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incessant swelling hymns of praise ("Sing it one more time with all you have! The King is coming soon!") bouncing off the 750-foot-long, cable-supported, Teflon-coated fiberglass roof and beaming out of the dozens of Sony televisions jammed between billboards advertising Hooters girls, Doritos, Napa Auto Parts, Delta Airlines, and Coke. There was Good News without end.

Indeed, both the Good News of Jesus and the good news of this mortal coil was everywhere to be seen. Born in part out of support for slavery and nourished for generations in Bible-thumping, true-believing churches on small-town Main Streets throughout the South, the confederation of Southern Baptists always summed up the feverish religiosity, righteous probity, and confining insularity of the South. It was a world of tent revivals, riverside baptisms, and Main Street piety, a world sketched in shades of gray by Southern writers like Erskine Caldwell and Flannery O'Connor, a world where, as the writer Marshall Frady, himself the son of a Southern Baptist minister, put it, "The Old Testament and the Crucifixion always seemed to count for more than the New Testament and the Resurrection—a dire melodrama of thorns and betrayal and midnight anguish, with nothing in the life of Jesus mattering quite so much as his suffering and his death."

Now, both the president and the vice president, like the only other Democratic president of the past quarter century, were Southern Baptists—if not quite the Southern Baptists most of the messengers in Atlanta would have chosen—and the Republican road to oppose them was certain to run right through the heart of the South, its conservative values and the evangelical community of which the Baptists are a vital part. Indeed, the great conservative tide of the past quarter century had brought the values of Southern Baptists, and of millions of their brothers and sisters in other evangelical denominations and the new nondenominational Christian churches proliferating in shopping-mall-like churches across the country, from the fringe of the Bible Belt to the very center of national life.

Furthermore, in a way that once would have seemed a contradiction in terms, Southern Baptists were no longer geographically Southern Baptists. Beginning in 1942, when they spread to California, Southern Baptist congregations have set up shop in every state in the Union; now there are 1,900 black congregations, 3,000 Hispanic ones, and 800 Korean ones, a denomination speaking 101 languages endlessly morphing and

THEY CAME IN MIGHTY CHARIOTS TO THE SEA-GREEN OASIS OF THE Georgia Dome in downtown Atlanta proclaiming victory.

They came in humongous white Winnebago Chieftan 27s from Illinois, in Bibleland Travel charter buses, in the Chevy van from the Cross Roads Baptist Church of Easley, South Carolina, and in an ancient Lincoln Continental from Washington with home-schooling bumper stickers and pipe-cleaner hearts strung together hanging from the rearview mirror. They had Dr Peppers and Cokes in the coolers and Christian music by the Fairchilds or the Happy Goodman Family in the tape decks. They had Christian fish symbols, American flag decals, and bumper stickers reading GOD SAID IT. I BELIEVE IT. THAT SETTLES IT. OR SAVE THE BABY HUMANS. STOP ABORTION.

They came in the shimmering heat of June 1995, on the 150th anniversary of the founding of the Southern Baptist Convention, to celebrate the past and contemplate the future of that most Southern of institutions, which now, with 15 million members, was the largest Protestant denomination in America.

There were great lacquered helmets of Jimmy Johnson hair, thick gray thatches of Newt Gingrich hair, breathtaking swards of Ronald Reagan hair, swept-back evangelist big hair that looked like it had been styled with a power blender and laced with Elmer's Glue. There were young Nordic Track bodies and bodies with bellies like canteloupes, honeydews, and watermelons. There were blond baby linebackers built like bowling balls being pushed in their strollers and toddlers in their Sunday-best white lace dresses with pink bows in their hair. There were

reproducing itself across the country, like a Southern gene, bringing both the Good News of Jesus and the conservative values of the small-town South with it. Thus, in addition to the big hair and lime-green jackets of the white Southern Baptists, participants in the convention included Southern Baptists like Harriet Nelson, a black woman born in the Virgin Islands who now belonged to the largely black Peaceful Baptist Church in Miami, or like Billy Rios, pastor of the largely Brazilian First Portuguese-Speaking Baptist Church of San Francisco. Amid the sea of religious books could be found Bibles and religious texts in Chinese, Japanese and Korean, *La Biblia al Minuto*, *Dios Habla Hoy*, and Billy Graham's *Paz Con Dios*.

Make no mistake: despite the usual resolutions and witnessing about social issues like abortion or pornography or social decay and a rather extraordinary vote by the convention to "repent of racism of which we have been guilty" and to apologize and ask forgiveness from "all African Americans," this was a gathering about religion, not politics. But it occurred to more than a few of those present that the denomination's remarkable growth had parallels that went beyond religion, that the Southern conservatism these people grew up with had spread its reach beyond anything they could have imagined years ago. So when Billy Graham ended the convention by proclaiming, "Let the light shine. Let's light a candle that will banish moral and spiritual blight in America and around the world," there was reason to believe it could happen.

"Across our country there's an undercurrent that is not only conservative but also is very Christian," said Eugene Greer, the sports evangelism consultant for the Baptists' Foreign Mission Board, who helps send Southern Baptist athletes around the world to play, preach, and proselytize. He was standing in the Foreign Mission Board booth, surrounded by straight-arrow Baptist missionaries from Oklahoma and Texas who were wearing native garb from the Yucatan or Kenya and who looked vaguely as if they were at a costume party. "And I think the guts of it, the roots of it, is the stuff we always had in the South, what I grew up with in my little small church in Griffin, Georgia."

There's ample evidence that he's right. Indeed, the most striking aspect of American life at the century's end—in a way that would have been utterly unimaginable three decades ago at the height of the civil rights era—is how much the country looks like the South. In 1957, at a

time when the New Deal legacy seemed utterly triumphant in American life, fourteen Southerners contributed essays on the region to a collection called *The Lasting South*. Here is the columnist James J. Kilpatrick in the final piece:

The Southern States at mid-century find themselves very nearly alone in fighting this rear-guard action against the legions of Change, the armies of a supposed Enlightenment. They represent, collectively, the last and best hope of conservatism in the American Republic. If the conservative cause is to survive at all in the United States, as a political philosophy, as an approach to the perplexing problems of our rootless and edgy civilization, it will be largely because a body of tradition exists within the South and will not lie down.

Conservatism, of course, has prospered to a degree that almost no one would have predicted three or four decades ago and along with it so has the South. The two developments are not unrelated.

It's not just that the South has been the key to the nation's presidential politics since the development of the Republican Party's Southern strategy, first laid out in detail in Kevin Phillips's *The Emerging Republican Majority* in 1969 and then turned to political reality in Richard Nixon's presidential election campaign in 1972. It's not just that in every one of the nine elections between 1932 and 1988 in which one party captured all or nearly all the Southern electoral votes, that party won. It's not just that the two most successful Republican strategists of recent years, Newt Gingrich and Lee Atwater, rose to power from bases in the South nor that the 1994 Republican takeover of Congress for the first time in forty years reflected the transformation of white Southerners from diehard Democrats to reliable Republicans more than any other single factor.

It's not just that evangelical Christians like the faithful at the Georgia Dome account for one third of the Republican party membership and half the Republican primary vote in many states or that it's estimated they played a significant role in 120 congressional districts and were pivotal in Republican victories in 30 races in the historic 1994 Republican sweep.

The South's political ascendance reached a new peak in May 1996 when Bob Dole stepped down as majority leader of the Senate leaving two Republicans from Mississippi, the most Southern state of them all,

fighting for his job and the President, Vice President, Speaker of the House, House Majority Leader, House Majority Whip, and Republican Party Chairman all from the South. But the South's influence can be seen throughout the nation's political culture.

Think of a place that's bitterly antigovernment and fiercely individualistic, where race is a constant subtext to daily life, and God and guns run through public discourse like an electric current. Think of a place where influential scholars market theories of white supremacy, where the word "liberal" is a negative epithet, where hang-'em-high law-and-order justice centered on the death penalty and throw-away-the-key sentencing are politically all but unstoppable. Think of a place obsessed with states' rights, as if it were the 1850s all over again and the Civil War had never been fought. Such characteristics have always described the South. Somehow, they now describe the nation.

Partly, this simply reflects the fact that so much of America's population and wealth have moved South—with no end to the movement in sight. For the past two decades, ever since the word "Sunbelt" entered the nation's lexicon, various trendmeisters have noted the shift of the population toward the South so often that it's become a stale truism, replaced on the fashion rack of ideas by newer, sexier models. But in fact, while the idea has lost its novelty, the trend itself is incontestably, demonstrably true. Along the way, demography, as it always does, has proved to be destiny.

Between 1970 and 1990, the population of the eleven states of the Old Confederacy, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, and Arkansas, plus Kentucky (a fairly conservative notion of the South), grew by 40 percent—more than 20 million people—twice the national growth rate. The population of Florida grew by 76 percent, Texas by 46 percent, Georgia by 38 percent. All but Kentucky and the Deep South laggards of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama grew faster than the national average, and even forlorn Mississippi has been one of the nation's economic success stories so far in the nineties. In 1970, the region accounted for about a quarter of the nation's population. By the end of the century the portion will be almost a third. The Census Bureau says that of the ten states that will add the most residents between 1993 and 2020, six are in the South: Texas, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, Virginia, and Tennessee. Using the Census Bureau's

broader definition of the South, which runs from Maryland to Texas, in 1990–91 alone the region attracted 370,000 new residents from the Northeast.

The population increase has enormously increased the political clout of the South. The eleven states of the Confederacy plus Kentucky and Oklahoma now elect 137 members of the House of Representatives—17 more than in 1960—while Northern states like New York and Massachusetts have lost representation at the same time.

The population shift to the South, and to the West, has been so stark that a presidential candidate could now win by carrying exactly the same states that Richard Nixon carried when he *lost* to John F. Kennedy in 1960. Going back further, under the same electoral calculus, the fire-and-brimstone populist, William Jennings Bryan, would have been an easy winner in 1896. More than two decades ago, the famous curveball artist and demographer Satchel Paige allowed: "You give this country twenty or thirty more years, everybody's got any sense is going down South." It looks like he was right.

As a result, the South in the first half of the nineties was transformed from the nation's economic outhouse, famously proclaimed by F.D.R. in 1938 to be the nation's number one economic problem, into its main engine of economic growth. In fact, if the eleven states of the Confederacy were a separate country, it would have the world's fourth-largest economy. In 1993, over half of America's new jobs were created in the South. During the same time, eight of the top ten states in terms of growth in manufacturing plants were in the South. Cities like Charlotte, Nashville, and Raleigh-Durham were experiencing labor shortages, and businesses in Nashville were advertising for workers from as far away as Puerto Rico. Atlanta added more jobs than any other city in the nation during 1993, '94, and '95. Lazy resort towns like Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, and once godforsaken Appalachian and Ozark hollows like Pigeon Forge, Tennessee; Branson, Missouri; and Eureka Springs, Arkansas, were transformed almost overnight into booming middle-class country-music and family-values vacation havens—the Coney Islands and Catskills of the nineties.

Conversely, in a way that parallels the evolution of evangelical Christianity from a distinctly Southern phenomenon to a national one, the region's influence on the nation was also reflected in the great and only dimly understood exodus of people *from* the South during the half

century from 1910 to 1960, a migration virtually without parallel in American history. Most obvious was the migration of nearly 4.5 million blacks from the South, most of them to cities in the North, a development that changed forever the nature of urban life and American politics, turning race from an issue that defined the politics of the South into an issue that defines the politics of the nation. But just as important, if far more elusive, was the exodus of almost 4.6 million whites: Okies trekked to Bakersfield, California; poor whites joined poor blacks in the exodus from Mississippi and Alabama to Chicago; Tennesseans, Kentuckians, and West Virginians migrated to Ohio—so many Kentucky mountain people went to work in the auto plants of Ypsilanti, Michigan, that they still call the place Ypsitucky. Like the carriers of a dominant gene, they didn't stop being Southerners. They brought their music, their values, their evangelical religion, their history as the people of the nation's most violent region, and a whole panoply of Southern-fried virtues and sins.

On the face of it, the idea of the South as the home of quintessential Americana does not compute. Ever since the prologue to the Civil War, the South's stock in trade has been the myth and reality of its distinctiveness: the only part of the nation with institutionalized apartheid; the only part of the nation to know the crushing burden of losing a war; a place congenitally geared to looking toward the past in a nation rushing headlong into the future; a region whose holy vapors of evangelical religion, crushing poverty, and indelible sense of history made it if not quite a separate country, as close to it as this nation has ever known within its borders. When Quentin Compson's Harvard roommate in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* requests of Quentin, "Tell about the South," he gets hundreds of pages of response that end with a resigned "You can't understand it. You would have to be born there." That distinctiveness never seemed more apparent than during the civil rights era just three decades ago.

But if Southern exceptionalism was and is real, it also hid as much as it revealed. To a large degree, the story of the nation is a mating dance between the North and the South, its history an index of which region was dominant. Over the years, the rest of the nation has Ping-Ponged between views of the South as a hellhole of poverty, torment, and depravity and as an American Eden of tradition, strength, and grace.

H. L. Mencken lampooned the South as the "bung-hole of the United

States, a cesspool of Baptists, a Miasma of Methodism, snake-charmers, phoney real-estate operators, and syphilitic evangelists." Rhett, Scarlett, Melanie, and Ashley played out the ultimate pageant of grandeur and romance. Erskine Caldwell's grotesque cavalcade of rural lowlifes and losers picked at the scabs of what he called "a retarded and thwarted civilization" at the same time an endless parade of Depression-era musicals like *Hearts of Dixie*, *Hallelujah*, *Steamboat 'Round the Bend*, *Mississippi*, and *The Little Colonel*, portrayed a happy-go-lucky plantation paradise of grinning, dancing, banjo-playing darkies, gallant colonels and cavaliers, and delicate Southern belles in hoopskirts and lace. There is Carl Sandburg, the quintessential poet and singer of America's song, who deserted Chicago for the Blue Ridge Mountains in 1945, where he became a passionate adoptive Southerner; and there is the South that a reviewer in *The Nation* at roughly the same time described as "so sick from its old infections of prejudice and poverty that it is a menace to the nation." Hollywood has forever bounced back and forth serving up at one moment the murderous rednecks of *Deliverance*, *Cape Fear*, and *Easy Rider* and at the next the blissful grace and uplift of *Places in the Heart* or *The Trip to Bountiful*. Look one way, the South is the heart of darkness in *Mississippi Burning*. Look the other, it's the embarrassingly stereotypical but oddly redeemed drama of family values, roots, racial peace, and national healing of *Forrest Gump*.

Given the South's ability to evoke America in extremis, it's no surprise that American film as an art form began with *The Birth of a Nation* and the quintessential American film remains *Gone With the Wind*. Or, for that matter, that even if you discount William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, William Styron, Walker Percy, Robert Penn Warren, Thomas Wolfe, and the rest of the familiar pantheon of Southern authors, probably the two most prototypically American literary creations, Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, were the creations of an author, Mark Twain, who came from a slaveholding family in a Southern-sympathizing community and who enlisted in a Confederate volunteer unit when the Civil War broke out.

As recently as the civil rights era three decades ago, the differences between the South and the North seemed so glaring that it was easy for Northerners to cluck and grimace at the spectacle of depravity playing out in Selma and Birmingham and Jackson as if it reflected a realm of evil separate and apart. But even then the distinctions had a

tendency to melt away. The historian Howard Zinn, who taught at Spelman College in Atlanta during the height of the civil rights era, began his evocation of that time in a book called *The Southern Mystique* with an almost stereotypical Yankee's view of entering a strange land.

There was something about Georgia, the Carolinas, that marked them off, as with a giant cleaver, from the rest of the nation: the sun was hotter, the soil was redder, the people blacker and whiter, the air sweeter, heavier. But beyond the physical, beyond the strange look and smell of this country, was something more that went back to cotton and slavery, stretching into history as far as anyone could remember—an invisible mist over the entire Deep South, distorting justice, blurring perspective, and, most of all, indissoluble by reason.

But after seven years in Atlanta, he concludes that the South is different only in degree, in style, in the naked and terrible way race plays out there—not in the nature of the problem. Indeed, he finds himself viewing the South not as an aberration, but as “the essence of the nation.” The South, he wrote in 1964, in a remarkably prescient passage,

is not a mutation born by some accident into the normal lovely American family. It has simply taken the national genes and done the most with them. . . . And it may be important, exactly at this moment in our history when the South is going through the early stages of a kind of shock therapy, for the rest of the nation to understand that it stands by not as an administering doctor but as the next patient in line.

Indeed, three decades later, the region outside the South is the sicker patient; furthermore, most of the prescriptions for change are coming from the South, not the North, and they are coming almost exclusively from the right.

There is historical precedent for this. No one alive remembers a time when the South dominated America, so it is easy to forget that this was ever the case. But, of course, the first permanent colony in North America was Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607. Southerners wrote the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. For forty-nine of the nation's first seventy-two years, more than two thirds of the time until Abraham Lincoln's election, a slaveholding Southerner was president of the United States. During that period, in Congress twenty-three of the

thirty-six Speakers of the House and twenty-four of the presidents pro tempore of the senate were Southerners. On the Supreme Court, twenty of the thirty-five justices appointed until 1861 were Southerners.

The secessionist firebrand William Lowndes Yancey may have been more propagandist than historian when he proclaimed on the eve of the Civil War, “As for our history, we have made about all that has glorified the United States.” But, now that the dogma of states' rights echoes through Washington like an old alarm clock that suddenly begins ringing after a long silence, it's worth remembering that John C. Calhoun, the South's preeminent political thinker, who lived from 1782–1850 and who framed the states' rights doctrine prior to the Civil War, had a vision of American politics that's startlingly relevant now. Not only did Calhoun, the tall, gaunt, brilliant, humorless son of the South Carolina upcountry near Abbeville, lay the intellectual groundwork for a defense of states' rights and the need to set limits on the power of national majorities and the federal government, he also laid out the strategy for the South's political triumph—knowing full well that secession could light a blaze that would render politics, for a time at least, secondary to force. The historian Richard Hofstadter, among others, has pointed out that Calhoun didn't want the South to leave the Union—he wanted the South to dominate the Union.

Well before the Civil War, Calhoun predicted an alliance between conservative forces in the South and the rest of the country as well as the agrarian interests of the South and the West. His impeccable logic was that the South, united on slavery, increasingly self-conscious as a region forged by myth and folk wisdom, and seeing itself under siege, was being cemented into a unified bloc in a way the North never would be. That's precisely what happened.

It was Southern Democrats and Northern Republicans who stopped the New Deal in its tracks—not to mention the Fair Deal, the New Frontier, and the Great Society. It was Southern Republicans and Northern Republicans who eviscerated Bill Clinton's legislative agenda in the spring of 1994; more than any other factor, the apparent shift of white Southerners from yellow dog Democrats to staunch Republicans created the tidal wave of the 1994 elections.

A perpetual debate goes on about how much of the real South is left—is it still distinctive or is it now just Topeka with more fried food, road kill, heat, and history? At the endless stream of conferences in

which scholars and politicians philosophize about the region, John Shelton Reed, the witty sociologist and author from the University of North Carolina, often represents the notion of the enduring South, and Hodding Carter III, the writer and former Carter Administration spokesman, enjoys playing the role of Mr. The-South-Is-Dead. Indeed, it's mostly liberals and writers who don't live there anymore who tend to present the more-Southern-than-thou case that without segregation, one-party politics, and one-crop agriculture, the real South no longer exists. "The South is being etherized," intoned Frady in 1972, in the funereal tones with which the region has been repeatedly interred and reinterred for a century, "subtly rendered pastless, memoryless and vague of identity. What we are talking about is the passing of a sensibility—an event perhaps too wispy to define, but no less seismic. . . . The old pipe-organ range of prodigal possibilities for life there—both gentle and barbarous, good and evil—has contracted to the comfortable monotone note of middle C."

The South isn't what it was any more than New York is the city of Gene Kelly and Frank Sinatra in sailor suits singing "New York, New York, it's a wonderful town," in *On the Town*. But that utterly misses the point.

Rather than being pastless, the South is a place that at the end of the twentieth century, amazingly, is still fighting most of its oldest battles—over states' rights, the Confederate flag, integration, the meaning of its own history. Rather than memoryless, it's a place where blacks and whites compulsively reenact their separate histories as if to forever reconfirm Faulkner's famous remark that the South is a place where "the past is never dead, it isn't even past." Rather than neutered, it is still the most conservative part of America, still drenched in religion, still carrying the banners of the antebellum Old South states' rights crusades and the New South booster ideology of the 1880s, still in thrall to individualism in its most extravagant sense. Rather than without identity, it's still shaped by the endless sultry summers, voluptuous foliage, and wild, romantic excesses of spring colors and summer monsoons that some historians have cited as the most important factors in molding the identity of the South and creating a worldview at odds with its Northern neighbors.

Back in 1973, John Egerton, who writes from Nashville on the two great Southern verities of race and Southern cooking of the six

major food groups—sugar, salt, butter, eggs, cream, and bacon grease—published a book called *The Americanization of Dixie: The Southernization of America*. People remember the first half of the title, but it's in the second half that he was really onto something. Egerton noodled around with the ways the South was disappearing, and good Southern boy that he is, he saw plenty. No one who compares the segregated, largely rural South of just three decades ago and the strip-malled South of Tex-Mex chains, bagel shops, and designer coffee kiosks today could fail to see that the South now is part of a national commercial culture in a way that it never was in the past. But Egerton also envisioned something else, a nation in which the South wasn't merely melting into the national stew but leading in the creation of a new one through a process in which North and South were exchanging not strengths but sins, "exporting vices without importing virtues." Rather than a disappearing South, he saw a "modern, acquisitive, urban, industrial, post-segregationist, on-the-make South . . . coming back with a bounce in its step, like a new salesman on the route, eager to please, intent on making it."

I'm not sure the transaction is so bleak—it is probably producing a less insular South and a less arrogant North. But where the South remains the most preaching, believing, testifying, proselytizing, evangelizing region of the country when people are looking back for the sense of roots, connections, and history—mythic or real—that the South represents, its success in closing the sale is no surprise.

The nation is too volatile and diverse, its culture too mercurial, to confidently look from any one moment and see a straight road stretching into the future. Less than two years into the 1994 Republican "revolution" of conservative social policy, fiscal conservatism, and power devolving to the states, Newt Gingrich and the Republican Robespierres of 1994 had the look of card players who had overplayed their hand, forgetting that you can capitalize on the throw-the-bums-out spirit of one year and be the new bums in the next. Indeed, it's clear that the one thing most likely to derail the nation's drift to the right in the short run is if the Republicans sing too loudly from the unadulterated Old South hymnal, like their disastrous attempt in 1995 at showing that the South's old game of nullification—or its new variation, shutting down the government—could work as a governing philosophy.

As evidenced by the frantic backtracking at the 1996 Republican

Convention, where the religious right and the Republicans' dubious record on race were stashed out of sight, even some Republicans realize the Revolution of 1994 could turn out to be not a watershed victory, but the South's new Gettysburg, a disastrous incursion too far into enemy territory. After all, on many social issues and in some ways on race, much of the nation has become more liberal while the political culture has lurched to the right. But if the South's conservative revolution shows signs of ebbing, it comes only after three decades of gains that have turned Nixon administration Attorney General John Mitchell's famous boast that "this country is going so far to the right that you won't recognize it" into political reality.

And at a time when a Democratic president like Bill Clinton is coming out for school prayer, going along with sweeping Republican legislation shredding welfare and taking his cues from a consultant, Dick Morris, who formerly worked for Southern arch-conservatives like Jesse Helms and Trent Lott; when race is a fractious national obsession; when the nation's population is moving steadily South; when the Supreme Court is acting as if Jefferson Davis were chief justice; when country music has become white America's music of choice and even stock car racing has become a \$2 billion juggernaut; when evangelical Christians have transformed American politics; when unions are on the run across the nation much as they always have been in the South; when whites nationwide are giving up on public education just as so many Southerners did after integration—in times such as these, to understand America, you have to understand the South.

You have to understand how the howls and rebel yells of the Wallace campaign seeped into the nation's soul and exactly what Pat Buchanan was doing bragging about his Confederate ancestors and contributing regularly to one of the contemporary Lost Cause journals still refighting the Civil War. You need to make sense of mythic Southern places like stodgy old Natchez, Mississippi, with its dazzling planters' mansions and endlessly layered choreography of race, and of the odd mix of anywheresville suburban and rock-hard Southern values in places like Cobb County, Georgia, Plano, Texas, or suburban Birmingham. You need to make sense of the bizarre mixture of third-world tin-roof squalor and Las Vegas neon luxury coexisting in the Mississippi Delta; of Charlotte, North Carolina's, Wizard-of-Oz downtown and

look-at-me boosterism; of the David Duke posters on weathered barns that pop up like a flashback from a train wreck just when you think the Cajun country around Breaux Bridge, Louisiana, is just about the greatest place in the world; of the evil eye and baleful glare the wary blacks give the rare white boy who wanders into Mosses, Alabama; of the great heart of Atlanta Congressman John Lewis; of Richard in Sweethome, Hobbes, Big Heat, and their front porch cyberchatter on the Internet Bubba list; of the way Patrick Lanzo's proposed Last Chance Beer and Pawn Shop, a nude dance club featuring Klan memorabilia, became the Georgia Peach Museum near Dallas, Georgia.

Maybe you don't need to make sense of Three States, the rural hamlet, which produced the fabulous Brown family—the late brothers Thester and Lester and Thester's son Chester—which staggers around the point on the map where Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas intersect in the heart of the Ark-La-Tex region. You probably shouldn't worry too much about figuring out Helen, the supremely stupid ersatz German village plopped into the North Georgia mountains; or the towns of Nail, Yale Ben Hur, Oil Trough, or Egypt in the lonely Ozark reaches of northern Arkansas. The future of the country may not rest on fully comprehending the 1996 gathering of Christian nudists in Ocean City, North Carolina, or just what Joe Buddy Caine and Junior Bright had in mind when they decided to play the game of rattlesnake catch that left Joe Buddy dead of snakebites and Junior hospitalized in Anniston, Alabama, in September 1995.

But surely you would need to try to make sense of the insane jumble of progress and stagnation that is the South three decades after the civil rights revolution petered out. Indeed, there's probably no better place to start trying to understand race in America than to make sense of the utterly unexpected way the civil rights revolution turned out to be the best thing that ever happened to the white South, paving the way for the region's newfound prosperity, but a mixed blessing for Southern blacks, who won a measure of integration into a white world at the expense of some of the enduring and nurturing institutions of their old black one.

This book is both journalistic—because I've spent most of my adult life writing about the South for *The Dallas Morning News*, *Texas Monthly* magazine, and *The New York Times*—and personal, because in very

conflicted ways what has happened to the country feels like what has happened to me. I'm not a native Southerner, but like a lot of people I wandered down here thinking of it as an interesting detour and ended up living here for most of my life. If it were up to me, I wouldn't leave.

Along the way I've eaten chow mein with David Duke, checked out Lester Maddox's tape deck (lots of Liberace and Lawrence Welk), and toured the Elvis-A-Rama in Branson, Missouri, the Cyclorama in Atlanta, and the Confederama in Chattanooga (which has since inexplicably been renamed The Battle for Chattanooga Museum). I've communed with people who found Jesus in a Pizza Hut sign and have done my best to digest both *Southern Partisan* magazine's collection of Confederate homages, *So Good a Cause*, and the epochal, unknown Dixiephobic screed, *How the South Finally Won the Civil War—and Controls the Political Future of the United States*, by Charles Potts, a real-estate broker, poet, toastmaster, and amateur historian from Walla Walla, Washington. I married a woman from Louisiana whose Great-aunt Linda (sister of her grandfather Daddy Boy) was married to Mississippi's infamous pot-bellied, jug-eared bigot, Senator Theodore Bilbo, giving me a branch on the outermost tendrils of my family tree whose existence I could not have imagined in a zillion years.

I'm not claiming any of that makes me a real Southerner, although at a time when two Yankees ran in 1994 for governor of Tennessee, Southern political powers like Newt Gingrich and Dick Armev aren't native Southerners, and country music stars are coming from places like Windsor, Ontario, and Princeton, New Jersey, it's no longer very clear exactly what a real Southerner is. Instead, my history has made me something of a schizophrenic, someone who thinks he's a Yankee but hasn't lived in the North for twenty-one years, doesn't want to go back, and has come to the point where Southerners look normal and Yankees seem weirdly out of touch—among them, people who actually thought Michael Dukakis could be elected president of the United States.

Out of habit or ancestral loyalties, I still vote Democratic and root for the Celtics and the San Francisco/New York Giants of the world of my father and grandfather. I hate football. I find stock-car racing unfathomable. I don't have a bass boat, a pickup, a gun, or a taste for bourbon. I've never read *Gone with the Wind* and fell asleep the only time I went to the movie. I don't even root for the Atlanta Braves. But, like countless people before me, I know I've been seduced. The weather is

warmer, the people nicer, the traffic milder (well, don't hold me to this one), the prices lower, the pace of life saner, the greenery lusher, the history richer. Even the race relations are better.

I do not approach the fervor of the late Southern humorist and savant Brother Dave Gardner, who once allowed: "I love everything about the South; I even love hate." But when I trek out to the Civil War battlefields at Kennesaw or Vicksburg or Chickamauga with my nine-year-old son, Ben, or when my six-year-old daughter, Emma, and I dance around to Dwight Yoakam's "A Thousand Miles from Nowhere," or any of the other slick, suburban country music that Nashville cranks out these days, capturing the mood of the moment as the Brill Building in New York or Motown in Detroit captured the mood of a time long ago, the North seems a thousand miles from nowhere and the South feels like America.

This book doesn't pretend to be one of those encyclopedic attempts to stop for an RC Cola and Moon Pie and pick up country witticisms at every truck stop and boiled-peanut stand along the road. And it makes no pretense of capturing all the diversity of a region that, most broadly defined, encompasses El Paso and Miami, the bluegrass country and coal hollows of Kentucky, the yuppie suburbs of northern Virginia and the Cajun-Mediterranean insane asylum that is New Orleans. Instead, I've chosen to roam in the crevices and around the edges of the belly of the beast, the Deep South and Upper South from the Carolina Piedmont to the Mississippi Gulf Coast. The chapters attempt to evoke a place and an idea that says something about the region and, usually, something about the nation as well: the burgeoning suburban South of Newt Gingrich's home turf in Cobb County, Georgia; the mixed legacy of the civil rights movement in Selma, Alabama; the New South booster ethos of Charlotte, North Carolina; the startling nostalgia blacks have for the segregated schools of the 1950s in Wilmington, North Carolina; the new Tin Pan Alley of Nashville; the overheated combination of cottonfield gambling palaces, Elvis cultists, and hard-right politics that is Mississippi.

Ultimately, this book is an attempt to make sense of what the South's ascendance says about America and to figure out what kind of a place this South is, anyway. The South of Jimmy Carter or of Newt Gingrich? The South that elects more blacks to office than anywhere else in America or the South that elects so many of them from places where

they have more political power and less economic opportunity than anywhere else in America? The South where Atlanta managed to put on the ultimate show of the South's renaissance—the 1996 Olympics—largely by selling itself and the contemporary South as a model of interracial harmony or the South where black churches were being torched by arsonists with terrifying frequency, like a macabre nightmare from the past? The South that, for my tastes, still elects all the wrong people for all the wrong reasons or the South where I've lived for half my life, where my kids were born, where I'd just as soon stay, the South that feels like home?

Looked at one way, it's a place of grace and faith that has purged most of its old sins while maintaining most of its old virtues, a place that for all its bloody past and the ambiguities and unresolved issues of the present offers the nation's best blueprint for racial peace. Looked at another way, it's a Potemkin Village of mirrors and trap doors, where old inequities are cloaked in new forms, a chameleon South changed only on the surface, now pumping old poisons into new veins, a place where even in the most neutered suburbs, what was still lives, beating insistently away like Poe's telltale heart.

Once when I was driving through the Florida panhandle, I stopped to check out the roadside artistry at a squat yellow tourist emporium with two signs out front. One read FACTORY OUTLET, CONCRETE SOUVENIRS. The other read BUMBLE BEE REALTY. Gold streamers glistened in the wind and United States and Georgia flags hung out front. True, this was Florida, but the proprietors obviously figured that they got more bang for their buck with the Georgia flag with its gaudy Confederate Battle Flag design than they would with the more prosaic Florida one, featuring the more muted Confederate design of a red Saint Andrew's cross and the state seal against a white background.

The wares consisted of concrete yard art without end—revolting flying-bulldog gargoyles with spiked collars; sated nymphs; stern Indian chiefs; flamingos, dolphins, and seahorses; three-foot-tall cowgirls with long blond hair; sweet-faced seraphim; happy Buddhas and coiled dragons from the inscrutable East; handy funeral urns; trusty old black Sambos chowing down on watermelon and faithful black lawn jockeys ever ready to guard your Bermuda grass against unseen evil; jaunty derby-wearing Irish frogs, raffish stud-muffin frogs leaning seductively

on their elbows, miserable frogs huddled on park benches looking as if they were about to be boiled alive. They don't call the panhandle L.A.—Lower Alabama—for nothing.

But drive on for a few miles and you're in the relentlessly tasteful *Architectural Digest* dreamland of Seaside, the instant Dixie Cape Cod of cobblestone streets, white picket fences, widow's walks, langorous front porches, and New England cottages in Bermuda pastel shades of pink, yellow, and blue where platoons of Atlanta lawyers and squadrons of Birmingham doctors' wives alight each summer to eat designer corn chips with peach melba salsa, drink piña coladas, and take seaside yoga classes. In the South these days, it always helps not to be too sure you know where you are.

"Southerners are very aggressive about their beliefs; it's almost like war with them," Diane Lacock was saying back at the concrete souvenir stand, where she was the salesperson on duty. "No wonder they're taking over everything." Thirteen years ago, her uncle, Robert Russell, an anthropologist and herbalist, came down from New York. Though he had always complained about the Southern politicians, he never left. Instead, after discerning that the family's genetic weakness was in the liver, he spent much of his time enjoying the sun and beach and concocting vitamin and herb combinations.

When he died in 1995 at the age of seventy, Diane came down from Colorado to settle his estate but soon moved into his yellow-pine house in the woods, where she listens to the cardinals and blue jays and orioles and smells the magnolia perfume and figures she'll leave someday—but then again, maybe not. "They'll probably convert us all or get all of us down here before it's over," she said and trundled off to the wholly owned subsidiary next door that sells campers and trailers, where the sign out front reads GOD IS THE CALM IN OUR STORM.

We all need a calm in our storm, divine or otherwise. In ways both real and illusory, the South these days seems to promise one. It offers a sense of history, roots, place, and community when the nation desperately is seeking all four. It has a bedrock of belief—religious, cultural, political, and racial—that has enormous power and appeal at a time of national drift and confusion. It is the purest kernel of conservative values and politics in a conservative era it has largely created. The South's golden moment has so often been glimpsed or predicted, only

to recede like a mirage, that only a fool could look around now and say the South's time had incontrovertibly arrived, now and forever, amen. "It's America's will-o'-the-wisp Eden," a skeptical historian once said.

Still, there was another gathering in downtown Atlanta a year after the Baptists encamped that made a rather resounding statement about the South's new prominence in American and international life. In the end, the 1996 Olympics turned out to be a lot like the South, at turns glorious and tawdry, full of moments of soulful inspiration and searing tragedy. At their most bombastic, the games reflected the overreach of Southern boosterism run amuck. But for all the corporate clutter and commercial overkill, they also reflected the weird degree to which the South reborn was still the South. The most affecting moment of the whole two-week extravaganza didn't involve gymnastics or swimming or sprinting. It came on the Tuesday morning when Centennial Olympic Park reopened after the pipe bomb attack that killed one person and injured 111 others. Without a word of introduction, a lone black man walked to the middle of the huge Olympic stage. It was Wynton Marsalis, the great New Orleans trumpeter. He lifted his trumpet to his lips and in a mighty whisper and a gentle roar, he played the old hymn "Nearer My God to Thee"—"Just a closer walk with thee/Precious Jesus hear my plea"—in a New Orleans jazz funeral for the world. Beyond the quiet pathos of the moment and the noisy clamor of the rest of the games was a simple truth: risen again, the South had turned out to be not America's insular kingdom of the eccentric, forlorn, or exotic, but a place that had managed to maintain its identity while also putting its fingerprints on almost every aspect of the nation's soul, from race, to politics, to culture, to values.

"Southerners can never resist a losing cause," Margaret Mitchell once said. The question now is what they're making of a winning one.