

## A Geography Lesson for the Tea Party

Even as the movement's grip tightens on the GOP, its influence is melting away across vast swaths of America, thanks to centuries-old regional traditions that few of us understand.

by [Colin Woodard](#)

We're accustomed to thinking of American regionalism along Mason-Dixon lines: North against South, Yankee blue against Dixie gray or, these days, red. Of course, we all know it's more complicated than that, and not just because the paradigm excludes the western half of the country. Even in the East, there are massive, obvious, and long-standing cultural fissures within states like Maryland, Pennsylvania, Delaware, New York, and Ohio. Nor are cultural boundaries reflected in the boundaries of more westerly states. Northern and downstate Illinois might as well be different planets. The coastal regions of Oregon and Washington seem to have more in common with each other and with the coasts of British Columbia and northern California than they do with the interiors of their own states. Austin may be the capital of Texas, but Dallas, Houston, and San Antonio are the hubs of three distinct Texas, while citizens of the two Missouris can't even agree on how to pronounce their state's name. The conventional, state-based regions we talk about—North, South, Midwest, Southwest, West—are inadequate, unhelpful, and ahistorical.

The real, historically based regional map of our continent respects neither state nor international boundaries, but it has profoundly influenced our history since the days of Jamestown and Plymouth, and continues to dictate the terms of political debate today. I spent years exploring the founding, expansion, and influence of these regional entities—stateless nations, really—while writing my new book, *American Nations: A History of the Eleven Rival Regional Cultures of North America*. It demonstrates that our country has never been united, either in purpose, principles, or political behavior. We've never been a nation-state in the European sense; we're a federation of nations, more akin to the European Union than the Republic of France, and this confounds both collective efforts to find common ground and radical campaigns to force one component nation's values on the others. Once you recognize the real map (see above), you'll see its shadow everywhere: in linguists' dialect maps, cultural anthropologist's maps of the

spread of material culture, cultural geographer's maps of religious regions, and the famous blue county/red county maps of nearly every hotly contested presidential election of the past two centuries. Understanding America's true component "nations" is essential to comprehending the Tea Party movement, just as it clarifies the events of the American Revolution or the U.S. Civil War.

Our regional divides stem from the fact that the original clusters of North American colonies were settled by people from distinct regions of the British Islands—and from France, the Netherlands, and Spain—each with their own religious, political, and ethnographic characteristics. For generations, these discrete Euro-American cultures developed in remarkable isolation from one another, consolidating their own cherished principles and fundamental values, and expanding across the eastern half of the continent in nearly exclusive settlement bans. Some championed individualism, others utopian social reform. Some believed themselves guided by divine purpose, others championed freedom of conscience and inquiry. Some embraced an Anglo-Protestant identity, others ethnic and religious pluralism. Some valued equality and democratic participation, others deference to a traditional aristocratic order modeled on the slave states of classical antiquity. Throughout the colonial period and the Early Republic, they saw themselves as competitors—for land, settlers, and capital—and even as enemies, taking opposing sides in the English Civil War, the American Revolution, and the War of 1812. Nearly all of these regional cultures would consider leaving the Union in the eighty-year period after Yorktown, and two went to war to do so in the 1860s. Immigration enriched these nations—or, more accurately, the nations that were attractive to immigrants—but it did not fundamentally alter the characteristics of these "dominant" cultures; the children and grandchildren of immigrants didn't assimilate into an American culture, instead tending to assimilate to the norms of the regional culture in which they found themselves. There's never been an America, but rather several Americas, and there are eleven today.

### **Yankeedom**

Founded on the shores of Massachusetts Bay by radical Calvinists as a new Zion, since the outset Yankeedom has put great emphasis on perfecting earthly society through social engineering,

individual self-denial for the common good, and the aggressive assimilation of outsiders. It has prized education, intellectual achievement, community (rather than individual) empowerment, and broad citizen participation in politics and government, the latter seen as the public's shield against the machinations of grasping aristocrats, corporations, and other tyrannies. From its New England core, it has spread with its settlers across upper New York State, the northern strips of Pennsylvania, Ohio, Illinois, and Iowa, parts of the eastern Dakotas, and on up into the upper Great Lakes states and Canada's Maritime Provinces.

### **New Netherland**

Established by the Dutch at a time when the Netherlands was the most sophisticated society in the Western world, New Netherland has displayed its salient characteristics throughout its history: a global commercial trading culture— multiethnic, multireligious, and materialistic— with a profound tolerance for diversity and an unflinching commitment to the freedom of inquiry and conscience. Today it comprises Greater New York City, including northern New Jersey, western Long Island, and the lower Hudson Valley. Like seventeenth-century Amsterdam, it emerged as a leading global center of publishing, trade, and finance, a magnet for immigrants, and a refuge for those persecuted by other regional cultures, from Sephardim in the seventeenth century to gays, feminists, and bohemians in the early twentieth. Not particularly democratic or concerned with great moral questions—it sided with the South on slavery prior to the attack on Fort Sumter—it nonetheless has found itself in alliance with Yankeeedom in defense of a shared commitment to public-sector institutions and a rejection of evangelical prescriptions for individual behavior.

### **The Midlands**

America's great swing region was founded by English Quakers, who believed in man's inherent goodness and welcomed people of many nations and creeds to their utopian colonies on the shores of Delaware Bay. Pluralistic and organized around the middle class, the Midlands spawned the culture of Middle America and the Heartland, where ethnic and ideological purity have never been a priority, government has been seen as an unwelcome intrusion, and political opinion has been moderate, even apathetic. An ethnic mosaic from the start—it had a German

rather than British majority at the time of the Revolution—it shares the Yankee belief that society should be organized to benefit ordinary people, but it rejects top-down government intervention. From its cultural hearth in southeastern Pennsylvania, southern New Jersey, and northern Delaware and Maryland, Midland culture spread through central Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, northern Missouri, most of Iowa, southern Ontario, and the eastern halves of South Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas, sharing the border cities of Chicago (with Yankeedom) and St. Louis (with Greater Appalachia).

### **Tidewater**

Settled in many cases by the younger sons of southern English gentry, Tidewater was meant to reproduce the semifeudal manorial society of the countryside they'd left behind, where economic, political, and social affairs were run by and for landed aristocrats. These self-identified “Cavaliers” largely succeeded in their aims, turning the lowlands of Virginia, Maryland, southern Delaware, and northeastern North Carolina into a country gentleman's paradise, with indentured servants and, later, slaves taking the role of the peasantry. Tidewater has always been fundamentally conservative, with a high value placed on respect for authority and tradition, and very little on equality or public participation in politics. The most powerful nation in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, today it is a nation in decline, having been boxed out of westward expansion by its boisterous Appalachian neighbors and, more recently, eaten away by the expanding Midlands.

### **Greater Appalachia**

Founded in the early eighteenth century by wave upon wave of rough, bellicose settlers from the war-ravaged borderlands of northern Ireland, northern England, and the Scottish lowlands, Appalachia has been lampooned by writers and screenwriters as the home of rednecks, hillbillies, crackers, and white trash. It transplanted a culture formed in a state of near-constant warfare and upheaval, characterized by a warrior ethic and a deep commitment to personal sovereignty and individual liberty. From south-central Pennsylvania, it spread down the Appalachian Mountains and out into the southern tiers of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, the Arkansas and Missouri Ozarks, the eastern two-thirds of Oklahoma and on down to the Hill Country of Texas, clashing with

Indians, Mexicans, and Yankees along the way. Intensely suspicious of lowland aristocrats and Yankee social engineers alike, Appalachia has shifted alliances based on whoever appeared to be the greatest threat to its freedom; since Reconstruction and, especially, the upheavals of the 1960s, it has been in alliance with the Deep South in an effort to undo the federal government's ability to overrule local preferences.

### **The Deep South**

Established by English slave lords from Barbados as a West Indies-style slave society, this region has been a bastion of white supremacy, aristocratic privilege, and a version of classical Republicanism modeled on the slave states of the ancient world, where democracy was the privilege of the few and enslavement the natural lot of the many. It spread apartheid and authoritarianism across the southern lowlands, ultimately encompassing most of South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Florida, and Louisiana, plus western Tennessee and southeastern Arkansas, Texas, and North Carolina. Its slave and caste systems smashed by outside intervention, it continues to fight for rollbacks of federal power, taxes on capital and the wealthy, and environmental, labor, and consumer safety protections.

### **El Norte**

The oldest of the Euro-American nations, El Norte dates back to the late sixteenth century, when the Spanish empire founded Monterrey, Saltillo, and other outposts in what are now the Mexican-American borderlands. Today this resurgent culture spreads from the current frontier for a hundred miles or more in both directions, taking in south and west Texas, southern California and the Imperial Valley, southern Arizona, most of New Mexico, parts of Colorado, and the six northernmost Mexican states. Most Americans are aware that the region is a place apart, where Hispanic language, culture, and societal norms dominate; few realize that among Mexicans, *nortenos* have a reputation for being more independent, self-sufficient, adaptable, and work centered than their central and southern countrymen. Long a hotbed of democratic reform and revolutionary settlement, various parts of the region have tried to secede from Mexico to form independent buffer states between the two federations. Today it resembles Germany during the Cold War: two peoples with a common culture separated from one another by a large wall.

## **The Left Coast**

A Chile-shaped nation wedged between the Pacific Ocean and the Cascade and Coast mountain ranges and stretching from Monterey to Juneau, the Left Coast was originally colonized by two groups: merchants, missionaries, and woodsmen from New England (who arrived by sea and dominated the towns); and farmers, prospectors, and fur traders from Greater Appalachia (who generally arrived by wagon and controlled the countryside). Yankees expended considerable effort to make it “a New England on the Pacific,” but were only partially successful: the Left Coast is a hybrid of Yankee idealism, faith in good government and social reform, and the Appalachian commitment to individual self-expression and exploration. The staunchest ally of Yankeedom and greatest champion of environmentalism, it battles constantly against Far Western sections in the interior of its home states.

## **The Far West**

The other “second-generation” nation, this is the one part of the continent where environmental factors trumped ethnographic ones. High, dry, and remote, the Far West stopped the eastern nations in their tracks and, with minor exceptions, was only colonized via the deployment of vast industrial resources: railroads, heavy mining equipment, ore smelters, dams, and irrigation systems. As a result, settlement was largely directed and controlled by large corporations headquartered in distant New York, Boston, Chicago, or San Francisco, or by the federal government itself, which controlled much of the land. Exploited as an internal colony for the benefit of the seaboard nations, Far Western political leaders have focused public resentment on the federal government (on whose infrastructure spending they depend) while avoiding challenges to the region’s corporate masters, who retain near Gilded Age influence. It encompasses nearly all of the interior west of the 100th meridian, from the northern boundary of El Norte to the middle reaches of Canada, including much of California, Washington, Oregon, British Columbia, Alaska, Colorado and Canada’s Prairie Provinces, and all of Idaho, Montana, Utah, and Nevada. Two other nations—the Inuit-dominated **First Nation** in the far north and Quebec-centered **New France**—are located primarily in Canada and are peripheral to this discussion. Their U.S. enclaves in northern and western Alaska and southern Louisiana respectively have scant electoral power, but they both have considerable sway in Canada and

have come the closest to forming independent nation-states of their own (in Quebec and Greenland).

Nearly every internally divisive development in U.S. history in the past two centuries has pitted Yankeedom against the Deep South. Since neither of these regional “superpowers” has had a sufficient share of the population to dominate federal politics in this time period, they have sought to build and maintain alliances with other regional cultures. Some of these alliances have been remarkably durable, like those between Yankeedom and the Left Coast or between the Deep South and Tidewater, each of which has survived since before the Civil War. Others are younger and weaker, such as the axis between Greater Appalachia and the Deep South—cultures that took up arms against one another in both the American Revolution and the Civil War—or between the Deep South and the Far West, where resentment of corporate control may one day eclipse anger at the federal government.

During the Revolution, each of the regions fought to preserve their distinctive societies. New Netherlanders—dependent on commerce and unaccustomed to self-rule—generally remained loyal to the Crown. Yankee citizen minutemen and mounted Tidewater gentlemen enthusiastically took up arms to maintain local control and institutions, while Deep Southerners reluctantly did so in response to fears the British would free their slaves. Midlanders tried to remain neutral, supplying both British forces in Philadelphia and American forces wintering in Valley Forge. Appalachian people sided with whoever was against their oppressors on the coast, who’d denied them representation in colonial assemblies and the Continental Congress; they joined the rebellion in Pennsylvania (at one point occupying Philadelphia and overthrowing the Midland elite) and the British in the Carolinas and Georgia (against the Deep Southern oligarchs, triggering a bloody civil war there). Only in Virginia and Maryland—whose gentry had extended them reasonable representation—did they find common cause with coastal regions against the British.

In the run-up to the Civil War, Yankees were isolated in their willingness to go to war to stop Deep South-controlled states from seceding. Most observers expected the country to split into

three or four confederations, as the other regions had no desire to remain with either party. New York City Mayor Fernando Wood proposed that the city and its Long Island suburbs should become an independent citystate modeled on those of the Hanseatic League, a plan endorsed by at least one congressman, many merchants and bankers, and three major newspapers. The Midlands, Tidewater, and Appalachia sought to create a Central Confederacy that would act as a buffer state between the rival superpowers, a plan championed by Maryland Governor Thomas Hicks. Had Deep Southerners not attacked Fort Sumter— a move that instantly made enemies of most neutral regions—they would almost certainly have peacefully seceded. Instead, they wound up with only one ally, Tidewater, who shared a commitment to slavery and a racial mythology that cast the conflict as a reprise of the Norman invasion and the English Civil War, with southerners the descendants of the aristocratic, civilized Normans, and the Yankees the offspring of the crude Anglo-Saxons. (The Yankee “Roundheads,” Tidewater’s leading journal, the *Roundhead*, predicted in 1861, would “lose the last [battle] and then sink down to their normal position of relative inferiority,” freeing the Confederacy to create “a sort of Patrician Republic” ruled by people “superior to all other races on the continent.”) Appalachian people overwhelmingly sided with the Union, leading a successful secessionist movement to create (Unionist) West Virginia, and unsuccessful ones in eastern Tennessee and northern Alabama; a quartermillion men from Appalachian sections of the Confederacy volunteered for Union service, joining tens of thousands more from Pennsylvania, Maryland, Kentucky, and beyond.

Backed by the Midlands, the Left Coast, and the Far West, Yankeedom dominated the federation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, though Reconstruction lost them the support of Appalachia. In the following decades, alliances shifted around based on the fear of Yankee-directed federal power, but over the past half century the regional blocs have remained stable. Yankeedom, New Netherland, and the Left Coast have faced off against the Deep South, Tidewater, Greater Appalachia, and the Far West over civil rights, the Vietnam and Iraq wars, the environmental and gay rights movements, health care and financial reform, and the last three presidential elections.

The “northern” alliance has consistently favored the maintenance of a strong central government, federal checks on corporate power, and the conservation of natural resources, regardless of which party was dominant in the region at any given time. (Recall that prior to the civil rights struggle of the 1960s, the Republicans were the party of Yankeeedom.) The presidents they have produced—John F. Kennedy, Gerald Ford, George H. W. Bush, and Barack Obama—have all sought to better society through government programs, expanded civil rights protections, and environmental safeguards. All faced opposition from the Dixieled nations even from within their own parties. With the southern takeover of the GOP, all three nations have become overwhelmingly Democratic in recent years.

The goal of the Deep Southern oligarchy has been consistent for four centuries: to control and maintain a one party state with a colonial-style economy based on largescale agriculture and the extraction of primary resources by a compliant, low-wage workforce with as few labor, workplace safety, health care, and environmental regulations as possible. Not until the 1960s was it compelled by African American uprisings and external intervention to abandon caste, sharecropper, and poll tax systems designed to keep the disadvantaged majority of their region’s population out of the political process. Since then, they have relied on fearmongering—over racial mixing, gun control, illegal immigrants, and the alleged evils of secularization—to maintain support. In office they’ve instead focused on cutting taxes for the rich, funneling massive subsidies to agribusiness and oil companies, rolling back labor and environmental programs, and creating “guest worker” programs and “right to work” laws to ensure a cheap, compliant labor supply. Tidewater, weakened to satellite status over the past 150 years, has fallen in line. But keeping Greater Appalachia and, now, the Far West in the coalition has been trickier, as both have strong populist and libertarian streaks that run counter to the interests of the modern-day southern aristocracy.