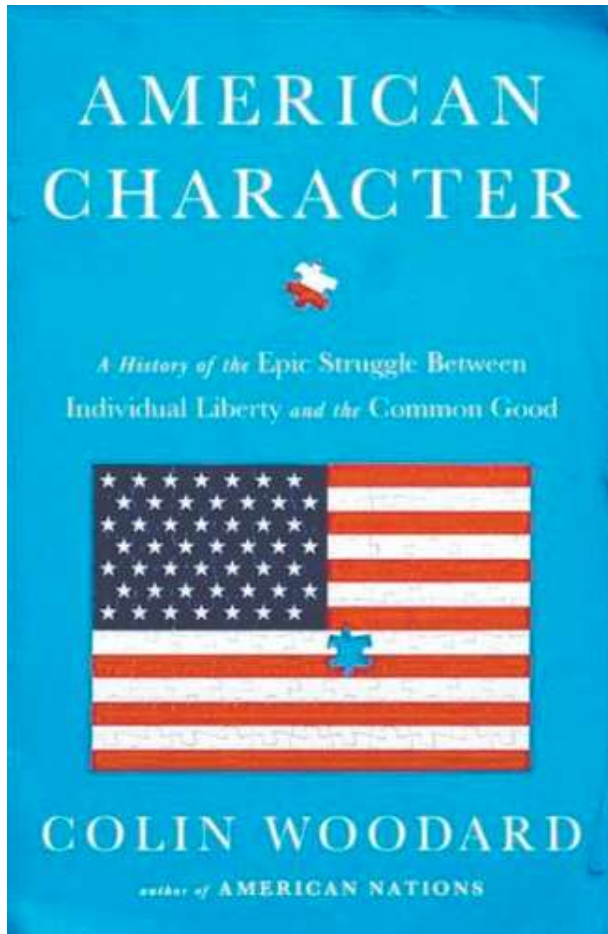


'American Character' an eye opener

Posted: Sunday, May 22, 2016

"American Character: A History of the Epic Struggle Between Individual Liberty and the Common Good" by Colin Woodard. New York: Viking (An Imprint of Penguin Random House), 2016, 320 pages, \$29.



“Many of the underlying ideas we have about how to achieve human freedom come from a handful of English political thinkers who lived in the 17th and 18th centuries,” Colin Woodard explains near the beginning of “American Character: A History of the Epic Struggle Between Individual Liberty and the Common Good,” his new exploration of the American experiment. “They were writing at a time when the easy assumptions of the medieval era – the divine right of kings, the inerrancy of the Bible, the natural subjugation of humans to their superiors – were coming apart.”

So begins an epic journey spanning 400 years. When I ran across this gem at our local Barnes & Noble Booksellers, I was actually engaged in a discussion with my youngest son, who has recently developed an interest in political theory. Much like his older brother, once he gets interested in a topic, he wants to know everything about it. So after I spent some quality time devouring “American Character,” I passed it along to my son. As far as I am concerned, Woodard’s treatise is a must-read for anyone grappling with how we arrived at the present moment. The author made me see things I thought I knew very well in a new light.

The quest to balance individual rights against societal needs has been ongoing since the first colonists arrived in the New World. And, after four tempestuous centuries, in many respects we are still no closer to putting closure on the question than our ancestors were when they first stepped off the boats that brought them here. Woodard’s contribution to the perennial dialog and debate is to provide a realistic and accurate context from which the opposing ideologies can be intelligently understood and evaluated.

“The struggle to define freedom has been particularly fractious in the United States for a simple reason,” Woodard notes in “Maintaining Freedom,” the inaugural chapter. “Unlike Norway, Sweden, South Korea or Japan, we’re not a unitary state with a common culture, but rather a coalition of nearly a dozen regional cultures, most of which trace their origins and fundamental characteristics back to one of the colonial clusters founded on the eastern or southern rims of what is now the United States.”

“American Character” is extensively researched, with 22 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the nine chapters comprising the main narrative. One of the features I liked about the tome was Woodard’s inclusion of an “Acknowledgments and Suggested Reading” section after the final chapter. Although I am not always enamored by the selections recommended by some writers – indeed, many tend to consist of a thinly veiled advertisement for their previous works – in this case I was intrigued by the follow-up resources listed there. One book he seems to champion enthusiastically is E.O. Wilson’s “The Social Conquest of Earth.” I have already added this selection to my reading list, along with Kim Phillips-Fein’s “Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan.”

Woodard is an accomplished journalist who works for The Portland Press Herald and Maine Sunday Telegram. In addition to being a contributing editor for Politico, he is a longtime correspondent for The Christian Science Monitor and The Chronicle of Higher Education. His articles have appeared in The Washington Post, Newsweek, The Daily Beast and The Economist. The recipient of a Pew Fellowship in International Journalism at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, his previous books include “American Nations: A History of the Eleven Rival Regional Cultures of North America,” “The Republic of Pirates: Being the True and Surprising Story of the Caribbean Pirates and the Man Who Brought Them Down” and “The Lobster Coast: Rebels, Rusticators and the Struggle for a Forgotten Frontier.”

“American Character” is as much a history lesson as it is a political manifesto. Woodard goes into considerable detail as he traces the evolution of the ongoing battle between liberals and conservatives – and in so doing he makes it abundantly clear this is not a recent phenomenon. He devotes a disproportionate share of the volume to dissecting several pivotal events in our nation’s past that serve to accentuate his primary thesis. Witness the following passage from “The Rise and Fall of National Liberalism (1933-1967),” the sixth chapter and one of my favorites. Here, the author discusses the political realities confronting FDR in 1938: “On election day 1938, his southern Democratic opponents were returned to office while some of his key allies were swept away in the first decisive Republican wave of the post-crash era. The GOP doubled its strength in the House and gained seven seats in the Senate, most of them in Yankee-controlled areas. Instead of advancing a communitarian coalition, Roosevelt faced a revived conservative one. The president now discovered the limits of American toleration for collectivist reform. By late 1938, he had lost considerable support for his agenda across the country.”

Although the prose is effortlessly accessible to a general audience, the manuscript could easily serve as a textbook in a number of different disciplines – history, economics, political science and psychology, just to name a few. Again, I was intrigued by many of Woodard’s interpretations of the underlying significance of several events I was aware of but had understood differently before reading his elucidation of their true meaning.

“Our fundamental nature is conflicted on the question of individualism versus collectivism,” Woodard concludes. “We’re torn on how to balance these forces, and while most of us teach our preschoolers to share their toys and show kindness to others, we hope they will be at the top of their high school graduating class. As Wilson puts it, there’s an iron rule to genetic social evolution: ‘Selfish individuals beat altruistic individuals, while groups of altruists beat groups of selfish individuals.’ Our curse, as it were, is to forever strive to keep these forces in equilibrium.”

“American Character” is an eye-opening critique and analysis that should be read by anyone interested in the future direction of our republic; I recommend it highly.

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