

AlbertMohler.com

Are You Retro or Metro? Culture War from the Left

Are you Retro or Metro? That's the question raised by a series of unusual advertisements placed in some of the nation's leading newspapers. Featuring the question in bold relief, the ads portray "Retro Americans" as backward, rural, conservative, and Christian, while "Metro Americans" are forward-thinking, technological, urbane, and sophisticated—as well as secular. Newspaper readers have been scratching their heads for days, wondering about the meaning of these odd representations. Now we know—these ads are nothing less than a declaration of culture war from the Left.

Tuesday, August 24, 2004

Are you Retro or Metro? That's the question raised by a series of unusual advertisements placed in some of the nation's leading newspapers. Featuring the question in bold relief, the ads portray "Retro Americans" as backward, rural, conservative, and Christian, while "Metro Americans" are forward-thinking, technological, urbane, and sophisticated—as well as secular. Newspaper readers have been scratching their heads for days, wondering about the meaning of these odd representations. Now we know—these ads are nothing less than a declaration of culture war from the Left.

The "Metro versus Retro" campaign is the brainchild of John Sperling, an eccentric eighty-three year old billionaire most famous as the founder of the University of Phoenix, the nation's largest for-profit academic institution. Sperling has an agenda—a big one—and that's to push the Democratic Party to the far left, arguing that it must leave behind any hope of securing a political base among Retro Americans. While the thought of an even more liberal Democratic Party may be enough to send shivers down the national spine, a closer look at Sperling's agenda is even scarier.

Though the newspaper ads are minimalist, Sperling and four coauthors have released a massive book distributed through Amazon.com. In *The Great Divide: Retro versus Metro America*, Sperling and his associates set out an audacious plan to divide America along class, culture, and religious lines.

Starting with a map of the nation, *The Great Divide* assigns a Metro or Retro label to each state. "Geographically, America is two nations. We call these two nations Retro and Metro America. Retro America is defined by the South, the Midwest, and the Rocky Mountain states; Metro America by the two coasts and the Great Lakes states," they argue. These states are roughly analogous to the "red states" and "blue states" that are now a staple of modern political analysis. Even as Red America voted overwhelmingly for George Bush, the Blue states voted for Al Gore.

The Great Divide is a convoluted argument filled with inconsistencies and odd-ball claims. The work falls short as a work of serious sociology or cultural analysis, but it is profoundly meaningful as a prophetic warning of what at least some on the Left would hope to see in an all-out culture war in America.

Sperling and his team direct their aim at the South, the Rocky Mountain states, and the Midwest as centers of backwardness, Christian conservatism, agricultural values, and "extraction industries." According to their analysis, the Metro states are associated with the Democratic Party, while the Retro states are largely Republican. Though some form of cultural division has marked American life throughout most of the nation's history, Sperling and his coauthors argue that the cultural divide is now reaching an acute stage.

These authors write with an attitude of condescension that is nothing less than astounding, and their confidence in their grasp of both facts and analysis is undermined by their eccentric and self-serving conclusions. *The Great Divide* simply separates Americans along lines of class, education, Christian conviction, aesthetic taste, and rural versus metropolitan residents. As a piece of cultural analysis, the book is crude, reductionistic, and lacking in seriousness. As a text for political analysis, the book is both extreme and cruel. As a factor in our current cultural debates, the book is nothing less

than scary. John Sperling is adamantly opposed to everything George Bush represents, and he is opposed to virtually everything President George W. Bush has done. He wants to revamp the nation's economy, reshape the nation's political debate, and even restructure the American government. He points to the Constitutional Convention of 1789 as an example of Retro supremacy. Retro America's political and economic power is rooted in the U.S. Constitution's failure to provide for an absolute democracy. Sperling and his associates call for the elimination of the Electoral College, and they describe the Senate as "a mockery of democracy." The Great Divide offers an unembarrassed elitist vision of America, calling for the smart people who live in the cities to seize power from the dumb folk who live on farms and in states located in the South and what the Hollywood elite calls "fly-over country." The big states, which tend to be Metro, should seize power from the smaller states, which tend to be Retro. "Over the past 200 years, America has paid a terrible price for the senatorial power of the small states, especially the veto power that can be exercised by one-third of the Senate."

The book also suggests that large metropolitan areas might just declare themselves to be states, claiming representation in the U.S. Senate and expanding Metro power in Congress's upper chamber. Throughout the book, the authors argue that the dominance of agriculture and the "extraction industries" explain much of the backwardness of the South and other Retro regions. These extraction industries would include oil, coal, and other fossil-fuel industries. Energy is a big issue for The Great Divide's authors. As they see it, Retro America is largely funded by Metro America's dependence upon these backward states for fuel and energy needs. In a statement that might charitably be described as eccentric, the authors argue, "Although Metro America is gaining increasing independence from Retro energy, the current arrangement of energy flow from Retro to Metro and money flow from Metro to Retro is the product of historical precedence and political power rather than rational economic arrangement." What in the world can this mean?

How are we to understand that Metro America is "gaining increasing independence" from energy needs? Is New York City's electricity now derived from millions of yuppies riding stationary bikes attached to electric generators? Is Los Angeles piping in power from another planet without telling the rest of the country? Are New Age channelers directing new and undisclosed energy sources to San Francisco, Portland, and Seattle?

Virtually all Americans would agree that independence from fossil fuels would be a great gain for the nation. Nevertheless, it is precisely liberals like John Sperling who have closed off virtually any other alternative. The obvious alternative to fossil fuels for electric generation is the building of additional atomic energy plants. But nuclear power—which produces virtually no air pollution and requires no foreign dependence—is vehemently opposed by the very people who oppose the use of fossil fuels.

Readers will hardly be shocked to know that The Great Divide's authors hate Wal-Mart and McDonald's—places none of them are likely to frequent. These authors are about as likely to be seen eating a Big Mac while headed for Wal-Mart as Ronald McDonald is likely to be seen crossing the graduation platform at Harvard or Yale. They hate mainstream America and everything it represents. They also oppose agricultural values and see family farms and agricultural communities as hopelessly mired in conservative values. And yet, though they appear to hate farms, they apparently still want to eat. Go figure.

According to their analysis, dumb people live in the South and in rural areas while smart people—the "creative class"—head for metropolitan areas such as San Francisco, Boston, New York, and the like. As they explain, "creative people move to these places because of the abundant, high-quality amenities and the opportunity to validate their identities as creative people. There is a vibrancy of street life, cafe culture, arts, music, and outdoor activities. These people also seem to care about physical fitness and access to outdoor activities and the wilderness. They want to live in a safe and clean environment."

By inference, we should assume that conservative and thus "uncreative" people continue to live in the South, in the Midwest, in the Rocky Mountain states, and in rural contexts because they love fast food, cherish low-quality amenities, neglect physical fitness, and are happy to live in unsafe and unclean environments. All this is due, we must presume, to the fact that they lack interest in "validating" their identities as creative people.

Just think of this—if a conservative billionaire and his cronies bought a series of well-placed advertisements in leading national newspapers, describing liberals, metropolitan residents, and northerners in these terms, the national media would be in an absolute uproar.

The Great Divide is nothing less than a declaration of culture war against conservative values and the Americans who

hold them. The work is filled with hate, cultural condescension, and bizarre proposals backed up with harebrained analysis. Nevertheless, the book's greatest insult to the American character is its all-out assault on Christian conviction. This book assaults mainstream America and authentic Christianity. How will the prophets of cultural "tolerance" respond to this?

Content Copyright © 2002-2010, R. Albert Mohler, Jr.