Dixie's Dove: J. William Fulbright, the Vietnam War, and the American South

BY RANDALL BENNETT WOODS

DURING THE TWO YEARS FOLLOWING HIS SHEPHERDING OF THE GULF OF Tonkin resolution through the United States Senate in 1964, J. William Fulbright of Arkansas, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC), came to the conclusion that the war in Vietnam was essentially a civil war and that the United States was simply supporting one side against the other. By the time President Lyndon B. Johnson left the White House in 1969, Fulbright was insisting that the insurgency in South Vietnam was chiefly a response to the repressive policies of the government in Saigon and its American ally, that the war had no bearing on the vital interests of the United States, and that the nation's involvement there was corroding its institutions and corrupting its public life. Though he was a true internationalist, Fulbright, anguished by what he perceived to be America's uncontrollable impulse to dominate, eventually sought refuge in a realism that bordered on neo-isolationism. In "The Price of Empire" (1967) and The Arrogance of Power (1966) he advocated an Asian policy similar to that espoused in 1950 by former President Herbert Hoover and Senator Robert A. Taft.¹

In public hearings, on television, and in Congress, the junior sena-

¹ "The Price of Empire," in Haynes Johnson and Bernard M. Gwertzman, Fulbright: The Dissenter (Garden City, N. Y., 1968) and J. William Fulbright, The Arrogance of Power (New York, 1966). For Hoover's and Taft's views see John W. Spanier, The Truman-MacArthur Controversy and the Korean War (Cambridge, Mass., 1959), 156–57. The Johnson administration, Fulbright wrote, should abandon its efforts to "extend unilaterally its power in such a way as to promote its conception of ‘world peace’ generally, or the defense of ‘free people’ and seek to maintain such base facilities there as will protect the sea and air routes of the area from domination by hostile forces." "Summary Proposal for Disengagement in Vietnam," Folder April–June 1967, Box 7, Papers of Carl M. Marcy, Records of the U.S. Senate, Record Group 46 (National Archives, Washington, D. C.; hereinafter cited as RG 46). Like Hiram Johnson and Charles Beard before him, he called upon America to retreat within itself and work to perfect its own institutions and social system and thus to become an example to the rest of the world. "If America has a service to perform in the world—and I believe it has—it is in large part the service of its own example," he declared to a Johns Hopkins University audience. "In our excessive involvement in the affairs of other countries, we are not only living off our assets and denying our own

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THE JOURNAL OF SOUTHERN HISTORY
Volume LX, No. 3, August 1994
tor from Arkansas worked assiduously to erode national support for the Johnson administration's policies in Vietnam. The motives and circumstances surrounding Fulbright's decision to confront Lyndon Johnson were hotly debated by his contemporaries and are of increasing interest to historians. The Arkansan's dissent was a product of his fear of the burgeoning radical right, his growing perception of the strength of the military-industrial complex, his love-hate relationship with Lyndon Johnson, and his commitment to détente with the Soviet Union. But, somewhat ironically, Fulbright's perspective on Vietnam and the sharpness of his critique of American policy grew out of his southern background and his commitment to Wilsonian internationalism as he defined it. His ties to both the upland South and the Delta, his Anglophilia, his classic liberal education, and his opposition to the civil rights movement contributed to the form and substance of his opposition to the war. Perhaps most important, his southern background and perspective enabled him to communicate with those on the political right, to act as a bridge between conservative supporters and liberal opponents of the war.

In trying to understand Fulbright and his antiwar position it is helpful to compare his social agenda with that of pro-war southerners. In his 1968 essay on the Cold War and the burden of southern history C. Vann Woodward lamented that such cosmopolitan southerners as Lyndon Johnson and Secretary of State Dean Rusk had helped expand America's presence in Southeast Asia, invoking themes of invincibility and cultural superiority, which had long constituted the core of America's missionary mentality. Woodward believed that Johnson and Rusk had not heeded his call for a new generation of southern politicians to shape a foreign policy based on empathy and restraint. According to Woodward, these bellicose sons of Dixie had betrayed their regional heritage by rejecting the South's history of "defeat and

people the proper enjoyment of their resources; we are also denying the world the example of a free society enjoying its freedom to the fullest." Congressional Record, 89 Cong., 2 Sess., 10808 (May 17, 1966).

2 Several books have been written on Fulbright's life and his opposition to the war. The two best are Johnson and Gwertzman, Fulbright, and William C. Berman, William Fulbright and the Vietnam War: The Dissent of a Political Realist (Kent, Ohio, and London, 1988). It should be noted that two of the most comprehensive and careful histories of the antiwar movement, Melvin Small's Johnson, Nixon, and the Doves and Charles DeBenedetti and Charles Chatfield's An American Ordeal, discuss Fulbright only in terms of his actions in opposition to the war. They make no attempt to portray him as representative of a particular culture or philosophy. Small, Johnson, Nixon, and the Doves (New Brunswick, N. J., 1988), 49, 72, 78–81, and 107–8; and DeBenedetti and Chatfield, An American Ordeal: The Antimwar Movement of the Vietnam Era (Syracuse, N. Y., 1990), 110, 113, 124, 152–54, and 358–59.

failure, . . . frustration and poverty, . . . slavery and its long aftermath of racial injustice," a tradition that should have led them to an understanding of other nations and engendered a sense of cultural relativity. Woodward failed to acknowledge, however, that their very appreciation of the burden of southern history—the historical suffering of the South and its endemic problems—had in part impelled Lyndon Johnson and other idealistic southerners to intervene in Vietnam.

In the spring of 1966 Henry Cabot Lodge, then in the midst of his second tour of duty as United States Ambassador to South Vietnam, wrote a concise, impressionistic description of the South Vietnamese people for Lyndon Johnson. The similarity between Vietnam and the American South, with its heritage of defeat in civil war, northern economic domination, and voluble patriotism, was striking. He observed that "they have had one-hundred years of colonial domination followed by ten years of Diem's dictatorship and in their subconscious is the feeling that they don't have to take responsibility for their actions . . . . At the same time, because of their colonial past, they are touchy about sovereignty and independence—about 'face'." Like American southerners, the Vietnamese possessed a strong sense of family as well as long experience of farm tenancy and sharecropping. Neither people had enjoyed a strong tradition of economic or political democracy. Moreover, both Vietnam and the South had proved remarkably resistant to reform—and for roughly the same reasons.

These similarities were not lost on certain key members of the Johnson administration. Indeed, the perceived presence in South Vietnam of conditions and traits traditionally associated with the American South played a role in Washington's decision in 1965 to commit combat troops to the conflict in Indochina. In many ways Dean Rusk and Lyndon Johnson represented southern liberalism at its best and at its worst. They were the southerners of C. Vann Woodward's hopes, men who had encountered in their history "guilt" rather than "innocence, . . . the reality of evil," rather than "the dream of perfection," which were almost universal in the human experience. Contrary to Woodward's expectations, however, this experience did not produce in them a realism that would constrain America's imperial impulse. In the Hill Country of Texas and the hills of Georgia, Lyndon Johnson and Dean Rusk had encountered poverty, racial exploitation, igno-

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4 Ibid., 229.
5 See Henry Cabot Lodge to Johnson, April 29, 1966, National Security Files—Memos to President, Walt W. Rostow, Box 7, Papers of Lyndon B. Johnson (Johnson Library, Austin, Texas; hereinafter cited as LBJ Papers).
6 Ibid.
rance, and human degradation. The southern experience generated in them a reformist zeal that would culminate in the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965, Medicare, the War on Poverty, and other Great Society programs. It also engendered in them, if not a desire to carry the blessings of liberty and democracy to Southeast Asia, at least a wish to create a viable society in South Vietnam when forced by the exigencies of the Cold War to do so. Following John F. Kennedy’s assassination, the historian Eric Goldman touched a responsive chord in Johnson by invoking a presidency based on unity and ministration to the needs of all the people; and following Johnson’s victory in the 1964 presidential election, W. Averell Harriman, veteran diplomat and adviser to presidents, appealed to Johnson to extend that vision to the international arena. Harriman argued that because of Johnson’s overwhelming mandate, he had the opportunity to unify the peoples of the free world through the proclamation of an updated version of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms. Harriman called upon Johnson to do nothing less than extend the War on Poverty to foreign lands; the Texan responded enthusiastically. Thus Johnson and his secretary of state came to see the war in Southeast Asia as a corollary and not as a contravention of the Great Society. They thrust America into Vietnam not only out of a desire to contain Sino-Soviet imperialism but also out of a determination to uplift the downtrodden. It was very much in character for Lyndon Johnson to identify the peasantry of Southeast Asia with the rural laborers of the South.

J. William Fulbright acknowledged the noble motives behind the Johnson-Rusk dream while also recognizing in it the seeds of America’s destruction. Indeed, Rusk and Fulbright believed that there was an intimate relationship between domestic and foreign affairs. Yet while Rusk was sure that the war in Southeast Asia was necessary to preserve democracy, free enterprise, and individual liberty at home and abroad, Fulbright was convinced that the war was undermining those very principles in the United States and overseas. Rusk never seemed to perceive the contradiction between Woodrow Wilson’s de-

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8 Dean Rusk Interview with author, Athens, Georgia, October 14, 1988; and Harry McPherson Interview with author, Washington, D. C., July 13, 1990 (transcripts in possession of author).

9 Harriman to Johnson, November 19, 1964, Box 439, Papers of W. Averell Harriman (Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.). In truth Johnson was caught in a bind. Shortly after he became president he observed to his advisers that there had been too much emphasis on social reconstruction in the aid program in Vietnam. All too often when the U. S. became involved in the affairs of another country, he admonished, it tried to make the other country over in its own image. Meeting of the president with Rusk, Robert McNamara, George Ball, McGeorge Bundy, John McCone, and Lodge, November 24, 1963, Meeting Note File, Box 1, LBJ Papers. But as he became aware of the political vacuum in South Vietnam and as he became caught up in the effort to build a society able to stand on its own, Johnson’s fears concerning American imperialism receded into the background.
sire to see other nations enjoy the right of self-determination and his efforts early in his administration to export democracy forcibly. Fulbright did.

As the Arkansan’s dissent bit ever deeper into the Vietnam consensus that Lyndon Johnson desperately tried to maintain, a number of administration supporters and members of the Johnson foreign policy establishment came to attribute Fulbright’s opposition to the war to his southernness, or rather to what they regarded as the worst of the southern tradition. A member of Fulbright’s staff who was interviewed by Life magazine noted the Senator’s Arkansas roots and explained Fulbright’s antiwar stance by asserting: “He appreciates the pride a little country has in telling off a big country.” Members of the White House staff carried the argument somewhat further. “In other words,” Fred Panzer wrote Hayes Redmon, “it appears that Fulbright, identifying with the anti-bellum [sic] Southern gentry is still wrangling from the seething hatreds of the Civil War; Vietnam is his ancestral plantation, the Vietnamese—especially the Viet Cong—are an amalgam of his tattered gallant Rebels and his devoted and dedicated darkies, and the American presence is those hated carpet baggers and damn yankees.” 10 In fact, Dean Rusk and Walt W. Rostow, former State Department official and National Security Adviser under Kennedy and Johnson, have argued that Fulbright’s opposition to the war was a direct outgrowth of his racism. According to them, he simply thought it abhorrent that white men should have to spill their blood to safeguard the freedom and independence of yellow men. 11 His position on civil rights and traits that he shared with both the planting aristocracy and yeomen farmers affected Fulbright’s stance on foreign affairs—but not in the ways that his enemies have argued.

In many ways Fulbright was the very antithesis of W. J. Cash’s “glandular, God obsessed, hedonistic” southerners, people “doomed by their savage ideal,” in whom a propensity for violence was combined with religious fundamentalism and deep distrust of intellectual inquiry and discipline. Nor did he resemble the upland planters a few notches above Cash’s rednecks whom Ben Robertson writes about in Red Hills and Cotton: “We are farmers, all Democrats and Baptists—a strange people, complicated and simple and proud and religious and family-loving, a divorceless, Bible-reading murderous lot of folks, all of us rich in ancestry and steeped in tradition and emotionally

11 Walt W. Rostow Interview with author, November 15, 1988, Austin, Texas (transcript in possession of author); and Rusk Interview with author.
quick on the trigger.” 12 Fulbright was as different from these visceral and tempestuous southerners as his views on the Vietnam War were atypical of the South. 13

Nonetheless, J. William Fulbright was and is very much a southerner. As United States Senator from Arkansas for thirty years, Fulbright represented both the Ozarks and the Delta. Stubborn, independent, and refined, he exhibited strains of both highlander and planter in his personality. Although there were populist echoes in his philosophy and legislative agenda, Fulbright was in many ways a paternalistic patrician. Above all, these influences bred in him a determination to preserve the traditional features of Anglo-American civilization—a republican form of government, rule by an educated elite, reverence for the law and tradition, political stability, and a humane free enterprise system.

Certainly Anglophilia and especially a devotion to classic English liberalism is typically, if not exclusively, southern. During his tenure as a Rhodes scholar, Fulbright immersed himself in the writings of Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, and their Whiggish descendants. The chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee was singled out by Vann Woodward as one of a new generation of intellectuals called upon to articulate a foreign policy grounded in empathy and restraint. Fulbright’s opposition to the war in Vietnam, however, along with his antimilitarism and anti-imperialism, stemmed not from a liberalism born of contact with suffering but rather from a deep-seated conservatism. “Despite a persistent malaise from their heritage of slavery, secession, defeat, and poverty,” writes Charles P. Roland, “southerners looked upon themselves as defenders of the ancient American virtues.” 14 “He is not a liberal at all,” I. F. Stone once remarked of Fulbright. “This is the landed civilized gentleman type . . . foreign to the American egalitarian tradition.” 15

It is indisputable that J. William Fulbright was a racist. To his mind,


13 In 1968 and 1972 the great majority of white southerners supported Richard Nixon. The South was the most patient region in the nation with the president’s deliberate withdrawal from Vietnam. Indeed, one of George C. Wallace’s main appeals as a presidential candidate was his call for an “honorable” peace in Vietnam. Compared with the universities of the North and Far West the southern schools were models of decorum and stability in the 1960s. Often the core of dissidents on the southern campuses was composed of students and instructors whose origins were outside the region. Such radical organizations as the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) made little gain against the deep-rooted conservatism and respect for authority among southern youth. Charles P. Roland, The Improbable Era: The South since World War II (Lexington, Ky., 1975), 94–96 and 112.

14 Ibid., 2.

15 Newscloppings, Folder 98, Box Control Number 155, First Accession, Papers of J. William Fulbright ( Mullins Library, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville; hereinafter cited as JWF Papers with references to F and BCN).
the blacks he knew were not equal to whites nor could they be made so by legislative decree. His answer to the problem of prejudice and poverty was federal aid to education. Throughout his career he regarded involuntary integration as anathema. In 1956 Fulbright signed the Southern Manifesto, an attack on the Supreme Court’s Brown decision, and remained conspicuously aloof from the Little Rock school crisis of 1957. When Fulbright’s sister, Anne Teasdale, wrote and urged him to speak out against the lawlessness and violence spawned by Governor Orval Faubus’s defiance lest the world think that he shared the provincial prejudices of his native region, he refused.\(^{16}\)

In the spring of 1960 he participated in the southern filibuster in the Senate against pending civil rights legislation. No new law was needed in Arkansas to protect the voting rights of African Americans, he declared during his three-and-a-half-hour tour of duty: “In Arkansas the Negroes take advantage of their right to vote by the thousands. It is only individual unconcern or apathy that keeps the number from being greater; it is not caused by any discrimination or interference on the part of the officials or citizens in Arkansas.”\(^{17}\)

In the spring of 1962 he argued against a Constitutional amendment to eliminate the poll tax, and he testified before a subcommittee of the Senate Judiciary Committee against bills outlawing literacy tests by states.\(^{18}\)

In March 1964 he participated prominently in a Senate filibuster designed to defeat Title VII of the Civil Rights Bill. The northern approach in Congress, Fulbright proclaimed, had been to enact bills merely declaring equality, while the southern approach had been to enact legislation that would help Negroes upgrade themselves through vocational training and other educational programs. “The people of the South are burdened with a historical legacy that the rest of the Nation does not share,” he told the Senate. “They are marked in some strange ways by a strange disproportion inherited from the age of Negro slavery,” and no one—neither he, nor Congress, nor the Supreme Court—could change that.\(^{19}\)

J. William Fulbright—his name sonorous as a lord’s title—patrician, educated, “senatorial,” upper-class, Anglo, was thus vividly and concretely yoked with that which was disreputable and reprehensible.

But Fulbright was no racist in the Vardaman-Talmadge-Russell tradition, with its race-baiting and vicious discrimination. To argue that Fulbright was filled with a visceral hatred toward blacks is patently

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\(^{16}\) Teasdale to Fulbright, May 20, 1958, and Fulbright to Teasdale, May 27, 1958, F 67, BCN 105, *ibid.*

\(^{17}\) *Congressional Record*, 86 Cong., 2 Sess., 3981 (March 1, 1960).


\(^{19}\) *Congressional Record*, 88 Cong., 2 Sess., 5639 (March 18, 1964).
absurd. He founded the Fulbright Exchange Program and advocated the notion of cultural relativity. He was no more hostile or resentful toward African Americans than he was toward Indonesians. But he did not feel compelled by Christian duty or social conscience to use the power of the state to remedy historical wrongs, correct maldistribution of wealth, or legislate equality of opportunity. "In theory no one approves of discrimination just as no one approves of bad manners or meanness or sin of any kind," he wrote a constituent in 1946. However, flaws in human nature could not and should not be corrected through legislative statute or judicial edict. In a democratic, secular state the government had no business acting in this realm.²⁰ Fulbright did work behind the scenes to desegregate the University of Arkansas School of Law in 1948.²¹ A year later, he tacitly supported the "Arkansas Plan," a scheme put forward by Congressman Brooks Hays and Arkansas Gazette editorial writer Harry Ashmore whereby the white South would grant African Americans the right to vote and equal protection under the law in return for the freedom to continue to segregate public facilities and discriminate in hiring.²² Though the Arkansas legislator signed the Southern Manifesto in 1956, it was with great reluctance and only after he worked vigorously and successfully to moderate the extremist original version penned by Senator Strom Thurmond of South Carolina and Senator Sam J. Ervin Jr. of North Carolina.²³ Indeed, Fulbright was featured on the cover of the first issue of the Citizen, the national publication of the white supremacist Citizens' Councils of America, and branded as one of the nation's most dangerous liberals.²⁴ Nevertheless, not until 1970 did he cast his first vote for a civil rights bill, a measure extending the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Fulbright continually justified his civil rights voting record on the grounds of political expediency, though he never denied believing that education and time rather than legally mandated integration and nondiscrimination were the true avenues to improved race relations. "In an issue of this kind which affects a person's children, you have to go along or you can't be in the Senate," he remarked frankly. "They

²⁰ Fulbright to Theron Raines, February 1, 1946, F19, BCN 48, JWF Papers. See also Fulbright to J. Lewis Henderson, June 15, 1945, F 18, BCN 50, and Fulbright to Rose Stenzler, August 29, 1946, F 9, BCN 48, ibid.
²¹ Fulbright to Herbert Thomas, February 25, 1946, F 16, BCN 25, ibid., and Jack Yingling Interview with author, October 12, 1988, Savannah, Georgia (transcript in possession of author).
always imagined the black would rape their daughter. This was the worst possible thing . . . I was justly criticized as an opportunist," he later recalled, but he added, "I don't think anything has happened to shake my belief that I wouldn't have survived politically if I hadn't taken the course I did."25 Whatever the politics of the situation, Fulbright believed that race relations fell into the area of folkways and mores and that in these fields all peoples are entitled to control their own destiny.

In truth Fulbright's racism was born of the blindness of the southern highlander who had not experienced black life and culture. Lee Williams, his longtime administrative assistant, recalled, "He shares the class and caste consciousness of his planter friends from eastern Arkansas but he does not share their fear of 'race-mixing'."26 Indeed, Fulbright had almost no personal contact with the poverty and racism characteristic of much of the South. His father was a wealthy farmer and banker who settled in Fayetteville, a small university town tucked away in the northwest corner of the state, just after the turn of the century. The future senator led a sheltered, privileged life in a region in which African Americans were less than 2 percent of the population and sharecropping was virtually unknown.27 In Fulbright's youth northwest Arkansas was made up of independent mountain folk, proud, reclusive, stubborn, and poor. The population of the state became blacker, the land flatter, and the planter class more numerous as one moved from northwest to southeast, toward a land of cotton and rice plantations, tenant farmers and sharecroppers. Of course Fulbright was aware of the South's miserable living standards and meager personal incomes, but he had personally witnessed little of the human suffering that was the wrenching by-product of those statistics. His maternal great-grandparents had owned slaves in Virginia.28 Some of his strongest political supporters were planters, men like Robert E. Lee Wilson and Hugh Brinkley, who owned tens of thousands of acres in eastern Arkansas. Nonetheless, the African Americans whom his ancestors had owned and whom his friends exploited were for him pri-

25 J. W. Fulbright Interview with author, Washington, D. C., October 11–20, 1988 (transcript in possession of author). Fulbright's fears were hardly groundless. In his first campaign for the Senate in 1944, his opponent, Homer Adkins, declared him to be both a communist sympathizer and a "nigger lover." Undated advertisement, F 39, BCN 6, JWF Papers.
26 Lee Williams Interview with author, Washington, D. C., June 20, 1989 (transcript in possession of author).
27 The Appalachian and Ozark highlands "was a different South, without plantations, many black people, or a palpable Confederate mystique," writes Jack Temple Kirby. Northwestern Arkansas in 1930 resembled the southern rim of Appalachia. Benton and Washington Counties in the extreme northwest enjoyed relative commercial prosperity with their diversified grain-dairy-livestock and fruit-based economies. By 1959 eleven of the fourteen counties in the quadrant had adopted grain-dairy-livestock economies. Kirby, Rural Worlds Lost, 80, 96, and 106–7.
arily abstractions. Fulbright’s status as a white southerner affected his views on Vietnam; but it was the South’s concern with class and with preserving the status quo, rather than its obsession with race, that was important in the formation of his views.

As previously noted, Fulbright’s upper-class background, his Rhodes scholarship, and his contacts with the masters of the Delta combined to produce in him a deep-seated Anglophilia. Indeed, the characterization of him as “British Billy” by his political enemies had substantial truth to it.29 In March 1945 the newly elected senator from Arkansas appeared before the Joint Committee on the Organization of Congress to suggest the creation of an executive-legislative cabinet that would have the power to dissolve the government and call general elections when the two branches deadlocked over an important issue.30 A year later when the Republicans gained control of Congress in the midterm elections, Fulbright suggested that President Harry S Truman follow parliamentary procedure and resign in favor of a prominent Republican senator such as Arthur H. Vandenberg of Michigan.31 Fulbright was an ardent supporter of postwar aid to Britain and a committed Atlanticist. Like many other members of the southern and English aristocracy, Fulbright’s education was grounded in the classics and in the literature of the Enlightenment. His degrees at the University of Arkansas and at Oxford were in history; his reading focused on Republican Rome, Greece, and modern Europe.

As a classicist and an Anglophile, Fulbright was devoted to the republican form of government. Indeed he considered pure democracy in many ways a dangerous experiment, declaring during the debate over the 1957 civil rights bill: “The Constitution does not provide in any place that every citizen shall have the right to vote. The truth of the matter is that during the early days of this Republic few if any responsible leaders of the country believed in universal suffrage. . . . The idea that in some mysterious way vast masses of voters possess a wisdom and sanctity superior to that of a more restricted electorate gained its greatest momentum under Hitler and Mussolini . . . .”32 He held to the Lockean notion that humans were born a blank slate. Over time, events, circumstance, experience, and education etched out a distinct person and personality. Implicit in this philosophy was the notion that humankind could be improved through education and a rationally ordered society.33 “Our form of government is the product of

29 Johnson and Gwertzman, *Fulbright*, 79.
30 *Congressional Record*, 79 Cong., 1 Sess., A1586 (March 29, 1945).
31 Johnson and Gwertzman, *Fulbright*, 103.
32 *Congressional Record*, 85 Cong., 1 Sess., 11080 (July 9, 1957).
great human effort,” Fulbright asserted; “It was created by our forefathers with the realization that man is potentially good, but also potentially a beast. Wise actions by our people will always be needed to keep the beast from seizing control. Through education we strive to bring out the good in our young people and to cultivate in them a desire to preserve and protect the values of our society.”

Care for the commonweal must reside, he believed, with an elite that practiced public virtue—that vital characteristic of all republics. According to Forrest McDonald, public virtue has meant traditionally “firmness, courage, endurance, industry, frugal living, strength, and, above all, unremitting devotion to the weal of the public’s corporate self, the community of virtuous men.” To Anglo-Americans of two centuries ago, “the public” included only independent adult males. For Fulbright it comprised the educated and public-minded, those who brought discernment and commitment to public affairs.

From convictions shaped by reading Plato, Thucydides, and Montesquieu during his formative years, Fulbright became persuaded that the Vietnam War was eroding the political liberties of the American people. As a student of empires, Fulbright was acutely conscious both of America’s military and economic dominance at the close of World War II and of the inevitability of decline from that lofty status. He was fearful that in its efforts to retain its power America was destroying its political institutions. In 1967 he told a meeting of the American Bar Association that America was “fighting a two-front war and doing badly in both.” In the same speech he declared that “one is . . . the war of power politics which our soldiers are fighting in the jungles of Southeast Asia. The other is a war for America’s soul which is being fought in the streets of Newark and Detroit and in the halls of Congress, in churches and protest meetings and on college campuses, and in the hearts and minds of silent Americans from Maine to Hawaii.”

The great question before America was whether it could simultaneously pursue imperialism abroad and republicanism at home, which were to him “morally incompatible roles.” The “arrogance of power,” the “tragedy of American foreign policy,” “myth and reality in Soviet-American relations,”—those and other phrases in Fulbright’s rhetoric pointed to the era in Athenian history when democracy was devolving into empire. A recurrent theme in Fulbright’s speeches was that in seeking to impose its will on Vietnam, the United States, like

34 Unpublished speech draft, April 18, 1946 (Fulbright family papers in possession of author).
35 McDonald, Novus Ordo Seclorum, 70.
36 Congressional Record, 80 Cong., 2 Sess., 3949 (April 1, 1948).
37 J. William Fulbright, “The Price of Empire,” in Johnson and Gwertzman, Fulbright, 308 (first quotation) and 304 (second quotation).
38 Ibid., 304.
Athens, was perverting its idealism and abandoning its search for excellence. Decrying the federal government’s massive military budget and the Johnson administration’s Asian Doctrine, Fulbright told a joint congressional committee: “Contrary to the traditions which have guided our nation since the days of the Founding Fathers, we are in grave danger of becoming a Sparta bent on policing the world.”

The war in Vietnam threatened republicanism in Fulbright’s view because the corridors of power were walked by persons who were incapable of restraint or sound judgment, unwilling or unable to practice “public virtue.” During his days at Oxford, Fulbright studied under Ronald Buchanan McCallum, a historian of contemporary Europe and a disciple of Woodrow Wilson. Among the many authors McCallum had his student read was David Hume. According to Forrest McDonald, Hume believed that “parties arising ‘from principle, especially abstract speculative principle’ . . . were ‘known only to modern times’ and were destructive to the point of ‘madness.’” It was Fulbright’s fear of an ideologically driven foreign policy that was in part responsible for his opposition to the war. “The fears and passions of ideological conflict have diverted the minds and energies of our people from the constructive tasks of a free society to a morbid preoccupation with the dangers of Communist aggression abroad and subversion and disloyalty at home,” he told an audience at the University of North Carolina in 1964. From approximately 1965 through 1972 Fulbright operated on the assumption that an unholy alliance of Russophobe interventionists and liberal zealots—driven by speculative principle—had seized control of the executive and were attempting to build an American empire in Asia. In turn, the war in Asia was polarizing American society and stimulating the growth of extremist groups from the John Birch Society to black nationalists.

The war in Southeast Asia was especially offensive to Fulbright because it contravened the principles of Wilsonian internationalism as he perceived them. Throughout twenty-five years of correspondence

40 Quoted in McDonald, Novus Ordo Seclorum, 163.
43 Recently the notion of southern internationalism has come under attack. What is clearly absent in the traditional southern exegesis of foreign policy, argues Paul Seabury and Charles O. Lerche Jr., is a sense of “multilateralism.” There is nowhere in the southern ethos any appreciation of the interdependence of peoples and states and the necessity facing the United States of adapting itself and its desires to the demands of a sometimes hostile environment. Those participating in the formulation of policy and those commenting on that policy between 1919 and 1953 have spoken in xenophobic and unilateralist terms even when calling for support of America’s allies. The Walking Tall image of the rugged individualist going it alone even within such bodies as the League of Nations and United Nations was always implicit and frequently explicit in southern discourse. Charles O. Lerche Jr., “Southern Internationalism—Myth and Reality,” in
with his former pupil, Fulbright’s Oxford tutor and friend, Ronald McCallum, defended the Wilsonian vision of an interdependent, peaceful world. Like Wilson’s biographer, Arthur S. Link, Fulbright believed that Wilson’s pledge to “make the world safe for democracy” indicated (at least by 1917) not a determination to export American culture and institutions but rather a commitment to the principle of national self-determination. And he focused throughout his public life on Wilson’s dream of an international collective security organization in which the community of nations acted for the common good. Contemporary internationalists, he told the Cuberly Conference in the summer of 1962, were trying to create “a system of permanent processes for the gradual improvement of the human condition on earth, in trying to make—in Woodrow Wilson’s words—‘a society instead of a set of barbarians out of the governments of the world’. 

Fulbright authored the Fulbright-Connally Resolution, which committed the United States to participation in an international collective security organization following World War II. He was an ardent supporter of the concept of a federation of Europe and, like his friend Assistant Secretary of State William L. Clayton, a multilateralist in international economic matters. As early as the debate over ratification of the United Nations Charter in 1945, Fulbright had blasted his Senate colleagues for clinging to the principle of national sovereignty, and as the Cold War progressed he lamented Washington’s tendency to ignore the world organization. The Vietnam War did not have the support of the United Nations, he frequently observed, and by 1967 America’s Southeast Asian adventure was deeply dividing the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In acting outside the framework of the United Nations, in refusing its offers of mediation, in violating the provisions of the 1954 Geneva Accords, the United States was not only destroying Vietnam and itself but also undermining the principles of collective security and international cooperation.

Patrick Gerster and Nicholas Cords, eds., Myth and Southern History (Chicago, 1974), 262–63; and Paul Seabury, The Waning of Southern “Internationalism” (Princeton, 1957), 139–43. Despite his being a southerner, Fulbright’s internationalism, under the criteria established by these critics, is authentic.

In 1944 McCallum published Public Opinion and the Lost Peace (London), in which he challenged the long-standing view of John Maynard Keynes that the peace structure hammered out at the Versailles Conference was predestined to fail. The concept of the League of Nations was sound, McCallum argued; the organization had not worked because political figures on both sides of the Atlantic had never been willing to make a true commitment to the principles that underlay it and had attempted to use it for their own selfish, political purposes. Herb Gunn, “The Continuing Friendship of James William Fulbright and Ronald Buchanan McCallum,” South Atlantic Quarterly, LXXIII (Autumn 1984), 417–19.


Congressional Record, 80 Cong., 1 Sess., 3138 (April 7, 1947).

Ibid. 79 Cong., 1 Sess., 7962–64 (July 23, 1945).
It should be noted that in arguing that nation-states would have to relinquish a portion of their sovereignty if a system of world government were to work, Fulbright was not typically southern or typical of southern internationalists. Tennant S. McWilliams and others have shown that most Dixie advocates of international cooperation were nationalists under the skin. Indeed, Woodrow Wilson, although born a southerner, had acquired his views on multilateralism and world government as part of his immersion in the politics and culture of the urban Northeast. Many southerners touted Wilsonian internationalism because they perceived it to be a vehicle that would restore to the region a degree of dignity and respect, that would act as an antidote to slavery, civil war, and reconstruction. What in truth they favored was an association of nations in which each member retained complete freedom of action. Indeed, influenced by the Cold War and McCarthyism, many southern politicians came to define internationalism as an American-led crusade to defeat communism.\textsuperscript{48} Fulbright certainly shared the region's pride in Woodrow Wilson and in Wilson's vision of international cooperation, but unlike many of his fellow southerners (and perhaps unlike Wilson), Fulbright took Wilson's principles at face value.\textsuperscript{49} In part the exchange of persons program that he founded was designed to eradicate the nationalism and xenophobia that made internationalism unworkable.\textsuperscript{50}

Fulbright's perception that U. S. foreign policy had been captured by unilateralists and imperialists was responsible for his well-known reversal on the relative powers of the executive and legislative branches in the field of foreign policy. Fulbright began his career as a champion of the executive's prerogatives in foreign affairs. He defended the Yalta Accords, the Bretton Woods Accords, the Dumbarton Oaks Conference, the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, and NATO; he identified executive domination of foreign policy with internationalism and congressional control with isolationism. Those perceptions did not really change, but Fulbright's perception of internationalism and isolationism altered dramatically. The executive, he believed, had perverted internationalism, converting it exclusively into Cold War interventionism. While Fulbright's critique of American foreign policy and its perversion may not have been typically southern, it had its roots in his southern heritage and education.


\textsuperscript{49} "I have always suspected that if Wilson had not suffered a stroke on his train in Colorado and had been able in full vigor to carry out his campaign to educate the American people," Fulbright once observed, "he might have succeeded and the history of twentieth century might have been incalculably different." Fulbright, "National Goals," \textit{Series}, 4:19, Box 29:7, JWF Papers.

\textsuperscript{50} Fulbright to George A. Horne, February 6, 1946, F 50, BCN 24, \textit{ibid}.
If Fulbright’s philosophy was rooted in the Anglophilia and class-consciousness of Arkansas’s planting aristocracy, it grew also out of the mind-set of the southern highlanders who populated the Ozark mountains. Their salient features—a stubborn independence and an ingrained tendency to resist established authority—contributed significantly to Fulbright’s stance toward the war in Vietnam. Throughout his public career he seemed determined to swim upstream—against Harry Truman and the cronyism of the early 1950s, against Senator Joseph R. McCarthy and his Russophile supporters, against the complacency and materialism that marked Dwight D. Eisenhower’s years as president, and against Lyndon Johnson, the larger-than-life Texan and the military-industrial complex that supported him. Like many southern highlanders, Fulbright embraced dissent for dissent’s sake. In “A Higher Patriotism,” an antiwar speech he delivered at Storrs, Connecticut, in 1966, the Arkansan observed with distaste that intolerance of dissent was a typically American characteristic. He echoed Alexis de Tocqueville’s thoughts on the United States 150 years earlier: “I know of no country in which there is so little independence of mind and real freedom of discussion.” Fulbright insisted that unanimity was tantamount to complacency: in the absence of debate and dissension, errors—the war in Vietnam being the most glaring—were sure to be made.51 And, in fact, it was his penchant for dissent that helped the junior senator survive in office until 1974. A large majority of Arkansans believed that North Vietnam was the aggressor and that the American cause was just, but they distrusted Johnson because he was a Texan, because he seemed to epitomize big government, and because he was seen as a bully. Fulbright, cast in the role of the courageous underdog struggling against insuperable odds, appealed to the average Arkansan whose immense inferiority complex lay always just beneath the surface. “If the present Administration is half as vindictive against its foreign policy critics as was the Roosevelt regime,” a pro-war constituent from northwest Arkansas wrote, “you may well find yourself being undercut, patronage-wise and in other ways, here in Arkansas in order to render you ineffective and sour the voters on you. In any event, you must have courage—a quality I greatly admire in any man.”52

52 David M. Baxter to Fulbright, March 20, 1966, Series 48:11, Box 35:3, JWF Papers. A Little Rock television survey taken in the fall of 1967 indicates that 54 percent of the viewers questioned responded that they opposed Fulbright’s stand on the war while 46 percent approved. For socioeconomic and educational reasons opposition to the war was greater in this, the state’s only urban area, than in other regions of Arkansas. “Fulbright’s Stand Tested by TV Poll,” Little Rock Arkansas Democrat, November 2, 1967. Former governor and marine veteran Sid McMath, one of Arkansas’s most popular figures, repeatedly and publicly denounced the junior senator’s opposition to the war. The state’s equally popular sitting governor, Winthrop Rockefeller,
Fulbright's opposition to the war in Vietnam, then, stemmed from his attachment to republicanism, his traditional English liberalism, and his southern highlander independence. It also flowed from his views on the South and its place in American history. Senator Fulbright, whose paternal great-grandparents' home in Missouri had been burned by Union raiders, bought into the myth of Reconstruction that held sway in the South well into the 1960s, namely, that from 1867 through 1877 Dixie had been forcibly occupied by federal troops and compelled to accept governments run by ignorant field hands, exploitative carpetbaggers, and unscrupulous scalawags. During that supposedly terrible period, radical Republicans in Congress turned the South's cavalier social system upside down; the poor, the ignorant, and the corrupt ruled the virtuous, educated, and civilized. "Even today," he observed to the Senate, "although the South has long since recovered its political rights and has begun at last to share in the nation's economic prosperity, the very word 'Yankee' still awakens in Southern minds historical memories of defeat and humiliation, of the burning of Atlanta and Sherman's march to the sea, or of an ancestral farmhouse burned by Cantrell's raiders ... ."53

To him the civil rights movement was in large part just another attempt by the North to impose its will and culture on the South. "The South lost the war in 1865," he observed to the Senate with some bitterness during the debate over the Civil Rights Act of 1960. "Why are there so many in the North who wish to prolong it?"54 Fulbright's historical memory led him to identify both with his own nation, embroiled in a hopeless war half a world away, and with Vietnam, struggling desperately to fend off a larger imperial power. Like Edmund Burke, an Irishman who became one of eighteenth-century England's most powerful politicians and a man whom Fulbright was fond of quoting, the Arkansan represented the experience of defeat in the halls of the national legislature. "Perhaps we Southerners have a sensitivity to this sort of thing [the stalemate in Vietnam] that other Americans cannot fully share," he remarked in 1966. "We—or our forebears—experienced both the hot-headed romanticism that led to Fort Sumter and the bitter humiliation of defeat and a vindictive Reconstruction." The South's burden, he observed, had become the nation's burden.55

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54 Congressional Record, 86 Cong., 2 Sess., 7312 and 7324 (quotation), (April 5, 1960).
As an individual with a strong sense of class, kinship, and place, he believed it no less abhorrent that the United States should force its culture, political institutions, and economic theories on another society than that the North should impose its mores on the South. Fulbright acknowledged that most Americans supported the war in Vietnam for admirable reasons—to extend the blessings of democracy and individual liberty and to guarantee stability and prosperity to a people threatened by communist imperialism. But he also believed that popular and official ignorance of Indochinese history and culture prevented Americans from perceiving that nationalism was a stronger component in the ideology of Vietnamese Communists than was Marxism-Leninism, that respect for authority and continuity were more important political values in Vietnamese society than democracy and freedom, and that China and Vietnam were age-old enemies rather than co-conspirators out to communize the world. America’s efforts to remake Vietnam in its image were as absurd as the North’s efforts to legislate racial equality in the South.56 If the Vietnamese wanted to live under communist rule, so be it. His was a live-and-let-live mentality, a mentality that had led to the Compromise of 1877 and that had been used for a hundred years to block federal action to help African Americans. Nonetheless, that same perspective produced a much-needed critique of the notion of American diplomatic omnipotence.

Further contributing to Fulbright’s determination to protect the sanctity of indigenous cultures was his dislike of colonialism, a southern and Wilsonian preoccupation. Like so many other leaders of the New South, Fulbright never forgot that Arkansas and the entire region were economic colonies of the North. In 1964 during an exchange with Senator Jacob Javits, he declared: “Where did New York get its many dollars? It did not take the money out of the ground, out of a gold mine. . . . For many years Mr. Joseph Eastman [a New York industrialist] dominated the Interstate Commerce Commission. The Interstate Commerce Commission set up freight rates so that we in the South could not start an industry . . . .”57 From 1943 through 1955, which covered his term in the House and his first decade in the Senate, Fulbright devoted much of his energy to freeing his constituents from their economic bondage. His views on the South as an exploited economic colony of the North, his adherence to the Wilsonian principle of national self-determination, as well as his resentment at what he

56 “U. S. efforts to preserve the independence of States in Asia and to promote their economic growth will fail unless greater indigenous Asian . . . support is forthcoming,” he advised President Kennedy in 1961. Fulbright to Kennedy, May 19, 1961, Box 1, Fulbright Papers, Records of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, RG 46.
believed to be the North’s efforts to impose its racial views on the South instilled in him an intense anticolonialism.

From late 1956 through 1960 the Arkansan repeatedly castigated John Foster Dulles and Dwight Eisenhower for adopting a rigidly counter-revolutionary position in regard to the anticolonial, nationalist revolutions that were beginning to sweep the developing world. In propping up military dictators and aging colonial regimes, Washington was merely adding fuel to the flames of regional disputes and blocking healthy change. The second Indochinese war was the bitter fruit of that neocolonial stance. As visualized by its architects, containment was designed to prevent the spread of Soviet aggression, Fulbright told journalists Martin Agronsky and Eric Severeid in 1966. As it had evolved under Johnson, it was an attempt to contain a worldwide movement toward self-government and self-expression by peoples formerly yoked to European empires.\(^{58}\) From being one of foreign aid’s staunchest supporters Fulbright moved during the Vietnam era to being one of its most adamant opponents.\(^{59}\) The Vietnamese were suffering from the “‘fatal impact’ of the rich and strong on the poor and weak,” he told a Johns Hopkins audience in the spring of 1966. “Dependent on it though the Vietnamese are, our very strength is a re-proach to their weakness, our wealth a mockery of their poverty, our success a reminder of their failures.”\(^{60}\)

In part it was his sensitivity to imperialism, particularly cultural imperialism, that set Fulbright apart from conservative nonsouthern critics of the war. George F. Kennan, who although still enamored of the domino theory and concerned about a possible loss of credibility should the United States pull out of Vietnam, had during the 1966 SFRC televised hearings on Vietnam called for “a resolute and courageous liquidation of unsound positions” in that war-torn country.\(^{61}\) Like Fulbright, Kennan distrusted democracy, recommending the establishment of rule by an “elite . . . of mind and character.”\(^{62}\) He be-

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60 *Congressional Record*, 89 Cong., 2 Sess., 10807 (May 17, 1966). Fulbright believed that in its effort to save Vietnam, the United States was destructively projecting its values and goals on a foreign culture. As Lyndon Johnson prepared to pour thousands of additional troops into Vietnam in the summer of 1965, Carl Marcy, Fulbright’s chief-of-staff on the SFRC, lamented the change that had come over America since John Kennedy’s inauguration. “We have tried to force upon the rest of the world a righteous American point of view which we maintain is the consensus that others must accept,” he told Fulbright. “Most of the tragedies of the world have come from such righteousness.” Marcy to Fulbright, August 17, 1965, Series 48:1, Box 16:2, JWF Papers.
lieved that the key to winning the Cold War was maintaining a healthy society at home. He was a conservative who bemoaned the erosion of traditional American virtues; however, unlike Fulbright, who denounced perceived efforts by the United States to foist its values, virtuous or otherwise, on other nations, Kennan worried that mistakes made in Vietnam and the impact of the war on America would undermine the nation’s ability to lead the free world.

Fulbright’s position on civil rights, if not his southernness, posed a problem for antiwar dissidents, many of whom looked to him for leadership and for most of whom opposition to the war in Vietnam and support for the second reconstruction were part of the same moral and philosophical cloth. Most accepted the political argument that he put forward in justification of his racist voting record. Nevertheless, they could never quite forget or forgive Fulbright for signing the Southern Manifesto and voting against every civil rights bill until 1970.63

The great irony was that Fulbright’s participation in the struggle against civil rights enabled him to communicate with southern hawks who were beginning to have doubts concerning the war. And the alienation of the hawks was the key to the destruction of the pro-war consensus in Congress. Throughout 1967 Fulbright worked to convince Richard B. Russell of Georgia, Sam Ervin of North Carolina, and other strict constructionists in the Senate to apply the same constitutional standards to the Johnson administration’s foreign policy as they did to its civil rights program. Russell and Ervin had initially opposed the introduction of troops into Vietnam but had subsequently taken the position that, once there, they should be supported to the fullest. By 1967 they were frustrated with the stalemate on the battlefield and angry at Johnson’s deception and arrogance.64 In the issues of executive usurpation of congressional prerogatives and the “unconstitutional” extension of American power abroad, Fulbright offered the disillusioned hawks of Dixie a face-saving way to oppose the war. When in July 1967 the chairman of the SFRC offered his national commitments resolution, a proposal requiring explicit congressional approval of executive agreements with foreign countries, Russell and Ervin

63 In later years Fulbright responded to those who questioned at the time how he could take such apparently incongruous positions on the war and civil rights. Philosophical questions aside, Arkansans were willing to listen to arguments in behalf of an enlightened foreign policy; this was patently not the case in the area of civil rights. “They [the people of Arkansas] know what their daughter is and they know what the conditions are in their local school. It’s not over in Vietnam or the Middle East. There they are subject to persuasion . . . . They didn’t agree with my view on Vietnam. But I could make them shake their view of it by saying, “After all, I know more about it.” On the other hand, “You had a hell of a chance of persuading them that it’s a good thing for their daughter to go to school with a black man.” Fulbright Interview with author.

64 Russell to General L. O. Grice, March 21, 1967, Dictation Series, Box 1J. 34e., Vietnam Folder, Russell Papers.
leaped to their feet to support it. "I know of nothing that is more in need of clarification than the present state of the alleged commitment of the United States all over the world," Russell told his colleagues.\(^65\) That attitude, in turn, led to the passage of the Cooper-Church amendment, setting a deadline for withdrawal of American troops from Cambodia, and eventually to enactment of various end-the-war resolutions during the administration of Richard M. Nixon.\(^66\)

Fulbright’s opposition to the Vietnam War thus stemmed from southern and conservative roots that most of his followers would neither have understood nor appreciated. Deeply conservative and even racist, he was treated as a hero by war protesters and widely heralded for a time by the New Left. Committed to aristocratic values and to an elitist perception of society, he was viewed as a crusader against the establishment.\(^67\) It may be, as Sheldon Hackney argues, that the South is a counterculture; however, only in that special sense may Fulbright be considered a rebel.\(^68\) Nevertheless, Fulbright put forward a searching critique of American policy at a crucial point in the nation’s history. That indictment, particularly as it pertained to cultural imperialism, was in part an expression of Fulbright’s southern and aristocratic background, compounded alike of his classical education, Ozark roots, Delta associations, and historical memory.

\(^{65}\) Congressional Record, 90 Cong., 1 Sess., 20702–7 (July 31, 1967). Congress eventually passed the national commitments resolution during the Nixon administration.

\(^{66}\) Throughout 1970 and early 1971 Fulbright labored to convince Senator Sam Ervin, the strict constructionist from North Carolina, to apply the same constitutional standards to Nixon’s foreign policy as he did to civil rights, impoundment, and other issues. Ervin had put him off and cast one hawkish vote after another. Like Richard Russell, Ervin believed that U. S. involvement in the Second Indochinese War had been a mistake, but that once the “boys” were committed to battle, the nation could not look back. But Fulbright’s persistence, coupled with the brouhaha over publication of the Pentagon Papers (the secret history of the war commissioned by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara), and the declared intention of Senator John C. Stennis of Mississippi to seek a congressional limit on the war-making powers of the president finally turned Ervin. In August the self-styled country lawyer, his jewels shimmying and eyes flashing, opened hearings before his Judiciary Subcommittee on various pending measures designed to keep the executive branch from withholding information from Congress. The first item on the agenda was the Fulbright bill, which would compel the president either to furnish full information to Congress upon request or to invoke executive privilege, and it was clear from the beginning that the North Carolinian was now ready to support his Arkansas colleague. “Senate G.O.P. Chief Backs Restrictions on President’s Warmaking Powers,” New York Times, July 28, 1971, sec. 1, p. 7. From the summer of 1971 on, Ervin consistently supported end-the-war resolutions.

\(^{67}\) Karl Campbell, “The Triumph of Conservatism: Senator Sam Ervin and the Road to Watergate,” paper presented to the 1993 American Historical Association meeting in Washington, D. C.

\(^{68}\) Fulbright always shunned the mantle of leadership that radical America sought to thrust upon him, however. One of Fulbright’s aides asserted: “Fulbright is not a zealot. He gave responsibility to the anti-war movement, but he based his opposition on rational judgment rather than emotion, and he was always worried by the long-haired demonstrators who saluted him as their leader.” Quoted in Stanley Karnow, “Henry and Bill: The Kissinger-Fulbright Courtship,” New Republic, December 29, 1973, p. 16.

\(^{69}\) Sheldon Hackney, “The South as a Counterculture,” American Scholar, XLII (Spring 1973), 283–93.