

# THE MYTH OF SOUTHERN EXCEPTIONALISM

EDITED BY  
MATTHEW D. LASSITER  
& JOSEPH CRISPINO



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EXCEPTIONALISM**

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## PREFACE

“The white South’s uncontrollable urge to self-obituarize actually became a steady source of supplementary income for a select squadron of the usual academic and journalistic suspects who convened with amazing frequency to deliver shamelessly recycled speeches at countless symposia dedicated to kissing southern distinctiveness good-bye one more time.”

James C. Cobb, *Away Down South*

We begin with a confession. In March 2006, we convened a conference at Emory University, the goals of which could be construed to resemble those of the long line of southern symposia described above. We called the conference “The End of Southern History? Integrating the Modern South and the Nation.” We even invited Jim Cobb to speak. He indulged us with a gracious, incisive, knee-slapping commentary on a panel. It was one of many rich and provocative intellectual exchanges that took place that weekend, as we debated whether to keep the question mark in the conference title, take it out, or perhaps replace it with an exclamation point.

We organized the Emory conference in order to produce this anthology, and we deliberately recruited half of the contributors from outside the ranks of “southern history” as traditionally defined. Readers can decide for themselves whether or not we offer something new or have simply continued the recycling process, but it says something about the staying power of the myths of southern exceptionalism that scholars can’t stop having this debate. We should be clear that “kissing southern distinctiveness good-bye” was never really our goal. The concern that motivated our conference and that informs this volume is not whether the South has come to an end, so much as what it means to recognize that it is time for a distinctive southern history and historiography to end.

We take it for granted that there is, and will continue to be, some entity called “the South,” and that people will continue to love it or hate it, defend it or deride it—or, in that great Faulknerian tradition, do all at the same time. And we trust that readers will recognize that we are not arguing

that “there are no regional differences anymore” because “the South is the same as every place else,” to reference some of the critiques that we have heard in the process of compiling this book. Our concern is how the idea of “the South”—defined as a unified region that is not just different in some matters of degree but *exceptional* from the rest of America and in historical opposition to dominant national trends—has shaped and continues to shape the kinds of narratives that we tell about the region and the nation. This book explores regional history and reconsiders southern exceptionalism as a way to address broader questions about American history, the equally problematic category of “the North,” and the related myths of American exceptionalism.

We are deeply indebted to each of the scholars who participated in the conference at Emory. In addition to Professor Cobb and the contributors to this volume, they include Jane Dailey, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, Doug Flamming, Charles Payne, Bryant Simon, Susan Ashmore, Merle Black, Michelle Brattain, Cliff Kuhn, Andrew Lewis, Allen Tullos, and Earl Lewis. We thank, in particular, President Jimmy Carter and John Egerton for their keynote addresses.

We are grateful to Emory University for granting us the resources to assemble such a distinguished group of scholars, specifically the Emory Conference Center Subvention Fund, Hightower Lecture Fund, Emory Academic Exchange, and the Departments of History, African American Studies, and Political Science. Becky Herring, Rosalyn Page, and Allison Adams provided indispensable help with conference logistics. We also thank Emory College and Dean Christine Levenduski for supplying funds for the illustrations used in the book.

The anonymous peer reviewers provided many valuable suggestions and wisely counseled us to clarify that this volume represents a contribution to the consolidation of a paradigm shift that has been under way for some years now (in the academy much more than in popular discourse), as the doctrine of southern exceptionalism has been exerting less and less influence on the best scholarship about the South and about other parts of the United States. Kevin Kruse has been instrumental in the development of this book from the beginning, and he generously arranged for us to present draft versions of our chapters to the Modern America Workshop at Princeton University. Susan Ferber, our editor at Oxford University Press, supported this project with energy and enthusiasm from its earliest stages, and she supplied great advice and welcome feedback throughout the process.

Editing this anthology took much more time than we initially anticipated when the idea for a combined conference and book project began to take shape in the hallways and bars of a conference meeting almost four years ago. For their patience and for so much else, we especially thank Tracy Davis, Caroline Herring, and Carrie and Sam Crespino.

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# **THE MYTH OF SOUTHERN EXCEPTIONALISM**

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# INTRODUCTION: THE END OF SOUTHERN HISTORY

**Matthew D. Lassiter and Joseph Crespino**

LITTLE ROCK, ARKANSAS, SEPTEMBER 1957. Three years after the *Brown* decision, nine black students carefully selected by the Little Rock school board were prepared to desegregate Central High School. Governor Orval Faubus, however, upended months of community preparations and defied the federal court order by mobilizing the Arkansas National Guard to prevent “the forcible integration of Negroes and whites.” On September 4, about one hundred white onlookers and a throng of journalists watched the National Guardsmen turn the black students away. *Time* magazine blamed Faubus for manufacturing a racial crisis and observed that the vast majority of white residents of Little Rock were ready to comply with the constitutional requirement to desegregate their public schools. The governor removed the National Guard after a three-week legal standoff, which allowed a mob of four hundred segregationists to surround Central High when the “Little Rock Nine” tried to enter for the second time. The mayor of Little Rock requested federal assistance to prevent violence, and President Dwight Eisenhower sent U.S. Army troops to restore order and avert a constitutional crisis. With bayonets fixed, members of the 101st Airborne escorted the black students to school, and an international audience observed the first military occupation of a southern city since Reconstruction (figure I.1). These indelible images soon became seared into the dramatic storyline of the civil rights era: massive resistance to school integration, unruly white segregationists confronting peaceful black activists, the exposed violence at the heart of the Jim Crow system, a global humiliation in the Cold War struggle, the latest stage in the South’s timeless defiance of national norms.<sup>1</sup>



**FIGURE I.1.** White students at Central High School in Little Rock watch as federal troops escort six members of the “Little Rock Nine” to classes, October 16, 1957. Six weeks earlier, Governor Orval Faubus mobilized the Arkansas National Guard to prevent school desegregation in Little Rock. This forced President Dwight Eisenhower to intervene in order to uphold the authority of the *Brown* decision. © Bettmann/CORBIS.

LEVITTOWN, PENNSYLVANIA, AUGUST 1957. Two weeks before national and international attention focused on the Little Rock Nine, the first African-American family moved into the model postwar suburb of Levittown, a middle-class community of 60,000 located on the outskirts of Philadelphia. The NAACP previously had challenged the segregationist policy of the Levitt Corporation, because the racially exclusionary mortgage programs of the U.S. government insured all of the homes in the all-white development, but the federal courts refused to apply the *Brown* principle to the allegedly private issue of housing discrimination. “If we sell one house to a Negro family,” builder William Levitt explained, “then 90 to 95 percent of our white customers will not buy into the community.” When William and Daisy Myers and their young children arrived at their Levittown home, four hundred residents formed a mob that threw rocks through their picture window, harassed them with loud music and car horns, unfurled a Confederate battle flag, and burned a cross in the yard of a neighbor deemed too friendly to the newcomers (figure I.2). The governor of Pennsylvania dispatched state troopers to protect the Myers family, leading to a week of violent confrontations between law enforcement and the Levittown segregationists. Homeowners in the grassroots

resistance movement blamed outside agitators in the NAACP for the troubles and warned of a mass Negro invasion of their suburban enclave. Before descending on Little Rock, the national media briefly registered the Levittown storyline: a “peaceful community suddenly turned upside down by racial tension,” an unseemly eruption of racial prejudice in “a Northern community in a state which legally has no color bars.”<sup>2</sup>

Why do Americans remember Little Rock but not Levittown? Popular narratives about the “American Dilemma” of racial inequality reinforce a selective historical consciousness about the civil rights era, which is typically portrayed as an epic showdown between the retrograde South and a progressive nation. Many students still learn about the civil rights movement’s “classic period,” from the *Brown* decision of 1954 through the Voting Rights Act of 1965, through the filter of *Eyes on the Prize* dramas set only in Little Rock, Greensboro, Albany, Birmingham, Selma, and rural



**FIGURE 1.2.** August 20, 1957: Roughly two weeks before the Little Rock school desegregation crisis, neighbors gather outside the home of Mr. and Mrs. William Myers, Jr., the first African-American family to move into the all-white community of Levittown, Pennsylvania. The Myers family received police protection during several weeks of threats and harassment from white homeowners in the Philadelphia suburb, which typified federally subsidized patterns of housing segregation in postwar America. © Bettmann/CORBIS.

Mississippi.<sup>3</sup> Published in 2007, on the fiftieth anniversary of the concurrent riots in Levittown and Little Rock, a Pulitzer Prize-winning account of “how America awakened to its race problem” celebrated the national media coverage of the “shocking indignities and injustices of racial segregation in the South” while barely even acknowledging parallel civil rights conflicts in the North and West.<sup>4</sup> In recent years, academic historians have dismantled the “myth of the liberal consensus” and excavated a “hidden era” of civil rights activism and white resistance in cities and suburbs across the nation from the 1940s through the 1960s.<sup>5</sup> Yet the burgeoning literature on the “long civil rights movement” has failed to alter popular understanding and journalistic tropes about the “Second Reconstruction,” a region-specific framework that keeps the spotlight focused on the most troubled parts of the Deep South. In the traditional narrative (and the second installment of the *Eyes on the Prize* documentary series), when attention finally shifts northward and westward in the mid-1960s, urban race riots and the Black Power movement emerge without historical context as the catalysts for white backlash and the seemingly sudden “southernization of American politics.”<sup>6</sup>

These interpretations have contributed to a distorted account of political realignment that attributes the rise of modern conservatism primarily to white southern backlash against the civil rights movement. The decline of New Deal liberalism and the ascendance of the New Right “can be summed up in just five words,” according to influential *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman: “Southern whites started voting Republican. . . . End of story.”<sup>7</sup> The GOP dominates the South, in the conventional wisdom summarized by political scientist Thomas Schaller, because of the “southern strategy invented by Barry Goldwater, accelerated by Richard Nixon, and perfected by Ronald Reagan.” Schaller’s *Whistling Past Dixie* concludes that “southerners hold distinctly conservative values and have long prided themselves for their obstinacy, for resisting the social transformations unfolding elsewhere across America. . . . The South is different. . . because it’s still full of southerners.”<sup>8</sup>

These formulations ignore more than six decades of dynamic growth in the metropolitan Sunbelt, the longstanding political divisions between the Deep South and the much more populous states of the Outer South (where a majority of white voters supported Eisenhower in the 1950s), and the inconvenient fact that about one-third of the present-day southern electorate consists of migrants born outside the region. The “southern strategy” thesis is popular and ubiquitous precisely because it reduces a complex phenomenon of national political transformation to another familiar story of southern white backlash. Yet Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan did not need to learn their political strategies from southern demagogues such as George Wallace. They honed their conservative platforms in the segregated suburbs of postwar California, and each secured forty-nine states in his presidential reelection campaign.<sup>9</sup> The current binary of red state–blue

state polarization represents the latest version of this simplistic dichotomy between southern backlash and American progress, an intractable region alternately deviating from and dominating an otherwise liberal nation.<sup>10</sup>

We argue in this volume that the notion of the exceptional South has served as a myth, one that has persistently distorted our understanding of American history. Although scholars and journalists have repeatedly chronicled the decline of regional distinctiveness for more than a century now, the basic features of southern exceptionalism still structure the popular mythology of American exceptionalism—a story of white racial innocence (occasionally compromised by the “southernization” of northern race relations), of a benevolent superpower (that temporarily tasted the “southern experience” of defeat after Vietnam), of an essentially liberal national project (if only the red states would stop preventing the blue states from resurrecting the Great Society).<sup>11</sup> In challenging southern exceptionalism, our agenda is not to absolve the South but to implicate the nation. We write during an era dominated by color-blind myths of American innocence from the burdens of the past, when our political culture turns Martin Luther King Jr. into a sanitized national hero, while the Supreme Court requires public school districts across the nation to abandon racial integration plans by drawing a direct analogy between affirmative-action remedies and Jim Crow segregation.<sup>12</sup> Today the “blue states” of the Northeast and Midwest have the nation’s highest rates of school and housing segregation, but our suburban students from Michigan and Atlanta and New England and Virginia know much more about the civil rights movement in Mississippi and Alabama than they do about what happened in their own states and hometowns.<sup>13</sup> Discarding the framework of southern exceptionalism is a necessary step in overcoming the mythology of American exceptionalism, transforming the American Dilemma into a truly national ordeal, and traversing regional boundaries to rewrite the American past on its own terms and in full historical perspective.

The most insightful observers of southern history have always insisted that the region is inseparable from the nation, that the South is not the antithesis of a progressive America but, rather, has operated as a mirror that reveals its fundamental values and practices. In *The Southern Mystique*, published in 1964 as national attention focused on Mississippi’s racial violence, Howard Zinn argued that the American Dilemma “has never been the tension between an American dream and Southern reality, but between the American dream and national reality.”<sup>14</sup> In a similar fashion, C. Vann Woodward’s *Strange Career of Jim Crow* (1955) located the origins of legal segregation in the antebellum North and highlighted the nation’s complicity in the establishment and maintenance of the South’s racial order. While civil rights reform and economic modernization have “already leveled many of the old monuments of regional distinctiveness,” Woodward observed in 1958, “national myths have been waxing in power and appeal, . . . national legends of opulence and success and innocence.”<sup>15</sup> In 1960, at the height of massive resistance to the civil rights movement, a