

Leaving the Middle Behind Wisconsin at a Turning Point by John Gurda

Twenty-five years is not a particularly long time, even by American standards. A quarter-century is barely enough for a single generation to grow from infancy to adulthood—hardly an epoch in the annals of the republic. And yet in that blink of an eye, that snap of the fingers, the world can change on a multitude of levels.

Consider the shifts of the most recent quarter-century. In 1985, unless you were in the military, there were no cell phones, much less cell phones that took pictures. There were no iPods, no DVDs, and the first minivans were still under warranty. Some fixtures of American life have slipped beneath the waves since 1985—typewriters, card catalogs, long-distance bills—and we have grown accustomed to such new features as Google, bar codes, and Viagra.

From the technological to the pharmaceutical, these innovations are global in nature, but there have been equally impressive developments on the state level. Wisconsin has experienced transformative changes in the last quarter-century, tectonic shifts that have moved the state materially from its traditional base. Even 25 or 30 years ago, it was possible, if you didn't look too closely, to maintain an image of Wisconsin rooted in the 19th century. For decades there were nearly as many cows as people in the state, and the standard postcard of America's Dairyland was a bucolic scene of contented Holsteins grazing in spring-fed pastures under a clear blue sky.

But the dairy state was also a factory state, a capital of enterprise and innovation that gave a waiting world the outboard motor, the all-steel automobile frame, the rubber-tired tractor, the NESCO roaster, and enough beer to float a fleet of battleships. Wisconsin's industrial stronghold was Milwaukee, a quaintly Socialist enclave of "Old World charm and New World vigor," with cozy corner taverns serving as communal living rooms for an army of skilled workers who delivered an honest day's work for an honest day's pay.

Wisconsin's ethnic heritage seemed just as well defined. In the popular imagination, the Norwegians were safely ensconced in Westby and Stoughton, the Swiss in New Glarus, the Germans in a hundred communities throughout the state, and the resident Indian tribes dwelt in picturesque isolation on their reservations. There were minorities in the larger cities, to be sure, but they seldom traveled beyond their home communities. The state's European imprint was unmistakable.

In the political arena, we prided ourselves on a tradition of fierce independence and legislative innovation. Wisconsin was a much-watched and rarely predictable laboratory of social change, the birthplace of such concepts as the direct primary and worker's compensation, school choice and welfare reform—and the Republican Party. We were the home of Joe McCarthy but also of Gaylord Nelson, a state whose voters have embraced mavericks from Bill Proxmire to Russ Feingold.

Wisconsin was, in short, a state that worked: a stalwart member of the Union with a solid economy, a solid citizenry, and a solidly distinctive political tradition.

Wishful thinking and a generous dose of hyperbole shaped the popular image of Wisconsin, but whatever kernel of truth underlay the prevailing stereotypes, reality has

been eroded and the state has transformed itself. There is not the slightest doubt that the Badger State has undergone a sea change in the last 25 or 30—agriculturally, economically, demographically, and politically. On a potentially overwhelming number of fronts, Wisconsin is in such a different state today that a resident returning after a few decades away might mistake it for a different state.

Some of the changes are evident in the landscape itself. No one who travels Wisconsin can fail to notice how commerce has migrated from Main Street to the edge of town, generally coalescing around big-box retailers oriented to the nearest four-lane highway. The national retailers offer more goods under a single roof than small-city downtowns can under dozens, and the state's historic retail districts are reduced to a mix of antique shops, real estate firms, and the occasional restaurant. The pattern extends far beyond places like Plymouth and Richland Center. Most of the business once done in the center of Green Bay has migrated to suburban Ashwaubenon, just as much of Stevens Point's commerce takes place in neighboring Plover. The same scenario plays out from Racine to Wausau.

Other changes in the landscape are more subtle. Wisconsin is as large today as it was at statehood in 1848, and corn, soybeans, and alfalfa are still ubiquitous in most counties, but less and less land is devoted to agriculture—18 percent less between 1980 and 2008 alone. The number of farms supported by that land has dropped just as fast, falling from 93,000 in 1980 to 78,000 in 2008. Although Wisconsin still leads the nation in cheese production, California became America's largest supplier of milk in 1993. Ironically, more and more Wisconsin dairy farms are assuming California-scale dimensions. The average dairy herd has soared from 40 head in 1980 to 99 in 2010, and a growing number of farms are classified as Confined Animal Feeding Operations, or CAFOS—industrial-sized enterprises that milk thousands of cows around the clock in facilities as large as airplane hangars. CAFOS are technically still farms, but not in any sense that Thomas Jefferson would recognize: The yeomen have become hired men. As the transformation continues, the iconic red dairy barn of tradition is gradually becoming an architectural antique, filled with horses, boats, or nothing at all.

Commercial sprawl and a new era of agribusiness have both dramatically altered the landscape of Wisconsin, but they are by no means the dominant developments of the last quarter-century. Other changes are so broad that they rise to the level of social trends, remaking not only the landscape of the state but our common life as a people.

Three trends stand out from the rest: the catastrophic decline of manufacturing, the globalization of Wisconsin's populace, and the growing gap between government and the governed. What they have in common is the loss of a shared center, a departure from common experience and civic consensus. Any of the major trends would alter the fundamental character of the state, but together they amount to a quiet revolution. Each merits fuller explanation:

THE DECLINE OF MANUFACTURING

Walk with me along Milwaukee's North Thirtieth Street industrial corridor. A single railroad track threads its way from Highland Boulevard to Congress Street, running through a concrete canyon at first and then at street level for nearly four miles. With the exception of the nearby Menomonee Valley, there was once no greater concentration of industry in the city and perhaps the state. The Thirtieth Street corridor and its multiple

sidetracks formed a sort of horizontal trellis on which scores of enterprises took root and grew. Some were national or even global in scope: Miller Brewing, Harley-Davidson, A.O. Smith (car frames), Evinrude (outboard motors), Cutler-Hammer (electrical controls), Master Lock (padlocks), Fuller-Warren (stoves), Koehring (concrete mixers), and Interstate Drop Forge (industrial forgings). Other companies on the corridor manufactured everyday necessities like chairs, luggage, ink, doors, bedsprings, light bulbs, rope, and paint. Still others turned out what might be considered specialties: church statuary, potato chips, casket trim, pipe organs, pool tables, and even burial shoes—slippers, essentially, that were not built for heavy wear. Together these industries, large and small, employed tens of thousands of workers.

Those workers would not recognize the Thirtieth Street corridor today. Miller Brewing and Harley-Davidson still anchor the south end, but Miller, the last major brewer in the city, has merged with Coors and moved its headquarters to Chicago. As you travel north of this historic pair, the scene becomes progressively bleaker. Ghost signs in various stages of decay proclaim “Cabinet Makers,” “Plate Glass,” and “Dies, Jigs, Molds and Fixtures.” Graffiti cover every bridge abutment, and the banks are strewn with garbage: TVs, bicycles, mattresses, tires, and enough bottles and cans to fill a hundred Dumpsters. A handful of the old establishments, notably Master Lock at Center Street, are still operating, but the padlock plant employs only a fraction of the 1,300 workers who once labored there. Some of the corridor’s smaller shops have been converted to day care centers or churches, while their larger neighbors have been vacant for years, windows gone and roofs collapsing. You might be surprised to encounter deer and songbirds in this urban no-man’s-land as nature quietly reasserts its dominion.

In the mile north of Townsend Street, you traverse a land of fallen giants. The former Evinrude plant is sealed up as tight as a medieval fort, and likewise the Interstate Forge shop. Cutler-Hammer (Eaton) still does research and development work in its office tower, but the firm’s sprawling factory complex now houses a smaller manufacturer. The saddest sight of all is the former A.O. Smith factory south of Capitol Drive. In the years after World War II, soaring demand for car frames and other products swelled the Smith complex to more than 100 buildings on 140 acres of land; the fence tracing the plant’s circumference was more than two miles long. The company’s payroll swelled accordingly, rising to a peak of nearly 9,000 workers, who kept the plant humming 24 hours a day. Many of them were African-Americans earning, for the first time, union wages in a union town.

The end came with surprising speed. A.O. Smith was rocked by the recession of the early 1980s and practically capsized by the automotive industry’s switch from steel frames to unibody construction. In 1997, the frame business and the entire North Side plant were sold to Tower Automotive, whose efforts to resuscitate the enterprise proved unsuccessful. After the all-too-familiar progression from layoffs to wage cuts to bankruptcy, the plant was shuttered in 2006—the largest in a long line of fatalities along Thirtieth Street.

AVAILABLE

Some valiant attempts at redevelopment are under way, both within the Smith complex and along the corridor as a whole. The programs, most involving sizable outlays of public funds, have generated some results, but no one is predicting a return to the glory days of

A.O. Smith, Evinrude, and Cutler-Hammer. As the buildings decay and the garbage accumulates, the Thirtieth Street industrial corridor has a post-apocalyptic feel. An old order has vanished; a new one has yet to materialize.

Thirtieth Street is hardly an isolated case. Its story, in fact, is a microcosm of what is occurring elsewhere in Milwaukee and indeed throughout the state. The most accurate poster for Wisconsin's current manufacturing climate would feature a closed industrial plant with a sign out front declaring the property "AVAILABLE." Weeds now sprout in the acres of asphalt surrounding the massive General Motors complex in Janesville—a factory that once employed 7,000 area residents—and the parking lots around the Delphi plant in the Milwaukee suburb of Oak Creek are just as overgrown. But the job losses are by no means confined to the larger cities. From the Crepaco plant in Lake Mills to the Cummins factory in Wautoma to the NewPage paper mill in tiny Niagara, the decline of industry has been general and generally disruptive, if not disastrous. In 1979, before a recession that ravaged the industrial sector, 583,000 of Wisconsin's workers were engaged in manufacturing—27 percent of the total. By 1983, the state had shed 123,000 of those jobs, a drop of 21 percent in just four years. Despite an encouraging rebound that lasted through most of the 1990s, employment began to fall again in 2000. By 2008, the manufacturing sector provided 476,000 Wisconsinites with jobs, and their share of total employment had fallen to 16.3 percent.

Metropolitan Milwaukee, the state's industrial pacesetter for generations, has set the pace for its decline as well. The number of Milwaukee manufacturing jobs plummeted from its historic high of 220,200 in 1979 to 115,100 in 2009—a drop of 48 percent in three decades. The proportion of the metropolitan workforce employed in manufacturing sank to 14.2 percent during the same period—a cataclysmic fall from its peak of 56.9 percent in 1951.

OFF SHORE WINDS

The roots of the devolution are not difficult to trace. Wisconsin's economy came of age with the wind at its back. The currents of enterprise and ingenuity flowed directly through the Midwest in the late 1800s, drawing people with little to lose and everything to gain. By 1900, as hundreds of shops turned promising ideas into prosperous realities, metal-bending had become Milwaukee's most important industry, and manufacturers from Beloit to Green Bay to Superior were hiring workers by the thousands. Milwaukee proclaimed itself the "Machine Shop of the World," and Wisconsin became the western province of an industrial heartland stretching east through Chicago to Detroit, Cleveland, Buffalo, and Pittsburgh.

That pattern held, through booms and busts, for the next eight decades. Then, not many years ago, the wind began to blow in a different direction: offshore. Since the late 1970s, local jobs and local dollars have been migrating to lower-wage producers all over the globe, most recently and most notably to China. Once the stuff of think-tank papers and economic summits, the "global economy" became an established reality. As China sought to become the world's factory floor, even the oldest of old-line manufacturers were drawn to its promise of comparable quality at sharply lower costs. The Actuant Corporation, formerly Applied Power, was once a hydraulic-tools giant owned by the Brumder family, a pillar of Milwaukee's German aristocracy. All of Applied Power's production took place in a single factory in West Allis. Today's Actuant is a multi-national, multi-line conglomerate whose sourcing staff in China outnumbers its entire corporate staff in Milwaukee.

The wonder is that, even after years of steady attrition, Wisconsin still retains a strong manufacturing base—relatively speaking. The state has lost industrial jobs, but other states have lost them much faster. Although payrolls are a fraction of their former size, Wisconsin had America’s highest concentration of manufacturing jobs (15.8 percent) in 2009, and Milwaukee (14.2 percent) is second only to San Jose among the nation’s largest metropolitan areas. Globalization, to coin a phrase, is a global phenomenon. As the world develops a single central nervous system, geography has lost much of its relevance, and Wisconsin and Milwaukee are left with larger portions of a shrinking pie.

The fact that the dislocations are so widespread makes them no less painful. As a maker of place, nothing trumps the economy. A community’s setting might be glorious and its weather grand, but no one—with the exception of the exceptionally affluent—settles there without some means of financial support. For countless Wisconsinites, manufacturing supplied that means. It was their surest and often their only route to the middle class: the source of down payments for their homes, cash for their cars, and tuition checks for their children. Generations of workers grew up and grew old working for the same employer, starting as apprentices fresh out of high school and staying until retirement.

Absolutely no one has those expectations today. It has taken only three or four decades for the possibility of lifetime employment to vanish, but it has vanished forever, and nothing, really, has replaced it. What the last generation of Wisconsinites took for granted seems as distant today as the era of spinning wheels and kerosene lanterns. Even 25 years ago, some state residents were at least mildly uncomfortable with the beer-and-brats image rooted in our blue-collar ethnic heritage; it was too lowbrow for comfort, too *déclassé*. Now they’d give anything to have those industrial jobs back. Legions of dislocated workers have struggled to land lower-paying employment, and prevailing wages for the manufacturing jobs that remain have fallen steadily. In constant dollars, the average annual wage for Wisconsin production workers dropped from \$44,669 in 1978 to \$38,007 in 2008—a decline of 15 percent during a period when white-collar jobs were posting impressive gains.

THE STORY OF WILLIE BOSTON, JR.

Return with me to the Thirtieth Street industrial corridor. If you walk the blocks east of the old A.O. Smith plant, you might see Willie Boston, Jr. sitting on the front porch of his tidy bungalow. Born in Oxford, Mississippi, Boston is a sharecropper’s son who moved with his family to Milwaukee when he was 10. His father worked in construction, but Willie got a job at A.O. Smith in 1968, beginning as a laborer but spending most of his career as a welder. By the time he retired in 2003, Boston was earning \$23 an hour, with full health insurance benefits, a solid pension plan, and six weeks of vacation. His children have not fared as well. Willie Boston’s son was passed over by Smith’s hiring department because he lacked a high school diploma. He became a long-haul trucker, earning far less than his father. Boston’s daughter is a child-care worker making \$7.50 an hour.

A father’s opportunities are not passed on to his children. The ladder to the middle class loses its lower rungs. “Entry level” is redefined as low-wage, dead-end employment, and, in the lengthening gaps between jobs, a permanent underclass grows. What is Willie Boston’s prognosis for the younger generation? “I feel sorry for ’em,” he says. “You can’t make it on \$7.50.”

THE CHANGING FACE OF WISCONSIN

When Shoua Thao came to Wisconsin from Southeast Asia in 1979, he was a 15-year-old refugee who spoke very little English, had never experienced winter, and had no idea who the Green Bay Packers were. Thao had, in fact, never heard of American football; soccer was the game of choice in the Hmong refugee camp where he had lived previously. During the Vietnam War, his father, a farmer in the northern highlands of Laos, was recruited by CIA operatives to fight on America's side. He rose to the rank of lieutenant, leading other Hmong soldiers into battle against the Communist forces. When the United States pulled out of the region in 1975, Hmong partisans who had fought in the "secret war" were left behind and singled out for persecution by the victorious Communist regime. Shoua Thao and his family were forced to live in the jungles of Laos for months at a time, subsisting on dried rice and, when the rice ran out, wild plants. In 1978, Thao and an uncle struck out on their own, crossing the dangerous Mekong River at night to the relative safety of a camp in Thailand.

America finally acknowledged its debt to these endangered allies. After varying lengths of time in the crowded camps, most Hmong refugees were resettled in the United States. Catholic and Lutheran agencies, traditionally strong in the upper Midwest, took the lead in resettlement efforts. As a direct result, Minnesota and Wisconsin today trail only California in the size of their Hmong populations. Shoua Thao and a brother were sponsored by a Beaver Dam church group in 1979. They moved to Madison, where Shoua graduated from high school, and then to Green Bay, which has become the home of their parents and siblings as well. As a member of the first wave, Thao has spent his career helping later arrivals adjust to life in Wisconsin, first as an employment specialist for a state-sponsored refugee program and currently as a bilingual aide for the Green Bay school district.

Shoua Thao is one of an estimated 5,000 Hmong residents in the Green Bay area, but Titledown is hardly the group's only settlement in Wisconsin. His story, or a variant of it, is repeated all across the state. Although Milwaukee has the largest concentration, there are significant Hmong communities in Wausau, Madison, Sheboygan, Appleton, La Crosse, Eau Claire, and a number of smaller cities—all established by refugees who helped American forces in Southeast Asia and suffered exile as a consequence. More than 50,000 strong—enough people to fill La Crosse and then some—the Hmong have become the largest Asian group in the state.

The Hmong also illustrate a larger point. Just as globalization has remade the Wisconsin economy, it is remaking the state's population as well. In the last 25 or 30 years, newcomers have arrived from all over the world, updating and transforming our inherited ideas of ancestry. As might be expected, the trend is most pronounced in Milwaukee. Large cities have always been major points of entry for new arrivals, and few cities have received more, in proportional terms, than Wisconsin's metropolis. In 1890, immigrants and their children accounted for 86.4 percent of Milwaukee's population, making it the most "foreign" city in America. In recent decades, the city has resumed that tradition with an entirely different cast of characters.

South Sixteenth Street provides a perfect example. In the 1970s, fresh out of college, I worked at a youth center on the street called Journey House. The near South Side in those years was what a later generation would describe as "Anglo"—filled with non-Hispanic whites from a variety of European backgrounds. The families who used our

center were uniformly blue-collar, and many of them had moved from elsewhere in Wisconsin—Two Rivers, Cascade, Sturgeon Bay, Phillips—to take advantage of Milwaukee’s abundant factory jobs.

BURGERS TO TACOS

More than 30 years later, Sixteenth Street bears almost no resemblance to its earlier incarnation. The Driftwood Restaurant, where we used to gather for greasy burgers and chocolate shakes, is now Taqueria Jalisco. Karpek’s Accordion Store has become Super Mercado La Hacienda. Schupp’s Radio Shop—an antique even in the 1970s—is now El Tianguis clothing store. Between Pierce Street and Greenfield Avenue, Sixteenth is lined with restaurants, money-order shops, and other businesses with names like El Pollo Feliz, El Punto, Los Comales, La Ley, Las Reynas, El Charro, and the biggest, Mercado El Rey—a grocery store and restaurant whose new quarters cover most of a block. From The Happy Chicken to The King, the blocks I knew in the ’70s have become the Main Street of Latino Milwaukee. A stroll down Sixteenth today is like a visit to the Mexican border. Spanish is the dominant language, and local stores offer a daunting variety of peppers, piñatas, soccer shirts, and cowboy hats. In 1996, the street’s name was officially changed to Cesar Chavez Drive, in honor of the Mexican-American labor leader.

Although its Latino imprint is most obvious, Milwaukee’s near South Side is hardly monolithic. There is a Hmong store on Chavez Drive, and the surrounding residential areas are a cosmopolitan blend of African, Southeast Asian, Native American, and European ancestries as well as Hispanic. In 1967, protesters led by Father James Groppi marched down all-white Sixteenth Street to demand an ordinance banning residential segregation. More than 40 years later, open housing on the South Side is an accomplished fact.

The pattern of diversity has become general. Milwaukee itself became a “majority minority” city in the late 1990s. Its African-American population—a presence since the 1830s—swelled to 37 percent of the total in 2000, and other non-European groups have rounded out the majority. They include newcomers from the Middle East and Africa as well as Latin America and Southeast Asia—groups that have broadened the area’s religious profile significantly. The Islamic Society of Milwaukee purchased an old public school on the far South Side in 1982. It has since blossomed into a full-service institution with two imams (religious leaders) and a school accommodating 700 students from kindergarten through high school. In 1968, Milwaukee’s Muslims gathered for the annual Eid prayers in an apartment. Today the services draw nearly 6,000 people, and the entire Muslim community is at least twice as large. Its members constitute a virtual league of nations, tracing their lineage to Pakistan, India, Palestine, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Afghanistan, and such disparate locales as Burma and Somalia.

The suburbs, too, have felt the cultural shift. The Hindu Temple of Wisconsin opened on a 20-acre parcel in Pewaukee in 2000. After outgrowing an old bank building in the Bay View neighborhood, the Sikh Temple of Wisconsin relocated to Oak Creek in 2007. Shorewood and its North Shore neighbors experienced the trend even earlier. In the late 1980s, when the Soviet Union began to ease restrictions on the movement of its Jewish citizens, a flood of the disaffected reached America’s shores. They settled virtually everywhere an American Jewish community was there to receive them, including Milwaukee. Nearly 4,000 Soviet Jews started over in the metropolitan area, most of them

beginning in Shorewood. They have since spread as far north as Mequon, but Russian is still the dominant language in a number of Shorewood apartment buildings.

As metropolitan Milwaukee assumes a broader ethnic identity, the rest of the state has begun to look more like Milwaukee. In Jefferson, the self-proclaimed “City of Gemuetlichkeit,” where the cemeteries have their share of Moldenhauers and Haubenschilds, at least 7 percent of the population—and more than 12 percent of public school enrollment—is Hispanic. The biggest restaurant on Main Street is El Chaparral, “House of Authentic Mexican Food.” In Portage County, generations of Polish farmers brought their produce to market on the public square in downtown Stevens Point. The farmer’s market is still going strong, but today’s vendors are more likely to be Hmong than Polish. Even Madison, a city whose diversity was once supplied by international students on the University of Wisconsin campus, has developed a demographic profile that older residents might find surprising: 6.4 percent African-American, 6.2 percent Asian, and 5.9 percent Latino in 2005. Some of the larger trends of the last quarter-century have begun to intersect. As Wisconsin’s dairy herds increase in size, there has been a corresponding increase in the immigrant labor force. Latinos make up nearly 60 percent of the dairy workers on farms with over 300 cows—a total of more than 5,000 people.

The numbers for the state as a whole are revealing. Between 1980 and 2008, African-Americans grew from 3.9 percent of Wisconsin’s population to 6.1 percent, Asians from 0.4 to 2 percent, Native Americans from 0.6 to 1 percent, and Hispanics from 1.3 to 5.1 percent. These traditionally defined minorities accounted for 14.2 percent of the state’s population in 2008—a sharp increase from 6.2 percent in 1980. You can still celebrate Syttende Mai with the Norwegians in Stoughton, observe Cesky Den with the Czechs in Hillsboro, and enjoy Oktoberfest with the Germans in Milwaukee and elsewhere, but other players have taken their place at the table.

The implications for the state—social, political, and economic—are still emerging. At the very least, the presence of so many different cultures is forcing other residents to recalibrate their ideas of what it means to be a Wisconsinite. The Badger State was once a polyglot’s paradise, but the languages its citizens spoke were practically all European. Today’s context is global, and the state’s population, no less than its economy, reflects forces that are international in scope. How well the natives and newcomers are adjusting to each other remains open to question. There have been relatively few incidents of open conflict between the older groups and their more recently arrived neighbors, but there has also been relatively limited interaction and even less assimilation.

For their part, many of the new Wisconsinites are doing precisely what the generations before them did: getting on with the business of becoming American. Shoua Thao, the Hmong refugee who began this account, is a case in point. He now lives on 24 acres near Denmark, a small town southeast of Green Bay. The Danes who established the village could not have foreseen such a development, but Thao has adapted to his host culture with alacrity. He has become, among other things, a devout Packers fan. As a self-described “tiny little guy,” he’s too short to follow the action at regular games, but the refugee attends practices regularly, collects autographed footballs, and owns green-and-gold jerseys bearing the names of Aaron Rodgers, Donald Driver, and A.J. Hawk. Every Friday during the football season, he wears one of those jerseys to his job in the Green Bay schools. “The kids love it,” says Thao, and so, obviously, does he.

GOVERNMENT VS. THE GOVERNED

The veteran lobbyist has seen it all. Wisconsin's Capitol has switched from Democratic to Republican and back again multiple times during his long career, hundreds of legislators have come and gone, and the body of statutes has grown substantially. But he has never seen anything quite like the current situation in Madison. "The endgame," he says, "used to be to get the job done, do your business, and go home. Now the endgame is to stay in power." When the lobbyist began to walk the halls of the Capitol in the 1960s, legislators had other things to do. The Wisconsin Senate, for instance, met on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays so that its members could get back to their regular jobs. Unless they were committee chairs, the senators had no offices. Five of them shared a single secretary, and the members of this august body were paid \$300 a month.

The days of the part-time legislator are long gone, and with them the days of the \$1,000 political campaign. Getting elected—and staying elected—has become a full-time job, requiring the support of skilled staff members, a sophisticated party apparatus, and constant fund-raising. The professionalization of politics has not necessarily produced better government. The need to stay in power, in fact—the need to win at all costs—has been a major factor in the growing partisan divide of the last decade or two. Republicans and Democrats line up on either side of the ball like football players with a grudge, intent on doing maximum damage to each other. Politics has become a blood sport, with no quarter given and none asked.

In this charged partisan atmosphere, even symbolic measures take on an emotional weight that may exceed their true importance. During a recent Assembly session, Democrats planned to introduce a resolution commemorating the fatal shooting of seven Milwaukee strikers by state militia troops during the 1886 demonstrations for the eight-hour day. Even though the marches occurred nearly 125 years ago, some Republicans took vigorous exception to the proposal. The Democrats then noted that the Assembly parlor contained a portrait of Jeremiah Rusk, the Republican governor who ordered the militia to "fire on them" in 1886. They requested that the painting be removed from its place of honor, which drew more howls from the Republican side. Rusk remained on the wall, but Democrats received the Assembly speaker's permission to drape the portrait in black cloth. Such political sideshows may be diverting, but they indicate a serious inability to get along.

TOXIC PARTISANSHIP

You have to go back to the nineteenth century to find a climate more vituperative. In the 1830s, it was not unusual for one Wisconsin politician to blast his opponent as a "whiffling, hypocritical pimp" and to be castigated in turn for his own "impotence and imbecility." Office-seekers questioned each other's ancestry as well as their integrity, and disagreements sometimes escalated to the point of physical violence. Even if today's duels are only rhetorical, the return of partisan enmity has not been a positive development for the state. There are certainly people of talent and vision in the Wisconsin Legislature, but even they are drawn inextricably into the us-vs.-them polarity. A political variant of Gresham's Law begins to take hold. Just as bad money drives out good from the marketplace, the bitterly partisan tenor of state government discourages people of intelligence and equanimity from getting involved. The current environment seems to favor those with fixed ideologies and a taste for combat—and without a nuanced, patiently cultivated understanding of how government really works.

It goes without saying that these trends are not limited to the Badger State. The professionalization of politics, the rise of toxic partisanship, and the monetization of campaigns are as apparent in 49 other statehouses—and in the U.S. Capitol—as they are in Madison. But Wisconsin's climate shows the influence of factors particular to the state. The first is a traditionally high expectation of our public servants. During the Gilded Age of the late 19th century, political corruption was as prevalent in Milwaukee and Wisconsin as it was in most other sections of the country. That changed with the rise of the Socialists in Milwaukee and the Progressives in Wisconsin.

Victor Berger, the chief architect of the city's Socialist movement, was fond of saying that honesty was the highest quality to which a Democrat or Republican could aspire. "With us," he crowed, "this is the first and smallest requirement." Robert La Follette and his fellow Progressives placed a similar emphasis on moral probity. The result was a squeaky-clean ethical climate that became normative throughout the state and persisted long after the third-party movements had lost their vigor.

Wisconsin's sky-high expectations have been rudely disappointed in recent years. There had been earlier lapses, but a perfect storm hit the state between 2000 and 2002. Mayor John Norquist of Milwaukee confessed to a "consensual sexual relationship" with a female staffer. Milwaukee County Executive Tom Ament and the County Board approved a stunningly generous pension plan for non-union employees. In Madison, legislative leaders Chuck Chvala, a Democrat, and Scott Jensen, a Republican, were indicted for putting public employees to work on behalf of candidates supported by their respective caucuses. Back in Milwaukee, one alderman faced prosecution for misappropriation of federal funds, and two more would follow. All of these misdeeds took place in a period of less than two years. The caucus and pension scandals might not have raised many eyebrows in Chicago, Providence, or Atlantic City, but they prompted a massive backlash in Wisconsin. Tom Ament and John Norquist resigned, seven Milwaukee County supervisors were recalled, and a number of politicians in Milwaukee and Madison went to jail. The normally placid waters of Wisconsin politics were roiled beyond recognition, and the ship of state seemed utterly adrift. A sense of direction, or at least stability, finally returned, but not before many Wisconsinites had developed grave misgivings about their state's political course.

If some public officials have been major disappointments, so have some public institutions. Wisconsin has traditionally considered itself a state that works, and innovations like the Wisconsin Idea, which brought the resources of the university to bear on matters of public policy, encouraged a widespread belief in the efficacy of government. Fewer residents share that belief today. In the statewide poll taken for this project, 43 percent of those questioned think the state government is doing only a fair job and a full quarter rated it poor.

From exorbitant cost overruns on computer systems to a troubled child welfare system, individual units of state government are patently not working, but Exhibit A for the disenchanting is the Milwaukee Public Schools. Despite some individual successes and a number of exemplary programs, MPS as a whole has been unable to turn around its dismal record of student achievement and find a sustainable solution to the problems of urban education. The system's leaders resemble a group of mechanics watching a vehicle hopelessly mired in the mud. They can come to only one conclusion: "Yup, she's stuck, all right." As they continue to pour gas into the tank, the wheels keep spinning, and the taxpayers at the pump wonder what they're getting for their money.

Taken together, the forces shaping Wisconsin's public life have opened a distinct gap between government and the governed. The divide reflects, to an important degree, the culture of partisan competition that has seized the Capitol—the I'm-right-and-you're-nuts school of political discourse that seems endemic there. State politics in the 21st century has come to resemble a gigantic rugby scrum, with each side pushing blindly toward its goal—total subjugation of the opponent—rather than serving the interests of the people. When you add a few players flagrantly breaking the rules and a stadium showing signs of poor upkeep, the game becomes both grimmer and less engaging. Spectators stay away, and even the roster of participants thins to the diehard partisans.

These patterns reflect the more general disengagement from civic life so painstakingly analyzed in Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone*, but they are particularly painful to observe in Wisconsin. Earlier generations of state residents shared a view of government as a basically collaborative "us." With the rupture of trust that has taken place in recent years, more and more Wisconsinites see government as a fundamentally predatory "them." That shift in perspective, that loss of faith, may be the most troubling trend of all.

SEARCHING FOR THE CENTER

Wisconsin is not on the verge of collapse. You can still find excellent Swiss cheese in Monroe and first-rate bratwurst in Sheboygan. You can still canoe the broad Wisconsin River, stroll along the gin-clear waters of Lake Superior, and bicycle on one of America's most extensive networks of dedicated trails. The economy, too, has its share of stand-outs, from Milwaukee giants like Johnson Controls and Northwestern Mutual to the biotech firms on the west side of Madison. Wisconsin's distinctive blend of landscapes and its equally distinctive blend of cultures make the state unlike any other in the nation.

Wisconsin is not on the verge of collapse, but it is in the throes of change—pervasive and fundamental change that has forever altered our traditional understandings. The pillars of an older order have crumbled. Our manufacturing economy has shredded, our sense of peoplehood is being transformed, and our faith in our democratic institutions and the people who lead us has eroded. What these and other trends of the last quarter-century have in common is their direction. In ways both literal and metaphorical, Wisconsin is leaving the middle behind. As commerce moves from the heart of our communities to the edges, the middle is left behind. As the state's farms become fewer and larger, mid-sized operations are disappearing. As the supply of family-supporting industrial jobs dwindles by the year, our middle class becomes a threatened species. As the state's accent shifts from a European amalgam to a broader Babel, the cultural middle is increasingly difficult to locate. As polarization grips Wisconsin's Capitol, middle ground of any description is conspicuously absent. On a multitude of levels, the center has not held.

These matters are, or should be, of grave concern to every Wisconsinite, wherever he or she resides on the political spectrum. The economic trends endanger our very livelihoods. Our growing diversity could be enriching, but only if older groups see the presence of new cultures as an opportunity rather than a threat. The political trends imperil the continued health of our civil society. All of these shifts cry out for attention, but we have been, for generations, a state short on urgency and light on outrage. There is a phlegmatism abroad in the land, associated by stereotype with the solid, stolid burghers of central Europe who sent their progeny to America's heartland. But ignoring the trends will not diminish their impact. In some respects, Wisconsin has come to resemble a dinosaur

that's grown so large and cumbersome that its tail is half-eaten before its brain senses a problem. The result, later or sooner, could be the extinction of our economic and cultural viability, of our capacity to hold our young and look after our old.

We are left, in the end, with questions. How can Wisconsin preserve the manufacturing jobs it has and create new opportunities for the next generation? As the global economy reshapes our work force, how can we avoid the perils of a permanent underclass? As we become a state of many peoples, how can we remain one people? Will we be able to enlarge our concept of the commonwealth to embrace citizens from all over the globe? Can we forge even the most rudimentary political consensus? Will we ever again develop statesmanlike centrists like Warren Knowles and Patrick Lucey—and the climate that nurtured them? And the biggest question of all: How can Wisconsin recover its past greatness as a stronghold of innovation, a wellspring of cultural vitality, and a laboratory of democracy?

The state has indeed changed enormously in the last quarter-century. Old assumptions have been upended, and troubling new questions have been raised. Although Wisconsin's changing ethnic profile presents definite opportunities, the major trends have been experienced by most residents as a movement downward—in their quality of life, in their satisfaction with government, and in their prospects for the future. But the gathering crisis has so far been met with a collective shrug. It is the purpose of this report to call Wisconsinites to awareness and then to action, because it is only through informed awareness and concerted action that our state can reclaim its place in the nation's vanguard. It is only through knowledge and hard work that we can, after so many years of attrition, make our next quarter-century a time of change for the better.

In the papers that you'll read on this site, one theme seems to rise above the rest: Wisconsin is in desperate need of bold, honest, and energetic leaders—leaders who will put the interests of the state above the state of their campaign funds. Party does not matter, gender does not matter, color does not matter; the essentials are a passion to serve and a long-term perspective. While many of the forces transforming our state are global in scope, it becomes clear that our politicians have been unable to shelter their constituents from the storm. Stale thinking and uninspired half-measures have been the order of the day in Wisconsin, while leaders elsewhere have moved decisively to meet new challenges and seize new opportunities. It is still possible to build a sound future on the solid foundation of our past. The people of Wisconsin require—and deserve—no less.