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**A Road Trip Through Rusting and Rising America**

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OAK RIDGE, Tenn. — In his dystopian Inaugural Address, President Trump painted a picture of America as a nation gripped by vast “carnage” — a landscape of “rusted-out factories scattered like tombstones” that cried out for a strongman to put “America first” and stop the world from stealing our jobs. It was a shocking speech in many ways and reportedly prompted former President George W. Bush to say to those around him on the dais, “That was some really weird [stuff].”

It was weird, but was it all wrong?

I just took a four-day car trip through the heart of that landscape — driving from Austin, Ind., down through Louisville, Ky., winding through Appalachia and ending up at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee to try to answer that question.

Trump is half right in his diagnosis, but his prescription is 100 percent wrong. We do have an epidemic of failing communities. But we also have a bounty of thriving ones — not because of a strongman in Washington but because of strong leaders at the local level.

Indeed, this notion that America is a nation divided between two coasts that are supposedly thriving, pluralizing and globalizing and a vast flyover interior, where jobs have disappeared, drug addiction is rife and everyone is hoping Trump can bring back the 1950s, is highly inaccurate.

The big divide in America is not between the coasts and the interior. It’s between strong communities and weak communities. You can find weak ones along the coast and thriving ones in Appalachia, and vice versa. It’s community, stupid — not geography.

The communities that are making it share a key attribute: They’ve created diverse adaptive coalitions, where local businesses get deeply involved in the school system, translating in real time the skills being demanded by the global economy.

They also tap local colleges for talent and innovations that can diversify their economies and nurture unique local assets that won’t go away. Local foundations and civic groups step in to fund supplemental learning opportunities and internships, and local governments help to catalyze it all.

The success stories are all bottom-up; the failures are all where the bottom has fallen out.

I started in one of the bottomless places: Austin, Ind., a tiny town of 4,000 off Interstate 65, which was described in a brilliant series in The Louisville Courier-Journal “as the epicenter of a medical disaster,” where citizens of all ages are getting hooked on liquefied painkillers and shooting up with dirty needles.

The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention confirmed that Austin “contains the largest drug-fueled H.I.V. outbreak to hit rural America in recent history.” Its 5 percent infection rate “is comparable to some African nations.” Austin, the newspaper noted, doesn’t just sit at the intersection between Indianapolis and Louisville but at the “intersection of hopelessness and economic ruin.”

I chose to go there to meet the town’s only doctor, Will Cooke, whose heroic work I learned of from the Courier-Journal series. Cooke’s clinic, Foundations Family Medicine, sits at 25 West Main Street — opposite Marko’s Pizza & Sub, a liquor store and a drugstore. Down the street was a business combination I’d never seen before: Eagle’s Nest Tanning and Storage. It’s the Kissed by the Sun Tanning Salon and a warehouse — both of which seemed to be shuttered, with the space available for rent.

For generations Austin’s economy was anchored by the Morgan Foods canning plant, but, as The Courier-Journal noted, “then came a series of economic blows familiar to many manufacturing-based communities. The American Can plant next to Morgan Foods shut its doors in 1986 after more than 50 years in business. A local supermarket closed. Workers left along with the jobs and poverty crept up among those who stayed.”

Austin, Cooke explained to me, got caught in the vortex of declining blue-collar jobs, leading to a loss of dignity for breadwinners, depression and family breakdown, coinciding with doctors’ and drug companies’ pushing painkillers, and with too many people in the community failing to realize that to be in the middle class now required lifelong learning — not just to get a job but to hold one.

“Thirty percent of students were not even graduating from high school,” said Cooke. “Then you take high unemployment, generational poverty, homelessness, childhood abuse and neglect, and cloak that within a closed-off culture inherited from Appalachia, and you begin to have the ingredients that contributed to the H.I.V. outbreak.”

Austin’s insularity proved deadly for both jobs and families. “The close-knit, insular nature of the community worked against it, with the C.D.C. later finding up to six people shared needles at one sitting, and two or three generations — young adults, parents and grandparents — sometimes shot up together,” The Courier-Journal reported.

Lately, though, Cooke told me, the town’s prospects have started to improve, precisely because the community has come together, not to shoot up but to start up and learn up and give a hand up. “The local high school has introduced college-credit classes and trade programs so people are graduating with a head start,” said Cooke. Faith-based and civic groups have mobilized, celebrating social and economic recovery, providing community dinners called “Food 4R Soul” and even installing community showers for people without running water.

Addiction is often a byproduct of social breakdown leading to a sense of isolation. Cooke feels hopeful because he sees the tide slowly shifting as “social isolation gives way to community.”

“Only a healthy individual can contribute to a healthy family, and only a healthy family can contribute to a healthy community — and all of that requires a foundation of trust,” said Cooke. “That kind of change can’t come from the outside, it has to be homegrown.”

I shared with him the business philosopher Dov Seidman’s admonition that “trust is the only legal performance-enhancing drug.” Dr. Cooke liked that a lot and only wished he could prescribe it as easily as others had prescribed opioids.

But just 40 minutes down the highway from Austin, I interviewed Greg Fischer, the mayor of Louisville, a city bustling with energy and new buildings. “That ‘Intifada’ you wrote about in the Middle East is happening in parts of rural and urban America — people saying, ‘I feel disconnected and hopeless about participating in a rapidly changing global economy.’ Drug-related violence and addiction is one result — including in a few neighborhoods of Louisville.”

But Louisville also has another story to tell: “We have 30,000 job openings,” said Fischer, and for the best of reasons: Louisville has “a vision for how a city can be a platform for human potential to flourish.” It combines “strategies of the heart,” like asking everyone to regularly give a day of service to the city; strategies of science, like “citizen scientists” bearing GPS-enabled inhalers that the city uses to track air pollution, mitigate it and warn asthma suffers; and strategies for job creation that leverage Louisville’s unique assets.

One job-creation strategy led to a slew of new businesses that make “end of runway” products for rapid delivery by leveraging the fact that Louisville is UPS’s worldwide air hub; “bourbon tourism” that leverages the fact that Kentucky is the Napa Valley of bourbon; a partnership with Lexington, home of the University of Kentucky, has created an advanced manufacturing corridor; and by leveraging Humana’s headquarters in Louisville, the city has unleashed a lifelong wellness and aging-care industry.

Show me a community that understands today’s world and is working together to thrive within it, and I’ll show you a community on the rise — coastal or interior, urban or rural.

I found more such communities as I moved south on Interstate 75 through Tennessee to Oak Ridge, home of the Manhattan Project facilities where the enriched uranium for the “Little Boy” atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima was produced.

Today, the Oak Ridge National Laboratory, which sprawls across two counties, is still involved with nuclear weaponry, but its supercomputer, one of the world’s most powerful, and its hundreds of scientists help drive a broad array of research in energy, materials science, 3-D manufacturing, robotics, physics, cybersecurity and nuclear medicine — research it now actively shares with the surrounding Appalachian communities to spawn new industries and jobs.

Sitting on the spot where the K-25 Manhattan Project facility once stood, I interviewed Ron Woody, county executive for Roane County, where Oak Ridge is partly located, and Steve Jones, an industrial recruiter hired by the city of Oak Ridge to seek out companies interested in investing in the region or leveraging spinouts from Oak Ridge’s labs. That kind of active entrepreneurship is a new thing for Roane County, where generations of people have known only a government job.

“Back in the 1980s you had the T.V.A. [Tennessee Valley Authority], and it had over 50,000 employees. Now it has 10,000 employees,” explained Woody, so “we were not diversified in our employment. We had to convince the public that we can’t rely on the Oak Ridge lab and T.V.A. The Cold War is over. So our communities had to make a big transition from a lot of government programs to very few.”

It’s starting to work, said Woody, “but progress is slow.” One of those success stories was luring a former three-time Tour de France winner, Greg LeMond, to open a 65,000-square-foot factory for his new company, LeMond Composites, for making lightweight carbon-fiber bikes, based on new materials pioneered at Oak Ridge.

“The research Oak Ridge has done is going to change the way we make things,” LeMond explained to me, as we sat in his new factory. “It is a really exciting future. My goal is that you will be able to go on my website and design your own bike out of carbon fiber.”

But just because there are workers looking for employment and there are new jobs opening, it isn’t automatic that local people work in those jobs, explained Jones, the recruiter. Because of the opioid crisis, many people cannot pass the mandatory drug test — and years of working for the government has left them unprepared for the pace of today’s private sector.

“The two biggest issues we are dealing with are the soft skills and passing the drug test,” explained Woody. “I thought the problem was that people needed more STEM skills.” But that’s not the case.

It turns out that it’s not that hard to train someone, even with just a high school or community college degree, to operate an advanced machine tool or basic computer. “Factory managers would say, ‘I will train them and put them to work tomorrow in good jobs” requiring hard skills, said Woody. “The problem they have is finding people with the right soft skills.”

What are those soft skills? I asked. “Employers just want someone who will get up, dress up, show up, shut up and never give up,” Woody responded without hesitation. And there are fewer workers with those soft skills than you might think, he added.

When new companies come into the area today, noted Jones, who grew up on a farm, they ask specifically for young people who were either in a 4-H club or Future Farmers of America (now called FFA) because kids with a farming background are much more likely to get up, dress up, show up on time and never give up in a new job.

Soft skills also include the willingness to be a lifelong learner, because jobs are changing so quickly. For instance, the Oak Ridge lab is partnering to embed top-level local technical talent as entrepreneurial research fellows in advanced manufacturing who want to start companies in this realm. Every summer Oak Ridge’s M.D.F. — Manufacturing Demonstration Facility — hosts 100 young interns to learn the latest in 3-D printing, and its experts coach teams from local high schools for national robotics competitions.

The beauty of 3-D printers is that any community can now go into the manufacturing business, explained Lonnie Love, a corporate fellow at Oak Ridge, as he showed me around the M.D.F., where whole car bodies and car parts are being “printed” on giant 3-D printers.

“Traditionally to make a car part you first had to build a die, and those dies cost anywhere from $500,000 to $1 million to make,” Love said. Every die consists of a female and a male die, and the way you made a car part was to stamp them together. There are hundreds of dies needed to make a car, and that was why an assembly line for a new car model in Detroit could cost upward of $200 million — and take two years to build. Sadly, that die-making industry actually moved out of America to Asia over the last 15 years, leaving only a dozen such companies in the U.S.

No more. “Large-scale 3-D printing is enabling us to re-shore that industry,” explained Love, who then offered this example: “The naval air station at Cherry Point, N.C., repairs all the aircraft for the Navy on the East Coast. About a year ago their head of engineering called me on a Monday and asked if we could print a die mold for them and I said, ‘Sure, just send me the digital model of what you want printed.’

“We got it by email that afternoon, and by Friday he had the mold to make the new part. And it only weighed about 40 pounds because with 3-D printing we could make it stronger but lighter weight by hollowing out the inside. The following Monday he calls and asks me how much did it cost and how long did it take me to make? I told him it took me longer — and was more expensive — to ship it to him than it was make it.”

Think about car dealers in the future who, instead of needing a huge lot with hundreds of cars in inventory, will just custom print the car you want. “Our only inventory is carbon fiber pellets that cost $2 a pound, and we can make any product out of them,” said Love. “You won’t need inventory anymore.”

Over the last 100 years, Love concluded, we went from decentralized artisan-based manufacturing to centralized mass manufacturing on assembly lines. Today, with these emerging technologies, we can go back to artisans, which will be great for local communities that spawn a leadership and workers able to take advantage of these emerging technologies. We are going to see a world of micro-factories, and you can see them sprouting around Oak Ridge already.

“There’s a new wave of kids coming up who love this stuff,” said Love. “We can create mini-moonshots all over the place.”

The same applies to the design of the parts. Thom Mason, the director of the Oak Ridge lab, explained to me that high-performance computing “allows you to design and test out all the parts on the computer and only make those that you know will work. It is totally speeding up the iteration loop of physical manufacturing. You move all the trial and failure into the digital world — so you don’t need to do all that costly tooling of prototypes — and then go straight to manufacturing.”

But the state of Tennessee has also had its thinking cap on about the fast world. In 2014 it decided to make tuition and fees free for high school graduates who want to enroll in any state community college or technical school — on the condition that they maintain at least a C- average, stay in school for consecutive semesters, contribute eight hours of community service each semester and meet with a volunteer coach/mentor who will help them stay on track to get their degree. Starting in 2018, Tennessee adults who don’t already have a two-year degree will be able to go to any state community college and earn one free as well.

I ended my little tour in Knoxville, Tenn., where I met with the mayor at a restaurant in the newly rejuvenated downtown square, a beehive of restaurants, public art exhibitions, theaters, shopping and museums.

“Until the mid-1980s, the old economic development model here was low wages and no unions. That model wasn’t sustainable,” said Mayor Madeline Rogero, the first woman mayor of Knoxville and a former organizer for Cesar Chavez’s United Farm Workers union. “We wanted better schools, and you cannot build a great school system on the back of low-wage workers. So we started thinking about what are our unique assets and stopped selling ourselves as a low-wage town.”

The whole region came together around that project and wove an adaptive coalition that could draw in investors based on the region’s strengths. It’s call Innovation Valley, the mayor explained, and it markets the assets of the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, Oak Ridge National Laboratory, Pellissippi State and Roane State Community Colleges, the work force skills in the metro area and available infrastructure that can be utilized by technology companies. It also stimulated a dialogue between employers and higher-learning institutions to ensure they’re meeting the labor force needs of the future.

But there are real constraints that need to be overcome. The region has a shortage of both manufacturing and back-office workers. “We face the same work force development issues that all metro areas in the U.S. are facing,” explained Bryan Daniels, president of the Blount Partnership, one of Knoxville’s regional development boards. “Our local law enforcement has described the prison populations as having approximately 65 percent opioid-related inmates.”

It is vital, therefore, for the community to develop programs to get this population back to being employable. At the same time, said Daniels, the Knoxville region is exploring new ways to get workers from outlying rural areas into the metro area labor force and help them acquire the “educational attainment they need to get their skill level up” for a modern economy. They are even studying “public-private partnerships to provide transportation for [rural] workers up to a two-hour commute radius,” he said.

This is the real picture of America today.

It’s cities and regions rising together to leverage their unique assets from the bottom up — living side by side with distressed and lost communities where the bottom has fallen out. It’s not your grandparents’ America, but it is also not Trump’s America — that land of vast carnage and an industrial wasteland. The picture is much more complex.

It’s actually Bill Clinton’s America.

Clinton once famously observed, “There is nothing wrong with America that cannot be cured with what is right in America.” That has never been more accurate — and necessary — than it is today.

What is wrong with America is that too many communities, rural and urban, have broken down. What is right with America is the many communities and regions that are coming together to help their citizens acquire the skills and opportunities to own their own futures. We need to share and scale these success stories.

Only strong communities, not a strong man, will make America great again.