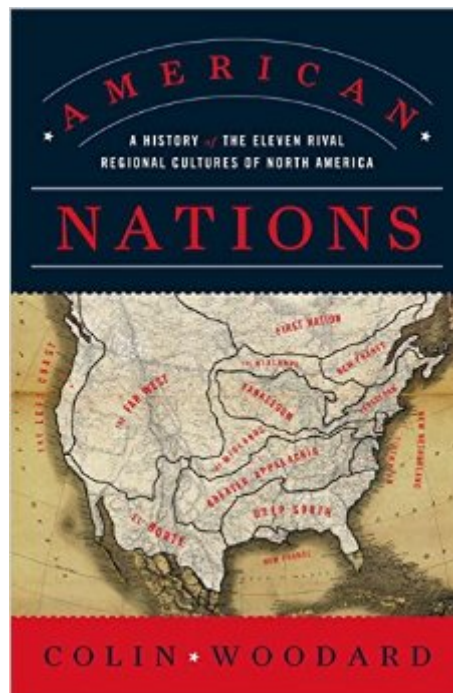


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# American Nations: A History Of The Eleven Rival Regional Cultures Of North America



## Synopsis

• New Republic Best Book of 2011 • The Globalist Top Books of 2011 • Winner of the 2012 Maine Literary Award for Non-fiction • An endlessly fascinating look at American regionalism and the eleven nations that continue to shape North America According to award-winning journalist and historian Colin Woodard, North America is made up of eleven distinct nations, each with its own unique historical roots. In *American Nations* he takes readers on a journey through the history of our fractured continent, offering a revolutionary and revelatory take on American identity, and how the conflicts between them have shaped our past and continue to mold our future. From the Deep South to the Far West, to Yankeedom to El Norte, Woodard (author of *American Character: A History of the Epic Struggle Between Individual Liberty and the Common Good*) reveals how each region continues to uphold its distinguishing ideals and identities today, with results that can be seen in the composition of the U.S. Congress or on the county-by-county election maps of presidential elections.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This is a remarkable book, synthesizing many earlier efforts to explain the distinct differences among different regions of the US - and Canada and part of Mexico too. Some reviewers have stated that there is not much new here compared to Joel Garreau's 1980s book postulating 9 nations. I disagree - to me the historical thread tracing the origins of these differences are what makes it so compelling. Woodward's romp through that history is worth the price of the book. And

there are startlingly different accounts of many of the historical events that are not covered in high school text books, that's for sure. As a Canadian, it is interesting to see a treatment of history that, for Canadians, does not stop at the US border; and for Americans, does not stop at the Canadian (or Mexican) border. I do agree with reviewers that Woodward's comments at the end of the book add too much personal opinion that diminishes the historical objectivity he shows elsewhere. In summary, this is a compelling explanation of the enormous regional differences that make up the cultural and political landscape of America - and explains a lot about those same differences in Canada too. I strongly recommend this book to both those interested in North American History and those interested in its cultural and political trends.

Colin Woodard has written the story of North America that should be taught in school in place of the simplified, sanitized, nearly fictional versions created, like all national histories, for the purpose of welding disparate peoples into a single nation by convincing them they all share a common history. I just got it back from loaning to a friend and re-read it. Like other reviewers here I had read Joel Garreau's "Nine Nations" in the 1980s and more recently Kevin Phillips' "The Cousins Wars" and Dante Chinni's "Patchwork Nation". They were full of interesting information, but Nine Nations and Patchwork Nation didn't address the origins or persistence of the notable regional differences among North Americans. I think Woodard's main thesis is that these regional cultures left their marks so deeply that we are no longer consciously aware of them, and should be. My experience living and working in several of these "nations" indicates that the regional differences do persist, though national media and advertising have masked them. Reading "American Nations" I felt the pieces falling into place. I am undecided on the question of just how valid the thesis of eleven rival nations is as political science, but it makes for a fine explication of our history. And as cultural anthropology it provides the same level of explanatory power for understanding our cultural differences that the theory of evolution provided for understanding biology, or that the theory of plate tectonics did for understanding planetary-scale geologic processes. Just as those two sciences could not advance beyond the observational phase without a theoretical framework, this third dimension of historical immigration patterns transforms a two-dimensional hodgepodge of cultural observations into a meaningful three-dimensional portrait far more illuminating than the usual North-South analysis. The map on the "American Nations" cover showed me that I grew up roughly where the Deep South, Appalachia, and El Norte meet in eastern Texas. We said we were "Scotch-Irish" but seemed to have no knowledge of or interest in how we came to be there, nor did I ever know anyone who was aware that there were early Spanish missions in the pine woods of East

Texas or that there had been a large Cherokee village not four miles from my home. Later I learned that my own family had entered the U.S. in South Carolina from Barbados in the 1680s; little is known about them except that they were poor whites, so now we know there is a good chance they were indentured servants to Barbadian slave lords. How many Americans know the Deep South was founded at Charleston by migrants from Barbados? I never did. I had always lumped Tidewater, Appalachia, and the Deep South as "the South", but distinguishing them by origin explains a lot. Now I have some insight into features of my county that have puzzled me for decades: why the tiny community where I attended school in the 1950s and 60s was clustered around its original plantation house, Cumberland Presbyterian church, and cotton fields (it was founded by a slave-holding family from Savannah, Georgia in the 1840s or 50s); why my neighbors had such casual contempt for blacks, Jews, Mexicans, Indians, Catholics, Chinese, and all other foreigners; why Ku Klux Klan actions were still fresh in older folks' memories; why blacks lived either in their own parts of town literally across the tracks or entirely separately in their own towns or isolated communities tucked away in the woods; why my parents were so puzzled that "our Negroes" seemed dissatisfied with our hand-me-down clothes and an occasional pig (I recall puzzled discussions of "What do they want?" implying lack of gratitude); why some neighbors said "Bide a wee" for "stay a while" or occasionally exclaimed "Gott in himmel!" but otherwise spoke in Texas drawl; why hillfolk in remote cabins in the woods practiced subsistence hunting using antique Springfield and Henry rifles, had a near-religious devotion to one-shot kills and complete disregard for hunting season and licenses, and distilled their own liquor (Appalachians for sure!); why there was a deeply ingrained presumption that gentlemen rode horses and peasants walked, so any poor farmer that came into oil money bought horses immediately (Deep South cavaliers influence); why there was hardly any familiarity with or emphasis on attending college, and disdain for the (rare) "know it all college boy" (Appalachian ignorance and apathy influenced by Deep South resistance to education for the masses); why employers referred to employees as "hands"; why our relatives in far southwest Texas seemed to us to live in a different country (they did - El Norte), while relatives in Tennessee and business associates in Mississippi seemed to come from an earlier and more violent time; why Cajuns in south Louisiana and southeast Texas seemed like such an anomaly in the Deep South in their Catholicism and complete disregard of racial boundaries (New France egalitarianism); maybe even why some blacks in East Texas practiced a strange mixture of Southern Baptist services and voodoo lore - one local black church was even named the Voodoo Baptist Church, and the pastor roamed the area on foot wearing an animal skin cape and carrying a long shepherd's staff (West Africa via the West Indies). Does any of this sound like growing up in

Michigan? Have you lived in a state with a state religion? Texas has one, best characterized as southernbaptistfootball. Recognition that the region is essentially Appalachia with a strong Deep Southern influence and only faint traces of Spanish and Indian influence remaining provides the key to unlock all those scattered observations made as an ignorant but curious youth. Knowing the origins of Yankeedom, the Midlands, Tidewater, and the cavalier South even sheds light on why North Dakotans and Minnesotans, coastal Northern Californians, Oregonians, Washingtonians, and my in-laws in Evanston, Illinois are so similar to New England Yankees, while my prospective in-laws in northern Virginia were deeply interested in our "bloodlines". Appalachia and the Deep South were of particular interest to me, but the story of the founding and migrations of El Norte, New England, New Netherland, New France, the Midlands, Tidewater, the Far West, the Left Coast, and more recently the founding of the Canadian First Nation are completely fascinating and illuminating, and leave me embarrassed at how much is new to me. (Woodard could've made it an even dozen by including New Sweden, a Swedish colony along the Delaware River in parts of Delaware, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania from 1638 to 1655! I guess it didn't leave enough of a cultural mark.) Lastly, I did not think Woodard unfairly favored the Yankees; his description showed the harsh, violent, and meddlesome parts of their Puritan cultural heritage along with the elements we still cherish (for much more detail see Fischer's "Albion's Seed"). The key difference is that Yankees changed with the times. Nor did I take the epilogue as an unwelcome interjection of personal opinion. I read it as unflinching commentary that grappled with unpleasant realities and made some educated extrapolations regarding possible futures for the U.S. and North America. Woodard is not the first to speculate along these lines of fracture, as he notes. And I have made the same comments on "the Baptist equivalent of sharia law" since the conservative coup of the Southern Baptist Convention in the mid-1990s. The Deep South has been a reluctant participant in the U.S. federation and has routinely made threats to withdraw since the Articles of Confederation days; in the 2010 mid-term election we again heard southern politicians talk of secession. That would be either puzzling or shocking without this deep background. Can a nation-state cobbled together from Dutch, Spanish, French, and multiple waves of incompatible English colonists, along with unwilling Indians and Africans, really hold together for another 200 years? Maybe a mutual divorce based on irreconcilable differences would eventually result in more compatible second marriages for all or even decisions that they prefer to go it alone. And really lastly - I've enjoyed and learned nearly as much from the reviewers and commenters here as from the book.

If you like your history big, all-encompassing, different, quirky, and bound to make you think, you'll

love this one. It's basically a follow-up to David Hackett Fisher's *Albion's Seed*. That book, which came out in 1989, posited 4 basic cultures that settled the US, and which continued to have a huge influence up to this day. To those cultures (Puritan New England, Quaker Pennsylvania, Cavalier Tidewater, and Scots-Irish Appalachia), Woodard has added a few more (New Netherlands and the Deep South, for example), and extended coverage of them up to the current day. He does an excellent job showing how different the nations were at the time of the Revolution, and why uniting the country was as difficult as it was. He also shows how the different cultures extended across the landscape (for example, a Yankee influence in the Western Reserve of Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota as well as a similar influence on the "Left Coast"). He does a good job showing how immigration fits in as well (basically, the original cultures were so strong that immigrants went where they fit in). Finally, he shows how the current impasse between red and blue states can all be tied back to a basic cultural division between Yankeedom and the Deep South. It really does help explain "what's the matter with Kansas?"

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