
As for southern racial violence, Ayers reveals that the lynching of blacks occurred less frequently in areas where blacks had large majorities, as in the Mississippi Delta or Alabama Black Belt, than in areas of economic dislocation and collective stress, into which smaller numbers of blacks had recently moved. Motives for a lynching were less likely to be retribution for the rape of a white woman than a desire to settle a particular score with an allegedly "uppity-minded" black homeowner or entrepreneur. Ayers has an eye for the telling detail. He relates, for example, how at a carnival in 1896 a white schoolboy unsuspectingly put on earphones and heard an Edison recording of a lynching. To his horror, the boy heard the crackle of the flames and the victims "asking God to forgive their tormentors." The pitchman, noticing the boy's distress, dismissed it: "Too much cake, too much lemonade. You know how boys are at a picnic."

Inevitably, perhaps, Ayers has lost some of the coherence that Woodward's more schematic and morally driven account provided. After all, Woodward wrote when the American giant patrolled the world against communism. Ever a skeptic, Woodward set before an unheeding nation seemingly bent on a career of world domination and world policing the example of post-Reconstruction southerners, who understood from the defeat of 1865 the cost of overbearing greed and national hubris.

By contrast, Ayers shuns moral prescriptions of any kind. He belongs to the post-Vietnam War generation, which recoils from the moral imperatives of irony, places faith in the voices of ordinary people, not of authorities, and prefers readers to draw their own conclusions without much authorial direction. At times Ayers's sheer piling up of unfailingly fascinating details has the effect—in the absence of an overarching motif—of leaving the reader intellectually benumbed.

Ayers's accomplishments, however, far outweigh such deficiencies. He has permanently altered our understanding of the New South by revealing a region with many faces, a region where the tackiest, cruelest, and most human moments are all jumbled together. Above all, he has produced a work of frequently stunning beauty. The elegance and sensitivity that he achieves are typical of few historical works, most of which retain a measure of the pedantry that the young Woodward found so disheartening 50 or so years ago.

—Bertram Wyatt-Brown, a former Wilson Center Fellow, holds the Richard J. Milbauer Chair of History at the University of Florida. His most recent book is *Honor and Violence in the Old South* (1986).

OTHER TITLES

Contemporary Affairs

PREPARING FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY. By Paul Kennedy. Random House. 428 pp. \$25

Paul Kennedy's best-selling *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (1987) was, for all its imposing size, a fundamentally simple book. Kennedy's unit of analysis remained the sovereign state, which by

the 1980s already looked to be distinctly old-fashioned—the currency of imperial *Weltpolitik* rather than of the modern world economy. The Yale historian never offered a definition of state power but seemed to assume that it was ultimately measurable in military terms. With disarming frankness, Kennedy now recounts the criticism he received on this point, and his new book is presented as a corrective. Here he turns his attention to larger, transnational develop-

ments such as demography, global warming, biotechnology, and robotics that are bound to influence, if not dictate, the shape of a future social life—a life in which the sun becomes an enemy rather than a friend and nature a victim instead of a challenge, and in which babies are not only weighed but measured by the “environmental damage” they represent. (An American baby represents 280 times the damage of a Haitian one, which, Kennedy soberly observes, is “not a comfortable statistic for anyone with a conscience.”)

Of course, futurology is a hazardous trade, never more so than in the aftermath of the Cold War. While some changes may be somewhat predictable—population growth is the most important of these—others, such as ecological shifts, are much more uncertain, and political, religious and intellectual revolutions lie outside the range of every crystal ball known. Historians are typically opponents of prediction. Yet they are exceptionally well-equipped to grasp the parameters of the possible. Kennedy’s careful inquiry is a good example of this. At one level he might appear merely to be offering a prodigious digest of everything from genetic engineering to the origins of the nation-state, but that digest is informed by sober realism and held in focus by his governing question: How can people prepare for the future?

It is in attempting to answer this question that Kennedy’s analysis runs out of steam. Who is capable of systematically “preparing” on such a scale? Corporations, within their limits, maybe, but states are becoming ever less capable of solving major problems whose causes lie outside their borders. On Kennedy’s showing, indeed, the state is already obsolete in a technical sense. People’s thinking, however, has not begun to catch up with this fact: National sovereignty is still defended and pursued (as in Bosnia) with unremitting, even mounting, ferocity. Meanwhile, the logically necessary vehicle for preparing for the 21st century, the world-state, remains as unlikely as it has ever been. In its absence, the familiar disparate list of competing structures—countries, social groups, societies, states—jostle inconclusively through Kennedy’s final pages.

Within the context of nationality, Kennedy concludes with a poignant historical parallel. He

suggests that Britain a century ago was in something like the position of the United States today: uneasily aware that its supremacy was fast eroding, but still too mesmerized by faith in its uniqueness to learn lessons from others who were setting the new pace. He is right to fix on that sense of exceptionalism. Plenty of influential people in turn-of-the-century Britain could see what needed to be done, “but nobody was capable of getting it done. The British people thought it better to ‘muddle through,’ ” Kennedy writes. But even this implies a more deliberate strategic choice than is conceivable in a mass democracy. What present historians say about Britain’s failure to adapt, future historians (if any) may well repeat about America’s incapacity, for example, to tolerate a 50-cent gasoline tax. As Kennedy bleakly concludes, “Humankind will have only itself to blame for the troubles, and the disasters, that could be lying ahead.” Who else?

MEXICAN AMERICANS: The Ambivalent Minority. By Peter Skerry. Free Press. 463 pp. \$27.95

Americans tend to have one great concern about the millions of Mexican Americans who have crossed the border in recent years: Will they join the mainstream? Will they learn English, recite the Pledge of Allegiance, move to the suburbs, and adopt a pro football team as their very own? They almost certainly will, says Skerry, Washington director for the UCLA Center for American Politics and Public Policy. Unfortunately, he reports, that is not the important question. Mexican Americans face a collective *political* choice about their identity in America. They will be forced to decide whether to define themselves as a traditional ethnic group, like the Irish or Poles, or to adopt the status of a minority group, like the African Americans, and seek special protection under the law.

These alternative futures are already embodied in two cities. San Antonio, Texas, has a large and stable Mexican-American community, with relatively few newcomers and a modified machine-style politics rooted in the city’s churches, neighborhoods, and community organizations.