

The Yankee Problem in America

by Clyde Wilson

Since the 2000 presidential election, much attention has been paid to a map showing the sharp geographical division between the two candidates' support. Gore prevailed in the power- and plunder-seeking Deep North (Northeast, Upper Midwest, Pacific Coast) and Bush in the regions inhabited by productive and decent Americans. There is nothing new about this. Historically speaking, it is just one more manifestation of the Yankee problem.

As indicated by these books (listed at the end), scholars are at last starting to pay some attention to one of the most important and most neglected subjects in United States history — the Yankee problem.

By Yankee I do not mean everybody from north of the Potomac and Ohio. Lots of them have always been good folks. The firemen who died in the World Trade Center on September 11 were Americans.

The politicians and TV personalities who stood around telling us what we are to think about it are Yankees.

I am using the term historically to designate that peculiar ethnic group descended from New Englanders, who can be easily recognized by their arrogance, hypocrisy, greed, lack of congeniality, and penchant for ordering other people around.

Puritans long ago abandoned anything that might be good in their religion but have never given up the notion that they are the chosen saints whose mission is to make America, and the world, into the perfection of their own image.

Hillary Rodham Clinton, raised a Northern Methodist in Chicago, is a museum-quality specimen of the Yankee — self-righteous, ruthless, and self-aggrandizing. Northern Methodism and Chicago were both, in their formative periods, hotbeds of abolitionist, high tariff Black Republicanism. The Yankee temperament, it should be noted, makes a neat fit with the Stalinism that was brought into the Deep North by later immigrants.

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The ethnic division between Yankees and other Americans goes back to earliest colonial times.

Up until the War for Southern Independence, Southerners were considered to be the American mainstream and Yankees were considered to be the "peculiar" people.

Because of a long campaign of cultural imperialism and the successful military imperialism engineered by the Yankees, the South, since the war, has been considered the problem, the deviation from the true American norm. **Historians have made an industry of explaining why the South is different** (and evil, for that which defies the "American" as now established, is by definition evil). Is the South different because of slavery? white supremacy? the climate? pellagra? illiteracy? poverty? guilt? defeat? Celtic wildness rather than Anglo-Saxon sobriety?

Unnoticed in all this literature was **a hidden assumption**: the North is normal, the standard of all things American and good. Anything that does not conform is a problem to be explained and a condition to be annihilated. What about that hidden assumption? Should not historians be interested in understanding how the North got to be the way it is? Indeed, is there any question in American history more important?

According to standard accounts of American history (i.e., Northern mythology), New Englanders fought the Revolution and founded glorious American freedom as had been planned by the "Puritan Fathers." Southerners, who had always been of questionable character, because of their fanatic devotion to slavery, wickedly rebelled against government of, by, and for the people, were put down by the armies of the Lord, and should be ever grateful for not having been exterminated. (This is clearly the view of the anonymous Union Leaguer from Portland, Maine, who recently sent me a chamber pot labeled "Robert E. Lee's soup tureen.") And out of their benevolence and devotion to the ideal of freedom, the North struck the chains from the suffering black people. (They should be forever grateful, also.

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Take a look at the Boston statue with happy blacks adoring the feet of Col. Robert Gould Shaw.)

Aside from the fact that every generalization in this standard history is false, an obvious defect in it is that, for anyone familiar with American history before the War, it is clear that **"Southern" was American and Yankees were the problem. America was Washington and Jefferson, the Louisiana Purchase and the Battle of New Orleans, John Randolph and Henry Clay, Daniel Morgan, Daniel Boone, and Francis Marion.**

Southerners had made the Constitution, **saved it under Jefferson from the Yankees**, fought the wars, acquired the territory, and settled the West, including the Northwest. To most Americans, in Pennsylvania and Indiana as well as Virginia and Georgia, this was a basic view up until about 1850.

New England had been a threat, a nuisance, and a negative force in the progress of America. Northerners, including some patriotic New Englanders, believed this as much as Southerners.

When Washington Irving, whose family were among the early Anglo-Dutch settlers of New York, wrote the story about the "Headless Horseman," he was **ridiculing Yankees**. The prig Ichabod Crane had come over from Connecticut and made himself a nuisance. So a young man (New York young men were then normal young men rather than Yankees) played a trick on him and sent him fleeing back to Yankeeland where he belonged. James Fenimore Cooper, of another early New York family, felt the same way about New Englanders who appear unfavorably in his writings. Yet another New York writer, James Kirke Paulding (among many others) wrote a book defending the South and attacking abolitionists. It is not unreasonable to conclude that in Moby Dick, the New York Democrat Herman Melville modeled the fanatical Captain Ahab on the Yankee abolitionist. In fact, the term "Yankee" appears to originate in some mingling of Dutch and Indian words, to designate New Englanders. Obviously, both the Dutch New Yorkers and the Native Americans recognized them as "different."

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Young Abe Lincoln amused his neighbors in southern Indiana and Illinois, nearly all of whom, like his own family, had come from the South, with "Yankee jokes," stories making fun of dishonest peddlers from New England. They were the most popular stories in his repertoire, except for the dirty ones.

Right into the war, **Northerners opposed to the conquest of the South, blamed the conflict on fanatical New Englanders out for power and plunder, not on the good Americans in the South who had been provoked beyond bearing.**

Many people, and not only in the South, thought that Southerners, according to their nature, had been loyal to the Union, had served it, fought and sacrificed for it as long as they could. New Englanders, according to their nature, had always been grasping for themselves while proclaiming their righteousness and superiority.

The Yankees succeeded so well, by the long cultural war described in these volumes, and by the North's military victory, that there was no longer a Yankee problem. Now the Yankee was America and the South was the problem. America, the Yankee version, was all that was normal and right and good. Southerners understood who had won the war (not Northerners, though they had shed a lot of blood, but the accursed Yankees.) With some justification they began to regard all Northerners as Yankees, even the hordes of foreigners who had been hired to wear the blue.

Here is something closer to a real history of the United States: American freedom was not a legacy of the "Puritan Fathers," but of Virginians who proclaimed and spread constitutional rights. New England gets some credit for beginning the War of Independence. After the first few years, however, Yankees played little part. The war was fought and won in the South. Besides, New Englanders had good reasons for independence — they did not fit into the British Empire economically, since one of their main industries was smuggling, and the influential Puritan clergy hated the Church of England. Southerners, in fighting for independence, were actually going against their economic interests for the sake of principle.

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Once Southerners had gone into the Union (which a number of wise statesmen like Patrick Henry and George Mason warned them against), the Yankees began to show how they regarded the new federal government: as an instrument to be used for their own purposes. Southerners long continued to view the Union as a vehicle for mutual cooperation, as they often naively still do.

In the first Congress, Yankees demanded that the federal government continue the British subsidies to their fishing fleets. While Virginia and the other Southern states gave up their vast western lands for future new states, New Englanders demanded a special preserve for themselves (the "Western Reserve" in Ohio).

Under John Adams, the New England quest for power grew into a frenzy. They passed the Sedition Law to punish anti-government words (as long as they controlled the government) in clear violation of the Constitution. During the election of 1800 the preachers in New England told their congregations that Thomas Jefferson was a French Jacobin who would set up the guillotine in their town squares and declare women common property. (What else could be expected from a dissolute slaveholder?) In fact, Jefferson's well-known distaste for mixing of church and state rested largely on his dislike of the power of the New England self-appointed saints.

When Jeffersonians took power, **the New Englanders fought them with all their diminishing strength.** Their poet William Cullen Bryant regarded the Louisiana Purchase as nothing but a large swamp for Jefferson to pursue his atheistic penchant for science.

The War of 1812, the Second War of Independence, was decisive for the seemingly permanent discrediting of New England. **The Yankee ruling class opposed the war** even though it was begun by Southerners on behalf of **oppressed American seamen, most of whom were New Englanders.** **Yankees did not care about their oppressed poorer citizens because they were making big bucks smuggling into wartime Europe.** One New England congressman attacked young patriot **John C. Calhoun** as a backwoodsman who had never seen a sail and who was unqualified to deal with foreign policy.

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During the war Yankees traded with the enemy and talked openly of secession. (Southerners never spoke of secession in time of war.) Massachusetts refused to have its militia called into constitutional federal service even after invasion, and then, notoriously for years after, demanded that the federal government pay its militia expenses.

Historians have endlessly repeated that the "Era of Good Feelings" under President Monroe refers to the absence of party strife. Actually, the term was first used to describe the state of affairs in which New England traitorousness had declined to the point that a Virginia president could visit Boston without being mobbed.

Yankee political arrogance was soulmate to Yankee cultural arrogance. Throughout the antebellum period, New England literature was characterized and promoted as the American literature, and non-Yankee writers, in most cases much more talented and original, were ignored or slandered. Edgar Allan Poe had great fun ridiculing the literary pretensions of New Englanders, but they largely succeeded in dominating the idea of American literature into the 20th century. Generations of Americans have been cured of reading forever by being forced to digest dreary third-string New England poets as "American literature."

In 1789, a Connecticut Puritan preacher named Jedidiah Morse published the first book of American Geography. The trouble was, it was not an American geography but a Yankee geography. Most of the book was taken up with describing the virtues of New England. Once you got west of the Hudson River, as Morse saw it and conveyed to the world's reading public, the U.S. was a benighted land inhabited by lazy, dirty Scotch-Irish and Germans in the Middle States and lazy, morally depraved Southerners, corrupted and enervated by slavery. New Englanders were pure Anglo-Saxons with all virtues. The rest of the Americans were questionable people of lower or mongrel ancestry. The theme of New Englanders as pure Anglo-Saxons continued right down through the 20th century. The alleged saints of American equality operated on a theory of their racial superiority. While Catholics and Jews were, in the South, accepted and

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loyal Southerners, Yankees burned down convents and banished Jews from the Union Army lines.

A few years after Morse, Noah Webster, also from Connecticut, published his American Dictionary and American spelling book. The trouble was, it was not an American dictionary but a New England dictionary. As Webster declared in his preface, New Englanders spoke and spelled the purest and best form of English of any people in the world. Southerners and others ignored Webster and spelled and pronounced real English until after the War of Southern Independence.

As the books show, Yankees after the War of 1812 were acutely aware of their minority status. And here is the important point: they launched a deliberate campaign to take over control of the idea of "America."

The campaign was multi-faceted. Politically, they gained profits from the protective tariff and federal expenditures, both of which drained money from the South for the benefit of the North, and New England especially. Seeking economic advantage from legislation is nothing new in human history. But the New England greed was marked by its peculiar assumptions of moral superiority. New Englanders, who were selling their products in a market from which competition had been excluded by the tariff, proclaimed that the low price of cotton was due to the fact that Southerners lacked the drive and enterprise of virtuous Yankees! (When the South was actually the productive part of the U.S. economy.)

This transfer of wealth built the strength of the North. It was even more profitable than the slave trade (which New England shippers carried on from Africa to Brazil and Cuba right up to the War Between the States) and the Chinese opium trade (which they were also to break into).

Another phase of the Yankee campaign for what they considered their rightful dominance was the capture of the history of the American Revolution. At a time when decent Americans celebrated the Revolution as the common glory of all, New Englanders were publishing a literature claiming the whole credit for themselves. A scribbler from Maine named Lorenzo Sabine, for one example

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among many, published a book in which he claimed that the Revolution in the South had been won by New England soldiers because Southerners were traitorous and enervated by slavery. As William Gilmore Simms pointed out, it was all lies. When Daniel Webster was received hospitably in Charleston, he made a speech in which he commemorated the graves of the many heroic Revolutionary soldiers from New England which were to be found in the South. The trouble was, those graves did not exist. Many Southern volunteers had fought in the North, but no soldier from north of Pennsylvania (except a few generals) had ever fought in the South!

George Washington was a bit of a problem here, so the honor-driven, foxhunting Virginia gentleman was transformed by phony folklore into a prim New Englander in character, a false image that has misled and repulsed countless Americans since.

It should be clear, this was not merely misplaced pride. It was a deliberate, systematic effort by the Massachusetts elite to take control of American symbols and disparage all competing claims. Do not be put off by Professor Sheidley's use of "Conservative Leaders" in his title. He means merely the Yankee ruling elite who were never conservatives then or now. Conservatives do not work for "the transformation of America."

Another successful effort was a New England claim on the West. When New Englanders referred to "the West" in antebellum times, they meant the parts of Ohio and adjacent states settled by New Englanders. The rest of the great American West did not count. In fact, the great drama of danger and adventure and achievement that was the American West, from the Appalachians to the Pacific, was predominantly the work of Southerners and not of New Englanders at all. In the Midwest, the New Englanders came after Southerners had tamed the wilderness, and they looked down upon the early settlers. But in Western movies we still have the inevitable family from Boston moving west by covered wagon. Such a thing never existed! The people moving west in covered wagons were from the upper South and were despised by Boston.

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So our West is reduced, in literature, to *The Oregon Trail*, a silly book written by a Boston tourist, and the phony cavortings of the Eastern sissy Teddy Roosevelt in the cattle country opened by Southerners. And the great American outdoors is now symbolized by Henry David Thoreau and a little frog pond at Walden, in sight of the Boston smokestacks. The Pennsylvanian Owen Wister knew better when he entitled his Wyoming novel, The Virginian.

To fully understand what the Yankee is today — builder of the all-powerful "multicultural" therapeutic state (with himself giving the orders and collecting the rewards) which is the perfection of history and which is to be exported to all peoples, by guided missiles on women and children if necessary — we need a bit more real history.

That history is philosophical, or rather theological, and demographic. New Englanders lived in a barren land. Some of their surplus sons went to sea. Many others moved west when it was safe to do so. By 1830, half the people in the state of New York were New England-born. By 1850, New Englanders had tipped the political balance in the Midwest, with the help of German revolutionaries and authoritarians who had flooded in after the 1848 revolutions.

The leading editors in New York City, Horace Greeley and William Cullen Bryant, and the big money men, were New England-born. Thaddeus Stevens, the Pennsylvania steel tycoon and Radical Republican, was from Vermont. (Thanks to the tariff, he made \$6,000 extra profit on every mile of railroad rails he sold.)

The North had been Yankeeized, for the most part quietly, by control of churches, schools, and other cultural institutions, and by whipping up a frenzy of paranoia about the alleged plot of the South to spread slavery to the North, which was as imaginary as Jefferson's guillotine.

The people that Cooper and Irving had despised as interlopers now controlled New York! The Yankees could now carry a majority in the North and in 1860 elect the first sectional president in U.S. history — a threat to the South to knuckle under or else. In time, even the despised Irish Catholics began to think like Yankees.

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We must also take note of the intellectual revolution amongst the Yankees which created the modern version of self-righteous authoritarian "Liberalism" so well exemplified by Mrs. Clinton. In the 1830s, Ralph Waldo Emerson went to Germany to study. There he learned from philosophers that the world was advancing by dialectical process to an ever-higher state. He returned to Boston, and after marrying the dying daughter of a banker, resigned from the clergy, declared the sacraments to be a remnant of barbarism, and proclaimed The American as the "New Man" who was leaving behind the garbage of the past and blazing the way into the future state of perfection for humanity. Emerson has ever since in many quarters been regarded as the American philosopher, the true interpreter of the meaning of America.

From the point of view of Christianity, this "American" doctrine is heresy. From the point of view of history it is nonsense. But it is powerful enough for Ronald Reagan, who should have known better, to proclaim America as the shining City upon a Hill that was to redeem mankind. And powerful enough that the United States has long pursued a bipartisan foreign policy, one of the guiding assumptions of which is that America is the model of perfection to which all the world should want to conform.

There is no reason for readers of Southern Partisan to rush out and buy these books, which are expensive and dense academic treatises. If you are really interested, get your library to acquire them. They are well-documented studies, responsibly restrained in their drawing of larger conclusions. But they indicate what is hopefully a trend of exploration of the neglected field of Yankee history.

The highflying Yankee rhetoric of Emerson and Hillary Rodham Clinton has a nether side, which has its historical origins in the "Burnt Over District." The "Burnt Over District" was well known to antebellum Americans. Emersonian notions bore strange fruit in the central regions of New York State settled by the overflow of poorer Yankees from New England. It was "Burnt Over" because it (along with a similar area in northern Ohio) was swept over time and again by post-millennial revivalism. Here preachers like Charles G. Finney began to

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confuse Emerson's future state of perfection with Christianity, and God's plan for humanity with American chosenness.

If this were true, then anything that stood in the way of American perfection must be eradicated. The threatening evil at various times was liquor, tobacco, the Catholic Church, the Masonic order, meat-eating, marriage. Within the small area of the Burnt Over District and within the space of a few decades was generated what historians have misnamed the "Jacksonian reform movement:" Joseph Smith received the Book of Mormon from the Angel Moroni; William Miller began the Seventh Day Adventists by predicting, inaccurately, the end of the world; the free love colony of John Humphrey Noyes flourished at Oneida; the first feminist convention was held at Seneca Falls; and John Brown, who was born in Connecticut, collected accomplices and financial backers for his mass murder expeditions.

It was in this milieu that abolitionism, as opposed to the antislavery sentiment shared by many Americans, including Southerners, had its origins. Abolitionism, despite what has been said later, was not based on sympathy for the black people nor on an ideal of natural rights. It was based on the hysterical conviction that Southern slaveholders were evil sinners who stood in the way of fulfillment of America's divine mission to establish Heaven on Earth. It was not the Union that our Southern forefathers seceded from, but the deadly combination of Yankee greed and righteousness.

Most abolitionists had little knowledge of or interest in black people or knowledge of life in the South. Slavery promoted sin and thus must end. No thought was given to what would happen to the African-Americans. In fact, many abolitionists expected that evil Southern whites and blacks would disappear and the land be repopulated by virtuous Yankees.

The darker side of the Yankee mind has had its expression in American history as well as the side of high ideals. Timothy McVeigh from New York and the Unabomber from Harvard are, like John Brown, examples of this side of the

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Yankee problem. (Even though distinguished Yankee intellectuals have declared that their violence was a product of the evil "Southern gun culture.")

General Richard Taylor, in one of the best Confederate memoirs, *'Destruction and Reconstruction'*, related what happened as he surrendered the last Confederate troops east of the Mississippi in 1865. A German, wearing the uniform of a Yankee general and speaking in heavily accented English, lectured him that now that the war was over, Southerners would be taught "the true American principles." Taylor replied, sardonically, that he regretted that his grandfather, an officer in the Revolution, and his father, President of the United States, had not passed on to him true American principles. Yankeeism was triumphant.

Since the Confederate surrender, the Yankee has always been a strong and often dominant force in American society, though occasionally tempered by Southerners and other representatives of Western civilization in America. In the 1960s the Yankee had one of his periodic eruptions of mania such as he had in the 1850s. Since then, he has managed to destroy a good part of the liberty and morals of the American peoples. It remains to be seen whether his conquest is permanent or whether in the future we may be, at least to some degree, emancipated from it.

- [Sheidley, Harlow W. *Sectional Nationalism: Massachusetts Conservatives and the Transformation of America, 1815—1834*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998.](#)
- [Grant, Susan-Mary. *North Over South: Northern Nationalism and American Identity in the Antebellum Era*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000.](#)
- [Bensel, Richard F. *Yankee Leviathan: The Origins of Central State Authority in America*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990.](#)
- [Tuveson, Ernest L. *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968.](#)
- [Norton, Anne. *Alternative Americas: A Reading of Antebellum Political Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.](#)