

Op-Ed How the widening urban-rural divide threatens America

By **Victor Davis Hanson**

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Of all the growing divides in America, none is sharper than that between city and country. For rural residents, existential issues on the national level are seen as magnified versions of personal considerations: Does the country have enough food, fuel and minerals? Can America defend itself, protect its friends and punish its enemies? These concerns differ markedly from the urbanite's worry about whether the government will provide services to take care of vulnerable populations or whether those of different races and religions can get along in such a crowded environment. Add all this up and rural residents are more likely to be conservative and thus Republican, their urban counterparts liberal and logically Democratic. Most hot-button issues — deficit spending, defense, same-sex marriage, amnesty, affirmative action, gun control, and abortion — break along rural or urban lines.

But what, exactly, causes this division?

Rural living historically has encouraged independence, and it still does, even in the globalized and wired 21st century. Autonomy and autarky, not narrow specialization, are necessary and are fueled by an understanding that tools must be mastered to keep nature in its proper place. Such constant preparedness nurtures skeptical views about the role and size of government, in which the good citizen is defined as someone who can take care of herself.

The urban ideal tends to be just the opposite. Looking to cement his lead among urban unmarried women during his 2012 reelection campaign, Barack Obama ran an interactive Web ad, "The Life of Julia." Its dependency narrative defined the life of an everywoman character as one of cradle-to-grave government reliance — a desirable thing. Julia is proudly and perennially a ward of the state. She can get through school only thanks to Head Start and federally backed student loans. Only the Small Business Administration and the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act enable her to find work. In her retirement years, only Social Security and Medicare allow her comfort and the time to volunteer for a communal urban garden, apparently a hobby rather than a critical food source.

Article continues below ↓

The urban-rural divide can be experienced within hours. I live half the week in a 140-year-old

farmhouse in the rural Central Valley, the other half in a studio apartment in Palo Alto near the Stanford University campus.

At my house, I worry about whether the well will go dry. I lock the driveway gate at night, and if someone knocks after 10 p.m., I go to the door armed. Each night, I check the security lights in the barnyard and watch to ensure that coyotes aren't creeping too close from the vineyard. I wage a constant battle against the squirrels, woodpeckers and gophers that undermine the foundation, poke holes in the sheds and destroy irrigation ditches.

At my apartment, I have few concerns about maintenance and more time to read, brood and mix with others. Urbanites may work long hours at the office among thousands of people, but they often remain in a cocooned existence shielded from the physical world. Essential to the neurotic buzz of 24/7 cable news, Twitter and Facebook is the assumption that millions of Americans are not busy logging, hauling in a net on a fishing boat or picking peaches.

These differences wouldn't matter so much if it weren't for the fact that the nation's urbanites increasingly govern those living in the hinterlands, even as vanishing rural Americans still feed and fuel the nation.

The elite that runs the country in politics, finance, journalism and academia is urban to the core: degrees from brand-name universities, internships at well-connected agencies, residence in New York or Washington, power marriages. The power resume does not include mechanical apprenticeships, work on ships or oil rigs, knowledge of firearms or farm, logging or mining labor — jobs now regulated and overseen by those with little experience of them. Few in Silicon Valley know where in the High Sierra their Hetch Hetchy water comes from or where in the bay their sewage is dumped. Food, too, is an abstraction. I doubt that most of my Stanford colleagues know that a raisin is typically a dried Thomson seedless grape, or whether a peach or plum needs to be cross-pollinated.

A comparison between how California used to confront environmental challenges and how the state deals with them now illustrates the dangers of having a clueless urban population call the shots.

Once the state grew to more than 10 million people, California legislators, along with federal officials, created the federal Central Valley Project and, later, the California State Water Project. These joint ventures helped turn the scenic but dry corridor along the coast from sparsely populated to the most densely inhabited in the United States, and helped transform semi-arid desert terrain in the southwestern Central Valley into productive farmland. Because city and country were once seen as complementary, most state residents supported the planning for additional dams, reservoirs, canals and pumping stations to match population growth.

How did the new Californians deal with the drought? Not as in the past. Enthralled by a fantasy of a pristine 19th century California that has it all — from daily fresh organic tomatoes to schools of fish jumping amid white water, without understanding what it takes to grow those tomatoes — urbanites have argued that farmers can make do with less but wildlife needs ever more. Millions of acre-feet of precious stored water were released out of rivers as urban environmentalists hoped to increase the population of 3-inch delta smelt and to restore salmon to the upper San Joaquin River. Despite millions of acre-feet of released water, both fish projects have so far failed. Meanwhile, under pressure from environmental groups, the state canceled water projects such as the huge Temperance Flat reservoir on the San Joaquin River.

Common sense would have warned that droughts are existential challenges, the severity and duration of which are unpredictable. Droughts are times to bank water, not to release it for questionable green initiatives. Such common sense would assume, though, that millions of Californians had seen a broccoli farm or a Flame Seedless vineyard and had made the connection that what they purchased in supermarkets was grown from irrigated soil.

The founders and early observers of American democracy, from Thomas Jefferson to Alexis de Tocqueville, reflected a classical symbiosis, in which even urban thinkers praised the benefits of life in rural areas. Jefferson famously wrote: "I think our governments will remain virtuous for many centuries; as long as they are chiefly agricultural; and this will be as long as there shall be vacant lands in any part of America. When they get piled upon one another in large cities, as in Europe, they will become corrupt as in Europe."

From Hesiod's "Works and Days" to Virgil's "Georgics," the connection between farming and morality was always emphasized as a check on urban decadence and corruption. What was gained by the city's great universities and pageantry was often lost through the baleful effects of being cut off from nature and defining success through intangibles such as transient goods, status and material luxuries. Physical and mental balance, practicality, a sense of the tragic rather than the therapeutic — all these were birthed by rural life and yet proved essential to the survival of a nation that would inevitably become more mannered, sophisticated and urban.

Rural folks didn't romanticize the city but rather, like characters in Horace's "Satires" or the rustic mouse of "Aesop's Fables," saw it as a necessary evil. Yet urbanites idealized the farm — if certainly from a safe distance.

The 21st century may at last see the end of a venerable consensus that rural citizens prizing liberty and freedom provide a necessary audit on the dependent urbanites. We have left for good the world of Harry Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower and entered the age of Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump — and likely with worse to come.

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