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# Red and Blue America—The Washington Post Takes a Look

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**Thursday, April 29, 2004**

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This development has caught the attention of The Washington Post, and the paper has responded with a fascinating three-part series on “Red-Blue America.” As might be expected, the Post gives first attention to the political nature of the divide. With the 2004 presidential elections on the horizon, the paper notes a hardening of political lines, as the nation appears to be split right down the middle in terms of a liberal/conservative division. While in previous elections candidates gave strategic attention to those known as “swing voters,” both parties now see the election hinging on their ability to get their base voters to the polls. By some reckonings, the nation is now fully divided along partisan and ideological lines, with the Republican and Democratic parties each claiming about forty-seven percent of the nation’s likely voters. Writing for the Post, reporter David Von Drehle explained that as many as seven out of ten voters say they “have already made up their minds and cannot be swayed.”

The split between “Red” and “Blue” America is traced to the familiar electoral maps used by the networks and other media with reference to voting patterns in the Electoral College. Red America—primarily the districts that voted for George W. Bush—is found in the South and in America’s heartland—populated by farmers, families, and churchgoers. Blue America—primarily those districts that voted for Al Gore—is found on the two coasts and in university centers, where young urban professionals and those involved in the knowledge culture tend to congregate. The values that separate Red and Blue America cover everything from abortion and sexuality to entertainment choices and sporting events. Political scientist Hans Noel of the University of California at Los Angeles argues that the country is now polarized around conservative and liberal positions which—for the first time in the nation’s history—correspond to party lines. “It has taken 40 or 50 years to work itself out, but the ideological division in America—which is not new—is now lined up with the party division,” he said. Some go so far as to describe the nation in terms of two tribes “unhappily sharing the country.” As Noel remarked: “People in these two countries don’t even see each other.”

How does this apply to a political race? Pollster John Zogby reports that voters for Bush were “more likely to be married, less likely to join a union, more likely to be regular churchgoers—mostly at Protestant churches—and far more likely to be ‘born again’ Christians.” Zogby, who often works for Republican candidates, argues that these demographic trends were indicated by “clear statistical margins.”

A pollster traditionally associated with Democrats, Stanley B. Greenberg, has reported similar findings. According to the Post, Greenberg found that Blue Americans “are most likely to be found among highly educated women, non-churchgoers, union members and the ‘cosmopolitans’ of the New York area, New England and California.”

The human reality behind these statistical trends was brought to life by Post reporter David Finkel in two articles published in the series. The first was written from Sugar Land, Texas, and focused on Britton Stein as a representative of Red America. According to Stein, a landscaper, a Republican, and a devout conservative Roman Catholic, George W. Bush is “a man, a man’s man, a manly man.” Al Gore, on the other hand, is “a ranting and raving little whiny baby.” Mr. Stein seems never to be at a loss for words. According to Finkel’s reporting, “he lives in a house that has six guns in the

closets and 21 crosses in the main hallway. His wife cuts his hair with electric clippers. His three daughters aren't embarrassed when he kissed them on their cheeks. He loves his family, hamburgers and his dog. He believes in God, prays daily and goes to church weekly. He has a jumbo smoker in his backyard and a 40-foot tree he has climbed to hang Christmas lights. He has a pickup truck that he has filled with water for the Fourth of July parade, driving splashing kids around a community where Boy Scouts plant American flags in the yards. His truck is a Chevy. His beer is Bud Light. His savior is Jesus Christ." This is not Kerry Country.

Finkel's second article was written from San Francisco, and focuses on the Harrison family as representatives of Blue America. The Harrisons describe Bill Clinton in terms like "intelligent," "charismatic" and "a good representation of America." George W. Bush, on the other hand, is "frightening," "a total imbecile," and "monkey boy."

Like the Steins, the Harrisons are Catholics, but their understanding of Catholicism is very different from the conservative piety and theology of the Stein family. According to Finkel, "their neighborhood is filled with restaurants that are cafes and stores that are boutiques, and their neighbors include straight people, gay people, rich people, homeless people, married people, single people, and the House minority leader, Rep. Nancy Pelosi, who says of this place: 'I think it is more American than most places in the country'."

John Kenneth White of Catholic University argues that the Steins and the Harrisons represent two "parallel universes." Sen. John Kerry and President George W. Bush will compete for votes in these two parallel universes, knowing full well that what endears them to one universe will make them an object of scorn in the other. For most Americans, the election is not just about politics—it is about choosing a picture of America for the future.

White, who teaches political science, explains that lifestyle issues such as marriage, church, sexuality, gay rights, and guns separate these two moral universes. David Finkel gets down to the basic questions at hand: "Is the United States to be guided by the rigid morality of the Ten Commandments, or by something more elastic? By the desire for national security or civil liberties? By the feeling that leaders are authoritative or authoritarian? What is the proper definition of marriage? Of family? Of the true American life?" There is very little middle ground on these issues.

The split between Red and Blue America has been noted by many scholars and reporters, but few have approached the issue with the verve and insight of David Brooks. In "One Nation, Slightly Divisible", an article published in the December 2001 edition of *The Atlantic Monthly*, Brooks described the split between Red and Blue America in terms of lifestyle and cultural issues virtually all can understand: "Different sorts of institutions dominate life in these two places. In Red America churches are everywhere. In Blue America Thai restaurants are everywhere. In Red America they have QVC, the Pro Bowlers tour, and hunting. In Blue America we have NPR, Doris Kearns Goodwin, and socially conscious investing. In Red America the Wal-Marts are massive, with parking lots the size of state parks. In Blue America the stores are small but the markups are big. You'll rarely see a Christmas store in Blue America, but in Red America, even in July, you'll come upon stores selling fake Christmas trees, wreath-decorated napkins, Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer collectable thimbles and spoons, and little snow-covered villages."

Brooks went on to describe Blue America as culturally enlightened, sophisticated, and cosmopolitan, but completely out of touch with the culture of Red America. "We don't know who Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins are, even though the novels they have co-written have sold about 40 million copies over the past few years. We don't know what James Dobson says on his radio program, which is listened to by millions. We don't know about Reba or Travis. We don't know what happens in mega-churches on Wednesday evenings, and some of us couldn't tell you the difference between a fundamentalist and an evangelical, let alone describe what it means to be a Pentecostal. 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, although stock-car races are the best-attended sporting events in the country. We don't know how to shoot or clean a rifle. We can't tell a military officers rank by looking at his insignia. We don't know what soy beans look like when they're growing in a field."

Even so, Brooks ended with an optimistic conclusion. Despite the lifestyle, moral, and spiritual issues dividing Americans in to two different camps, Brooks denied that the nation is fundamentally divided into two immovable groups. "We are not a divided nation. We are a cafeteria nation," Brooks argued. "There is no Culture War," he firmly insisted. Nevertheless, voting trends say otherwise. As one letter writer to *The Atlantic Monthly* responded to Brooks, "Americans . . . let their ballots do the talking, and in the 2000 election they voted as if there was indeed such a war."

The Washington Post series does not offer the final word on the subject, but the paper's insightful reporting demonstrates that our current cultural conflict is deeper than most Americans have ever imagined. Both sides see the 2004 presidential election as crucial for the nation's future. Both sides are right.

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