

The Country I Left Behind: Conversations Across America **by JL Deffenbaugh**

Book Proposal

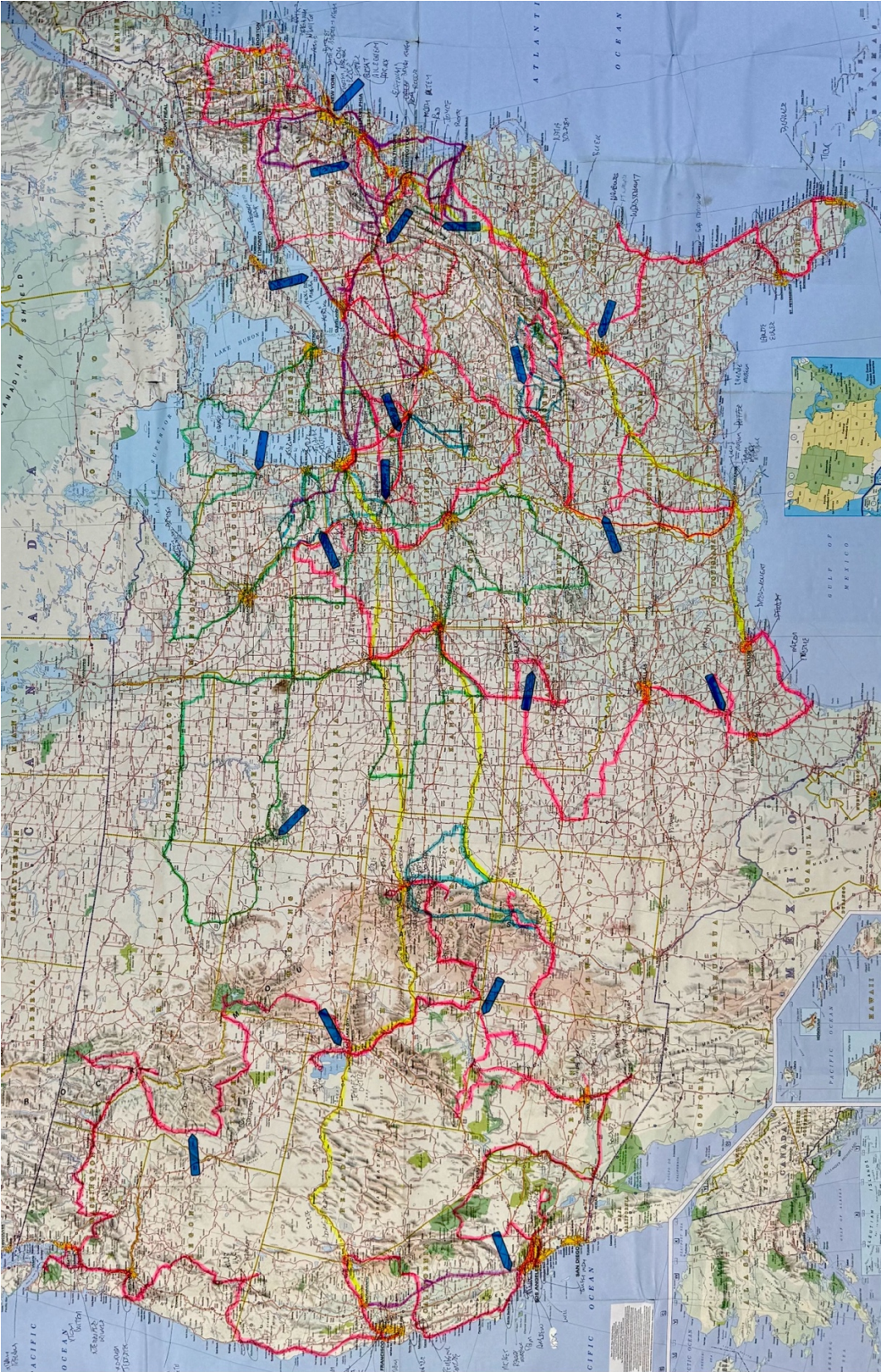
I'm a Scotsman who grew up in Peoria, Illinois in the '60s, moved back to the UK, then returned 50 years later to discover what had happened to the country I loved. For the two years leading up to the last election, I traveled to every corner of the Lower 48, covering more than 50,000 miles by car, train, bus and bike like a modern-day de Tocqueville, visiting the historical sites that define the country in contradictory ways, and speaking at length with more than 600 people. Their trenchant comments about the nation are at the heart of my memoir, *The Country I Left Behind: Conversations Across America*, in which I compare the America of my youth, which many have mythologized, to the America of today, these Disunited States.

For readers of James Fallows's *Our Towns*, Sarah Kenzidor's *The Last American Road Trip*, Neil King's *American Ramble*, and especially Arlie Russell Hochschild's *Strangers In Their Own Land* and *Stolen Pride*, my book explores conflicting attitudes from Green Bay to Tulsa to Austin, from Simi Valley to Salt Lake City to Stone Mountain, and scores of places in between. I believe my book fills a gap in what is already on the shelves. What I found was that the legacy of slavery has turned America into a deeply divided and unequal society. People believe that isolating their country from the multi-polar world will protect them even as dog whistle politics turn them on their countrymen. As a people, they are held together by national symbols, which are fraying, and sports affiliations, which are inherently antagonistic. Americans, I found, are friendly, yet uncaring, trumpeting their own individualism while simultaneously decrying a decline in community cohesion and demanding that elites solve all their problems. They've accepted moral and governmental decay while championing anti-majoritarian institutions that undermine democracy and equality. But while the freedom I felt travelling the country is no sure thing for those living in it today, I found grounds for optimism in the willingness of the many Americans I met to take action to reclaim its future.

I've completed a 125,000-word manuscript and have a rich set of the pictures from my journeys that can illustrate the book. My plan is to publish before the 2026 midterms.

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Road Trip



Map Key

Car 2022

Train

Bus

Car 2023

Car 2024

Election 2024

Chapter anchor city



Maps on website: <https://rediscoveringamerica.us/maps/>

Photographs



Gallery on website: <https://rediscoveringamerica.us/gallery/>

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