

Are the United States still the «God's Country»?

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Abstract

Arriving to the «new world» across the Atlantic Ocean from England, the Founding Fathers, as an act of thankfulness to God's guidance, called the United States the «God's Country». On the other hand, serious scholars would call them the «unfinished country» and quite a few political scientists would talk about «our more perfect Union», touching on the variety and contradictions of the Two-centuries and a half old «nation of nations».

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I submit that the United States still retain some basic values, connected with their origin but in a more complicated sense. History does not have a «libretto»; it does not follow a preconceived line of development and seems to be inclined to surprise us with sudden, unforeseen turns. Progress, on the other hand, in spite of all the more or less inspired or prophetic predictions, is far from being a chronological fatality.

By the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, during the period that everybody would unwisely call the «belle époque», Europe was about to commit suicide following two world wars, not to mention the nazi *Lager* and the Stalin's *gulag*.

It is perhaps in this connection that a *modicum* of gratitude is due to Donald J. Trump. The man, coming from real estate business to a major political role, has been instrumental in bringing into politics a business, like behavioural pattern completely alien to traditional American politics. One should not forget that Trump is the author of *The Art of the Deal*, a far cry from the Aristotle's idea of «prudence» as the most important virtue of the policy-maker and even more distant from the jeffersonian prerogatives of the Founding Fathers. However, I do not feel that the election of Joe Biden is a pure and simple «return to decency», as *The New York Times* (6 December 2020) would have it. According to Roger Cohen,

«President Trump is not yet gone, but he's muted, marginalized and moribund. American democracy was challenged by Mr. Trump at its very heart – respect for truth – and resisted. Joe Biden will take office in January as the 46th president of the United States. Decency will return to the White House, a fundamental moral shift. Dictators the world over will no longer have carte blanche to do their worst unchallenged.

Mr. Biden, with 306 Electoral College votes – the same number that Mr. Trump won in 2016 when he called his victory a «massive landslide» - won with a little room to spare. All the protest and bluster from Mr. Trump cannot undo the facts. The obscenity of the president's refusal to concede feels less stark in a nation inured to outrage. Still, it demonstrates the extent of Mr. Trump's attempt to subvert the institutions and traditions of democracy.

An American authoritarian lurch posed a real danger. Europe already felt isolated in its defence of the rule of law and human rights. That insidious, wheedling, plaintive voice from the Oval Office, oozing self-obsession, got inside everyone's heads. Mr Trump's political genius lay in his feel for the dark side of human nature and his ferocious, social media-propelled energy in appealing to it. The volume has dropped as the nightmare recedes. Suddenly there is mental space to think again».

Roger Cohen seems to ignore that the Donald Trump phenomenon, despite some of its incredible aspects, is nothing new in American politics. An American historian, Daniel J. Boorstin, in his book, *The Genius of American Politics*, maintains and tries intelligently to prove that America does not have and does not need an «ideology». It was born out of some sort of a «miracle», well expressed in Thomas Jefferson's «preamble» to the American Constitution, a sense of *givenness*, including all the basic democratic values that cover all the possible historical evolution. For this reason, Boorstin thinks that «American politics is not for export». In this respect, president Trump and his strange, surprising incoherence imply a significant break of the American political and cultural tradition, but they will be easily absorbed, as it were, within what could be called the «American exceptionalism».

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the United States remains what it used to be when the Founding Fathers were finally able to land in New England: «God's Country». I do not share in this connection the blasphemous *bon mot* that, if God did exist, he would certainly apply for American citizenship or at last for a green card. What I mean to say is that the collapse of the Soviet Union and the decline of ideological absolutism were more sudden and sweeping than most observers anticipated. In less than a couple of years the «Evil Empire», as President Ronald Reagan, in a controversial biblical rhetoric would term it, has simply disappeared from the map of the world. When I asked Mr. Mikhail Gorbachev, on the occasion of a UNESCO seminar in Venice, how he did it, his answer was disarmingly candid: «It was not difficult. It was inevitable».

It is my contention that the United States is still «God's Country», but in a more profane sense: that is to say, from a strictly social and political point of view. It provides a unique economic, social, and cultural laboratory. It is a dynamic force in constant change even while remaining at the same time basically faithful to the fundamental principles embodied and expressed in the Constitution as the

transcendent Law of the Land. This does not mean that other countries of the world, in Europe as well as in Asia, in the Middle and Far East and in Latin America, should look at the United States as a normative standard or criterion on the basis of which to measure their domestic progress or their regression from democratic practice. It is a fact, however, that the United States seems to precede and to pave the way, if not to indicate the road, for those countries that have decided to enter the difficult, and at times tortuous and painful, process of modernization and industrialization on a large scale.

There is a widespread feeling, especially among Europeans, concerning the US: at least since the end of the Second World War, and even more clearly since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States has attained a leadership position in the world, but it is a reluctant world leader for various intrinsic reasons. First of all, because it has no sense of history; secondly, because it cannot communicate effectively with other cultures and other countries due to the fact that it tends to project only itself and has a serious difficulty in understanding, as in were, the «otherness» of others; thirdly, because, whenever confronted with issues that cannot be resolved through organizational measures or technical know-how, the US seems to be helpless and to suffer a loss of nerves. There is a bit of truth in these strictures. I do think, however, that what the other countries have to learn from the United States as it is today is precisely the ability to communicate and understand on a foot of equaling a wide variety of cultural values and behavioral patterns. It is an undisputable fact that the United States is today the first «nation of nations» in world history. As such, it is certainly unique. It is no longer a unified and more-or-less monolithic culture. It is the first truly multiethnic and multicultural society in a world in which we are all migrants, one that is characterized by huge mass movements among different countries and continents. In this respect, the twenty-first century is bound to be the true American century, and, although reluctantly, the United States would have to accept the uneasy role of world leader.

Obviously, there is a price to be paid this. The price does not only concern the fact that the United States shall be forced more and more to play the unpleasant role of world policeman. The Cold War is over, but any idea of an idyllic world would be quite unrealistic. The international situation is chaotic and, worse, is to a large extent unpredictable. Religious and ethnic conflicts, tribal bloodshed and upheavals headed by local irresponsible «war lords», huge population movements, and a demographic explosion which is supposed to double the world population by the year 2050 - these are the predicaments facing the world leader of tomorrow.

Moreover, two continental elusive forces must be dealt with peacefully but firmly at the same time: Russia and China.

And too, one has to consider the position of the allied nations that are today on the verge of uniting in a single formidable power bloc: the new United Europe. What will happen to NATO? Are the strategic interests of the United States and of the future United Europe going to be compatible, if not identical?

If one analyzes the inconsistencies, which could also be viewed as the result of a pragmatic approach of the present American administration in the field of foreign relations, a certain cautious is in order. The United States does not seem to be willing to fly too high.

Different as they are, it is true that Vietnam and Bosnia have been two severe lessons in moderation. Not even the only remaining world power can be all powerful. Some degree of prudence is necessary. No room should be allowed for a delirium of omnipotence. Not every war in every corner of the world can be stopped or controlled by the United States, although some conflicts might be resolved or reduced. We know in Western Europe, based on past experience, that the United States will do whatever is in his power to do.

However, there is a chance that some difficult problems will be posed by the relationship between the United States and the United Europe which is now laboriously, but hopefully, in the making. There are issues such as the attitude toward Iraq and Cuba, that might cause a serious split, at least in the short run, between them. Other sensitive areas might concern international trade, the behavioural patterns of American multinational corporations, or the effects of globalization on economic decisions affecting world trade.

In order to deal with these problems as the world's leader, the American mind must undergo a profound change. The golden days of splendid isolationism are over. The age of innocence is finished. The «American Dream» needs some basic rethinking. A new version of it has to be elaborated. The «Homo Americanus» needs to redefine his identity.

The average American, that is the type we like to call «Homo Americanus», is a purely mental fiction. It does not exist in reality and it does not have any empirical correspondent. It is, however, useful as a heuristic device in the sense of Max Weber's «ideal type». Historically, this type has come to the American shores from all over the world. Trying desperately to escape from religious or political persecution or both, set in motion strictly from hunger and famine, lack of opportunity, and chronic unemployment, a human wave, as it were, has at first crossed the Atlantic Ocean from Europe in search of a better life, peace and freedom, moved and almost mesmerized by a powerful thrust toward acceptance, integration, dignity, and freedom, with an ability to face self-sacrifice which rarely visits the probing scholars who study the world in the quiet penumbra of their *cabinets de travail*.

When Martin Luther King said in a famous speech to the enormous crowd gathered and pressing against Capitol Hill in Washington, «I have a dream», he certainly was not addressing the Afro-Americans only. He was in fact talking to all the citizens of the American Commonwealth.

For the constitution of the American self, I submit that the «American Dream» is essential. This seems true today as it was at the very beginning upon the Founding Fathers and later, when the American colonies broke their ties with the English Crown. However, there is nothing dogmatic about the «American Dream». It is not a monolithic vision or a strictly unified goal. It changes in time in its successive stages. What seems a stable characteristic is its individualistic nature. It has to be earned as a personal reward.

Without any scientific pretense, a typology of the «American Dream» can be plausibly constructed. The first type carries an essentially religious connotation and for many years remains at the root of what used to be called the *Protestant Establishment*. I have elsewhere remarked that when the Pilgrim Fathers managed to touch the shore of the State of Massachusetts - which they called, and not by chance, «New England», to signify a rebirth in pure and renewed form away from the evil of the Old World - they perceived their experience in miraculous terms. The new land gave them a prodigious sense of «givenness», a gift from God. The wide-open spaces, the magnificent sunsets, the incredibly rich snowfalls, and the dense, mysterious forests - that wild, rich, untamed American nature, so different from the manicured nature of Europe - all seemed to show them that this was, in fact, the country God had reserved for them.

Here there was nothing to invent. No value was unrevealed. Everything had already been given, presented by grace, and everything must be accepted. The substance of the early American identity is essentially religious, in the most literal sense, biblical. This is hard to understand for Europeans whose political identity had to fight bitterly against churches and denominations in order to retain the autonomy of the State vis-à-vis the competing religious authorities. As the basic values were given and explicitly elaborated already, there was at that time, and still there is today, no need and no use for ideologies. Nothing could be farther or more alien to the European scene. Contrary to Europe, the United States (typically a country without a pre-history in which the empirical datum has been traditionally conceived as equated with the transcendental value in a country that is in fact considered a «promised land»). As all the basic values are given and beyond discussion, no wonder pragmatism and scientism are fundamental ingredients of American culture. From Charles Peirce to John Dewey, one is impressed by the fact that an idea is viewed as true if it works. Ideological partitions do not count and are actually considered a mere waste of time, a professorial exercise in idle curiosity. All the possible values are already there,

embodied in the Constitution. The only factor that can differentiate social groups and classes lies on the way in which to put them into practice; it has to do with technical know-how, not with moral options. The basic trauma of American social and political life, the Civil War, was not fought along mutually exclusive ideological lines. It concerned life-styles more than philosophical ideas. Even the American Revolution of 1776 had very little ideological or dogmatic content. To use a phrase of Edmund Burke, the English conservative political thinker, it had to do with a practical, pragmatic question: «It was a matter of local grievance» (no taxation without representation), entirely opposed to the French Revolution posture aiming at a universal dogmatic ideal («liberté, égalité, fraternité»).

The early religious orientation of American identity has been preserved until today. It still has a certain amount of resonance, no matter how «corrupted» or downgraded for purely utilitarian reasons, as in the case of the «moral majority» movements and in other forms of emotional populism.

No doubt the American Revolutionary motto: «no taxation without representation» would sound too prosaic to refined European ears. But those European intellectuals who are considering Americans as the true, only «primitives» of the modern world (see J. Baudrillard as an example) should perhaps realize that, given the present day hegemonic position of the United States on a world scale, the consequences of such alleged «primitivity» will weigh on the whole of humanity for the foreseeable future.

Perhaps against these so-called primitives, who are actually technically very advanced, there is nothing, or very little, that can be accomplished by French *grandeur* and Eurocentric prejudice.

The evolution from the biblical spirit, with its strong community-based conformity (see Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*) to the independent individual, extremely jealous of his freedom of judgement and of his ability to take care of himself as regards his means of subsistence, marks the transition to a second type of American self-identity: the free, self-sufficient, and self-centred individual. We are lucky in this respect because for the description of this type we have an admirable example, Henry David Thoreau. He represents, together with the religious-biblical component, an important characteristic of the American self-identity: a kind of rugged, almost tough, certainly proud, self-reliance that tends to use consumer goods but stubbornly refuses to be used by them. In this respect, Thoreau has perhaps been misunderstood. His stand is not so much inimical to the machine. He rather seems afraid that in the end the machine will take over and become an end in itself, and that a new kind of slavery will take place: from master and inventor, man will become the servant of the machine. While he seems to go against the American grain, Thoreau is, on the contrary, quite pragmatic.

In his self-imposed solitude, he wants to prove to himself his self-sufficiency in a true pioneer spirit. He does not need to go West and grow up with the country. His small pond and his log cabin in Concord are quite sufficient. His attack on the basic services of any civilized society certainly sounds radical and definitive, but there is nothing theoretical or ideological about it. It is pure non-abstract pragmatism and belongs to the original American culture.

Thoreau represents the inner-directed personality that does not need indications from the outside. He is not against necessary consumption. He denounces only «conspicuous waste», to use Thorstein Veblen's phrase. His ideal is to be able to live frugally and in this way to earn his independence and leisure. At times, in his book *Walden*, he anticipates the damage done today by work alcoholism. «I went to the woods - he writes - because I wanted to live deliberately, to confront only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary». This is revealing passage. The past last line marks a total departure from what might be seen as a purely passive acceptance of what the natural environment has to offer. Thoreau's refusal of resignation to circumstances is quite American. Moreover, with a tone which we find almost literally identical in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*, Thoreau seems obsessed with the idea that most people come to die without having ever been really alive. I do not think his stand is against mechanization on a large scale. His vitriolic attack is rather against consumerism. Not machines per se, but the attitude that forces one to lose self-consciousness by relying too much on objects that make you sleepy, is evil. In my opinion, the interpretation offered by Ralph Waldo Emerson is in this respect inadequate. While admiring the fact that Thoreau «chose to be rich by making his wants few», Emerson (in *Selected Essays*, London, 1982, pp. 393-415) detects in his nature «somewhat military, not to be subdued, always manly and able, but rarely tender, as if he did not feel himself except in opposition». Emerson sees these qualities more in keeping with an anarchist bent than with the American character. I tend to disagree with Emerson, at least in this respect. There is a definite amount of toughness in the American character, in New England as well as in the Far West.

After the Civil War, with the defeat of the South and the inevitable decline of its genteel life-style, industrialism was bound to flourish and a relatively new type of American identity slowly emerged. «Carpet baggers», and «robber barons» would enter the scene. It was the beginning of the acquisitive society that actually was not and is not today in opposition to the early biblical-religious component of the American identity, nor with the frugal and fiercely independent citizens of the small towns. Wealth acquired by hard work and shrewd business practice was and still is regarded as evidence of a clear evidence of future salvation.

In the best Calvinistic tradition, a good standing in the community is for the true believer the assurance of *certitudo salutis*. The specific religious elements of American identity tend to be blurred. They remain implicit in the American psychological structure as an important cultural trait, but more than the promised land the United States today can better be described at this point with the formula put forward by Talcott Parsons's: «instrumental activism». Community spirit in its pure form seems to be on the way out.

The transition that takes place in modern times, especially after the two world wars, amounts to a profound transformation of the American character and involves both self-identity and collective identity. Not only the inner-directed persons are now outnumbered by other-directed persons or by what Theodor Adorno and his collaborators decided to define as «the authoritarian, that is gregarious, personality». But the very dichotomy between community and society, as expounded one hundred years ago by Ferdinand Toennies, seems to lose its grip. Contractualism seems to have the upper hand. America becomes more and more a legalistic minded country. Most members of Congress are lawyers by training. Every time an American feels in trouble, the first thing he thinks of is: «Let me call my lawyer». Everybody seems to be suing everybody else. Political language and propaganda might help to understand the prevailing social mood. A political platform that has led recently the Republicans to an astounding victory in the House of Representatives is called emphatically «Contract with America» and has been put together by the present House Speaker, Newt Gingrich. It was written in a brisk style like a legal memo and has ten parts, like the Bill of Rights and Moses's Ten Commandments.

According to classical political philosophy, politics is the art of what is possible and the greatest virtue of the policymaker is prudence. In the «Contract with America», there is on the contrary a *hybris*, a sweeping tone that smacks of business efficiency rather than of political wisdom. Under the Contract, the Republican majority committed itself to enact crucial legislation within one-hundred days, from the balanced-budget amendment, the measures expanding prison construction and increasing sentences to tax breaks for Social Security recipients and definite term limits for Representatives and Senators. Some of these measures are in themselves important and correspond to wide spread feelings of the American population at large. «Taking back metropolitan streets» by freeing them from micro-criminality is something every American strongly desires for himself and his family. Among the measures advocated in the «Contract with America» there is also a provision entitled the «American Dream Restoration Act». Wonderful! But this restoration, which is badly needed, is conceived only in terms of a different form of tax-sheltered retirement account. Perhaps necessary, certainly not sufficient.

To restore the «American Dream» it takes much more than a few fiscal petty innovations. An excessively legalistic civilization and way of life must be brought back, little by little, to a community feeling, to what Robert Bellah called the forgotten «habits of the heart». A cold-blooded look at American society as it is today is, in this respect, necessary. Let's forget about Constitutional promises and self-congratulatory rhetoric. Under present social conditions, the pursuit of happiness is on the verge of becoming a desperate pursuit of loneliness. Morality tends to become morale. Personal, genuine human relations tend to be replaced by business-oriented «public relations». American society is undergoing a process of polarization that could spell disaster in the near future. There are today two major factors troubling American collective identity and self-perception: on the domestic scene, the decline of that backbone of democracy, as the middle class used to be thought of and the emergence of relatively new ethnic minorities that so far were regarded as irrelevant; from the international point of view, the growing uncertainty of a clearly defined national purpose, an uncertainty which has been paradoxically, made worse by the sudden disappearance of the Soviet Union. Perhaps, it is true for America today what has been true for huge empires throughout history: a great victory is a great danger. Whenever I hear somebody praising uncritically the American Empire for the next millennium, I cannot help but thinking of the tears of Scipio crying over the destruction of Carthage ordered to the Roman legions by himself because he could anticipate, by looking at the end of this proud city the future collapse of his own city of Rome.

American collective identity needs to bring itself up to date in order to face the challenge posed by the new situation, both domestic and international. This amounts to an assumption of new responsibilities. In the first place, it seems necessary to recapture a degree of community spirit. The WASP syndrome belongs to the past. The price paid by Afro-American citizens, especially during the Second World War in terms of human lives and personal sacrifices, has put the racial question in the United States under a new light. The hypocritical formula «equal but separate» is no longer viable. The «global village» idea is still the misconceived approach in technical terms to a problem which is social and political in essence. The «melting pot» is a piece of wishful thinking which is today replaced by the «salad bowl»: each ethnic group, far from being ashamed of its origin and trying to forget it through the imitation of Anglo-Saxon mores, is becoming more and more conscious and proud of its roots and of the value of ethnicity. As I have noted above, the United States is today a splendid, historically unique country in which different ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural groups are living together within the framework of a dynamic Constitution and under the rule of democratic law.

Living physically together, however, does not mean yet to have implemented a real community. America has become an achieving society, but achievement is still considered a lonely, individual conquest. Making it, or «roughing it», as Mark Twain

would say, is still a purely individual goal in a society in which everybody fends for himself while God is supposed to keep an eye on all, a society that at times resembles closely a Darwinian jungle. To transform such a society into a democratic, articulated community – a community certainly not monolithic nor homogeneous but rather similar to a multifaceted mosaic – is the major challenge facing American leaders at the end of the Twentieth Century. In this respect, the sweeping tone of the «Contract with America» does not seem to help. It is likely to deepen the cultural cleavages and economic contrasts among the different groups. However, more than in the past, political leaders seem to be listening today to the new voices coming from inside America. Left and Right have perhaps lost their power of connotation. They read like labels without much meaning. The basic source of discontent is not only traditional economic scarcity or fear to lose social status together with one's job. It concerns big government, overregulation, the excessive influence of the «politically correct», and other apparently non-economic issues. More than just being liberal or conservative, the present day American wants again to be his own master, and in this connection it is difficult not to recall Thoreau, but at the same time he becomes increasingly conscious that the problem of the individual in society today is not an individual issue.

The reelection of Bill Clinton in November 1996 proves that the doctrinaire approach of the radical Republicans does not pay. Since 1944 with Franklin Delano Roosevelt's, no Democratic president had been reelected. Bill Clinton is undoubtedly a great political opportunist. He smells the mood of the time. He can grasp it. He has understood the new face of America. The WASP model has gone. The melting pot was an extemporaneous theory by sociologists and anthropologists eager to make peace with the Establishment but unaware of its warning. The balance of power has shifted from the East coast to the West coast, from New England to California and the South. The steel belt has since years become the rustbelt. Traditional conceptual categories can no longer describe nor interpret a society that has become an «archipelago» of cultures. This «archipelago» seems to have found in Bill Clinton his clever, pragmatic navigator. Is Clinton some kind of Gladstone resurrected? It is too soon to tell. He does not have charisma. But who wants it? As compensation, he can change his mind if it is required by a new unpredicted situation. He is flexible. By the end of his first term in office, Clinton was able to accomplish something that some day, in retrospect, will appear as a political masterpiece. In a radically different situation, with the economy booming and therefore without the benefit of a serious economic depression that has always been helpful to Democrats, Clinton has put together a social bloc which recalls Roosevelt's *New Deal*: with the same opportunism of that great patrician president, with his apparent *nonchalance*, giving up, whenever expedient, the grand plan for a national Welfare so dear to his wife, and eventually asking her to take a step back, if not to go on a world lecture tour, as it had happened to Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt. Some astute political commentators have asked themselves: what if Nixon had no shame?

Meaning: what would have happened if Nixon had been able to be, like Clinton, shameless and somewhat careless or flippant about his lack of Protestant virtues?

I submit that these are rhetorical questions without much import. Politics is action, not comment. It has to do with decision, not with an idle evaluation of mere intentions. For Clinton, politics seems to be the art of navigating without a radar in a mostly unknown ocean, taking stock of the fact that a country as vast as a continent has changed skin at the threshold of a third millennium for which nobody seems to have a crystal ball. Today America is a fascinating reality because it hardly fits any traditional picture. Europe, when it comes to the problems of extra-communitarian immigrants, has much to learn from America. Here ethnicity, far from being a problem, has come to be viewed as a value. It is asserted as a basis for personal and group identity and is linked with the reevaluation of one's roots. Since the publication of *An American Dilemma* by Gunnar Myrdal much mileage has been covered. «Separate but equal» had been the principle through which segregation was perpetuated for a century despite the Fourteenth Amendment. This «principle» has been exposed and overcome. American Anglo-Protestant groups expected immigrants to «melt». Today ethnicity has reemerged as a central aspect of personal identity and a common focal point of community life. It must be recognized that many sociologists, not only in the United States, have studied racial and cultural differences from a strictly ethnocentric point of view. Their attitude can easily be summed up in Henry Kissinger's phrase when he admitted one day he did not know, and moreover he cared nothing, about the world south of the Pyrenees. Fortunately, the cultural mood is rapidly changing.

Americans are fast learning how to live with a problem. Not every difficulty can be solved instantly. You may have to wait a while: maybe a week, maybe a century.

Years ago, Max Lerner published a big volume, with a somewhat self-deprecating title, about America. The title read: *The Unfinished Country*. I think it is a great title, and a great compliment, and an important recognition of the American genius for constant change, for an ongoing pragmatic revolution. History goes on. Perfection means paralysis.

At the individual level, Europeans can learn today from the United States how to manage the maze of overlapping loyalties in a single person and how to negotiate, as it were, a multiple ego in the age of «virtual reality». There is no guarantee of success but at least it is worth trying.

At the social level, European countries will perhaps be able to learn something from the American ability to have, instead of rigidly exclusive cultural norms, «loose canons», to use the phrase of Henry Louis Gates, that is cultural co-traditions, at the cost of a degree of confusion.

In this sense, the «unfinished country» is still «God's country».

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