On Safari in Trump's America

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It was the hippies who drove Nancy Hale over the edge. She had spent three days listening respectfully to the real people of Middle America, and finally she couldn't take it any longer.

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She turned off the tape recorder and took several deep breaths, leaning back in the passenger seat of the rented GMC Yukon. The sun had just come out from behind a mass of clouds, casting a gleam on the rain-soaked parking lot in rural Wisconsin.

Hale, who is 65 and lives in San Francisco, is a career activist who got her start protesting nuclear plants and nuclear testing in the 1970s. In 2005, she was one of the founders of Third Way, a center-left think tank, and it was in that capacity that she and four colleagues had journeyed from both coasts to the town of Viroqua, Wisconsin, as part of a post-election
listening tour. They had come on a well-meaning mission: to better understand their fellow Americans, whose political behavior in the last election had left them confused and distressed.

The trip was predicated on the optimistic notion that if Americans would only listen to each other, they would find more that united than divided them. This notion—the idea that, beyond our polarized politics, lies a middle, or third, path on which most can come together in agreement—is Third Way's raison d'etre. It is premised on the idea that partisanship is bad, consensus is good, and that most Americans would like to meet in the middle.

But these are not uncontested assumptions. And, three days into their safari in flyover country, the researchers were hearing some things that disturbed them greatly—sentiments that threatened their beliefs to the very core.

The last focus group, a bunch of back-to-the-land organic farmers and artisanal small-businesspeople, was over, and the researchers had retreated to their car to debrief. There was a long pause after Hale turned off the tape recorder on which they were recording their impressions.

“I had a very hard time with that meeting,” she finally said. “The longer the meeting went on, the more it started to feel to me like just another community that had isolated itself, and it was right and everybody else wasn't, you know?” The hippies should have been her kind of people, but the attitudes they'd expressed had offended her sense of the way America ought to be. She had come seeking mutual understanding, only to find that some people were not the least bit interested in meeting in the middle. And now she was at a crossroads: Would she have to revise her whole worldview to account for this troubling reality?

Third Way's researchers are far from the only Americans inspired to undertake anthropological journeys in the past year. Nearly a year after Donald Trump's election shocked the prognosticators, ivory-tower types are still sifting through the wreckage. Group after group of befuddled elites has crisscrossed America to poke and prod and try to figure out what they missed—“Margaret Meads among the Samoans,” one prominent strategist remarked to me.

HuffPo embarked on a 23-city bus tour to get to know places like Fort Wayne, Indiana, and Odessa, Texas. Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg undertook a series of carefully choreographed interactions with factory workers and people on tractors. The liberal pollster Stan Greenberg appeared at the National Press Club to discuss his findings from a series of focus groups with “Obama-Trump” voters in Macomb County, Michigan. A new group of Democratic elected officials hosted a “Winning Back the Heartland” strategy conference in Des Moines this month. The title of yet another research project, a bipartisan study underwritten by the eBay founder Pierre Omidyar, encapsulates the sentiment: “Stranger in My Own Country.”
Third Way, for its part, announced in January it would spend $20 million on what it called the “New Blue” campaign to “provide Democrats with a path out of the wilderness.” Like many of their peers, the think tank’s brain trust had been stunned by the election. On November 9, too devastated to work, its staff had simply sat together and cried.

For all intents and purposes, it was Third Way’s vision that had been on the ballot in 2016—and lost. The think tank, inspired by the New Democrat centrism of the 1990s, had advised Hillary Clinton on her 2016 policy platform. In debates within the Democratic Party, Third Way advocated for the sensible center. It argued that a left-wing platform could not win elections, and that what voters preferred was a pragmatic, moderate, technocratic philosophy, socially liberal but pro-business and wary of big government. It used research and data to demonstrate that these policies made good politics.

After the electoral-college majority unexpectedly rejected Clinton and the Democrats, Third Way, in characteristic fashion, set out to research the problem and find a solution. Its data wonks got to work crunching demographic information. But its leaders were well aware that their statistics—everything the professional know-it-alls thought they knew—had failed to predict 2016. Data alone would not suffice.

And so Hale and her colleagues began a series of visits to targeted areas, including this one, Wisconsin’s Third Congressional District, which had voted Democratic for more than two decades—until it swung more than 15 points for Trump. I was allowed to ride along on the condition that I not identify any of the focus-group participants. I was hoping to use the trip as my own focus group of sorts: I wanted to get a sense of what 2017’s many delegations of liberal anthropologists were hearing from Trump Country.

I wondered if any of the tourists from the coasts would be open-minded enough to absorb a reality that might cut against their preconceptions. Did Third Way and Zuckerberg and HuffPost and all the rest want to confront an angry and divided nation head-on, or would they settle for a series of earnest exchanges that left their core assumptions intact?

Open-mindedness was the sworn commitment of the Third Way team. The researchers were determined to approach rural Wisconsin with humility and respect. After the election, Hale told me, “You heard people saying, ‘These people aren’t smart enough to vote, they’re so stupid, if that’s what they want, they deserve what they get.’ That hit us, on every level, as wrong.” They wanted to open their hearts and their minds and simply listen. They were certain that, in doing so, they would find what they believed was true: a bunch of reasonable, thoughtful, patriotic Americans. A nation of people who really wanted to get along.

Our tour of western Wisconsin had begun two days earlier, at an imposing courthouse in the rural county seat of Ellsworth, the self-proclaimed “cheese curd capital of Wisconsin.” A farmer in the group told Third Way’s eager listeners he knew exactly what was wrong with
America: his fellow Americans.

“You’ve got all these parasites making a living off the bureaucracy,” the farmer declared, “like leeches pulling you down, bleeding you dry.” We had been in the state for just a few hours, and already the researchers’ quest for mutual understanding seemed to be hitting a snag.

Others in the group, a bunch of proudly curmudgeonly older white men, identified other culprits. There were plenty of jobs, a local elected official and business owner said. But today's young people were too lazy or drug-addled to do them.

As we proceeded to meetings with diverse groups of community representatives, this sort of blame-casting was a common refrain. Disdain for the young, in particular, was a constant, across demographic, socio-economic, and generational lines: Even young people complained about young people. “They don't want to do the work, and they always feel like they're being picked on,” a recent graduate of a technical school in Chippewa Falls said of his fellow Millennials.

Some of the people we met expressed the conservative-leaning view that changes in society and the family were to blame. One, a technical-skills instructor at the Chippewa Falls school, questioned whether women belonged in the workplace at all. “That idea of both family members working, it's a social experiment that I don't know if it quite works,” he said. “If everyone's working, who is making sure the children are raised right?”

Others expressed more liberal-minded sentiments, seeing insufficient government action as the root of the community's problems. A school-board official cried as she described the problems plaguing education. A group of middle-class women who met through local activism lamented the area's lack of diversity and hidden pockets of poverty.

Politics, though, was not the focus of the Third Way interviewers, who believed there was more to be gained by asking neutral, open-ended questions. In accordance with Third Way's ideology, they believed that political partisanship was not most people's primary concern. But sometimes the Wisconsinites brought up politics anyway.

At the Labor Temple Lounge in Eau Claire, nine gruff, tough-looking union men sat around a table. One had the acronym of his guild, the Laborers International Union of North America, tattooed on a bulging bicep. The men pinned the blame for most of their problems squarely on Republicans, from Trump to Governor Scott Walker. School funding, the minimum wage, college debt, income inequality, gerrymandering, health care, union rights: It was all, in their view, the GOP's fault. A member of the bricklayers' union lamented Walker's cuts to public services: “If we can't help each other,” he said, “what are we, a pack of wolves—we eat the weakest one? It's shameful.”

But their negativity toward Republicans didn't translate to rosy feelings for the Democrats, who, they said, too frequently ignored working-class people. And some of the blame, they
said, fell on their fellow workers, many of whom supported Republicans against their own interests. “The membership”—the union rank-and-file—“voted for these Republicans because of them damn guns,” a Laborers Union official said. “You cannot push it out of their head. A lot of ‘em loved it when Walker kicked our ass.”

Debriefing after this particular group, the Third Way listeners said they found the union men demoralizing. “I feel like they can’t see their way out,” Hale said.

“They were very negative,” Paul Neaville, another researcher, concurred.

They were so fixated on blaming Republicans, Hale fretted. “It was very us-and-them.”

On the long drives between stops, I asked the researchers about their views and what they had been hearing around the country. They admitted that some of the things they had heard had shocked them. In South Florida, Hale told me, a local chamber of commerce official had calmly asserted, “We don’t have any Muslims here, and that’s a good thing, because Muslims are trouble.”

Hale, a tall woman with a breathy voice and a mop of curly red hair, had come to Wisconsin fresh off a silent Zen meditation retreat in California. She had spent her career building organizations and training activists to work for social change. Instinctively warm and curious, she easily struck up conversations with strangers and often ended interactions with hugs. Hers was a politics of empathy, she told me. “Whether you’re talking about nonviolence or feminism, it’s really the same idea: Everybody matters,” she said.

When she heard views that challenged her sense of empathy—Muslims were bad, welfare recipients were leeches, women should not have careers outside the home—Hale reminded herself that she was there to listen, not to judge. “People have said stuff I was surprised to hear them say out loud,” Hale told me. “But we have to learn from that, too. Whatever they believe is true, because it’s true for them.”

Part of the point of the Wisconsin trip was to gather the evidence that would help them advance this agenda in intra-party debates. Understanding the mysterious ways of the elusive Trump voter had become the crucial currency of any political discussion. The face-to-face interactions they were having in Wisconsin, Hale said as we drove, were so much more valuable than any of the data-driven reports they customarily churned out for their “customers”—donors, elected officials, and the Democratic National Committee.

We sped from town to town in the rented Yukon, watching the exotic Middle American landscape fly by. At one point, a gaggle of bikers roared past us on one side. On the other side of the road, a bright-green field dotted with hay bales passed by. Looking at the bales, Hale mused, “Don’t they look like shredded wheat?”
Hale or her colleague Luke Watson, Third Way’s deputy director of strategy, began each Wisconsin focus group with a variation on the same refrain.

“We are a think tank that deals with what the plurality of Americans are thinking about—in other words, we don’t spend a lot of time on the ideological edges,” one of the two would explain. “It has started seeming like the far left and the far right were the only voice in America, but we know that’s not true. We focus on the 70 percent in the middle, because we think most of us, as Americans, are there.”

This was slightly disingenuous. Third Way, while not officially affiliated with a party, is an organization with a policy agenda, from gun control to entitlement reform, that it seeks to advance within the Democratic Party and with the broader public. Most of its funding comes from corporations and financial executives. Critics on the left call the group the Wall Street wing of the Democratic Party, and accuse it of advancing its donors’ interests over the greater political good. Third Way has called for cutting Social Security and Medicare and vehemently attacked the soak-the-rich economic populism of Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders. Voters, it claims, are not interested in a party that’s all about big government and tax-and-spend.

This debate between left and center has consumed the Democratic Party as it looks for a way forward after the debacle of 2016. Leftists claim that Hillary Clinton’s technocratic caution and coziness with Goldman Sachs alienated voters, and that Sanders, had he won the Democratic nomination, could have defeated Trump. Third Way makes the case that its brand of neoliberal centrism is still the party’s best hope.

Hale and Watson’s opening remarks to focus groups were an honest statement of the group’s animating worldview: that all things are possible when politicians make the right sales pitch to a fundamentally reasonable electorate that can agree on a lot of things. That in a time of division, they could find the things that still bound Americans together. That with enough research and focus groups and listening tours and charts and graphs, they could figure out—and cure—what ails the body politic.

It was a thesis that would not go unchallenged, even in flyover country. In rural Wisconsin, it turns out, the natives have Google.

We had come to the final stop on our listening tour, and the hippies were wary. Viroqua, a town of less than 5,000 people, has in recent years become home to a tiny progressive community. Earnest college graduates toil on organic farms; a “folk school” offers classes in sustainable living, from rabbit butchering to basket-weaving. Migrants from the likes of Madison and Berkeley are attracted to a rural idyll of food and electric co-ops, alternative schools, and locally sourced everything.
“Isn’t this underwritten by the DNC?” a local cafe owner asked Watson after his just-here-to-listen opening spiel. “I read somewhere you’re spending $20 million,” another man said. Another participant asked about corporate donors.

This was all pretty much true—Third Way, not the DNC, was paying for the project, but the “New Blue” campaign was hardly a nonpartisan effort. But Watson tried to deflect. He acknowledged that the session was “part of” the $20 million project, but he insisted it had nothing to do with any political party. “This is not about Democrats or Republicans—it’s about what’s going on beyond the Beltway,” he said.

With those concerns dispatched, the listening began in earnest. The Viroqua representatives were eager to extol the virtues of their community. It was an oasis of sanity, an organic farmer in a pink-and-blue plaid shirt said—unlike the dismal city where he’d grown up. “There was no culture with which to identify, just television, drinking, maybe sports,” he said. “There’s nothing to aspire to. You’re just going through life with a case of Mountain Dew in your car.”

The cafe owner—a bearded man in a North Face fleece—had recently attended a town hall held by the local Democratic congressman, Ron Kind, a Third Way stalwart and former chair of the House’s centrist New Democrat Coalition. “I’m not, like, a jumping-up-and-down Bernicrat,” the man said. “But what you see in these congressional meetings is a refusal to even play ball” with ideas considered too extreme, like single-payer health care. “All these centrist ideals,” he said, “are just perpetuating a broken system.”

This was a direct attack on the very premise of Third Way’s existence. These were not the ideas of the middle 70 percent. These were not the voices of an America that wanted to find mutual understanding with its neighbors. They were, essentially, separatists, proud of their extremism and disdainful of the unenlightened.

It was after this exchange that Hale, after she and Watson got back into the Yukon to debrief, as they did after every session in order to compose their eventual after-action report, had to stop and vent. Her problem wasn’t that people were wrong. She had managed to maintain her equanimity while hearing other groups express opinions she disagreed with. It was that they didn’t want to get along.

“I have so much hope, and it’s gotten kind of shaken from both ends, you know?” she said. “There’s an, I don’t know, blue-sky part of me that was like, ‘I’m going to go traveling around the country and see that we’re more about commonalities than differences, that we’re more about our desire to be together than to be separate.’ And I’m not saying that isn’t true. I’m just saying every once in a while it gets kicked in the ass.”
That moment of doubt does not appear in the report that Third Way released, which distills the group's conclusions from the tour I joined. In the report, there is only one quotation from the hippie roundtable in Viroqua—a man who extols the area’s turnaround, in a section about the area's “intense local pride.” “There's love, beauty, and a sense of opportunity,” he is quoted as saying. “There's been a rejuvenation of identity.”

In the moment, Hale had heard sentiments like this as disturbing, of a piece with the community's self-satisfied separatism. In the report, it had been made to sound like a paean to localism.

The report surprised me when I read it. Despite the great variety of views the researchers and I had heard on our tour, the report had somehow reached the conclusion that Wisconsinites wanted consensus, moderation, and pragmatism—just like Third Way. We had heard people blame each other for their own difficulties, take refuge in tribalism, and appeal to extremes. But the report mentioned little of that. Instead it described the prevailing attitude as “an intense work ethic that binds the community together and helps it adapt to change.” (Third Way disputes these characterizations of its report.)

This supposedly universal belief in the value of hard work was the researchers' principal finding from their trip to Wisconsin. “It is their North Star, guiding their sense of what is right and wrong, inside and outside of WI-3,” the report states. In the face of challenges, from school budget cuts to factory closures, the community had responded “with a fierce work ethic and a no-nonsense attitude.”

We had certainly heard some of that, but it wasn’t all we heard. In many cases, the report presents only one side of an issue about which we'd heard varying views. For example, it quotes a local employer who sang the praises of automation, but none of the union members who worried about jobs disappearing. It quotes a technical-college instructor proclaiming that crises in the education system create opportunities, but none of the public-school teachers who saw their classrooms gutted by voucher programs.

The report is short, covering only three big takeaways from the seven listening sessions Third Way conducted. The first is the importance of hard work; the second is the need for a strong workforce. The third, described in a section entitled “Just Get the Hell Out of My Way,” is locals' purported antagonism to big government. “Whether the question is about immigration or banks, taxes or welfare, the people we spoke to generally felt that government policies were irrelevant to their daily lives,” it states. This view is made to sound like one that was broadly expressed, but in fact, we mostly heard it in just one session—the group of curmudgeonly farmers. Almost all of the quotations in this section are drawn from that group. There are no quotations from the people we met who were pro-government, such as the teachers and laborers and activists, who voiced concern that local, state, and federal government ought to be doing more to take care of people.
According to the report, the community’s “biggest frustrations” are “laggard government and partisan squabbling.” “The idea that such bickering can be tolerated in D.C. is appalling to most,” it states. The good people of western Wisconsin, Third Way found, wanted nothing so much as a society where people could put aside their differences. The report quotes a man who said, “We come together on projects and solve problems together.” It doesn’t quote any of the Wisconsinites we met who expressed partisan sentiments or questioned the prospect of consensus.

The researchers had somehow found their premise perfectly illustrated. Their journey to Trump’s America had done nothing to unsettle their preconceptions.

The Wisconsin report is the second Third Way has produced from its listening tour; still to come are its findings from Florida and Arizona. The group's first report, on a trip to northwest Illinois, was quite a bit more pessimistic, with more emphasis on the decline of manufacturing, and more skepticism expressed about trade and immigration. Still, the Illinois report did, in the end, come to many of the same conclusions about what drove people: love of work and community, concern for the future, distrust of big government, and a desire to move past partisanship. Validating the researchers’ project, the Illinois report also found that Midwesterners felt overlooked in the national political dialogue. It quotes a local as complaining, “The coasts think we’re Jesusland or Dumbasfuckistan.”

In Wisconsin, I had seen and heard everything the Third Way researchers did—and eaten at the same restaurants, and slept at the same Hampton Inn in Eau Claire, and watched the same landscape roll by the windows of the same SUV. I heard all the optimism they did, but I also heard its opposite: that one side was right and that the other was the enemy; that other Americans, not just the government, were to blame for the country's problems. There's plenty of fellow-feeling in the heartland for those who want to see it, but there's plenty of division, too. And not every problem can be solved in a way that splits the difference.

The other groups of anthropologists roaming Middle America face the same quandary. Having gotten the country drastically wrong, they have set out on well-meaning missions to bring the country together by increasing mutual understanding. They share Third Way's basic assumption that mutual understanding is something Americans can agree to find desirable. But as hard as they try to open their minds to new perspectives, are they ready to have that basic assumption challenged?

The researchers I rode with had dived into the heart of America with the best of intentions and the openest of minds. They believed that their only goal was to emerge with a better understanding of their country. And yet the conclusions they drew from what they heard corresponded only roughly to what I heard. Instead, they seemed to revert to their preconceptions, squeezing their findings into the same old mold. It seems possible, if not likely, that all the other delegations of earnest listeners are returning with similarly
comforting, selective lessons. If the aim of such tours is to find new ways to bring the country together, or new political messages for a changed electorate, the chances of success seem remote as long as even the sharpest researchers are only capable of seeing what they want to see.

The last time I spoke to Nancy Hale, she was off on another Third Way trip, this one to southern Arizona. At a hotel in Tucson, preparing for her next discussion with a group of young immigration activists, she reflected on what a valuable experience the listening tour had been. “I’ve come to the conclusion that most of our divisions have to do with lack of understanding,” she told me. “And I don’t mean in some kind of academic way, I mean in a very human way. I know it’s very unpopular to say there are any benefits of the recent election, but people seem to be moving more toward that.”

There was another way the tour had been valuable: As Third Way argued its preferred course for the Democratic Party, its on-the-ground research was already lending crucial credibility to its claims, she said. In meetings with Democratic elected officials and presentations to the DNC, Hale told me, Third Way’s representatives could reel off anecdote after anecdote about the Real People of Middle America they’d met. “The fact that we now have this very direct experience that we can use to tell a story—we get listened to in a different way, because we’ve figured out a better way to say it,” Hale told me. I had no doubt this was true—that Beltway Democrats were eagerly swallowing Third Way’s claims, bolstered by their firsthand accounts of the mysterious heartland. Since the Wisconsin trip, Third Way has published an analysis claiming the Democratic Party cannot win back the House if it focuses on its base and ignores working-class whites, and another that says the party’s main problem is that “Americans don’t see Democrats as the party of jobs.”

What stuck with her above all, Hale told me, was how grateful people were to the researchers for hearing them. “The things people end up saying to us are really kind of miraculous considering that, five minutes before, they had never met us,” she said. “I think that has to do with us saying, This matters. You are the democracy. You matter.”

It was gratifying to Nancy Hale to find, in the end, that America wasn’t lost. To be sure, there had been moments that made her wonder. But as she looked back on it, she had managed to edit those moments out of her memory. The American people, she concluded, were not as divided and irreconcilable as the election made them seem. Progressive neoliberalism was not a lost cause. The world she believed in before—the world she preferred to inhabit—was the one she and her fellow American explorers had managed to find: not a strange land at all but a reassuring one.