Introduction

As readers find themselves approaching the middle of the third decade of the twenty-first century, many Americans are searching for new understandings of their history, ones that can explain chronic political polarization, acute pandemic polarization, rampant social media addiction, heightened concern over global warming and armed global conflict, widening cultural and economic gaps between city and countryside, persistent racial tensions, growing gender divides, deep cultural tensions over public school curriculums, abortion rights, and what we term affirmative action. Moreover, and perhaps most significantly, a forty-year pattern of increasing economic inequality in the United States grows steadily more visible. Americans are looking for a past, not a past rendered usable for partisan advantages and brief news bites but one that can help them understand the divided and fractious present, a past that informs and inspires. Americans seek to make sense of the state of the nation as it stands now, not thirty, fifty, or seventy-five years ago. But they are searching for new and more complex understandings of the nation's history to better comprehend its present.

As an American and southern historian who has spent a lifetime studying the politics, economy, and social fabric of the American South and its relationship with the rest of the nation, I have long asked the enduring question: Can we, as Americans and as southerners, learn from our history? And, if so, how? After decades of reflection, my answer now is essentially the same one that nudged me toward a career as a historian several decades ago. That answer was and is that any effort to understand our nation's or region's present and future challenges inevitably leads both citizen and scholar alike into an examination of our history, including an examination of the American South's often critical role in making that history. After all, is it not better to learn from our history, however complicated, burdensome, and even painful, than to forget, ignore, or try to erase that history? The past should never be our only guide, but it is a valuable, and arguably indispensable, one, and one we ignore at our individual and collective peril.

I have also learned over the course of my career that as we seek to learn from the past, we must approach the endeavor with a deep sense of humility. And with that humility in mind, I have undertaken to offer my understanding of how the American South shaped the nation and its future through this book of essays, recognizing that at times the South offers a counterpoint to the prevailing national story, and quite often offered anger, bitterness, meanness, and tragedy rather than uplift and wisdom. Even a brief look at the writings of William Faulkner revealed more meanness, sadness, and tragedy than inspiration or even comic relief while offering the assurance that the human spirit will endure and, ultimately, even prevail. We can at least do our share and trust Providence for the rest.

This book of original essays does not pretend to cover every important facet of the history of the American South and its full impact on the American nation, rather it reflects my desire to draw on my areas of expertise, which lean toward political and economic history as well as slavery to help bring a deeper understanding of American history, and of the American South's complicated relationship with it, to bear on our twenty-first-century world and its many challenges. These essays attempt an innovative approach to seeking new understandings and using them to shape our interpretations of the present. The essays use the past to inform the present, but they also acknowledge that the pressures of the present require us to ask new and different questions about the past. These questions not only emerge from current trends but also from probing unexamined corners of the past and seeking new connections with it. We also must recognize that, however well-meaning our endeavors, at some future point we will all look as foolish to future generations as past generations sometimes look to us. Differently put, this book of essays seeks to both use the present to interrogate the past and to use the past to interrogate the present, and to do so more openly and directly than traditional historical scholarship typically allows or encourages.

Most of the essays in the volume start by considering and reevaluating a landmark work authored by a well-known scholar or writer dealing with a pivotal question about the nature of the American South, its history, and its impact on the nation. Each of the essays not only explicates the major arguments of historical scholarship but also explores how these interpretations have fared over time. Most importantly, these essays look for insights emanating from both the original work and its subsequent critiques and elaborations, so that we might enhance our current efforts to understand and meet the challenges facing twenty-first-century America. In brief, the book's aim is to promote a dynamic and nuanced understanding of our past to illuminate our future and guide us as we negotiate a path forward.

To fulfill its purpose, the book travels down four related avenues of inquiry. The first avenue explores a hardy but often revealing perennial – the meaning of the American Civil War – from the standpoints of the nineteenth, twentieth, and most importantly the twenty-first centuries. To do so, the book's lead essay evaluates historian David Potter's 1968 assertion that, from an international perspective, the defeat of the American South's bid for independent nationhood and the emancipation of enslaved Blacks in the American Civil War resulted in an unprecedented marriage (or at least a civil union in twenty-first-century terms) of liberalism and nationalism, a union unique in the formation of nineteenth-century nation-states. This fortuitous marriage not only gave liberalism a strength it might otherwise have lacked but also lent nationalism a democratic legitimacy, and even a morality, that it may not otherwise have deserved. The essay also provides a close examination of how, during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the end of the Cold War and the emergence of multiple decentralizing technologies (including cell phones and social media) and other polarizing forces raise serious questions about whether a more than 150-year-old marriage can survive the alluring centrifugal temptations and frustrations of the new century.

The book's second line of inquiry examines several scholarly manifestations and cautions advanced following *Time* and *Life* publisher Henry Luce's 1941 prediction of a coming "American Century," an epic golden age characterized by the spread of democracy and prosperity around the globe under American auspices. The extended post-World War II economic boom and the advent the Cold War facilitated something approaching a triumphal American Century, at least in the eyes of some influential scholars who seized on the new national mood of triumphalism to produce an influential literature arguing the case for American exceptionalism and grappling with the place of the once-defeated South in the presumably triumphant American nation. Emerging from the confidence and optimism of the immediate postwar years, a series of sweeping historical interpretations appeared, each designed to precisely define the unique character of the American nation and explain its "triumph" as the leader of the "free world," while also trying to explain, or explain away, the place and history of the American South in this phase of triumphalism.

Three of the nation's leading scholars (Louis Hartz, Daniel Boorstin, and David Potter) crafted broadly interpretative books trying to define the American national character while also cautioning the nation against embracing Luce's uber-optimistic proclamation of an American Century too eagerly or too literally, at least in terms of foreign policy. Each essay in Part II explores one of these three efforts to define the cohesive essence of the nation and the role the American South played (whether supporting or contradictory). These essays also examine how later scholars have refined and challenged the original arguments, casting new light on the original interpretations. The subject of Part II's first essay, Louis Hartz's triumphalist manifesto for an enduring American liberal tradition, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, certainly did not underestimate the role of ideology in American history, but it badly misinterpreted the origins and content of the nation's prevailing ideologies. Hartz's underlying argument that all American ideologies emerged from a liberal core (rejecting monarchy, aristocracy, and state religion) contained a kernel of truth. But the battle-scarred terrain of American politics reveals that its political ideologies have been far more complex and nuanced than Hartz comprehended when he wrote during the 1950s. Hartz's fundamental misunderstanding of the ideology of the founders led him into a thicket of problems in defining the fluid liberalism that flourished in American life. But ironically, his insistence on explicating American liberalism produced in Hartz's work an original understanding of American conservatism, whether of southern slaveholders trying to fashion the Tory conservatism of a landed gentry or twentieth-century businessmen trying to find a conservative ideology that was consistent with the constant churn, uncertainty, and creative destruction that define capitalism. Hartz's more enduring legacy may be his insight into the flaws of southern and American conservatism rather than his understanding of liberalism.

Part II's second essay, "The 'Genius of American Politics': The South, Ideology, and American Identity," examines historian Daniel Boorstin's contention that historically Americans' special genius grew from their taking a practical, nonideological approach to politics and government. In Boorstin's view, such a pragmatic approach, one unfettered by ideology, allowed Americans to react to changing circumstances on the ground with confidence and alacrity. The practical problem-solving of the moment realized within a stable historical and constitutional context constituted Boorstin's "genius" of American politics. Boorstin boldly argued that the American Civil War was a nonideological conflict. Instead, in his mind, the conflict emerged directly from a practical sectional disagreement over the need to adopt appropriate measures for managing the problem of slavery in the United States and its expansion into new territories. Over the seven decades since Boorstin published *Genius*, scholarship has revealed that Boorstin failed to grasp the intensely ideological nature of American politics in the Age of Civil War and the conflicting ideologies that drove both North and South to war while Boorstin constructed a fictitious consensus that could hardly explain the human cost of the war. Given the horrific conflict, the sweeping nature of emancipation, and the promise, later abandoned, of full citizenship to African Americans, how can we now, as a nation, have confidence that the elusive political "genius" of American politics can survive the current era of polarization and disillusionment?

The concluding essay in Part II turns again to David Potter and focuses on his compelling argument that American exceptionalism emerged neither from a practical, nonideological political genius, nor a prevailing faith in an inherited ideology, but rather on the influence of widespread and enduring economic abundance on the American character. Potter's *People of Plenty* argued that the broad availability of abundance, or simply the broadly available opportunity to amass at least a sufficiency and perhaps an abundance, became the nation's single most defining characteristic. Potter's argument proved especially convincing during the broadly shared prosperity of the post-World War II years. Yet Potter's explanation never quite accounted for the enduring postbellum poverty of the American South that lingered long enough for President Franklin Roosevelt to label the South the "nation's no. 1 economic problem" in 1938. Moreover, as the nation's economic growth slowed significantly and inequality worsened since 1980, there are now new reasons to question whether Potter's argument can remain influential, especially if the problem of growing and apparent hardening of economic inequality and the related class anger persists or worsens.

For its third avenue of exploration, the volume turns to a direct reexamination of the American South and its peculiar yet formative relationship with the rest of the American nation. Part III, comprising five essays, opens by focusing on historian Charles Sellers' argument that by the mid-nineteenth century, many white southerners, influenced by the spirit of American democracy and the values of evangelical Christianity, could never fully embrace the proslavery argument and maintained only a half-hearted commitment to the region's peculiar institution out of a mix of economic necessity and racial fear. Sellers argued that most white southerners experienced moral unease if not full-fledged guilt over how to justify living in a slaveholding society. In Sellers' view, this "travail of slavery" burdened white southerners throughout the late antebellum period and even beyond emancipation.

For at least a decade or so after the publication of Sellers' essay in 1960, subsequent scholarship supported and embellished Sellers' argument that white southerners experienced varying measures of guilt over slavery. But during the 1970s, an impressive array of new scholarly studies not only revealed that most white southerners eagerly defended slavery as either a necessary or a benign institution but, more importantly, that they accepted the racial justification for slavery and retained a deep commitment to white supremacy, white privilege, and Black subordination for at least a century after the end of slavery and the defeat of the Confederacy. One lingering legacy of slavery remains the dynamic of white domination and Black subordination that informs some white southern attitudes down to the present day. The manifestation of that legacy reveals much more rekindled anger than lingering guilt.

The second essay is Part III addresses the critical historical contributions of the Black scholar W. E. B. Du Bois, one of the most important, and most radical, American intellectuals of the twentieth century, and his influence on historical scholarship down to the present day. His *Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and *Black Reconstruction* (1935) created a field in Black history with particular emphasis on its intersection with the history of the American South. DuBois' *Souls of Black Folk* (1903) lyrically introduced the idea of the "two-ness" of the Black experience in the United States, and lent DuBois prestige he used as a co-founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Later in his life, DuBois' *Black Reconstruction* (1935) stood as a bold interpretive challenge to much of the existing historical literature. DuBois emphasized the democratic achievements of Black politicians and their allies during Reconstruction, achievements which were later eroded and dismantled by white supremacist politicians of the post-Reconstruction era. Decades later, as the direct action phase of the postwar civil rights movement gained momentum, a new generation of scholars turned to DuBois' work on Reconstruction as an example of how Black agency in history could be recognized and serve as the impulse for new understandings of slavery as well as Reconstruction. DuBois' work inspired impressive later work on slave resistance, slave communities, slave religion, the slave family, and slave political awareness, as well as a reinterpretation of the Reconstruction era as one of expanding democracy and the era's end as the dawn a truly tragic era in southern and American history. The essay also examines the rich historiography spawned from DuBois pioneering work and its progress down to the present day, including the revived emphasis on caste privilege and economic inequity. Moreover, this essay explores the role of DuBois' work as the basis for the creation of an anti-triumphalist interpretive thrust to American history, a thrust which persists down to the present day.

For nearly three-quarters of a century after the Civil War, the American South seemed the exception to American exceptionalism. As the late British historian Eric Hobsbawm put it, after the end of Reconstruction, the South remained "agrarian, poor, backward, and resentful; whites resenting the never-forgotten defeat and Blacks the disfranchisement and ruthless subordination imposed by whites when reconstruction ended." Confederate defeat and the emancipation of slaves (who constituted not only the majority of the South's agricultural labor force but also its largest single capital investment), left the American South faced with the challenge of embarking upon the "Age of Capital" while largely bereft of the era's key resource: capital. Using Hobsbawm's *Age of Capital* as a starting point, the third essay in Part III focuses on how the southern capital shortage turned much of the rural South into a "vast pawn shop" with financing for planting crops coming from a mortgage on a crop not yet produced. Moreover, as beggars for capital and wanting in skilled labor, the American South became the ragged stepchild of the industrializing American economy, an economic backwater forming a sort of "colonial economy" largely controlled by outside capital. Unable to control their economic destiny, white southerners defined success as reestablishing white supremacy in the region through disfranchisement and the creation of Jim Crow laws that clearly relegated the region's emancipated Black population to second-class citizenship. Even in the twenty-first century, active economic legacies of the capital-starved South haunt the region's economic landscape in the form of underdeveloped human capital and dependence on outside investment.

While most of the essays in this volume are organized around or in response to a particular interpretation shaping the discourse of American and southern history, the striking reality about the role of women in

American and southern history remained that for many years the absence of scholarship about women, and the even more pronounced absence of women historians in the profession, left large gaps in the nation's history and its history profession. Women seeking to find their way into the profession and to gain a voice in important historical discussions found many obstacles looming in their path. In particular, the journey of women into the world of professional historians involved overcoming many stereotypes and prejudices. A few women emerged as professional historians who made major contributions into new areas of scholarship during the early post-World War II era, but the ratio of women to men only began to increase in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Recent Nobel Prize winner in economics Claudia Goldin, whose expertise included the participation of women in the workforce, found that the "quiet revolution" of women entering the history profession that ran from 1950 to 1970 exploded as women rushed into the profession in full force during the 1970s, largely in search of job satisfaction. But more importantly than the enhanced ratio of women entering the profession, the influx of talented women opened new fields of study (women, family, social history topics, etc.) and their role shaped the profession dramatically as the extent of male dominance that had prevailed for many decades diminished. Chapter 8 examines the influence of talented women who opened and shaped new areas of study largely, or at least partially, little noticed or explored by men, while also offering new perspectives on longstanding questions of scholarly inquiry. Through their scholarship, women historians both opened new fields and enriched contributions of already established areas of scholarship. This essay reveals how valuable contributions made by women scholars have been in both opening new lines of inquiry as well as deepening the previously male-dominated dialogue on existing topics.

The fifth and concluding essay in Part III explores the rapid and dramatic "coming apart" of white working-class communities across the American South as the New Age of Inequality (post-1980) settled in, bringing stagnation and decline to rural areas, small towns, and even medium-sized cities. As the economic doldrums took hold across swaths of the American South and its diaspora during the decades since 1980, social dysfunction emerged with a vengeance in white working-class communities, a phenomenon that captured national attention through J. D. Vance's depiction in his best-selling *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016). While some southern urban areas boomed and diversified into attractive "brain hubs," other cities, small towns, and rural areas became mired in economic stagnation and decline. And even some older, chiefly industrial cites also suffered and declined as the economy deindustrialized. The many challenges the faltering economy presented white southern workers and their communities stimulated a visceral response from disaffected workers, a response manifest in angry efforts to reclaim white privilege and the aggressive championing of "traditional" values, and ultimately an unprecedented level of death and despair among white working-class southerners during the opioid epidemic. The complex story of disruptive economic forces, lingering racial resentments, and fierce atavistic loyalties led white southern workers to choose clinging to cultural values over building alliances that might redress their economic grievances.

The book's final essay returns to the larger but crucial point of what we can expect to learn from history, and how the study of history can enrich our understanding of our present, including our predicaments as well as our gifts. The late dean of southern historians, C. Vann Woodward, once asserted that the poor, defeated, and pessimistic South could serve as a counterpoint to the overweening confidence and optimism expressed by rest of the American nation. But Woodward later conceded that rather than offer a counterpoint to the national myths of virtue and prosperity, white southerners, at least, emerged as avid champions of American power and eager boosters for American capitalism, despite the region's history of poverty, defeat, and racial antagonism.

This essay, drawing not only on Woodward but also on the insights of Reinhold Niebuhr, Garry Wills, and Abraham Lincoln, among others, suggests that the irony of history should explode our innocence, chasten our arrogance, scold our self-righteousness, and alert us to the folly of ignoring inconvenient history. In sum, history, at its best, should give us a keen awareness of the irony embedded in the human experience, and, as it does, it should temper our pride even when showing mercy and our zeal even when seeking justice, while strengthening our recognition of the need to walk with humility in all our endeavors.