Irreconcilable Differences

The American nation that never was

REVIEW BY MICHAEL W. MASTERS

> The [American] nations have been struggling with one another for advantage and influence since they were founded, and from 1790 the biggest prize has been control of federal government institutions: Congress, the White House, the courts, and the military. As the central government has grown in size, scope, and power, so have the nations' efforts to capture and reshape it — and the rest of the continent — in their own image.

As America plunges into the uncertain future of a twenty-first century marked by ever-diverging views of what should constitute a social contract by which all can live, one searches for an explanation for unending national contentiousness. Why is a historically predominantly Christian nation under such intense attack for its long-time faith? Why are liberals so insistent on homosexual "marriage" and traditionalists so diametrically opposed? (And where did liberals and right-wingers come from anyway?) Why do elections swing back and forth between the two parties so frequently and inexplicably? Why is one party intent on spending the nation into oblivion and the other accused of denying the very milk of human kindness to those claimed to be most in need? And why does the party of supposed fiscal responsibility have virtually the same open borders stand on non-Western immigration as the openly minority-oriented party (although for widely divergent reasons), a stand that puts native-born workers, including their own constituents, on the streets by the millions?

Questions such as these abound and beg for explanations.

***Michael W. Masters** is a long-time writer on ecology, sustainability, immigration, sociobiology, moral philosophy, Southern heritage, and other political, historical, and cultural topics.*

Maine author Colin Woodard's *American Nations, A History of the Eleven Rival Regional Cultures of North America* offers a thesis that has hidden in plain sight for four hundred years. His book describes eleven founding ethnocultural regions: El Norte (the Southwest, including northern Mexico), New France (Quebec plus Acadian Louisiana), Tidewater, Yankeedom, New Netherland (New York City), the Deep South, the Midlands, Greater Appalachia, the Left Coast, the Far West, and Canada's First Nation. With the exception of Canada's native peoples, each was founded by colonists from Western Europe. Yet *American Nations* exposes an underlying divergence, even incompatibility, in values among these seemingly similar peoples — a gulf that time has never bridged. Woodard asserts that these differing worldviews predated America's founding as a nation. Thus informed, one is left with the troubling realization that today's social, cultural, and political impasse may have been foreordained from the beginning — and may, in fact, be intractable.

American Nations
A History of the Eleven Rival Regional Cultures of North America
By Colin Woodard
Penguin: New York, NY
371pp., HB, $30

In an 1858 speech, New York Senator William Seward foresaw "an irrepressible conflict between opposing and enduring forces." Seward's words were an indictment of slavery, but the differences were, and are, more fundamental than that. The greatest period of violence in American history, the Civil War, was but a chapter in a conflict that was already 200 years old. When the war ended, differences did not go away. That suicidal catastrophe served only to further polarize the factions into two alliances that have continued to be at odds — not over slavery but rather over the very nature

of the value system that would undergird the republic.

The eleven nations

Except for El Norte and First Nation, the eleven North American nations were populated largely although not exclusively from ethnically similar northwest European countries: England, Scotland, Ulster, Ireland, France, the Netherlands, Germany, and Spain. Each group became tied to specific geographic regions at the time of their settling and subsequent expansion. Needless to say, these regions are now much diluted by subsequent immigration. It would take far too much space to summarize the history of each. Nor is that the purpose of this review, which instead focuses on conflicts between the founding factions.

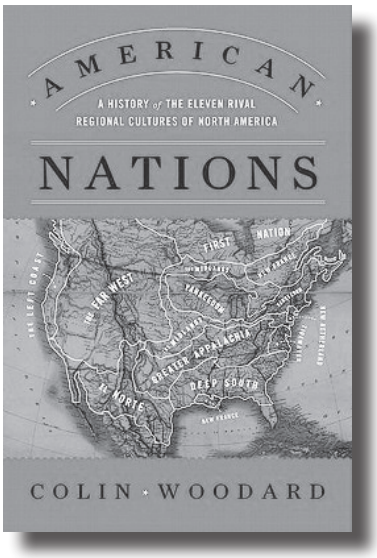
The founding American regions were Puritan New England, Tidewater, Greater Appalachia, the Deep South, the Midlands, and New Netherland. New France played only a minor role in the early conflict and El Norte and Canada's First Nation virtually none. The ideological conflict was between New England vs. Tidewater and the Deep South. New Netherland became New York and soon sided with New England. Greater Appalachia is important because its people became a disruptive force from the moment they arrived on the continent — just as they are today. The Deep South is important because of slavery and the fact that the war that ended it forged the Southern alliance with Tidewater and Greater Appalachia that continues to this day. The Midlands, initially settled by pacifist Quakers, has served as a moderating influence for much of America's history. The Left Coast, settled by New England traders and missionaries, eventually joined the Yankee coalition. The Far West, settled much later, tilted libertarian, spurred by corporate and government control over its resources.

America's four hundred year conflict arrived already in being, in the form of Tidewater colonists and their political rivals in Yankeedom. After Oliver Cromwell overthrew the English monarchy in the mid-1600s, many loyalists fled to the Tidewater area, bringing with them an English heritage of hierarchy, albeit without a formal aristocracy, a tradition in direct violation of the utopian and egalitarian worldview of New England.

> Indeed, as we shall see Tidewater and Yankee New England stood at the opposite poles of the mid-seventeenth-century English-speaking world, with diametrically opposed values, politics, and social priorities. And when war came to England in the 1640s, they backed opposing sides, inaugurating centuries of struggle between them over the future of America.

This paragraph, perhaps more than any other in *American Nations*, is the foundational explanation of why America has never existed as a unified nation for an extended period — and perhaps never can. As Woodard paints the canvas, the Puritan New England outlook was one of utopian and communitarian idealism. Mankind is perfectible, and should be made so. By coercion if necessary — even Woodard admits that early New England sought to impose its vision on the rest of the regional cultures.

The Puritans came to America to build a better life for themselves and their families — John Winthrop's City upon a Hill. And so they did, through industry and acumen, carving a thriving civilization out of the stern New England landscape. Settled largely in the early going by colonists from East Anglia, "the most economically sophisticated part of the British Isles," the Puritans came as intact family groups, largely middle class merchants and craftsmen without an embedded aristocracy, to "build a completely new society: an applied religious utopia, a Protestant theocracy based on the teachings of John Calvin." Woodard's narrative contains a veritable litany of the virtues of this idealistic, classless society. "While larger or wealthier families might have been granted larger lots, the division was surprisingly egalitarian." And, "the rich and wellborn were given no special privileges either in politics or before the law."



Unfortunately, Woodard allows his New England roots to unbalance an otherwise valuable historical perspective. Puritan New England is for the most part lauded, with what little criticism there is delivered in the mildest terms. The founding peoples of each Southern region, on the other hand, are described only negatively. Whether this is deliberate or subconscious is difficult to say. But, no group of people can be all good or all bad, and Woodard's work is diminished by his inability to maintain scholarly detachment and balance.

Of course, the author knows he must confront the question of how New England's antithesis, aristocratic Tidewater, could produce men like Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, and James Madison — leading figures among America's Founders. Woodard draws a contrast between the Norse, Anglo-Saxon, and Germanic ideal of individual *freedom*, and the classical Greek and Roman concept of *liberty.* The latter encompasses a tiered society of free citizens and a slave underclass. Virginia's Founders are equated with Greco-Roman slave realms and thus summarily dismissed. Then, by an act of journalistic acrobatics, he ascribes the concept of individual freedom to collectivist Yankee New England!

This is simply a journalistic dry well. If there was a founding group that brought the torch of individual freedom to America, it was not the collectivist Puritans. Surely it was the Lowland Scots, border English, and Ulster Scots who settled Greater Appalachia — an ethnocultural group that Woodard comes perilously close to describing as the scum of the earth.

The Puritans did not think in terms of individual freedom, but rather as a collective right that they idealized for themselves, compatible with their utopian, communal view of society as a whole. In a similar work, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America*, David Hackett Fischer writes, "The idea of collective liberty, or 'publick liberty' as it was sometimes called, was thought to be consistent with *close restraints* upon individuals." [Emphasis added] Fischer makes clear in *Albion's Seed* that no British founding group enforced conformity on its inhabitants with more harshness and ferocity than New England. He describes seventeenth and eighteenth century Massachusetts as a "paradox of private order and public violence." Fischer adds,

> For many generations, individual order coexisted with an institutional savagery that appeared in the burning of rebellious servants, the maiming of political dissenters, the hanging of Quakers, the execution of witches and the crushing to death with heavy stones of an old man who refused to plead before the court.

Woodard is silent on these failings, but he admits that there were problems when it came to relations with other regions. "If the Puritans had kept to themselves, their neighbors might have taken little notice of them. But what would cause Yankeedom eventually to be so loathed by the other nations was its desire — indeed, its *mission* — to impose its ways on everyone else."

As the epicenter of slavery, one expects to find the Deep South excoriated mercilessly, and Woodard does not fail to deliver. The initial settlers arrived at Charleston in 1670 from Barbados and quickly set out to create "a near-carbon copy of the West Indian slave state these Barbadians had left behind..." Woodard indicts the Deep South as an acquisitive region. "Its expansionist ambitions would put it on a collision course with its Yankee rivals, triggering military, social, and political conflicts that continue to plague the United States to this day." Yet, however morally repugnant slavery was or is, much of the drive into new states by the South was done in an attempt to preserve parity in a Congress that used high import tariffs to serve the interests of an industrialized North but that harmed the agrarian South, an underlying cause of sectional tension that Woodard, like many modern historians, simply writes out of the record.

The Midlands were initially settled by pacifist Quakers arriving in the Delaware Valley, followed by German sects (who came to be known as the Pennsylvania Dutch) wishing to follow beliefs that were unpopular in their homeland. From its founding in the 1680s and its subsequent "spread across a vast swath of the American heartland," the Midlands has remained "a tolerant, multicultural, multilingual civilization populated by families of modest means — many of them religious — who desired mostly that their government and leaders leave them in peace." Throughout American history Midlanders have, as a rule, been political and ideological moderates, refusing to commit to either camp. While this moderation probably served the nation well in the past, it can be argued that, with the dramatic demographic changes taking place in America, the time for fence-sitting is past.

Perhaps no founding group has been so little appreciated — or so frequently reviled — as the Scots and Scots-Irish who settled Greater Appalachia. Today, most do not know who they are or that they are a distinct people, with a rich heritage that confounded not only the English but the Roman Empire, which built Hadrian's Wall to keep them out. Always outnumbered or outgunned, they never held a nation of their own for long. As a result, they "learned to rely only on themselves and their extended families to defend home, hearth, and kin against intruders, be they foreign soldiers, Irish guerrilla fighters, or royal tax collectors." Of them Woodard writes,

> A clan-based warrior culture from the borderlands of the British Empire, it arrived on the backcountry frontier of the Midlands, Tidewater, and Deep South and shattered those nations' monopoly control over colonial governments, the use of force and relations with

> the Native Americans. Proud, independent, and disturbingly violent, the Borderlanders of Greater Appalachia have remained a volatile insurgent force with North American society to the present day.

Like Tidewater and the Deep South, Borderlanders get little respect. Many "became nomadic outlaws, hunting and stealing their way through the backcountry, annoying just about everyone." Pennsylvania's Quakers were happy to push them west, as a buffer against Indian depredations. The American Revolution began in New England but it was won in the Midlands and the South, and Borderlanders played a larger role than most today realize. "In Pennsylvania, the Borderlanders were the shock troops of the revolution," writes Woodard, adding, "Here the Scots-Irish so dominated the rebel armies that one British officer called them the 'line of Ireland.'" The British leadership was well aware of their impact. "In London King George III referred to the entire conflict as 'a Presbyterian War,' while Horace Walpole told Parliament: 'Cousin American has run off with a Presbyterian parson!'" At Valley Forge, George Washington's army was composed almost entirely of "Yankees and Borderlanders."

"Drums beating and colors flying"

American Nations can be recommended as a valuable source of insights into the historical origins of the conflicts that continue to divide America. However, given Woodard's New England slant, one must carefully evaluate what one reads, not only to separate fact from opinion but also to question what facts have been omitted that might reveal history in a more objective light. There is space to discuss only one example, but it is an egregious one, and it leaves one wondering whether the author is being deceitful or is merely fooling himself. That example is Woodard's recounting of how the Bill of Rights came to be.

The original Articles of Confederation were perceived as being weak, resulting in a call for a new constitution. The document drafted at the Constitutional Convention of 1787 created a strong federal government, but some thought it went too far. Patrick Henry famously refused to attend the Convention, declining with the pithy reply, "I smell a rat!" Henry and others argued for strong limits on federal power. The result was passage of the first ten amendments to the Constitution. Needless to say, the concepts contained in the Bill of Rights did not arise from whole cloth. Historical precedents existed that are recognized by scholars — and that were well known to the Founders.

But not, apparently, to Woodard.

American Nations leaves puzzled readers with the head-scratching impression that the Bill of Rights somehow derived from a document called the Articles of Capitulation on the Reduction of New Netherland. Yet, on examination one finds that this document simply fixes the terms of surrender signed by the Dutch as they turned over New Netherland to the English in 1664, after a long siege. Nevertheless, Woodard writes, "New Netherlanders refused to vote on it [the Constitution] at all until Congress agreed to add thirteen amendments modeled on the civil liberties enumerated" in said Articles. "Had the Congress not agreed to these demands by passing the Bill of Rights, the United States would probably not have lived to see its tenth birthday." No other antecedent or actor is named, potentially giving rise to a false interpretation that the Bill of Rights derives from the 1664 surrender articles, and perhaps that New Yorkers were solely responsible for its passage.

Author Colin Woodard

We will cover what the Founders thought about antecedents to the Bill of Rights. But first, it is worth taking a look at the Articles of Capitulation. There are twenty-three provisions, which must be viewed in light of the fact that they appear in a document dictating *terms of surrender*. Article Eight reads, "The Dutch here shall enjoy the liberty of their consciences in Divine Worship and church discipline." Likewise Articles Nine and Ten exempt Dutchmen from being pressed into war service or forced to quarter troops in their homes, respectively. Worthy provisions, to be sure. But, these articles exist side by side with others. For example, "All public houses shall continue for the uses which they are now for." In other words, the taverns remain open, so belly up to the bar gents. Article 19 states, gloriously,

> The officers, military and soldiers, shall march out, with their arms, drums beating and colors flying, and lighted matches, and if any of them will plan they shall have 50 acres of land set out for them, if any of them will serve

> as servants, they shall continue with all safety, and become free denizens afterwards.

Not surprisingly, Article 19 did not make it into the Bill of Rights, nor did the public house provision. More to the point, articles dealing with worship, property, and contracts were not profound statements of universal principle, but rather simply concessions to the besieged Dutch inhabitants in return for a surrender that brought a lengthy conflict to a peaceful end.

As every competent historian knows, Virginia's James Madison wrote the Bill of Rights. Madison was strongly influenced by many things, among them the English Bill of Rights of 1689, one of the cornerstones of English law. Closer to home, George Mason had authored the Virginia Declaration of Rights in 1776, proclaiming what he believed to be inherent rights of man. Mason's document had a far-reaching impact, influencing the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. Jefferson wrote Virginia's Statute for Religious Freedom, which became law in 1786. Madison was familiar with all of these.

These documents rested on a foundation grounded in natural law that was well known to the Founders. In the second of his 1689 essays, *Two Treatises of Government*, John Locke argued that individuals exist initially in a *state of nature* and are under no obligation to obey anyone, but rather are solely responsible for judging how they will conduct themselves. However, in this state they will soon be overwhelmed by those who are stronger — that is, the state of nature must devolve into anarchy and war, where, in the words of Thomas Hobbes, "the life of man [is] solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short." Men enter into civil and political society in order to secure protection. But, whereas Hobbes's *Leviathan* invoked an absolute sovereign, to which individuals surrendered a measure of freedom in return for protection, Locke saw society very differently. All men were inherently free, he said, and governments are simply contracts among the people, established for the mutual protection of their persons, property, and labor. There was no divine right of kings, and no one need surrender freedom to an all-powerful government. Civil societies existed solely by the consent of the governed.

Locke also took up the right of revolution. When a government ceased to act in the interests of the people the social contract was dissolved, and the people had the right to replace the government with another that better served their interests. Needless to say, this reasoning would have widely circulated in the colonies. One finds strong echoes of Locke's language in Mason's Virginia Declaration of Rights and Jefferson's Declaration of Independence. Locke's rationale constitutes a true theoretical foundation for natural law and the rights of man — and by derivation, the Bill of Rights. Undoubtedly, it was seen as such by Madison and the Founders, and it was woven inextricably into the very fabric of the founding documents.

It is difficult to know what is in another's mind. But, for Woodard to ignore the historical basis of the Bill of Rights suggests either intellectual dishonesty or self-deceit.

National future

The struggle has morphed into a fight between liberals vs. conservatives, but its regional origin is still visible, not only in national elections and congressional delegations but in enduring cultural patterns. For hundreds of years there was no clear victor, but the 1965 act that opened the United States to largely Democrat-voting non-Western immigrants changed the political calculus. What once was held in balance is approaching a tipping point. Unless something changes, demographics will finally produce a winner through sheer weight of imported numbers.

Yet, the author is strangely silent on this most compelling issue. In over three hundred pages, describing how groups of similar Europeans have been so at odds that they cannot resolve their differences, Woodard utters not a peep about the re-peopling of America with a cross section of *highly dissimilar* peoples from everywhere on the planet. Why wouldn't this new population diverge even more in their goals, beliefs, and values — and, therefore be even less willing to come together? The reality is that such a policy must disenfranchise the founding population, creating even more divergence, and ultimately, more likelihood of conflict.

The existential question is, what is America's future? One often hears the phrase, "We must take our country back" from conservative talk show hosts and pundits. One is reminded of the words of Garet Garrett, the Old Right journalist who resisted FDR's New Deal, calling it an imperial state. In "The Revolution Was" he wrote,

> There are those who never ceased to say very earnestly, "Something is going to happen to the American form of government if we don't watch out." These were the innocent disarmers. Their trust was in words. They had forgotten their Aristotle. More than 2,000 years ago he wrote of what can happen within the form, when "one thing takes the place of an-

> other, so that the ancient laws remain, while the power will be in the hands of those who have brought about revolution in the state."

The revolution is both political and demographic. Non-Western immigration is shifting the balance toward Puritan utopian communitarianism, updated to socialistic multiculturalism — a value system that imposes its will by fiat on anyone who opposes it. With the inevitability of a moving tectonic plate, stresses must build up within the fabric of American society that cannot be diffused, only suppressed. One sees the signs of incipient repression in recent laws that violate due process — justified on the basis of enhancing public safety and security, but that call into question the commitment of both parties to civil liberties guaranteed in the Constitution.

To his credit, Woodard attempts to come to grips with an America that might someday founder on the unresolved conflict of values. He even ventures a thought that sounds a lot like Patrick Buchanan, namely that the United States "appears to be losing its global preeminence and has been exhibiting the classic symptoms of an empire in decline." This would exclude military matters, of course. Or perhaps military imperialism is contributing to decline on other fronts, which he explicitly acknowledges. He also points out the precarious state of Mexico, which could collapse at some future time, leaving the northern part free to either join the U.S. or cast a covetous eye on the American southwest — the mythic Aztlan.

Woodard paints two possible futures. The first would preserve the status quo by adopting the Canadian example, compromising cultural agendas for the sake of unity. However, Woodard rejects this as unlikely. States in the two power blocks will likely "continue to wrestle with one another for control over federal policy, each doing what it can to woo the 'purple' ones to their cause, just as they have since they gathered at the First Continental Congress."

The more remote possibility is that, "faced with a major crisis, the federation's leaders will betray their oath to uphold the U.S. Constitution, the primary adhesive holding the union together." Given a deadly pandemic or a terrorist attack, the public "might condone the suspension of civil rights, the dissolution of Congress, or the incarceration of Supreme Court justices." With the federal system abandoned, one or more regional confederacies might form. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Woodard's speculation is this:

> Chances are these new sovereign entities would be based on state boundaries, because state governors and legislators would be the most politically legitimate actors in such a scenario.

One can guess that the Northeast would be one such configuration. The Dixie coalition would certainly be another. The Far West might be another. What might happen in the Southwest is open for speculation. As is the entire scenario given that it is based on the assumption that centralized power might somehow be surrendered at a time when it is being consolidated to a degree unprecedented in American history.

This raises a third choice. Woodard cites Wilber Zelinsky's Doctrine of First Effective Settlement. When an empty territory is settled or earlier inhabitants dislodged, "the first group to effect a viable, self-perpetuating society are of crucial significance for the later social and cultural geography of the area." But, First Effective Settlement crumbles before the inescapable fact that Demography is Destiny. America opened its borders in 1965, and every non-Western group votes with the party that caters to its ethnic self-interest. Over time, society will come to resemble that which immigrants brought with them rather than that which they joined.

Once that happens, Americans descended from the founding nations, who differ in beliefs from the reigning orthodoxy, may find laws passed ostensibly to protect them from outside threats now applied to themselves — the Constitution's guarantees of civil liberty and due process having been long since vacated by those who care nothing for its history, principles, or the people who wrote it. At that point, those who prided themselves on their advocacy of moderation and accommodation may wish they had gotten off the fence a little sooner. ■