

Chapter 1 : The Burden of Southern History | eBay

C. Vann Woodward's The Burden of Southern History remains one of the essential history texts of our time. In it Woodward brilliantly addresses the interrelated themes of southern identity, southern distinctiveness, and the strains of irony that characterize much of the South's historical experience.

It was in Cross County in eastern Arkansas. Woodward attended high school in Morrilton, Arkansas. In he transferred to Emory University in Atlanta , Georgia , where his uncle was dean of students and professor of sociology. After graduating, he taught English composition for two years at Georgia Tech in Atlanta. There he met Will W. Alexander , head of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation, and J. Saunders Redding, a historian at Atlanta University. In New York, Woodward met, and was influenced by, W. Du Bois , Langston Hughes , and other figures who were associated with the Harlem Renaissance movement. He also traveled to the Soviet Union and Germany in He was granted a Ph. Beale , a Reconstruction specialist who promoted the Beardian economic interpretation of history that deemphasized ideology and ideas and stressed material self-interest as a motivating factor. His *The Battle for Leyte Gulf* became the standard study of the largest naval battle in history. Career[edit] Woodward, starting out on the left politically, wanted to use history to explore dissent. Du Bois about writing about him, and thought of following his biography of Watson with one of Eugene V. Watson in was the presidential candidate of the Populist Party , but this time was the leader in mobilizing the hatred of the same poor whites against blacks, and a promoter of lynching. Jim Crow laws, Woodward argued, were not part of the immediate aftermath of Reconstruction; they came later and were not inevitable. Following the Compromise of , in the s and s there were localized informal practices of racial separation in some areas of society along with what he termed "forgotten alternatives" in others. Finally the s saw white southerners "capitulate to racism" to create "legally prescribed, rigidly enforced, state-wide Jim Crowism. It combined the Beardian theme of economic forces shaping history, and the Faulknerian tone of tragedy and declension. He insisted on the discontinuity of the era, and rejected both the romantic ante-bellum popular images of the Lost Cause School as well as the overoptimistic business boosterism of the New South Creed. Sheldon Hackney , a Woodward student, hails the book, explaining: The durability of *Origins of the New South* is not a result of its ennobling and uplifting message. It is the story of the decay and decline of the aristocracy, the suffering and betrayal of the poor whites, and the rise and transformation of a middle class. It is not a happy story. The Redeemers are revealed to be as venal as the carpetbaggers. The declining aristocracy are ineffectual and money hungry, and in the last analysis they subordinated the values of their political and social heritage in order to maintain control over the black population. The poor whites suffered from strange malignancies of racism and conspiracy-mindedness, and the rising middle class was timid and self-interested even in its reform movement. The most sympathetic characters in the whole sordid affair are simply those who are too powerless to be blamed for their actions. Appointments, teaching and awards[edit] Woodward taught at Johns Hopkins University from to He did much writing but little original research at Yale, writing frequent essays for such outlets as the *New York Review of Books*. Carlton, Professor of History at Vanderbilt University. In , the United States House Committee on the Judiciary asked Woodward for an historical study of misconduct in previous administrations and how the Presidents responded. Woodward led a group of fourteen historians and they produced a page report in less than four months, *Responses of the Presidents to Charges of Misconduct*. He alternated between denying it, qualifying it, and apologizing for it. He became greatly troubled by the rise of the black power movement, disliked affirmative action, never came to grips with feminism, mistrusted what came to be known as "theory," and became a strong opponent of multiculturalism and "political correctness. He wrote his daughter afterwards, "The preparations paid off and I had pretty well second-guessed the Rads on every turn. In he joined the conservative scholars who made up the National Association of Scholars , a group explicitly opposed to the academic Left. *The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus*. Vann Woodward died in Hamden, Connecticut in The Southern Historical Association has established the C. Vann Woodward Dissertation Prize, awarded annually to the best dissertation on Southern history. There is a Peter V.

Chapter 2 : The Burden of Southern History – CIVIL WAR MEMORY

The Burden of Southern History is quintessential Woodward -- wise, witty, ruminative, daring, and as alive in the twenty-first century as when it was written.

In "The Search for Southern Identity," Woodward described a conviction among American southerners that their sectional identity was slipping away from them as the South developed and urbanized, and, in the 1950s, as the Jim Crow edifice began to totter. Woodward suggested that there actually was a distinctive southern culture worth saving; it was a form of dissent from relentless American nationalism, materialism, and conformism. The South had also, thanks to slavery, known what it meant to have a collective "tortured conscience," which was something that might occasionally do the rest of the country good. Thus, southern identity was something very valuable to conserve. The great danger for the modernizing South, however, was that it would cling to racism as its defining characteristic, as the Old South had clung to slavery. This would be a second great southern tragedy. In "The Irony of Southern History," Woodward also addressed the question of what the South could offer the rest of the country during the 1950s. While Americans pretended to be uniquely unspotted by the corruptions of the world, their idealism in the nuclear age actually forced them into the position of potential global executioner. The South, of course, participated in this illusion and irony; but unlike the rest of the country, it had already seen vividly that claims of noble character sometimes conceal -- and even cause -- moral depravity, and that a people zealous for its beautiful traditions can thereby become fanatical in defense of its vices. The South, in other words, was a place where "history" had happened -- where there were limits to optimism about human goodness. Surely this knowledge could be useful to a victorious and idealistic American people who had never yet known the chastening of history. The idea is a good one but the essays vary too much in quality and I think towards the end even Woodward had to admit that his thesis had come apart. Indeed, his thesis could have been expanded to America, for as the USA has encountered defeat it has also become more "southern" in its culture and politics. Most of all, he can be vague and repetitive. In discussing non-Southern authors he says they have no sense of history, so he ignores F. I finally read a Woodward book that left me underwhelmed. In discussing non-Southern authors he says they have no sense of history, so he ignores F. Scott Fitzgerald, possibly because it would disprove his contention. All of that being said, it is still Woodward. It is still well written, provocative, thoughtful, and engaging. The essay on John Brown is flawless. Even when he comes up short he still manages to impress.

The Burden of Southern History This is the first guest post in a series of reviews written by students who are currently enrolled in Prof. Peter Carmichael's graduate seminar at West Virginia University.

In a time when nationalism sweeps everything else before it, as it does at present, the regional historian is likely to be oppressed by a sense of his unimportance. America is the all-important subject, and national ideas, national institutions, and national policies are the themes that compel attention. Foreign peoples, eager to know what this New-World colossus means to them and their immediate future, are impatient with details of regional variations, and Americans, intent on the need for national unity, tend to minimize their importance. New England, the West, and other regions are occasionally permitted to speak for the nation. But the South is thought to be hedged about with peculiarities that set it apart as unique. As a standpoint from which to write American history it is regarded as eccentric and, as a background for an historian, something of a handicap to be overcome. Of the eccentric position of the South in the nation there are admittedly many remaining indications. I do not think, however, that this eccentricity need be regarded as entirely a handicap. In fact, I think that it could possibly be turned to advantage by the Southern historian, both in understanding American history and in interpreting it to non-Americans. For from a broader point of view it is not the South but America that is unique among the peoples of the world. This peculiarity arises out of the American legend of success and victory, a legend that is not shared by any other people of the civilized world. The collective will of this country has simply never known what it means to be confronted by complete frustration. Whether by luck, by abundant resources, by ingenuity, by technology, by organizing cleverness, or by sheer force of arms America has been able to overcome every major historic crisis- economic, political, or foreign-with which it has had to cope. This remarkable record has naturally left a deep imprint upon the American mind. It explains in large part the national faith in unlimited progress, in the efficacy of material means, in the importance of mass and speed, the worship of success, and the belief in the invincibility of American arms. The legend has been supported by an unbroken succession of victorious wars. Battles have been lost, and whole campaigns - but not wars. In the course of their national history Americans, who have been called a bellicose though unmartial people, have fought eight wars, and so far without so much as one South African fiasco such as England encountered in the heyday of her power. This unique good fortune has isolated America, I think rather dangerously, from the common experience of the rest of mankind, all the great peoples of which have without exception known the bitter taste of defeat and humiliation. It has fostered the tacit conviction that American ideals, values, and principles inevitably prevail in the end. That conviction has never received a name, nor even so much explicit formulation as the old concept of Manifest Destiny. It is assumed, not discussed. And the assumption exposes us to the temptation of believing that we are somehow immune from the forces of history. The country that has come nearest to approximating the American legend of success and victory is England. The nearness of continental rivals and the precariousness of the balance of power, however, bred in the English an historical sophistication that prevented the legend from flourishing as luxuriantly as it has in the American climate. Only briefly toward the end of the Victorian period did the legend threaten to get out of hand in England. Toynbee has recalled those piping days in a reminiscent passage. There is, of course, a thing called history, but history is something unpleasant that happens to other people. We are comfortably outside all that. I am sure, if I had been a small boy in New York in I should have felt the same. Of course, if I had been a small boy in in the Southern part of the United States, I should not have felt the same; I should then have known from my parents that history had happened to my people in my part of the world. But the illusion that "history is something unpleasant that happens to other people" is certainly not one of them - not in the face of accumulated evidence and memory to the contrary. It is true that there have been many Southern converts to the gospel of progress and success, and there was even a period following Reconstruction when it seemed possible that these converts might carry a reluctant region with them. But the conversion was never anywhere near complete. Full participation in the legend of irresistible progress, success, and victory could, after all, only be vicarious at best. For the inescapable facts of history

were that the South had repeatedly met with frustration and failure. It had learned what it was to be faced with economic, social, and political problems that refused to yield to all the ingenuity, patience, and intelligence that a people could bring to bear upon them. It had learned to live for long decades in quite un-American poverty, and it had learned the equally un-American lesson of submission. For the South had undergone an experience that it could share with no other part of America-though it is shared by nearly all the peoples of Europe and Asia-the experience of military defeat, occupation, and reconstruction. Nothing about this history was conducive to the theory that the South was the darling of divine providence. These illusions have their origins in both North and South, though at a period before there was any distinct regional consciousness. They were fostered by the two great moral traditions of early national life, New England Calvinism and Virginia deism of the Jeffersonian school. I believe that Niebuhr would agree that what I have described as the American legend of success and victory has assisted in fostering and perpetuating these illusions of innocence and virtue. At any rate, he demonstrates that these illusions have been preserved past infancy and into national adulthood. In clinging to our infant illusions of innocence along with our new power, writes the theologian, we are "involved in ironic perils which compound the experiences of Babylon and Israel"-the perils of overweening power and overweening virtue. Our opposite numbers in the world crisis, the Russian Communists, are bred on illusions of innocence and virtue that parallel our own with ironic fidelity, even though they are of very different origin and have been used to disguise perhaps even from themselves what seems to us much greater guilt of oppression and cruelty. They combine these illusions with Messianic passions that find a paler reflection in one layer of American conscience. Looking upon their own nation as the embodiment of innocence and justice, the Russians take it for granted that America is the symbol of the worst form of capitalistic injustice. Both America and Russia find it almost impossible to believe that anyone could think ill of them and are persuaded that only malice could prompt suspicions of motives so obviously virtuous. Each tends to regard the other as the only force wilfully thwarting its dream of bringing happiness to all mankind. There are many perils, both for our nation and for the world, inherent in this situation - and they do not all come from abroad. We are exasperated by the ironic incongruities of our position. Having more power than ever before, America ironically enjoys less security than in the days of her weakness. Convinced of her virtue, she finds that even her allies accuse her of domestic vices invented by her enemies. The liberated prove ungrateful for their liberation, the reconstructed for their reconstruction, and the late colonial peoples vent their resentment upon our nation-the most innocent, we believe, of the imperial powers. Driven by these provocations and frustrations, there is the danger that America may be tempted to exert all the terrible power she possesses to compel history to conform to her own illusions. The extreme, but by no means the only expression, would be the so-called preventive war. This would be to commit the worst heresy of the Marxists, with whom it is dogma that they can compel history to conform to the pattern of their dreams by the ruthless use of force. To save ourselves from these moral perils, Dr. Niebuhr adjures us to disavow the pretensions and illusions of innocence derived from our national childhood, along with all self-righteousness, complacency, and humorless idealism. If we would understand our plight and prepare for the role we must play, we must grasp the ironic implications of our history. Whatever its theological implications - and I have frankly never explored them - the view has a validity apart from them that appeals to the historian. Yet the ironic interpretation of history is rare and difficult. In the nature of things the participants in an ironic situation are rarely conscious of the irony, else they would not become its victims. Awareness must ordinarily be contributed by an observer, a nonparticipant, and the observer must have an unusual combination of detachment and sympathy. He must be able to appreciate both elements in the incongruity that go to make up the ironic situation, both the virtue and the vice to which pretensions of virtue lead. He must not be so hostile as to deny the element of virtue or strength on the one side, nor so sympathetic as to ignore the vanity and weakness to which the virtue and strength have contributed. Obviously, the qualifications of the ironic historian are pretty hard to come by. In fact, the headlong precipitancy with which the South has responded to the slogans of nationalism in recent world crises has often exceeded that of other sections of the country. Mass response sometimes suggests the zeal of recent converts. Yet there are aspects of its history and experience that make the South an observer as well as a participant, which set it apart in certain ways from the experience

of the rest of the country, and which constitute a somewhat detached point of view. Ironic implications of Southern history are not concealed by any legend of success and victory nor by the romantic legend of the Lost Cause. To savor the full irony of the confident and towering ante-bellum dream of a Greek Democracy for the New World one has only to recall the words of a speech that Robert Barnwell Rhett made when South Carolina seceded. The orator was picturing the historian of AD. It had already arrived, full blown, here and now. For as Charles Sydnor has observed, "the affirmation of Southern perfection" meant just that. Blind to evils and imperfections all around them, Southerners described what they saw as the ultimate in social perfection. Nor does it seem to have made Southerners any wiser than their fellow countrymen. But it has provided them with a different point of view from which they might, if they will, judge and understand their own history and American history, and from which to view the ironic plight of modern America. This transformation took place too recently for anyone to have forgotten, though many seem to have forgotten it entirely. In the thirties and well into the following decade there occurred the most thoroughgoing inquest of self-criticism that our national economy has ever undergone - not even excepting that of the muckraking and progressive era. No corner nor aspect nor relationship of American capitalism was overlooked, and no shibboleth of free enterprise went unchallenged. The prying and probing went on at every level from the share croppers to holding companies and international cartels. Subpoenas brought mighty bankers and public utility empire-builders to the witness stand. Nor was this activity merely the work of the wild-eyed and the woolly-haired, nor the exclusive concern of one of the major parties. It was a popular theme of the radio, the press, the screen, the theater, and even the pulpit. Some churches took up the theme and incorporated it into their programs. Universities hummed and throbbed with it. And in the former president of a public utility holding company, then candidate for President of the United States on the Republican ticket, made the theme a part of his campaign. Some of the outpouring of criticism in the thirties and forties was misdirected, some was perhaps a bit silly. But the electorate repeatedly endorsed with large majorities the party that was the more closely identified with the movement. On the whole, the people regarded it as productive of good. It was at least indicative of a healthy and self-confident society, uninhibited by fear. Then in the mid-forties something happened. It happened rather suddenly. The floodstream of criticism dwindled to a trickle and very nearly ceased altogether. It was as if some giant sluice gate had been firmly shut. The silence that followed was soon filled with the clamor of voices lifted in accusation, denial, or recantation. No reputation was now secure from the charges of the heresy hunters, the loyalty investigators, and the various committees on public orthodoxy and conformity.

Chapter 4 : The Burden of Southern History by C. Vann Woodward

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