

A REQUIEM FOR THE SOUTH

Can the South Survive?

Michael Andrew Grissom

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Reviewed by Dwight D. Murphey

Americans who have not lost track of their roots in the American past endure an inward agony. They know that the country and the people they have fondly revered have largely passed from the scene. The pervasive trends toward ever-deeper cultural decay and loss of national memory could be reversed if “enough people would wake up.” But the average American’s coma seems so intractable that there is little chance of that.

If someone who views the country as a whole feels that way, imagine how another person must feel whose deepest loyalties are to the ideals and culture of the Old South. Michael Andrew Grissom is an author who, to the deepest levels of his being, feels that attachment.

This book is a paean to the image of the South as it once was, and a description of what has befallen it. There is a two-century sweep to the book, and its perspective is so different from what this reviewer has read before that I count it as one of the more instructive books I have read. Most readers will find that it has much to say that is new to them. And since Grissom makes no effort to conform his thought to “political correctness,” the book rings with sincerity and with the sort of truth that both surprises and delights.

The seven hundred pages of Grissom’s book present a coherent account to which a brief review can’t do justice, but here are some salient parts nevertheless:

First, his description of the antebellum South is similar to that given by Richard Weaver in *The Southern Tradition at Bay*. What one thinks of as “the South” of that time was a white population drawn from English, Dutch, French, Scotch, Welsh, and Irish stock. A new but genuine landed aristocracy

had arisen among them, around whom was based a culture and way of life that was “a fair imitation of European feudalism.” There was magnificence, fashionable gaiety, dignity and formality, religious sensibility, chivalry, and a *noblesse oblige* that led to a fundamental paternalism toward the slaves whom, since Harriet Beecher Stowe, we have been accustomed to picturing as having been much abused. In all, it was a culture very different from that of the North. (The North, for example, held the “work ethic” in high esteem, consistent with the principles of an individualistic, commercial society. The South valued leisure and the gentility that went with it.)

Second, a virtue of Grissom’s book is that it gives us a window into how a Southern traditionalist sees the events that led up to the horrific war of 1861–1865 and the developments that followed it. The South was devastated by the war, with its chivalric leadership replaced by a sort of man in search of immediate results. The South was for several years under military occupation, and its political system was turned over to three million former slaves, with all of the implications that that entailed. When this incursion was over, Southerners quite imperatively reclaimed white control and worked toward a system of “parallel societies.” Grissom quotes Carleton Putnam to the effect that “the South, after generations of experience, had developed customs and a way of life with the Negro that took his limitations into consideration with a minimum of friction and a maximum of kindness.”

This perception is worth noting, because it differs so greatly from today’s impression. The traditional Southern position (supported articulately by Booker T. Washington) was that it was “better for the Negro to develop his own race by concentrating upon the infrastructure of the race, strengthening its social and economic and educational systems from within as opposed to clamoring for a piece of the white pie.” At the same time, there was a “white consciousness” that was aware of its own imperatives. The existence of “parallel societies” was reflected in the “separate but equal” principle. Most Americans today would observe that “that was a hypocritical principle—separate but certainly not equal.” Grissom says, however, that that impression is wrong. He points out that two black colleges were established in Selma alone, and that Mississippi was, at the time of *Brown v. Board of Education*, “increasing its black school funding with record appropriations.” The reluctance to give blacks the vote is explained by the memory that their vote had been “manipulated during Reconstruction” and the knowledge that “black voters have, without exception, voted as a bloc from their political inception.”

As a traditionalist, Grissom has little sympathy for the “New South,” whose leading proponent was Atlanta’s Henry W. Grady. This sought the industrialization of the South in partnership with Northern capital. Over time, the South came under the sway of a “powerful triumvirate” of business, Northern-owned newspapers, and “liberal politicians.” This was far removed from the traditional culture.

The 1954 *Brown* decision desegregating schools came as a bombshell, marking the “beginning of the end” for a South based primarily on the old way of life. Voices that might have provided an intellectual rationale for the South’s defense were brushed aside not only by Americans in general, but by a silent, irresolute Southern population. Grissom describes at length the confrontation at Ole Miss and tells how it broke the South’s morale. He describes the Old South, so far as it still exists, as lying prostrate under an incubus of “media bias, fictionalized history..., political correctness..., deracinated megalopolises..., and confusion.” Even the “Southern church” is rapidly being overhauled. Ongoing efforts are under way to erase the symbols of the South’s past, with the removal of tombstones marking Confederate graves, attacks on the playing of “Dixie,” the changing of the Ole Miss mascot, new license plates, and, of course, the drive to do away with displays of the Confederate flag. This is an effort to obliterate the Southern memory.

Third, Grissom’s attention is primarily on the South, but he sees that its current predicament is mirrored by the condition of the United States in general. He says that “America is in a state of spiritual, moral, and political degeneracy”—and cites many specifics. In politics, the word “conservative” has become meaningless, just as the Republican Party has become irrelevant as its leaders refuse to wage the cultural fight and to resist demographic inundation by the Third World. In Grissom’s narrative, these are not just generalizations, but realities brought alive by his many examples.

He sees as perverse the “multiculturalism” that is the reigning ideology. He puts it starkly: “Multiculturalism means recognition of every culture except the one belonging to the white man.” His examples point to endless double standards now applied against whites and in favor of minorities. The fact that Grissom is willing to speak openly about these realities rather than in whispers is intellectually a major virtue of his book. Most of those who support “the West” speak in terms of culture and political principle, not of race; and for the most part that seems to remain preferable. But today’s adversary culture doesn’t content itself with attacking Western civilization; it also poses a racist challenge to the future existence of Caucasians as such. It is that attack that forces the question of race on those who would otherwise avoid it, and Grissom at least is one who is prepared to discuss it. This makes his book one of the more important in today’s highly constrained “marketplace of ideas.”

Fourth, this reviewer considers it unfortunate that Grissom ends with a chapter on “The Case for Secession.” The strongest argument for secession by the South today is that nothing else seems to be working, either for the South or for the United States (or for the West) as a whole. But that negative certainly doesn’t make a positive out of secession. What Grissom has described is a contemporary South that has none of the leadership, spiritual force, intellectual insight, or personal fortitude to mobilize and make a secessionist movement successful. The United States may well someday break up, but that will be

because of its own debility and demographic inundation, not because a significant pocket of strength has suddenly emerged from hearts and minds that are otherwise enervated. (A fatalistic surrender to this enervation is itself effete and ineffectual, but under contemporary circumstances a militant, seemingly virile alternative would itself be an act *in extremis* that would simply underscore how far Americans have departed from their past.) There is no substitute for a general revival, which seems an impossibility.

Nevertheless, there is as much chance for Americans in general to throw off the existing incubus as there is for today's South to do so. And if that's true, there is every reason for anyone who sees himself as an *American* patriot—because of his love for an image of America as a whole—to take great offense at the suggestion of any part of the United States seceding. To such a person (and this reviewer is one), the thought of Southern secession or of the breaking off of a southwestern “Aztlán Republic” is virtual treason, softened only by the despairing knowledge that the America he has loved is fast disappearing in any event. Some very fine people are speaking the language of secession today, but they need to know that any move in that direction will split quite profoundly the very constituency to which they would need to look for support.

Even though there are those of us to whom a call for secession is repugnant, that doesn't change the fact that there is much in Grissom's book worth reading. The chapter and verse he cites about the history of slavery among blacks in Africa is itself worth the price. That history goes far beyond the capture of some blacks by others who took them to the coast and sold them to slave traders. The nineteenth century accounts of slavery and black-on-black brutality in Africa are chilling, and put Southern slavery into an altogether different perspective. More and more, it seems that perspective is essential to an understanding of history.

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