

What's the Matter with
KANSAS?

How Conservatives Won the Heart of America



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Introduction

What's the Matter with America?

The poorest county in America isn't in Appalachia or the Deep South. It is on the Great Plains, a region of struggling ranchers and dying farm towns, and in the election of 2000 the Republican candidate for president, George W. Bush, carried it by a majority of greater than 80 percent.¹

This puzzled me when I first read about it, as it puzzles many of the people I know. For us it is the Democrats that are the party of workers, of the poor, of the weak and the victimized. Understanding this, we think, is basic; it is part of the ABCs of adulthood. When I told a friend of mine about that impoverished High Plains county so enamored of President Bush, she was perplexed. "How can anyone who has ever worked for someone else vote Republican?" she asked. How could so many people get it so wrong?

Her question is apt; it is, in many ways, the preeminent question of our times. People getting their fundamental interests wrong is what American political life is all about. This species of derangement is the bedrock of our civic order; it is the foundation

on which all else rests. This derangement has put the Republicans in charge of all three branches of government; it has elected presidents, senators, governors; it shifts the Democrats to the right and then impeaches Bill Clinton just for fun.

If you earn over \$300,000 a year, you owe a great deal to this derangement. Raise a glass sometime to those indigent High Plains Republicans as you contemplate your good fortune: It is thanks to their self-denying votes that you are no longer burdened by the estate tax, or troublesome labor unions, or meddling banking regulators. Thanks to the allegiance of these sons and daughters of toil, you have escaped what your affluent forebears used to call "confiscatory" income tax levels. It is thanks to them that you were able to buy two Rolexes this year instead of one and get that Segway with the special gold trim.

Or perhaps you are one of those many, many millions of average-income Americans who see nothing deranged about this at all. For you this picture of hard-times conservatism makes perfect sense, and it is the opposite phenomenon—working-class people who insist on voting for liberals—that strikes you as an indecipherable puzzlement. Maybe you see it the way the bumper sticker I spotted at a Kansas City gun show puts it: "A working person that *supports* Democrats is like a chicken that *supports* Col. Sanders!"

Maybe you were one of those who stood up for America way back in 1968, sick of hearing those rich kids in beads bad-mouth the country every night on TV. Maybe you knew exactly what Richard Nixon meant when he talked about the "silent majority," the people whose hard work was rewarded with constant insults from the network news, the Hollywood movies, and the know-it-all college professors, none of them interested in anything you had to say. Or maybe it was the liberal judges who got you mad as hell, casually rewriting the laws of your state accord-

ing to some daft idea they had picked up at a cocktail party, or ordering your town to shoulder some billion-dollar desegregation scheme that they had dreamed up on their own, or turning criminals loose to prey on the hardworking and the industrious. Or perhaps it was the drive for gun control, which was obviously directed toward the same end of disarming and ultimately disempowering people like you.

Maybe Ronald Reagan pulled you into the conservative swirl, the way he talked about that sunshiny, Glenn Miller America you remembered from the time before the world went to hell. Or maybe Rush Limbaugh won you over, with his daily beat-down of the arrogant and the self-important. Or maybe you were pushed; maybe Bill Clinton made a Republican out of you with his patently phony "compassion" and his obvious contempt for average, non-Ivy Americans, the ones he had the nerve to order into combat even though he himself took the coward's way out when his turn came.

Nearly everyone has a conversion story they can tell: how their dad had been a union steelworker and a stalwart Democrat, but how all their brothers and sisters started voting Republican; or how their cousin gave up on Methodism and started going to the Pentecostal church out on the edge of town; or how they themselves just got so sick of being scolded for eating meat or for wearing clothes emblazoned with the State U's Indian mascot that one day Fox News started to seem "fair and balanced" to them after all.

Take the family of a friend of mine, a guy who came from one of those midwestern cities that sociologists used to descend upon periodically because it was supposed to be so "typical." It was a middling-sized industrial burg where they made machine tools, auto parts, and so forth. When Reagan took office in 1981, more than half the working population of the city was

employed in factories, and most of them were union members. The ethos of the place was working-class, and the city was prosperous, tidy, and liberal, in the old sense of the word.

My friend's dad was a teacher in the local public schools, a loyal member of the teachers' union, and a more dedicated liberal than most: not only had he been a staunch supporter of George McGovern, but in the 1980 Democratic primary he had voted for Barbara Jordan, the black U.S. Representative from Texas. My friend, meanwhile, was in those days a high school Republican, a Reagan youth who fancied Adam Smith ties and savored the writing of William F. Buckley. The dad would listen to the son spout off about Milton Friedman and the godliness of free-market capitalism, and he would just shake his head. *Some day, kid, you'll know what a jerk you are.*

It was the dad, though, who was eventually converted. These days he votes for the farthest-right Republicans he can find on the ballot. The particular issue that brought him over was abortion. A devout Catholic, my friend's dad was persuaded in the early nineties that the sanctity of the fetus outweighed all of his other concerns, and from there he gradually accepted the whole pantheon of conservative devil-figures: the elite media and the American Civil Liberties Union, contemptuous of our values; the la-di-da feminists; the idea that Christians are vilely persecuted—right here in the U.S. of A. It doesn't even bother him, really, when his new hero Bill O'Reilly blasts the teachers' union as a group that “does not love America.”

His superaverage midwestern town, meanwhile, has followed the same trajectory. Even as Republican economic policy laid waste to the city's industries, unions, and neighborhoods, the townsfolk responded by lashing out on cultural issues, eventually winding up with a hard-right Republican congressman, a born-again Christian who campaigned largely on an anti-

abortion platform. Today the city looks like a miniature Detroit. And with every bit of economic bad news it seems to get more bitter, more cynical, and more conservative still.

This derangement is the signature expression of the Great Backlash, a style of conservatism that first came snarling onto the national stage in response to the partying and protests of the late sixties. While earlier forms of conservatism emphasized fiscal sobriety, the backlash mobilizes voters with explosive social issues—summoning public outrage over everything from busing to un-Christian art—which it then marries to pro-business economic policies. Cultural anger is marshaled to achieve economic ends. And it is these economic achievements—not the forgettable skirmishes of the never-ending culture wars—that are the movement's greatest monuments. The backlash is what has made possible the international free-market consensus of recent years, with all the privatization, deregulation, and deunionization that are its components. Backlash ensures that Republicans will continue to be returned to office even when their free-market miracles fail and their libertarian schemes don't deliver and their “New Economy” collapses. It makes possible the policy pushers' fantasies of “globalization” and a free-trade empire that are foisted upon the rest of the world with such self-assurance. Because some artist decides to shock the hicks by dunking Jesus in urine, the entire planet must remake itself along the lines preferred by the Republican Party, U.S.A.

The Great Backlash has made the laissez-faire revival possible, but this does not mean that it speaks to us in the manner of the capitalists of old, invoking the divine right of money or demanding that the lowly learn their place in the great chain of being. On the contrary; the backlash imagines itself as a foe of

the elite, as the voice of the unfairly persecuted, as a righteous protest of the people on history's receiving end. That its champions today control all three branches of government matters not a whit. That its greatest beneficiaries are the wealthiest people on the planet does not give it pause.

In fact, backlash leaders systematically downplay the politics of economics. The movement's basic premise is that culture outweighs economics as a matter of public concern—that *Values Matter Most*, as one backlash title has it. On those grounds it rallies citizens who would once have been reliable partisans of the New Deal to the standard of conservatism.² Old-fashioned values may count when conservatives appear on the stump, but once conservatives are in office the only old-fashioned situation they care to revive is an economic regimen of low wages and lax regulations. Over the last three decades they have smashed the welfare state, reduced the tax burden on corporations and the wealthy, and generally facilitated the country's return to a nineteenth-century pattern of wealth distribution. Thus the primary contradiction of the backlash: it is a working-class movement that has done incalculable, historic harm to working-class people.

The leaders of the backlash may talk Christ, but they walk corporate. Values may "matter most" to voters, but they always take a backseat to the needs of money once the elections are won. This is a basic earmark of the phenomenon, absolutely consistent across its decades-long history. Abortion is never halted. Affirmative action is never abolished. The culture industry is never forced to clean up its act. Even the greatest culture warrior of them all was a notorious cop-out once it came time to deliver. "Reagan made himself the champion of 'traditional values,' but there is no evidence he regarded their restoration as a high priority," wrote Christopher Lasch, one of the most astute analysts of the backlash sensibility. "What he really cared about

was the revival of the unregulated capitalism of the twenties: the repeal of the New Deal."³

This is vexing for observers, and one might expect it to vex the movement's true believers even more. Their grandstanding leaders never deliver, their fury mounts and mounts, and nevertheless they turn out every two years to return their right-wing heroes to office for a second, a third, a twentieth try. The trick never ages; the illusion never wears off. *Vote* to stop abortion; *receive* a rollback in capital gains taxes. *Vote* to make our country strong again; *receive* deindustrialization. *Vote* to screw those politically correct college professors; *receive* electricity deregulation. *Vote* to get government off our backs; *receive* conglomeration and monopoly everywhere from media to meat-packing. *Vote* to stand tall against terrorists; *receive* Social Security privatization. *Vote* to strike a blow against elitism; *receive* a social order in which wealth is more concentrated than ever before in our lifetimes, in which workers have been stripped of power and CEOs are rewarded in a manner beyond imagining.

Backlash theorists, as we shall see, imagine countless conspiracies in which the wealthy, powerful, and well connected—the liberal media, the atheistic scientists, the obnoxious eastern elite—pull the strings and make the puppets dance. And yet the backlash itself has been a political trap so devastating to the interests of Middle America that even the most diabolical of string-pullers would have had trouble dreaming it up. Here, after all, is a rebellion against "the establishment" that has wound up abolishing the tax on inherited estates. Here is a movement whose response to the power structure is to make the rich even richer; whose answer to the inexorable degradation of working-class life is to lash out angrily at labor unions and liberal workplace-safety programs; whose solution to the rise of ignorance in America is to pull the rug out from under public education.

Like a French Revolution in reverse—one in which the sans-culottes pour down the streets demanding more power for the aristocracy—the backlash pushes the spectrum of the acceptable to the right, to the right, farther to the right. It may never bring prayer back to the schools, but it has rescued all manner of right-wing economic nostrums from history's dustbin. Having rolled back the landmark economic reforms of the sixties (the war on poverty) and those of the thirties (labor law, agricultural price supports, banking regulation), its leaders now turn their guns on the accomplishments of the earliest years of progressivism (Woodrow Wilson's estate tax; Theodore Roosevelt's antitrust measures). With a little more effort, the backlash may well repeal the entire twentieth century.⁴

As a formula for holding together a dominant political coalition, the backlash seems so improbable and so self-contradictory that liberal observers often have trouble believing it is actually happening. By all rights, they figure, these two groups—business and blue-collar—should be at each other's throats. For the Republican Party to present itself as the champion of working-class America strikes liberals as such an egregious denial of political reality that they dismiss the whole phenomenon, refusing to take it seriously. The Great Backlash, they believe, is nothing but crypto-racism, or a disease of the elderly, or the random gripings of religious rednecks, or the protests of "angry white men" feeling left behind by history.

But to understand the backlash in this way is to miss its power as an idea and its broad popular vitality. It keeps coming despite everything, a plague of bitterness capable of spreading from the old to the young, from Protestant fundamentalists to Catholics and Jews, and from the angry white man to every demographic shading imaginable.

It matters not at all that the forces that triggered the original "silent majority" back in Nixon's day have long since disappeared; the backlash roars on undiminished, its rage carrying easily across the decades. The confident liberals who led America in those days are a dying species. The New Left, with its gleeful obscenities and contempt for the flag, is extinct altogether. The whole "affluent society," with its paternalistic corporations and powerful labor unions, fades farther into the ether with each passing year. But the backlash endures. It continues to dream its terrifying dreams of national decline, epic lawlessness, and betrayal at the top regardless of what is actually going on in the world.

Along the way what was once genuine and grassroots and even "populist" about the backlash phenomenon has been transformed into a stimulus-response melodrama with a plot as formulaic as an episode of *The O'Reilly Factor* and with results as predictable—and as profitable—as Coca-Cola advertising. In one end you feed an item about, say, the menace of gay marriage, and at the other end you generate, almost mechanically, an uptick of middle-American indignation, angry letters to the editor, an electoral harvest of the most gratifying sort.

My aim is to examine the backlash from top to bottom—its theorists, its elected officials, and its foot soldiers—and to understand the species of derangement that has brought so many ordinary people to such a self-damaging political extreme. I will do so by focusing on a place where the political shift has been dramatic: my home state of Kansas, a reliable hotbed of leftist reform movements a hundred years ago that today ranks among the nation's most eager audiences for bearers of backlash buncombe. The state's story, like the long history of the backlash itself, is not one that will reassure the optimistic or silence the cynical. And yet if we are to understand the forces that have pulled us so far to the right, it is to Kansas that we must turn our attention. The high priests of conservatism like to comfort themselves by

insisting that it is the free market, that wise and benevolent god, that has ordained all the economic measures they have pressed on America and the world over the last few decades. But in truth it is the carefully cultivated derangement of places like Kansas that has propelled their movement along. It is culture war that gets the goods.

From the air-conditioned heights of a suburban office complex this may look like a new age of reason, with the Web sites singing each to each, with a mall down the way that every week has miraculously anticipated our subtly shifting tastes, with a global economy whose rich rewards just keep flowing, and with a long parade of rust-free Infinitis purring down the streets of beautifully manicured planned communities. But on closer inspection the country seems more like a panorama of madness and delusion worthy of Hieronymous Bosch: of sturdy blue-collar patriots reciting the Pledge while they strangle their own life chances; of small farmers proudly voting themselves off the land; of devoted family men carefully seeing to it that their children will never be able to afford college or proper health care; of working-class guys in midwestern cities cheering as they deliver up a landslide for a candidate whose policies will end their way of life, will transform their region into a "rust belt," will strike people like them blows from which they will never recover.

PART I:

Mysteries of the Great Plains



Chapter One

The Two Nations

In the backlash imagination, America is always in a state of quasi-civil war: on one side are the unpretentious millions of authentic Americans; on the other stand the bookish, all-powerful liberals who run the country but are contemptuous of the tastes and beliefs of the people who inhabit it. When the chairman of the Republican National Committee in 1992 announced to a national TV audience, “We are America” and “those other people are not,” he was merely giving new and more blunt expression to a decades-old formula. Newt Gingrich’s famous description of Democrats as “the enemy of normal Americans” was just one more winning iteration of this well-worn theme.

The current installment of this fantasy is the story of “the two Americas,” the symbolic division of the country that, after the presidential election of 2000, captivated not only backslashers but a sizable chunk of the pundit class. The idea found its inspiration in the map of the electoral results that year: there were those vast stretches of inland “red” space (the networks all used

red to designate Republican victories) where people voted for George W. Bush, and those tiny little “blue” coastal areas where people lived in big cities and voted for Al Gore. On the face of it there was nothing really remarkable about these red and blue blocs, especially since in terms of the popular vote the contest was essentially a tie.

Still, many commentators divined in the 2000 map a baleful cultural cleavage, a looming crisis over identity and values. “This nation has rarely appeared more divided than it does right now,” moaned David Broder, the *Washington Post*'s pundit-in-chief, in a story published a few days after the election. The two regions were more than mere voting blocs; they were complete sociological profiles, two different Americas at loggerheads with each other.

And these pundits knew—before election night was over and just by looking at the map—what those two Americas represented. Indeed, the explanation was ready to go before the election even happened.¹ The great dream of conservatives ever since the thirties has been a working-class movement that for once takes *their* side of the issues, that votes Republican and reverses the achievements of working-class movements of the past. In the starkly divided red/blue map of 2000 they thought they saw it being realized: the old Democratic regions of the South and the Great Plains were on their team now, solid masses of uninterrupted red, while the Democrats were restricted to the old-line, blueblood states of the Northeast, along with the hedonist left coast.*

I do not want to minimize the change that this represents. Certain parts of the Midwest were once so reliably leftist that the historian Walter Prescott Webb, in his classic 1931 history of the

*The handful of midwestern states that also went Democratic did not fit easily into this scheme, and so were rarely taken into account by commentators.

region, pointed to its persistent radicalism as one of the “Mysteries of the Great Plains.” Today the mystery is only heightened; it seems inconceivable that the Midwest was ever thought of as a “radical” place, as anything but the land of the bland, the easy snoozing flyover. Readers in the thirties, on the other hand, would have known instantly what Webb was talking about, since so many of the great political upheavals of their part of the twentieth century were launched from the territory west of the Ohio River. The region as they knew it was what gave the country Socialists like Eugene Debs, fiery progressives like Robert La Follette, and practical unionists like Walter Reuther; it spawned the anarchist IWW and the coldly calculating UAW; and it was periodically convulsed in gargantuan and often bloody industrial disputes. They might even have known that there were once Socialist newspapers in Kansas and Socialist voters in Oklahoma and Socialist mayors in Milwaukee, and that there were radical farmers across the region forever enlisting in militant agrarian organization with names like the Farmers' Alliance, or the Farmer-Labor Party, or the Non-Partisan League, or the Farm Holiday Association. And they would surely have been aware that Social Security, the basic element of the liberal welfare state, was largely a product of the midwestern mind.

Almost all of these associations have evaporated today. That the region's character has been altered so thoroughly—that so much of the Midwest now regards the welfare state as an alien imposition; that we have trouble even believing there was a time when progressives were described with adjectives like *fiery*, rather than *snooty* or *bossy* or *wimpy*—has to stand as one of the great reversals of American history.

So when the electoral map of 2000 is compared to that of 1896—the year of the showdown between the “great commoner,” William Jennings Bryan, and the voice of business, William McKinley—a remarkable inversion is indeed evident.

Bryan was a Nebraskan, a leftist, and a fundamentalist Christian, an almost unimaginable combination today, and in 1896 he swept most of the country outside the Northeast and upper Midwest, which stood rock-solid for industrial capitalism. George W. Bush's advisers love to compare their man to McKinley,² and armed with the electoral map of 2000 the president's fans are able to envisage the great contest of 1896 refought with optimal results: the politics of McKinley chosen by the Middle America of Bryan.

From this one piece of evidence, the electoral map, the pundits simply veered off into authoritative-sounding cultural proclamation. Just by looking at the map, they reasoned, we could easily tell that George W. Bush was the choice of the plain people, the grassroots Americans who inhabited the place we know as the "heartland," a region of humility, guilelessness, and, above all, stout yeoman *righteousness*. The Democrats, on the other hand, were the party of the elite. Just by looking at the map we could see that liberals were sophisticated, wealthy, and materialistic. While the big cities blued themselves shamelessly, the *land* knew what it was about and went Republican, by a margin in square miles of four to one.³

The attraction of such a scheme for conservatives was powerful and obvious.⁴ The red-state narrative brought majoritarian legitimacy to a president who had actually lost the popular vote. It also allowed conservatives to present their views as the philosophy of a region that Americans—even sophisticated urban ones—traditionally venerate as the repository of national virtue, a place of plain speaking and straight shooting.

The red-state/blue-state divide also helped conservatives perform one of their dearest rhetorical maneuvers, which we will call the *latte libel*: the suggestion that liberals are identifiable by their tastes and consumer preferences and that these tastes and preferences reveal the essential arrogance and foreignness of lib-

eralism. While a more straightforward discussion of politics might begin by considering the economic interests that each party serves, the latte libel insists that such interests are irrelevant. Instead it's the places that people live and the things that they drink, eat, and drive that are the critical factors, the clues that bring us to the truth. In particular, the things that *liberals* are said to drink, eat, and drive: the Volvos, the imported cheese, and above all, the lattes.*

The red-state/blue-state idea appeared to many in the media to be a scientific validation of this familiar stereotype, and before long it was a standard element of the media's pop-sociology repertoire. The "two Americas" idea became a hook for all manner of local think pieces (blue Minnesota is only separated by one thin street from red Minnesota, but my, how different those two Minnesotas are); it provided an easy tool for contextualizing the small stories (red Americans love a certain stage show in Vegas, but blue Americans don't) or for spinning the big stories (John Walker Lindh, the American who fought for the Taliban, was from California and therefore a reflection of blue-state values); and it justified countless *USA Today*-style contemplations of who we Americans really are, meaning mainly investigations of the burning usual—what we Americans like to listen to, watch on TV, or buy at the supermarket.

*The state of Vermont is a favorite target of the latte libel. In his best-selling *Bobos in Paradise*, David Brooks ridicules the city of Burlington in that state as the prototypical "latte town," a city where "Beverly Hills income levels" meet a Scandinavian-style social consciousness. In a TV commercial aired in early 2004 by the conservative Club for Growth, onetime Democratic presidential candidate Howard Dean, the former governor of Vermont, is reviled by two supposedly average people who advise him to "take his tax-hiking, government-expanding, latte-drinking, sushi-eating, Volvo-driving, *New York Times*-reading, body-piercing, Hollywood-loving, left-wing freak show back to Vermont, where it belongs."

Red America, these stories typically imply,⁵ is a mysterious place whose thoughts and values are essentially foreign to society's masters. Like the "Other America" of the sixties or the "Forgotten Men" of the thirties, its vast stretches are tragically ignored by the dominant class—that is, the people who write the sitcoms and screenplays and the stories in glossy magazines, all of whom, according to the conservative commentator Michael Barone, simply "can't imagine living in such places." Which is particularly unfair of them, impudent even, because Red America is in fact the *real* America, the part of the country where reside, as a column in the Canadian *National Post* put it, "the original values of America's founding."

And since many of the pundits who were hailing the virtues of the red states—pundits, remember, who were conservatives and who supported George W. Bush—actually, physically lived in blue states that went for Gore, the rules of this idiotic game allowed them to present the latte libel in the elevated language of the confession. David Brooks, who has since made a career out of projecting the liberal stereotype onto the map, took to the pages of *The Atlantic* magazine to admit on behalf of *everyone who lives in a blue zone* that they are all snobs, toffs, wusses, ignoramuses, and utterly out of touch with the authentic life of the people.

We in the coastal metro Blue areas read more books and attend more plays than the people in the Red heartland. We're more sophisticated and cosmopolitan—just ask us about our alumni trips to China or Provence, or our interest in Buddhism. But don't ask us, please, what life in Red America is like. We don't know. We don't know who Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins are. . . . We don't know what James Dobson says on his radio program, which is listened to by millions. We don't know about

Reba and Travis. . . . Very few of us know what goes on in Branson, Missouri, even though it has seven million visitors a year, or could name even five NASCAR drivers. . . . We don't know how to shoot or clean a rifle. We can't tell a military officer's rank by looking at his insignia. We don't know what soy beans look like when they're growing in a field.⁶

One is tempted to dismiss Brooks's grand generalizations by rattling off the many ways in which he gets it wrong: by pointing out that the top three soybean producers—Illinois, Iowa, and Minnesota—were in fact blue states; or by listing the many military bases located on the coasts; or by noting that when it came time to build a NASCAR track in Kansas, the county that won the honor was one of only two in the state that went for Gore. Average per capita income in that same lonely blue county, I might as well add, is \$16,000, which places it well below Kansas and national averages, and far below what would be required for the putting on of elitist or cosmopolitan airs of any kind.⁷

It's pretty much a waste of time, however, to catalog the contradictions⁸ and tautologies⁹ and huge, honking errors¹⁰ blowing round in a media flurry like this. The tools being used are the blunt instruments of propaganda, not the precise metrics of sociology. Yet, as with all successful propaganda, the narrative does contain a grain of truth: we all know that there *are* many aspects of American life that are off the culture industry's radar; that vast reaches of the country *have* gone from being liberal if not radical to being stoutly conservative; and that there *is* a small segment of the "cosmopolitan" upper middle class that considers itself socially enlightened, that knows nothing of the fine points of hayseediana, that likes lattes, and that opted for Gore.

But the "two nations" commentators showed no interest in examining the mysterious inversion of American politics in any

systematic way. Their aim was simply to bolster the stereotypes using whatever tools were at hand: to cast the Democrats as the party of a wealthy, pampered, arrogant elite that lives as far as it can from real Americans; and to represent Republicanism as the faith of the hardworking common people of the heartland, an expression of their unpretentious, all-American ways just like country music and NASCAR. At this pursuit they largely succeeded. By 2003 the conservative claim to the Midwest was so uncontested that Fox News launched a talk show dealing in culture-war outrage that was called, simply, *Heartland*.

What characterizes the good people of Red America? Reading through the “two Americas” literature is a little like watching a series of Frank Capra one-reelers explaining the principles of some turbocharged Boy Scout Law:

A red-stater is humble. In fact, humility is, according to reigning journalistic myth, the signature quality of Red America, just as it was one of the central themes of George W. Bush’s presidential campaign. “In Red America the self is small,” teaches David Brooks. “People declare in a million ways, ‘I am normal.’” As evidence of this modesty, Brooks refers to the plain clothing that he saw residents wearing in a county in Pennsylvania that voted for Bush, and in particular to the unremarkable brand names he spotted on the locals’ caps. The caps clearly indicate that the people of Red America enjoy trusting and untroubled relationships with Wal-Mart and McDonald’s; ipso facto they are humble.

John Podhoretz, a former speechwriter for Bush the Elder, finds the same noble simplicity beneath every adjusto-cap. “Bush Red is a simpler place,” he concludes, after watching people at play in Las Vegas; it’s a land “where people mourn the death of NASCAR champion Dale Earnhardt, root lustily for their

teams, go to church, and find comfort in old-fashioned verities.”

When the red-staters themselves get into the act, composing lists of their own virtues, things get bad fast. How “humble” can you be when you’re writing a three-thousand-word essay claiming that all the known virtues of democracy are sitting right there with you at the word processor? This problem comes into blinding focus in a much-reprinted red-state blast by the Missouri farmer Blake Hurst that was originally published in *The American Enterprise* magazine. He and his fellow Bush voters, Hurst stepped forward to tell the world, were *humble, humble, humble, humble!*

Most Red Americans can’t deconstruct post-modern literature, give proper orders to a nanny, pick out a cabernet with aftertones of licorice, or quote prices from the Abercrombie and Fitch catalog. But we can raise great children, wire our own houses, make beautiful and delicious creations with our own two hands, talk casually and comfortably about God, repair a small engine, recognize a good maple sugar tree, tell you the histories of our towns and the hopes of our neighbors, shoot a gun and run a chainsaw without fear, calculate the bearing load of a roof, grow our own asparagus . . .

And so on.

On the blue side of the great virtue divide, Brooks reports, “the self is more commonly large.” This species of American can be easily identified in the field by their constant witty showing off: *They think they are so damn smart.* Podhoretz, a former Republican speechwriter, remember, admits that “we” blue-staters “cannot live without irony,” by which he means mocking everything that crosses our path, because “we” foolishly believe that “ideological and moral confusion are signs of a higher consciousness.” Brooks, who has elsewhere ascribed the decline of

the Democratic Party to its snobbery,¹¹ mocks blue-staters for eating at fancy restaurants and shopping in small, pretentious stores instead of at Wal-Mart, retailer to real America. He actually finds a poll in which 43 percent of liberals confess that they “like to show off,” which he then tops with another poll in which 75 percent of liberals describe themselves as “intellectuals.” Such admissions, in this company, are tantamount to calling yourself a mind-twisting communist.

Which was, according to that Canadian columnist, precisely what liberals were, as one could plainly see from the famous electoral map. While humble red-state people had been minding their own business over the years, “intellectuals educated at European universities” were lapping up the poisonous teachings of Karl Marx, then returning to “dominate our universities,” where they “have condemned America’s values and indoctrinated generations of students in their collectivist ideals.” Thus the reason that liberals rallied to Al Gore was the opportunity to advance “collectivism.” (Podhoretz, for his part, claims liberals liked Gore because he was so witty!)

A *red-stater*, meanwhile, is *reverent*. As we were repeatedly reminded after the election, red-state people have a better relationship with God than the rest of us. They go to church regularly. They are “observant, tradition-minded, moralistic,” in Michael Barone’s formulation. Liberals of the coasts, meanwhile, are said to be “unobservant, liberation-minded, relativistic.”

But don’t worry; a *red-stater* is *courteous, kind, cheerful*. They may be religious, but they aren’t at all pushy about it. The people David Brooks encountered in that one county in Pennsylvania declined to discuss abortion with him, from which he concludes that “potentially controversial subjects are often played down” throughout Red America. Even the preachers he met there are careful to respect the views of others. These fine peo-

ple “don’t like public scolds.” They are easygoing believers, not interested in taking you on in a culture war. Don’t be frightened.

A *red-stater* is *loyal*. This is the part of the country that fills the army’s ranks and defends the flag against all comers. While the European-minded know-it-alls of blue land waited only a short time after 9/11 to commence blaming America for the tragedy, the story goes, sturdy red-staters stepped forward unhesitatingly to serve their country one more time. For Blake Hurst of Missouri, this special relationship with the military is both a matter of pride (“Red America is never redder than on our bloodiest battlefields”) and a grievance—you know, the usual one, the one you saw in *Rambo*, the one where all the cowards of the coasts stab the men of red land in the back during the Vietnam War.

But above all, a *red-stater* is a *regular, down-home working stiff*, whereas a blue-stater is always some sort of pretentious paper shuffler. The idea that the United States is “two nations” defined by social rank was first articulated by the labor movement and the historical left. The agrarian radicals of the 1890s used the “two nations” image to distinguish between “producers” and “parasites,” or simply “the robbers and the robbed,” as Sockless Jerry Simpson, the leftist congressman from Kansas, liked to put it. The radical novelist John Dos Passos used the phrase to describe his disillusionment with capitalist America in the twenties, while the Democratic presidential candidate John Edwards has recently made a point of reviving the term in its original meaning.¹² For the most part, however, the way the “two Americas” image is used these days, it incorporates all the disillusionment, all the resentment, but none of the leftism. “Rural America is pissed,” a small-town Pennsylvania man told a reporter from *Newsweek* in 2001. Explaining why he and his neighbors voted for George Bush, he said: “These people are tired of moral decay.

They're tired of everything being wonderful on Wall Street and terrible on Main Street." Let me repeat that: they're voting *Republican* in order to *get even with Wall Street*.

This is not yet the place to try to sort out the tangled reasoning that leads a hardworking citizen of an impoverished town to conclude that voting for George W. Bush is a way to strike a blow against big business, but it is important to remind ourselves of the context. During the decade that was then ending, the grand idea that had made the pundits gawk and the airwaves sing had been the coming of a New Economy, a free-market millennium in which physical work was as obsolete as the sundial. It was the age of the "knowledge worker," we were told, the heroic entrepreneur who was building a "weightless" economy out of "thin air." Blue-collar workers, meanwhile, were the ones who "didn't get it," fast-fading relics of an outmoded and all-too-material past. Certain celebrated capitalist thinkers even declared, at the height of the boom, that blue collars and white collars had swapped moral positions, with workers now the "parasites" free-loading on the Olympian labors of management.¹³

The red-state/blue-state literature simply corrected this most egregious excess of the previous decade, rediscovering the nobility of the average worker and reasserting the original definitions of *parasite* and *producer*.¹⁴ What was novel was that it did so in the service of the very same free-market policies that characterized the hallucinatory nineties. The actors had put away their lap-tops and donned overalls, but the play remained the same.

Consider, in this connection, the "two nations" story that appeared in *American Handgunner*, which tells us how the 9/11 terrorist attack brought home the truth to one "self-described 'Blue' American in New York City." As she stood "alongside other New York 'intellectuals'" watching the construction workers and firefighters do their job, she realized that

those tired men and women passing in trucks make it all happen. They are the ones who do the actual work of running the country. They cause the electricity to flow, the schools to be built, the criminals to be arrested and society to run seamlessly. She realized, with a blazingly bright lightbulb of awareness flashing in her mind, she didn't know how to change a tire, grow tomatoes, or where electricity comes from.

This deracinated white-collar worker cast her mind back over her "power lunches" and other pretentious doings and suddenly understood that "she had no real skills." No lightbulb flashes to remind her that the rescue and construction workers were *also* from a blue state and probably voted for Gore. Instead, we are told, she has become a humbler person, a red-stater in attitude if not in place of residence. The tale then ends with an exhortation to get out there and vote.

Blake Hurst, the Missouri farmer who is so proud of being humble, also chimes in on this theme, pointing out in *The American Enterprise* that "the work we [red-staters] do can be measured in bushels, pounds, shingles nailed, and bricks laid, rather than in the fussy judgments that make up office employee reviews." But there's something fishy about Hurst's claim to the mantle of workerist righteousness, something beyond the immediate fishiness of a magazine ordinarily given to assailing unions and saluting the Dow now printing such a fervent celebration of blue-collar life. Just being familiar with the physical world shouldn't automatically make you a member of the beaten-down producer class any more than does living in a state that voted for George W. Bush. Indeed, elsewhere Hurst describes himself not as a simple farmer but as the co-owner of a family business overseeing the labors of a number of employees, employees to whom,

he confides, he and his family “don’t pay high wages.” Hurst has even written an essay on that timeless lament of the boss, the unbelievable laziness of workers today.¹⁵ This man may live in the sticks, but he is about as much a blue-collar toiler as is Al Gore himself.

Perhaps that is why Hurst is so certain that, while there is obviously a work-related divide between the two Americas—separating them into Hurst’s humble, producer America and the liberals’ conceited, parasite America—it isn’t the scary divide that Dos Passos wrote about, the sort of divide between workers and bosses that might cause problems for readers of *The American Enterprise*. “Class-consciousness isn’t a problem in Red America,” he assures them; people are “perfectly happy to be slightly overweight [and] a little underpaid.”

David Brooks goes even further, concluding from his fieldwork in Red America that the standard notion of class is flawed. Thinking about class in terms of a hierarchy, where some people occupy more exalted positions than others, he writes, is “Marxist” and presumably illegitimate. The correct model, he suggests, is a high school cafeteria, segmented into self-chosen taste clusters like “nerds, jocks, punks, bikers, techies, druggies, God Squadders,” and so on. “The jocks knew there would always be nerds, and the nerds knew there would always be jocks,” he writes. “That’s just the way life is.” We choose where we want to sit and whom we want to mimic and what class we want to belong to the same way we choose hairstyles or TV shows or extracurricular activities. We’re all free agents in this noncoercive class system, and Brooks eventually concludes that worrying about the problems faced by workers is yet another deluded affectation of the blue-state rich.¹⁶

As a description of the way society works, this is preposterous. Even by high school, most of us know that we won’t be able to choose our station in life the way we choose a soda pop

or even the way we choose our friends. But as a clue into the deepest predilections of the backlash mind, Brooks’s scheme is a revelation.¹⁷

What divides Americans is *authenticity*, not something hard and ugly like economics. While liberals commit endless acts of hubris, sucking down lattes, driving ostentatious European cars, and trying to reform the world, the humble people of the red states go about their unpretentious business, eating down-home foods, vacationing in the Ozarks, whistling while they work, feeling comfortable about who they are, and knowing they are secure under the watch of George W. Bush, a man they love as one of their own.