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

The current installment of this fantasy is the story of “the two Americas,” the symbolic division of the country that, after the presidential election of 2000, captivated not only 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 (the networks all used
red to designate Republican victories) where people voted for George W. Bush, and those tiny little "blue" coastal areas where people lived in big cities and voted for Al Gore. On the face of it there was nothing really remarkable about these red and blue blocs, especially since in terms of the popular vote the contest was essentially a tie.

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

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

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

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

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

So when the electoral map of 2000 is compared to that of 1896—the year of the showdown between the "great commoner," William Jennings Bryan, and the voice of business, William McKinley—a remarkable inversion is indeed evident.
Ib. What's the Matter with Kansas?

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

From this one piece of evidence, the electoral map, the pundits simply veered off into authoritative-sounding cultural proclamation. Just by looking at the map, they reasoned, we could easily tell that George W. Bush was the choice of the plain people, the grassroots Americans who inhabited the place we know as the "heartland," a region of humility, guilelessness, and, above all, stout yeoman righteousness. The Democrats, on the other hand, were the party of the elite. Just by looking at the map we could see that liberals were sophisticated, wealthy, and materialistic. While the big cities blue 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.

The red-state/blue-state divide also helped conservatives perform one of their dearest rhetorical maneuvers, which we will call the late 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. While a more straightforward discussion of politics might begin by considering the economic interests that each party serves, the late libel insists that such interests are irrelevant. Instead it's the places that people live and the things that they drink, eat, and drive that are the critical factors, the clues that bring us to the truth. In particular, the things that liberals are said to drink, eat, and drive: the Volvos, the imported cheese, and above all, the lattes.

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

*The state of Vermont is a favorite target of the latte libel. In his best-selling Bobos in Paradise, David Brooks ridicules the city of Burlington in that state as the prototypical "late town," a city where "Beverly Hills income levels" meet a Scandinavian-style social consciousness. In a TV commercial aired in early 2004 by the conservative Club for Growth, onetime Democratic presidential candidate Howard Dean, the former governor of Vermont, is reviled by two supposedly average people who advise him to "take his tax-hiking, government-expanding, latte-drinking, sushi-eating, Volvo-driving, New York Times-reading, body-piercing, Hollywood-loving, left-wing freak show back to Vermont, where it belongs."
Red America, these stories typically imply, is a mysterious place whose thoughts and values are essentially foreign to society’s masters. Like the “Other America” of the sixties or the “Forgotten Men” of the thirties, its vast stretches are tragically ignored by the dominant class—that is, the people who write the sitcoms and screenplays and the stories in glossy magazines, all of whom, according to the conservative commentator Michael Barone, simply “can’t imagine living in such places.” Which is particularly unfair of them, impudent even, because Red America is in fact the real America, the part of the country where reside, as a column in the Canadian National Post put it, “the original values of America’s founding.”

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

We in the coastal metro Blue areas read more books and attend more plays than the people in the Red heartland. We’re more sophisticated and cosmopolitan—just ask us about our alumni trips to China or Provence, or our interest in Buddhism. But don’t ask us, please, what life in Red America is like. We don’t know. We don’t know who Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins are. . . . We don’t know what Reba and Travis are. . . . 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 soybeans 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 he gets it wrong: by pointing out that the top three soybean producers—Illinois, Iowa, and Minnesota—were in fact blue states; or by listing the many military bases located on the coasts; or by noting that when it came time to build a NASCAR track in Kansas, the county that won the honor was one of only two in the state that went for Gore. Average per capita income in that same lonely blue county, I might as well add, is $16,000, which places it well below Kansas and national averages, and far below what would be required for the putting on of elitist or cosmopolitan airs of any kind.

It’s pretty much a waste of time, however, to catalog 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. Yet, as with all successful propaganda, the narrative does contain a grain of truth: we all know that there are many aspects of American life that are off the culture industry’s radar; that vast reaches of the country have gone from being liberal if not radical to being stoutly conservative; and that there is a small segment of the “cosmopolitan” upper middle class that considers itself socially enlightened, that knows nothing of the fine points of hayseediana, that likes lattes, and that opted for Gore.

But the “two nations” commentators showed no interest in examining the mysterious inversion of American politics in any
systematic way. Their aim was simply to bolster the stereotypes using whatever tools were at hand: to cast the Democrats as the party of a wealthy, pampered, arrogant elite that lives as far as it can from real Americans; and to represent Republicanism as the faith of the hardworking common people of the heartland, an expression of their unpretentious, all-American ways just like country music and NASCAR. At this pursuit they largely succeeded. By 2003 the conservative claim to the Midwest was so uncontested that Fox News launched a talk show dealing in culture-war outrage that was called, simply, Heartland.

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

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

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

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

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

And so on.

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

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 real America. He actually finds a poll in which 43 percent of liberals confess that they "like to show off," which he then tops with another poll in which 75 percent of liberals describe themselves as "intellectuals." Such admissions, in this company, are tantamount to calling yourself a mind-twisting communist.

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

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

But don't worry; a red-stater is courteous, kind, cheerful. They may be religious, but they aren't at all pushy about it. The people David Brooks encountered in that one county in Pennsylvania declined to discuss abortion with him, from which he concludes that "potentially controversial subjects are often played down" throughout Red America. Even the preachers he met there are careful to respect the views of others. These fine 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 blue land waited only a short time after 9/11 to commence blaming America for the tragedy, the story goes, sturdy red-staters stepped forward unhesitatingly to serve their country one more time. For Blake Hurst of Missouri, this special relationship with the military is both a matter of pride ("Red America is never redder than on our bloodiest battlefields") and a grievance—you know, the usual one, the one you saw in Rambo, the one where all the cowards of the coasts stab the men of red land in the back during the Vietnam War.

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

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

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

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

The "two nations" story that appeared in American Handgunner, which tells us how the 9/11 terrorist attack brought home the truth to one "self-described 'Blue' American in New York City." As she stood "alongside other New York 'intellectuals'" watching the construction workers and firefighters do their job, she realized that those tired men and women passing in trucks make it all happen. They are the ones who do the actual work of running the country. They cause the electricity to flow, the schools to be built, the criminals to be arrested and society to run seamlessly. She realized, with a blazingly bright lightbulb of awareness flashing in her mind, she didn't know how to change a tire, grow tomatoes, or where electricity comes from.

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

Blake Hurst, the Missouri farmer who is so proud of being humble, also chimes in on this theme, pointing out in The American Enterprise that "the work we [red-staters] do can be measured in bushels, pounds, shingles nailed, and bricks laid, rather than in the fussy judgments that make up office employee reviews." But there's something fishy about Hurst's claim to the mantle of workerist righteousness, something beyond the immediate fishiness of a magazine ordinarily given to assailing unions and saluting the Dow now printing such a fervent celebration of blue-collar life. Just being familiar with the physical world shouldn't automatically make you a member of the beaten-down producer class any more than does living in a state that voted for George W. Bush. Indeed, elsewhere Hurst describes himself not as a simple farmer but as the co-owner of a family business overseeing the labor of a number of employees, employees to whom,
he confides, he and his family “don’t pay high wages.” Hurst has even written an essay on that timeless lament of the boss, the unbelievable laziness of workers today. This man may live in the sticks, but he is about as much a blue-collar toiler as is Al Gore himself.

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

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

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, sucking down lattes, driving ostentatious European cars, and trying to reform the world, the humble people of the red states go about their unpretentious business, eating down-home foods, vacationing in the Ozarks, whistling while they work, feeling comfortable about who they are, and knowing they are secure under the watch of George W. Bush, a man they love as one of their own.
of a depopulated world, then, is this theme, they're powerless to
work their magic either through the use of weapons or through the
world and color TVs: mass media, take-magnifying cameras. The world
and spirit keep house, the families of appliance salesmen, into
dir"—my dad remembered, now, a place where the ranch homes
country, and the subdivisions were checkerboarded with joy.

In 1965, the year I was born, my family still lived in the blue-
collar Kansas City suburb of Shawnee, a modern settlement on
of the World
In the Garden
Epilogue
Shawnee today has the feel of a place whose energy has been spent, whose time has come and gone, like one of those dead towns built in the western half of the state in some burst of inexplicable optimism in the 1880s. When I visit the old neighborhood now, I am the only pedestrian on the streets, a spectacle so odd that people slow their cars down in order to get a better look at me. The elementary school my brother attended in the crew-cut days—B-47s roaring overhead as he capered on the jungle gym—is in the process of closing for good. There is not a trace of the armies of kids that used to chase one another up and down the blocks. Nor would those armies of kids be welcome in this new Shawnee, with its occasional heaps of rusting junk and its snarling rottweilers and its testy “No Trespassing” signs. The Lutheran church down the street that impressed five-year-old me with its daring sixties modernism looks today like a home-built A-frame, laughably shoddy, forlorn in a treeless lawn of knee-high weeds, its paint peeling. The shopping mall they were constructing the summer my family moved to Mission Hills has now passed through all the stages of retail life and is sinking irreversibly into blight, its storefronts empty except for a pool hall, a karate studio, and the obligatory “antique” store.

The implacable ideological bitterness that one finds throughout the state has here achieved a sort of saturation. The eastern part of Shawnee is still a blue-collar suburb, but after three decades of deunionization and stagnant wage growth, blue-collar suburbs like this one look and act very differently than before. Shawnee today burns hotter than nearly any place in the state to defund public education, to stamp out stem-cell research, to roll back taxes, and to abase itself before the throne of big business. The suburb is famous for having sent the most determined of the anti-evolutionists to the State Board of Education and for having chosen the most conservative of all Kansas state legislators, a woman who uses her hard-knock life story to dress up her constant demands that the state do whatever is necessary to lessen burdens on corporate enterprise. The offices of Kansans for Life, Tim Golba’s old group, occupy a storefront in that dying mall, and the headquarters of the Phill Kline campaign are here too, in a glorified Quonset hut squatting on a weed-covered lot three blocks from the former Frank residence.

A while back the Wall Street Journal ran an essay about a place “where hatred trumps bread,” where a manipulative ruling class has for decades exploited an impoverished people while simultaneously fostering in them a culture of victimization that steers this people’s fury back persistently toward a shadowy, cosmopolitan Other. In this tragic land unassuageable cultural grievances are elevated inexplicably over solid material ones, and basic economic self-interest is eclipsed by juicy myths of national authenticity and righteousness wronged.

The essay was supposed to be a description of the Arab states in their conflict with Israel, but when I read it I thought immediately of dear old Kansas and the role that locales like Shawnee play in conservatism’s populist myth. Conservatism’s base constituent, the business community, is the party that has gained the most from the trends that have done such harm out here. But conservatism’s house intellectuals counter this by offering an irresistible alternative way of framing our victimhood. They invite us to take our place among a humble middle-American folk, virtuous and yet suffering under the rule of a snobbish elite who press their alien philosophy down on the heartland.

Yes, the Cons will acknowledge, things have gotten materially worse on the farms and in the small towns, but that’s just business, they tell us. That is just the forces of nature doing their thing. Politics is something different: Politics is about blasphemous art and crazy lawsuits filed by out-of-control trial lawyers.
What's the Matter with Kansas?

In the Garden of the World

and smart-talking pop stars running down America. Politics is when the people in the small towns look around at what Wal-Mart and ConAgra have wrought and decide to enlist in the crusade against Charles Darwin.

But the backlash offers more than this ready-made class identity. It also gives people a general way of understanding the buzzing mass-cultural world we inhabit. Consider, for example, the stereotype of liberals that comes up so often in the backlash oeuvre: arrogant, rich, tasteful, fashionable, and all-powerful. In my real-world experience liberals are nothing of the kind. They are an assortment of complainers—for the most part impoverished complainers—who wield about as much influence over American politics as the cashier at Home Depot does over the company's business strategy. This is not a secret, either; read any issue of The Nation or In These Times or the magazine sent to members of the United Steelworkers, and you figure out pretty quickly that liberals don't speak for the powerful or the wealthy.

But when you flip through People magazine, you come away with a very different impression of what liberals are like. Here you read about movie stars who go to charity balls for causes like animal rights and the "underprivileged." Singers who were big in the seventies express their concern with neatly folded ribbons for this set of victims or that. Minor TV personalities instruct the world to stop saying mean things about the overweight or the handicapped. And beautiful people of every description don expensive transgressive fashions, buy expensive transgressive art, eat at expensive transgressive restaurants, and get edgy with an expensive punk sensibility or an expensive earth-friendly look.

Here liberalism is a matter of shallow appearances, of fatuous self-righteousness; it is arrogant and condescending, a politics in which the beautiful and the wellborn tell the unwashed and the beaten-down and the funny-looking how they ought to behave, how they should stop being racist or homophobic, how they should be better people. In an America where the chief sources of one's ideas about life's possibilities are TV and the movies, it's not hard to be convinced that we inhabit a liberal-dominated world: feminist cartoons for ten-year-olds are followed by commercials for nonconformist deodorants; entire families of movies are organized around some transcendent dick joke; even shows for toddlers have theme songs about keeping it real.

Like any industry, though, the culture business exists primarily to advance its own fortunes, not those of the Democratic Party. Winning an audience of teenagers, for example, is the goal that has made the dick joke into a sort of gold standard, not winning elections for liberals. Encouraging demographic self-recognition and self-expression through products is, similarly, the bread and butter not of leftist ideology but of consumerism. These things are part of the culture industry's very DNA. They are as subject to change by an offended American electorate as is the occupant of the Danish throne.

Never understanding this is a source of strength for the backlash. Its leaders rage against the liberalism of Hollywood. Its voters toss a few liberals out of office and are surprised to see that Hollywood doesn't care. They toss out more liberals and still nothing changes. They return an entire phalanx of pro-business blowhards to Washington, and still the culture industry goes on its merry way. But at least those backlash politicians that they elect are willing to do one thing differently: they stand there on the floor of the U.S. Senate and shout no to it all. And this is the critical point: in a media world where what people shout overshadows what they actually do, the backlash sometimes appears to be the only dissenter out there, the only movement that has a place for the uncool and the funny-looking and the pious, for all the stock buffoons that our mainstream culture glories in lampooning. In this sense the backlash is becoming a perpetual
alter-ego to the culture industry, a feature of American life as permanent and as strange as Hollywood itself.

Even as it rejects the broader commercial culture, though, the backlash also mimics it. Conservatism provides its followers with a parallel universe, furnished with all the same attractive pseudospiritual goods as the mainstream: authenticity, rebellion, the nobility of victimhood, even individuality. But the most important similarity between backlash and mainstream commercial culture is that both refuse to think about capitalism critically. Indeed, conservative populism's total erasure of the economic could only happen in a culture like ours where material politics have already been muted and where the economic has largely been replaced by those aforementioned pseudospiritual fulfillments. This is the basic lie of the backlash, the manipulative strategy that makes the whole senseless parade possible. In all of its rejecting and nay-saying, it resolutely refuses to consider that the assaults on its values, the insults, and the Hollywood sneers are all products of capitalism as surely as are McDonald's hamburgers and Boeing 737s.

Who is to blame for this landscape of distortion, of paranoia, and of good people led astray? I have spent much of this book enumerating the ways in which Kansas voters choose self-destructive policies, but it is just as clear to me that liberalism deserves a large part of the blame for the backlash phenomenon. Liberalism may not be the monstrous, all-powerful conspiracy that conservatives make it out to be, but its failings are clear nonetheless. Somewhere in the last four decades liberalism ceased to be relevant to huge portions of its traditional constituency, and we can say that liberalism lost places like Shawnee and Wichita with as much accuracy as we can point out that conservatism won them over.

This is due partially, I think, to the Democratic Party's more-or-less official response to its waning fortunes. The Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), the organization that produced such figures as Bill Clinton, Al Gore, Joe Lieberman, and Terry McAuliffe, has long been pushing the party to forget blue-collar voters and concentrate instead on recruiting affluent, white-collar professionals who are liberal on social issues. The larger interests that the DLC wants desperately to court are corporations, capable of generating campaign contributions far outweighing anything raised by organized labor. The way to collect the votes and—more important—the money of these coveted constituencies, "New Democrats" think, is to stand rock-solid on, say, the pro-choice position while making endless concessions on economic issues, on welfare, NAFTA, Social Security, labor law, privatization, deregulation, and the rest of it. Such Democrats explicitly rule out what they deride as "class warfare" and take great pains to emphasize their friendliness to business interests. Like the conservatives, they take economic issues off the table. As for the working-class voters who were until recently the party's very backbone, the DLC figures they will have nowhere else to go; Democrats will always be marginally better on economic issues than Republicans. Besides, what politician in this success-worshipping country really wants to be the voice of poor people? Where's the soft money in that?

This is, in drastic miniature, the criminally stupid strategy that has dominated Democratic thinking off and on ever since the "New Politics" days of the early seventies. Over the years it has enjoyed a few successes: the word yuppy, remember, was coined in 1984 to describe followers of the presidential candidate Gary Hart.1 But, as political writer E.J. Dionne has pointed out, the larger result was that both parties became "vehicles for upper-middle-class interests" and the old class-based language of the left quickly disappeared from the universe of the respectable. The Republicans, meanwhile, were industri-
ously fabricating their own class-based language of the right, and while they made their populist appeal to blue-collar voters, Democrats were giving those same voters—their traditional base—the big brush-off, ostening their representatives from positions within the party and consigning their issues, with a laugh and a sneer, to the dustbin of history. A more ruinous strategy for Democrats would have been difficult to invent. And the ruination just keeps on coming. However desperately they triangulate and accommodate, the losses keep mounting.

Curiously enough, though, Democrats of the DLC variety aren't worried. They seem to look forward to a day when their party really is what David Brooks and Ann Coulter claim it to be now: a coming-together of the rich and the self-righteous. While Republicans trick out their poisonous stereotype of the liberal elite, Democrats seem determined to live up to the libel.

Such Democrats look at a situation like present-day Kansas and rub their hands with anticipation: Just look at how Ronald Reagan's "social issues" have come back to bite his party in the ass! If only the crazy Cons push a little bit more, these Democrats think, the Republican Party will alienate the wealthy suburban Mods for good, and we will be able to step in and carry places like Mission Hills, along with all the juicy boodle that its inhabitants are capable of throwing our way.

While I enjoy watching Republicans fight one another as much as the next guy, I don't think the Kansas story really gives true liberals any cause to cheer. Maybe someday the DLC dream will come to pass, with the Democrats having moved so far to the right that they are no different than old-fashioned moderate Republicans, and maybe then the affluent will finally come over to their side en masse. But along the way the things that liberalism once stood for—equality and economic security—will have been abandoned completely. Abandoned, let us remember, at the historical moment when we need them most.

There is a lesson for liberals in the Kansas story, and it's not that they, too, might someday get invited to tea in Cupcake Land. It is, rather, an utterly and final repudiation of their historical decision to remake themselves as the other pro-business party. By all rights the people in Wichita and Shawnee and Garden City should today be flocking to the party of Roosevelt, not deserting it. Culturally speaking, however, that option is simply not available to them anymore. Democrats no longer speak to the people on the losing end of a free-market system that is becoming more brutal and more arrogant by the day.

The problem is not that Democrats are monolithically pro-choice or anti-school prayer; it's that by dropping the class language that once distinguished them sharply from Republicans they have left themselves vulnerable to cultural wedge issues like guns and abortion and the rest whose hallucinatory appeal would ordinarily be far overshadowed by material concerns. We are in an environment where Republicans talk constantly about class—in a coded way, to be sure—but where Democrats are afraid to bring it up.

Democratic political strategy simply assumes that people know where their economic interest lies and that they will act on it by instinct. There is no need for any business-bumming class-war rhetoric on the part of candidates or party spokesmen, and there is certainly no need for a liberal to actually get his hands dirty fraternizing with the disgruntled. Let them look at the record and see for themselves: Democrats are slightly more generous with Social Security benefits, slightly stricter on environmental regulations, and do less union-busting than Republicans.

The gigantic error in all this is that people don't spontaneously understand their situation in the great sweep of things. They don't just automatically know the courses of action that are open to them, the organizations they might sign up with, or the measures they should be calling for. Liberalism isn't a force
of karmic nature that pushes back when the corporate world goes too far; it is a man-made contrivance as subject to setbacks and defeats as any other. Consider our own social welfare apparatus, the system of taxes, regulations, and social insurance that is under sustained attack. Social Security, the FDA, and all the rest of it didn't spring out of the ground fully formed in response to the obvious excesses of a laissez-faire system; they were the result of decades of movement building, of bloody fights between strikers and state militias, of agitating, educating, and thankless organizing. More than forty years passed between the first glimmerings of a left-wing reform movement in the 1890s and the actual enactment of its reforms in the 1930s. In the meantime scores of the most rapacious species of robber baron went to their reward untaxed, unregulated, and unquestioned.

An even more telling demonstration of the importance of movements in framing people's perspectives can be found in the voting practices of union members. Take your average white male voter: in the 2000 election they chose George W. Bush by a considerable margin. Find white males who were union members, however, and they voted for Al Gore by a similar margin. The same difference is repeated whatever the demographic category: women, gun owners, retirees, and so on—when they are union members, their politics shift to the left. This is true even when the union members in question had little contact with union leaders. Just being in a union evidently changes the way a person looks at politics, inoculates them against the derangement of the backlash. Here values matter almost least of all, while the economy, health care, and education are of paramount concern. Union voters are, in other words, the reverse image of the Brownback conservative who cares nothing for economics but torments himself night and day with vague fears about "cultural decline."

Labor unions are on the wane today, as everyone knows, down to 9 percent of the private-sector workforce from a high-water mark of 38 percent in the fifties. Their decline goes largely unchecked by a Democratic Party anxious to demonstrate its fealty to corporate America, and unmourned by a therapeutic left that never liked those Archie Bunker types in the first place. Among the broader population, accustomed to thinking of organizations as though they were consumer products, it is simply assumed that unions are declining because nobody wants to join them anymore, the same way the public has lost its taste for the music of the Bay City Rollers. And in the offices of the union-busting specialists and the Wall Street brokers and the retail executives, the news is understood the same way aristocrats across Europe greeted the defeat of Napoleon in 1815: as a monumental victory in a war to the death.

While leftists sit around congratulating themselves on their personal virtue, the right understands the central significance of movement building, and they have taken to the task with admirable diligence. Cast your eyes over the vast and complex structure of conservative "movement culture," a phenomenon that has little left-wing counterpart anymore. There are foundations like the one operated by the Kochs in Wichita, channeling their millions into the political battle at the highest levels, subsidizing free-market economics departments and magazines and thinkers like Vernon L. Smith. Then there are the think tanks, the Institutes Hoover and American Enterprise, that send the money sluicing on into the pockets of the right-wing pundit corps, Ann Coulter, Dinesh D'Souza, and the rest, furnishing them with what they need to keep their books coming and their minds in fighting trim between media bouts. A brigade of lobbyists. A flock of magazines and newspapers. A publishing house or two. And, at the bottom, the committed grassroots organizers like Mark Gierzen and Tim Golba and Kay O'Connor, going door-to-door, organizing their neighbors, mortgaging their houses, even, to push the gospel of the backlash.
And this movement speaks to those at society’s bottom, addresses them on a daily basis. From the left they hear nothing, but from the Cons they get an explanation for it all. Even better, they get a plan for action, a scheme for world conquest with a wedge issue. And why shouldn’t they get to dream their lurid dreams of politics-as-manipulation? They’ve had it done to them enough in reality.

American conservatism depends for its continued dominance and even for its very existence on people never making certain mental connections about the world, connections that until recently were treated as obvious or self-evident everywhere on the planet. For example, the connection between mass culture, most of which conservatives hate, and laissez-faire capitalism, which they adore without reservation. Or between the small towns they profess to love and the market forces that are slowly grinding those small towns back into the red-state dust—which forces they praise in the most exalted terms.

In this onrushing parade of anti-knowledge my home state has proudly taken a place at the front. It is true that Kansas is an extreme case, and that there are still working-class areas here (Wyandotte County, parts of Topeka) that are yet to be converted to the Con gospel. But it is also true that things that begin in Kansas—the Civil War, Prohibition, Populism, Pizza Hut—have a historical tendency to go national.

Maybe Kansas, instead of being a laughingstock, is actually in the vanguard. Maybe what has happened there points the way in which all our public policy debates are heading. Maybe someday soon the political choices of Americans everywhere will be whittled down to the two factions of the Republican Party. Whether the Mods still call themselves “Republicans” then or have switched to being Democrats won’t really matter: both groups will be what Kansans call “fiscal conservatives,” which is to say “friends of business,” and the issues that motivated our parents’ Democratic Party will be permanently off the table.

Sociologists often warn against letting the nation’s distribution of wealth become too polarized, as it clearly has in the last few decades. Societies that turn their backs on equality, the professors insist, inevitably meet with a terrible comeuppance. But those sociologists were thinking of an old world in which class anger was a phenomenon of the left. They weren’t reckoning with Kansas, with the world we are becoming.

Behold the political alignment that Kansas is pioneering for us all. The corporate world—for reasons having a great deal to do with its corporateness—blanks the nation with a cultural style designed to offend and to pretend-subvert: sassy teens in Skechers flout the Man; bigoted churchgoing moms don’t tolerate their daughters’ cool liberated friends; hipsters dressed in T-shirts reading “FCUK” snicker at the suits who just don’t get it. It’s meant to be offensive, and Kansas is duly offended. The state watches impotently as its culture, beamed in from the coasts, becomes coarser and more offensive by the year. Kansas aches for revenge. Kansas gloats when celebrities say stupid things; it cheers when movie stars go to jail. And when two female rock stars exchange a lascivious kiss on national TV, Kansas goes haywire. Kansas screams for the heads of the liberal elite. Kansas comes running to the polling place. And Kansas cuts those rock stars’ taxes.

As a social system, the backlash works. The two adversaries feed off of each other in a kind of inverted symbiosis: one mocks the other, and the other heaps even more power on the one. This arrangement should be the envy of every ruling class in the world. Not only can it be pushed much, much further, but it is fairly certain that it will be so pushed. All the incentives point that way, as do the never-examined cultural requirements of...
modern capitalism. Why shouldn’t our culture just get worse and worse, if making it worse will only cause the people who worsen it to grow wealthier and wealthier?

Should you ever happen to take the tour of Kansas City, Kansas, that is prescribed by the 1939 WPA guide, you will notice a peculiar thing: many of the features it highlights are no longer there. You will find no trace of the tower billed as the tallest in the city. Or the “elaborate Italian Renaissance architecture” of the public library. Or the city’s many meatpacking plants. Or even the “panoramic view” of the bend in the Missouri where Lewis and Clark landed: the spot where the visitor was supposed to stand has been leveled by the confused, coiling ramps of an interstate highway.

This disfigured landscape is a large part of my father’s Kansas City: From a childhood spent riding the now vanished streetcars, he knows where each once-grand avenue in the old metropolis will take you, what businesses used to occupy each abandoned building, what each erased neighborhood was called and precisely where it stood. He remembers the big bands playing at the now demolished Pla-Mor ballroom, and the proud newspaper pictures of the Wichita machinists pasting dollar bills on their thousandth B-29, and the packinghouse workers streaming on foot across the now disused James Street Bridge, a form of transportation as inconceivable here today as are the urban neighborhoods in which those workers once lived.

As you cast your eyes back over this vanished Midwest, this landscape of lost brotherhood and forgotten pride, you can’t help but wonder how much farther it’s all going to go. How many of those old, warm associations are we willing to dissolve? How much more of the “garden of the world” will we abandon to sterility and decay?

My guess is, quite a bit. The fever-dream of martyrdom that Kansas follows today has every bit as much power as John Brown’s dream of justice and human fraternity. And even if the state must sacrifice it all—its cities and its industry, its farms and its small towns, all its thoughts and all its doings—the brilliance of the mirage will not fade. Kansas is ready to lead us singing into the apocalypse. It invites us all to join in, to lay down our lives so that others might cash out at the top; to renounce forever our middle-American prosperity in pursuit of a crimson fantasy of middle-American righteousness.