

Freedom-Zine

America

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**Which Way Middle America?
Toward Awareness and Action
or Ignorant Apathy?**

Review of: Longworth, Richard C.
*Caught in the Middle: America's
Heartland in the Age of
Globalization*. New York:
Bloomsbury, 2008.

Richard C. Longworth's book has abundant current day case-examples and readable statistics linking the history of the Middle Western United States to the uncertain future of a proud, no longer prosperous, dim forecast for America's "Heartland" if its citizens and leaders lack courage to accept reality and implement change.

The author describes this "Middle America" well. His useful definition of the region's values can be summed as where working class lived the American dream.

Longworth's geography includes the whole or the parts of states from Ohio to Wisconsin formed by the 1787 Northwest Ordinance (pre-Constitution) and all of Iowa and Minnesota northern Missouri, these formed later from the Louisiana Purchase. He excludes only those parts of such states that gravitate toward the "Dixie south" or the great plains to the west of the Missouri River.

In short, Longworth sets his

Midwest as the inward-looking, insulated region that had the greatest "connections" of cultural and language similarity connected by "corridors" of transportation. The "value" identity over the course of 200 years of settlement and industrialization formed "conservative" leaning, patriotic, church going unionized laborer cities and populists small-farmer towns. Without much over-analysis, these formed the Jacksonian and "Reagan" Democratic base of national, state, and local politics.

From the time of early pioneers of the Scot-Irish, through the mass waves of pan-European settlement, the rural centers of farming and the urban manufacturing put raw human muscle power to energize the export of foods and finished goods. Upon these elements America built its economy. Plentiful rich black dirt, with coal and ore deposits, contributed to the powerful engine that has defined the middle of a wealthy America. The settlers first came to plant their homes along the great rivers and greater lakes connecting them from the east coast. When the industrial era came into full force of this region it rode the iron rails of trains. The foundation

corner-stone for an inward looking culture, the ethnic immigrants in concentrated areas, and capital investment came along these great corridors. From these inputs, a vigorous output of products steam-rolled outward to America, and even beyond to overseas.

The common sense, street smarts, and back-breaking labor helped make a distinctly American dream. The great land-grant universities established themselves in the area beginning in the 1840s. Such public and private schools as the Big Ten universities, Notre Dame and the University of Chicago, grew to the intellectual powerhouses training the sons and daughters of farmers and wage earners to lead this great society. But the dream meant, and has largely been until globalization, that education in universities or even community colleges were unnecessary for good living. Grain and stockyards, automobile or steel industries did not require depth of thinking. Without degrees, people made moderate wealth to retire to a comfortable twilight of reflection with grandchildren living just a few blocks away.

Globalization has ripped apart all 220 years of complacency. Since the

great global economic integration began after World War II, immigrants, free trade, lack of creativity, shortage of capital, and the flight of native youth wanting more opportunity has brought a future of potential turmoil. Thankfully, Longworth does NOT blame any one thing, one person, one party or one group (i.e. Hispanic immigrants) in his easy to understand journalism of the land he remembered growing up in the 1950s. The plentiful and good times.

The decay that everyone sees in the Midwest, from ghostly store fronts on main street driven out by superstores to derelict factories, is all created by the new realities—in politics, economics, society, and culture. These realities now dominate a world connected by corridors of speed and volume. The Midwest of North America stands too far from competitive price levels of labor and materials, too far from the distant export markets, too close to global corridors of bedroom communities pushing the bottom lines of supply and demand against wage unskilled labor. In the authors view, old suspicion wrongly discounts intelligent but radical truths.

Longworth uses some case examples as diverse as Chicago, Minneapolis, Madison, and even semi-rural Iowa and Illinois to see a solution to the problems. First, specialization is key. To make a difference, the successes of Chicago's commodities markets or Iowa's knowledge of corn, or Minnesota's medical research and development, might provide a hope for the Midwest in becoming a biosciences and biomanufacturing "vital center" of global 21st century commerce. But it all depends on education, beyond high school to post-doctorate training in a knowledge based technical society.

The biggest obstacle Longworth diagnoses comes from all level of governments trying to breath life into the corpse of family farms and mass-production instead of cutting

away dead flesh so new can regenerate. With the political boundaries set over 220 years, and with outside investment unwilling to come, Longworth believes in a regional solution. For example, he proposes college, university, and think-tank programs for research and tuition funding from private and public across accessible across state lines followed by regional venture capital for "new new idea" businesses. Awareness needs a following of action.

The needed changes suggested by the author hold a valid route to preventing the great Middle West from intellect to bring educated youth and retrained unemployed back to the communities and save cities from predatory poverty and crime.

Some things leave a reader miffed. Longworth says governments stand in the way of change for the immediate satisfaction of votes. Instead of focusing on a "super-state" of the region's several states, this "revolution" in the Midwest can only take place in the culture—where people step on the land—where governments cannot operate except by force. Would not a regional wide effort simply hand over human labor and entrepreneurial creativity in the form of more wealth and power to the richer and over-educated at the expense of the common Joe? Would not permanent change happen better if people, not governments, took responsibility for their communities, their culture? This grass roots action could create not a global economy but a Post-Historical one based on the values Midwesterners hold most dear: spirit, family, community and country.

The Underground Journal

In a cavern deep below the streets and concrete of a riverside city, beneath civilization posting reality above, one can find beneath the world in Polk County an "Underground" bunker of art refuge and sanctuary. Musicians, painters, glass sculptors, and other odd assorted writers of mad telling tales all meet and hide in the cave-like bastion of creativity and freedom of thought and word. Plying skill, craft, and genius, the "undergrounders" commiserate in the cities, towns, and hamlets of this bedroom-urbia of the old northwest. For the undergrounders are pioneers of the new wave of the groove-thing for the nominal reason—because it is just good to do for everyone's soul trapped in a world where we want to flee the reality.

I had the fortune a few days ago to visit the underground. I couldn't stay for the last band, the math and instrumental tones I had wanted to see. I had to leave to evade the weather bringing me chill and sickness when outside the underground, or is the "outrigger." They came so far and I regretted missing their show.

Cheeky, Pat, Dave and Adam came on the scene and ranned their ambient sounds through the tools of electricity-generated tone and melody. They played second, before I left, and gave their slice of stage time a wonderful retro-cathedral echo of intro a rock swoon and vibe.

The first band, in this reverse order, I thoroughly enjoyed. First, to open the show, B.H., a known Metro music comic book-like industry hero, played his swanning cord fed guitar and single base drum in a solo show of mind-unbounding back beats, rhythms, and tempest tempos. He ended. B.H. brought his crescendoing audience to the brick stop wall of fascinated, delightful stupor of his cleverness, or it might even have been genius. Then John and Derek joined him on stage.

For one and a half bands, anyway, I enjoyed my time in the underground that night. You can go, if you know where to find it. Or you can build your own where you are for all of us to stop by for a safe, sanctuary from dull-edged reality and the insanity of real life.

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