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MIDDLE

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RICHARD C. LONGWORTH

**AMERICA'S HEARTLAND
IN THE AGE OF GLOBALISM**

Prologue

I grew up in a small town in central Iowa, a safe and secure place, confident in its isolation. This was lonesome-whistle territory, where passing trains announced another world out there. In time, some of us got on those trains and went to seek that world; we knew it wasn't going to come to us.

Not too much happened in my town, a county seat called Boone. But there was a bustle in the mid-1960s when a British newspaper proclaimed it the typical American small town, geographically and socially, and sent a reporter to write about it. He interviewed one local elder who pronounced, "We are pretty well self-sufficient. We don't need the world."

Even then, this was a blinkered attitude. After all, somebody out there bought the corn and hogs we raised. But it was true that distant events—in Europe, China, Latin America—did not dictate our daily lives. Businesses were locally owned. Jobs were secure and lasted for life. Everybody looked like everybody else, and immigration amounted to a few Greek restaurant owners, such as Danny Canakes, and their families. If a store closed, it was because the owner retired, not because a Wal-Mart opened out on the highway.

For the most part, this sense of stability and self-sufficiency stretched across the vast middle of America, the heartland region called the Midwest. Things were more complicated in the great cities, such as Chicago or Detroit, but even they pumped out their steel and cars with no thought that events and trends thousands of miles away, across oceans and continents, would turn their lives upside down.

By the 1970s, the Rust Belt era and the rural debt crisis shattered this smug certainty. But few saw these as global events. When industries left the Midwest, they went to the Sun Belt, seldom to Mexico, certainly not to China. When farms failed, it was because they took on too much debt, not because Brazil had started to grow soybeans.

Then, about a decade ago, globalization arrived and changed the Midwest forever. Traditional family farms vanished. Steel mills closed and auto factories shrunk. "Downsizing" and "outsourcing" enriched our vocabularies and frightened our workforce. Some big cities, such as Chicago, coped. Others, like Detroit, rotted. Small industrial cities fought to stay alive. "Rural" became a synonym for "poor." Immigrants, mostly Mexicans but Africans and Asians, too, moved into towns and regions that were all European, and northern European at that. Self-sufficient little places, such as my hometown, became bedroom suburbs if they were lucky enough to lie within commuting distance of bigger cities. Those beyond this range, or too far from the interstate, shriveled.

I left Boone for a life mostly spent in other regions and other countries. Out in this world, I learned that, when economies change, everything else changes, too. How we earn our living determines how we live and who we are. This is true for people, and it's true for towns, and regions, and countries. The Midwest does two big things for a living—farming and heavy industry—and globalization has turned both upside down. In many ways, Boone—and the Midwest—look as they always have. But their character has changed totally.

Once Boone was a farm and railroad center. Mostly, it existed as a market town that served farm families, each tilling its 160 acres of rich Iowa earth, and as a stop for the passenger trains heading west from Chicago to Denver and Los Angeles. Competition was local: Ames, thirteen miles to the east, loomed as the great rival, especially in high school football. Des Moines, forty miles to the south, was the metropolis: trips there, for shopping or basketball tournaments or the state fair, represented forays into the outside world.

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grew up in Ames. "I had a friend in Ames who got a job in Boone," Ted told me, "and we never saw him again."

These days, Boone appears little changed. Its population, about twelve thousand, has barely budged for a half century. Giant oaks still shade the Victorian and Georgian houses on the south side of town and the working-class homes on the north side. There's a beautiful big swimming pool down in McHose Park. Nearby, the softball diamond looks little changed from the days when I cut my journalistic teeth there, covering sports for the local daily, the *News-Republican*.

But there's a difference. The town, once self-sufficient, now is a place where workers in Ames and Des Moines come home at night. About twenty-two hundred people, a quarter of its workforce, commute out each day. In the morning, all the traffic on U.S. 30 is one-way east, toward Ames and the interstate to Des Moines. In the evening, the traffic flows back west, carrying people who like life in a small town but who earn their livings somewhere else. Freight trains still go through, but the passenger trains are long gone. So are the 160-acre farms and the people who worked them: an era of farm consolidation has left a barony of big farms, run by a handful of families, the survivors of the great Midwestern agricultural shakeout, too few to even begin to support a market town.

Story Street is still the main drag, but it's a sorry place now, with closed stores and inessential commerce, such as gift shops. The big employers are out on the highway, and they're all global. There's a company that makes plasma out of cattle blood; it has thirty other plants or joint ventures, many in the United States but also in Denmark, Argentina, Brazil, Spain, and Britain. There's a Japanese-owned firm that produces antibodies for testing kits. There's a dental-supply company headquartered in Minneapolis. There's a genetics company owned by South Africans that does high-tech applications of seed corn. And there's a vast building with four hundred workers, mostly women with high school degrees, who handle subscriptions for some of the world's most sophisticated publications: if you want to subscribe to the *New Yorker* or *Gourmet*, you have to send a letter to Boone, Iowa.

I went to see Bob Fisher, an old friend whose family ran a

first-rate shoe store for two generations. There's not enough business on Story Street today to support a shoe store. Bob, now retired, oversees the local economic development agency, working to create a new economy utterly different from the one that he—and I—knew when we grew up. “Yes, globalization has sunk in,” Bob told me. “When France says it's not going to import American blood plasma, Boone, Iowa, gets shut down.”

This book is about change. It's about the transformation of a place, the American Midwest, that always symbolized stability and rootedness. The Midwest is geared to permanence, and it isn't handling this transformation very well.

Some cities, like Chicago, or college towns, like Madison, Wisconsin, thrive in this new world. Others, like my hometown, struggle to find their place; many are failing. Change has come to Boone and the rest of the Midwest and forced a redefinition of their place in the world. In the age of globalism, do many of the Midwest's towns and cities, and their people, have a future? For that matter, does the Midwest have a future?

To find out, I got behind the wheel and took to the interstates and back roads of the Midwest. I spent eleven thousand miles on the road, driving around this new Middle West. I found dying farm villages and crumbling old factory towns, which may not survive. I found once great cities that have become empty shells, and I found displaced farmers and workers, adrift in communities consumed by denial and bitterness and a real political anger. I found inadequate schools and a political system that seems almost designed to fail.

I found people left behind by a new economy for which nothing prepared them.

This book is a report from the front line of America's new economy.

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CHAPTER 1

Caught in the Middle

The Midwest is the bellwether of America, the spearpoint of the American economy.

It was the frontier when the first pioneers moved west, across the Alleghenies. The mills of Chicago and the factories of Detroit powered America's industrial revolution. Here commerce boomed and labor wars first raged. The great reformers—Debs and Dewey, Bryan and La Follette, Jane Addams and Betty Friedan—sprang from Midwestern soil. The Great Depression began on Midwestern farms, ten years before the Crash. When the nation recovered in the 1940s, the Midwest recovered first, and most spectacularly. When American industry declined twenty years later, the decline started in the Rust Belt of the Midwest, along with the textile towns of New England. Midwestern steel mills, Midwestern auto factories, and Midwestern television makers felt the first sting of foreign competition, especially from Japan, as world markets began to open, long before globalization appeared.

Chicago invented the skyscraper. Henry Ford invented modern manufacturing. Midwestern unions invented the weekend.

What happens to America happens first to the Midwest.

It's happening again. When Americans think about the Midwest, they think about stability, the rhythmic turn of the seasons, the unchanging solidity of towns and cities where everyone knows everyone else, a land of deep roots. Now, for better or for worse, this Midwest has changed. If no part of America is immune to globalization, its impact is felt most here in the heartland, in the great fecund plain that spawned the American dream and nurtured

its values. No part of the Midwest, neither Ohio nor Iowa, Michigan nor Missouri, escapes. The problems are similar or the same in each state. The issues facing each state—farming, industry, immigration, rural decline, education—vary in degree, if at all.

Globalization unites and divides. It cements ties across borders while weakening old ties at home. It celebrates the transnational at the expense of old loyalties. It brings people together from around the globe while stirring new xenophobia. It destroys old industries and economies and creates new ones—not always in the same places. It makes some people richer and other people poorer, and this gap is growing.

And like any huge economic revolution, globalization has the power to remake societies—not just their economies but their politics, the shape of their towns and cities, the way their people think and live. The industrial revolution did this. In fact, the entire Midwest is the result of the technology—railroads, harvesters, the telegraph—that powered the industrial era: this era and its machines created the Midwest's cities, formed its farm economy, shaped its universities. The global era is powered by technology as well, and it, too, is transforming the Midwest.

To grasp what is happening, we need to understand how globalization works. At its base, globalization means a revolution in communications—specifically, communications satellites and the Internet. This ease of communication has created a global money market—you can buy dollars or euros or yen for the same price in Chicago or Frankfurt or Singapore. This means that investors can borrow anywhere and invest anywhere. This means that big corporations are no longer cooped up within national boundaries or limited to a few “multinational” operations, such as factories overseas. Instead, these firms have turned themselves into global corporations, viewing the world as one big market and treating frontiers as though they don't exist. These corporations, which are the driving force of globalization, can put their design, manufacturing, marketing, and almost everything else anywhere they want, so long as it makes economic sense. They can set up business where taxes are low and regulations lax: the biggest corporations, such

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as Wal-Mart or Exxon/Mobil or Toyota, are richer and more powerful than many of the countries where they do business. It also means that it's cheap to ship things, and virtually free to ship ideas and services. In turn, this creates more trade: why buy one of something in Ohio when you can buy three from China for the same price? The digital-age communications, then, enable a relative handful of executives in the headquarters back home to control their empire with the click of a computer key.

Mostly, globalization makes it possible to hire workers almost anywhere in the world. This means that the corporations can put operations anyplace where workers are skilled but wages are low.

This all adds up to the one big fact of globalization: companies and workers who used to compete with the next town or the next state now compete with China, India, Ghana, Poland, Costa Rica, or anywhere else that global technology—which is to say, communications and shipping technology—makes investment possible and profitable.

The impact of this is being felt across the Midwest and especially in its old manufacturing towns. Galesburg, Illinois, the home of Carl Sandburg, is a town of thirty-three thousand that had a place in the industrial era but may not have one in the global age. In 2000, the Galesburg area provided 35,000 jobs. Then its Maytag refrigerator plant moved to Mexico, killing 1,600 jobs. The Australian owners of Butler, which had built steel buildings in Galesburg for seventy-five years, closed the plant, firing another 270 workers. A rubber-hose plant, an industrial-screens factory, a plant making landfill liners—all are gone. A local pottery works is down to a skeleton staff. Altogether, the Galesburg area has lost about 7,000 jobs in seven years. The town is too far from Chicago or St. Louis to live off the economies of those cities. Its workforce, basically hardworking high school graduates without the skills or education that the new economy demands, may be unemployable.

Galesburg, like much of the Midwest, is reeling before forces that it doesn't understand.

But really, what's so new? Trade has been growing since Marco Polo went to China. Distances shrank with every new invention,

from the steamship to the telegraph. Multinational corporations have made things in other countries for decades. In a recent speech, Ben Bernanke, the new chairman of the Federal Reserve Bank, said, yes, a lot of this is new, for three reasons.

First, he said, change has shifted into top gear. The Web and the browser, which make all this possible, are younger than today's high school seniors. China and India have become the two biggest new players in the global economy: China decided to join that economy only thirty years ago, and India's rise dates back barely a decade. There's always been trade, foreign investment, flows of money, and they have always changed the way we live. But now the flows are global and the change is coming faster and faster. Globalization today is about where the industrial revolution was in 1790, twenty years after James Watt invented the steam engine. It took two more centuries for Watt's revolution to run its course. We're just at the beginning of ours.

Second, Bernanke says, globalization erases the dividing line between the First World and the Third. Once, poor countries and colonies shipped raw materials to the rich countries, which made the goods. Now both processes go both ways.

Geopolitics had a lot to do with it. The collapse of Communism, less than twenty years ago, added 2 billion new workers to the global economy. But these workers came from countries such as China, Russia, and Eastern Europe, plus India, that were poor and added little to the world's supply of money. In other words, you now have 3.5 billion workers competing for the same pot of money, more or less, that was formerly shared by 1.5 billion workers. These 2 billion new workers are willing to work cheap. So the 1.5 billion First World workers will have to work cheap, too. No wonder Third World wages are low and First World wages are going down.

Third, production—of goods and ideas—is fragmented as never before. Once, an auto factory in Detroit produced most of a car, perhaps buying some parts from another factory next door. The boss worked upstairs over the factory. So did the designers, salesmen, and bookkeepers. Later, the company opened some factories in places like Europe, but kept everything else in Detroit. Now, as

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Bernanke says, an American chip producer does research in California, production in Texas, Germany, and Japan, and final processing and testing in Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, and China, then sells its product all over the world. If it were cheaper and better to do the research in China and the testing in Texas, that's how the producer would do it. And that's what a lot of Midwestern companies, including the auto suppliers that used to sell to that car factory in Detroit, have done.

Globalization transforms the way that even traditional businesses operate. In my hometown, I talked with Stan Redeker, who owns one of the biggest furniture stores in central Iowa. Redeker's has been a fixture in Boone since Stan's father started the store in 1930. Stan and his wife, Maxine, both eighty, still go in regularly, but their son runs the store now, with help from his children: it's a four-generation business.

Stan always bought a few accessories, such as lamps or vases, overseas. But the so-called case goods—bedroom and dining-room furniture, sofas, entertainment centers—were American-made, mostly top-of-the-line brands such as Ethan Allen and Thomasville. "Then, five years ago, everything changed dramatically," he recalls. Chinese factories started licensing and producing top American brands, using the latest technology, achieving high quality and low prices.

"We get three forty-eight-foot containers a week from China now," he says. "In major wood furniture, seventy-five percent of what we sell is Chinese. Maxine and I went over there for two weeks last year. We went through a case goods plant that employs seventy-five hundred people and a leather goods plant that employs four thousand. They house their people in dorms. I watched Thomasville coming out of a chute. Then some Ethan Allen started coming out of the same chute. At the Chinese ports, there were thousands and thousands of containers stacked up. Unbelievable. They're put on ships that handle four thousand containers, and then on a railcar to Omaha or Kansas City. They're put on a truck to our back door. They're sealed in China, opened in Boone.

"You name the company, they're over there. Thomasville used

to have fourteen plants in North Carolina. They have one now and probably are having trouble keeping that going.”

Only big furniture makers can survive this competition. At the other end, only big stores like Redeker’s, which buy enough stock to fill a container, can stay in business. “When I started, every little town around here—Ogden, Jewell, Stratford—had a family furniture store. Jefferson and Perry had three. They’re all gone now.

“The thing that scares everybody is that the Chinese might come over here and open their own stores. They’re making the stuff, and they have the financial capability to do this.”

It’s like that in every arena. Only big companies can spread production and administration across a dozen countries. Only big stores can afford to deal with these companies. Only big farmers can deliver food to the specifications of the big corporations that dominate agribusiness. Only big cities offer the business services and intellectual pizzazz to compete in global services and global ideas. This is what is happening to small companies, mom-and-pop stores, family farms, and small towns. The implications are endless. Midwest farms and factories compete daily with farms and factories in China and Brazil. So do their workers. This means that jobs that used to be done here are moving overseas, mostly to places where workers can’t follow. All the signs indicate that it’s just beginning.

I drove to Freeport, Minnesota, a little town north of Minneapolis, best known as the place where Garrison Keillor lived when he began to write his Lake Wobegon stories. Keillor modeled much of Lake Wobegon on Freeport, including Ralph’s Pretty Good Grocery, the Sidetrack Tap, and the Chatterbox Café: the town epitomized the safe, isolated Midwest of yesteryear. But globalization has come to Lake Wobegon. Freeport’s small industry competes with factories in China. Factory farming, Mexican immigration, big-box retailing—the area has them all. “Globalization?” said Paul Hetland, Freeport city clerk. “It’s here. You bet. We think about it, all the time.”

We’ve had outsourcing before, of course. The Midwest became the Rust Belt when all those manufacturing jobs went south, to

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nonunion towns in Dixie, or were driven under by Japanese competition. That's what happened to the steel industry in Chicago and the auto industry in Flint: these industries collapsed two or three decades ago, before anyone had ever heard of globalization.

The Japanese invasion struck the Midwest first, wiping out the region's television industry, revolutionizing its steelmaking, shattering the dominance of its Big Three automakers, destroying its machine tool companies. What's happening now is different. The Japanese were good at what they did, with the aim of achieving dominance for Japanese firms, while keeping their own markets firmly closed. Globalization, by contrast, is based on open markets, not closed ones, and it's American firms, not Chinese or Indian ones, that lead the charge. Now Midwestern workers see their jobs move to Mexico first, then to China. Many of the cities we will visit in this book, from Dayton in Ohio to Newton in Iowa, are reeling from this second wave of outsourcing.

Most of this earlier outsourcing dealt with manufacturing and factory workers. For people who make economic policy or write editorials, this blue-collar outsourcing happened to uneducated people whom they don't know and was a regrettable price to pay for free trade and an open market. The newest wave is different. It's white-collar outsourcing, with jobs mostly going to India, not China, and it can hit anyone whose job isn't absolutely nailed down. The old globalization dealt with money, goods, and factory jobs; the new globalization deals with all this, and with service jobs, too. The color of your collar, the years of your education, and the size of your paycheck have less to do with this than the kind of job you have. Suddenly, for those policy-makers and editorial writers, it's personal.

Basically, any job that does not require face-to-face contact with a customer can be outsourced. Defense attorneys who must appear in a Wisconsin court cannot be in India, but real estate lawyers searching titles can. An Indiana X-ray technician has to be in the same room with the patient; the doctors who read the X-rays can be anywhere. Barbers in Columbus, taxi drivers in Chicago, and kindergarten teachers in Des Moines are outsource-proof. Stockbrokers and tax accountants aren't. All this is happening now. Already,

more than half a million American tax returns are being prepared in India each year: all it takes is a smart Indian accountant who understands American tax law.

Nandan Nilekani, cofounder of the Indian IT company Infosys (and the man who gave Thomas L. Friedman the idea that “the world is flat”), told the *Financial Times* newspaper that we haven’t seen anything yet. “Anything that can be sent over a wire can be outsourced, anything fungible is up for grabs, any tradable service anywhere in the world,” Nilekani said. “Fifty percent of global GDP is services, and a lot of that is tradable.”

Most of the Midwest remains in denial. Other regions of the world, from New England to India, know they are in global competition and are off and running. This truth is just beginning to dawn on much of the Midwest. Heavy manufacturing isn’t just in a slump: it’s going. The family farm has been replaced by the factory farm. Schools that were good enough to train workers for assembly-line jobs aren’t good enough anymore.

Globalization poses a conundrum that will bedevil the Midwest—and America—for the rest of this century. If globalization has a moral justification, it lies in its ability to raise the Third World to the level of economic decency that has enriched the lives of First Worlders, especially Americans.

But this is the question: must this be done on the backs of American workers? Can globalization work for both Chinese peasants and the factory workers of Indiana? Can we raise living standards in India without lowering them in Michigan or Iowa?

So far, globalization has destroyed more in the Midwest than it has created. But there are success stories. Globalization, like any economic trend, is impersonal. It can do great harm and great good, often at the same time. What it does depends on how it is shaped and guided.

Twenty years ago, Chicago epitomized the Rust Belt. Today it is a global city, reborn and revitalized. On a smaller scale, other Midwestern cities such as Minneapolis and Omaha find a global niche. Kansas City, sitting astride the trade route from Mexico, feels reenergized by the North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA.

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St. Louis has put all its bets on bioscience. Some Midwestern industries—medical instruments, for instance—boom. Some small Midwestern cities thrive: Warsaw, Indiana, is a world center for the manufacturing of implantable joints. Even the clapped-out iron mines of northern Minnesota still produce, thanks to investment from China.

But challenges and problems outweigh the boons. Even potentially positive forces, such as immigration, sit uneasily on a region that distrusts change.

Tom Friedman, the author and *New York Times* columnist, has written that a globalized world is a flat world. What he means is that global communications have brought previously remote places, like India, into real-time competition with the United States. Thus, there really is a level global playing field, and anyone anywhere with enough broadband capacity can compete on an equal basis with anyone else in the world.

But Friedman's "flat world" metaphor misses a crucial point. This new world isn't really flat. Instead, it's made up of peaks and valleys. On the peaks stand the global cities, global universities, global research centers, hubs of global wealth and creativity. Chicago and Minneapolis are such global cities. Madison and Ann Arbor, arks of creativity, share this rarefied atmosphere. Other peaks rise in such places as Shanghai, Guangzhou, Bangalore, and Chennai. The West no longer dominates the world. In that sense, Friedman is right.

But that doesn't mean that everyone, in America or India, shares this level playing field. From their mountaintops, the happy residents of the peaks—the global citizens—talk to each other and carry on the business of globalization. Far below, down in the valleys, live the rest of mankind, globalization's have-nots, all but shut out of this conversation. They live in Calcutta's slums and on China's farms—and in much of the Midwest, in inner cities and remote rural villages. For these people, globalization is at best a rumor, at worst a threat.

The changes are felt everywhere—in farming, which has always defined the Midwest; in manufacturing, which has put bread on its tables; in education, long a source of pride but now a

vital concern; in immigration, which made the region and is now remaking it; in politics, where its greatest divisions lie—as well as its great hopes. In later chapters, this book will deal with each area and introduce the people who are leading the changes, or coping with the effects.

Larry Summers, the former Harvard president and treasury secretary, summed up the pressures in an article a week before the 2006 elections: “The vast global middle is not sharing the benefits of the current period of economic growth. As the great corporate engines of efficiency succeed by using cutting-edge technology with low-cost labor, middle-class workers and their employers—whether they live in the American Midwest, the Ruhr Valley, Latin America or Eastern Europe—are left out.” But it’s no comfort to Midwesterners to know that Europeans and Latin Americans share their pain, because this pain isn’t going to stop. As Summers said, globalization is going to grow, and “the economic logic of free, globalized, technologically sophisticated capitalism may well be to shift more wealth to the very richest and some of the very poorest of the world, while squeezing people in the middle.”

The Midwest can thrive only if it meets its global challenges on a regional basis. Globalization’s impact in the heartland is different from its impact on the West Coast, say, or the South, or New England. If the problems are regional, then the thinking should be regional, to find regional solutions. But this regional thinking and regional leadership are nowhere in sight.

Both Midwestern politics and Midwestern thinking are fragmented, based on states, not the region. As a result, the Midwest is coping with a twenty-first-century problem with a nineteenth-century political and social structure. In my travels, I was astounded to find so many “experts” in these states who had no idea what was going on next door, across the state line.

All over the world, in Asia and in Europe, regions are coming together to meet the challenges of globalization. As globalization weakens the reach of national governments, regions with common histories and problems find common cause. The Midwest also is a region with its own particular history, economics, demographics,

and politics. There's no reason why it can't find its own way to cope with the world.

But first it must find its voice.

Big cities, smaller industrial cities, corporations, universities—all face common problems but wouldn't dream of working together to solve them. It is time for them to talk together, perhaps at a think tank funded by the Midwest's foundations.

In the Midwest, nostalgia comes easily. All Midwesterners lament the passing of a golden era that, even if it never shone as brightly as we remember it, remains vivid in our minds. But nostalgia is the flip side of denial. The Midwest's collective myth and memory keep it from dealing with the problems at hand.

The Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci described the crisis of an era when "the old is dying and the new cannot be born." The Midwestern crisis is just the opposite. The future is already here, but the past refuses to die. The good news is that globalization is new and can be shaped. The bad news is that the Midwest is already behind.

The American future does not lie in Alabama or Las Vegas. It lies where it has always lain, in the heartland, in the battered bellwether in the very middle of the country. So far, the Midwest is failing the global challenge. This book intends to ask how the Midwest—and America—can win that battle.

The Midwest and the Globe

Thinking about the Midwest is hard, because no one can say just what it is. When I grew up in Iowa, we looked at Ohio and saw the effete East. Some Ohioans see Iowa as part of the Great Plains. Friends who do business in China say it's hard to sell the Midwest there, because the Chinese think it's in Arizona. One book argues that the Midwest's real pastoral heart lies in Kansas; not surprisingly, the author was a professor at the University of Kansas.

The Midwest presents a blurry landscape, a squishy concept, an area with no real boundaries. It doesn't begin or end so much as it oozes into the East on one end and the Great Plains on the other. In the north, it looks like Canada. In the south, it sounds like Arkansas.

To talk about the Midwest, we must decide what it is. This book argues that the Midwest exists as a coherent region, a single unit, with a common history, people, economy, politics, needs—and a common global challenge. This true Midwest embraces the vast American midsection of America from east-central Ohio to the eastern fringe of the Great Plains, just west of the Missouri River. This definition cuts across states, including all of some and only parts of others. State lines, drawn arbitrarily in the nineteenth century, have little to do with twenty-first-century reality. The states themselves are no longer political or social units but hives of warring interests, split by the forces of globalization and the modern world. If the Midwest has common problems, state boundaries, being irrelevant to the problems, are irrelevant to the solutions. Rooted in the past, they are roadblocks to the future.

The Midwest then includes all of Michigan, Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. It includes the northern two thirds of Ohio and Illinois and the northern halves of Indiana and Missouri. On its western fringe, the Midwest crosses the Missouri River, but not by much. Both Kansas Cities and Lawrence, Kansas, are Midwestern. So are Omaha and Lincoln, in Nebraska (although some people there say they truly belong to the Great Plains). This area (as shown in the map on pages viii and ix) contains about fifty-six million people, or roughly 20 percent of all Americans.

And there it ends. The southern third of Ohio and Illinois and the southern half of Indiana are Southern, closer to Mississippi than to Minnesota. The northern half of Missouri is mostly Midwestern, but the southern half, south of the Missouri River, is Ozarks, in economy and character. In the west, the rest of Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas belong to the Great Plains.

My Midwest hangs together for two reasons. One is its economy, which stands on two legs, agriculture and manufacturing. The Midwest is a thousand-mile swath across the middle of America that depends on farming and heavy industry for its livelihood. The other reason is its people—their character and, especially, where they came from. The Midwest was formed by a great wave of nineteenth-century immigration from northern Europe and the eastern United States and retains that character to this day. If the early explorers were French, the Midwestern ethos is German, Scandinavian, Dutch, and English.

This definition consigns to the South that which is truly Southern, in heritage and attitudes. In southern Indiana and Illinois, the Ku Klux Klan flourished until the middle of the twentieth century. It also recognizes that the Great Plains is a separate region, drying out, depopulating, beset by problems that have more to do with geography and climate than with globalization. Some scholars see the region around the Great Lakes as the true Midwest, but any definition that includes upper New York State, Ontario, and Quebec is simply too unwieldy.

There is more to the Midwestern economy today than farms and factories, and later newcomers—largely black or Hispanic—have altered and enriched its people. But these two traits—economy and

demography—give the Midwest its basic character and enable its people to talk together, a kin with a common cause.

This Midwest is a region, not just a collection of states. When we talk about the Midwest in this book, we'll be talking about the core region that shares this economy and this kinship, because it is this community that will shape the Midwestern future.

Naturally, differences exist between the Midwestern states, even if they are less than the natives claim. Minnesota has colder weather and better schools than Missouri. Michigan and Indiana build cars and car parts, Iowa and Illinois specialize in farm machinery. Central Ohio is more crowded and more religious than central Iowa. Michigan has more heavy industry than Minnesota and, hence, more industrial problems.

Attitudes differ, too. Michigan and Iowa talk about globalization all the time; Indiana seems barely aware it exists.

But in months of traveling across the Midwest, I found more similarities than differences. This region shares a character, a politics, and a set of common problems arising from common causes. First, though, this Midwest shares a history.

The first settlers in the Midwest arrived in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and they came up from the South, from Appalachia, from Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, and the piedmont of the Carolinas. They crossed the Ohio River into southern Ohio or rode the river into southern Indiana and Illinois. These early pioneers were true frontiersmen, tough, independent, scornful of government, “with an emphasized loyalty to clan, a hierarchical sense of the social orders, relative indifference or skepticism toward education and a fatalistic outlook,” as an Illinois historian, Cullom Davis, put it. They sank cultural roots where they settled, and their part of the world—the southern tier of southern Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois—remains Southern in outlook to this day, more fundamentalist, patriotic, nationalistic, than the lands to the north. Their landscape is rolling, wooded, and harshly beautiful. Their economy rests on small farms, far from the great spreads and industrial towns farther north, and their accents are closer to the drawl of Alabama than the flat vowels heard farther north.

The settlers who gave the Midwest its true character came later, toward the middle of the nineteenth century, and they could not have been more different in origin and outlook. They moved straight west, from New York and New England, or directly from northern Europe—Scandinavians, Germans, English, and other nationalities. These people, according to Davis, “were much more modern in orientation, stressing individualism and ambition, faith in social progress and education, and civic egalitarianism.” These later immigrants both built the Midwest and gave it the reputation it has never lost, as a balanced society, hardworking, religious, stolid, and dull.

Other nationalities, especially Poles and other Slavs, flooded cities like Detroit and Chicago. Later, in the twentieth century, came two more waves of immigration, the great black movement from the South and, still later, the arrival of millions from Mexico. The newcomers modified the Midwestern character, especially in the cities, but never replaced it.

This Midwest also shares a common political history, stemming from two big national decisions. The first was the Northwest Ordinance, passed by the Continental Congress in 1787, which set up the Northwest Territory. This territory stretched from the Ohio River to the Canadian border and included the land that later became Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, and part of Minnesota. The second decision, in 1803, was the Louisiana Purchase, stretching from New Orleans to Canada; this vast swath later became many states, including Missouri, Iowa, and the rest of Minnesota.

The Northwest Ordinance, enacted 220 years ago, before most of the Midwest was even settled, decreed state boundaries that bedevil the region’s thinking to this day. The Ordinance said the territory would eventually become at least three and possibly five states, as soon as it was settled. It laid out the north-south boundaries, which are pretty much where the Ohio-Indiana and Indiana-Illinois state lines exist today. The existence of Michigan and Wisconsin, and the lines between them and their neighbors to the south, grew out of political horse-trading. The final result makes as much sense today as the arbitrary frontiers that colonialist governors drew in Africa and Iraq and cause almost as much trouble.

This Midwest shares a common economy, agricultural and industrial. It's the breadbasket. The Midwest produces 85 percent of the nation's corn and soybeans, 70 percent of its hogs, 45 percent of its eggs, 33 percent of its milk. Iowa and Illinois have more corn, Indiana and Ohio produce more cows and eggs. Take farming away from the Midwest and you've stolen not only its economy but its identity.

It's also the foundry. Like farming, industry spreads fairly evenly across the Midwest. The five American states that depend most heavily on manufacturing for their income are all Midwestern—Indiana, Wisconsin, Michigan, Ohio, and (yes!) Iowa.

This Midwest shares a common focus. Midwesterners see Chicago as the metropolis, the city that defines and dominates the region. Any region needs a capital, as Barcelona is the capital of Catalonia. In southern Illinois and Indiana, they look to Memphis, a Southern city. Once into the Plains, they look to Denver. In the Midwest, it's Chicago.

And this Midwest shares a common culture and a common reputation, which it goes to some effort to live down. The middle of the country gets low marks for exotica, which is unfair. Its flat landscape seems to excite some urge to the bizarre, from the pathologies of Bonnie and Clyde, to the rise and fall of utopian communities, to the pastoral purity of the Amish. A traveler through the Midwest runs often into strange and isolated little towns like Fairfield, Iowa, which has thrived ever since the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi came to town and set up his university there. Or Nauvoo, the Illinois town where Mormons have returned in droves to reclaim the community that once expelled them to Utah. Or another Iowa town, Postville, split between its native Germans and Norwegians, an influx of ultraorthodox Hasidic Jews who came there to open a kosher packinghouse, and the hundreds of Mexicans who work there.

But the fact is that the Midwest lacks a vivid identity, and most of its people seem to like it that way. Historian Andrew R. L. Cayton calls it "the anti-region." If there's a Midwestern bumper sticker, it would read, "It's no big deal." Cayton wrote, "The premium in the Midwest is on politeness, on the vague and unthreatening universal

rather than on the unfamiliar and dangerous particular." It is a region with no regional feel.

The Midwest is often called the Heartland or the Homeland or Middle America, but these concepts rise mostly from the politics of the moment. They imply a solid, down-home area filled with practical but parochial folks, mostly rural, friendly and dull, and inclined to vote conservative. The Midwest has plenty of this, but so does every other region.

Everybody knows what the South is: it has a vivid common history defined by the Civil War and a clear boundary drawn by Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon. New England is a geographic and historical unit: the very words *New England* conjure up a certain scenery, architecture, manners.

The Midwest enjoys no such clarity. Almost no institutions study it or speak for it as a region. Books about the South could fill a library. There are many books about Midwestern places, from Chicago to the bridges of Madison County. But books about the region itself—its history, politics, economics, character—fit on a very short shelf.

Instead, Midwesterners flaunt Midwestern "values" and argue among themselves over which state exemplifies these values. In a book called *Heartland*, an Indiana historian named James Madison asked scholars from each state to describe their state's history and character. Each scholar, writing about his or her own state, proclaimed it the repository of true Midwestern values.

"Missouri is the most American state," said the Missourian. The others chimed in. "Michigan is first of all Midwestern," said the scholar from Michigan. North Dakota "is the most Midwestern state." "Iowa is indeed the middle land, lying at the center of the Midwest and therefore at the center of the nation." What's more, "If the Middle West is the nation's heartland, then perhaps Iowa is the heart itself, pulsating quietly, slowly and evenly." It's hard to top that, but Ohio tries, by being both "the gateway to the Midwest" and "the epitome of Midwestern distinctiveness." It was a relief to come to the wry chapter on Nebraska and to read that the state's qualities of "determination, friendliness, generosity, stoicism and daring," the ability of its people to be "audacious, honest, creative,

imaginative, frugal, practical and so on," make sense only if these virtues are found only in Nebraska and nowhere else. Perhaps, the author suggests, good folk also live in Iowa, Kansas, even in Missouri.

Midwesterners do like to boast, in their quiet way, about "the bucolic and pastoral stability of the region, its traditional moral values and its down-to-earth veneration of family and hard work," as Madison put it. He quoted a magazine called *Midwest Living* to the effect that Midwesterners value "the land we live on. Clean air. Wide open spaces. Genuine friendships. Our family-oriented values."

Part of this is an aw-shucks act put on for outlanders. In reality, from John Dillinger to Charles Manson to Charles Starkweather, the Midwest has produced its share of psychopaths. More recently, watchers of the Enron scandal noted that virtually all the top players grew up on Midwestern farms or in small towns such as Tyrone, Missouri, or Aurora, Illinois, or Broken Bow, Nebraska. But part of it is a genuine appreciation of those values. And part amounts to a compensation for a small-town way of life that even boosters concede can be pretty boring.

These small-town values always were overrated. In life and in literature, the Midwest has too often been a place to leave. The small towns of Iowa post signs commemorating famous natives—the Donna Reed Theater in Denison, John Wayne Drive in Winterset, Mamie Eisenhower Avenue in Boone—but all these sons and daughters had to go away to get famous. The Midwest's great writers—Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis—mostly left to write novels about heroes and heroines who themselves fled the "dark fields of the republic," as Fitzgerald put it, for more expansive places. Glenway Wescott, the Wisconsin-born novelist, called the Midwest "a state of mind of people born where they do not like to live." These days, if any writer defines the Midwest today, it's Garrison Keillor. But his Lake Wobegon, too, describes a Midwest that no longer exists, any more than the South of *Gone with the Wind* exists.

The stereotype of the narrow, bigoted, unworldly bumpkin, the image of the Midwesterner passed down by Lewis and other

authors, clashes with reality. Across the Midwest, I found residents of once all-white towns dealing with maturity and sophistication with waves of Hispanic immigrants. Virtually every city of any size has its opera, symphony, ballet, art museum. And Midwesterners, especially in rural areas, also know they live far from the action and go to a great deal of trouble to stay in touch. If half the Midwest listens to Rush Limbaugh, the other half listens to NPR. As I drove through the Midwest, my car radio never passed out of range of Limbaugh and his brothers in bile, nor of first-rate classical-music stations, often broadcasting from local colleges and universities.

The Midwest is neither solidly conservative, like the South, nor as progressive as the cities of the seaboards. Rather, it's both. Midwestern factory workers may be baffled by the global forces that steal their jobs. But Midwestern farmers and small-town businesspeople have been dealing globally for years. If you want a smart discussion on global currency fluctuations, just go talk to a farmer who depends on exports for a living.

In other words, Midwesterners are tolerant, narrow-minded, cultured, crass, sophisticated, and naïve in pretty much the same measure as other Americans. What makes them unique, though, is their isolation, especially from each other. Rural villages, immigrant towns, factory cities, all battle the problems of globalization in isolation from each other, unaware that other people in neighboring states are fighting the same battle. By nature, Midwesterners can be aloof and uncooperative. That nature is hurting them now.

This nature springs from the region's sense of security, of distance from the evils of the outside world. Those of us who left the Midwest wanted glitter, excitement, the crush of cities. Those who stayed wanted something else—safety, or belongingness. Gopher Prairie was, as Sinclair Lewis wrote, “merely safe.” Ginny, the heroine of Jane Smiley's novel *A Thousand Acres*, felt that “our farm and our lives seemed secure and good.”

To see into the region's heart, I needed a poet. So I went to Nebraska, to meet Ted Kooser, and we talked one morning in a coffee shop in Lincoln, near the rural acreage where he lives. After an

Iowa boyhood, Kooser became an insurance executive in Omaha. But his real life belongs to poetry. He has published ten collections of poems, plus two small books of prose that may be the most evocative writing anywhere on Midwestern life. In 2004–5 he served two terms as America’s poet laureate. Wonderfully intelligent, wryly funny, Ted Kooser would have shone in any society. Why did he stay in the Midwest? I asked.

“I think it was because I felt safe here,” he said. “Most people here, you got a job, never asked for a raise. If you’re digging a ditch, you don’t ask why. I had enough of that in me. I got a steady paycheck. It was so much safer to stay where I was.

“My friend Margie Rine, her mother is elderly, lives in Seward. She’s on an electric cart. On a Sunday morning, when she was in her garden, she got dumped. She had to wait forty minutes until the neighbors came home from church and found her. Margie said, ‘Ma, what did you do for forty minutes?’ and she said, ‘I weeded the strawberries.’ That’s very Midwestern.

“We’ve got tractor pulls here. No amount of Islamic terrorism can ever touch this part of America.”

As Kooser suggested, the Midwest shares a communal myth, part Grant Wood, part Booth Tarkington, part Meredith Willson.

The Midwest lives on this historical myth, Ted Kooser told me. It’s a memory of a time that never really existed and is all the more powerful for that, like Garrison Keillor’s Lake Wobegon. It’s a past that keeps the Midwest from coping with its present.

Ted said, “This resistance to change is a big force. Our past is a fiction. It’s all stories. It may be that the collective past in an area like this is so uniform—so tied into the Depression and the golden Ike years—that it makes us resistant. If you have a common collective past that you keep vivifying, that affects how we deal with change.” And now change is here, and that sense of safety is vanishing.

“In 1905,” Ted said, “leather-harness makers could retool for cars. Now nobody can retool that fast. You’re teaching computer codes that are going to be obsolete. If you’re a Californian, you resort to crystals or I Ching. If you’re a Midwesterner, it’s Bud Light.”

A communal myth or idealized history is no help in a time of transformative change. Every hundred years or so, an economic

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revolution comes along and changes everything. This means that all of us—societies as well as people—must reinvent ourselves. But as the Chicago-born sociologist Richard Sennett says, this is easier said than done.

“Instability can be an opportunity,” Sennett wrote about globalization, “if you have real wealth to invest, or are young and unattached, or an immigrant exploring cracks in the labor force. If you are dutiful but not brilliant at work, if you have children and a mortgage, if you are worried about old-age hardship, then instability does not equal opportunity.”

“Dutiful but not brilliant,” aging and insecure—that sums up much of the Midwest. Faced with globalization, the region seems in denial. As Ted Kooser says, we don’t handle change, let alone revolutions, very well.