

**An American Conflict of Mind:
Competing Narratives of National Identity and Values**

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Introduction

Above all, never make a man feel ridiculous. It is an injury, which is not in human nature to forget, much less to forgive.
William Wirt¹

Recently the Washington Post ran a photo of Osama Bin Ladin with a caption of his words: "I would rather die than live humiliated or oppressed." This clearly demonstrates that living with dignity and respect is an essential basic human need; when this need is frustrated by a history of humiliation against an individual or group, conflict can become psychologically deep-rooted. Conflicts deeply rooted in such psychological forces are often manifested in ways that mask feelings of humiliation, anger and resentment. Instead, conflict can lie latent or can seemingly erupt on transient issues and hate objects that change with time. Without an understanding of the humiliation and anger fueling these seemingly localized episodes², the conflicts will continue from one episode to another. To break this cycle, an exploration of the history of interaction between conflicting groups should be undertaken in the hope that with an enhanced awareness of historical experiences and perspectives empathic understanding between groups can be generated. If we learn why hatred exists perhaps we can learn how not to hate.

In this paper I present positioning theory as a theoretical framework for understanding an overlooked aspect of historical identity conflict within the United States – a conflict in competing narratives of identity and values. Honor and humiliation

¹ William R. Taylor, *Cavalier & Yankee the Old South and American National Character* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979). P. 74.

² Daniel Rothbart, "Identity, Justice, and Threat Narratives" (paper presented at the Positioning Theory Workshop, Institute of Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University, March 25 2006).

provide the context for the positions of these narratives, so the second section discusses recent research on humiliation and the social constructs of Northern and Southern honor in the United States. Finally, I will demonstrate an historical account that empirically documents a consistent pattern of insult and disdain emanating mainly from the Northern/New England region toward the South in general and more specifically the rural white population of the South. It is my goal to enhance our understanding of the history of humiliation and alienation that rural Whites in the South experienced for generations, and to demonstrate how this history has contributed to deep-rooted transgenerational feelings of humiliation and positions of competing identities. This paper seeks to understand the dynamic process of this identity conflict by looking specifically at the position adopted by representative thinkers and writers of the North during the colonial era until after the Civil War and the position imposed – and resisted – by representatives of the South.

It is understood that precise geographical divisions of ethnic, cultural, and religious heritages in the US do not exist; however, these distinctions were more regionally bounded during the colonization period through the Civil War era. As William Taylor stated in his classic work *Cavalier and Yankee*: “The line separating North from South possessed no geographical definition; it was a psychological not a physical division, which often cut like a cleaver through the mentality of individual men and women everywhere in the country.”³

After the Civil War migration of white cultural groups, as well as blacks and recent immigrants, began a shift that resulted in less homogenous cultural groupings throughout the country; however, as a study of American cultural and religious history

³ Taylor, *Cavalier & Yankee the Old South and American National Character*. p. 333.

reveals, significant differences in worldview assumptions persisted and can be found to have closely followed the paths of the migrations. And on the heels of these migrations, oppositional worldview assumptions established a pattern of insult, stereotyping and general mistrust that bred regional and cultural hostility and resentment, which upon close examination exposes competing narratives of national identity conflict that began in the earliest days of the Republic.

Positioning theory is a framework for understanding relational evolution and devolution. The following 'walk through history'⁴ of American White cultural conflict, using positioning theory, illuminates the depth of the historically competing narratives between White cultural groups as profoundly identity based.⁵ I conclude by arguing that looking at history through an alternative lens enables us to reflect on and acknowledge an historical legacy of a Northern (New England) cultural imperialism⁶ created through an ongoing storyline in which Northern elites positioned Northern values as American values while diminishing Southern ones. By examining this storyline we will enhance our understanding of a significant cultural conflict of mind. With a renewed sense of historical perspective, we can recognize the Southern position as an imposed position and therefore analyze it through the region's attempts to resist marginalized positioning.⁷

In addition, we can encourage the recognition of different American cultural groups' achievements as well as their hardships, including the humiliation and anger that has long been a part of being Southern. This history of humiliation can be partly

⁴ Joe Montville, "Hope in the Cities : Walk through History," in *Hope in the Cities* (Initiatives of Change).

⁵ Joe Montville, "The Healing Function in Political Conflict Resolution," in *Conflict Resolution Theory and Practice: Integration and Application*, ed. Dennis and Van der Merwe Sandole (New York: Manchester University Press, 1993).

⁶ P. Lewis Simpson, *Mind and the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989). P. 35.

⁷ Sara Cobb, "Presentation on Positioning Theory" (paper presented at the Positioning Theory, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA, March 25 2006).

understood as a history of Northern aggressive positioning to impose a nationalism based on New England values, which relegated the South to a position of internal Other. With reflection, space may open for more honest, genuine dialogue between representatives of the different regions in the United States and provide insight for all Americans into a part of the American cultural fabric that is often misunderstood and misrepresented, but which continues to play significant role in American culture and politics. Ultimately, I would like to encourage engagement in a reflexive examination of our own cultural and historical assumptions. With an enhanced understanding of the positioning⁸ of our own perceptions we might grow to better understand the perceptions, and hence categories of reality, of a culturally alienated South: an American marginalized internal Other.⁹

Positioning Theory: A Theoretical Framework

According to Sara Cobb, narratives – or stories – structure our social world.¹⁰ Narratives can be understood through analysis using positioning theory. Examining narratives by listening to the stories people tell help us determine the storylines through which peoples’ realities are constructed and hence, how meaning is derived. According to Rom Harre, a position is a ‘cluster of rights and duties. Positions are formed and reformed from the episodic structures composed of a triadic relationship between positions, acts and actions. An action is performance: what is done, while an act is interpretation: what others perceive and the meaning that is ascribed to the act. A

⁸ Rom and Luk van Langenhove Harre, *Positioning Theory* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1999).

⁹ David R. Jansson, "American National Identity and the Progress of the New South in *National Geographic Magazine*," *The Geographic Review* (3) (2003).

¹⁰ Cobb, "Presentation on Positioning Theory".

position emerges from acts and actions – the episodes. Positions are fluid; as acts and actions change, positions can be transformed – or repositioned.¹¹

Cobb discusses the three orders of positioning. First order positioning is the act of positioning the self and others. In the historical presentation of Northern elite storylines of self and other presented below, it is quickly apparent that the northern storyline was framed relative to a particular moral code and understanding of rights and duties. This paper focuses primarily on the process of first order positioning. Second order positioning occurs when those positioned begin efforts to reposition – both self and other. A ‘conversation’ about the positioning occurs and through that, repositioning may emerge. Second order positioning for the South, resisting first order positioning imposed by the North, was the dominant ‘conversation’ until perhaps the 1970s. At that point, with Nixon and Reagan’s successful appeal to traditionally Democratic blue-collar/rural white Americans and the rise of the Moral Majority, positions began to shift. Since the 90s, it could be argued that the South has successfully repositioned.

The current political and cultural conversations reflect the tensions between regional tendencies of mind, but the South, with the rise of Neoconservatism and conservative Evangelicalism, has fundamentally challenged the power balance. To understand the meaning in the dynamic process of these shifts, we need to now move into third order positioning, which is conversation ‘about the conversation about repositioning.’¹² This paper offers one opportunity for understanding the historical relationship between American regions and white cultural groups through a historical

¹¹ Rom and Moghaddam Harre, Fathali, *The Self and Others* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003). Also, Cobb, "Presentation on Positioning Theory". And also Rothbart, "Identity, Justice, and Threat Narratives".

¹² Cobb, "Presentation on Positioning Theory".

analysis of the dynamic processes moving the 'conversations' and with them, our own understanding of American history, politics, and mind.

Harre states that groups can be assigned positions; once this occurs, the group can either refuse the position or accept it. In this paper, it is demonstrated that northern elites assigned a position of cultural and national hegemony to their region while assigning a marginalized position of internal Other to the South. The South, however, resisted this positioning. As these storylines emerged, the narratives positioned cultural groups according to rights and duties, but also, more perniciously, as moral and immoral actors. This analysis demonstrates this process in early American history by focusing on the efforts of one group to achieve legitimacy as the model for national identity while the marginalized group resisted; the result was a tension between second and third order positioning which in this case led to increased hostility and ultimately war.¹³

Karen Grattan, in her presentation of positioning theory, states that presumptive positioning is the ascription of character; this mediates the positioning process. Positioning begins with characterizing the Other. As the discourse gets taken up in the public sphere, it becomes metaphysical. The uptake by internal as well as external parties solidifies the narratives; the language of the discourse is then controlled as the storylines themselves carry the positions.¹⁴ In this case, the Southern resistance to Northern positioning created an alternative storyline, which provided legitimacy to Southern values. Southerners, out of loyalty to region and anger at perceived Northern hostility

¹³ Rom Harre, "Positioning Theory" (paper presented at the Positioning Theory Workshop, Institute of Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University, March 25 2006). See also, Cobb, "Presentation on Positioning Theory".

¹⁴ Karen Grattan, "On the Fate of Terri Schiavo: A Study of Positions and Social Episodes" (paper presented at the Positioning Theory Workshop, Institute of Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University, March 26 2006).

and aggression, took up this alternative narrative. The competing narratives evolved from characterological to metaphysical positions resulting in the hardened, polarized positions that eventually led to war. Repeated attempts to compromise failed, possibly because the underlying identity issues were never recognized or addressed.

The Importance of Healing and Reconciliation in Political and Religious Conflicts

The political/cultural conflict in the US needs to be addressed at a deeper level than that of the disparate issue-oriented disputes that are embedded in a larger, more profound context. Joe Montville argues that one way to approach this problem is through an honest examination of the conflicted relationship in which grievances and historical perspectives that have previously not been acknowledged are recognized. Often these grievances reside only subconsciously yet are experienced by groups that have been victims of negative stereotyping and perceived injustices.¹⁵

Transforming or repositioning public perceptions is a challenging prospect. I would argue that before such a repositioning could occur, reflexive examination and repositioning must take place in those seeking to affect relational change. Lindner points out that deep-rooted feelings of collective humiliation can create perceptions of primary cultural and social differences.¹⁶ In other words, where no difference between groups really exists, collective feelings of humiliation can create a psychology of differences. This construct is based on secondary differences rather than primary differences and can thus be reconstituted. This is a dynamic process that begins within, by listening to the

¹⁵ Montville, "The Healing Function in Political Conflict Resolution."

¹⁶ Evelin Gerda Lindner, "How Humiliation Creates Cultural Differences and Political Divisions: The Psychology of Intercultural Communication - Germany, Somalia, Rwanda/Burundi, and the International Community as Cases," (University of Oslo, Department of Psychology, 2000).

voice of the Other,¹⁷ and then hopefully progresses as enhanced awareness of historical antecedents that have shaped attitudes and beliefs, and hence spheres of reality, are better understood.¹⁸ As this occurs, relational shifts become possible, opening space for more inclusive, honest and long-lasting dialogue between and about the conflicted groups. It is within that space that the wounds of humiliation can begin to heal and loosen the mutual bondage of resentment.¹⁹

Humiliation and the Honor-code Society

Evelin Gerda Lindner²⁰ attempts to build an interdisciplinary theory of humiliation by drawing on elements of social psychology, sociology, social anthropology, history and political science. Through her research she attempts to map “the conceptual space of the process of humiliation and illustrate it on the personal and group level”. She describes humiliation as relational; humiliation is understood only through patterns of interchange. Donald Klein²¹ adds to this by describing a humiliation dynamic whereby the interaction the personal experience and the social sphere opens space for the potential of humiliation. This dynamic is a triadic relationship between the humiliators, the victims, and the witnesses. This paper assumes the existence of the humiliation dynamic and attempts to explore the historical relationship between the American North and South as one of humiliator and humiliated respectively.

¹⁷ Sara Cobb, "Narrative Facilitation As "Witnessing": A Framework for Ethical (Effective) Practice" (paper presented at the Narrative Facilitation, Fairfax, VA, January 27 2007).

¹⁸ Harre, *The Self and Others*.

¹⁹ Montville, "The Healing Function in Political Conflict Resolution."

²⁰ Evelin Gerda Lindner, "The Psychology of Humiliation," (Oslo: University of Oslo, 2001).

²¹ Donald C. Klein, "The Humiliation Dynamic: Looking to the Past and Future" (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies Network, Columbia Teachers College, New York City, December 15-16, 2005 2005).

Lindner²² defines humiliation as an emotion experienced when a person (or group) has been forcefully ‘lowered’ in a “process of subjugation that damages or strips away their pride, honor or dignity”. In other words, humiliation occurs when an individual or group is treated in a manner lower than their expectations. It can occur through acts of physical or structural violence²³ in which one is made to feel helpless in an asymmetrical relationship. The humiliator has some control or power over the humiliated.

In their study, Hartling and Luchetta²⁴ focus on the internal experience of humiliation as “the deep dysphoric feeling associated with being, or perceiving oneself as being, unjustly degraded, ridiculed, or put down – in particular, one’s identity has been demeaned or devalued.” Margalit²⁵ supports this understanding of humiliation by arguing that experiences of humiliation are formative and can shape individuals’ views of themselves, i.e. their identity. A humiliating event impacts not only self-identity but collective identity as well. Examples of collective identity shaped in part by a legacy of humiliation include the African-American experience of slavery and the Jim Crow laws as well as the memorialization of the words “never forget” to ensure the remembrance of the past collective humiliation of the Jewish people.²⁶

²² Evelin Gerda Lindner, "The Relational Anatomy of Humiliation: Perpetrator, Victim, and Third Party," in *The Feeling of being humiliated: A central theme in armed conflicts. A Study of the Role of Humiliation in Somalia, and Rwanda/Burundi, Between warring parties, and in relation to Third intervening parties* (Oslo: 2000).

²³ See Johan Galtung for more on structural violence. Structural violence exists in the absence of physical violence but when society is structured so that certain groups of people are disadvantaged and disprivileged.

²⁴ Linda M. & Luchetta Hartling, Tracy, "Humiliation: Assessing the Impact of Derision, Degradation, and Debasement," *The Journal of Primary Prevention* 19, no. 4 (1999).

²⁵ A. Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

²⁶ Hartling, "Humiliation: Assessing the Impact of Derision, Degradation, and Debasement."

In her four-year study of the role of humiliation in conflicts Lindner²⁷ confirmed several assumptions pertinent to the argument in this paper. She finds that feelings of humiliation are among the strongest emotions experienced by human beings, and that feelings of humiliation are among the most likely of emotions to incite conflict. She also found that feelings of humiliation are among the most difficult to heal and form the strongest obstacles to trust and cooperation. Finally, she concludes that reactions to humiliation vary according to social context, and feelings of humiliation can be instrumentalized by leaders. All four of these findings support the argument in this paper that the relationship between the North and South regions of the United States has fostered strong emotions that persist even until today. These feelings have frequently contributed to conflict – overt and latent – and have proven resistant to real healing. When it serves political purposes, these feelings have been and continue to be invoked by leaders. This invocation of historical difference and antagonism perpetuates a myth of difference.

A final area of the literature on humiliation salient to this study involves societal and historical distinctions of humiliation made by Lindner. Lindner builds on an argument made by William Ury in his book, *Getting to Peace*.²⁸ Ury argues that human history has evolved through three types of societies: interdependence, coercion and knowledge. Interdependence was required for mutual survival during the long period of the hunter-gatherers. Once civilization discovered agriculture, coercion replaced interdependence and incessant warfare and violence plagued the period. Ury argues that we are now in an age he calls the “knowledge revolution” in which globally we are more

²⁷ Lindner, "The Psychology of Humiliation."

²⁸ William Ury, *Getting to Peace. Transforming Conflict at Home, at Work, and in the World*. (New York: Viking, 1999).

interdependent again than we have been since the rise of agriculture. He posits that this new age will bring more peace and cooperation – more win-win scenarios rather than the win-lose competitive goals of the coercion period.

Lindner draws on these historical distinctions as a basis for her theory of humiliation. She argues that during the hunter-gatherer societies humiliation was rare. She calls this a period of ‘pride and pristine equality’ or a ‘self-pride’ society. While nature is subjugated during this period, human beings are not. Instead, an emphasis on fairness and equality existed. Relationships were egalitarian and the social order was based on pride. She suggests that the near-absence of humiliation is a result of a society structured without hierarchies.

Lindner differentiates ‘pride’ societies from ‘honor’ societies.²⁹ Honor societies evolved with agrarian and industrial societies. In honor societies humiliation is a tool or ‘normal device’ used for establishing hierarchies. If honor has been attacked it is considered legitimate to defend, even violently. Honor societies turn humans into tools – they are subjugated along with nature. The principle of inequality is often seen as divine; it is taught and enforced through language and myths. Violence and humiliation, in order to keep ‘people in their places,’ is viewed as legitimate. Lindner argues that defending honor was reason enough for men to risk their lives in duels for long stretches of history. But, she argues, honor is a “more collective feeling and institution than pristine pride or dignity. It is a learned response to institutionalized pressures”.³⁰

She states that although it can be argued that individuals feel and not groups, the dynamics of humiliation and honor can be “transported” from the individual to the group

²⁹ Lindner, "The Psychology of Humiliation."

³⁰ Ibid.

level through a process of organization and mobilization. One process that can move the dynamics of humiliation and a perceived need to defend honor is through “grand narratives of humiliation and retaliation”. Such narratives are often created and promoted by “humiliation entrepreneurs” who call on their supporters or publics to seek revenge or fight back for perceived acts of humiliation. Lindner calls this type of humiliation “honor-humiliation”.³¹

Finally, Lindner argues that Ury’s ‘knowledge societies’ correlate with dignity societies and hence “human rights – humiliation.” According to Lindner, honor-humiliation does not accept or include the concept that human beings are equal and deserving of equal respect and dignity. That concept is central to societies based on human rights or ‘dignity societies’. In human rights based societies, the imposition of inequality is unacceptable. In these societies what is considered ‘legitimate’ humiliations in honor societies become illegitimate examples of structural violence.³² According to Lindner, humiliation can “attack[s] a person’s core as a human being and inflict[s] very deep emotional wounds”.³³ In this same vein, experiences of humiliation can be perceived to be attacks against a sense of national identity as well.³⁴

Although the United States is largely a ‘dignity society,’ like all post-industrial countries, it possesses much of the traditions of an ‘honor society,’ especially in the south. A study conducted by Cohen, et al³⁵ revealed that southern white males react cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally according to the norms characteristic of a

³¹ Evelin Gerda Lindner, *Making Enemies: Humiliation and International Conflict* (Wesport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2006).

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Dov; Nisbett Cohen, Richard; Bowdle, Brian & Schwarz, Norbert, "Insult, Aggression, and the Southern Culture of Honor: An "Experimental Ethnography", " *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 70, no. 4 (1996).

“culture of honor”. The results of the study, which compared white northerners’ reactions to insult with white southerners’, demonstrated that while white northerners were mostly unaffected by the insult, southerners were more likely to perceive their reputations threatened, became more upset and primed for aggression and were more likely to engage in aggressive or dominant behavior. This study supports Lindner’s distinction between norms of dignity societies and those of honor societies, and further supports the argument of this paper that cultural differences between northern and southern white males remain deeply rooted in transgenerational collective emotions and continue to impact American society politically and socially.

Hochschild³⁶ points out that during the last thirty years white men have faced challenges to their sense of ‘mastery’ and honor. He notes that three quarters of them lack college degrees and that real wages for male high-school graduates have dropped 24 percent. To fully understand the broader context of the white man in the United States, however, he argues that we must look back to Richard Nixon’s “blue-collar strategy.”³⁷ This plan meant to “capture the hearts and votes of the nation’s white working men – the traditionally Democratic ‘forgotten Americans’”. Nixon would create and maintain an image as a “tough, courageous, masculine leader.” Jefferson Cowie, as cited by Hochschild, states, “It was neither the entire working class nor its material grievances on which the administration would focus; rather it was the ‘feeling of being forgotten’ among white male workers that Nixon and his advisors would seek to tap”.³⁸

³⁶ Arlie Hochschild, *Let Them Eat War* [internet] (AlterNet, 2004 [cited January 23 2007]).

³⁷ Hochschild cites here an essay by Jefferson Cowie on a strategy drawn up under Nixon to shift blue-collar workers to the Republican party.

³⁸ Hochschild, *Let Them Eat War*.

Hochschild argues that this strategy worked for Nixon and for each subsequent Republican President. President George W. Bush took this further by appealing to the *emotions* of male voters – especially blue collar workers. Bush has appealed to deep-rooted feelings of resentment and humiliation as well as the consequences of those emotions: fear and anger. In doing so, Bush aligns the white male, mostly blue-collar sense of personal identity with big business, empire and Bush himself – the ultimate masculine hero after 9/11.³⁹ In this context, the South remains homogenized, producing election results that maintain the sense of North/South distinction that has endured for nearly 300 years.

Honor and Humiliation in the American Experience

Bertram Wyatt-Brown states that the experience of humiliation is not often associated with the American experience. He suggests that, aside from the experience of the Vietnam War, the United States has led a privileged or “charmed” history. America is a proud nation – at times dangerously arrogant. America has largely basked in a history of military successes and unsurpassed wealth. Perhaps, as Wyatt-Brown suggests, a sense of ‘divine privilege’ has evolved. However, he argues, one section of the United States, the South, has endured historical experiences apart from the rest of the nation – long periods of “failure, frustration, poverty, moral obloquy, retrogression, defeat and humiliation”.⁴⁰

Out of this history a regional narrative, based on the antecedent of a concept of honor distinct from that of the North and later of the ‘lost cause’, evolved. This narrative is familiar to most Americans, setting the South somewhat apart and even romanticizing

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ C. Vann Woodward, as cited in Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "Honour, Irony, and Humiliation in the Era of American Civil War," (2005).

the region's past. This paper argues that that narrative evolved as second order positioning, as a response or reaction to the first order positioning imposed upon the South by a Northern narrative of superiority and insult toward the region. The dynamic between first order and second order positioning produced a tense 'conversation' between North and South that lasted until the late 20th century. Wyatt-Brown describes the concept of honor that permeated Southern society, and he distinguishes it from a Northern understanding of honor. This distinction may well have been the unconscious foundation of a regional history of misunderstanding, tension, and overt conflict.

During the antebellum period Southern whites cultivated a society organized around ethics that sanctioned slavery, hierarchy and martial virtues. This included a strict code of honor and the maintenance of masculine virtues. By the mid-nineteenth century Southerners, feeling assaulted and insulted by Northerners, were compelled by their honor code to resist perceived Northern hostility. The north, first through narrative that will be described below and then through war, attacked Southern "pride, power and way of organizing their society."⁴¹

The Southern sense of honor could have dangerous consequences. While various reasons exist for the eventual Southern secession, including the protection of slavery and state's rights, "it was Southern honor that pulled the trigger."⁴² Southerners developed a narrative of honor to support the morality of their position and to position their values against those of the North. Insulting the manhood of Northerners was a common means to deride the North and contrast its men – or character – to the South. When Abraham Lincoln was elected President, many Southerners responded in the language of honor. A

⁴¹ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "Honour, Irony, and Humiliation in the Era of American Civil War," *Social Alternatives* 25, no. 1 (2006).

⁴² *Ibid.*

New Orleans editor commented that his election was “a deliberate, cold-blooded insult and outrage against Southern honor, “ and in Virginia it was declared “an offense to the whole South.”⁴³

By this time however, the psychology of the North was moving further and further from the South. Northern culture created a distinct sense of honor. Honor in the North was linked to the ethics of national unity represented in ideas and symbols like free labor, the stars and stripes and the unity of the states. Honor in the South revolved around principles of family, locale and state; in the North a strong sense of national commitment evolved. After the defeat of the South in the Civil War, these distinct honor codes continued to evolve and shape the relationship between North and South – and indeed their differences. The strong honor code of the South made its defeat by the North more devastating. The South “suffered the humiliation of military defeat, occupation, and the ruination of its economic vitality...the desolation of its infrastructure and the impoverishment of most whites.” The result was a deep and long-lasting resentment of the North.⁴⁴

While much has been written about the Southern narrative of resentment toward the North during the antebellum years and after, few studies have been done on the evolution of the Northern narrative. This narrative positioned the North as a distinct and superior region. Since before the Revolution polarization in values and styles of life existed between North and South and the North played a significant role in creating and maintaining the perception of vast cultural differences. The final section of this paper aims to portray an account of the evolution of a Northern narrative that significantly

⁴³ Ibid. See McPherson, J.M., 1991. *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution*. New York: Oxford University Press.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

contributed to the idea of distinct cultures and helped fuel Southern resentment. A narrative of Northern superior character and value commitments emerged after the Revolutionary War and gained strength as the new nation grew. This humiliation narrative is anchored in perceived Northern moral and characterological superiority. Its pernicious life took root almost 300 years ago, and while its life force is not always overtly visible, it has persistently lived beneath the dynamics of American history.

A History of Insult and Disdain toward Southerners by Northern Elites: the Evolution of Historically Competing Narratives of American Identity and Values

Competing narratives of identity organized around principles of differing cultural and religious values emerged after the Revolutionary War and grew especially hostile during the 1820s through the 1850s. These narratives evolved into polarizing conceptualizations of normative value commitments, which created characterological and ultimately metaphysical identifiers of “Us” and “Them”. According to Daniel Rothbart, an extended process of stigmatizing and demonizing through characterizations leads to essentializing, thus the unjust or immoral Other is created. At the same time, the group demonizing the Other feels absolution for their own past or conveniently engages in historical amnesia. Absolved of sin, the demonizing group no longer takes responsibility for a shared past that may include moral transgressions and wrongdoing; released from a questionable and complicit past, the group is free to pursue myths of self-glorification.⁴⁵

Rothbart argues that an “axiology of difference” focusing on character attributions of virtues and vices significantly impacts identity formation. Importantly for the argument in this paper, he further states that vice has a stronger impact than virtue and

⁴⁵ Daniel Rothbart. Presentation on Positioning Theory at George Mason University, March 26, 2006. Rothbart refers to the work on stigmatizing done by Erving Goffman.

“defines the unity of a group with respect to a normative negativity.”⁴⁶ An axiology of difference is constructed through mythic narratives or storytelling that create normative orders and lays the foundation for future narratives. The normative order is dualistic, based on binary constructs that define a sense of the ‘good’ Self in relation to the ‘evil’ Other. It is not then historical authenticity that is most relevant to understanding the contemporary “mind” of the South or of the North, but a study of the mythic narratives of the past that have shaped the understanding of the present. As Rothbart states, “It is the mythic thinking that constructs [their] realities; this helps us to understand who they are.” Through an understanding of mythic narratives of the past and present, a shared vision of the future can be created.⁴⁷

In the classic study on the Southern mind, W.J. Cash (1941) argues that Southerners had long perceived a pattern of Northern insult and stigmatization. This perception created a reality for Southerners that often led to reactions of anger, frustration and humiliation. Current representatives of the North, such as liberal politicians and religious leaders interested today in communicating positively with Southerners, especially those in the “Red” states, should approach the South with knowledge and respect for the experiences and perceptions that have shaped a sense of a distinctive historical, cultural and national reality.⁴⁸

Through Cash, historical tendencies that are still evident in today’s “red” state culture are highlighted: conservative principles about the role of government; a strong national defense; the right to personal weapons; the importance of family life and tradition; and a strong sense of individualism. In addition to these tendencies, deeply

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

W.J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991).

held understandings of Christianity and its role in American politics and culture are also significant. These cultural tendencies are shared by many Americans today, but nonetheless reflect significant interpretive distinctions rooted in the historical origins and evolution of the worldviews of the particular white Protestant cultures that settled the colonies and developed the nation.⁴⁹ Listening to the stories told by the groups themselves opens the possibility of understanding the collective emotions and cultural assumptions that have shaped the worldviews.

In *Mind and the American Civil War*, Lewis P. Simpson (1989) focuses on the tensions that existed in the intellectual relationship between New England (the North) and the South during the antebellum period. Although the substance of issues have changed dramatically from colonial times to the present, the essential characteristics of this conflicted relationship have persisted. Opposing ideologies, which held divergent visions of the truth of the birth and the future of the American nation, emerged between those who settled New England, the South and the frontier.⁵⁰

One aspect of this tension that has persisted to present times has been the push and pull between secularization and traditionalism, especially religion. The process of secularization began with the Renaissance as early as the 13th Century. To Jefferson and Adams the creation of the United States was a culmination of this evolution: the first modern republic with allegiance to neither King nor God. As the Revolutionary era ended however, this intellectual context began to disintegrate. New England, represented

⁴⁹ Simpson, *Mind and the American Civil War*.

⁵⁰ Frontier at this point refers to what was considered the 'west' east of the Appalachian Mountains.

by Boston, began in the beginning of the 18th C. to move from the Puritan “pietistic faith to a moralistic faith.”⁵¹

A new relationship with Europe also developed in NE, which emphasized an appreciation of foreigners and a desire to understand and learn from Europeans. In NE, an evolving Utilitarian outlook contributed to the Romantic Movement and a great respect for learning and literary pursuits.⁵² The southern plantation holders, on the other hand, attempted to rationalize the Enlightenment ethos with the effort to preserve traditional ways of life, such as an aristocracy based on a feudal system of land ownership with slave labor. Efforts to reconcile these contradictory cultures of mind resulted in an intellectual parting of ways: while the North began to “secularize the spiritual”, the South sought to “spiritualize the secular.”⁵³

Most historians today argue that Americans of North and South have/had more in common than not. As Susan–Mary Grant points out Americans have a shared history of migration and revolution, heroes, a political system, way of life, and commitments to ideals of liberty and popular government. Yet, a historical narrative myth of difference has persisted throughout American history: “The south has always been regarded by nonsoutherners as distinct and separate from the nation as a whole, ‘as aberrant in attitude and defiant in mood, and as differentiated in some mysterious and irrational way from the national experience and the national ideals.’”⁵⁴

One feature of the historical myth of a separate North and South, which most historians have refuted, is that two distinct cultures settled the Northern and Southern

⁵¹ Ibid. Simpson, p. 48.

⁵² Taylor, *Cavalier & Yankee the Old South and American National Character*.

⁵³ Ibid. Simpson, p. 31.

⁵⁴ Susan-Mary Grant, *North over South* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000). P. 35.

colonies along the Atlantic coast. The myth identifies the Puritans who emigrated to New England and the Cavaliers to Virginia. This theory was popular in the North and held that the Yankee Anglo-Saxon descended from one party to the English Civil War - the Puritan Roundheads, and the Southern Normans by the other - the Royal Party or Gentlemen Cavaliers. Ethnically, this myth portrays the North as Anglo-Saxon and the South as Norman. This distinction helps explain the evolution of two different economic cultures and value commitments. The North developed a “leveling, go-getting utilitarian society and the South had developed a society based on the values of the English country gentry.” The myth, rooted in assumptions of primary differences rather than secondary, held that the two cultures had steadily moved apart since colonial times.⁵⁵

Northern hostility toward the South existed during and immediately after the Revolutionary War era, but it became increasingly dominant among Northerners during the 1820s through the 1850s. Grant argues that the North created a construct of nationalism based on a perceived oppositional culture of mind from the South. Consistent with Rothbart’s argument of identity formation through an “axiology of difference,” Northerners increasingly criticized the South for its backward nature in agriculture, economic development, education, and character. The criticism was frequently set against praise for the North. Grant quotes one Senator of the time: “The Southern planter does not, like the hardy farmer of the North [and West], lay his hand to the plough; ...his cultivation is without skill or care.” Many saw the South as a liability to the future success of the nation and to its reputation in the world: “Virginia, like the states

⁵⁵ Taylor, *Cavalier & Yankee the Old South and American National Character*. P. 15.

south of her, is, in great measure, dependent on the superior industry and enterprise of her eastern brethren.”⁵⁶

Grant’s study of Northern images of the South supports the argument that the North defined itself against a negative characterization of the South, creating first a Northern identity and then an American identity based on a Northern ideology. This suggests that the North’s first order positioning of self and Other played a significant role in the origin and perpetuation of the Southern myth. The Northern ideology excluded what it perceived as a threatening Southern ideology – one that was a world apart from the North’s. Eventually, this culminated with the emergence of the Republican Party whose opinion leaders engaged in a process of national identity creation according to categories of Northern vision and value commitments.⁵⁷

Both Montville and Rothbart, in different contexts, support Harre’s argument that the media as well as personal networks play a significant role in the ‘uptake’ of storylines into narratives that shape perceptions and attitudes.⁵⁸ The 19th century media was no less important. Grant studies the images of the South portrayed by Northern representative thinkers of the time through literary and political media evidence. The northeast, especially Boston and New York, was a major publishing center and much of literate America read and discussed the commentary and stories published in journals and newspapers.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Grant, *North over South*. Pp. 42-45.

⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 8-9.

⁵⁸ See Montville. See also Rothbart. See also Harre, et.al.

⁵⁹ See Grant, Montville, and Rothbart.

Creation of Competing Origin Myths

Origin myths significantly contribute to the development of national identity. The North and South, through storytelling, created separate myths. The North largely excluded the South from its vision of America's founding and even used the South as a negative reference point. The South increasingly represented everything the North did not want to be. This implies that it was not slavery alone that repelled the North, but perceptions of fundamental differences present since the birth of the colonies. Samuel Nott commented: "The South is a lower civilization [solely by virtue of its] greater barbarism and poverty at the starting-point of emigration."⁶⁰

One of America's earliest historians and a Northerner, George Bancroft, wrote a biased account of the Revolutionary War that positioned the North as the main contributors to its success. Other media took up this positioning. The New York Tribune, early in the 19th century, argued: "from the origin of our National history, the North has been steadily loyal and devoted to the Union, while every formidable opposition to it has derived its impulse and power from the South." The South, it further argued, was strongly Loyalist and had hurt more than help in the revolutionary cause. Theodore Parker argued that, "Massachusetts [that] took the initiative in the great strife of the eighteenth century." This origin myth was perpetuated in the North even though it ran contrary to historical fact. The South had shared a large role in the Revolution, from soldiers to leaders and Presidents.⁶¹

As two origin myths evolved, the sectional differences grew. The North interpreted the Declaration of Independence as a 'mission statement'; "America was the

⁶⁰ Grant, *North over South*. P. 57.

⁶¹Ibid. p. 28.

new Israel and its people God's chosen people. Many Americans saw it as their divinely inspired right to expand across the continent."⁶² Southerners also had an expansionist myth but envisioned slavery expanding with the nation. The Declaration of Independence was more of an 'insurance policy' against centralized power; this origin myth included the argument that the people had a right to 'alter or abolish' a government.⁶³ These narratives contributed to the creation of two 'imagined communities'⁶⁴ and like any relational dynamic each needed the other in order to define each other and themselves.⁶⁵

Northerners used the images of the southern Cavalier and northern Yankee to construct a myth of 'uncommon descent.' As Grant states:

Although it was a fictitious construction – and a destructive one – the idea that the North and South had separate origins helped northerners distance themselves from a society they saw as an affront to American values; it absolved them, too, of any residual share of guilt in the maintenance of slavery and conveniently ignored the overt racism of northern society.⁶⁶

The North, through its own narrative, attempted to rid itself from the moral stigma of slavery and to portray itself as the section most loyal to the Republic's founding principles of liberty. Its myth was as unrealistic as the Southern one; it conveniently overlooked the Northern colonies own complicity in the slave trade, as well as the violence and disorganization of the past.⁶⁷

Other themes present in the antebellum narrative emerged through representative thinkers of the times such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, William Cullen Bryant, and Horace

⁶² Ibid. p. 32.

⁶³ Ibid. p. 32.

⁶⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 1983).

⁶⁵ Grant, *North over South*.

⁶⁶ Ibid. p. 58.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

Mann. For these thinkers and writers the North had indeed fulfilled the Puritan vision of a “city on a hill” while the South, with wealthy landowners and masses of illiterate poor was the antithesis of this vision. Bryant considered the “children of the west” ignorant and immoral. Emerson argued that two nations existed: North and South; slavery was not the only divisive issue, but “climate and temperament.” Even more blunt, Emerson stated:

You know our idea of the southerner – to wit – as ignorant as a bear, as irascible and nettled as any porcupine, as polite as a troubadour, and a very John Randolph in character and address.⁶⁸

In his journal, he referred to the Southerner as: “a spoiled child with graceful manners, excellent self-command, very good to be spoiled more, but good for nothing else.” And he further insulted Southerners with his well-known characterization of the Southerner that: “has conversed so much with rifles, horses and dogs that he has become himself a rifle, a horse, and a dog, and in civil, educated company...he is dumb and unhappy.”⁶⁹

Horace Mann added to the theme of ignorance and inferiority. He comments: “ignorance was the root cause of all the problems facing the South...” At the same time, he praises the North: “New England schools were the mental architects of this age. They lay the granite foundation for the mind of the country.” In other comments he refers to the superiority of the North over the South: “the more educated community [would] forever keep ahead of the less educated one.” Part of Mann’s struggle for national education included a national curriculum, which would have emphasized Northern values. In reaction, “the South banned all northern textbooks and teachers.”⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Cited in *Ibid.* P. 122.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* Pp. 114-117.

The New York Times also chimed in with its share of negative discourse: [the south] “has not only comparatively little in the arts of civilization, but what she has she borrows. She has no superior industry or art. What she enjoys she does not originate. She buys the iron; she imports her engineers; she gets Fulton to invent her steamboats and Whitney her cotton-gin.” And of course, the Times also demonstrated its support of the educational superiority of the North by claiming “our Northern states are strongly inclined to reverence Books, and to lay very great stress on Book-culture.” Grant points out, however, that the Northern discourse of critique of the South failed to acknowledge its own deeply held racist attitudes and the concern for American White, particularly Protestant, society.⁷¹

Incidents of violence against Northerners occurred as one reaction to Northern hostility in the years prior to the Civil War. As the discourse narrowed, sedimentation of images and attitudes coalesced into a powerful and enduring narrative. The increasing violence, especially in Kansas and in the caning attack against Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner by Southern Congressman Preston Brooks only strengthened the Northern conviction that Southerners were “dangerous fanatics, educated by slavery to violence and determined to dominate the free states.” The New York Times echoed this character demonizing by declaring: “[Southerners] are intolerant, domineering and insolent, not occasionally nor by accident – but habitually and on principle.”⁷²

A narrative of fear of and disdain for the South had dangerously concentrated by 1856 and was accepted by a vast majority of Northerners. Construction of the narrative occurred through media such as newspaper articles, journals, books, travel accounts,

⁷¹ Ibid. Pp. 123-124.

⁷² Ibid. Pp. 134-137. See also Cobb, "Presentation on Positioning Theory".

political speeches and through personal networks. The themes were all familiar. The narrative included both denigrating characterizations and metaphysical concerns. More than characterizing Southerners as uncivilized, Northerners branded them as a threat to American republican ideals. This was the ultimate betrayal. Hatred on both sides had become deep-rooted and decades of compromises had failed to produce a peaceful reconciliation.⁷³

After the War: A Discourse of Legitimacy and Hegemony

The narrative of Northern superiority and true republican ideals was promoted after the Civil War by such representative thinkers of the New England cultural elite: Emerson, James Russell Lowell, Oliver Wendell Holmes, William Dean Howells, and well known writers such as Hawthorne, Stowe, and Thoreau, among others. Magazines such as the *Atlantic Monthly* were founded with the purpose of promoting humanistic cultural values prominent in New England such as high ethics, education, and aesthetics. An assumption prevailed that New England had as its mission to civilize the country. This elite group represented a largely Anglo-Saxon, middle-class, liberal Protestant heritage. They had shifted from a religious culture to a humanistic secular one. The political and social views advocated by this group were more reformist than the mainstream; they criticized laissez-faire capitalism and promoted a socially engaged liberalism. The themes of the discourse advanced were those of racial equality, social and industrial abuses, and more government regulation. During the 1870s and 1880s,

⁷³ Grant, *North over South*.

they lost some influence, but by the turn of the century the Progressive narrative began to dominate the public space.⁷⁴

Criticism of the South continued. In an anonymous article published in 1880 in the *Atlantic Monthly*, it was stated that: “the attitude of the South is [therefore] one which demands serious thought; it is not accidental or transitory or destitute of motive; its causes lie deeply imbedded in Southern sentiment, prejudice and ambition.”⁷⁵ The writer was particularly concerned about Southern loyalty to the South rather than the nation: “the South continues to be a separate political entity, not a mere geographical term...” and further, “they keep their own section riveted together by the bolts of old war memories, states-rights theories, and local pride and prejudice while seeking at the same time to divide the North. ...Therefore, the South grows more and more solid from year to year.”⁷⁶

Interestingly, this writer claims that the South had several specific political goals, several of which can be found in contemporary ‘blue-state’ discourses of mistrust and fear toward today’s Republican party represented most strongly in the former Confederate states. The writer accuses southern politicians of getting elected using terrorism and fraud and describes Southern ambitions as cohesive and definite in purpose. The writer lists the following as the Southern agenda:

- An attempt to gain power through legislative and executive control
- A narrative to justify the rebellion through legitimacy
- Recognition that it was an honor to serve the Confederacy
- The Constitution to be interpreted to support states-rights

⁷⁴ Ellery Sedgwick, *The Atlantic Monthly 1857-1909* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994).

⁷⁵ Anonymous, "The Political Attitude of the South," *the Atlantic Monthly* 45, no. 272 (1880).

⁷⁶ Ibid.

- Imperialist ambitions, especially toward Mexico and Cuba⁷⁷

Another anonymous writer in 1884 agreed that the Union victory in the Civil War gave legitimacy to New England principles, not Southern, and promoted the narrative of the primacy of New England influence with the creation and success of the nation.⁷⁸

Other newspapers such as the *New York Tribune* and *The Herald* influenced public attitudes as well, keeping the Northern narrative dominant and the discourse of Southern disdain vibrant. By 1905, this narrative included the assumption of its hegemony.

William Garrott Brown writes that the abolition of slavery effectively ended the states-rights interpretation of the Constitution; he argued: “In effect, Marshall’s and Webster’s and Story’s and Lincoln’s view of the Constitution had prevailed over the view of Davis, Calhoun, and Jefferson.”⁷⁹

From Narrative Reduction to Conflict Escalation

Sara Cobb, Ph.D, argues that as narratives become polarized, they also ‘thin’ or become ‘skinny’ narratives. History, issues and positions are robbed of their complexity and are reduced to gross simplifications of Manichean dualisms – or binary constructs. Moral worlds of good and evil are easily constructed from narrative reduction and the complexities driving the conflict become repressed or even forgotten. When narratives narrow, Cobb states, polarization increases and conflict escalates.⁸⁰ As the 19th century unfolded, sectional narratives indeed narrowed; they polarized around organizing principles of value commitments and progressed from denigrating characterizations to broader metaphysical constructs of good/evil and moral/immoral.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Anonymous, "Virginia and New England," *the Atlantic Monthly* 66, no. 000397 (1890).

⁷⁹ Garrot William Brown, "The Tenth Decade of the United States," *The Atlantic Monthly* 95, no. 0000005 (1905).

⁸⁰ Cobb, "Presentation on Positioning Theory".

During the first three decades of the 19th century, the North and South solidified their diverging origin myths and used them respectively to support their sectional values and aspirations. Tensions over principles of value commitments increased. Parker argued: “the conflict was not between regions but between value systems; ...the North represented democracy and the South despotism; the North was free and the South enslaved.” In a speech titled “The Nebraska Question” he emphasizes the North’s superiority in economics and intellect.⁸¹

Frederick Olmstead traveled widely throughout the South and sent back to the New England publishing houses his impressions, which later would become three volumes on the South. Olmstead consistently painted a negative image of the South while praising Northern successes. He wrote of the “sad contrast between capacity and achievement” in the South. Slavery he blamed as a system “on the very low and degraded condition of the mass of white southerners.” In another missive: “From their want of intelligence, the majority of white southerners are duped, frightened, excited, prejudiced and made to destroy their most direct and evident interests by the more cultivated and talented spendthrift and unprincipled of the wealthy class.”⁸²

This pattern of positioning the South through insult has continued through today. Political elites attempt to manipulate the Southern white vote through emotive appeals to traditional southern constructs. During the Civil War, most white southerners did not own slaves and lived in near poverty or worse. The slave system kept them poor, yet they willingly and passionately fought for the Confederacy and to preserve the system that oppressed them as well as Blacks. There was deeper meaning in their commitment

⁸¹ Grant, *North over South*. p. 31.

⁸² *Ibid.* Pp. 98-100.

to the South and the “Great Captains” appealed to that meaning through their own storyline and by using the Northern one to serve their interests.

Today, Thomas Frank makes a similar argument in his book: *What’s the Matter with Kansas?* (2004). Like Hochschild, Frank argues that the blue-collar workers, rural Whites and poor in Kansas align themselves politically with the Republican Party even though it is not in their economic interest to do so. Like the wealthy plantation owners of the antebellum South, Frank presents the case that contemporary wealthy Kansans persuade the less advantaged to vote on cultural issues rather than economic ones. And in a vein all too similar with the past, the cultural issues are part of a mythic narrative of national social decay and fears of liberal (substitute Northern) atheism and a perceived threatening interpretation of the US Constitution.⁸³ Echoes of the historical Southern political agenda resonate: intense individualism, states’ rights; limited government regulation; anti-intellectualism; Christian values; strong defense/military, and subtle seeds of imperialism.

Today’s southern narrative invokes God and faith as the means of saving America’s “crisis of the soul.”⁸⁴ The polarizing of Republicans (the South) and Democrats (the North) has narrowed in the last decade into familiar patterns of insult and stigmatization: the traditional myths of identity distinction have not disappeared; in fact, they have been resurrected with a vengeance. Howard Dean, Chairman of the Democratic National Committee, recently stereotyped White Southerners by claiming that he wanted to win the votes of “guys with Confederate flags in their pickup trucks. Charles Krauthammer, a conservative but no supporter of poor Whites in the South

⁸³ Thomas Frank, "What's the Matter with Kansas," in *Jesus Is Not a Republican*, ed. Clint and Hardcastle Willis, Nate (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2004).

⁸⁴ Wichita Congressman Todd Tiahrt as quoted in Frank's *What's the Matter with Kansas*.

responded: “Howard Dean wants the white trash vote,” and he goes on to refer to White Southerners as “yahoos” and “rebel-yelling racist rednecks.”⁸⁵ This insidious stereotyping of an internal Other, begun over 200 years ago, has led to the sedimentation of negative images and to the perpetuation of two hostile discourses of competing narratives. Today, a third order conversation needs to emerge in order to understand these narratives so that we might create a new narrative in which the shared value commitments of our society are enhanced. This may bridge the underlying identity conflict that keeps our nation politically and culturally polarized.

Conclusion⁸⁶

The Northern narrative of identity achieved a precarious hegemony. Northern value commitments and interpretations of American history would shape the cultural and political spheres for most of the 20th century, while the cultural and religious values most dominant in the South remained marginalized. In the early 20th century writers such as H.L. Mencken and Sinclair Lewis, among many others, attacked religion and praised the rise of scientific positivism. It can be argued that the South re-emerged, however, in the 1970s and a new period of active resistance to an imposed position began once again. The secularization of America, which many Progressives of the 20th century believed to

⁸⁵ Pat Buchanan, "Why Do They Hate Dixie?," *The American Conservative*, December 1 2003.

⁸⁶ In order to complete a more comprehensive study of the competing narratives and identities of the white Protestant cultural groups in America, a third storyline would need to be analyzed – the story of the Scots-Irish cultural and religious impact on American culture. This group largely settled in the South, west of the Tidewater area – the original frontier. The Scots-Irish history of poverty, alienation and resentment is movingly portrayed in Jim Webb’s book, *Born Fighting: How the Scots-Irish Shaped America*. He details the poverty and disdain endured by this group of early pioneers and suggests a potential correlation between this legacy and the militant political Christianity that many in the South embrace today. Including this storyline would significantly enhance an attempt to further understand the dynamic history of a frequently conflicted relationship between the white Protestant groups in the United States.

have been achieved, has been challenged by the growing influence and political activism of Conservative Christian organizations.⁸⁷

The dialectic between liberalism/modernism/progressivism and conservatism/traditionalism/religiosity continues today. More than 200 years of emerging and shifting positions between these equally American intellectual traditions reveals a continuous struggle for a dominant national identity organized around seemingly opposing value commitments. As Southern political, economic and religious representatives repositioned, power was redistributed and Northern/New England elites as well as progressive liberals in general felt suddenly marginalized. Narratives soon shifted and new storylines emerged that reflected this change.

The political, religious and cultural spheres of American life today share many common tendencies and clearly a shared past. However, a divide in these public spaces also exists and as elites struggle for positions of advantage, tactics for emphasizing differences are employed. Positions harden around poles of opposing value commitments, producing more common and harsher negative characterological positioning of the Other. As narratives 'thin' once again, misunderstandings and communicative impasses result.

To move beyond a communicative impasse, Cobb suggests that speakers (representative elites in this case) begin by reflexively examining their positioning. In addition, representatives should begin listening to the voice of the other and making real efforts to effect change, rather than instrumentally use distress, anger and humiliation to inflame a historical underlying narrative of essential and moral difference for political

⁸⁷ Thomas S. Engelman, "Religion and Politics the American Way: The Exemplary William Dean Howells," *The Review of Politics* 63, no. 1 (2001). See also Peter Applebome, *Dixie Rising How the South Is Shaping American Values, Politics, and Culture* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1996).

gain. Legitimacy for all parties must be established before genuine dialogue can occur in an atmosphere of mutual respect. Parties should listen to the stories of the Other so that the pain of negative positioning can be acknowledged and addressed.⁸⁸ The divergent White Protestant cultural groups in America share much common history as well as values that shape moral frameworks. Those commonalities should be discussed and shaped into a narrative of interdependence and legitimacy.

Most Americans share a common faith in national myths and ideals and most share a common vision for their nation. To fracture the increasing sedimentation of political, religious and cultural positions and mend the intellectual tensions that lead to political and cultural conflict, we must open space for new understandings – or “better-informed stories”⁸⁹ - of self and other within our own society. Our own history has demonstrated that positions and narratives are always shifting. This dynamic process allows space for the emergence of an alternative narrative to unfold. If centuries of resentment can be addressed, perhaps a new narrative, respectful of differences but built on commonalities can find expression in a nation that truly needs to acknowledge a painful history of often contradicting traditions - and heal.

⁸⁸ Sara Cobb, 2005.

⁸⁹ Sluzki, Carlos as cited by Cobb, "Presentation on Positioning Theory".

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