

They Took Their Stand

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For generations thoughtful Southerners have viewed with alarm the gradual collapse of their way of life. The Civil War was a catalytic agent that hastened a state of chaos for a section suffering from soil depletion and a single crop economy, and ever since, from all sides, has come the cry, "Do something about the South!" Robert L. Dabney and Charles G. Jones, after Reconstruction, wanted to get the South on its feet by sending the last Yankee North, and Albert Bledsoe used the *Southern Review* to warn against false prophets. Walter H. Page and Henry Grady, on the other hand, denounced such attitudes, and elicited the aid of numerous Chambers of Commerce in the construction of a new gilt-edged South.

In recent years objectivity has supplanted emotionalism, at least to some extent, and the argument has become more critical and penetrating. Much of the contention has focused around the volume *I'll Take My Stand*, published by twelve Southerners in 1930, and called by Aubrey Starke "the firing on Fort Sumter of a new civil war." We shall examine briefly its principle tenets, subsequent writings of several prominent contributors, and the programs of five other leading writers on the South. This should bring the conflict up to date, and allow us to take our own stand on the matter of a future Southern policy.

The authors of *I'll Take My Stand* would have their region turn its back on industrialization and urbanization and continue to build on historic foundations and agrarianism. They pursue what is essentially a three-fold argument, historical, economic, and cultural, which must be condensed here.

(1) Historically, the South is an agrarian Anglo-Saxon section, which has derived its wealth, culture, and prestige from the land. This way of life is superior, for the South at least, to the industrial and urban one, and to defend it the South fought a Civil War. (2) Economically, industrialism would not ultimately benefit the South, despite its glib myth of infinite progress. Unplanned production, disposed of by expensive advertising and salesmanship, cannot avoid the pitfalls of overproduction, unemployment, and a growing inequality in the distribution of wealth. (3) Culturally, any section that becomes industrialized tends to lose its moral fiber and artistic temperament. The machine is a spiritual dictator, degrading and destroying human lives, and the goal of standardization leads inevitably to a general decay of artistic sensibility.

Although an editor and poet of distinction, John Crowe Ransom has been very interested in the second line of argument, and in ways of resisting a Northern invasion with greenbacks. In 1932 he suggested that the unemployed be colonized on unoccupied land; in later years he has asserted that commercial farming is doomed, and farmers will be happy as long as they keep mass

production out of the fields. Yet the ante-bellum South mass produced and exported the great staple crops, cotton, tobacco, and sugar—and is this not the South that is held up to us time and again as a model society? Perhaps exposure to the world of modernism is, as Mr. Ransom puts it, "a demoralizing experience," because we know what our world is like, but dream about conditions a century ago.

Donald Davidson has been most concerned with phase three of the argument, attacking the commercial interests which manufacture, can, and peddle art under the motto *ars gratia pecunia*. What has modern civilization given us in the way of art? Hollywood movies, a highly commercial Tin Pan Alley, pulp magazines, and the Haldeman-Julius Blue Books. Money lavished on museums and symphony orchestras has only widened the breach between art and life. Sophisticated groups have carried art into the ivory tower, where it is a luxury quite beyond the reach of ordinary people. Industrialization is the enemy of art, so the artist must join forces with the agrarian against the common foe. Part of the past glory of the South was to accept nature and conditions as they actually were, without undertaking muscular crusades and disturbing other's lives. In *The Attack on Leviathan* Mr. Davidson sketches a regionalism which would respect the various cultural aspects in heterogeneous America. Like many other regionalists, his working out of the political aspects is the weak link in his chain.

Frank L. Owsley has devoted most his attention to the historical aspects of the Southern case. He would make the Southerners aware that the things their section stood for were reasonable and sound, regardless of Appomattox. This has led to speculation along political lines. In a 1935 article called "Pillars of Agrarianism", e.g., he advocated a national legislature composed only of a senate. This new version of the small states' argument at the Constitutional Convention would squelch the Northeast in quick order. In a rather vehement way, he has shown that historians have often maligned the South, but a lack of objectivity would seem to bar Mr. Owsley's contribution from the realm of the most significant historical work.

With this sampling of the so-called Nashville Agrarians' thought before us, let us turn to five other distinguished contemporaries who have contributed much along these lines. One represents the scientific approach, one the historical, one the political, one the sociological, and one the World War II generation in the South. In books such as *Southern Horizons* Williams Haynes calls for a new appraisal of Southern resources, and sings the praises of the chemists who, armed with such new products as furfural, xylose, and ramine, will make their section prosperous and productive. The mighty molecule will carry the South to regions no rebel yell ever attained. So far such scientific thought does not seem to have made much impact of the Southern mind, however.

Virginius Dabney, a devoted student of Southern history, stresses the point that in the past the South set the pace with new innovations; and he feels the Nashville group has by ignoring this fact given their program a reactionary emphasis. Throughout history, material advances have gone hand in hand with cultural and intellectual ones. A realistic attack on Southern agricultural poverty, he contends, is the place to orient our agrarian plans. He is in agreement with Ellis G.

Arnall, the unofficial leader of liberal political thinkers in the South, who formulated an admirable course of action while he was governor of Georgia. In *The Shore Dimly Seen* he does not waste words on the agrarian-urban argument, feeling that the industrialization of the South is a certainty in the next two decades. The big problem is to see that new industries are regulated, located, and operated so as to provide the maximum benefit for all concerned. And the place to start is with political reform.

The South's leading sociologist, Howard W. Odum, perceiving that no amount of talk will change an industrial civilization, is anxious to integrate agriculture properly into the twentieth century picture. This calls for the attention of regional experts and federal assistance. Balancing industry and agriculture is the major sociological task, with political, administrative, and cultural matters claiming subsequent attention. Some way to increase the technical facilities for the producing and processing of commodities will have to be devised. Planning, coordinating, and adjusting will be needed, and Mr. Odum has devoted years to teaching and writing about regionalism. The future may well give a strong affirmative verdict on the importance of his faithful performance.

Hodding Carter, who won the Pulitzer prize for editorial writing in 1945, was discharged from the army that year to become editor of the *Greenville Delta Star*. Writing in that small Mississippi paper, he is the mouthpiece of his World War II generation in the deep South.

On the matter of policy, Mr. Carter stands for a new industrial South. He is not interested in what might have happened if the agrarian economy had brought prosperity—it didn't, and the thing to do now is supplement the pitiful agrarian incomes with factory payrolls. But he holds no sympathy for any group that would change the South overnight, severing its deep roots with the past. He is committed, rather, “to a program of gradualism, convinced that the evolutionary processes of education. . .and regional betterment may in the long run prove faster than forced and drastic change.” The presence of such men as Hodding Carter in Dixie, seeing the South against a world background, is indeed a bright spot on the horizon.

Before evaluating the work of these men, it may be well to glance at the Southeast, too often viewed through the eyes of nebulous romanticism, as census-takers. This land of superabundance¹ has been the scene of dismal technological lag and waste. Erosion, poverty, isolation, poor medical and educational facilities, and introversion have taken a terrible toll. Malnutrition, pellagra, rickets, and anemia plague the area, and malaria alone reduces the industrial output by an estimated one-third. Look at wages, income, financial transactions, national leadership, education, tax receipts, and it is always the same—the Southern states are at the bottom of the list.²

¹ The eleven Southeast states contain 325 million acres, 40% of America's farms, and over 300 minerals. Natural and human resources have never been lacking, and are not now.

² A lucid picture of the South's position in these regards will be found in Howard W. Odum's excellent study, *Southern Regions of the United States* (Chapel Hill, 1936)

In the light of these sobering facts the major criticism of the Nashville agrarians is apparent. They were defending a mythical South, offering the Southerners ideas when they were hungry for bread. Perhaps liberalism that devotes itself to ideology and historical justification must wait until the immediate physical problems are faced. One sometimes feels that sectional pride has caused them to forget that much they are defending as the culture of the old South is antithetical to the democratic stream and culture they wish to preserve. They want the South to rise out of its poverty and live in 1947, yet they object to dropping the trappings of 1847.

But such a criticism, which might be directed at the economic and political facets of their program, does not hold against what might be their most successful realm—the literary and artistic one. Their correlation of nature and great art is provocative, and the caliber of their own literary production (novels, poetry, plays, criticism) must command our respect. The high quality of their own work makes it impossible to ignore the principles from which that work grew. As to modifications of their 1930 stand, we can make no categorical assertions. At the same time, there has been a general retraction on many issues, particularly economic ones, and a general toning down of the verbal bombardment against the industrial North. Perhaps Mr. Owsley and Mr. Ransom have stuck closest to their guns, Mr. Davidson carrying many of the precepts over to the regionalist's camp. There is little sectional zeal in the more recent works of several of the group, and perhaps even a little impatience with the Southern attitude.

But the great interest their volume aroused shows conclusively that they put their fingers on many key issues and dared suggest, perhaps without even wanting to see them adopted, startling answers and methods for solving Southern problems. Williams Haynes thinks, as we have seen, that science can rejuvenate the South. Virginius Dabney has examined Southern history and found there reasons enough to maintain that a South cured of its physical ills has much to contribute to the nation, Ellis G. Armall sees in political reform the weapon that will rid the South of demagogues and prejudice, and open the door to prosperity and development. Howard W. Odum works with the tools and influence of sociology for a regionalism that will eliminate waste and misunderstanding. Hodding Carter speaks with awareness of the plight and responsibilities the South is faced with, and of the new world that will grow out of the titanic conflict he and his generation are just emerging from.

Perhaps, in the light of their work, it seems superfluous to set forth a list of concrete objectives for the people and leaders of the South. It is done with a complete awareness of the many that have preceded it, but with the conviction that an immediate and realistic program of inquiry and action is so necessary that a student of the South who does not contribute as much as he can along these lines is shirking his duty. In this spirit I offer these six points:

- 1). We must see Southern provincialism and objection to change as what it really is—an attitude that is strangling the South. A section that glorifies its drawl, outmoded economic principles, and nostalgia cannot thrive. Since three-fourths of the Southerners are rural with few technological skills, and because of the climate and temperament of the people, there is no danger in the

overnight appearances of Pittsburghs in that arca. Decentralized industrialization, carefully restricted, should be encouraged.

2). Agricultural readjustment is an absolute necessity, and must have top priority. The permanent producing capacity of land and man must be increased, and the abundance of farm life in a new agrarian culture. Every deficiency is a logical consequence of certain traceable factors, and is remediable through normal processes. As Walter Lippmann put it, "Everything that was ever possible for civilized man is possible here."

3). This means that the South will have to throw over King Cotton, who is more of a tyrant than George III or Louis XVI ever thought of being. Single-crop economy has given the South nothing but depleted lands, instability, speculation, and a continuous debtor status. Since two-thirds of its cotton is exported, the South's survival economically depends on the whims of political manipulation and foreign trade. Small wonder that half the people who depend on cotton are tenants. In its place such things as dairy products, eggs, vegetables, legume crops, and fruits must be produced. In this way the South can be well-nourished and independent of the international or political fronts.

4). A fine enterprise to substitute for cotton farming would be dairying. Besides dairy products and meat there is manure, which means improved land. Soil covered with grass does not erode and the South, with the longest grazing season of any section, has a natural advantage. A switch to dairying turned pauper Denmark into one of the most prosperous nations in Europe.

5). The slogan "states rights" must make way for a new one, "cooperation." This must extend from the smallest to the largest units, from unions and cooperatives for the individual to international policies geared to sectional needs and exigencies. There is no longer any excuse for reckless unplanned production; that can be taken as a starting point.

6). The racial caste system and one-party system must be abandoned. When *the negro rises*—not until—*the South will rise*. I am a Southerner, and know this ground must be conquered an inch at a time. Already there are many promising signs.

Those who have resolved that the South shall not sacrifice spiritual values for temporary gain deserve our highest respect. The spirit, history, and fortitude of the South is something of which any section would be proud. Surely this internal personality is strong enough to cast off redundancies, provincialisms, and eccentricities. Conflict between agrarians and industrialists is inevitable, even desirable. We must hope there is not a pronounced victory on either side, but enough advances by both to bring about a state of equilibrium. The smaller the competing units, the better. Rather ten decentralized factories and fifty family sized farms than one giant corporation and one multi-tenant plantation.

Even if we disagree with certain points of the Nashville agrarians, we can admire their courageous stand. They have been on the side of sweetness and light, and when they have been over-enthusiastic and indignant, it has only been additional proof of their genuine interest and sincerity. More recent writers, as has been indicated, have injected notes of practicality and liberalism into the agrarian stream, and clarified the issues.

In the same spirit we must continue the investigation, bringing whatever tolerance, charity, and open-mindedness we can muster to the scene, expecting no utopia, but looking to the rehabilitation of the land and the people, gradually, steadily, democratically. "Give the people light and they will find their way," Thomas Jefferson said. The time has come in the South to give the people light.