

## PROLOGUE TO THE SEVENTIES

The American public school emerged in the early nineteenth century amid significant social and economic changes. In the beginning stages of industrialization in the United States, character traits associated with a Puritan-like self-discipline were demanded in work settings governed by the pace of machines. Whereas Puritan mores had been in decline for over a century, the necessities of industrial production demanded their partial resurrection. Punctuality, accuracy, diligence and perseverance were some of the traits that Puritans had held dear and which were at a premium once again in the emerging machine culture. A New England movement to found statewide public school systems promised to instill these old virtues in the upcoming generation. Simultaneously, many social habits suggesting lack of self-control came under increasing scrutiny. The American Temperance Society, founded in 1826 to combat drunkenness, was symbolic of this shift in American values away from the freedom-loving eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup>

Because of its focus upon shaping the values of children, the public school was the most important institution created to foster the renewed emphasis on self-discipline. The most important individual in founding this New England institution was Horace Mann, who served as secretary to the state board of education in Massachusetts from 1837 to 1848. Under his leadership, Massachusetts developed the first modern statewide public-school system in the United States. The development of internalized mechanisms of moral restraint was Mann's chief objective—even more important than disseminating academic knowledge. Mann harmonized the doctrines of the major Protestant sects to create a general catechism of moral teachings to be imparted in the public schools. Bible reading and hymn singing fleshed out his program of moral education.

The primary purpose of the public school was to create a common behavioral code for the entire society. Just as the new machines turned out standardized products, the public school was intended to standardize

society itself. From the vantage point of Horace Mann, disparate elements in the population (especially increasing numbers of Irish Catholic immigrants) needed to be Americanized. Nonetheless, while the public school would supposedly promote social homogenization, African Americans were kept in different schools. Girls were also taught in separate schools at the outset of the public education movement. These exceptions to the emerging ideal of cultural standardization, apparent to observers in our own time, were glossed over then by most early public-school advocates.<sup>2</sup>

The new American public school systems were characterized by centralized state controls, state-based professional administrators removed from local community influences, and general taxes funding the enterprise. However, their primary characteristic was an agenda for standardizing American culture. Under the new educational order, the older practice of providing government funds to church-based schools to accomplish the job of educating the community was increasingly discouraged. For example, in 1825, public aid was cut off for New York City's Catholic schools. In the early 1840s, with Catholic immigration on the rise, Catholic Bishop John Hughes of New York City sparked a movement to reverse the trend favoring public education but failed. He only succeeded in getting permission to substitute the Catholic-preferred Douay Bible for the Protestant's King James version in the public schools of several Catholic wards in the city. Pressure for cultural homogeneity was not discouraged by this small compromise, and Catholic complaints continued. In the 1850s, Catholic Archbishop John Purcell of Cincinnati protested the Protestant flavor of the public schools, paid for in part by Catholic taxes. Purcell argued that Catholics should not have to pay these taxes and instead should educate their children in Catholic schools funded by themselves. This kind of proposition only steeled the public school reformers more against those whom they perceived as promoting socially divisive "sectarian" education.<sup>3</sup>

The coming of the Civil War pushed the public-school issue onto a national stage. The emancipation of millions of African Americans forced the nation and the victorious Republican Party to confront a multitude of new issues related to the freedmen's new status. Slavery had deposited most of its unfortunate victims at freedom's door without the ability to read and write or to cipher and conduct everyday business transactions. Many feared that if black Americans were left in ignorance the Republic itself might eventually crumble. This attitude placed an extraordinary societal imperative on public education to rectify the situation. Modern historians have debated the wisdom of

that generation's emphasis on public education to the exclusion of all other African-American needs. Some have claimed that securing a healthy economic base was of far greater importance for the freedmen than learning to read and write. At the time, Radical Republican Congressman Thaddeus Stevens called for a land reform that would have granted to each freedman "forty acres and a mule." Historian Ronald E. Butchart and others have argued that Stevens's failure to win this essential economic reform doomed all other efforts, including the educational goal to eliminate black illiteracy. In Butchart's view, mass education for blacks, without the economic underpinnings of land reform, became simply a white mechanism to encourage pliant, docile black labor.<sup>4</sup> Other historians, such as William Gillette, have treated the failure to institute land reform as of little historic consequence. "Even if the blacks had become landowners," he has written, "they would not have escaped the poverty and indebtedness that plagued the cotton economy nor would they have avoided the decline and disappearance of the family farm in the South."<sup>5</sup> In any case, the Republican Party solution to African-American postwar poverty became mass education and not land reform.

Richard Henry Dana, Jr., had pressed for land reform. "We have got to choose between two results," he warned. "With these four millions of Negroes, either you must have four millions of disfranchised, disarmed, untaught, landless, thriftless, non-producing, non-consuming, degraded men, or else you must have four millions of land-holding, industrious, arms-bearing, and voting population. Choose between these two! Which will you have?" Such sentiments expressed a desire in some quarters to force a redistribution of wealth amassed by slave labor. But, as Eric Foner has pointed out, the Republican Party in general was too wedded to the ideas of the sanctity of private property and self-help to consider seriously any meaningful distribution of planter wealth among the former slaves. Consequently, when Andrew Johnson summarily discontinued the hope of land reform by ordering confiscated lands be returned to their former owners, his presidential will was not overturned by successive Republican Congresses. Whether delivery on the promise of "forty acres and a mule" would have produced a dramatically different history than that which transpired can never be known. Suffice to say, its absence made a positive outcome for African Americans all the more tenuous. Encouraged by an active Southern resolve not to rent or sell land to blacks, an economic structure of black peonage and white control of the land ensured the continuance of a rigid racial/economic stratification, irrespective of any individual educational accomplishment.<sup>6</sup> Most

Republicans did not acknowledge the disjunction between this economic reality and their own free-labor ideology. A cognitive dissonance concerning the supposed empowerment accompanying mass education and a lack of meaningful economic opportunity continued until the end of Reconstruction and even beyond.

Almost as serious as the absence of land reform, traditional Southern indifference to public education blocked the progress of the African American. As *De Bow's Review* noted in 1868, the slave South had widely considered common agricultural labor as not needing any training in letters. This attitude continued into the era of post-emancipation. "No agricultural day laborers are ever highly educated," commented the Southern journal. "It does not pay in plowing and ditching as in the mechanical arts." Additionally, the education of blacks had traditionally been viewed in the South as endangering the public safety.<sup>7</sup> Throughout the South, the concept of public education had long been viewed as a New England idea, spawned by the very same people who had raised the Northern aggression against their region. Nevertheless, even before the war that New England idea had made some inroads in the Southern states. At the beginning of the war, North Carolina had been well along toward developing a meaningful public school system for whites. More than one author has speculated that if the Civil War had not completely disrupted prewar Southern beginnings in the area of public education full-blown public school systems on the New England model would have blossomed throughout the South in the 1860s.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, it is hard to conceive that a political culture generally dominated by a landed, planter aristocracy with no keen economic interest in mass education would have on its own developed statewide uniform systems of taxation for school support. Also, had the Civil War not occurred, blacks would not have been included in any native-grown public-school effort. Accordingly, the weight of historical judgment attributes the flowering of public education in the South to outside influences.

Those influences came South during the war in the wake of advancing Northern armies. Southern blacks recruited as Union soldiers were provided the rudiments of reading and writing both to raise their morale and make them more effective troops. Even before that, the military had engaged in some efforts to educate runaway slaves who fled to Union lines. Early seizure of the sea islands off the coast of South Carolina also inspired educational as well as temporary land-management experiments among Southern blacks.<sup>9</sup> The Freedmen's Bureau, created by Congress only weeks before Lee's surrender at Appomattox, further promoted black education in the South. The

new agency cooperated with Northern philanthropic societies. The latter sent schoolteachers South, and the Freedmen's Bureau helped get them established in classrooms and provided a degree of protection against unreconstructed Southerners hostile to the very idea of educating blacks. By the end of 1865, there were 740 black schools in operation with 90,589 students enrolled.<sup>10</sup> The Northern teachers brought with them their values of intense nationalism and individual self-reliance. They exuded their cultural preferences for evangelical piety, self-control, and hard, steady work. They saw their mission to effect a moral reform among the former slaves, all in the process of helping to develop a true national culture founded on the Protestant work ethic. In line with the initial impulse that had driven reformers such as Horace Mann, they saw their purpose as creating cultural standardization. They were as ideologically opposed to true self-determination for African Americans as the former slave masters had been. They never questioned that their reform might not be appreciated by those about to be uplifted to the glorious New England standard. Indeed, they were oblivious as to how their takeover of many educational efforts begun by blacks themselves was viewed in the African-American community. In their view, the blacks could only benefit by their particular New England reconstruction of Southern culture. "New England can furnish teachers enough to make a New England out of the whole South," wrote one teacher, "and, God helping, we will not pause in our work until the free school system . . . has been established from Maryland to Florida and all along the shores of the Gulf."<sup>11</sup>

African-American reaction to this cultural invasion was mixed. The freedmen appreciated the teachers developing their educational skills but were annoyed at their intolerance of black cultural norms. For instance, the cultural value of group solidarity had been brought from Africa and was reinforced by the harsh realities of slavery. Northern teachers did not appreciate this value and instead viewed it as an obstacle to the development of modern, entrepreneurial individualism. Naively, these outsiders believed that hard work would always be rewarded with individual advancement in any environment. As true-believers in the free-labor ideology, the Northern teachers did not appreciate the enduring strength of the racial caste system of the South. As historian Jacqueline Jones has written, the encounter between these teachers and their black charges "amounted to a meeting between a rational, nineteenth-century middle-class culture and a traditional pre-modern one." Blacks did not appreciate the white teachers' moral lectures on matters regarding property rights and sexuality. African Americans commonly viewed the cultural standards of these New

England educational missionaries as too strict, inflexible, and unrealistic. Given this cultural distance, many blacks preferred African-American teachers to white ones, even when the former had less formal academic preparation than the latter. Essentially, blacks wanted to control their own institutions, including their schools, and white teachers were an obstacle to attaining this desire.<sup>12</sup>

While a cultural tension separated the Northern teachers from the black community, a more serious cultural gap divided these teachers from the Southern white community, which shared little of their free-labor and nationalistic assumptions. In the years immediately after the war, the white South tended to view these Northern educational missionaries as dangerous social revolutionaries. In July 1866, the *Norfolk Virginian* complained that the Northern teaching missions sent southward were motivated by spite and intended "to disorganize and demoralize still more our peasantry and laboring population." Accordingly, white Southerners burned black schools and ostracized and occasionally brutalized the teachers of African Americans.<sup>13</sup> This fact challenged the federal government to provide additional protection and encouragement of black education. Without such assistance, there could be no meaningful reconstruction of the South and no creation of a homogeneous, national culture.

The original act to create the Freedmen's Bureau had not explicitly provided for an educational role but had simply charged the agency to manage abandoned lands and in general deal with the transition from slavery to freedom. Under that vague mandate, the Freedmen's Bureau had begun its educational mission. On July 16, 1866, over President Johnson's veto, Congress passed a supplementary statute that specifically funded educational operations. Johnson charged that this new Freedmen's bill was unconstitutional. The constitutional justification for creating the Freedmen's Bureau in the first place had been the war power of Congress. With the war over, strict constructionists saw no valid reason for continuing what had been intended to be only a temporary agency. The presidential veto complained: "The Congress of the United States . . . has never founded schools for any class of our own people, not even for the orphans of those who have fallen in the defense of the Union." In making explicit provision for federally run schools, the Congress ventured onto new constitutional ground. In Republican minds, the war power argument remained valid years after war's end. As late as 1868, Republicans lectured their Democratic colleagues that the "war" continued as long as the spirit of slavery continued to obstruct the progress of African Americans. Using this



logic, the Freedmen's Bureau won Congressional extensions until the end of the decade. In 1871, the bureau finally passed out of existence.<sup>14</sup>

On March 2, 1867, Congress officially took control of Reconstruction. With the exception of Tennessee, it dismissed the Presidentially reconstructed governments of every ex-Confederate state. It placed the ten remaining ex-rebel states under temporary military control and required them to write new state constitutions, with the proviso that black men could participate in the process and that former rebels could not. Tennessee was then the only ex-Confederate state with an elected Republican administration. Alone of the former Confederate states, it had ratified the proposed Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution. On March 5, Tennessee validated the faith placed in it by creating a biracial (though segregated) statewide system of public education. General John Eaton, Jr., who during the war had organized a Mississippi Valley precedent to the Freedmen's Bureau, was appointed Tennessee's first superintendent of public instruction.<sup>15</sup>

During the war, several border slave states, under the influence of the federal military power, had written new state constitutions that had effectively reconstructed them. Maryland, Missouri, and West Virginia (summarily carved from rebellious Virginia in 1863) participated in this process. Their new constitutions had mandated public-school systems. Of these states, none but Missouri provided for the education of blacks, and that on a segregated basis. Nonetheless, the development of any public-education program was taken as a step in the right direction. It was common knowledge that the victorious North expected the former slave states to become more "Northern," and the development of public-school systems was primary evidence that this expectation was being met. In 1867, as the former Confederate states came under Congressional control, it was understood that the creation of public-education systems was expected of the Southern constitutional conventions.<sup>16</sup>

As the elections to these constitutional conventions were controlled by black votes, it was also understood that the new state constitutions would formally provide for African-American suffrage. Yet the mass of Southern blacks could not yet read or write their own names, and it was doubted that they had an ability to grasp the political issues of the day. Under these circumstances, they would be voted in herds as directed by their Republican managers. The idea of illiterates voting on a mass scale went against the grain of the common American understanding of essential prerequisites for good citizenship. Only the speedy establishment of public schools throughout the Southern states could possibly justify this hopefully temporary state of affairs.

Accordingly, all of the new Southern state constitutions provided for the establishment of state systems of public education, promising free education for all children. This is widely regarded as Reconstruction's most enduring reform. However, providing for public schools on paper did not necessarily mean that meaningful systems of public education would soon be established in the South.<sup>17</sup>

George Peabody, an American millionaire living in England, followed these developments closely. True to his New England roots, he wanted to encourage public education in the South and created a charitable fund worth several million dollars to do just that. Barnas Sears, who had succeeded Horace Mann as secretary of the Massachusetts board of education, was chosen to head the new Peabody Fund. Sears established his headquarters in Staunton, Virginia, to gain familiarity with Southern conditions. His purpose was to tease Southerners, with small seed grants, to push the development of public education themselves. As long as the public school remained a foreign, New England institution, public education could not long endure in the South. Its best chances relied on its being assimilated and internalized into the regional culture. That was the challenge facing Sears. A board of trustees, consisting of prominent Northerners and Southerners, was established to counsel Sears. Armed with the annual interest from the fund, Sears determined where and when to plant his "seeds" for the best effect. Over time, this work produced a revolution in educational attitudes in the South. Charles Sumner, the famous abolitionist senator from Massachusetts, commented at the outset that he could not recall any greater gift of national significance in American history.<sup>18</sup>

Earlier, others had tried to make public education palatable to Southern tastes. During the war, General Nathaniel Banks had worked to establish a public-school system in Louisiana. He attempted to win Southern sympathies by hiring only Southern white women as teachers. But his efforts failed to change white attitudes in any significant way. Barnas Sears knew of this record of failures and used the Peabody Fund's financial carrots only in ways to crack this phalanx of white racist sentiment, hostile to the very idea of public education. Slowly, through the efforts of Sears and public-school advocates emerging from the Southern states themselves, an enduring public-school culture took root in the South.<sup>19</sup>

While Sears worked to soften white opposition to the very idea of public education, African-American leaders fought to keep the racial caste mentality bred in slavery from being transferred to public education. They did not necessarily oppose racially segregated public schools, but they insisted that this not be mandated in their new state



constitutions. In 1867–1868, black delegates in the Southern state constitutional conventions succeeded in preventing such provisions from being adopted. They hoped for a system in which individual public schools, open to all, gravitated to the control of one race or the other on the basis of parental choice. Early on, the goal of Southern blacks (such as Rev. Francis L. Cardozo, who ran a well-respected black school in Charleston) was not integrated education but rather fair treatment from whites in the administration of public-school funds.<sup>20</sup> This could only be ensured in a public-education system in which schools were open to all, irrespective of race. South Carolina wrote such a provision into its new state constitution, while in practice this system came to be operated on a segregated basis. Most Southern states did not go even this far, preferring simply to defer to African-American wishes not to have segregated schooling mandated in the state constitutions themselves.<sup>21</sup>

The clear hostility of blacks to constitutionally mandated segregated schools was interpreted by most Southern whites as revealing a black desire to associate with whites in “mixed schools.” This was feared as a first step toward racial amalgamation. Louisiana inaugurated the only Southern school system that made any meaningful attempt toward racially integrated schools, but this integration was approximated only in New Orleans. Rural public schools in Louisiana were effectively boycotted by whites. In other Southern states, no effort was made to mix whites and blacks in public-school classrooms. Nonetheless, whites throughout the South were convinced that African Americans harbored a hidden intent to attend white schools in the not too distant future.

In South Carolina, where the new state constitution theoretically allowed for mixed schools, a white protest railed against the evils of the racial integration that it feared was sure to come. These white fears served to reactivate latent white violence against educating blacks at all, encouraging Ku Klux Klan burning of schools and terrorizing teachers. In 1868, the Freedmen’s Bureau’s superintendent of schools noted that a revived rebel spirit “thickened about” the schools.<sup>22</sup> Up until that time, schools for blacks in many parts of the South existed only with the support of military force, and it was problematic how long Northern voters would be willing to support such an ongoing commitment. With public school systems called for in the new Southern state constitutions, the responsibility for educating the freedmen effectively passed from the federal government to the Southern states themselves. By the end of 1868, all but three of the states undergoing Congressional Reconstruction had ratified their new constitutions mandating state-based public-school systems. The three states remaining were Virginia, Mississippi, and Texas. Of course, much remained to be done before any

meaningful public education would be established throughout the Southern states.

In designing their public-education strategy for creating a standardized national culture, Republican strategists kept one eye on the Roman Catholic church, which they regarded as their primary enemy in the North. In the South, white racism was the primary obstacle against public education. In the South, the enemies of the public school were presumably vanquished and under federal authority. In the North, they were growing in political power with each new wave of European immigration. Church pronouncements were squarely aligned against the American public school. In 1851, a papal encyclical had called on the church to provide for Catholic schools for Catholic youth. In 1864, another papal encyclical had damned non-Catholic public education as unacceptable. Increasingly, Catholic demands for dividing state school funds so that Catholic schools could be supported at public expense threatened the Republican push for cultural uniformity. Ironically as Republicans sought to expand the public school into the South, the institution's Northern base was in danger of being undermined by a growing enemy within. Accordingly, Republicans saw the need for a new federal agency to promote public education everywhere in the nation, North as well as South.<sup>23</sup>

Just as Northern teachers working under the protection of the Freedmen's Bureau felt a missionary commission to uplift the freedmen, public-school advocates in the North held similar attitudes toward Catholic immigrants, especially the Irish. In petitioning that Congress establish a federal agency to promote public education nationwide, the citizens of Medford, Massachusetts, revealed a paternalism that included both African Americans and the Irish in its sweep. In their words, the freedmen and the immigrating Catholic masses, "many of whom come here with ideas, tastes, and habits different from ours," required this effort. "The Anglo-Saxon blood on this side of the globe," their petition read, "must faithfully educate and peacefully lead the other races. It is our destiny, and *we must fulfill it.*" Republican Congressman Ignatius Donnelly agreed. Public education, he warned, should not be left to the states. He saw the nation in danger of cultural dissolution. With uneducated Irish immigrants and illiterate freedmen added to the electorate, the Republic was threatened with being directed by an "ignorant, bigoted, and brutalized population." He predicted that the nation itself might not last another fifty years if something were not done to keep ignorance from sinking the ship of state. Similar to the petition from Medford, Massachusetts, Donnelly's comments covered more than just conditions in the South. They were

framed in terms of a need to reconstruct a nation threatened by a cancerous ignorance growing in all sections of the Union. The envisioned purpose of the new federal agency that would promote public education was to help reconstruct the nation in this broader sense.<sup>24</sup>

The Republican bill to create the new agency provided that its sole purpose would be to collect and disseminate data concerning public education nationwide. Democratic opponents to the measure were skeptical and viewed it as the proverbial camel's nose under the tent. Nonetheless, congressional Republicans had the votes and sent the measure creating a new Bureau of Education to President Johnson. Surprisingly, he signed it, believing the Republican sponsors of the measure who promised him that the new agency would not try to nationalize public education in the United States. Nevertheless, almost immediately it set out to do just this. The new federal Commissioner of Education, Henry Barnard, began a study of public education in the District of Columbia. Congress had begun a biracial but segregated system of public schools in the nation's capital during the war. By the end of the decade, some Republicans led by Senator Charles Sumner were interested in reforming this system to serve as a model for the nation. Throughout the antebellum period, the slavery issue had often focused on the District of Columbia, which as a territory was constitutionally under the direct control of Congress. With slavery destroyed, the District of Columbia remained in the spotlight as a potential proving ground for national public-school reforms.<sup>25</sup>

This ambitious agenda called for energetic leadership, but initially that was lacking. Commissioner Barnard's efforts were stalled by his own inability to focus his energies. He continued to serve as editor of the *American Journal of Education* even after his appointment as the first head of an important new federal agency. Overwhelmed by his combined duties, he blamed his problems on a small staff and insufficient office space; but even his friends knew better. One month after the submission of Barnard's first and only annual report, Congress put a revamped Bureau of Education under the Department of Interior. On October 27, 1870, John Eaton, Jr., officially replaced Barnard. Months earlier, even one of Barnard's close friends wrote to Eaton that Barnard's dismissal was necessary as the latter was "not in all respects adapted to the place he occupied." Under new leadership, the Bureau of Education came to fulfill the expectations originally placed in the agency by public-school reformers. Eaton's perspective was distinctly national on his arrival in his new job. Writing to Barnas Sears, Eaton offered as his own highest priority in public education "the relation of our free school systems to the vast and increasing vagabondism." This problem clearly

transcended state lines.<sup>26</sup> Throughout the 1870s, Eaton's agency served as a nationalizing agency for public education. Republicans in Congress pushing public education as a national concern consistently relied on the expertise of Eaton and his small staff. From the time of Eaton's arrival in his new post until the end of Reconstruction, public education played an important role in the nation's political life.

On the eve of the 1870s, Horace Mann's public-school model had been replicated throughout the Northern states, and initial preparations had been made for spreading it throughout the South as well. The goal was clear. In the words of James P. Wickersham, principal of the Pennsylvania state normal school at Millersville, the intention of the postwar public-school reformers was "toward making homogeneous our social as well as our political institutions throughout the nation." In Wickersham's opinion, the "great lesson" that the Civil War had taught was "that the United States of America is a *nation*, and not a copartnership of states; and," he continued, "as a nation, our government ought not to release itself from all responsibility concerning education. . . . Without it, there may be reconstruction, but there can be no true union."<sup>27</sup> And the concern of reformers such as Wickersham was not merely toward remaking the South. They also hoped to shape the culture of the North in order to protect it from Roman Catholic inroads. They saw themselves as saving the Union from threatened forces of dissolution emanating from the lowest levels of society in all regions.

The adoption of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870 especially signaled the need for a dynamic public-school crusade. In addition to the millions of illiterate black voters empowered by the amendment, growing legions of unlettered Irish commonly voted before they ever became citizens. Corruptible Irish voters, susceptible to demagogues, especially bothered Republicans such as James Garfield who also worried about blacks someday leaving the Republican party. Throughout the seventies, Garfield was fond of quoting Lord Thomas Macaulay who had predicted that American democracy would eventually self-destruct either as a result of the poor plundering the rich or the rich resorting to military dictatorship for self-protection. "Either some Caesar or Napoleon will seize the reins of government with a strong hand," Macaulay had written, "or your republic will be as fearfully plundered and laid waste by barbarians in the twentieth century as the Roman empire was in the fifth." That Garfield repeatedly referred to this gloomy prediction until his death in 1881 says much about not only his frame of mind but that of his audiences as well.<sup>28</sup> Republicans such as Garfield had supported the Fifteenth Amendment in order to continue their party's temporary hold on national power, but they greatly

dreaded its possible long-term consequences in allowing the ignorant and dispossessed potentially to guide the destinies of the nation.

Few white people identified their own racial attitudes as threatening the future of the Republic, but United States Commissioner of Education John Eaton, Jr., highlighted this factor. In fact, he saw it as perhaps the most important ingredient in the recipe threatening to poison the nation. "In its eagerness to wound others," wrote Eaton, "the white race of our country has injured itself." Whites who could easily be persuaded to educate white children often could not see an identical need to educate others. As a result, minority races were left trapped by an ignorance that ultimately threatened even whites themselves. By thus perpetuating the internal enemy of illiteracy, white racism weakened the Union.<sup>29</sup>

To observers foreign and domestic, American life appeared on the edge of anarchy. "Judge Lynch" and the vigilantism executed by both Klansmen in the South and Danites in Utah seemed to characterize a violent people easily resorting to firearms to resolve social problems. American children in urban slums roamed as packs of wild animals preying on the weak. While Reconstruction's focus was on the problems of the freedmen, a bare majority of America's illiterates was white. Commissioner Eaton noted that nationwide there were 2,879,543 white illiterates and 2,763,991 illiterate blacks. A significant number of illiterate whites, especially in the South, were the children of native-born parents. One author described them as a growing "army of white barbarians." While most Americans of that time spoke of uplifting the illiterate children of America through education, they were quite aware of an alternate vision that showed ignorance taking over the body-national as a contagion or cancerous growth. Even Massachusetts, the home of the New England based public-education crusade, was threatened. "Power lies with the majority," observed one English visitor, "and the majority in Massachusetts is going over to the Irish poor, to the Fenian Circles and the Molly Maguires."<sup>30</sup>

For some reflective Americans, the Paris Commune in the Spring of 1871 provided a glimpse into the American future. The *Chicago Tribune*, in describing the Paris mob as "an enemy that knows no law but that of grape and canister," knew of its readers' fears that similar mass underclass violence was brewing in their own country and not solely because of the poverty forced by economic hard times. Traditional mores were disintegrating before the public eye, and many were concerned.

Republicans compared the chaos of the French capital to the anarchic Irish mobs of America's cities. "Our own condition is at bottom

so nearly analogous to theirs," reported the *New York Times*, "that save in a spirit of gloomy forecast, we have little reason to institute a contrast." Southern conservatives saw the Paris communists as the fruit of a contagion shared by Radical Republicans. Roman Catholics saw the Parisians as rebelling against Christian tradition, thus carrying on the degenerating consequences of the Protestant Reformation. Father Isaac Hecker, speaking for the Catholic perspective, noted that the cultural disease evidenced in Paris was in fact rife throughout all of western civilization. "We who live in Protestant countries," noted Hecker, "see society daily dissolving before our eyes." That Catholics, Republicans, and former Confederates could unite in common horror over the events in Paris was significant. All parties felt keenly a disintegrating America in need of unification, but they differed sharply on their prescription for curing the malady.<sup>31</sup>

Representing most of the country's wealth, Northern Republicans had the most to lose if the Paris Commune were ever acted out on American shores. More than any other group, Republicans obsessed about the underside of the industrial revolution. Currently, ignorant poverty-stricken African Americans were their political allies, but they worried about this fragile alliance. Especially, they worried about the large numbers of Irish poor entering the country. Neither the blacks nor the Irish seemed to be attuned to the free-labor ideology. *The Republic*, a political journal of the day, gave open voice to these fears in projecting a future time in which ignorant blacks and ignorant whites, both North and South, might coalesce for purposes of spoliation: "Suppose these ignorant voters should in any way find their interest one, or that their unguided passions should be turned in a single direction, and they should combine on any issue." The thought was not pleasant and revealed that confidence was often lacking in this supposedly optimistic age.<sup>32</sup>

These fears bred within the Republican Party a craving for middle-class uniformity and a cultural standardization that could protect the Republic against the specter of the Paris Commune. As a new decade dawned, the first in American history in which all men (whether rich or poor, or black or white, or educated or illiterate) could determine election results and thus steer the course of the nation, Republicans resolved to reconstruct the nation by means of the public school. The Reconstruction of the 1860s ended with the adoption of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870. Yet few Republicans were willing to concede that the work of Reconstruction was over. The Union was still threatened by illiteracy, ignorance, and lack of moral training. This, Republicans widely agreed, could only be overcome by public educa-



tion on a massive scale. Some sought to work this reform on a state by state basis, given that historically that institution had been a creation of state and local government. Others saw the emergency of impending national disintegration as warranting unprecedented centralized promotion of public education by the federal government.

At the outset of the seventies, the Republican Party faced the challenge of a Democratic Party that claimed allegiance to Republican norms. Democrats claimed themselves as loyal as Republicans to the Union, and supportive of the Reconstruction amendments and the new rights of freedmen. Democrats called this acceptance of past Republican accomplishments their "New Departure" strategy. They had concluded that the Republican Party could only benefit by Democratic reactionary resistance to the fruits of the Union victory on the battlefield. Senator Henry Wilson from Massachusetts was responsible for countering this Democratic Party "New Departure." As Chairman of the Republican National Committee, Wilson devised what he called the "New Departure of the Republican Party." In a widely read essay appearing in the *Atlantic Monthly* in January 1871, Wilson outlined the new Republican strategy which called on the public school to become the centerpiece of a new Reconstruction of all of American society, North as well as South.

In the article, Wilson confessed that the Republican Party apparently had achieved all of the objectives for which it had been created. Slavery had been destroyed, and the "slave power" had been dethroned. The freedmen had even been enfranchised to enable them to protect their own freedom by voting for the Republican Party. But, he warned, the heritage of slavery still lived in the form of illiteracy, ignorance, and undeveloped moral capacity. Concurrent with the miserable condition of the freedmen, he wrote, ignorant and illiterate immigrants from Europe were entering the country also to become voters. As never before, an unwanted cultural diversity characterized the voting class. Given this, the nation could not afford to drift and leave matters to chance. A genuine national unification through a national public school system was needed. Wilson recounted the early colonial days of his native Massachusetts when a heavy investment was made in the education of the common citizenry. General prosperity and individual self-control had been the result of this policy. The nation as a whole now needed a similar resolve. The Puritan economic values of "Poor Richard's Almanac" needed to be spread throughout the entire land and be adopted by all social classes. Only a national public-school program, he claimed, could protect property rights for the long term by creating a cultural unity on a proven New England standard.<sup>33</sup>

He realized that transferring public education from state to federal management would constitute a radical development. But he saw this as a natural progression of Reconstruction. "With the general rejection of the state rights heresy, state lines are becoming fainter," he wrote, "and state individuality is being more and more absorbed into national unity." He held up the model of Prussian public education, organized from the center. He pointed the Republican Party toward a new Germanic centralized political order. As Otto von Bismarck was centralizing a new German federation, the Republican Party was centralizing the American Union. As Prussia had invested heavily in primary education, the United States should do likewise. France had lagged behind in mass education, and it had suffered the ultimate consequence of its public-policy error on the battlefields of the Franco-Prussian War, just then concluding. The French people, he wrote, "ignorant, priest-ridden, and emasculated of their manhood, lies beaten on every field and helpless at the conqueror's feet. The lesson should not be lost on the American people." With a national school system, the United States could grow in prosperity, unity and military might. Without it, the disintegrating forces of illiteracy, ignorance, crime, labor upheaval, and cultural division would eventually tear apart the beloved Union. This was Wilson's warning and his prescription to avoid national catastrophe.<sup>34</sup>

The Democrats had claimed that they accepted Reconstruction. Could they accept Wilson's Republican "New Departure" for Reconstruction? Could they accept political centralization on the German model inherent in Wilson's national vision? He knew that they could not. He intended to reveal the strict states-rights limits of the Democrats' "New Departure." He intended to cast the Democrats as the opponents of a necessary reform in public education. He meant to expose them as real enemies of preserving the Union against ignorance, crime, and national disunity. He drew a new line of political demarcation for the next stage of Reconstruction, designed to create one nation unified by one set of cultural norms inculcated in national public schools directed from Washington, D.C. He knew who would oppose him. The South had already shown itself unwilling to surrender its distinct regional culture built around ancient racial prejudices. Talk of creating one nation in that quarter suggested to Southern ears the imagined terrors of racial amalgamation. And he knew of other opponents as well. The growing Roman Catholic church in America was not about to surrender to Protestant hegemony in the name of American nationalism. In 1870, the church made official the doctrine of papal infallibility, in part to shield Roman Catholic authority from the

rising power of modern secular nationalism led by Bismarck's emerging German nation. In America, as in Europe, the Roman Catholic church stood firmly opposed to all dreams of cultural homogeneity that did not concede primacy to its own ancient spiritual authority. This fact pitted Wilson's New Departure against the political power of the Roman Catholic church. Up until 1870, Reconstruction had been about race. After that date, it was about religion as well.<sup>35</sup>