
After Governor Dan Moody proclaimed in 1930 that a few of his Texas Rangers could rid the city of Chicago of its gangsters, the Chicago Daily Tribune shot back that the Lone Star State would be better served by minding its own business - and ridding itself of bootleggers and lynch mobs. A "fundamentalist belt of primitives," the editors added, Texas’ greatest contribution to science was paralysis and to public morality “the hypocrisy of the bottle nosed saint in the garb of the Ku Klux Klan.”

Texans shrugged off the insults. While Chicagoans were suffering the blight of lawlessness, Moody said, "the fundamentalist belt has managed to ride herd on its own criminals without the aid of the federal government."

For well over 150 years, Robert Wuthnow, a professor of social sciences at Princeton University, reminds us, as Texas evolved from a backwater to one of the most populous, prosperous, and powerful states in the Union, many of its leaders and ordinary citizens have reveled in its status as a "whole 'nuther country." In Rough Country, Wuthnow draws on an Everest of data to provide a comprehensive analysis of the connections between religion, race, and politics in the state that has given us Lyndon Johnson, George W. Bush, Ted Cruz, Roe v. Wade, FreedomWorks, a key sponsor of the Tea Party, and secessionist threats. It was "never possible," Wuthnow writes, to "regard Texas as a microcosm of America - or indeed in any way of being small." Or to claim that Texas "has high-jacked" the nation's agenda on, say, evolution, abortion or gay rights. Instead, Wuthnow presents Rough Country as a case study of a Bible Belt state shaped by slavery, proximity to Mexico, and a huge number of evangelical white Protestants, whose beliefs, traditions, and practices influenced their ideas about race relations, wealth and poverty, the role of government, individual rights, liberty of conscience, and the separation of church and state.

A proponent of "multi-level theory," which identifies "clusters of variables" to describe and explain complex processes, Wuthnow combines investigations of "individual and small networks in local situations" with concepts illuminating the larger power arrangements, resources, and cultural influences "in which those practices are situated." His book runs the risk of overwhelming readers who are searching for an "aha" thesis with information that appears to confirm what they already know about how a right-wing agenda was reinforced by religious forces.

That said, Rough Country includes some intriguing insights. Wuthnow suggests, for example, that like the United States, Texas has a "civil religion" that serves as "an essential component of solidarity in an otherwise diverse and fragmented society." It is unique among the states in its (albeit brief) existence as an independent nation. It has a pantheon of founding fathers, including Davy Crockett, Jim Bowie, and Sam Houston. And Texas was founded, in part, in reaction to the monopoly of the Roman Catholic Church on religious worship under Mexican rule. One implication of Texas’ civil religion, according to Wuthnow, was that, at first, there was a consensus that lay people rather than clergy should inject religious perspectives into the political arena. Over time, he indicates, that view morphed into a belief "held by many religious leaders that what they do and say has no political consequences - or should have consequences only for particular issues such as abortion and homosexuality."

Rough Country also documents - to a fare-thee-well - that religious leaders helped stoke animosity toward the federal government and made Texas, the nation's largest producer of petroleum, "a good place to live for wealthy people or those with above-average incomes "but less good for families that were poor or on welfare," with a larger percentage of its population than any other state either falling below the poverty line or making more than $200,000 a year. The absence of an income tax and reliance on sales taxes, Wuthnow reveals, means that taxes are low - and regressive. The poorest 20% of the population pays 14.6 % of their household income in state and local taxes; the wealthiest 20% 3.8%. In 2012 Texas spent 0.83% of GDP on state and local welfare programs - the lowest of any state in the United States (the average was 1.74%). Expenditures on pensions and health care are also considerably below the national average.

Along with many other observers of the contemporary political scene, Wuthnow wonders whether changing demography will result in the preferences of heretofore gerrymandered African American and Hispanic voters "trumping the religious conservatism of white non-Hispanics." Democrats, he observes, have had a propensity for snatching defeat from the jaws of...
victory. More important, perhaps, is the possibility, indeed the likelihood, that right-wing zealots, in Texas and elsewhere, will successfully exploit anti-government sentiments. And, Wuthnow concludes, "if the past in any indication, preachers will be available to reinforce these sentiments."