The New Political History and the Coming of the Civil War

Don E. Fehrenbacher

The author is William Robertson Coe Professor of History and American Studies Emeritus in Stanford University. This paper was his presidential address to the Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association at its seventy-seventh annual meeting in August 1984 in Seattle, Washington.

IN THE YEAR 1900, Edward Eggleston's presidential address to the American Historical Association was titled "The New History." By that phrase he meant historical study of the common people and how they had lived, with much less emphasis, accordingly, on the politics, statecraft, diplomacy, and warfare that had long been the staples of schoolbook history and historical scholarship.[1] Eggleston did not invent the phrase, and the need for a newer, better kind of history had often been proclaimed—by Henry Thomas Buckle and Herbert Spencer some forty years earlier, for instance, and by Voltaire a century before them.[2]

It was James Harvey Robinson of Columbia University who appropriated the phrase as the title of a book and made it the

[1] Edward Eggleston, "The New History," in *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for 1900* (2 vols., Washington, D.C., 1901), I, 37–47.

[2] Reviewing Karl Lamprecht's *Deutsche Geschichte* in 1898, Earle Wilbur Dow used the phrase "the new history," declaring that it took into account "all the activities of man as a social being" and entailed describing the human past "from the point of view of rational evolution." *American Historical Review*, III (1897–1898), 448. Buckle's call for a "science of history" is in the first chapter of his *History of Civilization in England*, published in 1857. Spencer's prescription for useable history is in his essay, "What Knowledge Is of Most Worth?" which first appeared in the *Westminster Review*, July, 1859, and was reprinted the next year as the first chapter of his *Education: Intellectual, Moral, and Physical*. On Voltaire's view of history, see his preface to the *Essai sur les Moeurs et l'esprit des Nations* and his article on history in the *Encyclopédie*, where he declares: "On exige des historiens modernes plus de détails, des faits plus constatés, des dates précises, des autorités, plus d'attention aux usages, aux lois, aux moeurs, au commerce, à la finance, à l'agriculture, à la population" (VIII, 225).

117

battle-cry of an informal, high-spirited movement among certain academic historians for reform of historical scholarship. *The New History,* published in 1912, the year also of Woodrow Wilson's New Freedom and Theodore Roosevelt's New Nationalism, reflected its Progressive context in maintaining that study of the past should be undertaken primarily in order to make the present more understandable and thus facilitate progress toward a better future. To fulfill this utilitarian purpose, said Robinson, history must extend its reach to the totality of human experience and must concentrate on "the normal and long enduring rather than the transient and exceptional." Freeing itself from the "trammels" of the literary tradition, history must embrace and synthesize all the other disciplines dedicated to the systematic study of human society. "The sciences relating to mankind will hereafter dominate the work of the historian," he predicted.[3]

Thus amalgamation with the social sciences, though perhaps not the central theme of the "new history," was a significant part of its credo. Not until more than half a century later, however, did it begin to appear that Robinson's prediction might prove to be accurate. For a time, despite the preaching and practice of a few prophets like the indefatigable Harry Elmer Barnes,[4] history and the social sciences tended, if anything, to drift further apart in the United States. This tendency was especially pronounced in the case of political science, which moved steadily away from its historical outlook and reliance on the genetic method toward an analytic and presumably more scientific mode heavily dependent on behavioral psychology.[5] It is true that the two most influential explanations of the American past came from two early advocates of the "new history" and that the work of both men had interdisciplinary implications. Yet neither Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier hypothesis nor Charles A. Beard's economic in-

terpretation of politics, for all the argument and scholarship that each inspired, drew the practice of historians appreciably closer to that of the social sciences.

Of course, the isolation of history as a discipline never approached totality. One way or another, many historians kept at least sporadically in touch with work being done in other fields. Some even borrowed concepts and terminology from the social sciences to enrich their own scholarship. But very few endeavored to actually *become* social scientists in pursuing their study of the past.[6] The barriers against doing so included professional inertia and academic departmentalization, but perhaps most important was a widespread conviction that the practice of history differed fundamentally from that of the social sciences, being concerned with the particularities of human experience, in all their rich and subtle variety, rather than with the regularities and universals that can be abstracted from such experience.

This "idiographic" character of history was generally affirmed in 1946 by the group of distinguished historians who, as the committee on historiography of the Social Science Research Council, produced Bulletin 54, *Theory and Practice in Historical Study.* According to one of the basic "propositions" presented in their report: "The ideal which controls the historian in search of the utmost knowledge of the past is to achieve the most informed understanding of *occurrences* and *personalities* that available sources and discriminating imagination will permit."[7] To be sure, the committee also paid its brief respects to the principle of interdisciplinary scholarship, but it gave much more attention to the problem of causality, and the longest chapter in the book was a case study of historical writing about the causes of the Civil War.[8]

Thomas C. Cochran, probably the strongest advocate of social science methodology on the committee, declared in 1948, "Fifty years of rapid growth in the social sciences have had surprisingly little effect on the general content and synthesis of American his-

[3]James Harvey Robinson, *The New History: Essays Illustrating the Modern Historical Outlook* (New York, 1912); Robinson, "The Conception and Methods of History," in Howard J. Rogers, ed., *Congress of Arts and Science Universal Exposition, St. Louis, 1904* (Boston, 1906), II, 40–51, esp. 51; Robinson, "The New History," in *American Philosophical Society Proceedings,* L (1911), 179–190, esp. 187.

[4]See especially Harry Elmer Barnes, *The New History and the Social Studies* (New York, 1925), 3–39; Barnes, *The History of Western Civilization* (2 vols., New York, 1935), I, v–ix.

[5]See Richard Jensen, "History and the Political Scientist," in Seymour Martin Lipset, ed., *Politics and the Social Sciences* (New York, 1969), 1–28.

[6]"I speak of the historian as having contacts with the social sciences rather than as being a social scientist"—Richard Hofstadter, "History and the Social Sciences," in Fritz Stern, ed., *The Varieties of History* (Cleveland, 1956), 360.

[7]*Theory and Practice in Historical Study: A Report of the Committee on Historiography* (New York, 1946), 138.

[8]*Ibid,* 55–102, 134–135, 139–140.

tory."[9] Yet the very article in which he made this complaint proved to be one of the early manifestos of a new "new history" that would have a striking effect on American historical scholarship. In 1954, a reconstituted SSRC committee on historiography, with Cochran now its chairman, presented another report, Bulletin 64, and devoted the whole of it to *The Social Sciences in Historical Study.* The most striking recent change in the study of history, the committee declared, was "the growing emphasis on fraternization or amalgamation with other disciplines."[10]

The shape of the new "new history" was at first but dimly apprehended. At a conference sponsored by the SSRC in 1953, fifteen leading historians freely acknowledged the value of interdisciplinary scholarship. "Nevertheless," says a report of the discussion, "the sense of the meeting was that historians should not consciously attempt to remake history in the social science image and should not attempt to restore communication with the social sciences simply by adopting social science methods as their own."[11] Richard Hofstadter, writing in 1956, suggested that the formal methods of the social sciences, useful though they might be, were less significant than the "substantive findings" of those disciplines and the "speculative richness" that their perspectives added to the study of history.[12] It is especially worth noting that Bulletin 64 devoted only one of its 171 pages to discussion of "quantitative method."[13] And as late as 1960, a member of the faculty of the New School for Social Research could assert: "The trend in the social sciences toward the quantitative methods and techniques of the natural sciences . . . has no counterpart in historiography."[14]

Yet in 1960 the quantification revolution was well under way. V. O. Key's "A Theory of Critical Elections," which was to have

[9]Thomas C. Cochran, "'The Presidential Synthesis,' in American History," *American Historical Review,* LIII (1948), 748.

[10]*The Social Sciences in Historical Study: A Report of the Committee on Historiography* (New York, 1954), 13.

[11]Richard D. Challener and Maurice Lee, Jr., "History and the Social Sciences: The Problem of Communications," *American Historical Review,* LXI (1956), 334.

[12]Hofstadter, "History and the Social Sciences," 364.

[13]*Social Sciences in Historical Study,* 150–151.

[14]Edward N. Saveth, "Scientific History," in Donald Sheehan and Harold C. Syrett, eds., *Essays in American Historiography: Papers Presented in Honor of Allan Nevins* (New York, 1960), 16.

such profound influence on the analysis of American voting behavior, had appeared a few years earlier. Alfred H. Conrad and John R. Meyer had published their essay on the profitability of slavery, often cited as the first significant product of modern cliometric scholarship. Merle Curti had produced *The Making of an American Community,* a critique of the Turner thesis, in which he made extensive statistical use of manuscript census returns and other quantifiable data. Lee Benson, already launched on his crusade for a more systematic historical scholarship, had just completed his seminal work, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy.* And Robert William Fogel was presumably viewing with pride his first book, a financial study of the Union Pacific Railroad, in which he used formal economic theory to analyze historical data and arrive at characteristically revisionist conclusions.[15]

There was resistance, of course, to what Carl Bridenbaugh called "that Bitch-goddess, Quantification," enough so that Fogel in 1979 characterized the relationship between "scientific" and "traditional" historians as one of "cultural warfare."[16] Resistance would have been obscurantist if it had been directed merely at efforts to introduce greater statistical precision into study of the past. In fact, few American historians stood openly opposed to such efforts, though many were avowedly skeptical about their potential value. But the word "quantification" came to signify much more than sophisticated measurement. It connoted the whole theoretical structure and operational strategy of the social sciences, including especially the building and testing of explicit models of human behavior. The nature of the struggle between the "scien-

[15]V.O. Key, Jr., "A Theory of Critical Elections," *Journal of Politics,* XVII (1955), 3–18; Alfred H. Conrad and John R. Meyer, "The Economics of Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South," *Journal of Political Economy,* LXVI (1958), 95–130; Merle Curti, *et al., The Making of An American Community: A Case Study of Democracy in a Frontier Community* (Stanford, Calif., 1959); Lee Benson, "Research Problems in American Political Historiography," in Mirra Komarovsky, ed., *Common Frontiers of the Social Sciences* (Glencoe, Ill., 1957), 113–183, 418–421; Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case* (Princeton, N.J., 1961); Robert William Fogel, *The Union Pacific Railroad: A Case in Premature Enterprise* (Baltimore, 1960).

[16]Carl Bridenbaugh, "The Great Mutation," *American Historical Review,* LXVIII (1963), 326; Robert William Fogel, "Scientific History and Traditional History," in L. Jonathan Cohen, *et al.,* eds., *Logic, Methodology and Philosophy of Science, VI: Proceedings of the Sixth International Congress of Logic, Methodology and Philosophy of Science, Hannover, 1979* (Amsterdam, 1982), 49. This essay has been reprinted with a response by G.R. Elton, in *Which Road to the Past?: Two Views of History* (New Haven, Conn., 1983).

tifics" and the "traditionals" has been obscured by confusion of the narrow and broad meanings of "quantification," as well as by the disposition of some of the more amiable quantifiers to portray their work as simply an enrichment of traditional historical methods, rather than a repudiation of them. But the question ultimately at issue was whether the discipline of history should be radically restructured in the image of the social sciences.[17]

The new "new history" that had emerged fully into view by the end of the 1960s was actually a cluster of movements associated with different behavioral science disciplines. So it became customary to speak of the new economic history, the new social history, the new political history, and (a breed somewhat apart) the new psychological history, or psychohistory. The term "new political history," as Allan Bogue has suggested, might well have been used to characterize the work of scholars like Hofstadter, Bernard Bailyn, and Eric Foner who were "exploring the significance of political ideas, symbols, and ideologies."[18] Instead, the label was appropriated (no doubt by analogy with the flourishing "new economic history") to designate the growing fellowship of political historians committed particularly to the use of quantification and more generally to the research methods and theory of the behavioral sciences.

The richness of quantifiable data encouraged practitioners of the new political history to concentrate heavily on voting behavior—that is, upon popular elections and legislative roll calls. Their two most important conceptual achievements have been the

[17]Lee Benson predicted in 1966 that within two decades, "a significant proportion of American historians will have accepted Buckle's two basic propositions: 1) past human behavior can be studied scientifically; 2) the main business of historians is to participate in the overall scholarly enterprise of discovering and developing general laws of human behavior." Quoted from "Quantification, Scientific History, and Scholarly Innovation," in Benson, *Toward the Scientific Study of History: Selected Essays* (Philadelphia, 1972), 99. See also Robert William Fogel, "The Limits of Quantitative Methods in History," *American Historical Review*, LXXX (1975), 329–350; Samuel P. Hays, *American Political History as Social Analysis* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1980); Allan G. Bogue, "Quantification in the 1980s," in Theodore K. Rabb and Robert I. Rotberg, eds., *The New History: The 1980s and Beyond* (Princeton, N.J., 1982), 137–175; J. Morgan Kousser, "Quantitative Social-Scientific History," in Michael Kammen, ed., *The Past Before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1980), 433–456; Kousser, "History QUASHED: Quantitative Social Scientific History in Perspective," *American Behavioral Scientist*, XXIII (1980), 885–904.

[18]Allan G. Bogue, "The New Political History in the 1970s," in Kammen, ed., *The Past Before Us* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1980), 232.

stability-realignment model of national elections, formulated principally by political scientists, and the ethnocultural (or ethnoreligious) interpretation of voter motivation, which is largely the work of historians. Beginning with Benson's work on the Jacksonian period, the ethnocultural model has substantially replaced the older progressive interpretation of American political alignments as reflecting primarily economic and class divisions.

Religion and ethnic identity, and the social attitudes derived from them—these, according to the ethnoculturalists, have been the major determinants of voting choice. In its most reductive version, as set forth by Ronald P. Formisano, Paul Kleppner, and others, the ethnocultural thesis presents an American electorate divided between pietist and antipietist subcultures: the one fervently puritan, the other coolly ritualistic; the one determined to impose rules of right behavior on the community, the other setting faith apart from conduct and resisting efforts at moralistic control; the one supporting Whigs and Republicans, the other faithfully Democratic.[19] In *Iolanthe*, a lonely sentry muses on the fact that "every boy and every gal born into the world alive is either a little Liberal or else a little Conservative." Perhaps if W. S. Gilbert had chosen to comment on politics in the United States, he would have written something like this:

> I say, there, American voters,
> Here's a model that will fit you all:
> You're either drunk on piety,
> Or else laid back on ritual.

Although the statistical methods and theoretical constructs of the ethnoculturalists have been called into question,[20] the gen-

[19]Ronald P. Formisano, *Mass Political Parties: Michigan, 1827–1861* (Princeton, N.J., 1971), 102–103, 110, 138, 160–164; Paul Kleppner, *The Cross of Culture: A Social Analysis of Midwestern Politics, 1850–1900* (New York, 1970), 69–91; Kleppner, *The Third Electoral System, 1853–1892: Parties, Voters, and Political Cultures* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1979), 143–197; Kleppner, "Partisanship and Ethnoreligious Conflict: The Third Electoral System, 1853–1892," in Kleppner, *et al., The Evolution of American Electoral Systems* (Westport, Conn., 1981), 134–136. Formisano used the terms "evangelicals" and "nonevangelicals." Kleppner first spoke of "pietists versus ritualists," but later of "pietists" and "antipietists," with the latter divided into "ritualists" and "salvationists." This subcategorization enabled him to finesse the problem of the statistically troublesome Methodists. Richard J. Jensen preferred the terms "pietists" and "ritualists." See note 40 below.

[20]See especially J. Morgan Kousser, "The 'New Political History': A Methodological Critique," *Reviews in American History*, IV (1975), 1–14; Richard B. Latner and Peter Levine, "Perspectives on Antebellum Pietistic Politics," *ibid.,* 15–24.

eral substance of their interpretation has won much acceptance and remains to date the most conspicuous finding of the new political history.

For a century and more, the most common complaint lodged against books of history had been that they were crammed with the details of specific *events* that were seldom worth the trouble of remembering. The French *Annalistes* Lucien Febvre and Fernand Braudel echoed Herbert Spencer and James Harvey Robinson in depreciating *l'histoire événementielle,* and they in turn were echoed by advocates of the new social science history in the United States. For instance, Samuel Hays maintained that the conceptual frameworks of historical scholarship "should be oriented toward *structure* rather than *event.*" Fascination with sensational events, he said, tended to limit the historian's imagination and make history virtually structureless, except for "the accidental juxtaposition of those events in a time sequence."[21]

But events come in many sizes, and a super-event like the French Revolution or the American Civil War, because it plays havoc with structure and continuity, is both a nuisance and a challenge for scholars viewing the past from a social science perspective. To Frederick Jackson Turner, for instance, the Civil War was of marginal interest. He subordinated the sectional struggle between North and South to the process of westward expansion and declared in his most famous essay that when American history came to be viewed properly, the slavery issue would appear merely as "an incident."[22] Charles A. Beard likewise belittled the moral conflict over slavery but made the Civil War itself a social cataclysm of prime importance in his economic interpretation of American history.[23]

In the 1940s and 1950s, when a good many founders of the "new political history" were entering the professional scene, Civil War causation was the most intensively discussed problem in American historiography—the principal matter at issue being the validity of the "revisionist" or "needless war" interpretation. In one eight-year interval major works on the subject were published by Avery Craven, Roy F. Nichols, David M. Potter, Kenneth M. Stampp, and Allan Nevins (whose contribution ran to four volumes), and these were but a fraction of the total output during the period. Lee Benson later ventured the guess that "more scholarly man years have probably been devoted to 'the coming of the Civil War' than to any other past event, American or non-American."[24]

Benson himself contributed several times to the discussion, but, with a few exceptions, the "new political history" tended to deemphasize the sectional conflict. Cochran had predicted such a tendency,[25] and Joel H. Silbey vehemently rationalized it in 1964. His article, "The Civil War Synthesis in American Political History," was an indictment of all those historians whose primitive research methods, "inaccuracies," "oversimplifications," and "naivete about the political process" had produced a false impression that the antebellum years were predominantly a period of increasing sectional antagonism. On the contrary, said Silbey, recent scholarship raised "serious doubts about the importance of sectional differences as far as most Americans were concerned," and even as late as the election of 1860, "many nonsectional issues were apparently more immediately important to the groups involved than any imminent concern with Northern-Southern differences." The Civil War, Silbey lamented, has accordingly had a "pernicious influence" on the study of antebellum politics because it has "distorted the reality of political behavior" in that era.

All was not lost, however. He, Silbey, and certain other scholars were already engaged in deflating the "myth" of a "universal preoccupation with sectionalism." Instead of depending upon the dubious evidence available in contemporary letters, newspapers, and other documentary sources, they were acquiring a much better understanding of public attitudes through statistical analysis of elections and legislative voting. "Historians," Silbey admonished, "must become more aware of the complexities of human

---

[21] Hays, *American Political History,* 115–116, 293.

[22] Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for 1893* (Washington, D.C., 1894), 217.

[23] Charles A. and Mary Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization* (2 vols., New York, 1927), II, 36–40, 53–54.

[24] Benson, *Scientific Study of History,* 191.

[25] Cochran, "Presidential Synthesis," 759.

behavior," and must recognize that "single-factor explanations" are not likely to work.[26]

Of course, the scholars whom Silbey criticized had not been as simple-minded as he portrayed them. For instance, when he assured his readers that "sectional matters were not the only problems confronting congressmen" in the antebellum period, he was denying what no historian had ever affirmed. His essay relied heavily upon use of such straw-man tactics. Furthermore, although it is true that our perceptions of the antebellum era are profoundly affected, and no doubt distorted, by our knowledge of what came next, that can scarcely be viewed as a peculiarity of Civil War historiography. Intervening events and developments affect the perception of *any* historical period and largely determine how it shall be studied. That retrospective influence constitutes one of the historian's occupational hazards. Hindsight is not an unmixed blessing; we can only try to maximize its advantages and minimize its disadvantages.

As it happened, scholarly interest in the sectional conflict was already subsiding when Silbey's article appeared. The civil rights revolution shifted attention to the problem of race, and thus to the study of slavery, emancipation, and reconstruction. Beyond that, young historians were being drawn toward other periods, fresher themes, indeed, into virtually whole new fields, such as women's history. And the progress of quantification had a transforming effect on the choice and design of many research projects. As the years passed, Silbey could presumably rejoice in the fact that the "pernicious influence" of the Civil War on the study of antebellum politics was declining. Yet by 1982, when he published another article on the subject, he had succumbed to the fascination of Civil War causality. He declared that the problem remained "open and alive to additional historical exploration," and that it "must be considered yet again if we are to understand it fully and accurately."[27]

At the same time, Silbey found new reason to be vexed with

---

[26]Joel H. Silbey, "The Civil War Synthesis in American Political History," *Civil War History,* X (1964), 130–140.

[27]Joel H. Silbey, "The Surge of Republican Power: Partisan Antipathy, American Social Conflict, and the Coming of the Civil War," in Stephen E. Maizlish and John J. Kushma, eds., *Essays on American Antebellum Politics, 1840–1860* (College Station, Texas, 1982), 201.

"traditional" historians. Their recent writings about the sectional conflict, he complained, had not taken the findings of the "new political history" properly into account. And "unfortunately," he added, "few of the new political historians themselves have tried to deal directly with the coming of the Civil War." His essay, to which I shall return later, was undertaken as a step toward repairing that deficiency and toward "integrating the factors unearthed by students of the new political history into our understanding of the breakup of the Union."[28]

One member of the "new political history" school who had previously displayed a persistent interest in the coming of the Civil War was Lee Benson, most notably, perhaps, in an essay titled: "Explanations of American Civil War Causation: A Critical Assessment and a Modest Proposal to Reorient and Reorganize the Social Sciences." Exasperated with the American "historiographic system" for its failure to reach scientific agreement on the causes of the Civil War, Benson elected to deal with the subject by assimilating it into the more general problem of "internal war" and the still more general problem of violence. He proposed creation of an institute for research on violence, funded with one billion dollars over a twenty-year period. In the meantime, he offered his own "tentative explanation of Civil War causation," simply as an illustration of how theory could be used to "generate hypotheses about a specific internal war." According to Benson's own summary, "a small group of Southern Nationalists" brought about secession and thus, "much more than any other group," pushed the nation into civil war. They succeeded in doing so largely because the American political system, particularly the presidency as it was shaped by Andrew Jackson, proved "favorable to their cause."[29] This verdict, which combined an unusual institutional interpretation with an old-fashioned conspir-

---

[28]*Ibid.,* 203–206.

[29]The essay is in Benson, *Scientific Study of History.* See especially pp. 316n, 323, 326, 331. Benson was not the first historian to link the coming of the Civil War with the Jackson presidency. Charles M. Wiltse, in *John C. Calhoun: Nullifier, 1829–1839* (Indianapolis, 1949), 172, declared: "If any single date can be fixed as that on which a given event was predetermined, the Civil War became inevitable on December 10, 1832." That was the date of Jackson's proclamation to the people of South Carolina in response to the ordinance of nullification.

acy thesis did not prove to be a major break-through in Civil War historiography.

The coming of the Civil War was an event of such magnitude and complexity that it may be useful at this point to divide the subject somewhat arbitrarily into three overlapping categories as follows: *First,* the structural background of the war, which embraces all the social and psychological conditions and all the institutional arrangements impinging upon it, such as the revolutionary tradition, the constitutional order, the slaveholding system, the staple-crop economy, revivalistic religion, the progress of public education, mass immigration and nativism, republican ideology, literary romanticism, racial attitudes, and the process of westward expansion. *Second,* the critical background of the war, which refers to the progressive intrusion of the slavery question into American public life from the founding of the nation to the showdown in 1860. *Third,* the immediate background of the war, including the election of 1860, the secession movement, and the precipitation of hostilities.

The structural background of the Civil War is obviously a subject too complex and unbounded for treatment merely in the narrative manner. Its investigation requires theoretical moorings, analytical modes, and conceptual frameworks other than, or in addition to, chronological ones. In short, the task seems well suited for scholars using the methods of social science. Although most of the accumulated writing on the subject has come from "traditional" historians, an impressive example of what the new "new history" can accomplish is the extensive work of cliometricians on the slaveholding economy. As for practitioners of the "new political history," their scholarship has begun to illuminate both the structural and the critical background of the war, but to simplify matters, I shall treat it primarily in the latter category.

One good example of the structural approach, however, is a thoughtful essay by Thomas B. Alexander titled "The Civil War as Institutional Fulfillment." In some respects following the lead of Benson, Alexander maintained that certain features of the American political system "directly facilitated the onset of the Civil War." For instance, the symbolic importance of the presidency, which proved so crucial in 1860, would have been considerably reduced if the Constitutional Convention had created a

plural rather than a unitary executive, as some of its members proposed.[30] Similarly, the manner of electing Presidents, the haphazard erection of states, and the voters' cultivated fidelity to party—all paved the way to disunion.[31] Alexander's argument was persuasive as far as it went, but he looked at only one side of the ledger. The institutional arrangements of which he spoke were at least partly offset by others that tended to postpone the day of reckoning between North and South. If a unicameral national legislature had been established as the Virginia plan proposed, if representation in Congress and in the Electoral College had been based upon free population alone as northern delegates desired, if amendment of the Constitution had been made easier, then a critical number of southerners might well have been driven much earlier to the conviction that the slaveholding system was no longer safe within the Union.

The critical background of the Civil War—that is, the process by which the slavery issue became a disruptive force in national politics—is more limitable in both scope and time than the structural background of the war. Attention centers mainly on the political universe, primarily in the period 1819–1860 and even more intensively in the years 1846–1860. Election results and various other records provide rich data for quantitative investigation, while the problems of how political behavior was motivated and how it was related to the rest of the culture, invite the application of social science theory and methods. Yet sequential connections were also important, and there is a need for narrative as well as analysis—not story-telling narrative, but "thick" narrative, which examines the complex tissues of change as it proceeds along a chronological course.

Among the first works of the "new political history" directly affecting interpretation of the coming of the Civil War were two studies of congressional voting behavior published in 1967. Joel

[30]One of the main reasons for the establishment of the unitary executive was that the members of the Convention had George Washington clearly in mind when they designed the office. Thus Alexander's line of reasoning could lead to the conclusion that Washington, just by existing in 1787, contributed significantly to the disruption of the Union seventy-four years later.

[31]The essay, an expanded version of Alexander's presidential address to the Southern Historical Association, appeared in the *Journal of Southern History,* XLVII (1981), 3–32.

L. Silbey's *Shrine of Party* covered both houses for the years 1841–1852, while Thomas B. Alexander's *Sectional Stress and Party Strength* extended from 1836 to 1860 but covered only the House of Representatives. Silbey struggled to give his book a revisionist cast by emphasizing the persistent strength of partisanship in contrast with the more episodic intrusions of sectionalism. But his conclusion that party loyalty predominated in the 1840s, *except* on slavery issues and *except* in intervals of crisis, such as 1849–1850, amounted to little more than insisting that the bottle was half empty instead of half full. As many reviewers noted, both the Silbey and Alexander volumes actually tended to confirm statistically the traditional picture of a sturdy party system increasingly battered and weakened by sectional antagonism.[32]

In any case, to treat sectionalism and partisanship strictly as competing loyalties, with one or the other necessarily predominant, is to overlook their progressive interpenetration and the resulting decline in the number of congressmen (principally southern Whigs and northern Democrats) who had to choose between them. Consider, for instance, Silbey's assertion that the voting on the Kansas-Nebraska bill in 1854 revealed "a degree of party unity within both parties despite the intense sectional rhetoric in Congress."[33] Thus we have party "unity" contrasted with sectional "rhetoric." But the fact is that the division on the measure was even more sectional than partisan. The measure received 72% of the Democratic votes in both houses and 27% of the Whig votes. It received 89% of the southern votes and 36% of the northern votes. What these figures revealed was the extent to which the parties themselves had taken on sectional colorings.

In their analyses, Alexander relied partly, and Silbey wholly,

upon Guttman scaling, a technique for measuring intensity of attitudes, positive and negative, on a particular issue or cluster of related issues. Although devised for another purpose, the technique has proved usable and useful in roll-call studies, but it is not automatically scientific. The procedure involves certain qualitative and arbitrary decisions which, if misguided, can lead to bizarre results. For example, Silbey's scalograms on the "compromise issue" in 1850 are simply out of touch with reality. They indicate, among other things: that there were "pro-compromise" majorities in both houses and that only 31% of the members of Congress were "anti-compromise"; that southerners were far more "pro-compromise" than northerners (86% to 21% in the Senate and 63% to 44% in the House); that only one out of eighteen southern Democratic senators was "anti-compromise"; that John Wales of Delaware, one of only four men to vote for passage of all six compromise measures in the Senate, was nevertheless "anti-compromise"; and that of the twenty senators from the future Confederate state appearing on the scalogram, every single one was more "pro-compromise" than Stephen A. Douglas. Nineteen of those twenty, incidentally, appear on a scalogram of "sectionalism" for the same session of Congress and score an average of 17.2 on a scale of 18, with the 18 representing the pro-southern extreme; yet all nineteen turn up as "pro-compromise" on the "compromise" scalogram.[34] They include such men as Andrew P. Butler, Jefferson Davis, Robert M. T. Hunter, James M. Mason, and Pierre Soulé, all of whom were actually enemies of the Compromise from beginning to end.[35]

It is in fact very clear from the voting record that only about a quarter of the members of Congress can be classified as "pro-compromise" in the sense of lending some measure of support to

[32]Joel L. Silbey, *Shrine of Party: Congressional Voting Behavior, 1841–1852* (Pittsburgh, 1967); Thomas B. Alexander, *Sectional Stress and Party Strength: A Study of Roll-Call Voting Patterns in the United States House of Representatives, 1836–1860* (Nashville, 1967). See the reviews of Silbey's book by David Donald in *Political Science Quarterly*, LXXXIII (1968), 455–456; and by Frank Otto Gatell in *Journal of American History*, LIV (1967–1968), 402–403; and the reviews of both books by Charles B. Dew in *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, LII (1968–1969), 182–184; and by Richard P. McCormick in *Journal of Southern History*, XXXIII (1967), 568–569, and in *Journal of American History*, LIV (1967–1968), 893–894.

[33]Silbey, *Shrine of Party*, 145. Silbey quotes Gerald Wolff, but Wolff's conclusion was that "both party and sectional influences played a major role in determining the voting behavior of Senators on the issue." Gerald W. Wolff, "Party and Section: The Senate and the Kansas-Nebraska Bill," *Civil War History*, XVIII (1972), 293–311, quotation on p. 307.

[34]Silbey, *Shrine of Party*, 109–114, 189–200. In calculating percentages, I have corrected one error. According to Table 8.6 on p. 112, there were 25 "pro-compromise" (scale-type 0–3) senators, 19 of them southerners, but a count of such senators on the list of scale positions, pp. 189–200, indicates 30 classified as pro-compromise, 24 of them southerners. This latter count is confirmed by examination of the Guttman scale on the compromise issue as it appears in Silbey's Ph.D. dissertation, "Congressional Voting Behavior and the Southern-Western Alliance, 1841–1852" (University of Iowa, 1963), 520–521.

[35]On July 31, 1850, for instance, those five senators not only voted three times for indefinite postponement of the "Omnibus Bill," but also joined wholeheartedly in the strategy of destroying the measure by striking out most of its provisions. See *Cong. Globe*, 31 Cong., 1 sess., Appendix, 1479–1483.

both northern and southern portions of the compromise package; and that only about a quarter of those true compromisers were southerners—most of them from the border states. Southerners in Congress voted overwhelmingly for the pro-southern measures in the Compromise of 1850 and overwhelmingly against the pro-northern measures. That scarcely adds up to a pro-compromise posture. By joining forces with the sectional supporters of each bill as it came up separately for consideration, the little band of compromisers in each chamber assembled the votes necessary for passage. The result, as David M. Potter has suggested, was more of an "armistice" than a compromise.[36]

Quantification went astray in this instance partly because the question of compromise was not suited to Guttman scaling; for, while the strongest proponents of compromise favored all the compromise measures, the fiercest opponents of compromise favored some of those same measures, very often even a majority of them. But in addition, the roll calls that Silbey used in his scalograms on the compromise issue were not well chosen, and often the votes that he identified as "pro-compromise" were actually pro-southern.[37] The principal consequence of these misjudgments was great exaggeration of the support for compromise among members of Congress in general and among southern members in particular.

Nothing in the critical background of the Civil War is more crucial than the political revolution in which the Whig party disappeared and was replaced by an entirely sectional Republican organization. This transition from the second to the third American party system extended over a number of years, though the

---

[36]David M. Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848–1861* (New York, 1976), 90; Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Dred Scott Case: Its Significance in American Law and Politics* (New York, 1978), 162–163.

[37]Silbey, "Congressional Voting Behavior," 521, 527–528. The ten Senate roll calls scaled by Silbey were associated with the abortive "Omnibus Bill," rather than with the actual passage of the compromise measures, and in at least half of them, Silbey's designation of a vote as "pro-compromise" or "anti-compromise" appears to have been wholly arbitrary. More striking is the fact that of the thirteen House roll calls scaled, eleven dealt with the Texas question and none dealt with California. Yet a vote for the Texas bill or for one of the territorial bills was in itself a pro-southern vote; it became a vote for compromise only if it was accompanied by a vote for the admission of California. One should note also that two parts of the compromise which evoked strong sectional reactions—the Fugitive Slave bill and the bill abolishing the slave trade in the District of Columbia—are omitted entirely from Silbey's "compromise" scalograms.

---

focal event was the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854. The transition figures prominently in the "critical realignment" synthesis of voting behavior, but that model contributes little except the principle of periodicity to explaining why such a revolution should have occurred. The brief explanations offered now and then by Walter Dean Burnham, the leading realignment scholar, seem to have been derived from the current historical scholarship. By the 1970s, significantly, Burnham had embraced the ethnocultural thesis in its reductive, pietist-vs.-ritualist version.[38]

The ethnocultural interpretation introduced by Lee Benson in his study of Jacksonian politics was offered as a rebuttal and an alternative to the economic explanation of political behavior that had been associated especially with Charles A. Beard. But when the ethnoculturalists applied the thesis to the 1850s, they were disposed to join hands with Beard in depreciating the significance of the slavery controversy as a political determinant. The struggle over the Kansas-Nebraska Act, they maintained, was of less importance in bringing about the disruption of the second party system than ethnic and religious conflicts at the local level over such issues as prohibition, sabbatarianism, and Know-Nothingism.[39]

This might be called the observational or analytic version of the ethnocultural interpretation. Based upon perceptions gained from intensive studies at state and local levels, it stressed the complexity and mutability of American politics in the early 1850s, while at the same time discounting as an oversimplification the antislavery explanation of the rise of the Republican party. But when certain ethnocultural historians undertook to synthesize—to impose conceptual order on the observed diversity—they themselves carried oversimplification about as far as it could go.

---

[38]Walter Dean Burnham, "Theory and Voting Research," in his *The Current Crisis in American Politics* (New York, 1982), 80, 84–86 (an essay first published in the *American Political Science Review*, LXVIII [1974], 1002–1023). Compare with Burnham's explanation in 1967 in "Party Systems and the Political Process," in William Nisbet Chambers and Walter Dean Burnham, eds., *The American Party Systems: Stages of Political Development* (New York, 1967), 288, 294–295.

[39]See, for example, Michael Fitzgibbon Holt, *Forging a Majority: The Formation of the Republican Party in Pittsburgh, 1848–1860* (New Haven, Conn., 1969), 145–146, 307–308; Ronald P. Formisano, *The Birth of Mass Political Parties: Michigan, 1827–1861* (Princeton N.J., 1971), 217–218, 235, 252–253.

According to Richard J. Jensen, for instance, "When Americans became converted to religion in the nineteenth century (in 1800 few were churchgoers), those people who were psychologically more modern chose pietistic denominations, while the traditionalists favored the liturgical churches." To this remarkable account of how American church membership originated, Jensen added the flat assertion: "Pietists voted mostly Republican and liturgicals Democratic, that much is certain."[40] Which meant that the character of Republicanism was largely determined by the pietistic urge to regenerate society. Reading Jensen convinced Burnham that "pietistic revivalism provided both the absolutism and the moral energy required to bring about the realignments of the 1850s and, hence, the war against secession and slavery."[41] Thus, while the observational version of the ethnocultural interpretation minimized the emotional and moral appeal of the slavery issue among Republicans and Democrats alike, the reductive version portrayed the new Republican party as a body of fervid, self-righteous crusaders for a better world, including a world without slavery.

Two questions arise at this point, one about the general validity of the ethnocultural thesis, the other regarding its relevance to the coming of the Civil War. On the first question, scholarly opinion is mixed. Various critics have exposed the methodological and conceptual weaknesses of the thesis. For instance, church membership, itself difficult to quantify accurately, is of doubtful reliability as an indicator of the religious attitudes and "belief systems" that supposedly governed political behavior. Also, large segments of the population proved difficult or impossible to incorporate in the ethnocultural model—specifically, (1) southerners, who were more often than not both pietistic *and* Democratic; (2) Methodists, the largest Protestant denomination, who appear sometimes in the pietist column and sometimes in the antipietist column; and (3) the many people who were hostile or indifferent to religion.[42] Nevertheless, as the perception of a gen-

eral tendency frequently discernible, the ethnocultural interpretation must be taken into account, whether it is fully accepted or not. The pervasiveness of religious and ethic influences in American politics has been amply demonstrated. What remains hypothetical is the assertion that those influences were consistently the prime determinants of voting behavior.

As for the second question (relevance to the coming of the Civil War), the observational version of the ethnocultural interpretation enriched scholarly understanding of the political realignment of the 1850s, but in the process, and especially in depreciating the slavery issue, it made the emergence of the Republican party more perplexing than before. Michael F. Holt, who had joined other ethnoculturalists in minimizing the slavery issue, became dissatisfied with what remained as an explanation of the realignment and accordingly developed a provocative new interpretation based largely upon two questionable propositions: that the second party system broke up because it ran out of issues, and that the real concern of the 1850s was not slavery but the preservation of those American values associated with the word "republicanism."[43]

The observational version also did little to explain why the anti-Nebraska coalition soon overshadowed nativism as a political force and grew so swiftly to become the North's majority party. Such explanation, to be sure, was not the purpose of the ethnoculturalists, who were concerned primarily with mass behavior at the polls. But what this illustrates is that social-science history, with its highly directional, problem-solving purposes, tends to trade comprehensive grasp for penetrative power.

The reductive version of the ethnocultural thesis, aligning aggressive, culturally imperialistic pietists against defensive, pluralistic ritualists, had the advantage of boldness and clarity, but not of credibility. A stereotypic characterization of Republican-

[40] Richard J. Jensen, *Grass Roots Politics: Parties, Issues, and Voters, 1854–1983* (Westport, Conn., 1983), 5, 7. See also Jensen, *The Winning of the Midwest: Social and Political Conflict, 1888–1896* (Chicago, 1971), 62–69.

[41] Burnham, "Theory and Voting Research," 80.

[42] For critiques of the ethnocultural thesis, see James E. Wright, "The Ethnocultural Model of Voting: A Behavioral and Historical Critique," *American Behavioral Scientist,* XVI

(1972–1973), 653–674; Richard L. McCormick, "Ethno-Cultural Interpretations of Nineteenth-Century American Voting Behavior," *Political Science Quarterly,* LXXXIX (1974), 351–377; Eric Foner, *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War* (New York, 1980), 16–19; and the articles cited in footnote 20 above. Kleppner and Formisano class Methodists with antipietists. Jensen puts them with the pietists, as historians of American religion are generally disposed to do.

[43] Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York, 1978).

ism that would surely have pleased Jefferson Davis was its principal contribution to the literature of the sectional conflict.

Of course, the Republican party was actually a congeries of unusually heterogeneous elements. If one attempts to apply the ethnocultural stereotype even to the members of Lincoln's Cabinet, the results are hilarious. William H. Seward, despite his Whig background, was a member of the liturgical Episcopalian church and behaviorally an antipietist. Salmon P. Chase would seem to have been the ideal pietist in the Cabinet, but his religiosity was largely derived from his uncle and guardian, an Episcopal bishop. Montgomery Blair, probably the most puritanical Cabinet member in his personal conduct, was a Presbyterian all right, but also a former Jacksonian Democrat who returned to the Democratic fold after the war. Gideon Welles regarded himself, perhaps not with entire accuracy, as a Jeffersonian freethinker. And no one is likely to classify Simon Cameron as a pietist. Are we nevertheless to believe, simply on the basis of correlations between voting and church membership, that the nearly two million men who voted for Lincoln in 1860 fitted the stereotype far better than this handful of advisers?

The secession crisis of 1860–1861, though in a sense part of the critical background of the Civil War, invites separate consideration because it was during that climactic interval that the background blended into the foreground and the causes of the war began to produce their chain of effects. Until the attack on Fort Sumter, various kinds of voting constituted much of the important action in the crisis—voting at the national party conventions, in the presidential election, in the secession elections and conventions, in the congressional efforts at compromise, and at the Washington Peace Conference. Consequently, there is rich material and good reason for quantitative analysis of both mass and elite political behavior. But at the same time, one must pay very close attention to the sequence, interaction, and reverberation of events, as well as to the play of contingency and individual personality upon the alternative possibilities that clustered along the path from election to civil war.

Secession was a very formal action, hard to set in motion and only partly successful when it did get under way. It is difficult to conceive of any other reasonably likely event besides the election

of a Republican President that could have provoked a secession crisis in 1860 or in the years immediately following. For the student of Civil War causation, then, the key question about Lincoln's election is this: How did the Republicans, after losing in 1856, manage to capture the presidency in 1860? What made the difference? More specifically: Was it a continuing growth of antislavery and antisouthern sentiment in the North as a result of such events as the Lecompton controversy and the Dred Scott decision? Was it the broadening of the Republican appeal to include other issues besides antislavery? Was it Republican success in absorbing much of the northern nativist vote by 1860? Did the split in the Democratic party, which shifted Stephen A. Douglas somewhat toward the antislavery side, work to the advantage or disadvantage of the Republicans? Did the nomination of Lincoln instead of Seward (openly antinativist and considered the more radical) secure victory where there would otherwise have been defeat? Practitioners of the "new political history" have seldom addressed these questions directly. They have concentrated on who voted for whom in 1860 and especially on whether the various ethnic groups supported or opposed the Republican cause.[44] Their studies have thus far only begun to penetrate the reasons for the surge of Republican power between 1856 and 1860.[45]

In any case, the heart of the matter is southern secession, for it was the most extraordinary action in the sectional crisis—the one requiring the greatest amount of initiative. Quantitative studies have already produced much new information, particularly with respect to who voted for and against secession. In 1960, Seymour Martin Lipset offered statistical evidence that lesser southern folk supported John Breckinridge as a matter of Democratic party loyalty, but then opposed secession as a matter of class interest; while large slaveholders made the same switch in reverse, voting with partisan loyalty for the more moderate John Bell, but then allow-

[44]See, for example, the essays by George H. Daniels, Robert P. Swierenga, Paul J. Kleppner, and James M. Berquist in Frederick C. Luebke, ed., *Ethnic Voters and the Election of Lincoln* (Lincoln, Neb., 1971).

[45]One such beginning is Dale Baum, *The Civil War Party System: The Case of Massachusetts, 1848–1876* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1984), 24–54, wherein it is demonstrated that Massachusetts Know-Nothings contributed little to Lincoln's victory in 1860. A forthcoming book by William E. Gienapp promises to shed much new light on the emergence and triumph of the Republican party.

ing class feelings to dictate their support of secession.[46] Later writing on the subject rejected or severely revised the Lipset formulation. Especially impressive was a study of three Gulf states by Peyton McCrary, Clark Miller, and Dale Baum, which lent some support to Lipset's finding of realignment but little to his class-interest explanation. The study revealed significant differences from state to state, with the largest amount of realignment occurring in Alabama and the least in Louisiana.[47]

Yet what Joel Silbey found sadly lacking in the literature on the coming of the Civil War was an application of the ethnocultural thesis to the explanation of secession. So in his 1982 essay he set out to repair that omission. Acknowledging that the thesis did not directly fit southern politics, he asserted that what counted most was the southern perception of northern politics. The anti-slavery aspect of Republicanism did not constitute enough in itself to account for secession, Silbey maintained. What the secessionists truly feared, being principally Democrats, was the same thing that northern Democrats feared—the cultural imperialism of the Republicans, whose rule "would lead to an unacceptably restrictive society with a dominant, snooping, interfering government forcing conformity to a narrow set of behavioral norms." Thus southern defense of the peculiar institution was just part of the defense of all those pluralistic values that Democrats everywhere held so dear. With Lincoln's election, the secessionists took decisive action because they realized, said Silbey, that "the same power used to defeat drunken Irish Catholics could be used to destroy slavery."[48]

Perhaps the first thing to be noted about this contribution to the Civil War synthesis is that Silbey did not build his argument on a foundation of quantitative analysis. Instead, he relied entirely on the kind of evidence that he had denigrated in his 1964 essay—namely, letters, speeches, and editorials. Furthermore, only about a third of the primary sources that he cited were asso-

[46]Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics* (2nd ed., Baltimore, 1981), 372–384.

[47]Peyton McCrary, Clark Miller, and Dale Baum, "Class and Party in the Secession Crisis: Voting Behavior in the Deep South, 1856–1861," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* VIII (1978), 429–457. For Georgia, see Michael P. Johnson, *Toward a Patriarchal Republic: The Secession of Georgia* (Baton Rouge, La., 1977), 63–78, 206–210.

[48]Silbey, "Surge of Republican Power," quotations from pp. 227, 229.

ciated with the seceding states. He justified quoting indiscriminately from northern and southern Democratic newspapers on the ground that they all had similar "sentiments" where ethnocultural matters were concerned.[49] That, however, was not an established fact to be assumed, but rather an assertion to be proved. Furthermore, a sentiment allegedly so common in both North and South seems of limited value as an explanation of sectional conflict and civil war.

Methodology aside, there are also substantive weaknesses in this ingenious argument equating secessionism with southern Democrats, and southern Democrats with antipietism. The first part of the equation is accurate only as a general tendency, with some notable exceptions. In Alabama, for example, it appears that a majority of Democrats opposed secession while the Bell supporters, if they voted at all, favored it.[50] The second part of the equation is not accurate even as a tendency. Even assuming that the reductive distinction between pietism and antipietism has merit, southerners were predominantly members of pietistic rather than liturgical churches. The South had its own brand of puritanism, its own sabbatarian and temperance crusades, its own extensive networks of social control. Indeed, because of security considerations, the slaveholders' South was the most regulated society in the country and the one in which freedom of expression was most at hazard. Neither Silbey nor anyone else has produced evidence that the secessionist Democrats were peculiarly libertarian and permissive in their social attitudes, or peculiarly sympathetic toward ethnic minorities and nonconformists. Furthermore, the alleged threat of cultural imperialism that northern Democrats were supposedly resisting came from Republican control of state and local governments, but there was no possibility of such control in the South and thus no Republican threat to any part of the southern social order, except slavery.

Of course, southerners did sometimes denounce northerners, and especially New Englanders, as puritan zealots, but that was part of the rhetoric of controversy. They also denounced the North as a land of deviants and libertines, of "Socialists, . . . revo-

[49]*Ibid.*, 213n.

[50]McCrary, Miller, and Baum, "Class and Party in the Secession Crisis," 444–445.

lutionists, rioters, anti-renters, Infidels, Mormons, Shakers, Greeleyites, Fusionists, Owenites, Free Lovers," and of "disgusting experiments in new forms of society."[51] For what little it might be worth, one could easily put together a string of quotations showing antebellum southerners to have been moralistic bigots, rather than freedom-loving pluralists, in their view of northern society. It should be added that when Confederate propagandists vilified Lincoln, they portrayed him, not as a puritan fanatic, but rather as a blasphemous, lecherous, pornographic drunkard. That was a puritanical vision of the ultimately evil man.

Explaining the course of events from secession to the firing on Fort Sumter constitutes a different kind of historical problem. What happened did not flow wholly out of accumulated, irresistible social forces; it was also shaped by random influences, contingent circumstances, personal impulses, and deliberate choices. The important decision-making was concentrated in the hands of a relatively few people, who cannot easily be unitized and treated as statistics. In studying the outbreak of hostilities, one is impressed again with the irregularity of the past, with the uniqueness of each moment, with the individuality and unpredictability of human behavior.

Consider, as one small example, the ambiguity of motive and the irony of consequence in Major Robert Anderson's decision to move his troops from Fort Moultrie to Fort Sumter on December 26, 1860. Anderson, a professional soldier and a southerner, wanted to avoid surrendering his command, but he also wanted to avoid armed conflict. His removal to the more defensible Sumter, unauthorized by his superiors, was an irenic effort at disengagement. But Moultrie in December had nothing like the enormous symbolic meaning attached to Sumter by the following April, when the guns of a proud new republic opened fire on the fort. Thus, by postponing the day of reckoning in Charleston

harbor, Anderson greatly increased its impact. He alone determined the place and nature of the confrontation that erupted into civil war. I can see no way to quantify the many ramifications of his action and no better way to handle such a subject than by employing the traditional skills of the historian.

From the *Annaliste* point of view, a single event of this kind amounts to just a surface bubble on the vast stream of the *longue durée*. But who is to say that against the background of the ages, a critical moment counts for less than a stagnant century? Before we accept the invidious distinction between structure and event, let us at least be clear about which is the more fundamental. Social structure is a pattern of regularity perceived in human behavior, and regular behavior is essentially the continuing repetition of common events. Therefore, events are, in a sense, the building-blocks of social structure. Of course, the biggest structure of any kind is the physical universe, and it originated according to current cosmological theory, in that primordial event raffishly labeled the "big bang." It seems to me, with the historiography of the Civil War very much in mind: (1) that the distinction between structure and event may be misleading because the difference between them is so far from absolute; (2) that one must, after all, know events in order to perceive structures and consider structures in order to understand events; and (3) that while a structureless history would have little meaning, an eventless history would have little interest.

Also, I do not find in the recent historiography of the Civil War anything approaching "cultural conflict" between traditional and scientific historians.[52] For one thing, the latter are hybrids, not pure scientists. The members of the ethnocultural school, for instance, rely heavily upon traditional sources and methods as well

---

[51] *Richmond Enquirer*, quoted in Avery Craven, *The Coming of the Civil War* (New York, 1942), 300. For an ambitious, eccentric, and unpersuasive effort to quantify the causes of the Civil War—one in which it is calculated, for instance, that "northern preferences to eliminate slavery were more than twenty times as strong as those to preserve the Union"—see Gerald Gunderson, "The Origin of the American Civil War," *Journal of Economic History*, XXXIV (1974), 915–945, quotation from p. 944.

[52] Silbey, "Surge of Republican Power," 204, misrepresents me as dismissing the new political history with the words "often synthetic and modish ... reflecting the latest fashions in behavioral science theory and terminology but adding little to the substance of explanation." Anyone taking the trouble to read this passage in *The South and Three Sectional Crises* (Baton Rouge, La., 1980), 3, will discover that I was referring, not to the methods and achievements of the new political history, but rather to the trendy overuse, by historians in general, of certain concepts picked up from other disciplines, and that I was talking particularly about the concept of "modernization." It may be worth adding that my cautionary words echoed similar sentiments expressed even more emphatically by one of the leading new political historians, Ronald P. Formisano, in his essay, "Toward a Reorientation of Jacksonian Politics," *Journal of American History*, LXIII (1976), 64–65.

as upon quantification and social-science theory. Their data may be more systematically gathered, but their inferences from the data are not more scientifically drawn than those of traditional historians. At the same time, the new history has been welcomed rather than rejected by the great majority of historians, who have made serious efforts to incorporate its findings in their teaching and scholarship.[53] It is true that the new methods have penetrated rather slowly into graduate history programs, but we have reached the day when it can be said with some assurance that any young person who enters the vocation without extensive training in social-science theory and methods does so at considerable risk to his or her professional future.

Still, history, if it is to remain history, should submit only to being improved, and not to being dominated, by social science methodology. More would be lost than gained in the complete transformation that one ethnocultural historian was envisioning when he declared that the "proper objective of historical practice" is the development of social theory.[54] This pronouncement runs contrary to the whole spirit of history, which is inclusive, rather than exclusive, and pluralistic in purpose. Surely, no improvement in method would be worth losing touch with the contextual richness of the past and the individuality of human experience. Those are the special qualities of history in its classic mode, the study of which promises, not social solutions, but personal enrichment of the life of the mind.

---

[53]For a different view on this point, see J. Morgan Kousser, "The Revivalism of Narrative: A Response to Recent Criticisms of Quantitative History," *Social Science History*, VIII (1984), 133–149.

[54]Kleppner, *Third Electoral System*, xx.

Problematic Panacea: Presbyterian Missionaries and the Allotment of Indian Lands in the Late Nineteenth Century

Michael C. Coleman

The author is member of the English department in the University of Jyväskylä, Finland.

"No PANACEA for the Indian problem was more persistently proposed than the allotment of land to the Indians in severalty," writes Francis Paul Prucha of the late nineteenth–century crusade to reform United States Indian policy. "It was an article of faith with the reformers that civilization was impossible without the incentive to work that came only from individual ownership of a piece of property." Allotment was "part of the drive to individualize the Indian," which "became the obsession" of those educators, civil servants, politicians, clergymen, and others who dedicated themselves to Indian "uplift."[1] During the nineteenth century many treaties included provisions for alloting lands to individual Indians who met certain requirements. Much evidence was, therefore, available, writes Prucha, to show that the practice

---

[1]Francis Paul Prucha, *American Indian Policy in Crisis: Christian Reformers and the Indian, 1865–1900* (Norman, Okla., 1976), 227–228, 231–232, and chap. 8. On late nineteenth-century reform, see also Prucha, ed., *Americanizing the American Indians: Writings by the "Friends of the Indian," 1880–1900* (Lincoln, Neb., 1973); Frederick E. Hoxie, "Beyond Sav-