

What's the Matter with
KANSAS?

How Conservatives Won the Heart of America



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Chapter One

The Two Nations

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And so on.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

talking truth-place where people are unaffected, genuine, and attuned to the rhythms of the universe. "I loved Kansas City!" Ann Coulter exclaimed to an interviewer in New York. "It's like my favorite place in the world. Oh, I think it is so great out there. Well, that's America. It's the opposite of this town. They're Americans, they're so great, they're rooting for America. I mean, there's so much common sense!"¹

Coulter is embracing a literary myth of long standing when she enthuses this way. Like Peoria or Muncie, Kansas figures in literature and film as a stand-in for the nation as a whole, the distilled essence of who we are. "The Kansan," wrote John Gunther in 1947, is "the most average of all Americans, a kind of common denominator for the entire continent."² Kansas is "Midway, USA"; it's the setting for countless Depression-era documentary photographs; it's the home of the bright boy in the mailroom who wants to be a player on Wall Street. It's where Dorothy wants to return. It's where Superman grows up. It's where Bonnie and Clyde steal a car and Elmer Gantry studies the Bible and Russian ICBMs destroy everything and the overchurched antihero of *American Tragedy* learns the sinful ways of the world.

The state has an undeniable instinct for the average in real life, too. It is anti-exotic, familiar even if you've never been there. As a tourist destination, Kansas ranks dead last among the states³ but it remains a popular proving ground for test marketers of every kind. It has been a prolific birthplace of chain restaurants—Pizza Hut, White Castle, and Applebees, to name a few⁴—and it supplies the nation with anchormen, comedians, and actors of wholesome visage and accent inoffensive. Kansas City* is the home of Hallmark Cards and the nation's very first

*Kansas City proper is in Missouri, but its metropolitan area sprawls across the state line, incorporating the much smaller Kansas City, Kansas, and the

Chapter Two

Deep in the Heart of Redness

As long as America loves authenticity, my home state of Kansas is going to be symbolically preeminent. Whatever the standard for measuring salt-of-the-earthness happens to be at the moment—the WPA social realism of the thirties or the red-state theories of today's conservatives—Kansas is going to rank high. It may not do too well by other measurements, but in the quest for symbols of down-home, stand-pat, plainspoken, unvarnished, bedrock American goodness Kansas has everyone else beat. If it's 100 percent Americanism we're looking for, Kansas delivers 110 percent. If it's the down-to-earth stoicism of Nixon-voting Middle Americans that's being celebrated, somebody will point out that Kansas is the most middling of all possible American places, the exact center of the continental United States, in fact. The vortex of the nation, in Allen Ginsberg's phrase. Kansas is deepest Reagan country, the heart of the heartland, the roots of the grass, the reddest of red states.

Kansas is what New York City is not: a guileless, straight-

suburban shopping center. Thanks to its unerring sense for the middle, the state is a politician producer of the first rank, a reliable wellspring of down-home statesmen.⁵

Its averageness has also made Kansas a symbol of squareness in the vast world of commodified dissent, the place that actors announce they're "not in anymore" when they chew an especially minty kind of gum or walk into a room where there's a lot of people with xtreme hairdos. Recall the late-eighties T-shirts that sneered, "New York—It Ain't Kansas." Or think back to those teen-rebellion movies in which the stern Kansas elders forbade dancing and all the bored farm kids long to escape to Los Angeles, where they can be themselves and adopt the lifestyle of their choice.

In politics, however, where Americans worship at the shrine of the unaffected common man, averageness allows Kansans to present themselves as something of an aristocracy. Regardless of the social position they actually enjoy, they are all to the farm-house born. Even bankers and oilmen, if they come from Kansas, carry with them the coveted authenticity of the real American: they speak automatically with the vox populi, and they strut upon the national stage with all the virtuous self-assurance that once belonged to the horny-handed sons of toil. Thus Senator Sam Brownback, a member of one of the wealthiest families in the state and a stalwart friend of the CEO class, refers to himself on the floor of Congress as a "farmboy from Parker, Kansas." Thus Bob Dole, that consummate Washington insider, opened his 1996 presidential campaign by complaining that "our leaders have grown too isolated from places like Topeka—embarrassed by the values here."

But nice warm averageness has not always been the framing

affluent suburbs of Johnson County, Kansas. Today about a third of the metro area's population lives in Kansas.

myth here. A century ago the favorite stereotype of Kansas was not the land of normality but the freak state.⁶ The place crawled with religious fanatics, crackpot demagogues, and alarming hybrids of the two, such as the murderous abolitionist John Brown, who is generally regarded as the state's patron saint, and the rabid prohibitionist Carry A. Nation, who expressed her distaste for liquor by smashing saloons with a hatchet. Kansas was a violent and a radical and maybe even a crazy place both by nature and by the circumstances of its founding. The state was initially settled by eastern abolitionists and free-soilers who came there to block Missourians from moving westward—in other words, to contain the "slave power" by armed force; before long the unique savagery of the border war they fought put Kansas in headlines around the world. Dodge City and Abilene, famed for picturesque cowboy homicides, are found there as well, as are a good proportion of the nation's tornadoes and, in the twentieth century, its dust storms, which obliterated farms and carried the topsoil of the entire region off into the wild blue yonder. Early accounts of the state even tell of settlers driven insane by the constant howling of the wind.

Politically, Kansas is what the marketing boys call an "early adopter," a state where the various ideological nostrums of the day—from Free Love to Prohibition, utopian communism to the John Birch Society—were embraced quickly and ardently. In the thirties the state almost elected as its governor a beloved radio doctor who claimed to restore virility by transplanting goat testicles into humans.

But its periodic bouts of leftism were what really branded Kansas with the mark of the freak. Every part of the country in the nineteenth century had labor upheavals and protosocialist reform movements, of course. In Kansas, though, the radicals kept coming out on top. It was as though the blank landscape prompted dreams of a blank-slate society, a place where institutions might

be remade as the human mind saw fit. Maps of the state from the 1880s show a hamlet (since vanished) called Radical City; in nearby Crawford County the town of Girard was home to the *Appeal to Reason*, a socialist newspaper whose circulation was in the hundreds of thousands. In that same town, in 1908, Eugene Debs gave a fiery speech accepting the Socialist Party's nomination for president; in 1912 Debs actually carried Crawford County, one of four he won nationwide. (All were in the Midwest.) In 1910 Theodore Roosevelt signaled his own lurch to the left by traveling to Kansas and giving an inflammatory address in Osawatimie, the onetime home of John Brown.⁷

The most famous freak-out of them all was Populism, the first of the great American leftist movements.* Populism tore through other states as well—wailing all across Texas, the South, and the West in the 1890s—but Kansas was the place that really distinguished itself by its enthusiasm. Driven to the brink of ruin by years of bad prices, debt, and deflation, the state's farmers came together in huge meetings where homegrown troublemakers like Mary Elizabeth Lease exhorted them to "raise less corn and more hell." The radicalized farmers marched through the small towns in day-long parades, raging against what they called the "money power." And despite all the clamor, they still managed to take the state's traditional Republican masters utterly by surprise in 1890, sweeping the small-town slickers out of office and ending the careers of many a career politician. In the decade that followed they elected Populist governors, Populist senators, Populist congressmen, Populist supreme court justices, Populist

*Spelled with an uppercase *P*, *Populism* refers to the specific movement associated with the Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party in the late nineteenth century. Spelled with a lowercase *p*, *populism* denotes a more general political style that emphasizes class antagonism and the nobility of the common man.

city councils, and probably Populist dogcatchers, too; men of strong ideas, curious nicknames, and a colorful patois.

The Pops' demands don't look all that crazy today: they wanted various farm programs, state ownership of railroads, a graduated income tax to pay for it all, and a silver or even a paper currency. At the time, however, they were damned by the respectable for their radicalism. *New York Times* writers did not, for example, find in them the very embodiment of untentious "red-state" Americanness. On the contrary; they were reviled by such newspapers for their bumpkin assault on free-market orthodoxy. The most vicious pummeling, though, came from one of their own: William Allen White, the Emporia editor later renowned as the voice of small-town America, who savaged the Populists in an 1896 essay titled "What's the Matter with Kansas?" The piece is a classic of political clock-cleaning. Mounting the platform of Republican respectability, White, a gifted lyricist of business ambition, blamed the Kansas radicals for ruining the state's economy with their cynical attitudes and heretical economics.

Oh, this is a state to be proud of! We are a people who can hold up our heads! What we need is not more money, but less capital, fewer white shirts and brains, fewer men with business judgment, and more of those fellows who boast that they are "just ordinary clodhoppers, but they know more in a minute about finance than John Sherman"; we need more men . . . who hate prosperity, and who think, because a man believes in national honor, he is a tool of Wall Street.⁸

The essay was picked up by the McKinley campaign and reprinted in vast numbers for use against William Jennings Bryan. It made White an instant Republican superstar.

Other observers saw in the movement's giant meetings and plainspoken style the markings of a "religious crusade." Populism was, as one Kansan put it, a "pentecost of politics in which a tongue of flame set upon every man, and each spake as the spirit gave him utterance."⁹ This is not far distant from how the Populists saw their movement: as a sort of revelation, a moment when an entire generation of "Kansas fools" figured out that they'd been lied to all their lives. Whether it was Republicans or Democrats in charge, they believed, mainstream politics were a "sham battle" distracting the nation from its real problem—corporate capitalism.

One of Populism's first electoral victims was the then-famous U.S. senator John J. Ingalls, whom the state legislature tossed out amid the deluge of 1890 to make way for a man whose beard dangled all the way to his waist. Stunned by his misfortune, Ingalls handed down a classic denunciation of crazy Kansas.

For a generation, Kansas has been the testing-ground for every experiment in morals, politics, and social life. Doubt of all existing institutions has been respectable.

Nothing has been venerable or revered merely because it exists or has endured. Prohibition, female suffrage, fiat money, free silver, every incoherent and fantastic dream of social improvement and reform, every economic delusion that has bewildered the foggy brains of fanatics, every political fallacy nurtured by misfortune, poverty and failure, rejected elsewhere, has here found tolerance and advocacy.¹⁰

Today the two myths are one. Kansas may be the land of averageness, but it is a freaky, militant, outraged averageness. Kansas today is a burned-over district of conservatism where the backlash propaganda has woven itself into the fabric of everyday

life. People in suburban Kansas City vituperate against the sinful cosmopolitan elite of New York and Washington, D.C.; people in rural Kansas vituperate against the sinful cosmopolitan elite of Topeka and suburban Kansas City. Survivalist supply shops sprout in neighborhood strip-malls. People send Christmas cards urging their friends to look on the bright side of Islamic terrorism, since the Rapture is now clearly at hand.

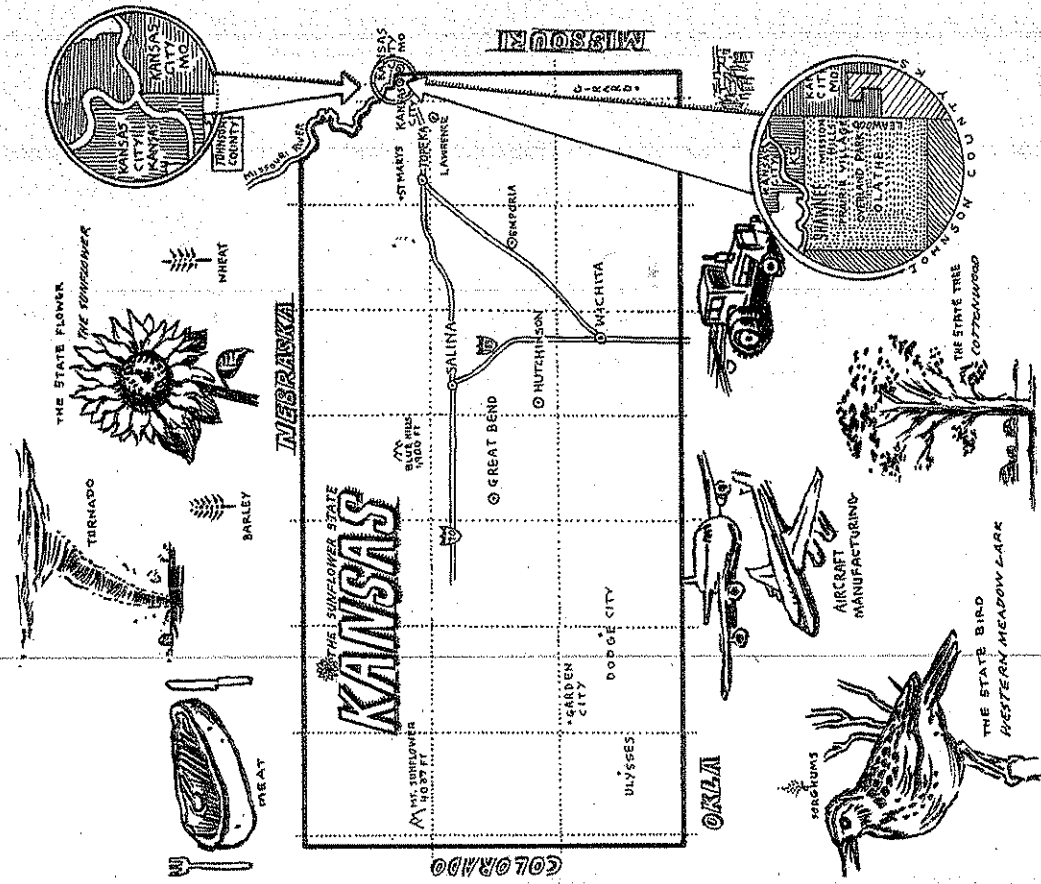
Under the state's simple blue flag are gathered today some of the most flamboyant cranks, conspiracists, and calamity howlers the Republic has ever seen. The Kansas school board draws the guffaws of the world for purging state science standards of references to evolution. Cities large and small across the state still hold out against water fluoridation, while one tiny hamlet takes the additional step of requiring firearms in every home. A prominent female politician expresses public doubts about the wisdom of women's suffrage, while another pol proposes that the state sell off the Kansas Turnpike in order to solve its budget crisis. Impoverished inhabitants of the state's most scenic area fight with fanatical determination to prevent a national park from opening up in their neighborhood, while the rails-to-trails program, regarded everywhere else in the union as a harmless scheme for family fun, is reviled in Kansas as an infernal design on the rights of property owners. Operation Rescue selects Wichita as the stage for its great offensive against abortion, calling down thirty thousand testifying fundamentalists on the city, witnessing and blocking traffic and chaining themselves to fences. A preacher from Topeka travels the nation advising Americans to love God's holy hate, showing up wherever a gay person has been in the news to announce that "God Hates Fags." Survivalists and secessionists dream of backyard confederacies out on the lone prairie; schismatic Catholics declare the pope himself to be insufficiently Catholic; Posse Comitatus hold imaginary legal proceedings, sternly prosecuting state officials

for participating in actual legal proceedings; and homegrown terrorists swap conspiracy theories at a house in Dickinson County before screaming off to strike a blow against big government in Oklahoma City.

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

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

Let us begin our survey of the state with the Kansans who suffer no derangement, the people who know precisely where



their interests lie and who go directly about getting what they want. In 2003, as it happens, the tastes, habits, and deeds of this species of Kansan came under intense media scrutiny, thanks to three local corporate scandals. Just as the *affaires* Enron and WorldCom were enlightening the nation about the mischief made by its CEO class, so three similar corporate disasters, on a slightly smaller scale, were teaching Kansans the same lessons about their own, homegrown elites—and, incidentally, about the true nature of the economic climate that conservatism has created. Each of the three cases, like the larger scandals of Enron and WorldCom, involved a quasi-public utility whose leadership had taken long pulls from the bubbling bong of New Economy theory. At each one the bosses, always heralded as geniuses, had invented elaborate plans for freeing themselves from the humdrum of public service and setting out to mulct the world—and in each case these plans collapsed for all the usual, predictable reasons, while workers and customers screamed and Mom and Pop Shareholder discovered they weren't going to retire in Hawaii after all.

In the windblown city of Topeka, the tale concerns the state's largest power company, an outfit that once bore the humble name Western Resources. Humility, though, was not to be Western's destiny. When this outfit looked in the mirror, it saw a *player*. So after almost a century spent playing the boring, regulated utility game, in the mid-nineties Western brought to Topeka one David Wittig, a flashy mergers-and-acquisitions man from Salomon Brothers, the Wall Street brokerage house, and set out to do some merging and acquiring, preferably in fields not subject to state regulation.¹¹ The company even proposed a deal at one point in which the debt piled up in all these corporate adventures would stay with the plodding public utility back in Topeka, where those plodding Kansas ratepayers could pay it off, while Wittig himself would run the sexy unregulated acqui-

sitions. You know the routine: socialize the risk, privatize the profits.¹² Along the road to this moment of enlightenment the organization picked up a "chief strategic officer," a stable of company jets, and a new name: Westar.

Westar never quite made it to player status. Its acquisitions turned out to be ill-advised, and shares in the company, which are widely held in Kansas, fell 73 percent from their 1998 highs. Wittig himself, however, became Topeka's player-in-chief. He continued to pull down millions of dollars in compensation even while the company's share price plummeted and employees were laid off to reduce costs. Wittig routinely flew to Europe and the Hamptons on company jets; he spent \$6.5 million decorating the company's executive suite to plans drawn up by Marc Charbonnet, a celebrated New York interior designer;* he even bought the old mansion of hometown hero Alf Landon and had it conspicuously renovated by this same Charbonnet. At the same time Westar's board was purged of dissenters and somehow prevented from entering the extravagant new offices.¹³ When Wittig finally left the company in 2002, thanks to an embarrassing but unrelated money-laundering charge (the president of a Topeka bank had approved a \$1.5-million loan to Wittig, which amount he then lent back to the bank president), local headlines screamed that he might walk away with some \$42.5 million *more* in cumulative compensation.

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

*This is not a small sum in a city like Topeka. For example, Jayhawk Tower, one of the city's most notable landmarks, is appraised for only \$1.6 million. Wittig could theoretically have purchased it four times over for the price of his office decorating scheme.

meaning altogether, to Aquila. The idea of public service was jettisoned too, as Aquila prepared for the great competitive utopia to come by acquiring utilities around the country and overseas, by investing heavily in fiber optics (there could never be too much fiber optics!), and by setting up a freewheeling energy trading operation where it sought to replicate the spectacular success then being enjoyed by Enron, that idol of the management gurus. At Aquila the resident geniuses were brothers Robert and Richard Green, who took turns sitting in the CEO's chair. And then came the familiar stages of disaster: the bonds downgraded to junk; the massive layoffs; the share price plummeting 96 percent; and the public revelation that Richard Green had pulled down \$21.6 million during the years of the collapse while Robert took home \$19 million, plus an additional \$7.6-million severance package when he walked away from the wreckage. Let the regulators clean it up.¹⁴

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

money and all that idolatry encouraged what now seems to have been a staggering amount of fraud and overconstruction.¹⁵

On a different level stood Sprint. Here the master of the whirl was William T. Esrey, a Kansas City native beloved by business journalists. Esrey's greatest moment was also the climax of the telecom bubble—the proposed 1999 merger with WorldCom that, at \$129 billion, would have been the largest of all time, and that would naturally have required Sprint to move to WorldCom's hometown. The national media turned somersaults saluting Esrey for engineering the triumph. What he really engineered, though, was a prominent place in the rogues' gallery of personal financial gluttony. As a condition of the deal, he and his top lieutenants were granted stupendous helpings of stock options—\$311 million worth between Esrey and Ronald LeMay, his right-hand man—whether regulators allowed the merger to go through or not.¹⁶

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

*Look on the bright side, counseled Jerry Heaster, the *Kansas City Star's* veteran business columnist. After all, “Kansas City can take pride in having provided an environment in which a company could be nurtured to the point of fetching the highest acquisition price in the history of corporate mergers.”¹⁷

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

At the time of their corporate stardom, Bill Esrey of Sprint and Bob Green of Aquila both lived in Mission Hills, Kansas, a small suburb of Kansas City. David Wittig, for his part, grew up in the next suburb to the south, while Ronald LeMay lived a few blocks to the east. Green's slate-roofed neoclassical manse is in fact only a few minutes' walk from Esrey's turreted Norman chateau, which in turn is situated next door to the rustic French manor of Irvine Hockaday, a retired Hallmark executive who sat on the boards of both men's companies. Scattered nearby are the homes of the owners of H&R Block, Hallmark, and Marion Merrell Dow, plus the slightly less imposing estates of various regional bank chieftains, press lords, and the ubiquitous suburban developers. Even the governor of Kansas lived here for a

Heaster's wisdom is worth recalling years later, as the New Economy hangs over slowly wears off. Utilities don't exist to serve cities: *cities serve utilities*, and the public's highest hope is that the casino of capitalism will someday fetch them up a gullible boob who will pay a premium for the operation thus "nurtured."

while in the nineties, in a suburban house less than one block from the Missouri line.

Out-of-town papers typically refer to the Kansas City "business community" as *close-knit*. David Brooks might say that Kansas City's owners are just people who like to sit together in life's cafeteria at what happens to be a very small, very well-stocked table. The correct description for them, however, is *elite*. In fact, this is the very word used by the local business magazine, which publishes a special "Power Elite" feature each year in which fawning essays about the nature of powerfulness accompany a list ranking the great men's relative puissance, in the same way that other magazines rank restaurants or movies or cars.

Mission Hills is a graphic illustration of what elites are about. Its two square miles of rolling, landscaped exquisiteness house a population of about thirty-six hundred with a median annual household income of \$188,821, making it by far the richest town in Kansas and, indeed, one of the richest in the country.¹⁸ Combined with the surrounding towns, it generates more money in individual contributions to the two political parties than does the rest of Kansas put together.¹⁹ But to call it a town, while technically correct, is misleading. Mission Hills has three country clubs and a church but no businesses of any kind. Its population is about the same as that of the two blocks surrounding my apartment in Chicago. It doesn't have buses, commuter trains, or even proper sidewalks, in most places. What it has are mansions, modern and colonial, whimsical and sober, ensconced in vast, carefully maintained lawns that roll tastefully to the horizon.

Mission Hills is obviously not representative of all of Kansas, but it is my family's home, my little town on the prairie, and it will serve us far better as an introduction to the way life is lived in the mysterious Midwest than would a thousand sentimental meditations on the noble red versus the arrogant blue. When Mission Hills was built after World War I, it was merely an

than we see today. Nobody mows their own lawn in Mission Hills anymore, and only a foot soldier in its armies of gardeners would park a Pontiac there. The doctors who lived near us in the seventies have pretty much been gentrified out, their places taken by the bankers and brokers and CEOs who have lapped them repeatedly on the racetrack of status and income. Every time I paid Mission Hills a visit during the nineties, it seemed another of the more modest houses in our neighborhood had been torn down and replaced by a much larger edifice, a three-story stone chateau, say, bristling with turrets and porches and dormers and gazebos and a three-car garage. The dark old palaces from the twenties sprouted spiffy new slate roofs, immaculately tailored gardens, remote-controlled driveway gates, and sometimes entire new wings. One grand old pile down the street from us was fitted with shiny new gutters made entirely of copper. A new house a few doors down from Esrey's spread is so large it has *two* multi-car garages, one at either end.

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

When workers are weak, taxes are down, and labor is cheap (as in the twenties and again today), Mission Hills coats itself in shimmering raiments of gold and green. Now the stock returns

extension of the upscale section of Kansas City known as the Country Club District. All the rest of that glamorous area, including the famous Country Club Plaza, the world's first suburban shopping center, was in Missouri. Mission Hills was the name given to the little bit of the development that spilled over State Line Road into Johnson County, Kansas. There was almost nothing to the south or west of Mission Hills in those days; for purposes of water and mail delivery, the suburb was treated as though it were part of Kansas City, Missouri.²⁰

When my family moved to Mission Hills at the tail end of the bull market of the sixties, it was a suburb where doctors and lawyers rubbed elbows with CEOs; where one found Pontiacs and riding lawn mowers and driveway basketball courts and even the occasional ranch house with an asphalt roof. There were also, of course, the original inhabitants whose grand old houses were now overgrown with vines and invisible from the street thanks to shrubbery and weeds that had been neglected for years. In their picturesque decay these dark palaces became a source of morbid fascination to my brothers and me in the troubled seventies. Even as children we knew these houses were relics of a dead past, a time when people had servants and gardeners and hand-built cars. In our own age of loss and decline it was prohibitively expensive simply to heat them, let alone tend their vast lawns. We followed the progress of a nearby creek as it slowly undercut a heavy stone gazebo, some millionaire's folly from that lost age, until after one rainstorm nothing was left but ruins. As late as 1987, the largest house in Mission Hills, an eleven-thousand-square-foot English-baronial layout that had been the home of the man who invented the Eskimo Pie, sat forlornly on the real estate market for months, unable to find a buyer.²¹

I recount all this not to downplay the suburb's affluence but only to note that it was affluence of a very different character

are plush, the bonus packages fat, the servants affordable, and the suburb finds that the princely life isn't dead after all. It builds new additions and new fountains and new Italianate porches overlooking Olympic-sized flower gardens maintained by shifts of laborers. People read books about the glory of empire. The kids get Porsches or SUVs when they turn sixteen; the houses with asphalt roofs discreetly disappear; the wings that were closed off are triumphantly reopened, and all is restored to its former grandeur. Times may be hard where you live, but here events have yielded a heaven on earth, a pleasure colony out of the paintings of Maxfield Parrish.

For my own family, this has not been an entirely happy series of developments. While it's soothing to have a neighbor who buzzes around the block in a Ferrari Supercar, the plutocratization of Mission Hills has pushed the Franks the other way. My father's unpretentious house is now valuable only for the lot that it sits on—his friends call it “the teardown”—and knowing this has pretty much drained his enthusiasm for maintaining it. The city has actually sent him notices warning him to keep the lawn mowed. It's that kind of place.

Growing up in Mission Hills, you quickly learn the boundaries and customs of the local notables: the local prep school attended by all the CEOs' kids, the snob colleges they all plan to attend in a few years, the family businesses they stand to inherit, the private police forces they maintain, the superexclusive country club they all belong to—which country club, by the way, was also the designated polling place for our corner of Mission Hills, the place where we had to go to vote, despite the fact that a good many people in the neighborhood would never be permitted to join.

You also learn that many of your friends' rich dads are in prison. Epidemic white-collar crime is the silent partner of the suburb's contentment, the ugly companion of its tranquil domes-

ticity and the earnest flattery of its courtiers. In addition to disgraced CEOs like Esrey and Green, Mission Hills is the home of numerous smaller-scale thieves, embezzlers, tax evaders, real estate frauds, and check forgers. Even the kids are often thugs: At the age of ten I was threatened by a switchblade-wielding lad who is today the president of a prestigious local bank. At the age of nineteen I watched a gang of Kansas City's most privileged, in their uniform madras shorts and polo shirts, snort cocaine at a party in some local grandee's sprawling Tudor-baronial pile. Growing up here teaches the indelible lesson that wealth has some secret bond with crime—also with drug use, bullying, lying, adultery, and thundering, world-class megalomania.

When I discovered that Mission Hills had been laid out by the same landscape architects responsible for River Oaks in Houston, the home of Ken Lay and other Enron execs, I began to suspect that tastefully wooded lawns were somehow the culprit, turning good men bad with their mysterious sylvan whisperings. But the prominence of the criminal element here is more likely due to Kansas's unlimited homestead exemption, which allows those declaring bankruptcy to keep their residence. Naturally, people preparing to go under wanted the priciest houses available, and thus Mission Hills became a magnet for the legally challenged from all across the region. That, plus the borderline criminality of capitalism itself, a condition that has rudely impressed itself on much of the world in the last few years.

Until World War II there was little development in Johnson County, Kansas, beyond Mission Hills. That suburb was then the very edge of the city, a semirural retreat for Kansas City's wealthy. But from that tiny affluent acorn a mighty suburban forest has since grown. The change occurred quite suddenly in the years after the war. As they did in so many places, cheap federal

loans made possible an instant suburban metropolis, mile after mile of ranch homes and split-levels and shopping malls thrown up by heroic developers in just a few years.

The second stage of the Johnson County boom, also as in most of suburban America, was triggered by the school desegregation ruling of 1954 and fueled by white flight out of Kansas City. Its third phase, in the eighties and nineties, came when corporate Kansas City packed up and moved its operations out to the Johnson County suburbs, where its top executives already lived. Today suburbs radiate across Johnson County from Mission Hills for fifteen miles to the south and the west, nearly eclipsing Kansas City proper and altering the complexion of the entire state of Kansas. Altogether Johnson County now houses more than 450,000 souls, making it the largest metropolitan area in the state.²²

The result has been one of the country's most extreme cases of low-density sprawl.²³ When I was in high school, our neighbors worked, shopped, and viced in Kansas City, Missouri; today they all drive in the other direction. A long way in the other direction: by the end of the nineties the metropolitan area's center of gravity had shifted to the most peripheral point of the Kansas suburbs. The largest of the suburbs, the aforementioned Overland Park, began to dream of rivaling Kansas City itself. It built hotels and a convention center, hoping to siphon even more sustenance away from the gasping metropolis; it slapped up shopping malls at a dizzying pace; it constructed a new office district, complete with runty glass mini-skyscrapers, at the southernmost point of settlement; and it platted out subdivisions without end, a raw, wood-shingled fortification stretching over the hills as far as the eye could see. And, as noted, it convinced Sprint to choose this locale for its sixteen-parking-garage "campus."

Today, Johnson County is a vast suburban empire, a happy, humming confusion of freeways and malls and nonstop construction; of identical cul-de-sacs and pretentious European street names and overachieving school districts and oversized houses constructed to one of four designs. By all the standards of contemporary American business civilization, it is a great success story. It is the wealthiest county in Kansas by a considerable margin,²⁴ and the free-market rapture of the New Economy nineties served it well, scandals notwithstanding. Telecom and corporate management were the right businesses to be in, and Johnson County's population grew by almost 100,000 over the course of the decade, an unflagging stream of middle-class humanity to fill its office parks and to absorb the manufactured bonhomie of its Fuddruckers and TGI Fridays. Johnson County is also one of the most intensely Republican places in the nation. Registered Republicans outnumber Democrats here by more than two to one. Of Johnson County's twenty-two representatives in the Kansas house, only one is a Democrat.

Back in the eighties, the journalist Richard Rhodes nailed the place with just two words: *Cupcake Land*.²⁵ To the irritation of local leaders, the nickname has stuck. Cupcake Land is a metropolis built entirely according to the developer's plan, without the interference of angry proles or ethnic pols as in nearby Kansas City. Cupcake Land encourages no culture but that which increases property values; supports no learning but that which burnishes the brand; hears no opinions but those that will further fatten the cupcake elite; tolerates no rebellion but that expressed in haircuts and piercings and alternative rock. You know what it's like even though you haven't been there. Smooth jazz. Hallmark cards. Applebees. Corporate Woods. Its greatest civic holiday is the turning-on of the

Christmas lights at a nearby shopping center—an event so inspirational to the cupcake mind that the mall thus illuminated has been rendered in paint by none other than Thomas Kinkade.

I myself witnessed Cupcake Land's dynamic recent growth episodically, coming back to visit every six months or so from a nineteenth-century city where people lived in apartments and dragged their groceries home in two-wheeled wire carts. Seeing it this way magnified Johnson County's strangeness: every time I returned, the developers had leapfrogged farther into the countryside, clicking off the once-unimaginable distances (119th Street! 143rd Street!) the way the Dow ascends past this or that landmark valuation. There was always some new suburban oddity to observe, some superlative to register, some combination church-mall to gawk at. I remember my astonishment when, driving around in 1996 after exploring an outer-ring development called Patrician Woods, I happened upon a Dean & DeLuca grocery store, a luxury chain previously found mainly in New York City, now holding down a corner opposite a plowed field. Even more bizarre: the budding "lifestyle center" of which it was part was called Town Center Plaza, despite being a full twenty miles from downtown Kansas City.

I am the strange one, though, for being astonished by all this. While dining recently at 40 Sardines, probably the finest restaurant in the KC area despite being situated in a mall built where corn grew only a few years ago, I quizzed employees and other patrons and discovered that they had all recently moved here from the corporate suburbs of other big cities. They saw nothing odd about finding, in what had so recently been farmland, this dimly lit postmodern palace, with its whimsical pebble-encrusted bar and its selection of foie-gras and duck-prosciutto appetizers. The people of Cupcake Land approve of age when talking about wine and cheese; they expect their cities to be brand-new.

The only other part of Kansas that had a winning formula for the New Economy years was at the other end of the state, the area around Garden City, a remote town on the treeless western plains. Johnson County is an anomaly, people believe, but Garden City is the future, the only real-world model for how the rest of the state can grow. Everyone in Kansas says this. I myself heard it from a U.S. senator.

There are no Dean & DeLuca in Garden City, though. This is cattle country, the other end of the food chain. The other end of the world.

They call places like Garden City "rural boomtowns." When you're there, you keep coming across the slogan "Just Plain Success." And from a statistical angle its accomplishments do look impressive. Thanks to Garden City and the nearby towns of Liberal and Dodge City, Kansas was the biggest beef-packing state in the country through most of the last decade. Today those three towns in far-western Kansas have a "daily slaughter capacity" of some twenty-four thousand cattle, and they produce fully 20 percent of the beef consumed in the United States.²⁶ I am a great eater of beef, and so I suppose this is something to be proud of.

But it is profoundly misleading to describe all these things in this old-fashioned way—as though Garden City were "cow butcher to the world," some miniature Chicago resourceful Kansans have hewn out of the barren prairie. These are things that have been done to Kansas and Garden City, and to remote towns all across the Great Plains. The only actors with real power in this situation are the companies that build the slaughterhouses and call the shots: Tyson (known universally by its former name, IBP, for Iowa Beef Packers), the unmelodious ConAgra (known universally by its former name, Monfort), and the even less melodious Cargill Meat Solutions (known universally by its former

name, Excel). And these entities, in turn, claim their every move is dictated by the remorseless demands of the market. There are ranchers aplenty but few rugged individualists out here anymore; today Garden City and Dodge City are caught on the steel hooks of economic logic as surely and as haplessly as are the cows they hack so industriously apart.

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

There were other advantages for the packers in moving to distant and isolated towns. In the big cities, they had always been conspicuous targets for reformers and reporters; you couldn't pass through Chicago without catching a whiff of the stockyards and being instantly reminded of *The Jungle*. On the High Plains the packers are just about the only game in town. And they use

their power accordingly. They threaten to close down a plant if they don't get their way on some issue or other. They play towns off against one another the way pro sports franchises do. Who will give the packers the biggest tax abatement? Who will vote the fattest bond issue? Who will let them pollute the most?

The stories about Garden City that appear in the national media tend to focus on all the town's non-anglophone residents and to marvel with enthusiasm on finding such "vibrant" multiculturalism out here on the lone prairie. And I suppose this is very liberal of them. Just like the conservative champions of Red America, however, the larger media generally shrinks from examining the brutal economic processes that make it all happen. The area around Garden City is a showplace of industrialized agriculture: vast farms raise nothing but feed corn despite the semiarid climate; gigantic rolling irrigation devices pump water from a subterranean aquifer and make this otherwise unthinkable crop possible; feedlots the size of cities transform the corn into cowflesh; and the windowless concrete slaughterhouses squat silently on the outskirts of town, harvesting the final product. Take a drive through the countryside here, and you will see no trees, no picturesque old windmills or bridges or farm buildings, and almost no people. When the aquifer dries up, as it someday will—its millions of years of collected rainwater spent in just a few decades—you will see even less out here.

One thing you do see these days are the trailer-park cities, dilapidated and unpaved and rubbish-strewn, that house a large part of Garden City's workforce. Confronted with some of the most advanced union-avoidance strategies ever conceived by the mind of business man, these people receive mediocre wages for doing what is statistically the most dangerous work in industrial America. Thanks to the rapid turnover at the slaughterhouses, few of them receive health or retirement benefits. The "social costs" of supporting them—education, health care, law enforcement—

are "externalized," as the scholarly types put it, pushed off onto the towns themselves, or onto church groups and welfare agencies, or onto the countries from which the workers come. With constant speedup of the line and with the cold temperatures of the plant, one angry worker told me, "After ten years, people walk like they're sixty or seventy years old."

This is economic growth, yes, but it is the sort of growth that makes a city *less* wealthy and *less* healthy as its population increases.²⁷ Nor does the situation improve much as the decades pass. It has been twenty years now since the packers first moved to Garden City, and two anthropologists who have studied the region now warn of a "permanent breakdown" in middle-class life; of a strategy of development that forever puts a town, despite its best efforts, "at the mercy of the meat industry's insatiable appetite for cheap labor and the social turmoil that follows from it."²⁸

Driving to Garden City, which is far from any interstate highway and well beyond the reach of my cell-phone service, I was reminded of one of those New Economy parables that some computer company used to run on TV back in the nineties: A bright and eager junior executive is shown driving a hardened old senior executive far out into the countryside. On the way the old guy gripes about the price of doing business in Manhattan. Once out in the middle of nowhere, though, the kid's dream is explained to him: New communications technology makes Manhattan irrelevant! This isn't the boondocks; this is the *frontier*—the land of opportunity. The old fellow's eyes light up as he gets it; he leaps and yips, a veritable cowboy. Out here, the businessman's century-long wage-and-tax nightmare is over. Out here he is his own master once again, a Wyatt Earp unencumbered by grandstanding aldermen or grievance-filing shop stewards or fancy intellectuals.

Driving back from Garden City, after taking in its brooding

slaughterhouses and its unearthly odors and the feeder lots that sprawl over the landscape like some post-Apocalyptic suburb of death, I was reminded of another parable, one that the Kansas Populists used to talk about: the frontier as a site of ghastly, spectacular plunder. Buffalo carcasses littering the ground, cattle ranchers shooting down the Indians, corporations moving whole populations around the globe, farmers exhausting the land, railroads taking the farmers for all they're worth—free-market economics in full and unrestrained effect.

Viewed from Mission Hills, this is a social order that delivers quaint slate roofs, copper gutters, and gurgling fountains in elegant traffic islands; viewed from Garden City, it is an order that brings injury and infection and death by a hundred forms of degradation; rusting playgrounds for the kids, shabby decaying schools, a lifetime of productiveness gone in a few decades, and depleted groundwater, too. The anthropologists caution us in their sober way about a recipe for "growth" that blandly accepts a permanent impoverished class,²⁹ but the people of Mission Hills are unfazed. They may be too polite to say it aloud, but they know that poverty rocks. Poverty is profitable. Poverty makes stocks go up and labor come down.

Two hundred miles east of Garden City lies Wichita, Kansas, a metropolis of 340,000 that is to civil aviation what Detroit used to be to automobiles. Maps of what is called the Air Capital are crisscrossed with the landing fields of the various manufacturers: Boeing, Cessna, Learjet, and Beechcraft* each build planes there, and McConnell Air Force Base keeps the sky filled at all hours with KC-135s and the occasional B-52. As the aircraft

*Cessna is now owned by Textron, Learjet is owned by Bombardier, and Beechcraft is now known as Raytheon.

industry's fortunes have risen and fallen, so have those of Wichita: The city's population exploded during World War II, as the defense contracts rolled in and the Boeing B-29s roared off for the Pacific. In the fifties and sixties Wichita built B-47s and B-52s; in later years it produced Boeing 737s and contributed elements to the company's other jetliners.

Histories of Wichita tend to focus on the promethean efforts of its business leaders, marveling at how they conjured up a thriving city from the bare prairie.³⁰ Viewed from the ground, however, the place looks very different. Wichita is a deeply blue-collar town, a city where manufacturing is still the largest sector of the local economy and just about the only place in the state with a strong union presence.

Until quite recently Wichita enjoyed the sort of blue-collar prosperity that is only a dim memory in places like Cleveland and Pittsburgh. Wichita is in trouble today, following the aircraft industry into a sharp nosedive, but in its fundamentals the place is still intact, its factories still open for business. The huge Boeing plant that sprawls for several city blocks is the largest private employer in Kansas. Entire neighborhoods are populated with Boeing workers, union members with excellent benefits and wages good enough to allow them to afford the sort of ranches or split levels that would elsewhere be the prerogative of white-collar types only. Wichita is the kind of city where the newspaper runs editorials about the Haymarket martyrs on Labor Day and where an election for the state legislature might well pit a maintenance man against a pipe fitter.

If you are, like me, a fan of American middlebiness, Wichita is your kind of place: an El Dorado of hamburger stands, alliterative city slogans, pork tenderloin sandwiches, souped-up trucks, old-school diners, bowling alleys, and steakhouses with Spandex-clad waitresses. And, above all, churches. Many, many churches: COGICs, Assemblies of God, Foursquare Gospels, and every

known variant of charismatic. The titles of upcoming sermons, displayed on signs outside these many churches, are enough to keep a collector of sacred kitsch occupied for hours: "Put on your spiritual running shoes"; "An R_x for spiritual pain." Even labor unions here have Bibles specially printed with their logo. Then there's the dark side, the trucks plastered with huge, graphic photos of broken fetuses that occasionally wander the city. And the cryptic side, the message that appeared through the steam on my bathroom mirror at the Wichita Hyatt, after I had let the hot water run for a few minutes: "Knight in God's Armor." I imagined a delegate to a pro-life gathering, reeling in some sort of saintly ecstasy, scrawling it there with his finger so it hovered over his head while he shaved.

Michael Carnody, the editor of a Wichita weekly, likens the town to a depression in the middle of the country that catches the pop culture runoff from everywhere else, a place where dead fads collect and build up and never really evaporate. "People think Camaros are still cool here," he tells me. The keenest observers of this freakishly average place were the Embarrassment, an early-eighties indie-rock outfit who may well have been the greatest rock band of them all. (They were, without a doubt, the finest ever produced by Kansas.) According to red-state myth, people out here are supposed to shun wit and cynicism on the grounds that these are symptoms of pseudosophisticated coastal liberalism, but the Embarrassment were as arch and melodic as anything that came out of the East Village in the same period, with their songs about thrift-store shopping, TV preachers, polyester clothes, sitcom reruns, and, of course, cars.

*Scott's Trans Am has the windows down
But he's in a jam when the girl's around.
He yells, "Hey! Get out of my way!"
"I haven't had any sex all day."*

The nineties were a bad decade for Wichita, just as they were for cities all over that still relied on manufacturing and skilled workers for their prosperity. The problem wasn't so much the end of the cold war, although that obviously took a toll; it was that companies like Boeing had fastened their eyes on a vision of themselves as "virtual corporations," shedding the old-fashioned baggage of gigantic plants and armies of employees. Throwing around words like *flexibility* and *competitiveness*, they subcontracted and "outsourced," they asked cities to bid against one another for new projects, they moved production overseas, and they picked fights with their unions. Between 1999 and 2002, the main union representing Boeing workers nationally lost nearly a third of its membership to layoffs; in Wichita, the number was closer to half.

The terrorist attacks of September 2001 made the situation worse, as the airlines reeled and orders for Boeing jetliners dried up overnight. Besides New York, the Air Capital may well have been the city most affected by the catastrophe. Boeing took the opportunity to shed even more union workers, informing Wichita that, this time, the jobs wouldn't be coming back even when times got better. In the summer of 2003, unemployment in Wichita passed 7 percent and foreclosures on homes spiked as these disasters reverberated through the local economy.

There were so many closed shops in Wichita when I visited in 2003 that you could drive for blocks without ever leaving their empty parking lots, running parallel to the city streets past the shut-down sporting goods stores and toy stores and farm implement stores. Once I simply stopped my car for several minutes in the middle of what my map claimed to be a busy Wichita thoroughfare; there was nobody around. Along Douglas Avenue, the city's main drag, there used to be a famous sign that arched over the throngs, crowing "Watch Wichita Win"; these days the

street is lined with bronze statues of average people, apparently so it doesn't look quite so eerily empty.

As for the rest of the state, nobody even bothers to try papering over what's happened; it's pretty much in free fall. I have even heard people justify what goes on in Garden City by reasoning that, well, it's better than what's gone on everywhere else in rural Kansas. It's better than having no economy at all.

Walk down the main street of just about any farm town in the state, and you know immediately what they're talking about: this is a civilization in the early stages of irreversible decay.

I was startled the first time I took such a stroll. I hadn't spent much time in small-town Kansas since the early eighties, and when I reminisced about the place, it always compared pretty favorably to the South Side Chicago neighborhood I have inhabited since then. I always thought of small-town Kansas the way you're supposed to think of it: friendly folks ambling slowly down the old brick sidewalks, little kids singing in the school, average people in rambling Victorian houses listening attentively to the radio broadcast of the high school football game. Maybe my recollections were too idealized; maybe Chicago's high-speed gentrification (and its systematic expulsion of the poor) over the intervening years has thrown me off. Either way, in the desolation sweepstakes, Chicago has nothing on Kansas anymore.

Main Streets here are vacant, almost as a rule; their grandiose stone facades are crumbling and covered up with plywood—rotting plywood, usually, itself simply hung and abandoned fifteen years ago or whenever it was that Wal-Mart came to town.

The one business that consistently survives here, whether you're in Osawatomie or El Dorado, is junk stores. This is what people do on Main Street nowadays: they sell old stuff that in a

more prosperous era would have gone to the Salvation Army or the trash. Leftover yarn. A bourbon bottle shaped like a CB radio. A box of *National Geographics*. Whom they sell it to remains a mystery. In each of the dozen or so Main Street junk stores I visited, I was clearly one of the only customers to come through all day.

If a Kansas town was once big enough to support shopping malls, you will find derelict buildings of the 1970s in addition to derelict buildings of the 1870s. You will find vast acres of crumbling asphalt surrounding former JCPenneys, which are either thrift stores now as well or else closed down altogether.

And you will start to wonder where the people are. To judge from the activity on the streets, every day looks like a Sunday or a holiday or 5 a.m. Go ahead, park anywhere; yours will be the only car on the block.

Indeed, over two-thirds of Kansas counties lost population between 1980 and 2000, some by as much as 25 percent. I am told that there are entire towns in the western part of the state getting by on Social Security; no one is left there but the aged. There are no doctors, no shoe stores. One town out here even sold its public school on eBay. Kansas dwindles in significance with each passing decade as its congressional delegation and electoral vote are steadily whittled away.

The town where this feeling of dissipation struck me most powerfully was Emporia, a place once famous as the home of the author and newspaperman William Allen White. In our grandparents' day White was a nationally known figure, a confidant of presidents, a winner of the Pulitzer Prize, and the unofficial spokesman of small-town America. White's signature literary offering, at least in his early days, was the droll vignette of village life; portraits of a Middle America that was easygoing and contented, industrious, tidy, crime-free, and wise in its humility. Kansas was so bountiful, White called it "the garden

of the world." All that it demanded of life was a chance to work hard, play fair, and show 'em what we were made of here in the heartland.

White is pretty much forgotten today, even in Kansas (a Republican official in Emporia told me he had never heard of the man before moving there), but in the architecture of Emporia's decaying downtown you can still discern traces of his booster heyday. The 1880 building with its twelve-foot-high second-story windows; the elegant Presbyterian church, built to serve an army of prosperous faithful: Here in crumbling brick are all the dead dreams of all the dead generations of small-town Kansas businessmen—so eager to put on a clean shirt and a positive attitude and to get in the game. They were going to get their town noticed by the august financiers in the big cities; they were going to draw in population and sell bonds and make improvements and raise a family and see their town rise in the world.³¹ Sure, they were. Just you watch Wichita win.

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

As usual, there are many factors at work in the latest farm crisis, among them (at least in Kansas) a severe drought in 2001 and 2002. But the main cause is the five or six huge agribusiness conglomerates that buy raw materials from farmers and process and package them for export or for sale in grocery stores. People who have never lived in a farm state often think of all agriculture interests as essentially identical: farmers and agribusiness all want the same things, they believe. But in reality the interests of the two are more like those of the chicken and Colonel Sanders of backlash lore. And Colonel Sanders has been on an unbroken winning streak now for twenty-some years, with farm legislation, trade policy, and a regulatory climate all crafted to strengthen the conglomerates while weakening farmers. For shareholders and upper management of companies like Archer Daniels Midland (ADM) and Tyson, the result has been miraculous, a heaven on earth. For towns like Emporia, it has been ruinous.

Ironically, the farm is where Americans learned their first lessons in the pitfalls of laissez-faire economics a hundred years ago. Farming is a field uniquely unsuited to the freewheeling whirl of the open market. There are millions of farmers, and they are naturally disorganized; they can't coordinate their plans one with another. Not only are they easily victimized by powerful middlemen (as they were by the railroads in the Populists' day), but when they find themselves in a tough situation—when, say, the price they are getting for wheat is low—farmers do not have the option of cutting back production, as every other industry does. Instead, each of those millions of farmers works harder, competes better, becomes more efficient, cranks out more of the commodity in question . . . and thus makes the glut even worse and pushes the prices still lower. This is called an "overproduction trap," and it can only be overcome by a suspension of competition through government intervention. Such intervention is what the Populists and the farmers' unions fought for decades to

kept thinking of what Sam Walton or one of our other modern robber barons would say to the town's faithful, optimistic founders: *So you wanted to be capitalists, eh?*

While I was absorbing all this bedraggledness, a parade passed by. It was homecoming at Emporia State University, and the various leaders of the Kansas Republican Party were along for the ride. A fraternity boy in an enormous black cowboy hat shouted out to his best gal:

He: Where's my sweatshirt?

She (lifting sweatshirt to flash him): It's right here, bitch.

There's a reason you probably haven't heard much about this aspect of the heartland. This kind of blight can't be easily blamed on the usual suspects like government or counterculture or high-hat urban policy. The villain that did this to my home state wasn't the Supreme Court or Lyndon Johnson, showering dollars on the poor or putting criminals back on the street. The culprit is the conservatives' beloved free-market capitalism, a system that, at its most unrestrained, has little use for small-town merchants or the agricultural system that supported the small towns in the first place. Deregulated capitalism is what has allowed Wal-Mart to crush local businesses across Kansas and, even more important, what has driven agriculture, the state's raison d'être, to a state of near collapse.

"The U.S. is experiencing the greatest farm loss numbers since the mid-1980s," says the National Family Farm Coalition.³² Talk to just about any farmer in Kansas, and you will find him extremely pessimistic about his livelihood. Except for the owners of the very largest spreads, farmers simply cannot make a profit. Kansas has only about half as many farms as it did in 1950; those that remain continue to grow. A few are getting big; most are getting out.

secure; it finally came with the New Deal, which brought price supports and acreage set-asides and loan guarantees.

For agribusiness, however, farm overproduction is the ideal situation. From their perspective, lower farm prices means higher profits and even greater power in the marketplace. Overproduction and all-out competition between farmers are thus to be encouraged by all available political means.

While farmers are naturally disorganized, agribusiness moves in the opposite direction: like all industries, it seeks always to merge and acquire and choke off competition. And, also like other industries, it was finally permitted to do these things in the deregulatory climate of the Reagan-Clinton era. In the eighties, according to William Heffernan, a sociologist at the University of Missouri, agriculture experts generally agreed that if four companies controlled over 40 percent of market share in a given field, it was no longer competitive. Today, however, Heffernan estimates, the four largest players process 81 percent of the beef, 59 percent of the pork, and 50 percent of the chicken produced in the United States. The same phenomenon is at work in grain: the largest four process 61 percent of American wheat, 80 percent of American soybeans, and either 57 percent or 74 percent of American corn, depending on the method.³³ It is no coincidence that the internal motto of Archer Daniels Midland, the grain-processing giant notorious for its political clout and its price-fixing, is reported to be "the competitor is our friend and the customer is our enemy."³⁴

Agribusiness had acquired most of this stranglehold by the mid-nineties, but farmers were not yet totally in their grasp, thanks to the various farm programs enacted in the thirties. This escape route was closed off in 1996 under the ironically named Freedom to Farm Act, which effectively terminated certain price supports, threw all acreage open to cultivation, and generally brought a close to the New Deal system of agriculture regula-

tion. It also launched the nation's remaining farmers into a desperate overproduction spiral, a frantic race to compete in which the devil, as usual, takes the hindmost. Written by Kansas senator Pat Roberts and supported by the other Republican members of the state's delegation, Freedom to Farm was one of the many bold deregulatory initiatives that marked the New Economy era; farmers, it was believed, now had the tools to compete effectively on the free market. Everything was different now. They didn't need the government telling them what to do (that farmers had themselves demanded the New Deal programs was forgotten by then); they could grow whatever they wanted in whatever quantities and trust to the market to give them a fair price.³⁵ Markets were great. Markets made everything jake.

But it turned out those bumper economic laws of the old days hadn't gone away after all. Farmers began producing food at maximum capacity, and farm prices plummeted, no longer supported by what were called "non-recourse loans." From a high of over \$6.50 in 1996, the average price of a bushel of wheat (the dominant crop in Kansas) fell to \$2.25 in 1999, the same price that it had fetched in the disaster years of the mid-eighties. At such a rate, failure was inevitable for everyone except the largest and most efficient farms. In fact, the crisis got so bad so fast that the federal government resumed making massive payouts to farmers in order to stop the bleeding—not as price supports this time, but simply on the basis of production, so that the larger farms, the ones that needed the money the least, got the most. In Kansas in 2000 and 2001, such federal handouts were actually greater than what farmers earned from farming itself.³⁶

For ADM, Cargill, ConAgra, and the rest of the food trust, Freedom to Farm couldn't have been better if they had written the law themselves. The processor or feedlot operator now paid substantially less for his wheat and corn than what it cost to grow the wheat and corn; for his finished goods he continued to

charge shoppers at the grocery store the same price as before.³⁷ The problem of fending off complete collapse in farm country, meanwhile, was shouldered by the government.³⁸ Bruce Larkin, a state legislator and farmer from northeastern Kansas, is blunt about the results. Freedom to Farm, he says, is "a license to a couple of multinational grain companies to steal the product produced by the farmers." The gigantic subsidies handed out since the law was passed in 1996 are merely "an indirect taxpayer subsidy to large-scale corporations and livestock operations."

Thinking in grander historical terms, the agricultural journalist A. V. Krebs finds in Freedom to Farm an exact antithesis to the Populist revolt that swept Kansas in the 1890s. This was the end of the century-long battle, the point of total defeat for the little guy, the moment where "corporate agribusiness finally realized their dream of robbing family farmers of their nearly last vestiges of that economic power first conceived and asserted by the agrarian Populists a century earlier."³⁹

The admirers of farm deregulation—and there are plenty of them, in economics departments as well as the Bush administration's Department of Agriculture—see in it not some hideous power grab but a heroic "restructuring" of the food industry. This is "vertical integration," a more flexible and a far more efficient food-delivery system than the fragmented, disorganized, heavily subsidized system of the past. Cargill, ADM, and the rest of the giants are bringing order out of chaos; if we finally have to say good-bye to the Jeffersonian fantasy of the family farm—if we have to transform the prosperous farmer into a sharecropper⁴⁰ and turn the countryside into an industrialized wasteland and destroy the small towns—maybe it's all for the best.

Chapter Three

God, Meet Mammon

One thing unites all these different groups of Kansans, these millionaires and trailer-park dwellers, these farmers and thrift-store managers and slaughterhouse workers and utility executives: they are almost all Republicans. Meatpacking Garden City voted for George W. Bush in even greater numbers than did affluent Johnson County.¹ The blue-collar, heavily unionized city of Wichita used to be one of the few Democratic strongholds in the state; in the nineties it became one of the most consistently conservative places of them all, a mighty fortress in the wars over abortion, evolution, loose interpretation of the Constitution, and water fluoridation.

Not too long ago, Kansas would have responded to the current situation by making the bastards pay. This would have been a political certainty, as predictable as what happens when you touch a match to a puddle of gasoline. When business screwed the farmers and the workers—when it implemented monopoly strategies invasive beyond the Populists' furthest imaginings—when it