

# The South's Three Personas

By John Shelton Reed

Array the major regions of the United States on whatever economic or demographic or political or cultural variable you wish and usually the South has stood alone at one end of the continuum. Sometimes the Northeast occupied the other end, sometimes the West, but almost invariably you found the South out there on its own: less wealthy, less healthy, more rural, more religious, more pessimistic, more conservative, less "American" than the other regions.

But if the South has been the region most often the exception to the American rule, of late it has begun to contradict its own accustomed rules. Consider the following:

It is a region with the old problem of rural poverty that still defies easy solution; the South today leads the nation in job creation. Now the most industrialized part of the country, its major cities are places of shining skyscrapers, sprawling suburbs, and boundless optimism.

---

**“What was once *“the Solid South”*—solid in support of the Democratic party and opposition to the party of Lincoln, the Union, and Reconstruction—cast most of its votes in 1992 and 1996 against a Democratic ticket from Arkansas and Tennessee, and its politicians now dominate the leadership of the national Republican party.**”

---

It is a place whose name can still evoke moonlight and magnolias, or pellagra and poll taxes; the South has lately spawned scores of homegrown market leaders like CNN, Columbia-HCA, Federal Express, Delta Airlines, Walmart, Compaq, even TCBY Yogurt, while its avid pro-business climate has attracted the headquarters of northern companies like J.C. Penney's, American Airlines, and UPS, as well as foreign investors from Burroughs-Wellcome to BMW.

It is the part of America where slavery lasted longest and died hardest, where a system of virtual apartheid prevailed for decades, where only yesterday "white supremacy" was preached as a positive good; the South now attracts black migrants by the hundreds of thousands. Its schools are less segregated, and more blacks hold public office there than anywhere else in the country.

It is the only part of America that ever fought the Stars and Stripes, and the only one to suffer military defeat and occupation; it now supplies the biggest proportionate share of America's soldiers and wears its American patriotism most conspicuously.

What was once "the Solid South"—solid in support of the Democratic party and opposition to the party of Lincoln, the Union, and Reconstruction—cast most of its votes in 1992 and 1996 against a Democratic ticket from Arkansas and Tennessee, and its politicians now dominate the leadership of the national Republican party.

What's going on here?

I often find it useful to think of there being three different Souths. They overlap

one another and all go by that name, but their origins, their defining features, their prospects, and even their boundaries are quite distinct.

## Dixieland

The old South—call it "Dixie"—came into being with the spread of cotton agriculture and slavery in the early 1800s. This South was an agricultural region, and after 1865 it was a poor agricultural region with unique racial and economic problems. Even today a band of rural counties with substantial black populations trace the old cotton belt in a long arc from southeastern Virginia down and across to eastern Texas, with arms reaching north and south through the bottomlands along the Mississippi River. The land of cotton is the *Deep South*, where many "Southern" characteristics and phenomena have been concentrated.

For nearly a century after Reconstruction this was the heartland of the political "Solid South," where whites didn't vote Republican and blacks didn't vote at all. In the 1930s its continuing poverty led President Franklin Roosevelt to call it "the nation's number-one economic problem." During and after World War I millions fled Dixie in one of the great mass migrations of human history, seeking opportunity in the North and West. In the 1960s it was the setting for the stirring events of the civil rights movement, events that captured the attention of the world.

Dixie is a mere shadow of what it used to be; it has become a thing of shreds and patches—and most Southerners don't live there any more. But the fossil remains of this South can still be found. Some regional differences in public opinion still reflect what the South was until only yesterday.

## States and Regions

### The Sun Belt South

Emerging as we watch, however, is a quite different South, a vibrant, dynamic, industrial region, a magnet for migration and investment from other parts of the nation and increasingly from abroad. It's a metropolitan region, its cities linked by innumerable ties of commerce and communication.

Urbanization, industrialization, and the civil rights movement's successful assault on racial segregation have changed the South's economy and politics beyond recognition. Perhaps most striking have been the changes in Southern race relations. With half of America's black population, the South now elects two-thirds of the nation's black officeholders, and although black incomes in the South are still lower than white, they're approaching parity with black incomes elsewhere in the US.

Economic and demographic statistics have also shown startling improvement. As late as the 1930s per capita income in the South was half of that elsewhere in the United States. Personal income is still lower in the South (only Virginia and Florida are above the national average), but the remaining difference is small enough that it's largely offset by a lower cost of living.

Two out of three Southerners are now urban or suburban folk, and even most rural Southerners work in industry. The agricultural labor force has dropped from half of the total to under 5%, and Southern agriculture has increasingly become "agribusiness." (One telling statistic: 10% of the 1950 cotton crop was picked by machine; in 1970 the figure was 90%.) As the South has moved from agriculture to industry, its birth rate has declined; indeed, since the mid-1950s it has been slightly lower than the US average.

The industrial development of the South is continuing. In the 1990s eight of the top 10 states in the growth of manufacturing plants were in the South. In 1992-94 over half the nation's new jobs and 10 of the top 13 states in jobs added per 100,000 population were Southern (the top three were North Carolina, Mississippi, and Kentucky).

Inter-regional migration now flows into the South, as its booming economy attracts non-Southerners and slows out-migration. Shortly after 1960 more whites began moving to the South than were leaving it; a decade later, the same was true for blacks. Now more than one of every eight residents of the South was born outside it. In consequence, the South's population has increased rapidly. Texas has replaced New York as the second most populous state, and Florida should surpass the Empire State early in the next century.

These developments are also reflected in public opinion. In particular, the rise of the Sun Belt South has been accompanied by the rise of Southern Republicanism, an occurrence

only accelerated by the movement of middle-class Northerners to Southern cities and suburbs.

### Down Home

So is there any reason, anymore, to talk about the South as "the South"? Well, of course there is. The South has always been as much a cultural region as an economic one. From the start the South has been the home of peoples whose intertwined cultures have set them off from other Americans. And where the economic and political story has been largely one of conflict, division, and separation, the tale of the cultural South is one of blending, sharing, mutual influence—and of continuing distinctiveness.

Start with the fact that the South was settled primarily by people from Great Britain (especially from its "Celtic fringe") and from West Africa. Its culture has been largely a matter of African-Americans and Protestant whites of British descent borrowing from each other, imitating each other, shaping one another's attitudes, tastes, and values in ways both obvious and subtle. (In the process, together, they have made the South a great seedbed—possibly *the* great seedbed—of distinctively American culture, inventing and exporting everything from Coca-Cola to rock and roll.)

Here is where regional differences persist in America. If you're looking for how the South is different these days, look at tastes and cultural patterns that don't simply reflect how people make their livings, or how good a living they make. Look at things that are passed on from generation to generation within families, things that people take with them when they move on geographically, or move up economically.

“***Emerging as we watch is a quite different South, a vibrant, dynamic, industrial region, a magnet for migration and investment from other parts of the nation and increasingly from abroad. It's a metropolitan region, its cities linked by innumerable ties of commerce and communication.***”

When you do, you find a cultural South that's bigger than the Cotton Kingdom, one that reaches from Virginia to Texas. Southern values and habits and practices are found in a great many areas marginal to the plantation South but settled by Southerners. Mapping cultural patterns makes it easy to figure out who settled most of Kentucky and Missouri, as well as the southern parts of Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio. Indeed, many of the same features can be found in scattered enclaves of Southern migrants throughout the US—among Michigan auto workers, Southern blacks in Chicago and Harlem, or the children



and grandchildren of Okies in California.

In nearly all of the South, for example, the religious life of both black and white Southerners is dominated by evangelical Protestant denominations, and in this respect the South may become even more distinguished from the rest of the country. (The region is more Baptist now than it was at the turn of the century.) The religion of the Southern highlands and the Southwest is every bit as Southern as that of the Deep South. And when it comes to Southern music, the mountains and the Southwest are right at the heart of things. Although black musicians in the Deep South gave us jazz and the blues, the white song writers and performers of country music mostly hail from the outer South. And where the two streams met, in and around Memphis, rock and roll was born.

Similar patterns can be found when you look at things like manners, speech, cuisine, and sports. Some of these Southern characteristics go back to the early days of Dixie, if not to the British isles and African savannahs from which so many of the South's people came. Many were mentioned by travelers in the antebellum South. But other regional folkways are of quite recent origin.

Occasionally Southerners have just appropriated pastimes invented somewhere else. American football, for instance, had its origins in New England, and it wasn't until Alabama beat Washington in the 1926 Rose Bowl that Americans were persuaded that Southerners could play the game competitively.

(Now, of course, the South provides far more than its share of players in the National Football League, and the tailgate party has become a Southern institution.) Often, however, new differences have emerged as Southerners have used their new resources and opportunities to express traditional values and tastes in new ways. Country music draws on old musical forms, but it took its modern form only after radio and the phonograph turned isolated rural folk into a mass audience. Similarly, stockcar racing reflects a historic admiration for daring and grace under pressure, but it appeared only after the whiskey-distillers of the upland South met the automobile.

Notice that the persistence of the cultural South doesn't require that Southerners stay poor and rural. Indeed, poor folks can't afford some of its trappings: new Southern phenomena from high-tech competitive bass-fishing to *Southern Living* magazine require technology, affluence, and mobility that simply didn't exist in the South even a half-century ago. No, mass society has made some inroads, but Southerners still do many things differently—and they keep inventing ways to do things differently. In the past two decades the culture of the South has had to adapt to migration into the region of Northerners, Hispanics, and Asians in unprecedented numbers. How these newcomers will be assimilated and how they will enrich the culture of the South are interesting questions, but that they will seems hardly in doubt. The cultural South has always shown remarkable resilience.

### "American by Birth, Southern by the Grace of God"

The South is no longer defined by an economic system that exports raw materials and surplus population while generating a variety of social and economic problems for itself. Some aspects of Dixie still linger, and a few of its legacies (notably a substantial black population) will be with us for the foreseeable future. But that South is largely—well, gone with the wind. Now more than ever the South is defined by its commercial and industrial economy and by the network of institutions that have emerged to serve it.

But whatever else it has been or is becoming, the South is still the homeland of people who think of themselves as Southerners. Some have even suggested that Southerners ought to be viewed as an American ethnic group, like Italian- or Polish-Americans, a people with a sense of group identity based on a shared history and a common culture. This is what W. J. Cash had in mind when he wrote in *The Mind of the South* that the South is "not quite a nation within a nation, but the next thing to it."

Geographers have come up with scores of criteria for locating the South, mapping everything from the kudzu vine to where people name their businesses "Southern" this and "Southern" that. But maybe the best way to define the South is with what Hamilton Horton calls the "Hell, yes!" line: you know you're in the South if that's what people say when you ask if they're Southerners.



*John Shelton Reed is Kenan Professor of Sociology and director of the Institute for Research in Social Science and the Louis Harris Data Center, the University of North Carolina.*