

## **THE COUNTRY I LEFT BEHIND**

by JL Deffenbaugh

### **Author**

I grew up in Peoria, Illinois in the 1960s and moved to the UK 50 years ago. I had a career in healthcare management and as an international business consultant. I've travelled back frequently but have found that America has moved on. I feel left behind by these seismic changes. As a historian and political scientist, I understand the passions that drove those changes. This is my story of what I learned about America and myself.



### **Synopsis**

1. I set out on a seven-month road trip to rediscover America. I drove over 34,000 miles across 48 states. I took trains and buses, rode around cities and national parks on bicycles. My route looked like an Etch-a-Sketch, giving me flexibility to explore.
2. I talked with friends, family, and strangers who I met on the road, having over 450 conversations about what has changed, what America is like today, and what the future holds. Everyone was keen to share their views. I listened and didn't pass judgement.
3. The story of my road trip is presented in a series of inter-related themes that form the basis for the book. The context is changing continuously. This is a pivotal election year, and I plan to explore further the momentous developments in America and publish after the election.
4. I bring a critical and curious eye of discovery. I'm American, but apart from America, so I feel I have a unique overview of this vast country. My narrative weaves together the big trends in the US today revealed through the themes in my book.
5. America and Britain have what's called a 'special relationship.' Both countries are facing similar challenges – immigration, popular discontent, political and social upheaval. I explore in the book how the themes from my road trip also apply to the UK.
6. I took thousands of photos of America, from the great landscapes of national parks to the homeless who live under the landscape of I-69 in Houston, Texas. My photos present a chronicle of my road trip.

### **My journey of discovery**

I was stopped for speeding a few times. The first time, in Georgia, I got out of the car to say hello but, with hands near their guns, was told by the cops to get back in the car. They checked my UK license and we had a convivial conversation about speed limits in the US. We discussed tourist sites in Savannah, and I was sent on my way. I wasn't Black.

I picked up Kelvin as he hitched north on the Navajo Reservation, Arizona. He offered to show me around the reservation the next morning, and the early rise gave me the best photo of my road trip – a silhouette of Monument Valley. We drove the back roads and Kelvin shared his story of truancy, alcoholism, divorce, custody, jail, retraining. He was trying to reconnect with his culture and was surprisingly optimistic about what life held for him.

Cycling through San Francisco, I stopped at the UN Plaza where homeless congregated. Drugs were traded and taken openly, and Tommie of the charity Urban Academy showed me how he and his

colleagues were trying to help. Fentanyl had replaced Opioids as the drug of choice, and all he could do was deal with the consequences.

## Themes

*The Country I Left Behind* combines my personal journey of discovery with cultural and political insight in a historical context. My road trip narrative will help readers understand better where America is now and what lies ahead, presented through inter-related themes, such as:

- One nation – The aspirations of the US from its founding and the Civil War are in stark contrast with America today. The schisms are stark between not just between North and South, but Blue and Red, rural and city, rich and poor, federal and state. Increasingly partisan politicians feed on these divisions for their own ends.
- Failure to communicate – Americans have lost the ability to communicate with each other. Many told me they had been cancelled by family and friends over politics and culture. Social media reinforces silo thinking and puts up further barriers to conversation.
- Drill, baby, drill – Climate change was, surprisingly, not a big topic of discussion on my road trip. Few were climate deniers, some were passionate about the pending apocalypse, but most felt the US needed to look after itself and let others pull their weight. Energy and gas prices needed to come down to help the car economy.

## Readership

This book is for readers who enjoy learning about history, politics, and culture presented in a travel narrative offering insight to contemporary America. It will appeal both to American and British readers:

- American readers will be challenged by my perspectives on their country as I hold up a mirror to let them see what an expat sees
- British readers will gain an understanding of a country that many view through the prism of Disneyworld, Las Vegas, and New York City

My book crosses competitive segments of travel, historical, current affairs, and cultural non-fiction. What differentiates *The Country I Left Behind* is that:

- I have a deep understanding of the place I am write about
- I am putting myself in that place
- I am setting the place in the context of America today

I will tap into my existing readership: 2,856 contributors to my website, 2,559 LinkedIn contacts who followed my road trip, and all the people who I had conversations with over the seven months on the road. I also have a radio audience in my hometown of Peoria: [https://omny.fm/shows/greg-dan-show-interviews/former-peorian-returns-from-scotland-to-rediscover?in\\_playlist=podcast](https://omny.fm/shows/greg-dan-show-interviews/former-peorian-returns-from-scotland-to-rediscover?in_playlist=podcast)

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