

Macsen Rutledge Book Report:

Colin Woodward's

American Nations: A History of The Eleven Rival Regional Cultures of North America

It is a sad fact that the residents of a place often neglect their own history and, in the age of the smartphone, even the local geography. Though I have had a fondness for the subject of history all my life, it wasn't until I read Colin Woodward's "American Nations" that I discovered much of the cultural backdrop for events and personalities. I would recommend this book to anyone looking to understand the "nation" of the United States of America, if we can call it a single nation at all. This book was even useful in filling-in my knowledge of my own hometown of Syracuse in Upstate New York. I always felt that I was a Yankee and embraced that "nation" (as Woodward would put it) in my identity, I did not really understand the region until I read the chapter on New Netherlands and New York city. Although I am a fan of Washington Irving and even enjoyed his satirical "Knickerbocker's History of New York" (which luckily was so insulting to the Dutch families that it inspired to a flurry of historical research and resulted in a preservation of much lore that may have been forgotten), but that was all the Dutch I was aware of. I chalked that up to the Upstate/Downstate divide that Syracusans like to remind all out-of-Staters of.

Woodward's excellent synopsis of the Dutch nation and its multicultural composition made me realize that the effects were not limited to Irving's stereotypical Dutch yeoman aesthetic. The Jewish diaspora, having migrated to the Netherlands from Spain and Portugal, set themselves up in New York City and spread their cultural influence all across the State. I always imagined that the Jewish influx was part of the later "Ellis Island story" and not so deeply rooted in the cultural fabric of the State. It makes perfect sense though, considering their impact on the arts, literature, and of course the many social justice organizations that I partook of in my younger days. I would go so far as to say that the social circles I was raised in were about equal parts Yankee and Jewish (with a more recent admixture of Southern culture from the African American migrations), but it was something I never even thought about, due to constant proximity. A combination of feeling ideologically out-of-place in this world and the rapid changes COVID brought to my social environment would eventually lead me to seek the idealized "American nation" as it is portrayed in the MAGA movement. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

They say that familiarity breeds contempt and this is true of one's own historical artifacts if we don't take the time to stop and learn from them. One example lies behind glass on the second

floor of Syracuse's own city hall. How many times did I ascend the steps of the Romanesque landing and never stop to look? Then one day it's shabbiness and totally out-of-place appearance broke through my somnambulist performance of mundane civil duties, and I looked. What seemed so shabby to me, was in fact a broken standard, born by the units of a civil war regiment, broken in half, and then hastily cobbled together with a leather bridle-- still stained and muddy from where the horse had fallen. A small plaque told the story of how one flag-bearer after another had stooped to raise the precious colors from the body of the previous owner, now dead or wounded, and carried it into the heat of an awful battle. Finally, the wood itself was splintered in half by shot and the standard fell in pieces to the ground, only to be resurrected by a makeshift leather halter at hand, rising once again to lead them to victory. That hasty cob-job had held itself together through all these years, preserved as a testimony to the endurance of a country itself barely strung together of disjointed parts, as Woodward shows in his book.

This revelation may not have given me a complete metaphor for the larger nation at the time, but it did instill a renewed interest in history and particularly the Civil War. Soon I found that, rather than a dull litany of battles, this conflict was a fascinating mixture of combat, politics, rhetoric and the clashing of ideals. I even enjoyed some of the classic novels of the pre and post-war period. "Uncle Tom's Cabin," is to this day the only literature that has actually moved me to tears, and presented the issue of slavery with surprising nuance. "Gone With The Wind," I devoured and, having never seen the movie, I was as shocked and scandalized as Scarlett O'Hara herself to discover that the main heroes of the story were members of the Klu Klux Klan!

How could I have been satisfied with the "Potemkin" history that displayed this conflict so boringly all through school? I suppose now that I have read "American Nations" that it is no wonder we Yankees fail to understand the South, seeing as it was not a uniform nation that we conquered. Instead, the North was composed of the "nations" of Yankeedom, New France, and the Midlands-- while the opponent was a patchwork of El Norte, the Deep South, Tidewater, and Greater Appalachia. There was even a sort of battle with the remnant of New Netherlands, New York City itself, ending in a naval barrage of the mob. I had never realized how much the Virginia aristocracy were a different people from the Barbados gentry of the Deep South and the Appalachian hill-billies. I definitely plan on reading Woodward's book on the Civil War period and how it formed the concept of "the Union", which I took for granted as being so fundamental. The winners indeed write the history books (or at least the ones I grew up reading).

One of the most interesting things about the Civil War is how controversial it remains on many of the key questions, such as why the war was fought in the first place. As I read more about the conflict and its causes I realized that there were actually quite a few answers to that question. South Carolina seceded for different reasons than Virginia, and none of them were the same reasons that Lincoln decided to call up a volunteer army. Although the South fired the first shots, they will point to Lincoln's actions as the real reason, never mind that the Southern armories had been stealing Federal weapons for years and were taking control of the officer schools.

As Woodward writes of the Revolutionary War,

“The event we call the American Revolution wasn't really revolutionary, at least while it was underway. The military struggle of 1775-1782 wasn't fought by an “American people” seeking to create a united, continent-spanning republic... On the contrary, it was a profoundly conservative action fought by a loose military alliance of nations, each of which was most concerned with preserving or reasserting control of its respective culture, character, and power structure.” *pg 116*

In some senses the clash of the Civil War was only possible because the separate nations that fought the Revolutionary War, for their own limited reasons, had formed into opposing camps and gained cohesion through mutual hostility. I believe this process began directly after independence, with the rise of the Virginian elite to dominance of the executive branch. When Aaron Burr, the chief representative of New York's anti-federalists, was cast under the bus by Jefferson, it was an act of regional loyalism over shared national interest and ideology. Though both New York and Virginia, as large and powerful States, sought a limited federal government, the enticement to establish the Virginia dynasty was too great. When this conflict of people's was personified in the duel between Yankee Burr and Barbados-bred Alexander Hamilton it meant that the Deep South (a sort of “New Barbados” as different from Virginia as it was from New York) was ditching their own ideological preferences in favor of expanding regional alliances.

Even though I had heard of these episodes in Nancy Isenberg's wonderful biography “Fallen Founder” (read by Scott Brick in the audio version I must add), it never made sense to me why Burr thought he could ally with the Jefferson clique as Vice President when he was from such

a different Northern region. Even Gore Vidal's very well researched novel "Burr" seemed to leave questions in my mind as it explains Burr's dilemma in the nation's first constitutional crisis. But Woodward lays out the differences in the Southern "nations" that make Virginia as likely to ally with Yankeedom as with the Barbadian Deep South and Greater Appalachia. It makes even more sense, considering that Alexander Hamilton, Burr's mortal enemy up to and even after his death, was a Barbadian outsider seeking a place in the new Virginian royalty. Hamilton was able to crush Burr's career through a pre-planned press blitz after their duel and the New York anti-federalists never recovered. Thus, once again I find that there is a cultural interplay of identities underlying the early history of the republic I live in, that I had never seen before. Although much of the vitriol against Burr turned out to be slander, it is true that he was not a person that could easily ally with Jefferson's social sphere because of radical differences in their respective nations. Again, I must conclude that the adulation of Hamilton and the tarring of Burr shows how deeply American history itself is driven by the different worldviews of the geographic regions Colin Woodward defines.

In a country that has so many parallel historical narratives existing side-by-side in the minds and on the bookshelves, is it any wonder that we fail to understand each other in the present day as well? This dichotomy in historical understandings is what began to alienate me from the Yankee world-view that I was accustomed to, most of my life. As I read more about the Civil War and the post-war era (Grant being my favorite President and his tomb my favorite national monument).

During COVID I found myself seeking the company of other people who would be more tolerant of a broad discussion. Having already moved away from the historical orthodoxy I had been raised in, it was just another small step to begin to move away from the political orthodoxy as well. When I voted for Trump, as a joke in 2016, I didn't realize I would become alienated from old friends who seemed to be hardening their positions at the same time. I also did not think he would win!! No doubt a bifurcation was happening in the national mood that reminded me of the turbulent years of Western expansion and ensuing Slave/Free State controversies. Although the mythology of the North and the South both portray themselves as united peoples, according to Woodward, these were a conglomeration of mini-nations. Still, under the pressure of harsh power struggles in Congress the sides were fused together into warring parties seemingly overnight. The

COVID pandemic and the government's response seemed to be a similar divisive issue that touched nerves still raw from the legacy of the Civil War, slavery, and the many evil results it produced. When the anti-lockdown protestors in Michigan were displaying militant symbols like the Confederate flag, I somehow found myself in distasteful associations, due to my own lockdown protesting (though they would claim it's just "redneck pride" or something like that).

During the election of 2020, I was still of the mindset that political issues were disagreements we could all compromise on, if we just worked on communication and making "deals" as Trump liked to say. I even attended the Stop the Steal protests thinking that a strong showing would convince legislators that the people needed a robust investigation of mail-in voting and other COVID innovations that, if nothing else, were destroying confidence in the system among my new Trumper friends.

The people I had been meeting were consumers of Q anon tales, which were more like Lovecraftian Scifi, than actual political commentary. But all sorts of people would show up and often we would discuss who had been to the most Grateful Dead shows while the guys in tactical-gear passed around beers.

At first at the Capitol on January 6th, 2021, it was a surprisingly light-hearted crowd. Even the wild events of January 6th had an almost festive vibe, from where I was on the other side from the building. At that point I figured that the election was over, but I thought that Trump was going to show up and make another speech and then Ted Cruz might get his resolution for an emergency investigation approved. We weren't done protesting yet, but it was kind of a big farewell party, too. When someone came out and started saying that Ashley Babbitt had been "murdered", people made him quiet down saying, "Hey now, are you trying to start a riot or something!?" I really had no idea how serious the rioting and destruction was, until I got back to the hotel and turned on the news where they were playing the video from the other side of the building and the Senate chamber. What was the most unsettling to me, was that some of the more dedicated Q followers were still thinking Trump might get another term!

At this point I began to rethink the past couple of years and decided to take a break from politics and US history. I had been becoming more interested in the Orthodox Church in America and visited some of the local monasteries where I learned that (again!) there was a whole different side to history centered on the city of Constantinople and the Eastern Roman Empire. While I had

been seeing the world as intellectual battleground where ideas and nations struggled to form more efficient systems from Enlightenment principles, I began to look at the spiritual side of the equation. After becoming a Catecumen for about a year. I was baptized into the Church and began a new life. Now when I read about American history, I see it as just one part of the story of humanity. There is no need to create the perfect system, to achieve the pinnacle of rational humanism and to solve all the world's problems. Rather, we should recognize that we are a patchwork nation, a beautiful patchwork, but never a perfect and unified whole. I can live with that and seek more pragmatic solutions like a Convention of the States, which I hope to see in my lifetime. In the meantime, I am going to finish my bachelors degree at Cortland College and to help to construct a temple in my new community of Groton where our OCA mission is located. Like many Americans before me, I am moving along to a community that suits me better in my middle age, continuing the gigantic sifting process that has created so many American nations.

Macsen Rutlege.. My thoughts and ponderings on myself, January 6th. and American History.