

“Flyover Country” and the Evolution of the Idea of Two Americas

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A . . . story grew up around two sisters from Burlington, Iowa who came to Boston to marry Bostonians. Declaring they were from Iowa, they once received the astonishing rebuke, ‘In Boston we pronounce it Ohio.’¹

The concept for this paper has its origins in a conversation I had at a posh resort in central Maine last spring with fellow invitees to the wedding of a dear college friend. As my friend is from Greenwich and has worked in New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, most of the guests were from major cities in the Northeast or California. “So where are you coming from” one man asked me, presuming, undoubtedly, that anyone at such a high cultural capital affair must be from coastal America. As I replied “Kentucky” there was a pregnant pause and then a quizzical look as he wrestled to figure out exactly where this was (let alone, why anyone would ever actually live there). *Somewhere in the middle --- possibly in the South* – one could sense an almost palpable grinding of mental gears as he searched for some greater geographic specificity. His next question was delivered in an even more tentative and elongated manner. “So how did you *get* here?” he wondered. I imagined he could almost envision a long ordeal of slashing one’s

¹ Cleveland Armory, *The Proper Bostonians*, reprinted in B.A. Botkin, *Sidewalks of America* - folklore, legends, sagas, traditions, customs, songs, stories, and sayings of city folk (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1954), 20-21.

way through the wilderness, all the while fighting off savage Indian attacks, before finally reaching some outpost of civilization. Instead, I informed him, we simply drove less than an hour to Nashville, then took a direct flight to Manchester, New Hampshire, followed by a two-hour drive to the lodge. This experience brought to my mind earlier incidents of the lack of knowledge by easterners of the vast middle of the nation – most vividly a long-ago debate in the 1980s one night at college in Massachusetts over beers where I had to finally produce a map to convince an all-too-self-assured classmate from the Garden State that not only was New Mexico (where I was from) indeed longer North to South than New Jersey (indeed, well over twice as long) but that it was nearly 14 times as large as well.

That such a mentality is still very much alive was recently confirmed by an online survey I filled out on the *New York Times* website. Designed to determine how likely Internet readers would be to use the newspaper's employment section, the survey asked me to indicate where I lived and where I would like to work, giving me the same 17 possible choices in both cases, from the specific ("Manhattan," "Westchester," "Long Island") to the impossibly large ("Outside of the U.S. and Canada"). Unfortunately, where I *actually* lived was not even an option. The closest choices were "Mid-West" (oddly hyphenated as if the survey's creators were not quite sure what to call it or where it was) or the strangely labeled "Mid or South Atlantic East Coast" that might cover everything from Philadelphia to Key West, but not, anything between, say, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania and Houston, Texas!² According to the survey, this region and its people simply did not exist.

² The complete list of choices the survey proffered was as follows: "Manhattan," "NYC outer borough (Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island, Bronx)," "Long Island," "Westchester," "Other New York City area (Rockland, Orange, Ulster, Sullivan, Pike, Putnam, Dutchess Counties)," "New York State outside of New York area," "New Jersey," "Connecticut," "California," "New England," "Mid or South Atlantic East Coast," "Mid-West," "Mountain Region," "Southwest," "Pacific Northwest," "Canada," and

Although in this case the erased area was the vast bulk of the southern United States, this survey is a prime example of the broader mentality of envisioning the great center of the nation as “flyover country,” a part of the United States that is simply land that needs to be traversed to get to somewhere that actually matters. This paper is an examination of the origins, evolution and potential consequences of such thinking from the perspectives of both coastal commentators and those in the central United States who see themselves as aggrieved parties. Although the term itself seems to have originated only some two decades ago, the underlying attitudes and perceptions are older than the republic. Closely tied to technological and transportation developments of the mid-twentieth century, the term has fascinatingly reemerged recently on the cultural and political landscape as a catch-all category meant to contrast “heartland” values and free market social and economic positions with the perceived cultural elitism and liberal excesses of the coasts. Too often lost in such a dichotomous vision of the nation divided between “flyover country” and “bicoastal America,” however, are the broader truths of the simultaneous increasing similarity of the early 21st century American experience as a result of the expansion of urban and suburban lifestyles and social problems into the countryside and the great diversity of the land, people, and cultures of non-coastal America.

Of course contrasting and, often, antagonistic conceptions of the differences between urban and non-urban long pre-date the rise of the idea of “flyover country.” Indeed, one can trace these differences back to the very origins of civilization. The ancient Romans clearly distinguished between “urb” and “rur,” seeing the former as defining civilized man and the latter a state approaching savagery. As William Howarth has rightly noted, these two identities and perceptions are so intertwined as to be “dialectical”; despite their perceived oppositionality,

“Outside of U.S. or Canada.” Survey from *New York Times* webpage and produced by Audience Profiler.com.

“rural and urban places define each other.”³ The American historical experience has been equally shaped and defined by the simultaneous admiration and repudiation of the countryside by urban dwellers, and of the city by rural residents. Portraits of the late 17th century characters of the New England rural bumpkin (in its many manifestations from Yankee Doodle to Brother Jonathan) were meant as figures of ridicule by urban commentators mocking the sensibilities and slower pace of agrarian life (even though most of those poking fun had themselves left the farm only a generation or two before). But such figures were also used to deride the pomposity of their presumed social betters in the city and to expose the social threat posed by the supposed avarice, corruption and social brutality that stemmed from urban life. In its American Revolution context and in the later writings of Thomas Jefferson and others, America’s rurality was celebrated as the source of the nation’s goodness, purity, and enlightened democracy, the key to preserving an “Empire for Liberty.”⁴

Jeffersonian ideals of the centrality of the “yeoman farmer” persisted as long as America was primarily agricultural and as the desire for westward expansion remained strong. But as America became an increasingly urban and industrial society over the course of the 19th century, and especially since the Civil War, the proponents of the idea that rural places and people would save the country from a decline into inequity and decadence steadily lost out to those who saw progress and power as synonymous with urban growth. The dire warnings by soon-to-be Democratic Party nominee William Jennings Bryan in his famous 1896 “Cross of Gold” speech that “destroy our farms and the grass will grow in the streets of every city in the country” failed to materialize, and the percentage of Americans who lived in rural areas, particularly as full-time

³ William Howarth, “Land and Word: American Pastoral,” in Emery N. Castle, ed., *The Changing American Countryside: Rural People and Places* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 14.

⁴ David B. Danbom, “Why Americans Value Rural Life,” *Rural Development Perspectives*, v. 12, no. 1 (1996), 15-16.

farmers, declined steadily throughout the century.⁵ Such a fundamental transition toward a predominantly urban and suburban society was the first prerequisite for the latter emergence of a “flyover” mentality by urban and rural folk alike.⁶

The more immediate origins of “flyover country,” however, required important technological and transportation developments that did not fully materialize until the mid twentieth century, most obviously the advent of non-stop coast to coast air travel. Although the U.S. Postal Service began experimenting with trans-continental mail delivery in the late 1910s, and completed the first coast to coast mail delivery solely by airplanes in 1922, it would not be until Charles Lindbergh electrified the nation (and indeed, the world) with his 1927 trans-Atlantic flight that the first experiments with a viable passenger airline industry began. Lindbergh himself was instrumental in this effort, tirelessly promoting his vision of the benefits of a commercial airline industry by flying to 82 cities across the country in 1927 and then launching the first coast to coast passenger air service in 1929. The route required a combination of air and train service and was certainly cumbersome by later standards – but it did let passengers cross the nation in under 48 hours.⁷ Even though the plane and train combination only lasted eighteen months and was then supplanted by cross country airline service alone, such travel still required numerous way stops and was prohibitively expensive for most Americans.

⁵ The percentage of the total population in rural communities (defined as less than 2500 persons) fell from 74.3% in 1870 to 54.4% in 1910 to 48.8% in 1920 (the first census where the urban population outnumbered the rural) to 36.9% by 1960 to 24.8% by 1990. See “Urban and Rural Populations, 190 to 1990,” Selected Historical Decennial Census Population and Housing Counts, United States Census Bureau [<http://www.census.gov/population/www/censusdata/hiscendata.html>]

⁶ “Bryan’s ‘Cross of Gold’ Speech: Mesmerizing the Masses,” reprinted on History Matters website, [<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5354/>]

⁷ “A History of Coast to Coast,” [<http://earthfriendarts.tripod.com/Ctochist.htm>], “Lindbergh,” special exhibit of the Missouri History Museum, St. Louis, Missouri. According to “A History of Coast to Coast” webpage, because most airports were not equipped for night-time landings, the multi-stepped route required passengers to take a Pennsylvania Railroad train from New York’s Penn Station to Columbus, Ohio; they then boarded a Ford Trimotor airplane that flew them in several short legs to Waynoka, Oklahoma; from here, they took a Santa Fe Railroad train west to Clovis, New Mexico, and finally, another Trimotor flew passengers into Los Angeles airport.

Conditions had not changed drastically even two decades later when low fare non-scheduled airline operators sought to attract daring passengers willing to fly unconventional schedules and accept bare-bones services to cross the country cheaply. The article “Coast to Coast for \$99” of 1949 is a remarkable account of these “happy-go-lucky non-schedule operators” who are, to the author, practitioners of “a sort of atomic-age swashbuckling.” He tells of taking a jeep to the edge of the runway to board the quasi-official war surplus transport, of the passengers taking a vote to decide whether or not to stop for a meal in Albuquerque, of needing the assistance of actual working cowboys on the return leg in Amarillo who used a lariat to help turn the propeller blade to start one of the engines, and of taking a detour from Dayton to Chicago to accommodate the wishes of a passenger!⁸ Although the airlines promised cross-country service in 12 hours or less, Jacobs notes that his return trip actually took 24 hours. At that rate and with so many intermediary stops, the particularity and diversity of America was still readily apparent to air passengers and it was hard for them to conceive of the nation’s interior as simply undifferentiated territory to get across.

By the mid 1950s, however, the advent of jet service promised “non-stop” (a term labeled in one article title a “magic word”) cross country trips in less than half a day with an “80 to 90 per cent increase in passenger-plane speeds.”⁹ The new emphasis on “speed and ease” was made explicit in both promotional maps and advertising iconography that increasingly presented the nation as simply space between New York and San Francisco or Los Angeles, traversed by a single unremitting arrow. Numerous 1954 ads for American Airlines, for example, used variations on this theme, presenting the country as a vast featureless space between the skyscrapers of coastal cities, or, in celebration of the one-year anniversary of their nonstop

⁸ Larry Jacobs, “Coast to Coast for \$99,” *Flying*, June 1949, 24-25, 58.

⁹ “You’ll Cross the U.S. in 41/2 Hours,” *U.S. News and World Report*, October 28, 1955, 44-45; “Magic word: Nonstop,” *Time*, April 12, 1954, 104.

transcontinental service, as a large birthday cake with only New York and Los Angeles labeled.

[Images 1 and 2]¹⁰

American makes History with NEW DC-7 service-

Fastest to San Francisco



1 Hour 25 min. **FASTER**
than any other Airline
to **SAN FRANCISCO**
on American's **GOLDEN GATE** Flight

Lv. NEW YORK	12:30 pm
Ar. TULSA	3:50 pm
Ar. SAN FRANCISCO	7:40 pm
<hr/>	
Lv. SAN FRANCISCO	9:00 am
Ar. TULSA	3:30 pm
Ar. NEW YORK	8:40 pm

American adds still another milestone to its long-record of leadership by offering the fastest service to San Francisco. Now you can span the miles to San Francisco 1 hour and 25 minutes faster than any other airline on American's new "Golden Gate" flight.

This service is made possible by American's new DC-7 Flagships—the finest, fastest commercial planes in U. S. air travel history, cruising at a speed of 365 miles an hour during record breaking schedules.

Best of all, you can take the premium "Golden Gate" flight at no extra cost. And soon American will add "The Southerner" flight, offering a choice of morning or afternoon departure to San Francisco via the fastest service. So be sure to specify American!

FOR RESERVATIONS and information, phone TWining 8-5000
or your travel agent

America's Leading Airline **AMERICAN AIRLINES INC.**

Image 1

¹⁰ "America Makes History with New DC-7 Service - Fastest to San Francisco," advertisement in *New York World Telegraph & Sun*, 1954; Ad number T1806, Ad* Access database, Digital Scriptorium, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University [<http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu:80/adaccess/>]; "First Anniversary . . . of the Greatest Advance in Coast-to-Coast Travel – American's DC-& Nonstop Service," *New York Herald Tribune*, 1954, Ad number T1799, Ad* Access database



First Anniversary

...of the greatest advance in coast-to-coast travel—
American's DC-7 nonstop service —

This week marks a milestone achievement in travel and aviation. American Airlines—one year ago—pioneered “Nonstop Mercury” travel between New York and Los Angeles. The service developed such popular demand that it has since carried more than 90,000 passengers on some 1,500 flights. To keep pace, American twice expanded its schedule and today offers the most frequent nonstop coast-to-coast service of any airline—with three nonstop flights... Join leaders in industry and entertainment on your next trip across the country. Enjoy luxury service and gain more time for business and pleasure. Morning, noon, afternoon, or night, fly American Airlines DC-7's. They'll go a long way—in the shortest time—to make your trip a big success.

Lv. New York (EST)	10:00 AM*	12 Noon	4:00 PM	one-stop
Ar. Los Angeles (PST)	3:45 PM	5:45 PM	9:45 PM	11:25 PM
				6:00 AM

*Only across Texas and Fla.
 For reservations call TWing 8-2000

AMERICAN AIRLINES INC.
America's Leading Airline

*Very H. Toib
 Dec. 1, 1954*

Image 2

Trans World Airlines ads of the same year took a different tact, featuring comely women in nightgowns resting comfortably in beds as the plane crossed the country. One possible tacit message here was that what lay between the takeoffs and landings in California and New York was not worth staying awake for [Image 3].¹¹ The experience of air travel in the mid 1950s was

¹¹ “Only TWA offers sleeper service to New York,” Trans World Airlines advertisement, *Sunset*, 1954, Ad number T1799, Ad* Access database; “NOW! Sleep coast to coast for only \$25 extra,” Trans World Airlines advertisement, *Vogue*, 1954; Ad number T2114, Ad* Access database.



Image 3

still far from widely shared and American and United Airlines felt it necessary to produce advertisements that answered the questions of those who had “never traveled by air” and were flying for the “first time.”¹² As these ads suggest, the initial reaction to non-stop jet service was one of excitement and some commentators even evoked a pioneer spirit. Stated one would-be passenger on the still-to-come cross-country jets, “We couldn’t ride in the first prairie schooner

¹² “Questions you may want answered if you’ve never traveled by air,” United Air Lines, *Time*, 1954 Ad number T2246, Ad* Access database; “Thousands Are Now Flying for First Time,” American Airlines, *Chicago Tribune*, 1954, Ad number T1805, Ad* Access database.

or the first auto . . . but we can ride in the first transcontinental jet liner.”¹³ But as air travel became increasingly routine, the experience of flying across the country and having it reduced to at best an ant-like landscape and at worst, at night or in cloud cover, simply dead time between take off and landing, became more familiar. This was another necessary first step toward imagining the nation’s interior as “flyover country.” Wallace Stegner neatly summed up the psychological results of commonplace jet travel in 1964. Referring to the attitudes of Eastern editors and publishers – but clearly applicable more broadly – he bemoaned that they envisioned the country as “shaped like a dumbbell: New York at one end, California at the other and United Airlines in between.”¹⁴

Another important transportation development that helped spur this thinking was the construction of the Interstate Highway system in the 1950s and 1960s. The Federal Interstate Highway Act of 1956 initiated the largest public works project in American history, consuming more than \$128 billion in federal and state funds between 1956 and 1991 for the construction and maintenance of over 42,000 miles of high-speed, multi-laned highways that criss-crossed the country. This transportation network promised to fulfill the long term American commercial dream of, in the words of Herbert Hoover, “eliminat[ing] all barriers between people and goods” while at the same time, in the era of the Cold War, supposedly ensuring that military material could be transported rapidly and cities could be evacuated quickly in the case of atomic attacks.¹⁵

¹³ Philip Gustafson, “LA to NY in 4 hours,” *Saturday Evening Post*, September 29, 1956, 46.

¹⁴ Robert C. Steensma, Review of Jackson J. Benson, *Wallace Stegner: His Life and Work* (New York: Viking, 1996), *Weber Studies*, Spring/Summer 1997, Volume 14.2 [<http://weberstudies.weber.edu/archive/archive%20B%20Vol.%2011-16.1/Vol.%2014.2/14.2BookReviews.htm>]. Also cited in Robert A. Marshall, “Anybody here seen Missouri?,” *Changing Times*, November 1981, 88.

¹⁵ Figures on expenditures and size of highway system from “Dwight D. Eisenhower National System of Interstate and Defense Highways,” Federal Highway Administration, U.S. Department of Transportation [http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/programadmin/interstate.html#Interstate_Funding]; Hoover quotation cited in William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York:

Initial reaction to the highway system both by the many industries that would most immediately benefit from it such as construction, automobile and heavy equipment producers, and real estate development, and by the general public was overwhelmingly positive. Even as late as 1968, an extensive article in *National Geographic* on the interstate highway system offered lavish praise and few complaints. “[T]he magnificent new super-roads blazoned with red-white-blue signs” were, according to author Robert Jordan, “the greatest revolution in ground transportation since the invention of the wheel.” The article ticked off the new highways’ many benefits in safety improvements, transportation cost reduction, and, of course, time savings for commuting and vacation trips.¹⁶ An article in *Popular Mechanics* three years later also emphasized above all the rapid travel the new highways afforded: “You can go faster and farther on a vacation or business trip” the author boasted, adding, “[s]tretches that used to take all day 15 years ago now take only a few hours. You bypass or whiz across cities and towns. . . .”¹⁷

One factor that neither of these articles touched upon, however, was the psychological consequences of the new landscape created by the four to eight lane wide superhighways, what James Howard Kunstler has correctly dubbed “the geography of nowhere.”¹⁸ Robert Jordan thrilled that the Interstate system “provides a vivid lesson in the geography of the United States” as it “cut[s] through brooding forests and silent deserts” and “endless prairies,” but as the highway system grew, the man-made landscape near on and off ramps of identical franchise

Vintage, 1993), 356. See also Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier – The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 248-251, and Owen D. Gutfreund, *Twentieth-Century Sprawl – Highways and the Reshaping of the American Landscape* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

¹⁶ Robert Paul Jordan, “Our Growing Interstate Highway System,” *National Geographic* February 1968, 195; *Ibid.*, 198.

¹⁷ Michael Lamm, “How to Plan Ahead and Get the Most From the Interstate Highway System,” *Popular Mechanics*, June 1971, 82.

¹⁸ James Howard Kunstler, *The Geography of Nowhere – The Rise and Decline of America’s Man-Made Landscape* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994). See also William Leach, *Country of Exiles : the destruction of place in American life*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1999.

restaurants, gas stations, and hotels made an exit ramp in Nevada look strikingly the same as one in Ohio or Georgia.¹⁹ By 1971, even the pro-business magazine *Fortune* lamented the “sterile monotony of look-alike filling stations, motels, and shopping centers” that formed “the new agglomerations around interchanges.”²⁰ As the sole criteria became speed of transversal (*Fortune* article marveled that on some stretches of the Interstate one could go “350 miles without a stoplight”) the antiseptic homogeneity of interstate communities became almost a prerequisite for their survival and the once strikingly unique traits of towns, states and even national regions became ever harder for motorists to recognize or appreciate.²¹

One might counter that highways and drivers “need for speed” had long shaped the American landscape and psyche and that a tendency to view the intervening countryside and its people as simply something to get through was nothing new. But such a perspective understates the degree to which the experience of non-stop highway travel transformed drivers’ perceptions of the human and natural landscape and how relatively recent a phenomena this was. The Interstate system has become such a dominant aspect of both the actual landscape and Americans’ mental map of the nation that we tend to forget how long this construction process took (the highway system as originally envisioned was not completed until 1977, and a few smaller sections were not finished until the early 1980s) or how different was the state highway system that preceded and then coexisted with the new “superhighways” well into the 1960s.²² The slower pace of travel on these earlier highways allowed for far more actual encounters with the local human and physical landscape. The enormous collection of avid amateur photographer Charles W. Cushman who shot some 14,000 pictures of the American scene between 1938 and

¹⁹ Jordan, “Our Growing,” 201.

²⁰ Juan Cameron, “How the Interstate Changed the Face of the Nation,” *Fortune*, July 1971, 80.

²¹ Cameron, “How the Interstate,” 78.

²² “Dwight D. Eisenhower National System of Interstate and Defense Highways”; Gutfreund, *Twentieth-Century Sprawl*, 180.

1969 offers a wonderful window into this older highway America. As Eric Sandweiss points out, one is struck by how surprisingly little Cushman's landscape changes in these 30 years of apparent dramatic change in the United States and how long the older world of the pre-Interstate highway system held on. Unlike the modern interstates with their "wide-paved shoulders, guardrails, central medians, [and] generous on- and of-ramps" the highways Cushman drove made relatively little impact on the natural landscape, and offered him numerous opportunities to photograph people along the roads (in their cars, but also in earlier modes of transportation such as horse-drawn carts, or just walking) [Images 4, 5]. Furthermore, unlike later interstates that usually bypassed nearby cities and towns in the name of driving speed and convenience, a number of Cushman's photographs show a highway that simply turns into a Main Street in the heart of a small town designed more around locals than long distance travelers [Image 6].²³



Image 4
Interstate 70 – Colorado (c. 2004)

²³ Eric Sandweiss, "Charles Cushman's Journey through the American Landscape, 1939-1968," Charles W. Cushman Photograph Collection, Indiana University Archives, Digital Library Program [<http://webapp1.dlib.indiana.edu/cushman/overview/urbanHistory.jsp>]. Examples of unobtrusive highways can be seen in images P08366, P01514, P05784, P06475, and P05953.



Image 5
Highway west from Ouray, Colorado (1965)



Image 6
Entering Helper, Utah on Highway 50 (1952)

Thus, beyond the often devastating economic consequences that the new Interstate system wrought on hundreds of small towns, either slowly withering them away or radically transforming them to cater exclusively to speeding motorists, they also had the perhaps unintentional consequences of encouraging the idea that the American interior was indeed “flyover country” because it all seemed uniform and lifeless from the vantage point of rocketing across it at 70-80 miles per hour.

Although many of the prerequisites for the development of the idea of “flyover country” from non-stop coast to coast air travel to the Interstate highway system to the general sense of difference or even antagonism between rural and urban were firmly in place by the early 1970s, the term itself does not seem to have existed in print until the end of the decade. Its appearance at that time seems tightly bound to another major technological transformation of the mid 20th century-- the advent of television and the peripatetic lifestyle of its producers and executives. The first reference to the concept I have found appeared in a 1979 Les Brown essay about the nature of the television audience. The long-time television critic explains that because most television programming decisions are made in the networks’ New York offices while creative decisions and actual production takes place in Hollywood studios, network executives spend much of their time “shuttling between the two Coasts, with rarely a stopover in the 3,000 miles in between.” Brown then cites an unnamed network president who sums up the mentality such a disconnection from actual people (as opposed to the virtual television audience) creates. “The public,” he is reported to have said, “is what we fly over.”²⁴ A 1985 editorial by Gary Belis, a publicity manager for *Fortune*, that was one of the first to explicitly use the term “flyover,” also directly referenced the mentality of “bi-coastal network executives hurtling between Gotham and Los Angeles” who supposedly had dubbed the populace in the “Out There” the “Flyover

²⁴ Les Brown, “The TV Audience Vs. the Public,” *New York Times*, August 19, 1979, D27.

People.” Prompted by what he saw as New York reporters’ whiney reaction to having to travel to the Midwest to cover that year’s so-called “I-70 World Series” (named for the interstate that traverses Missouri) between the St. Louis Cardinals and the Kansas City Royals, Belis, who had moved from Missouri to New York some years earlier, lampooned what he called “Coasters” and their shock at discovering that the middle of the country also had great cuisine and was up on recent fashion trends including paisley ties. Belis jeered that “a Coaster rather likes the idea of terribly green yahoos gathering around the sophisticated fella’s Swatch watch like chimpanzees examining the bright rubber ball.”²⁵ His use of “Flyover People” closely mirrored the earlier (1981) use of “flyover country” by Washington D.C. based (but Idaho bred) writer Robert Marshall in a commentary celebrating the steady westward movement of the country’s population center (the imaginary point from which all Americans would be in perfect balance in all directions) but lamenting how rarely the media reported news of the country outside of the two coasts. His neologism, Marshall explained, was how they viewed “all territory out of eyeshot of either ocean.”²⁶

It should not be surprising that television network executives would have been so instrumental in the coining of this expression, for even beyond the coastal-centric news coverage Marshall noted television had certainly played a central role in the steady erasure of the rural and even non coastal cities from the airwaves. After a run of highly successful rural shows in the 1960s (especially *The Real McCoys*, *The Andy Griffith Show*, and *The Beverly Hillbillies*), CBS purged them all from its lineup in 1970 (lamented *Green Acres*’s regular Pat Buttram: “they cancelled everything with a tree -- including *Lassie*.”).²⁷ Certainly the television networks have

²⁵ Gary Belis, “The Flyover People,” *New York Times*, Nov. 2, 1985, 25.

²⁶ Robert A. Marshall, “Anybody here seen Missouri?,” *Changing Times*, November, 1981, 88.

²⁷ Buttram quotation is from Paul Henning interview with Bob McClaster, September 4, 1997, Archive of American Television, Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, North Hollywood, California, and

aired shows over the following three decades with rural or “flyover territory” settings, but these have nearly all been either safely ensconced in the past such as *The Waltons*, *Little House on the Prairie*, or *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*, or have been set in regional cities in which the city itself appeared only infrequently including *The Bob Newhart Show* (Chicago), *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (Minneapolis), *WKRP in Cincinnati*, *One Day at a Time* (Indianapolis), and *The Drew Carey Show* (Cleveland). Nonetheless, these shows are the exceptions that prove the rule that network programming has been dominated by shows with urban coastal backdrops (nearly all in New York or Los Angeles) from sitcoms (*Friends*, *Seinfeld*) to romance dramas (*Melrose Place*, *Beverly Hills, 90210*, *Sex and the City*) to police and legal dramas (*L.A. Law*, *NYPD Blue*, *Law and Order*) to late night talk shows.

Although the exact causes for the term’s emergence in the late 1970s/early 1980s is unclear, it may also have been related to the fact that this was a time of fiscal and social crisis for New York City and older industrial cities in general. The mid 1970s was a devastating era particularly for the residents of the Big Apple, a time of garbage strikes, an escalating crime wave, and near bankruptcy. Such hard times made many New Yorkers relocate or at least seriously consider moving to “the country” (defined as anywhere ten miles beyond the five boroughs) and to comment on the possibilities of a better life elsewhere.²⁸ The Woody Allen film *Annie Hall* (1977) is another testament to these cultural doubts, for the entire film is an extended commentary on New York as a “dying” city and Los Angeles as the new plasticized Mecca. Yet most New Yorkers, like Allen in the film, stayed put and did their best to survive the maelstrom.

conversation with Stephen Cox; For an overview of the transformation at CBS, see Todd Gitlin, “The Turn Toward ‘Relevance’” in *Inside Prime Time* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 203-220.

²⁸ On New York’s fiscal crisis, see Martin Shefter, *Political Crisis/Fiscal Crisis – The Collapse and Revival of New York City* (New York: Basic Books, 1985) and William K. Tabb, *The Long Default – New York City and the Urban Fiscal Crisis* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1982). A typical contemporary commentary on the decision to leave the city is Colette Dowling, “Getting Out,” *New York Times*, March 28, 1976, 21+.

Perhaps the emergence of the concept of “flyover,” therefore, was one means by which New Yorkers could assuage their self-doubts about the advantages of urban life and convince themselves that there was no better alternative beyond the city’s boundaries.

Certainly the difficulties the city faced in overcoming its image as, in the words of the New York City Board of Trade, “the nation’s most maligned metropolis” was partly connected to such attitudes. “[B]eyond the Hudson,” the Board’s spokesman lamented, “our image is one of rampant crime, unchecked immorality, deteriorating services, pollution, traffic, blackouts and bankruptcy.”²⁹ In an effort to attract visitors and burnish its national image, the city’s promotional department in 1978 launched “Project Appleseed” designed to market the city as a place of civility, decency and every day Americans, or, as the *New York Times* put it, “to convince the nation that New Yorkers are just folks, too.” Unfortunately, the apparently short-lived campaign served only to reveal New Yorker self-congratulatory snobbishness and to reinforce the very perceptions the campaign ostensibly sought to reverse. Attempting to explain to the press the need for the campaign, spokesman Andrew C. Erish noted “[o]ften, a great bit of animosity is directed at New Yorkers because we’re so sophisticated,” adding that the campaign was sure to “leave them [the nation] smiling” because “America is 90 percent corn, it really is.”³⁰ Predictably, though, many readers outside of view of the city’s skyline were not won over. Wrote *Illinois Times* associate editor James Krohe, Jr., “what Mr. Erish claims as sophistication is nothing more that self-absorption.” Krohe went on to condemn the insularity of New Yorkers (quoting a friend who recently relocated to the city from Minneapolis), stating “[n]othing is more

²⁹ James P. Sterba, “City Will Try to Show U.S. It’s Jes’ Folks,” *New York Times*, July 15, 1978, 21.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

insufferable than a New Yorker who has never been anywhere else . . . [t]hey are some of the most parochial people I've ever known").³¹

The idea that New Yorkers are provincial or that they see the rest of the country in this way, was, of course, nothing new. Benjamin A. Botkin's 1954 compendium of urban folk culture and tales, *Sidewalks of America*, recognized that charges of city residents being "too 'smug,' 'provincial' and 'arrogant'" had long been commonplace as was the New Yorker's view that once you leave the city, "every town is a Bridgeport."³² This perspective was perfectly summed up by a favorite quotation cited by long-time *New Yorker* editor Brendan Gill (that he attributed to classical architecture champion Henry Hope Reed) that "anybody who is not living in New York City is camping out."³³ Yet there are also significant differences between these earlier examples of New York geographic elitism and the later conception of "flyover." Take for instance the map by Daniel K. Wallingford of Woodstock New York titled "A New Yorker's Idea of the United States of America" and apparently produced in or shortly after 1939 (since the World's Fair's Perisphere and Trylon are featured prominently) [Image 7]. Obviously intended as a droll commentary on New Yorkers' oversized sense of self importance, the map portrays New York city and state as nearly a quarter of the American landmass with "Lower New York Harbor" reaching down to Florida, while everything west of the Hudson is a jumble of compressed and out of place states, rivers and lakes. He also includes "typical" statements he overheard while conducting his "patient research" such as "So you are moving to Indianapolis; you must let me give you a letter to my niece in Minneapolis." Despite emphasizing the clear idea that most New Yorker's had only the foggiest ideas about the rest of the country, however,

³¹ James Krohe, Jr., "True or False: There's Something West of the Hudson," *New York Times*, Nov. 25, 1978, 23.

³² Botkin, *Sidewalks of America*, 481.

³³ Interview with Brendan Gill, undated, *City Arts Uncut* [<http://www.thirteen.org/cityarts3/show8/uncutp.html>]

Wallingford's map nonetheless does indicate nearly all of the then 48 states, numerous major cities and even the Great Lakes and major rivers (although he does show no less than five rivers marked "Swanee River").³⁴ Though the idea of New York city residents' insularity and egotism was clearly well established by the eve of World War II, therefore, the vision of the utter irrelevancy of the continental interior was not.

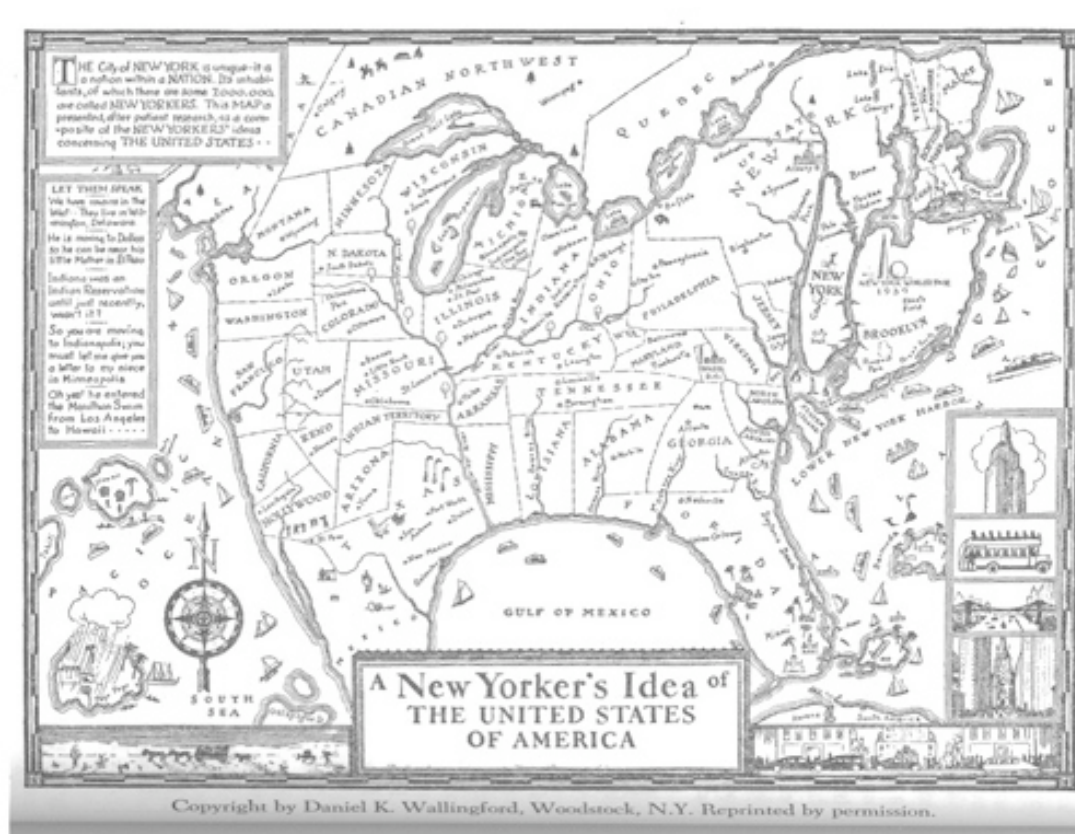


Image 7

Perhaps the quintessential commentary on such New York self-absorption and one that moved a significant step closer to this idea is Saul Steinberg's famous *New Yorker* magazine cover of March 29, 1976 (tellingly produced both in the middle of the city's crisis years and the nation's bicentennial) [Image 8]. Titled "View of the World from 9th Avenue," it portrays a

³⁴ Daniel K. Wallingford, "A New Yorker's Idea of the United States of America," reprinted in *Sidewalks of America*, 22.

rapidly receding landscape west of the Hudson, with “Jersey” forming a thin band, the rest of the United States compressed into a nondescript rectangle broken up only by a few fantastical landforms and a handful of city and state names (Chicago, Kansas City, Utah, Los Angeles), and the Pacific and lands beyond vanishing into the far distance. The Saul Steinberg Foundation later described it accurately as “not real space but the mental geography of Manhattanites.”³⁵ This

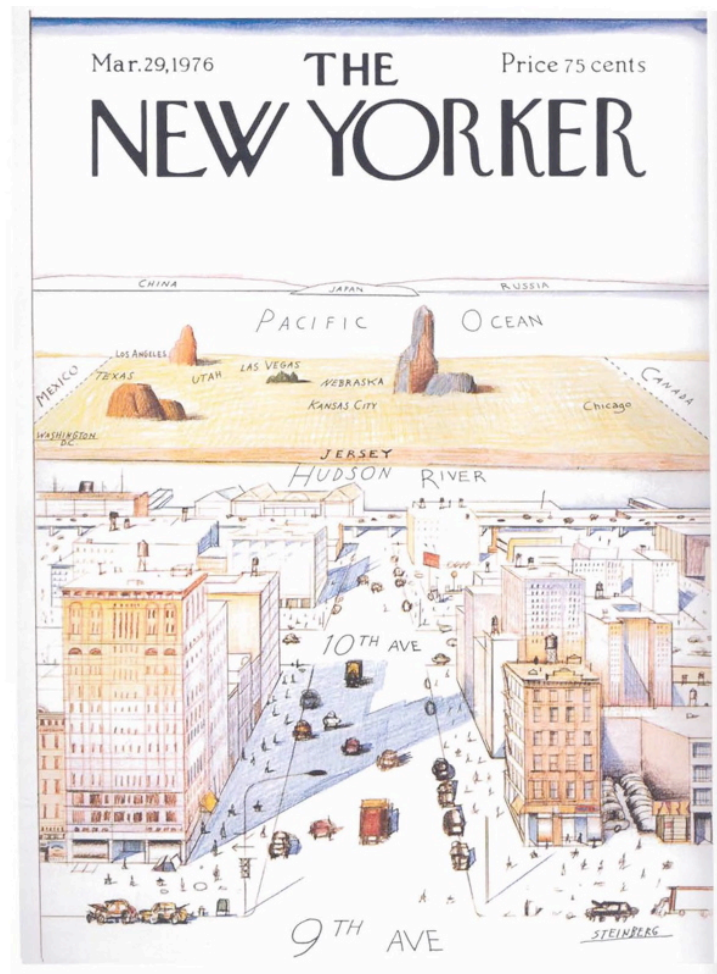


Image 8

image soon took on iconic status, reproduced on everything from posters to coffee mugs (and adopted by cities around the world from Rome to Durango) and came to be seen by many as an

³⁵ “Saul Steinberg- Life and Work”, The Saul Steinberg Foundation [www.saulsteinbergfoundation.org/life_work.html]

accurate portrait of the average New Yorker's vision.³⁶ In his 1978 editorial cited above, James Krohe Jr. writes that most Midwesterners he knew took this cover art to be "a wry comment on the traditional insularity of the island-bound New Yorker" but that others wondered if New Yorkers "didn't hang the thing on their walls, for the same reason some people hang the maps that come in National Geographic."³⁷ No firm answer about how the majority of New Yorkers interpreted the work exists, of course, but I do recall that several college friends from New York proudly displayed the poster version in their dorm, perhaps as a sign of the pride they took in such a New York-centric global vision. That Steinberg meant his drawing to be more a critique than a defense of New York myopia is suggested by the fact that the cityscape that makes up the entire bottom half of the image is of nondescript apartment and office buildings, not the majestic skyscrapers of midtown, and several of the cars on the street have their hoods and trunks popped open, suggesting they have broken down or been abandoned rather than simply parked. Joel Smith, the author of a recent Steinberg retrospective, concludes that Steinberg's true purpose was to illustrate that "the self-congratulation of a locale – any locale – is a mark of provinciality."³⁸ Regardless of Steinberg's exact intent, the cover and its many reproductions and imitations perfectly captured the "flyover" mentality that so many outside the city perceived, rightly or wrongly, New Yorkers (and, more broadly, coastal urbanites) to hold.

There are indeed sporadic examples in the years since of coastal commentators using the term in reports on the doings -- usually represented as quaint and curious, but occasionally characterized as unsettling or even threatening -- of "middle" Americans. For instance, *Miami Herald* reporter Bill Cosford deemed Memphis "flyover country" in a 1987 story on the tenth

³⁶ Sarah Boxer, "Saul Steinberg, Epic Doodler, Dies at 84," *New York Times*, May 13, 1999, A1. See also Joel Smith, *Steinberg at the New Yorker* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2005), 43.

³⁷ Krohe, 23.

³⁸ Smith, *Steinberg at the New Yorker*, 43.

anniversary of Elvis Presley's death and labeled the people who flocked to Graceland "flyover creatures" who deserved occasional study by "big media" in "the way Science pages do the dreaded killer bees."³⁹ Taking a far different tact, *Newsweek* the following year dubbed "'flyover country'" "a hip place to live" and presented the urban Midwest a welcome refuge for increasing numbers of "professional-class baby boomers" from "the high prices, rude neighbors and congestion on both coasts."⁴⁰ Yet as the Krohe, Belis, and Marshall editorials cited above suggest, by far the most common usage of "flyover" was and is by Midwesterners, but not always in the same way or for the same purposes. One subset of the use of the term is in articles and editorials defending the cultural offerings of a particular Midwestern metropolis against perceived snubs by "coastal snobs" as in an article in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* celebrating the "cultural sophistication" of the Twin Cities (that the writer boasted was an area refined enough that it could support *two* classical music groups). Articles in papers from Kansas City, St. Louis, and Dayton all took a similar stance.⁴¹

A second common theme was to use the trope of "heartland" to challenge the perceived affront of being deemed "flyover country." In such writings, "heartland" is shorthand not just for a geographic or economic space (such as "the Middle West" or "the breadbasket") but for the supposed better quality of life and values of the Midwest compared to the Northeastern corridor and California's megalopolises. David Chartrand's book of personal reflections, *A View from the Heartland – Everyday Life in America*, for instance, makes this contrast explicit, beginning by describing how he makes a habit of proudly announcing to fellow bi-coastal airline passengers flying over the region that he lives "down there." Telling his readers that the usual reply to his

³⁹ Bill Cosford, "Media, Fans: Let's Let Elvis Rest in Peace," *Miami Herald*, August 23, 1987, 1K.

⁴⁰ Patricia King, "The Heartland is Hot: 'Flyover country' becomes a hip place to live," *Newsweek*, December 19, 1988, 39.

⁴¹ "Can Twin Cities Support Two Classical Groups? The Answer is definitely 'yes,'" *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, June 24, 2005, B8.

statement is ““why would anyone live there”” and acknowledging that the Midwest “doesn’t look like much from an airplane window” he then explains that what’s being missed in such a cavalier dismissal are people like his parents “who believe that families are more important than careers, that love is more important than money . . . and that you have to work hard every single day at everything you do because it all can be taken from you in an instant.”⁴² Midwestern papers responded to the “Heartland is Hot” *Newsweek* article in a similar, if more humorous, vein. The *Akron Beacon Journal* editorialized that they had always known the Midwest was where “neighbors are nicer . . . “ and “life is a good bit slower and less hectic” but now “city slickers from the coasts” are learning “what it really means to live high on the hog.” Lori Ericson, writing in the *St Louis Post-Dispatch*, worried how the Midwest was going “to retain its cultural integrity” after it is invaded by “stress-crazed urbanites” with “monogrammed coffee grinders and dogs with designer collars.” To counter such threatening trends, she proposed a citizenship exam to test newcomers knowledge of the meaning of “farrowing,” “the Burpee Catalogue” and “what color flannel shirt goes best with a Pioneer feed cap.”⁴³ Even mainstream Hollywood films of the past several decades from *Breaking Away* to *Hoosiers* to *Field of Dreams* to even the portrayal of the female sheriff in *Fargo* have promoted the thesis that the Midwest and “Flyover Country” more broadly is the place where American values of goodness, neighborliness, and personal integrity live on in contrast to the dog eat dog mentality of the urbanized coasts. The 1988 film *Rain Man* captures this idea perfectly, for it is only when high-charging Charlie Babbit is forced by his autistic savant brother’s eccentricities out of the airport and off the Interstates

⁴² David Chartrand, *A View from the Heartland – Everyday Life in America*, Guilford, CT: The Globe Pequot Press, 2004, ix-xi. A similar, if more partisan, use of “heartland” permeates conservative talk-show host Glenn Beck’s *The real America: messages from the Heart and the Heartland* (New York: Pocket Books, 2003).

⁴³ “Now, the Midwest is Hot,” *Akron Beacon Journal*, December 27, 1988, A4; Lori Ericson, “Save us from Coastal Invaders – Midwestern borders threatened by sanity-seeking sushi crowd,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, February 24, 1989, 3B.

and then has to cross the country on “blue highways” from Cincinnati to Los Angeles that he is able to connect with his brother Raymond and with real human emotion.

Yet the intensity of the reaction of Midwesterners to perceived snubs of their region as “flyover country” reflects not only cultural pride and personal resentment but also a palpable sense of inferiority and self-doubt about their place and that of their region in the broader American social and cultural order. Numerous Midwestern writers have well captured this sensibility. C.J. Hribal writes about growing up in Hortonville, Wisconsin with the “gnawing knowledge that you’re in the middle of the middle of nowhere, at least as far as the rest of the country’s concerned. Flyover country, as we’re known to the coasts. You say to someone you’re from Wisconsin and their eyes glaze over. Oh yes, they say. Winter. Cheese. MOOOOOO! Repeated a few million times, that sort of gets to your self-esteem. . . .”⁴⁴ Essayist Michael Martone focuses on the psychic impact on outsiders of Midwestern “flatness” that he argues many perceive to be cultural as well as physical. “I see them starting out,” he describes, “big-hearted and romantic, from the density and the variety of the East to see just how big this country is.” But by the time they get to Sandusky, Ohio, he continues, “they have had enough, and they hunker down and drive, looking for the mountains that they know are ahead somewhere. They cannot see what is all around them now. A kind of blindness afflicts them, a pathology of the path. The flatness. . . .”⁴⁵ Nor, I would argue, are Midwesterners or others in the nation’s interior wrong in feeling looked over by the coasts. Indeed the relative paucity of examples of “flyover” in other than self-defensive writings suggests that the belief of many Midwesterners and other

⁴⁴ C.J. Hribal, “The Landfill of Memory, the Landscape of the Imagination,” in Michael Martone, ed., *Townships* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992), cited in Kent C. Ryden, “Writing the Midwest: History, Literature, and Regional Identity,” *Geographical Review* 89 (October 1999), 511.

⁴⁵ Michael Martone, “The Flatness,” in Michael Martone, ed., *A Place of Sense: Essays in Search of the Midwest* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1998), 29, cited in Ryden, “Writing the Midwest.” I am indebted to Kent Ryden’s interpretation of this passage.

“middle Americans” that “coasters,” elite or otherwise, perceive the middle of the country as “flyover” probably *overstates* how much attention many bi-coastal residents actually give to the area. To call the region “flyover” would at least mean that they were thinking about the region enough to label it. But in reality, except for cases when the news media is forced to cover the area because of natural disasters, school shootings, or the like, it is completely off the radar screen of many outside the region. It is not that they think of it as “flyover country” – they simply do not think of it at all.⁴⁶

But if coastal commentators have only used “flyover” sporadically, over the past half decade those in the nation’s interior have embraced it, redefining it in explicitly politicized ways as not only a signifier of regional pride and resentment but also as a marker of conservatism, patriotism, and advocacy of the Republican party. One can see this most explicitly on the Internet that is peppered with websites that highlight the term. A good example is the definition in “The Lexicon,” an extensive but selective dictionary on the politically libertarian “VikingPhoenix.com” website. “Flyover country,” the site explains, is “that part of the United States where peasants with pitchforks, rustics, hoi polloi and bumpkins (all terms the authors claim are used interchangeably by coastal liberals for rural folk) live.” “The boundaries of flyover country” the definition continues, “can be generally understood by the red zones in the 2000 electoral college map.” Further evincing the politicization of the term, the definition goes on to claim that “the term was introduced by political operatives in the Clinton Administration and popularized by talk radio listeners living in flyover country.”⁴⁷ The website for the property rights advocacy group The Alliance for America (“We are the *true* conservationists” they claim

⁴⁶ As wholly unscientific evidence of this fact, none of my friends on the east and west coasts who I have discussed this paper with had ever heard of the term “flyover country,” let alone thought of it as a reflection of cultural and geographic bifurcation.

⁴⁷ “Flyover country,” Definitions and Glossary, VikingPhoenix.com, [vikingphoenix.com/Internet/reference/defday.htm]

proudly) offers a similar political redefinition of the term, providing a map labeled “Fly-Over Country” of the 2004 Presidential election divided into red (Republican majority) and blue (Democrat majority) counties with red dominating the bulk of the nation’s interior [Image 9].⁴⁸ Thus, in its most recent manifestation, the term “flyover” has been reappropriated as a synonym for “red America” (those areas of the country where the majority of voting residents supported George Bush in the last two elections) and as a battle cry against what its adherents perceive to be the liberal-leaning and elite “blue” America areas of the Pacific coast and New England (or, as one blog puts it, the “Left Coast” and the “Right Coast”).⁴⁹

"Fly-Over" Country: Presidential Election 2004

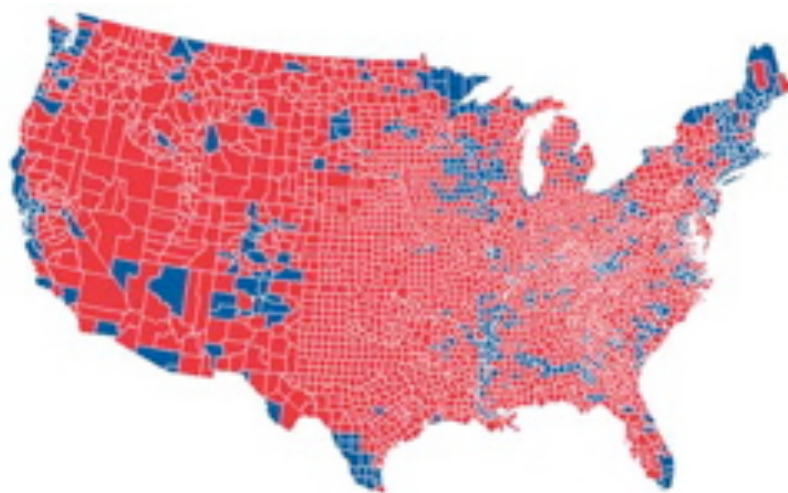


Image 9

Such connections between “flyover” and explicit political advocacy can take many forms. The website “Hollywood Hero,” a site promoting conservative voices in the entertainment business and denouncing radical activism by the “Hollywood Left,” calls on Americans in “Fly Over Country” to “take a stand” against such liberal outrages as the broadcasting of *The*

⁴⁸ ““Fly-Over Country”: Presidential Election 2004” map, The Alliance for America, [www.allianceforamerica.org/counties_won04.htm]

⁴⁹ “Flyover Country – observations on law, politics, and culture,” [<http://flyovercountry.blogspot.com>]

Reagans, the 2003 made-for-television movie that they saw as disparaging the former President.⁵⁰ Staunchly libertarian columnist Diane Alden, on the other hand, sees the place as one where people live everyday with nature rather than considering it part of “some National Geographic special.” Calling herself a “fly over country elitist snob,” she also presents the region as one of heartland values where residents “still go to church, attend PTO meetings . . . [and] make jelly for the bazarre” [*sic*] and concludes “[a]ll I know is that what is best about America still lives out here in the big wide somewhere called fly over country.” Such people and their way of life, she claims, are now “endangered species” under assault from “folks on the coasts and cities” who advocate “one size fits all Washington policies” and who “believe in ecosystems where we believe in woods.”⁵¹

Nor are conservatives the only ones who have sought to see the term and concept in strictly political terms. In an intentionally ironic editorial shortly after the 2004 presidential election, former *New Yorker* editor Tina Brown wryly noted of New Yorkers “suddenly they’re flyover country, relics from a dying tribe, seedy and unloved.”⁵² An even better example is the half coffee table book, half polemic *The Great Divide*. Chocked full of graphs, statistics, color coded maps and photographs and published on the eve of the 2004 election, the book tried to supplant the “red” and “blue” monikers by arguing that America is fundamentally and irrevocably divided between “metro” areas based in the Northeast and the Pacific Coast (and to a lesser degree the Great Lakes) and committed to “religious moderation; vibrant popular cultures; tolerance of differences of class, ethnicity, tastes, and sexual orientation” and “retro” areas

⁵⁰ Lisa Sarrach and Kevin Fobbs, “It’s Time for Americans *In Fly Over Country* To Take a Stand,” Hollywood-Hero – Hollywood Lives . . . Heartland Values, [<http://hollywood-hero.us/Hollywood-Hero-Fly%20Over%20Country%20Op-ed-11-20-03.htm>]

⁵¹ Diane Alden, “Letter from Rural America,” [<http://www.american-partisan.com/cols/alden/040500.htm>]

⁵² Tina Brown, “Those Post-Election, Pitiful Yankees, Big Apple Blues,” *Washington Post*, November 18, 2004, C1.

concentrated in the Midwest, the South, and the Rocky Mountain states and connected by a shared commitment to “religiosity, social conservatism,” extractive industry and agriculture, and “the Republican Party.”⁵³ Although the book does not employ the term “flyover country” itself, its bifurcated vision of the nation is based on just such a worldview.

I do not mean to deny that there are significant differences in voting patterns, workplace and environmental protections, and both overt and tacit social mores between much of the interior states and the coastal areas. But there are also important commonalities that are denied in the conceptualization of a neatly divided “red” and “blue” America or a nation split between “flyover” and “bicoastal.” For the most part people in “flyover” land drive the same cars in the same grinding commutes, go to the same chain restaurants, watch the same monotonous television shows and shop at the same Gap-ified stores as do those on the urbanized coasts. Two-thirds of rural residents commute to metropolitan centers for work and even more regularly shop or spend their leisure time in larger towns and cities. Because of the relatively widespread availability to the Internet and cable and satellite programming, the gap in access to the latest consumer trends and goods as well as the most recent news has diminished significantly from even a decade ago. There is even evidence that over the past decade the rural counties that makeup the bulk of “flyover country” are increasing in population and becoming more like urban and suburban areas in the process. As Kenneth M. Johnson and Calvin L. Beale argue, the newly-rural Americans “are not returning to farming, nor even in very large numbers to small towns, much as some may dream of it. They are scattering across the landscape in “farmettes,” trailer parks, houses along country roads, and even in subdivisions much like those in suburban

⁵³ John Sperling, et. al., *The Great Divide – Retro vs. Metro America* (PoliPoint Press, 2004), xvii.

America.”⁵⁴ Nor is much of rural “flyover” territory free of the same sorts of social and criminal problems that plague coastal inner cities. Indeed, many areas in rural America are plagued by above-average levels of poverty, drug and alcohol abuse and addiction, and poor health and disease.⁵⁵

Equally important, the conception of a monolithic “flyover country,” whether held by the mythic derisive “coastal elite” or by chest-thumping “middle” Americans, also distorts the wide range of people, landscapes, and cultures in this vast swath of land. Indiana is not Nebraska and Iowa City is a world apart from Cairo, Illinois. Even beyond the rich ethnic and racial diversity of cities such as Chicago, Cleveland, Louisville, Atlanta and Kansas City, non-coastal America is a culturally and economically complex place where people make their living not only on small farms or at ever-larger agribusinesses but also at car manufacturing plants, computer processing centers, and a wide array of middle class professions and service sector jobs. Recognizing this social complexity of so-called “Flyover People,” therefore, requires understanding the particularity of locale, geography and history. Film director Cameron Crowe, discussing his reason for shooting his new film *Elizabethtown* on location in Kentucky and with many regional actors, well captures the need to recognize this distinctiveness and the cost of not doing so. “[A]t the studio they will tell you that you don’t have to go all the way to Kentucky,” he explained to reporter George Thomas. “They will give you a list of places nearby that look like Kentucky. . . . but they don’t look like Kentucky and they aren’t Kentucky, and there’s nothing like the people from the region.” “[T]he whole idea [of making the film],” he continued, “was always to tell a

⁵⁴ Kenneth M. Johnson and Calvin L. Beale, “The Rural Rebound,” *Wilson Quarterly* 12 (Spring 1998):16-27, [<http://www.luc.edu/depts/sociology/johnson/TheWilsonQuarterly.html>]

⁵⁵ For brief snapshot overviews of rural America, see Karen Hamrick, editor “Rural America At A Glance, 2005,” Economic Information Bulletin No. 4 (EIB4), September 2005, Economic Research Service, United States Department of Agriculture [<http://www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/EIB4/>] and Dee Davis and Tim Marena, “A Rural Perspective,” The Center for Rural Strategies [<http://www.ruralstrategies.org/issues/perspective1.html>]

story that didn't originate in L.A. or New York. I think that hundreds of years from now they may look back at movies made during this time and wonder, 'Did anyone live in between these cities?'"⁵⁶ It may be understandable in a country as physically enormous as the United States that many, even otherwise well educated and sophisticated people, fall back on simplistic mental maps in an effort not to get lost in its vastness. But if we are to understand the nation's rich complexity and the way it continues to evolve and if we are to meet the serious social and economic problems that face us, it is essential to recognize both how inadequate the categorizations of "flyover" (and "bicoastal") are, and why they resonate so strongly with Americans "in the middle."

⁵⁶ George M. Thomas, for Knight Ridder, "Cameron Crowe weaves personal stories into films," *Bowling Green Daily News*, October 13, 2005, 3B.