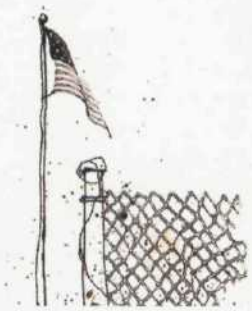
LIE DOWN FOR AMERICA

How the Republican Party sows ruin on the Great Plains

By Thomas Frank

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 75 percent.*

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. Figuring this out, 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 more than $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 meddlesome 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 take delivery on that limited-edition Segway with the 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:

** I am referring to Loup County, Nebraska. According to the Bureau of Economic Analysis, the county's per capita personal income was only $6,235 in 2002. In 2000, the poorest county was McPherson, also in Nebraska, which went for George W. Bush by more than 80 percent. On the sad phenomenon of High Plains poverty, see the study by Patricia Funk and Jon Bailey, "Trampled Dreams: The Neglected Economy of the Rural Great Plains" (Walthill, Nebr.: Center for Rural Affairs, 2000).*

Thomas Frank is a contributing editor of Harper's Magazine. *He is writing a book on this topic,* What's the Matter with Kansas? *which will be published by Metropolitan Books in June.*

Illustrations by Andrew Zbihlyj

A WORKING PERSON THAT *SUPPORTS* DEMOCRATS IS LIKE A CHICKEN THAT *SUPPORTS* COL. SANDERS!

Maybe you've seen it that way for so long that it's hard for you to remember why blue-collar people were ever Democrats in the first place. Maybe you stood up for America way back in 1968, sick and tired of those rich kids in beads bad-mouthing the country. Or maybe Ronald Reagan brought you over, the way he talked about that sunshiny, Glenn Miller America that you remembered from the time before the world went to hell. Or maybe Bill Clinton made a Republican out of you, with his obvious contempt for 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.

VALUES MAY "MATTER MOST" TO VOTERS, BUT THEY ALWAYS TAKE A BACK SEAT TO THE NEEDS OF MONEY ONCE THE ELECTION IS WON

Nearly everyone has a conversion story of this kind that 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.

Welcome to the Great Backlash, a style of conservatism that is anything but complacent. Whereas 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 de-unionization 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 book 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. 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 the 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 back seat 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, Ronald Reagan, was a notorious cop-out once it came time to deliver.

One might expect this reality to vex the movement's true believers. Their grandstanding leaders never produce, 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 meatpacking. *Vote* to stand tall against terrorists; *receive* Social Security privatization efforts. *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 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 undeniable 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 to the aristocracy—the backlash pushes the spectrum of the acceptable to the right, to the right, further 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 (Wilson's estate tax, Theodore Roosevelt's antitrust measures). With a little more effort, the backlash may well repeal the entire twentieth century.

In the backlash imagination, America is in a state of quasi-civil war pitting the unpretentious millions of authentic Americans against the bookish, deracinated, 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 that "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 backlashers 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 (all the networks 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. 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. 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, stout blocs of uninterrupted red, while the Democrats were restricted to the old-line,

blue-blood 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 1931 history of the 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. 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 organizations like the Farmers' Alliance, or the Farmer-Labor Party, or the Non-Partisan League, or the Farm Holiday Association.

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 in American history.

So when the electoral map of 2000 is compared with that of 1896—the year of the showdown that pitted the "great commoner," William Jennings Bryan, against 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 elite Northeast, which stood rock-solid for industrial capitalism. George W. Bush's advisers love to compare their man to McKinley, and armed with the 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 American voters for 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.

The attraction of such a scheme for conservatives was powerful and obvious. 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. But then the idea coasted on, becoming 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 separated by only 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 usual—what we Americans like to drive, to watch, to eat, and so forth.

Red America, these stories typically imply, 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 story in the Canadian *National Post* put it, "the original values of America's founding."

The Gore-voting people of the Blue states, meanwhile, were dismissed with what 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 liberalism. And since many of the

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

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* 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.

One is tempted to dismiss Brooks's grand generalizations by rattling off the many ways in which they're 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.

It's pretty much a waste of time, however, to catalogue the contradictions* and tautologies** and huge, honking errors*** blowing round in a media flurry like this. The tools being used are the blunt instruments of propaganda, not the precise metrics of sociology. The "two Americas" commentators showed no interest in examining the mysterious inversion of the nation's 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 hard-working 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

THE RED-STATE NARRATIVE LENT MAJORITARIAN LEGITIMACY TO A PRESIDENT WHO HAD ACTUALLY LOST THE POPULAR VOTE

* *Consider what we might call the snowmobile dilemma. David Brooks insists that one can trace the Red-state/Blue-state divide by determining whether a person does outdoor activities with motors (the good old American way) or without (the pretentious Blue-state way): "We [Blue-state people] cross-country ski; they snowmobile." And yet in* Newsweek*'s take on the Blue/Red divide (it appeared in the issue for January 1, 2001), a "town elder" from Red America can be found railing against people who drive snowmobiles precisely because they signal big-city contempt for the "small-town values" of Bush Country!*

** *In the selection printed above, David Brooks tosses off a few names from the conservative political world as though they were uncontroversial folk heroes out in the hinterland, akin to country-music stars or favorite cartoonists. But the real reason liberals don't know much about James Dobson or Tim LaHaye is not because they are out of touch with America but because both of these men are ideologues of the right. Those who listen to Dobson's radio program or buy LaHaye's novels, suffused as they are with Bircher-style conspiracy theory, tend to be people who agree with them, people who voted for Bush in 2000.*

*** *The central, basic assertion of the Blue-state/Red-state literature is that the Democrats are the party of the elite while the Republicans are the party of average, unpretentious Americans. Accordingly, David Brooks asserts in his* Atlantic *essay that "upscale areas everywhere" voted for Gore in 2000. As a blanket statement about the rich, this is not even close to correct. Bush was in fact the hands-down choice of corporate America: According to the Center for Responsive Politics, Bush raised more in donations than Gore in each of ten industrial sectors; the only sector in which Gore came out ahead was "labor." In fact, Bush raised more money from wealthy contributors than any other candidate in history, a record he then broke in 2003.*

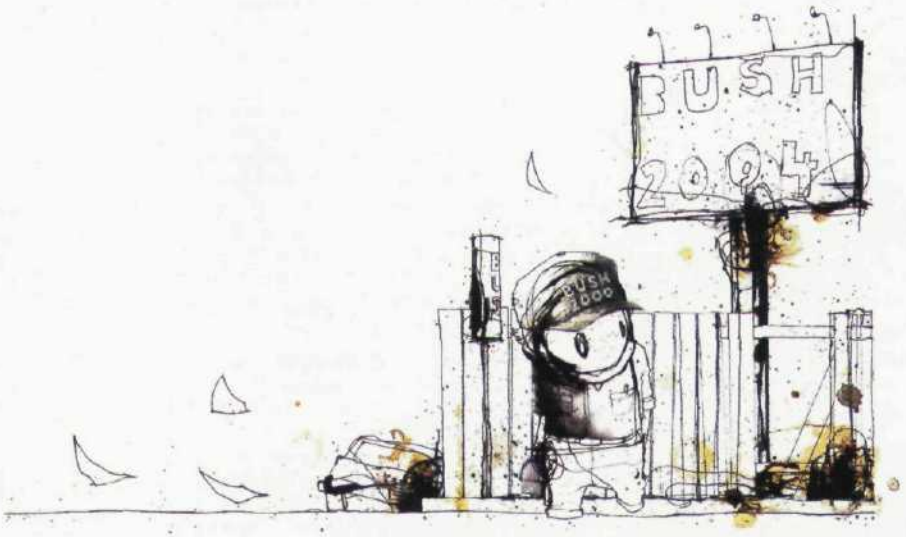
Nor is Brooks's statement valid even within its limited parameters. When he says "upscale areas everywhere" voted for Gore, he gives Chicago's North Shore as an example of what he means. And yet, when you look up the actual 2000 voting returns for those areas of the North Shore known for being "upscale," you find that reality looks very different from the stereotype. Lake Forest, the definitive and the richest North Shore burb, chose the Republican, as it almost always does, by a whopping 70 percent. Winnetka and Kenilworth, the other North Shore suburbs known for their upscalmess, went for Bush by 59 percent and 64 percent, respectively.

And there were obviously many other "upscale areas" where Bush prevailed handily: Fairfax County, Virginia (suburban D.C.), Cobb County, Georgia (suburban Atlanta), DuPage County, Illinois (more of suburban Chicago), St. Charles County, Missouri (suburban St. Louis), and Orange County, California (the veritable symbol of upscale suburbia), to name but a few.

launched a talk show dealing in culture-war outrage that was called, simply, *Heartland*.

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.'" "Bush Red is a simpler place," concurs John Podhoretz, a former speechwriter for Bush the Elder, 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."



Here is how Missouri farmer Blake Hurst put it, proudly, in *The American Enterprise* magazine:

> 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 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 . . .

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," mocks Blue staters for eating at fancy restaurants and shopping in small, pretentious stores instead of at Wal-Mart, retailer to the real America. He actually finds a poll in which 43 percent of liberals confess, "I 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 like calling yourself a mind-twisting Communist.

A Red stater, meanwhile, is reverent. As we were repeatedly reminded after the 2000 election, Red-state people have a better relationship with God than the rest of us do. 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 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 people "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 Blueland 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 Redland in the back during the Vietnam War.

But above all, **a Red stater is a regular, down-home working stiff,** whereas Blue staters are always some sort of pretentious paper-shuffler. Indeed, the entire idea that the United States is "two nations" defined by social rank was an invention of 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. Today we've got 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*. 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*.

Blake Hurst, the Missouri farmer who is so proud of being humble, points 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 a taste for meat loaf or NASCAR. 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 whom, he confides, he and his family "don't pay high wages." 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 although 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 Sockless Simpson yelled 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."

Class doesn't matter to the noble proletarians of Bush country. This is a verdict repeated virtually without fail throughout the "two Americas" literature, often only a few short sentences after the author has finished mocking rich Blue staters for their fancy cars, or their snob coffee, or their expensive nannies, or their ignorance of soybeans. Barone: "The divide is not economic, but cultural." Podhoretz: "The divide is not racial or economic." Brooks: "People in Franklin County [his microcosm of Red America] have no class resentment or class consciousness." A small-town newspaper editor tells him that people hereabouts are "really into the free market"; other "locals" are reported to stare at him blankly when he asks if they resent those who have done well in the New Economy; and Brooks eventually concludes that worrying about the problems faced by the working class is yet another deluded affectation of the Blue-state rich.

"IN RED AMERICA THE SELF IS SMALL," TEACHES DAVID BROOKS. ON THE BLUE SIDE, "THE SELF IS MORE COMMONLY LARGE"

Thinking about class in terms of a hierarchy, where some people occupy more exalted positions than others, Brooks continues, 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. 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.

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.

What divides Americans is *authenticity*, not something hard and ugly like economics. While liberals commit endless acts of hubris—consuming show-off products, 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.

For as long as America loves authenticity, my home state of Kansas is going to be symbolically preeminent. Whatever the standard for measuring salt-of-the-earthness happens to be at the moment—the WPA social realism of the thirties or the Red-state theories of today's conservatives—Kansas is going to rank high. It is the exact center of the continental United States, the

vortex of the nation, in Allen Ginsberg's phrase. Kansas is deepest Reagan Country, the heart of the heartland, the roots of the grass, the Reddest of Red states.

Kansas is what New York City is not: a guileless, straight-talking truth-place where people are unaffected, genuine, and attuned to the rhythms of the universe. "I loved Kansas City!" Ann Coulter exclaimed to an interviewer in New York.* "It's like my favorite place in the world. Oh, I think it is so great out there. Well, that's America. It's the opposite of this town. They're Americans, they're so great, they're rooting for America. I mean, there's so much common sense!"

Coulter is embracing a literary myth of long standing when she enthuses this way. Like Peoria or Muncie, Kansas figures in literature and film as a stand-in for the nation as a whole, the distilled essence of who we are. "The Kansan," wrote John Gunther in 1947, is "the most average of all Americans, a kind of common denominator for the entire continent." Kansas is "Midway, USA"; it's the setting for countless Depression-era documentary photographs; it's the home of the bright boy in the mailroom who wants to be a player on Wall Street. It's where Dorothy wants to return. It's where Superman grows up.

In politics, where Americans worship at the shrine of the unaffected common man, averageness allows all Kansans to present themselves as something of an aristocracy. Even bankers and oilmen, if they come from Kansas, carry with them the coveted authenticity of the real American. Thus Senator Sam Brownback, a member of one of the wealthiest families in the state and a stalwart friend of the CEO class, refers to himself on the floor of Congress as a "farmboy from Parker, Kansas." Thus Bob Dole, that consummate Washington insider, opened his 1996 presidential campaign by complaining that "our leaders have grown too isolated from places like Topeka—embarrassed by the values here."

But nice warm averageness has not always been the framing myth here. A century ago the favorite stereotype of Kansas was not as the land of normality but as the freak state. The place crawled with religious fanatics, crackpot demagogues, and alarming hybrids of the two, such as the murderous abolitionist John Brown, who is generally regarded as the state's patron saint, and the rabid prohibitionist Carry A. Nation, who expressed her distaste for liquor by smashing saloons with a hatchet. Kansas was a violent and a radical and maybe even a crazy place both by nature and by the circumstances of its founding. The state was initially settled by eastern abolitionists and Free-Soilers who came there to block Missourians from moving westward—in other words, to contain the "slave power" by armed force; before long the unique savagery of the border war they fought put Kansas in headlines around the world. Dodge City and Abilene, famed for picturesque cowboy homicides, are found there as well, as are a good proportion of the nation's tornadoes and, in the twentieth century, its dust storms, which obliterated farms and carried the topsoil of the entire region off into the wild blue yonder. Early accounts of the state even tell of settlers driven insane by the constant howling of the wind.

The most famous freak-out of them all was Populism, one of the first great American leftist movements. Populism tore through other states as well—wailing all across Texas, the South, and the West in the 1890s—but Kansas was the place that really distinguished itself by its enthusiasm. Driven to the brink of ruin by years of bad prices, debt, and deflation, the state's farmers came together in huge meetings where homegrown troublemakers like Mary Elizabeth Lease exhorted them to "raise less corn and more hell." The radicalized farmers marched through the small towns in day-long parades, raging against what they called the "money power." They saw their movement as a sort of revelation, a moment when an entire generation of "Kansas fools" figured out that they'd been lied to all their lives.

Today the two myths are one. Kansas may be the land of averageness, but it is a freaky, militant, outraged averageness. People in suburban Kansas City vituperate against the sinful cosmopolitan elite of New York and Washington, D.C.; people in rural Kansas vituperate against the sinful cosmopolitan elite of Topeka and suburban Kansas City. Survivalist supply shops sprout in neighborhood strip malls. People send Christmas cards urging their friends to look on the bright side of Islamic terrorism, since the Rapture is now clearly at hand.

Under the state's simple blue flag are gathered today the most flamboyant assortment of cranks, conspiracists, and calamity howlers the Republic has ever seen. The Kansas school board draws the guffaws of the world for purging references to macro-evolution from state science standards. Cities large and small across the state still hold out against water fluoridation, while one tiny hamlet takes the additional step of requiring firearms in every home. A prominent female politician expresses public doubts about the wisdom of women's suffrage, while another pol proposes that the state sell off the Kansas Turnpike in order to solve its budget crisis. Impoverished inhabitants of the state's most scenic area fight with fanatical determination to prevent a National Park from opening up in their neighborhood, while

* *Kansas City proper is in Missouri, but its metropolitan area sprawls across the state line, incorporating the much smaller Kansas City, Kansas, and the affluent suburbs of Johnson County, Kansas. Today about a third of the metro area's population resides in Kansas.*

the Rails-to-Trails program, regarded everywhere else in the union as a harmless scheme for family fun, is reviled in Kansas as an infernal design on the rights of property owners. Operation Rescue selects Wichita as the stage for its great offensive against abortion, calling down 30,000 testifying fundamentalists on the city, witnessing and blocking traffic and chaining themselves to fences. A preacher from Topeka travels the nation advising Americans to love God's holy hate, showing up wherever a gay person has been in the news to announce that "God Hates Fags."

If this is the place where America goes looking for its national soul, then this is where America finds that its soul, after stewing in the primal resentment of the backlash, has gone all sour and wrong. If Kansas is the concentrated essence of normality, then here is where we can see the deranged gradually become normal, where we look into that handsome, confident, reassuring, all-American face—class president, quarterback, Rhodes scholar, bond trader, builder of industry—and realize that we are staring into the eyes of a lunatic.

According to the backlash vision of America as it's supposed to be, people in places like Kansas are part of one big authentic family, basking in the easy solidarity of patriotism, hard work, and the universal ability to identify soybeans in a field. But of course this isn't the case. All over America, in the Red states as well as the Blue, different communities support different industries and experience dramatically different fates. And in Kansas, true to its reputation as a microcosm of America, you can find each of the basic elements of the American economic mix. In the wealthy Kansas City suburbs of Johnson County, "creative" white-collar types develop business strategies over lattes. In Wichita, unionized blue-collar workers manufacture airplanes. Way out west in Garden City, low-wage immigrant workers kill cows. And in between, farmers struggle to make a living on the most fertile and productive land in the world.

In 2003, just as the *affaires* Enron and WorldCom were enlightening the nation about the mischief made by its CEO class, so three similar corporate disasters, on a smaller scale, were teaching Kansans the same lessons about their own, homegrown elites—and, incidentally, about the true nature of the economic climate that conservatism has created. Each of the three cases, like the larger scandals of Enron and WorldCom, involved a quasi-public utility whose leadership had taken long pulls from the bubbling bong of New Economy theory. At each one the bosses, always heralded as geniuses, had invented elaborate plans for freeing themselves from the humdrum of public service and setting out to mulct the world—and in each case these plans collapsed for all the usual, predictable reasons, while workers and customers screamed and mom and pop shareholders discovered they weren't going to retire in Hawaii after all.

In the windblown city of Topeka, the tale concerns the state's largest power company, an outfit that once bore the humble name Western Resources. Humility, though, was not to be Western's destiny. When this outfit looked in the mirror, it saw a *player*. So after almost a century spent playing the boring, regulated utility game, in the mid-nineties Western brought to Topeka one David Wittig, a flashy mergers-and-acquisitions man from Salomon Brothers, the Wall Street brokerage house, and set out to do some merging and acquiring, preferably in fields not subject to state regulation. The company even proposed a deal at one point in which the debt piled up in all these corporate adventures would stay with the plodding public utility back in Topeka, where those plodding Kansas ratepayers could pay it off, while Wittig himself would run the sexy unregulated acquisitions. You know the routine: Socialize the risk, privatize the profits. Along the road to this moment of enlightenment the organization picked up a "chief strategic officer," a stable of company jets, and a new name: Westar.

> KANSAS MAY BE THE LAND OF AVERAGENESS, BUT IT IS A FREAKY, MILITANT, OUTRAGED AVERAGENESS

Westar never quite made it to player status: Its acquisitions turned out to be ill advised, and shares in the company, which are widely held in Kansas, fell 73 percent from their 1998 highs. Wittig himself, however, became Topeka's player in chief. He continued to pull down millions of dollars in compensation even while the company's share price plummeted and employees were laid off to reduce costs. Wittig routinely flew to Europe and the Hamptons on company jets; he spent $6.5 million decorating the company's executive suite to plans drawn up by Marc Charbonnet, a celebrated New York interior designer; he even bought the old mansion of hometown hero Alf Landon and had it conspicuously renovated by this same Charbonnet. When Wittig finally left the company in 2002, thanks to an embarrassing but unrelated money-laundering charge, local headlines screamed that he might walk away with some $42.5 million *more* in cumulative compensation.

Just across the state line in Missouri, a similar story was unfolding. This one involved a power company whose original, unassuming name had been Missouri Public Service ... which it had upgraded to UtiliCorp, and then, breaking the surly bonds of meaning altogether, to Aquila. The idea

of public service was jettisoned too, as Aquila prepared for the great competitive utopia to come by acquiring utilities around the country and overseas, and by setting up a freewheeling energy-trading operation through which it sought to replicate the spectacular success then being enjoyed by Enron, that idol of the management gurus. At Aquila the resident geniuses were brothers Robert and Richard Green, who took turns sitting in the CEO's chair. And then came the familiar stages of disaster: the bonds downgraded to junk, the massive layoffs, the share price plummeting 96 percent, and the public revelation that Richard Green had pulled down $21.6 million during the years of the collapse while Robert took home $19 million, plus an additional $7.6 million severance package when he walked away from the wreckage. Let the regulators clean it up.

GROWING UP IN MISSION HILLS, KANSAS, YOU QUICKLY LEARN THAT MANY OF YOUR RICH FRIENDS' DADS ARE IN PRISON

Then there is Sprint, the familiar provider of cell-phone and long-distance service, which started life as a small-town Kansas phone company called United Telecommunications. The free-market revolution of the nineties ballooned this sleepy local outfit into a telecom superpower, a titan in the most fabled New Economic field of them all. By 1999, Sprint was the largest employer in the Kansas City area and was building a colossal corporate campus in the Johnson County suburb of Overland Park that would incorporate 3.9 million square feet of office space, 16 parking garages, and its own zip code. This was typical of the industry. In the world of the telecoms, everything was bigger. The sums pocketed by those on the winning side of this great capitalist awakening were beyond comprehension, while the rhetoric buoying them up was otherworldly, awestruck, utopian—remember? The abolition of distance. The "visionary" CEOs. The "telecosm." Unfortunately, all that money and all that idolatry encouraged what now seems to have been a staggering amount of fraud and overconstruction.

On a different level stood Sprint. Here the master of the whirl was William T. Esrey, a Kansas City native beloved by business journalists. Esrey's greatest moment was also the climax of the telecom bubble—the proposed 1999 merger with WorldCom that, at $129 billion, would have been the largest of all time and would naturally have required Sprint to move to WorldCom's hometown. The national media turned somersaults saluting Esrey for engineering the triumph. What he really engineered, though, was a prominent place in the rogues' gallery of personal financial gluttony. As a condition of the deal, he and his top lieutenants were granted stupendous helpings of stock options—$311 million worth between Esrey and Ronald LeMay, his right-hand man—whether regulators allowed the merger to go through or not.

Kansas Citians were stunned. Not so much by the stock options as by the prospect of the city's largest employer packing up and disappearing. The blow was especially inconceivable in the smiling suburb of Overland Park, where the corporate way is almost a religion and where Sprint's massive "campus" was nearing completion. Were these the wages of "leadership," of "excellence," of deregulation? Would the suburb's southern reaches, which had been redesigned to please the telecom giant, now become a New Economy ghost town? Who would fill those parking garages, bid up the value of those gated communities, play on all those designer golf courses?

As we all know, federal regulators nixed the deal, saving Overland Park's Republican ass. Esrey and his posse still got their paper millions, as per their plan. But between late 1999 and the summer of 2002, Sprint shareholders saw the value of their holdings shrivel by 90 percent as the telecom rapture gave way to reality. By the beginning of 2003, Sprint had laid off more than 17,000 workers. WorldCom, meanwhile, confessed to accounting fraud on a scale previously unknown and then went bankrupt. The final act came in February 2003, when the tax shelters in which Esrey and LeMay had stashed their loot were called into question by the IRS. The two, it was revealed, had never sold the shares they received back in 1999, and now they were liable for a bubble-era tax bill in a distinctly austere time. Sprint responded to their plight by firing them.

At the time of their corporate stardom, Bill Esrey of Sprint and Bob Green of Aquila both lived in Mission Hills, Kansas, a small suburb of Kansas City. David Wittig, for his part, grew up in the next suburb to the south, while Ronald LeMay lived a few blocks to the east.

Out-of-town papers typically refer to the Kansas City "business community" as "close-knit." David Brooks might say that Kansas City's business owners are just folks who like to sit together in life's cafeteria at what happens to be a very small, very well-stocked table. The correct term for them, however, is "elite." Mission Hills is a graphic illustration of what elites are about. Its two square miles of rolling, landscaped exquisiteness house a population of about 3,600 with a median annual household income of $188,821, making it by far the richest town in Kansas and, indeed, one of the richest in the country. But to call it a "town," although technically correct, is misleading.

Mission Hills has three country clubs and a church but no businesses of any kind. Its population is about the same as that of the two blocks surrounding my apartment in Chicago. It doesn't have buses, commuter trains, or even proper sidewalks, in most places. What it has are mansions, modern and colonial, whimsical and sober, ensconced in vast, carefully maintained lawns that roll tastefully over the hills to the horizon.

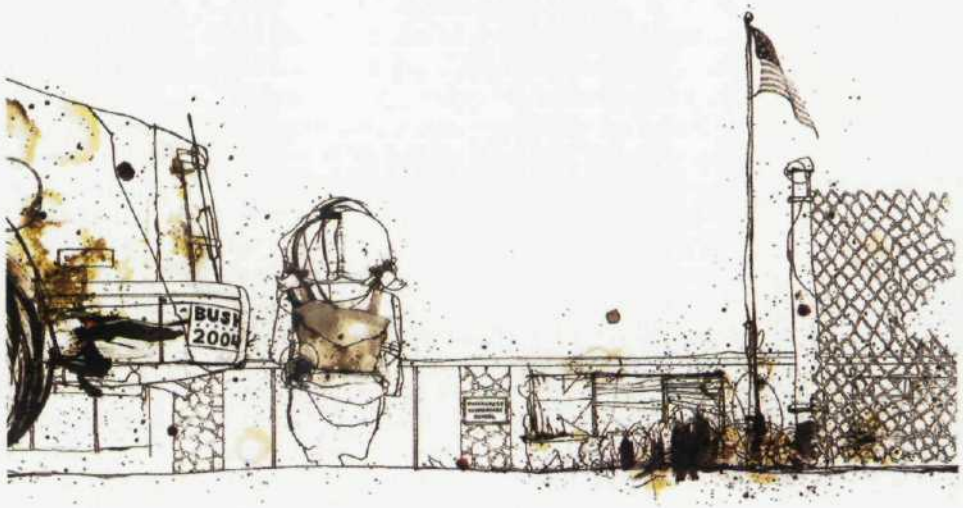
When my family moved to Mission Hills at the tail end of the bull market of the sixties, it was a suburb where doctors and lawyers rubbed elbows with CEOs; where one found Pontiacs and ride-on lawn mowers and driveway basketball courts and even the occasional ranch house with an asphalt roof. There were also, of course, the original inhabitants whose grand old houses were now overgrown with vines and invisible from the street thanks to shrubbery and weeds that had been neglected for years. In their picturesque decay these dark palaces became a source of morbid fascination to my brothers and me in the troubled seventies: Even as children we knew these houses were relics of a dead past, a time when people had servants and gardeners and hand-built cars.

Nobody mows his own lawn in Mission Hills anymore. Every time I paid a visit during the nineties, it seemed another of the more modest houses in our neighborhood had been torn down and replaced by a much larger edifice, a three-story stone château, say, bristling with turrets and porches and dormers and gazebos and a three-car garage. The dark old palaces from the twenties sprouted spiffy new slate roofs, immaculately tailored gardens, remote-controlled driveway gates, and sometimes entire new wings.

These changes are of course not unique to Mission Hills. What has gone on there is normal in its freakishness. You can observe the same changes in Shaker Heights, or La Jolla, or Winnetka, or Ann Coulter's hometown of New Canaan, Connecticut. They reflect the simplest and hardest of economic realities. The fortunes of Mission Hills rise and fall in inverse relation to the fortunes of ordinary working people. When workers are powerful, taxes are high, and labor is expensive (as was the case from World War II until the late seventies), the houses built here are smaller, the cars domestic, the servants rare, and the overgrown look fashionable in gardening circles. People read novels about eccentric English aristocrats trapped in a democratic age, sighing sadly for their lost world.

When workers are weak, taxes are down, and labor is cheap (as in the twenties and again today), Mission Hills coats itself in shimmering raiments of gold and green. Now the stock returns are plush, the bonus packages fat, the servants affordable, and the suburb finds that the baronial life isn't dead after all. It builds new additions and new fountains and new Italianate porches overlooking Olympian flower gardens maintained by shifts of laborers. People read books about the glory of empire. The kids get Porsches or SUVs when they turn sixteen; the houses with asphalt roofs discreetly disappear; the wings that were closed off are triumphantly reopened, and all is restored to its former grandeur.

Growing up in Mission Hills you quickly learn the boundaries and customs of the local notables: the local prep school attended by all the CEOs' kids, the snob colleges they all plan to attend in a few years, the family businesses they stand to inherit, the private police forces they maintain. You also learn that many of your rich friends' dads are in prison. Epidemic white-collar crime is the silent partner of the suburb's contentment, the ugly companion of its tranquil domesticity and the earnest flattery of its courtiers. In addition to disgraced CEOs like Esrey and Green, Mission Hills is the home of numerous smaller-scale thieves, embezzlers, tax evaders, real-estate frauds, and check forgers. The prominence of the criminal element here is likely related to Kansas's unlimited homestead exemption, which allows those declaring bankruptcy to keep their residence. Naturally people preparing to go under wanted the priciest house available, and thus Mission Hills became a magnet for the legally challenged from all across the region. That, plus the borderline criminality of



capitalism itself, a condition that has rudely impressed itself on much of the world in the last few years.

When I was in high school, our neighbors worked, shopped, and viced in Kansas City, Missouri; today they all drive in the other direction. By the end of the nineties the metropolitan area's center of gravity had shifted to the most peripheral point of the Kansas suburbs. The largest of the suburbs, the aforementioned Overland Park, began to dream of rivaling Kansas City itself. It built hotels and a convention center, hoping to siphon even more sustenance away from the gasping metropolis; it slapped up shopping malls; it constructed a new office district, complete with runty glass mini-skyscrapers at the southernmost point of settlement; and it platted out subdivisions without end—a raw, wood-shingled fortification stretching over the hills as far as the eye could see. And, as noted, it convinced Sprint to choose this locale for its sixteen-parking-garage "campus."

THE VILLAIN THAT DID THIS TO MY HOME STATE WASN'T THE SUPREME COURT OR LYNDON JOHNSON; IT WAS FREE-MARKET CAPITALISM

Today, Johnson County is a vast suburban empire, a happy, humming confusion of freeways and malls and nonstop construction; of identical cul-de-sacs and pretentious European street names and overachieving school districts and oversized houses constructed to one of four designs. By all the standards of contemporary American business civilization, it is a great success story. It is the wealthiest county in Kansas by a considerable margin, and the free-market rapture of the New Economy nineties served it well, scandals notwithstanding. Telecom and corporate management were the right businesses to be in, and Johnson County's population grew by almost 100,000 over the course of the decade: an unflagging stream of middle-class humanity to fill its office parks and to absorb the manufactured bonhomie of its Applebee's and the gourmet pretensions of its Dean & DeLucas. Johnson County is also one of the most intensely Republican places in the nation. Registered Republicans outnumber Democrats by more than two to one. Of Johnson County's twenty-two representatives in the Kansas House of Representatives, only one is a Democrat.

The only other part of Kansas that had a winning formula for the New Economy years was at the other end of the state, the area around Garden City, a remote town on the treeless western plains. There are no Dean & DeLucas in Garden City. This is cattle country, the other end of the food chain. The other end of the world.

They call places like Garden City "rural boomtowns." When you're there you keep coming across the slogan "Just Plain Success." And from a statistical angle its accomplishments do look impressive. Thanks to Garden City and the nearby towns of Liberal and Dodge City, Kansas was the biggest beef-packing state in the country through most of the last decade. Today those three towns in far-western Kansas have a "daily slaughter capacity" of some 24,000 cattle, and they produce fully 20 percent of the beef consumed in the United States. I am a great eater of beef, and so I suppose this is something to be proud of.

But it is profoundly misleading to describe these things in this old-fashioned way—as though Garden City were "cow butcher to the world," some miniature Chicago resourceful Kansans have hewn out of the barren prairie. These are things that have been done *to* Kansas and Garden City, and *to* remote towns all across the Great Plains. The only actors with real power are the companies that build the slaughterhouses: Tyson (known universally by its former name, IBP, for "Iowa Beef Packers"), the unmelodious ConAgra (known universally by its former name, Monfort), and the even less melodious Cargill Meat Solutions (known universally by its former name, Excel). And these entities, in turn, claim that their every move is dictated by the remorseless demands of the market. There are ranchers aplenty but few rugged individualists out here anymore. Today Garden and Dodge City are caught on the steel hooks of economic logic as surely and as haplessly as are the cows they hack so industriously apart.

The single most important element of that logic is, as always, the demand for cheap labor. From that simple imperative springs nearly everything that has happened here over the last twenty-five years. Beginning in the sixties the big thinkers of the meat biz figured out ways to routinize and de-skill their operations from beginning to end. Not only would this allow them to undercut the skilled, unionized butchers who were then employed by grocery stores but it would also let them move their plants to the remotest part of the Great Plains, where they could ditch their unionized big-city workers and save on rent. By the early nineties this strategy had put the century-old stockyards in Chicago and Kansas City out of business altogether. Like every other profit-maximizing entity, the industry's ultimate preference would probably be to have done with this expensive country once and for all and relocate operations to the Third World, where they could be free from regulators, trial lawyers, and prying journalists. Sadly, for them, they are prevented from achieving that dream by various food regulations. So instead they bring the Third World here, employing waves of immigrants from Southeast Asia, Mexico, and points south.

The area around Garden City is a showplace of industrialized agriculture: vast farms raise nothing but feed corn despite the semi-arid climate; gigantic rolling irrigation devices pump water from an aquifer and make this otherwise unthinkable crop possible; feedlots the size of cities transform the corn into cow flesh; and windowless concrete slaughterhouses squat silently on the outskirts of town, harvesting the final product. Take a drive through the countryside here and you will see no trees, no picturesque old windmills or bridges or farm buildings, and almost no people. When the aquifer dries up, as it someday will—its millions of years of collected rainwater spent in just a few decades—you will see even less out here.

One thing you do see, on the outskirts of town, are the trailer-park cities, dilapidated and unpaved and rubbish-strewn, that house a large part of Garden City's workforce. Confronted with some of the most advanced union-avoidance strategies ever conceived by the mind of business man, these people receive mediocre wages for doing what is statistically the most dangerous work in industrial America. Thanks to the rapid turnover at the slaughterhouses, few of them receive health or retirement benefits. The "social costs" of supporting them—education, health care, law enforcement—are "externalized," as the scholarly types put it, pushed off onto the towns themselves, or onto church groups and welfare agencies, or onto the countries from which the workers come. With constant speedup of the line and with the cold temperatures of the plant, one angry worker told me, "After ten years, people walk like they're sixty or seventy years old."

This is economic growth, yes, but it is a species of growth that makes a city less wealthy and less healthy as its population increases. Viewed from Mission Hills, it is a social order that delivers quaint slate roofs, copper gutters, and gurgling fountains in tasteful traffic islands; viewed from Garden City, it is an order that brings injury and infection and death by a hundred forms of degradation: rusting playgrounds for the kids, shabby decaying schools, a lifetime of productiveness gone in a few decades, and depleted groundwater, too. The good people of Mission Hills remain unfazed by all this. They may be too polite to say it aloud, but they know that poverty rocks.

Poverty is profitable. Poverty makes stocks go up and labor come down.

I have heard people justify what goes on in Garden City by reasoning that, well, it's better than what's gone on everywhere else in rural Kansas. It's better than having no economy at all.

Walk down the main street of just about any farm town in the state and you know immediately what they're talking about. This is a civilization in the early stages of irreversible decay. Main Streets here are vacant, almost as a rule; their grandiose stone facades are crumbling and covered up with plywood—rotting plywood, usually, itself simply hung and abandoned fifteen years ago or whenever it was that Wal-Mart came to town.

More than two thirds of Kansas counties lost population between 1980 and 2000, some by as much as 25 percent. I am told that there are entire towns in the western part of the state getting by on Social Security: No one is left there but the aged. There are no doctors, no shoe stores. Kansas dwindles in significance with each passing decade as its congressional delegation and electoral vote are steadily whittled away.

The town where this feeling of dissipation struck me most powerfully was Emporia, a place once famous as the home of the author and newspaperman William Allen White. In our grandparents' day, White was a nationally known figure, a confidant of presidents, a winner of the Pulitzer Prize, and the unofficial spokesman of small-town America. White's signature literary offering, at least in his early days, was the droll vignette of village life; portraits of a Middle America that was easygoing and contented, industrious, tidy, crime-free, and wise in its humility. All that it demanded of the world was a chance to work hard, play fair, and show 'em what we were made of here in the heartland.

Here is what I saw in the two hours that I wandered around Emporia on an October day some ninety-eight years after William Allen White published *In Our Town:* houses made of painted particleboard; a facade on Commercial Street composed of untreated two-by-fours, nailed one next to the other; imposing brick homes with every window frame empty and grass three feet high in the yard; tumbledown apartment buildings with sprayed-on stucco and peeling veneer; bungalows with porches in mid-collapse and flimsy plastic wrap instead of glass; prefabricated steel utility buildings interspersed with residences; stone-slab sidewalks grown so craggy and broken they can't be used; a rain gutter jutting from a house like a bone from a broken arm; an air conditioner abandoned in the middle of a weedy lawn. And wafting faintly above it all, as if from the PA system at some nearby public swimming pool, the eternal classic rock of the 1970s: Led Zeppelin, Van Halen, Rush.

There's a reason you probably haven't heard much about this aspect of the heartland. This kind of blight can't be easily blamed on the usual suspects like government or counterculture or high-hat urban policy. The villain that did this to my home state wasn't the Supreme Court or Lyndon Johnson, showering dollars on the poor or putting criminals back on the street. The culprit is the conservatives' beloved free-market capitalism, a system that, at its most unrestrained,

has little use for small-town merchants or the agricultural system that supported the small towns in the first place. Deregulated capitalism is what has allowed Wal-Marts to crush local businesses across the Midwest and, even more importantly, what has driven agriculture, the region's raison d'être, to a state of near-collapse.

People who have never lived in a farm state often think of all agricultural interests as essentially identical: farmers and huge agribusiness conglomerates want the same things, they believe. But in reality the interests of the two are more like those of the chicken and Colonel Sanders of backlash lore. And Colonel Sanders has been on an unbroken winning streak now for twenty-some years, with farm legislation, trade policy, and a regulatory climate all crafted to strengthen the conglomerates while weakening farmers. For shareholders and upper management of companies like Archer Daniels Midland and Tyson the result has been miraculous; for towns like Emporia it has been ruinous.

Whereas farmers are naturally disorganized, agribusiness seeks always to merge and acquire and choke off competition. And so, like other industries, it was finally permitted to do these things in the deregulatory climate of the Reagan-Clinton era. In the eighties, according to William Heffernan, a sociologist at the University of Missouri, agriculture experts generally agreed that if four companies controlled more than 40 percent of market share in a given field, it was no longer competitive. Today, Heffernan estimates, the four largest players process 81 percent of the beef, 59 percent of the pork, and 50 percent of the chicken produced in the United States. The same phenomenon is at work in grain: The largest four process 61 percent of American wheat, 80 percent of American soybeans, and either 57 percent or 74 percent of American corn, depending on the method. It is no coincidence that the internal motto of Archer Daniels Midland, the grain-processing giant notorious for its political clout and its price-fixing, is reported to be, "The competitor is our friend and the customer is our enemy."

The admirers of farm deregulation—and there are plenty of them, in economics departments as well as in the Bush Administration Department of Agriculture—see in it not some hideous power grab but a heroic "restructuring" of the food industry. Cargill, ADM, and the rest of the giants are bringing order out of chaos; if we finally have to say goodbye to the Jeffersonian fantasy of the family farm—if we have to transform the prosperous farmer into a sharecropper and turn the countryside into an industrialized wasteland and destroy the small towns—maybe it's all for the best.

One thing unites all these different groups of Kansans, these millionaires and trailer-park dwellers, these farmers and thrift-store managers and slaughterhouse workers and utility executives: they are almost all Republicans. Meatpacking Garden City voted for George W. Bush in even greater numbers than did affluent Johnson County.

Not too long ago, Kansans would have responded to the current situation by making the bastards pay. This would have been a political certainty, as predictable as what happens when you touch a match to a puddle of gasoline. When business screwed the farmers and the workers—when it implemented monopoly strategies invasive beyond the Populists' worst imaginings, when it ripped off shareholders and casually tossed thousands out of work—you could be damned sure about what would follow.

Not these days. Out here the gravity of discontent pulls in only one direction: to the right, to the right, further to the right. Strip today's Kansans of their job security and they head out to become registered Republicans. Push them off their land and the next thing you know they're protesting in front of abortion clinics. Squander their life savings on manicures for the CEO and there's a good chance they'll join the John Birch Society. But ask them about the remedies their ancestors proposed—unions, antitrust laws, public ownership—and you might as well be referring to the days when knighthood was in flower.

Let us pause for a moment and gaze across this landscape of dysfunction. A state is spectacularly ill served by the Reagan-Bush stampede of deregulation, privatization, and laissez-faire. It sees its countryside depopulated, its towns disintegrate, its cities stagnate—and its wealthy enclaves sparkle, behind their remote-controlled security gates. The state erupts in revolt, making headlines around the world with its bold defiance of convention. But what do its revolutionaries demand? More of the very measures that have brought ruination on them and their neighbors in the first place.

This is not just the mystery of Kansas; this is the mystery of America, the historical shift that has made it all possible.

In Kansas the shift is more staggering than elsewhere, simply because it has been so decisive, so extreme. The people who were once radical are now reactionary. Although they speak today in the same aggrieved language of victimization, and although they face the same array of economic forces as their hard-bitten ancestors, today's rebels make demands that are precisely the opposite. Tear down the federal farm programs, they cry. Privatize the utilities. Repeal the progressive taxes. All that Kansas asks today is a little help nailing itself to that cross of gold. ■