

Hush, Hush, Sweet Charlotte

In the Charlotte airport, my daughter and I were greeted by the most appallingly “We’re not really Southern!” New South slogan I have ever seen: “Charlotte USA.”

“North Carolina,” it seems, is so redolent of hickdom that it embarrasses the sub-Babbitts of Charlotte’s shovel-ready-for-the-global-economy-in-this-shrinking-world class. So N.C. is gone, ostensibly because Charlotte is no mere city but is instead a 16-county two-state blob that absorbs all the little communities within devouring distance, chewing them up into one masticated bolus flavorless enough to be swallowed by savvy global investors put off by states with directional adjectives in their names.

I say “sub-Babbitts” because George F. Babbitt loved his hometown, just as Sinclair Lewis loved his fictive creation Babbitt and his home state of Minnesota, whose 87 counties and county seats Lewis memorized. The image-makers who erased North Carolina from Charlotte’s identity quite obviously are ashamed of the Tar Heel State. Sure, North Carolina gave us Willie Jones, Michael Jordan, Thomas Wolfe, Fred Chappell, and dancing-pig barbecue shacks, but there’s that embarrassing Gomer and Goober thing, and besides, what do states matter when all are bathed equally in the bathetic “God Bless the USA”? Richard Weaver of Weaverville, North Carolina (*not* Weaverville, USA), said in the 1950s, “The relative incapacity for business of the Southerner has cost him sadly in this acquisitive world,” but them old times sure are forgotten.

Men who dismiss their places are unfit to be citizens of anything but TV Nation. From the comfort of my front porch in the Burned-Over District of New York, I hereby suggest that my

patriotic kinsmen in North Carolina—our two states were among the Anti-Federalist strongholds in 1788—beautify (or un-deface) the ubiquitous “Charlotte USA” banners by putting the N.C. back where it belongs.

The Charlotte slogan does have the virtue of frankness. The states have become administrative units of the empire, political nullities that meekly obey diktats from Washington and wouldn’t know the Tenth Amendment if its cremation smoke snaked upward from a medical marijuana pipe.

When, within the next decade, the Supreme Court hands down a *Roe v. Wade*-ish decision imposing gay marriage on the 50 states, the pension-collectors from Trenton to Tallahassee will obey this decretal as docilely as they now permit leviathan to send their neighbors in the state National Guards off to die in the wicked wars of our anti-American empire. I wonder: Will the fiercest resistance to a Supreme Court redefinition of marriage come from the only state whose admission to the union was delayed because of its own deviations from the one man, one woman formula? Or will Utah fold—again?

But let us look on the bright side. Perhaps the collapse will refresh our maps. After all, the Great Depression was the last time regionalism was a really potent force in American cultural, though not political, life.

State pride ought to be based in culture rather than politics anyway. Like anything good, it begins at home. In small acts. In laughter rather than bombast. In

whimsy, not rage. Even in dreams.

When our daughter was young we had great fun exaggerating the differences between states. (Maybe truth-stretching leaves behind a fuller truth?) We told her that Pennsylvanians subsisted on a diet of pretzels and spoke in an indecipherable Keystone language, so as we passed over the border into Lawrenceville we would shout loudly from our opened car windows, stressing each syllable, “We are from New York. Can you un-der-stand us?”

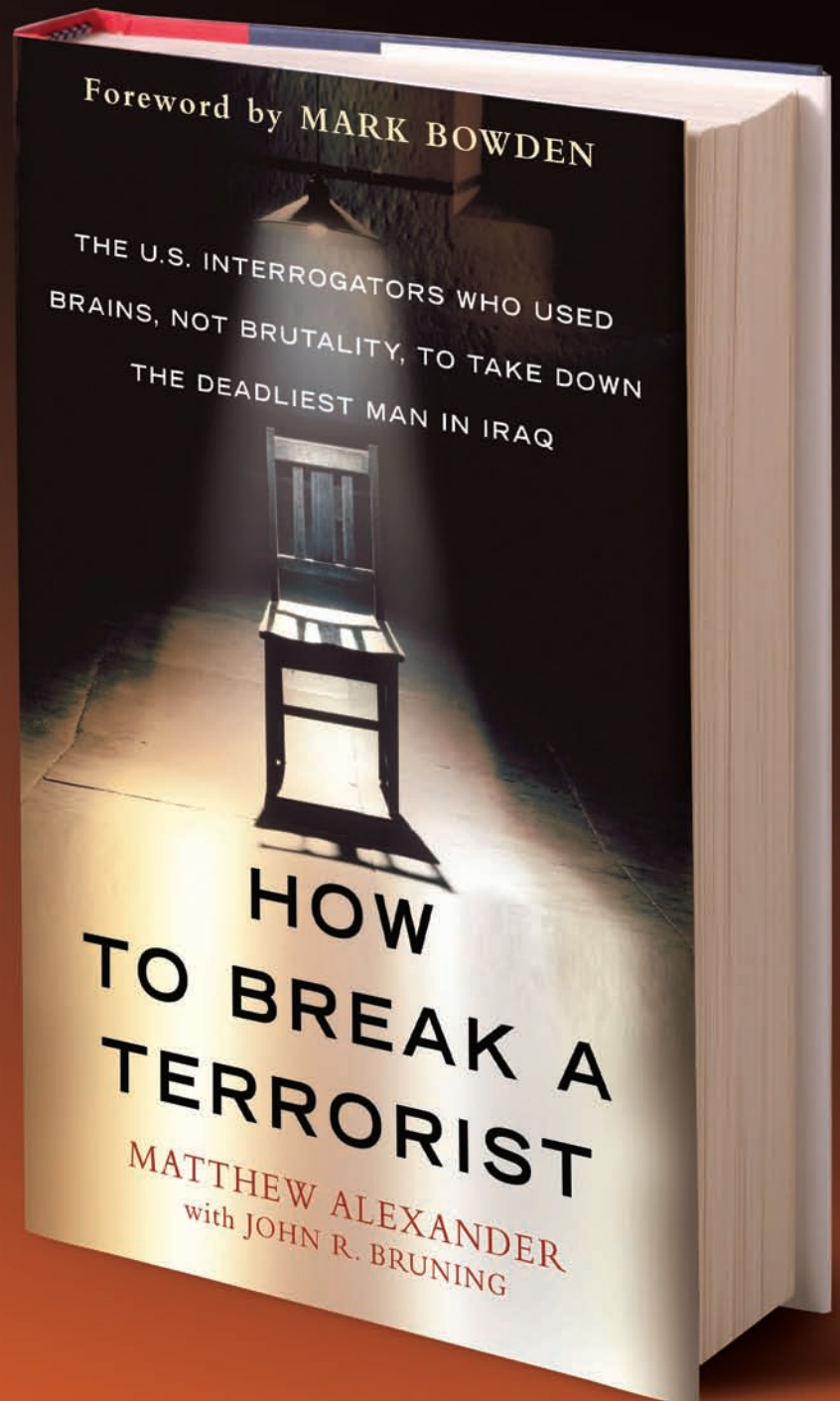
Each state we would endow with unusual properties and bizarre customs. We once saw a van driver with Michigan plates picking his nose, so that became, and has remained, the “Michigan hello.” Vermont is the tie-dye state, and Maine was embodied by our friends Carolyn and Michael Chute: wise country people with guns and dogs, homegrown radicals of the forest.

“Love the state, and let the nation save itself,” said Sen. Silas Wright, the New York Jacksonian. How can one love the United States if one does not first love a single state? Can one love the sum and be indifferent to its parts? If the states are indistinguishable lumps, then what good is the union?

The teaching of state history is a vital, and vitalizing, act that should not be reserved to 4th grade and then done with. Local tourism boards are promoting “staycations” in this summer of the melting credit card. An awful neologism, yes, but I say, “Go Babbitt!” See your state. We’re looking forward to watching baseball at Damaschke Field in Oneonta and visiting the homes of Hudson River School painters. I’ll bet there are even things to do in Charlotte, North Carolina—as long as you avoid the void of Charlotte USA. ■

Know your enemies.

The head of the handpicked interrogation team that tracked down Abu Musab al Zaraqawi takes you inside the interrogation room to show you how they did it—without using violence.



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