Two major issues with which the Kennedy administration must grapple bear a relationship to one another which is not visible at first glance. Significant progress in race relations—a matter of utmost urgency in both domestic and foreign policy—is closely linked to the whole question of federal aid to education. Neither civil rights legislation nor court decisions can provide a panacea for the problems of inequality between the races so long as we tolerate massive educational inequalities among the states.

In general, resistance to desegregation is highest where level of education is lowest. Industrial regions attract more people with more schooling than non-industrial regions. Rural areas have lower average educational levels than urban areas, and rural people find rapid social change less congenial than urbanites do. The doctrine of massive resistance to the Supreme Court's desegregation decision has its roots and strength in the least industrialized, most rural portion of the United States, the region where levels of formal education are lowest: the South.

During my brief tenure as assistant professor of sociology at the University of Mississippi a decade ago, I was struck by the sharp division of the faculty into two groups. Some—mostly young men, newly appointed, many in their first teaching post—oriented their thinking and their work toward the day when they would leave. The others were there to stay.

Those intending to leave were not a disgruntled or unhappy crew. They were scholars with a cosmopolitan view of the boundaries of their profession. To them, what was happening in physics or in psychology was more relevant than what was happening in Mississippi. They subscribed to national professional journals and presented research papers at national meetings.

Regional Boundaries

For those who would stay put, the world was local, not cosmopolitan. Their significant "reference groups," as sociologists would say, were Mississippi and the South. I do not mean to make them sound like narrow, uneducated dunces; they were (and are) not. They were part of a university faculty, interested in painting, politics, music, writing, and the exchange of ideas. But their dinner party discussions were likely to be devoted to topics with regional boundaries. What do you think of the new southern poet? Who are the most liberal southern Senators? Is the cultural life of Atlanta superior to that of New Orleans? What university has the strongest department of history in the South?

Even where they might come up with the same answers, the cosmopolitans and the locals phrased their questions differently. The former would ask who is the greatest contemporary American novelist; the latter would ask who is the greatest contemporary southern novelist.

The same choice of primary allegiance divided the student body. Most belonged to the group whose world was centered in Mississippi and bounded by the South. A markedly different few had their sights set on the time when, and the way in which, they would leave.

This division typifies the South as a whole. It represents the South's own problem, and the problem of the South as part of a larger nation. Some
white southerners “pass” into the wider society. Others remain segregated within the only large, clearly-defined regional subculture in the United States. These locally-oriented people are behaving exactly like what they are: a minority group.

So accustomed are we to thinking of minorities in racial and national terms—Italian-Americans, Negroes, Orientals, Jews, Polish-Americans—that it is easy for us to overlook the existence, much less the problems of our largest minority: the white southerners. By most criteria sociologists use in defining and studying minorities, white southerners are a minority.

Southern Stereotype

A minority is stereotyped by the dominant group. Whether Jews, Negroes, or white southerners, they are thought of as a category sharing common characteristics and treated as a lump. Most Americans may expect one Oregonian to be different from another. But it is customary, even among editorial writers, columnists, and other intellectuals, to generalize about southerners. (Indeed, this is true to such an extent that it provides another example of the status of the American Negro as an “invisible man.” When Americans say “southerner,” they mean southern white.)

The southerner passes the ultimate test of the stereotype: people who do not conform to expectations are exempted from the category. Several times in social gatherings the turn of the conversation has led me to comment that my wife was born and reared in the South. The usual reassuring reply is, “Why, she doesn’t seem like a southerner at all.”

In the North, the statement “you don’t seem like a southerner” is invariably intended as a compliment. It is like saying, “she’s a Jew, but she’s very quiet”; or “he’s a Negro, but a real gentleman.” However, such generalizations about southerners are made by people who describe themselves as liberals and would be offended if accused of holding a stereotype of a racial or ethnic minority. But there is no better evidence of the existence of a stereotype than the need to exempt individuals from membership in their social category.

A minority is self-conscious. They are aware of the fact that the dominant group in their society views them as inherently different. They have mixed feelings of pride in their origins and defensiveness about the characteristics which set them apart. Irish-Americans boast to one another and kid among themselves about being hard-drinking fighters while resenting that public stereotype of Irish uncouthness. No other jokes contain the mixed tribal tenderness and vicious anti-Semitism of Jewish stories about Jewishness.

They Used to Hate Us

Southerners, too, know that they are scorned by other Americans. But who waves the Confederate flag at football games? One would be hard put to find a more potent example of paranoiac chauvinism than the best selling (in Mississippi) automobile tags proclaiming: Mississippi—the most lied-about state in the Union. The cross borne in the Bible Belt was described poignantly by the late poet-sociologist Howard Washington Odum of the University of North Carolina: “They used to hate us; now they laugh at us.”

The way of life of a minority is viewed by others not as conforming to a set of standards with a value of its own, but as a measurable deviation from the “right way,” the standards of the majority. It is an annoyance and a bother when a Jewish holiday falls on the day of college registration. Jewish students must be registered the day before or the day after everyone else. They cause trouble. Somehow registration does not happen to fall on Christmas or Easter. Similarly, in a university whose English department harbors defenders of the Third Edition of Webster’s International Dictionary and teachers of the “usage, not rules” school of English, students with a southern accent take special corrective work in the School of Speech to learn to speak “correctly.”

No Southerner for President

A minority is excluded from full participation in the society’s business. The “balanced ticket” dear to the hearts of New York and Chicago politicians is not only a concession to minority power; it is evidence that the minority lacks true access to the power elite. We debated whether or not we could elect a Catholic President. No one raised seriously the question of whether we could elect as President a man really labelled a southerner. John Sparkman with Adlai Stevenson made a balanced ticket. But when Lyndon Johnson decided to try seriously for the top office, he and his supporters spent months creating an image of him as a Westerner and a national leader.

It is true, however, that white southerners enjoy influence and power in Congress very greatly out of proportion to their numbers, and in this way they differ from other minorities. Southern Congressmen are elected by small tightly-controlled electorates from which many whites as well as most