

# Legends of the Four-Lane Road

by Gregory McNamee

**Uneasy Rider: The Interstate Way of Knowledge**

by Mike Bryan

New York: Alfred A. Knopf;  
352 pp., \$25.00



The interstate highways, John Steinbeck complained in his 1962 memoir *Travels with Charley*, “are wonderful for moving goods but not for inspection of a countryside. When we get these thruways across the country, as we will and must, it will be possible to drive from New York to California without seeing a single thing.” When Steinbeck wrote these words, the interstate-highway system was still but a planner’s dream, the brainchild of the Eisenhower administration intent on creating a system whereby military units could quickly move from one homefront theater to another. Thirty-five years later, that system of national roads now completed, Mike Bryan insists that Steinbeck got it wrong. There is much to see beyond their shoulders, he argues. And finds much to report.

In *Uneasy Rider*—a genial book whose title is a bad pun, certainly not revealing of the author’s tone—that insistence occasionally peaks at downright annoyance. Bryan argues strenuously against the notion that the big highways “create and convey a homogenous culture, suburban and absolutely Middle American.” He takes potshots at writers like William Least Heat Moon, whose *Blue Highways* is the leading modern exemplar of the road-less-traveled genre, airily dismissing their search for arcane, rare, and forgotten pockets of America that “don’t have even marginal currency in the culture at large.” For Bryan, the interstate is where the real America is to be located, no matter what a host of other travelers have to say about the matter.

And so, studiously ignoring the ubiquitous Stuckeys and Burger Kings that make one stretch of interstate so much like the next, Bryan takes to the highway: in his case, mostly I-20 and I-10, and mostly in Texas. It is an enjoyable ride, so much so that we are inclined to for-

give his previous bad temper, and it takes in some fine detours along the way. His stops include a too-brief visit with the reclusive novelist Cormac McCarthy in El Paso; a longer sojourn at the sludge-treatment facility in nearby Sierra Blanca, where New York City’s waste meets the West Texas desert; and overnight stays in little towns into which the interstate feeds only thanks to political machinations that spared their being passed by. His pages are full of well-wrought history, for nearly every interstate follows paths laid out long before: sometimes by Native American hunters, sometimes by pioneer wagon trains, sometimes by mere accidents of topography. Bryan also ferrets out the bizarre and unfamiliar at roadside stops; among the best instances is a call on “a rattlesnake rancher with twenty-first century ambitions,” a dabbler in all things entrepreneurial who aims to expand his Texas empire to include turtles, emus, and hedgehogs.

In Bryan’s book, there is no short way from Point A to Point B. The charmingly topsy-turvy organization finds Bryan in Dallas one moment, in Flagstaff the next, and in Truth or Consequences after that. The scheme conveys something of the frantic speed of the roadway, and it is a little dizzying at times. Many of his venues are the result of creative fudging: he is fond, for instance, of Laughlin, Nevada, the blue-collar Las Vegas, which lies 20-odd miles from the nearest interstate and does not figure on many maps, although it is now Nevada’s second-favorite gambling destination. (Another cheat: the book’s cover sports a view from Arizona’s Tucson-Nogales Highway, far more picturesque than the interstate.)

You will learn from Bryan that the state of Texas is 878 miles wide along I-

10, that Lone Star state troopers issue 500,000 tickets and 400,000 warnings annually, that our nation’s three million miles of road cover a full one percent of the lower 48’s landmass.

If you are less given to statistical knowledge, you will still find arcana of more than marginal currency: how to conduct yourself at a Border Patrol checkpoint (do what you are told without complaining), how to catch a rattlesnake (grab it by the head), how to tell a good from a bad place to eat before entering (look for locals’ cars), how to differentiate the many kinds of trucks rolling down the road. Perhaps most usefully, you will learn how to increase your odds against getting a traffic ticket if you are stopped: politely hand over your driver’s license and proof of insurance and say, “Good day, officer” and nothing else.

Bryan has really written two, if not more, books here. The first is a wistful tour of places beside but not wholly part of the Interstate; the second, a look at the culture of the Interstate itself—at the truckers, the cops, the hitchhikers and transients, the East Indian motel operators and American Indian casino employees who populate the lonesome road. Sometimes these two books are at odds with one another. Sometimes the road seems a little wearying even for the author, since Bryan is too often reluctant to end an anecdote and get on with it. But mostly his well-considered, entertaining narrative does a good job of dispelling John Steinbeck’s complaint, and the traveler with enough leisure and gasoline could do far worse than to follow Bryan’s four-lane path.

Gregory McNamee is the author of *A Desert Bestiary* and many other books. He lives in Tucson.

## LIBERAL ARTS

### EVERY NINE SECONDS . . .

According to a handout distributed by the Iowa Domestic Abuse Hotline, “about one half of all women in Iowa have had domestic violence happen to them at some time in their lives.” How have they arrived at such an inflated figure? Their definition of domestic violence includes such actions as “threatening to harm himself” and “controlling all the money, not allowing you to work, not allowing you to associate with certain people.”

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## Principalities & Powers

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by Samuel Francis

### The New Shape of American Politics

*(The following remarks were delivered in a panel discussion, "The New Shape of Politics," at the International Conservative Congress in Washington, D.C., on September 27, 1997)*

First of all, I want to thank John O'Sullivan for asking me to take part in this panel, and secondly I want to issue a fair warning to my colleagues on the panel as well as to many in the audience. Many of you—perhaps most of you—will not agree with what I have to tell you about the new shape of American politics, and some of you may actually find it repellent. For some years I have been known, for lack of a better term, as a "Buchananite" conservative (at least that is one of the less objectionable things I have been called), and it is a fair description. But my allegiance to "Buchananism" goes beyond support for the Buchanan presidential candidacy in the last two elections. In my newspaper column as well as in my monthly columns in *Chronicles* (many of which are now collected in a new book called *Revolution From the Middle*, which has been sedulously ignored by the conservative press), I have argued that the Buchanan candidacy is but the formal political expression of a deep social and cultural transformation I have called the "Middle American Revolution." The essential concept and, to some extent, the term are derived from the studies of the late Donald Warren, a sociologist, whose 1976 book, *The Radical Center*, analyzed the underlying social and political forces that make up the Middle American Revolution.

Professor Warren identified a distinctive group in American society that he called "Middle American Radicals," or MARs, who are essentially middle-income, white, often ethnic voters who see themselves as an exploited and dispossessed group, excluded from meaningful political participation; threatened by the tax and trade policies of the government; victimized by its tolerance of crime, immigration, and social deviance; and ignored, ridiculed, or demonized by the

major cultural institutions of the media and education. MARs possess objective statistical characteristics, but these are not their defining features. Warren identified as their defining feature an attitudinal characteristic: they view themselves as sandwiched between—and victimized by—an elite (in government and politics, the economy, and the dominant culture) that is either indifferent to them or hostile to them, and an underclass with which the elites are in alliance and whose interests and values the elites support at the expense of the interests and values of Middle Americans.

In Professor Warren's original analysis, MARs were the backbone of George Wallace's national political following, but in later years the categories of "Reagan Democrats," "Perot voters," and—more recently—"Buchanan supporters" are largely identical to them. In my own development of Warren's work, Middle American Radicals represent both the central political base of the American right, from at least the time of George Wallace and probably going back to Joe McCarthy, and the core or nucleus of American culture and the American nation. Any movement of the right that wishes to succeed in national politics must mobilize Middle American forces, as both Nixon and Reagan did and as George Bush, Bob Dole, and Jack Kemp failed to do.

A convenient statistical definition of Middle Americans is that they are the middle-income categories, making between \$15,000 and \$50,000 a year, a group that comprises about 50 percent of the voting electorate. Exit polls show that Reagan won an average of 57 percent of this category in 1980 and 1984, while in 1992 and 1996 Bush and Dole won only an average of 37 percent—a precipitous decline of 20 percentage points. If the Republican Party continues to ignore MARs, it will find itself reduced to minority status and may even eventually cease to exist as a major party; and if the conservative movement continues to ignore them, it too will dwindle in cultural and political significance. The "crisis of conservatism," the "conservative crack-up," that Beltway and Manhattan conservatives today fret about is due precisely to the alienation of Middle

American Radicals from the mainstream and neoconservative right. If, however, the American right seriously wishes to govern, it will have to base its ideas and policies on Middle American Radicalism or Middle American Populism and incorporate the interests and values of MARs into its own political agenda.

My time is brief, so I will merely list some of the main issues that currently and in the foreseeable future are important issues for Middle Americans, illustrate why they are important, and how conservatives and Republicans have managed to blow them. The first and perhaps the most important issue that conservatives and Republicans have failed to address is immigration, both illegal and legal. There has been a fairly consistent trend in national opinion polls showing that large percentages of Americans of all ethnic and class backgrounds generally oppose immigration and want it reduced or stopped. Last year a Roper poll showed that some 83 percent of the public favors reducing or halting immigration. I think this poll speaks for itself; you cannot get public responses on most polls better than 83 percent. During the Persian Gulf War, when President Bush's popularity rating was about 90 percent, Bob Dole joked that the remaining 10 percent probably didn't know who the President was. Based on the Roper poll on immigration, it is probably fair to say that Americans who don't oppose immigration probably don't know that immigration is a problem or an issue.

Yet the Republicans have consistently failed to take up immigration reform. Virtually the first thing Bob Dole did last year after securing the party nomination was to repudiate the GOP platform plank on immigration, and Jack Kemp has long been notorious among immigration restrictionists for his unqualified support for immigration. Prior to his attempt with Bill Bennett in 1994 to sabotage California's Proposition 187, Kemp was actually in favor of both illegal and legal immigration, and as HUD Secretary he refused to allow the Immigration and Naturalization Service to enforce federal laws against illegal immigrants in federal housing projects.

This year the chairman of the Senate