



## The three Americas

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Early in the evening on the Fourth of July my wife, Carla, and I sat in a swing gazing across a pasture on a farm owned by the family of our son-in-law, John Houser.

Roosters crowed near the barn. Two small goats meandered among grazing horses and cattle. It was a scene not unlike the country home where Carla was raised; where she and I sat in a similar swing as teenagers near the watchful eyes of her mother, Peg.

As a presidential candidate in the 2012 Democratic primary, a former U.S. senator from North Carolina named John Edwards said there are two Americas: "One America that does the work, another America that reaps the reward...One favored, the other forgotten.... One privileged, the other burdened."

Sen. Edwards' two Americas were then and remain convenient ploys for politicians seeking the votes of the forgotten and the burdened. But it is not the America in which most of us live.

There are at least three Americas based on geography and perspective. The first America where Carla and I spent the Fourth is rural. Here, families live far enough apart they may not see their neighbors' homes. But when storms or tragedies hit, men with chainsaws and women with casseroles arrive in pickup trucks, their work gloves in hand, their children in tow, all there to do what is needed.

In the first America there are ample volunteers at the rural fire departments; church pews are reasonably full Sunday mornings; long distances are driven to work in factories and offices; concession stands at high school games are fully staffed by volunteers; Bibles are read with regularity; and prayers for family, country and others are offered daily.

The young men and women in the first America are more likely to join the military services and marry their high school sweethearts.

As we left our daughter's home, we drove 20 minutes south to our home in the second America. Here, large houses are neatly spaced on tree-lined streets. There are sidewalks and lampposts. Neighbors are doctors, lawyers, and senior executives in large organizations. Many own and manage small companies. All are more like Sen. Edwards than the people whose votes he sought.

They do not, as the senator asserted, take advantage of their associates or employees. Those who own businesses put their money at risk and work long, hard hours side-by-side their workers. The businesses they founded provide jobs and career opportunities to those who are willing to show up on time and do important work with them.

Fourteen miles east of this neighborhood is the third America. Though much of the city is a network of neighborhoods that belong to the second America, the third America is trapped in the belly of the metropolis.

Here, life is challenged. Here, the forgotten and burdened cram themselves into poor enclaves where they find inexpensive housing. The tradeoff is gangs, guns, and unsafe streets.

The traditional family values that shelter and nurture the lives of children in the other Americas are less likely to dominate in the third America. More children are raised by single parents. More heads of households are lifelong wards of government programs that subsidize housing, food, healthcare, transportation, and other aspects of their lives.

While the first and second Americas offer opportunity, the third America offers dependency.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2019, annual household income in America was \$68,000. Among Asian families it was \$98,000; white families, \$76,000; Hispanic families, \$56,000; and, black families, \$45,000. (Real Median Household Income by Race and Hispanic Origin: 1967 to 2019, U.S. Census Bureau) Income and education are related.

In high school, Asian students spend twice as much time studying outside the classroom as their white and Hispanic classmates who spend twice as much time studying as Black students.

Educational effort and attainment are also proportional to the educational level achieved by parents. The children of doctors are more likely to focus more on their studies than the children of high school dropouts. (Analyzing the Homework Gap Among High School Students; Michael Hanson and Diana Quintero; Brookings Institute; Aug. 10, 2017)

Virtually all government social programs are designed to address problems in the third America. According to the Cato Institute, since the Johnson Administration, almost \$15 trillion has been spent on welfare, with no change in poverty rates over this nearly six decades. Many politicians today are advocating to spend more on these failed programs.

Lifting a person out of poverty is not accomplished by the government. It is only done by an individual with the help of another person: parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles, pastors, teachers, and coaches.

Ask anybody who has built a successful life despite being born into poverty and they will tell you what they have achieved is the result of education, discipline, hard work and the inspiration and guidance of others.

Pouring more money on poverty does not reduce poverty. Inspiring responsible people to help those who want to break the cycle of poverty in their lives is the only true way to improve the lives of the forgotten and the burdened.

This is hard work. It is not a path to electoral success, fame, or fortune. But it is the way to make a real difference. The keys are education and employment. We should put all our eggs in those baskets and reject programs that promote, foster, or fund dependency.

We will never be one America, but together we can make the lives of those who are willing to study and work better and one-by-one we can break the cycle of poverty that still entraps so many