to be so ample in so many ways—in the creative arts, in certain aspects of the science of government, and in the capacity to transform so many phases of its economic order—might yet be able to confront fundamental changes in its social order. For only by such confrontation, tempered by a healthy recognition of the importance of change, can the South expect to survive as a viable and effective unit in the body politic and to point the way toward the ordering of a truly vital social organism where men and women, black and white, can live together in their common search for a better society.

⁶³ Gaston, *The New South Creed: A Study in Southern Mythmaking* (New York, 1970).