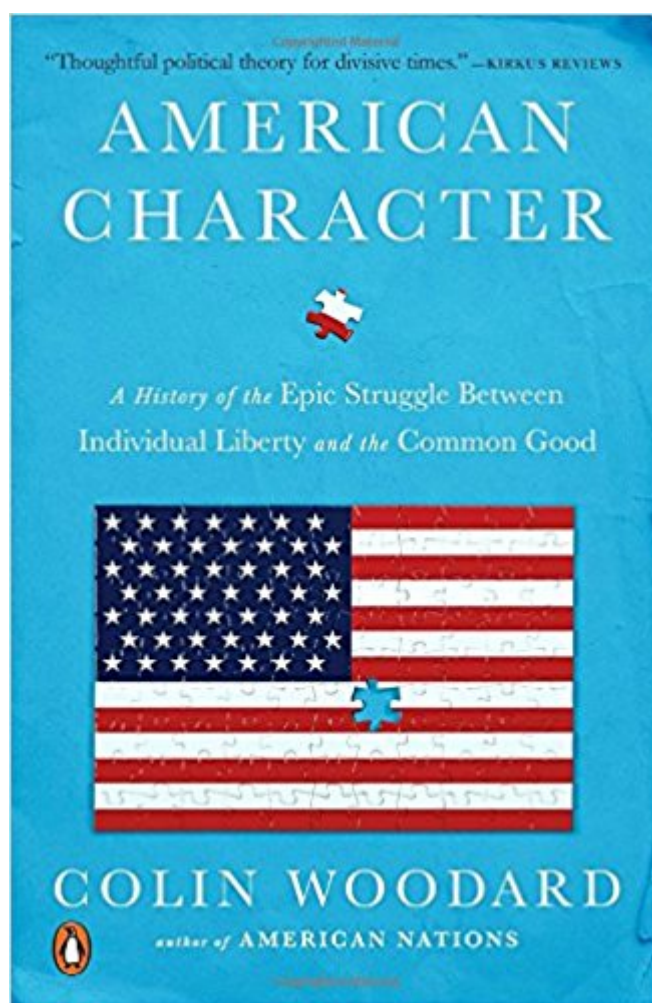


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# American Character: A History Of The Epic Struggle Between Individual Liberty And The Common Good



## Synopsis

The author of *American Nations* examines the history of and solutions to the key American question: how best to reconcile individual liberty with the maintenance of a free society. The struggle between individual rights and the good of the community as a whole has been the basis of nearly every major disagreement in our history, from the debates at the Constitutional Convention and in the run up to the Civil War to the fights surrounding the agendas of the Federalists, the Progressives, the New Dealers, the civil rights movement, and the Tea Party. In *American Character*, Colin Woodard traces these two key strands in American politics through the four centuries of the nation's existence, from the first colonies through the Gilded Age, Great Depression and the present day, and he explores how different regions of the country have successfully or disastrously accommodated them. The independent streak found its most pernicious form in the antebellum South but was balanced in the Gilded Age by communitarian reform efforts; the New Deal was an example of a successful coalition between communitarian-minded Eastern elites and Southerners. Woodard argues that maintaining a liberal democracy, a society where mass human freedom is possible, requires finding a balance between protecting individual liberty and nurturing a free society. Going to either libertarian or collectivist extremes results in tyranny. But where does the "sweet spot" lie in the United States, a federation of disparate regional cultures that have always strongly disagreed on these issues? Woodard leads readers on a riveting and revealing journey through four centuries of struggle, experimentation, successes and failures to provide an answer. His historically informed and pragmatic suggestions on how to achieve this balance and break the nation's political deadlock will be of interest to anyone who cares about the current American predicament—political, ideological, and sociological.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“Woodard, an award-winning journalist for the Portland Press-Herald in Maine, is a terrific writer, and his range is impressive. His musings about the impact of Ayn Rand on American conservatism or a day spent in the terrifying blackness of Nicolae Ceausescu’s crumbling Romanian dictatorship are elegant set pieces.”

•David Oshinsky, *Washington Post* “An illuminating national portrait at a particularly divisive time.”

•Downeast “Woodard’s treatise is a must-read for anyone grappling with how we arrived at the present moment . . . Although the prose is effortlessly accessible to a general audience, the manuscript could easily serve as a textbook in a number of different disciplines: history, economics, political science and psychology, just to name a few.”

•Bowling Green (Ky.) *Daily News* “A deep analysis of the history of the common good versus individual rights. . . . A healthy democracy needs to balance the two; either one alone leads to disaster. . . . American Character adds a further prism to the public-private spectrum. “The struggle for freedom is not bilateral, but instead triangular,” Woodard writes. “The participants are the state, the people, and the would-be aristocracy or oligarchy. Liberal democracy . . . relies on keeping these three forces in balance. The history of that struggle is a big-dipper ride through four centuries as first collectivists then individualists take their turn at managing the country. Lurking just below the surface are always mirrors reflecting our own times. . . . Woodard’s essential thesis is vital to understand.”

•Thomas Urquhart, *Portland Press-Herald* “Woodard builds on his previous analysis of the country’s regional differences to focus on the conflict between individualism and collectivism that defines our national character. As in his previous book, the author . . . maintains, “our country has never been united, either in purpose, principles, or political behavior. We’ve never been a nation-state in the European sense, but rather a federation of nations, like the European Union. . . . Although we have inherited a legacy of revolution against a king, making us vigilant against the rise of an overarching government that might deny us our individual potential,” Woodard sees that the vast majority of Americans believe that the “American Way” means pursuing happiness through a free and fair competition between individuals. Politicians must

reassure voters that fairness is the central issue of our political discourse by proposing tax reforms and investments in education that would help keep the playing field even. . . . Thoughtful political theory for divisive times.

**Kirkus Reviews** Praise for *American Nations* “[*American Nations*] sets itself apart by delving deep into history to trace our current divides to ethno-cultural differences that emerged during the country’s earliest settlement.

**The New Republic** (Editors’ Picks: Best Books of 2011) “[A] compelling and informative attempt to make sense of the regional divides in North America in general and this country in particular . . . Woodard provides a bracing corrective to an accepted national narrative that too often overlooks regional variations to tell a simpler and more reassuring story.

**The Washington Post** “Mr. Woodard’s approach is breezier than [David Hackett] Fischer’s and more historical than [Joel] Garreau’s, but he has earned a place on the shelf between them.

**The Wall Street Journal** “A smart read that feels particularly timely now, when so many would claim a mythically unified Founding Fathers as their political ancestors.

**Boston Globe** “[In] offering us a way to better understand the forces at play in the rumpus room of current American politics, Colin Woodard has scored a true triumph.

**Newsweek/The Daily Beast** “Woodard makes a worthwhile contribution by offering an accessible, well-researched analysis with appeal to both casual and scholarly readers.

**Library Journal** “For people interested in American history and sociology, *American Nations* demands reading.

**St. Louis Post-Dispatch** “[A] fascinating new take on our history. . . .

**The Christian Science Monitor** From the Hardcover edition.

Colin Woodard, an award-winning writer and journalist, is currently the state and national affairs writer at the *Portland Press Herald* and *Maine Sunday Telegram* and received a 2012 George Polk Award for an investigative project he did for those papers. A longtime foreign correspondent for *The Christian Science Monitor*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, he has reported from more than fifty foreign countries and six continents. His work has appeared in dozens of publications, including *The Economist*, *Smithsonian*, *The Washington Post*, *Politico*, *Newsweek*, *The Daily Beast*, *The Guardian*, *Bloomberg View*, and *Washington Monthly*. A graduate of Tufts University and the University of Chicago, he is the author of four previous books including *American Nations* and *The Republic of Pirates*. From the Hardcover edition.

Colin Woodard cuts to the core of the American psyche — a multiple personality, race conscious, class conscious, craziness that has been there long before we were born as a nation, let alone born into current generations. Based on his excellent work, *American Nations*, it takes his research on immigration, migration and European values that came to North America over the course of five hundred years to a deeper discussion of where we are today and why. He avoids politics and platitudes, instead giving us a historical perspective that tells more truth about the founding fathers, the meanings of freedom and liberty, and the wretched history of slavery that is still hard-wired in the American DNA. This is a must-read for anyone who cares about America and is looking for answers in this very polarized time.

Colin Woodard's new book is a sequel to his *American Nations: A History of the Eleven Rival Regional Cultures in North America*, which gained wide attention when published five years ago. He tried to explain there why disagreements about fundamentals have persisted in the United States. Searching back to the first European settlements of the seventeenth century, he showed how antagonistic ideas about a proper social order produced sharply divergent colonial regimes. In New England's intensely democratic towns, local self-government harnessed and restrained individual striving to secure a larger community well-being. South Carolina's slave plantations, by contrast, allowed the rich and powerful an unfettered pursuit of individual advantage. Sprightly and historically informed, *American Nations* showed how these and other regional cultures competed against each other. No unitary national culture could result; the outcome always has been contested and plural. In effect, New England and the Deep South each searched for allies, with the pivotal "midlands" of New Jersey-Pennsylvania and points west positioned to determine who would control the presidency and Congress. Andrew Jackson thus led a political coalition that prized individual endeavor and feared a powerful central government, while Abraham Lincoln led a coalition that wanted government to promote economic development and secure equal rights and opportunities. Woodard's *American Character* argues that both polar paradigms — hyper-collective and hyper-individualistic — are dystopian. As a college student, he saw first-hand how the malignant Nicolae Ceaușescu turned Romania into a ghastly police state. Although its alleged purpose was "the promotion of the common good," it "yielded instead collective misery" (28). But those traumatized by the collectivist nightmare, notably novelist

Ayn Rand and Wichita oil magnate Fred Koch, concocted "an extreme individualist creed" that prized the pursuit of "rapacious self-interest" (38). Their obsessions about a too-powerful state blinded them to the way that weak states become despotisms dominated by the rich and powerful. As in American Nations, Woodard grounds his case in history. New England gave priority to "individual self-denial, with community power enlisted to restrain the avarice of individuals." Yankees had "faith in government and public institutions." They prized education and "intellectual achievement" and they built public schools (62-63). By contrast, "the Deep South in the antebellum period was an extreme individualist's dream." It most valued "the freedom to own slaves." It favored minimalist government and low taxes, and it denied any public responsibility for education (47, 49, 51). Woodard notes that modern libertarians generally find it impolitic to celebrate the slave South. They look instead to an imagined sugar-coated utopia in the late nineteenth century's Gilded Age, when laissez-faire ideologies maximized the realm of private endeavor and kept government small. From a libertarian perspective, the two Roosevelts undermined these happy arrangements by championing a dangerous, intrusive national state that infringed on property rights, raised taxes, and coddled loafers. Woodard makes plain his own Rooseveltian preferences "what he dubs "national liberalism" "a free market society overseen by an active, equality-seeking government" (157). This took shape in the 1930s and provided the foundation for the postwar expansion of the middle class. Its potential benefits were widened in the 1960s to better include African-Americans and women. But the political coalition that sustained national liberalism came unhinged amid the domestic and international crises of the 1960s, and it has been in retreat ever since. The "laissez-faire right," seemingly discredited by Barry Goldwater's resounding defeat in 1964, embarked on a long march to build "its political and intellectual resources" (192). During the next fifty years, the fringe movement of 1964 moved to center stage. It gradually gained control of the Republican Party, where its ideological strait jacket has become a non-negotiable test of partisan allegiance. It has repeatedly slashed taxes on the rich and allowed the public sphere to deteriorate. Its dominance in the South is nearly absolute. It now controls both houses of Congress and a majority of state legislatures. The Speaker of the House and many of his rank-and-file are explicit devotees of Ayn Rand. Two Koch sons have invested heavily to make the

party do their bidding. But Woodard is convinced that the right has overreached and that its quest to recreate an imagined laissez-faire utopia cannot be the basis for a national majority coalition. He suggests instead that a new majority coalition can be created, based on a commitment to fairness and a widened equality of opportunity. The new majority will define itself in opposition to "the Deep South's tradition of hierarchical libertarianism" (262). And it will not hesitate to raise taxes on those who have won an undeserved lion's share in the new Gilded Age. Woodard's American Character is painted with a broader brush than American Nations. His purpose here is to explore the implications of his earlier analysis. He predicts, but he says little about how his predictions might be implemented. He could say more about why economic inequality widened after 1970, and how this trend might be reversed. He does not explain why issues such as guns and abortion so often eclipse what he might see as rational economic interest. He also could be more explicit about the coded racial scapegoating that suffuses all the never-ending complaints about taxes, health care, deficits, and immigrants. Historians, including this one, will continue to prefer American Nations. But Woodard's American Character seems keenly prescient in the spring of 2016 as the Republican Party flails helplessly while its ideological chickens come home to roost.

This book was recommended by a pretty liberal friend and I have to say, this book didn't tow the liberal company line like I expected. I was thoroughly interested the entire time. It is an interesting perspective on the history of the US and help solidify several positions I have had. Worth the read.

An outstanding follow-up to American Nations, and more important now than ever, Woodard explains our current geo political situation, and how we arrived.

This is a "must read" in our troubled times.

Colin Woodard does it again! Like his "American Nations", "American Character" is giving me a much deeper understanding of things I see each night on the Evening News, and explains how and why we got so screwed up.

Good book to help explain in part why we have such a partisan divide in politics today.

The book is the most relevant I've read regarding the causes of the political dysfunction in our government in recent years. Woodard believes this has resulted from two extreme poles pulling against one another with little middle ground left for compromise. He places greater blame for this on the extreme right, which is manifested in the uncompromising tea party, but also notes the unrealistic and often unworkable policies of the extreme left, which seeks a far larger role for government in the management of society. Woodard uses a new political geographic breakdown of the United States to help explain his thesis. These regions (Yankeedom, New Netherland, Deep South, Left Coast, etc.) are defined by their cultural history, ethnicity and religious backgrounds of those who originally settled them. The ethos each demographic brought to its region is reflected in the current political views of most people who live there. The author demonstrates that, unlike many other western nations, the United States is not ethnically, religiously, or racially homogeneous. He shows which regions cling to a strong individualist tradition and those that emphasize group welfare, but also value individual achievement. The extremes of individualist and group welfare mindsets both lead to untenable forms of government: laissez-faire or centralized control in extreme forms. He uses examples of both types that have failed. The extreme small government envisioned by libertarians can too easily lead to domination of a very small elite class of the rich and powerful, as occurred during the Gilded Age and is seen by many today in the so-called "one percent". Woodard cites the tyranny and repression that characterized the most centralized governments, such as Stalin's Soviet Union. The author says that there are two major alliances; the northern alliance (Yankeedom, New Netherland, and the Left Coast) and the Deep South coalition, which also takes in Greater Appalachia and the Far West, with strong libertarian populations. The author says that the "Dixie bloc" is more vulnerable than the northern alliance, whose regions have a higher degree of cohesion. Woodard says that neither alliance by itself can maintain control of the government or win elections without winning over at least some of the other regions, which contain crucial swing states. In order to do that, it is necessary to alter its philosophy to accommodate those of these swing regions. He finds the Democrats more likely to be able to do this than the current Republican party, which has fallen under the domination of an uncompromising tea party. Woodard lays out a program that could sustain such a coalition, one that combines a free market tempered with fairness that prevents abuse by those who succeed. He says that societies that go too far in the direction of laissez-faire soon become dominated by a small number of wealthy interests and cease to be free. He sees government as the regulator, or referee, whose role it is to maintain a balance between freedom and fairness through controls that prevent extremes. He



supports this view by pointing out that, despite very vocal minorities at both extremes, the country has consistently rejected both of them throughout its history. He finds consistency in this, despite the balkanized nature of the population. He contends that most Americans do not believe that government can solve all problems and should focus on those it can solve. Similarly, decades of polling show that few Americans want a Gilded Age-style laissez-faire government.

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