

## Rediscovering America by JL Deffenbaugh

### Book Synopsis

I have lived outside America for 50 years. My frame of reference is the 1960s when I grew up in Peoria, Illinois. I have travelled back to the US frequently since moving abroad in 1971, and these travels have reinforced how much America has changed – it's no longer the America that I knew.

I therefore want to rediscover America, and plan to do this through a long road trip that will reflect my personal journey of discovery. The result will be a socio-political historical travelogue, *Rediscovering America*.

My interest in history and politics will frame my exploration. I'll visit places that I've been before, and new places that interest me. I'll listen to what people say, their views, and what underpins their thinking. I'll visit old friends to renew connections, share stories and get their take on what has happened over the past 50 years. I'll find out what has changed and explore what has caused this change.

My challenge will be to listen, not to advocate. I want to keep an open mind – to understand people I encounter, and to see what this tells me about both America and me.

I'll have the flexibility to go where events are, where my curiosity takes me, and where I will be challenged in my thinking. Unlike John Steinbeck or William Least Heat Moon, I won't follow a set route nor use one mode of transport – I'll take trains, buses and planes, hire cars and campers, cadge lifts. But unlike my travels in the 1960s, I won't hitchhike.

The structure of the book will emerge from what I see, hear and understand. I will comment on history, politics and culture, seeking to understand people and their politics at this pivotal time – the road trip will take place after one contentious election and before what will no doubt be another.

I also want to explore my own contradictions. I was born in England, and carry both British and American passports, the consequence of an American father who worked for Caterpillar. Our family spent the 1950s in Britain and returned to the US in 1961. After a decade in the States, I came back to Britain to study and escape the Vietnam draft.

My heritage as a white man has equally shaped my story. My ancestors settled in the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia. Many fought for the Confederacy. We enslaved people. I knew little of this as I grew up in the Land of Lincoln.

I've had my adult life, family and professional career in Britain for the past 50 years. Through this expat lens I'll not only explore contemporary issues in the US, but also compare and contrast these with what I've experienced as an American abroad.

America has moved on, but to where? And how have I changed? I want to see if there is indeed something 'American' that binds the country together. In the UK, people search for the meaning of 'Britishness' – is this now the same in the US?

*Rediscovering America* will be a book both of its time and for the future. My understanding may help the understanding of others. We'll see on this journey of discovery.

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