Imagine a land in which the dominant culture is an internationalized one, at every level; in which the political units that really matter are confederations of city-states; in which loyalty is an economic concept, when it is not obsolete; in which "the United States" exists chiefly to provide military protection. That is the land our correspondent glimpses, and it is no longer beyond the horizon

by Robert D. Kaplan

Sandstone cliffs, a peacock-blue ocean, and an endless bar of cream-colored sand filled my first view of greater Los Angeles as I drove south from the Santa Barbara airport on the Pacific Coast Highway and entered Los Angeles County. With the 10,000-foot-high San Gabriel Mountains stepping down to the sea, L.A. appeared too beautiful to be real.

From north to south, greater Los Angeles spans close to a hundred miles of seacoast. I stopped at Santa Monica, a city of 90,000 on the northwest edge of Los Angeles. After checking into a hotel, I looked at a map and saw that the Third Street pedestrian promenade was only half a mile away. My decision to walk there was a mistake I did not repeat in Los Angeles. The scrawny palms provided no shade on the sun-blasted asphalt. Except for a bag lady, a woman pushing her child in a pram, and a young man with tattoos who passed me at high speed on Rollerblades, the street was empty for that half mile -- a half mile that took me past the Civic Center and Auditorium, where the Academy Awards ceremony used to be held; the Art Deco town hall; and the Rand Corporation. Rather than people I saw only cars and enormous parking lots.

Cars could not enter Third Street, which was roped off for pedestrians, filled with food and jewelry carts, and packed with shops and restaurants. The result was hordes of people strolling -- whereas just across the street and all the way back to my hotel there had been almost none. The crowd here was young, heavily Asian, and fiercely middle-class, dressed, like the crowds I have seen in Brazilian cities, in fashionable leisure and beach wear. I sat down at an outdoor Thai-Chinese restaurant for an early dinner. The manager was Japanese, the hostess Iranian, and the other help Mexican. The Iranian hostess, who wore many rings and had mint-green fingernails, was telling a friend that as a graduation present her father was going to drive her cross-country to see Elvis's grave, at Graceland. On the sidewalk beside my table a large crowd watched a black youth tap dance to Brazilian music. The globalized architecture of the shops and office façades was familiar
from the upmarket malls I had seen in the Midwest. Also on Third Street I saw more homeless people than I had ever seen in a similar-sized area in New York City or Washington, D.C. They were doing crossword puzzles, talking to themselves, and trying to enter the restrooms of expensive restaurants before waiters caught them. They were overwhelmingly white and male. I saw one man with long gray hair wearing an Army jacket and a woolen hat despite the 80° temperature. He banged his hand against a bench and shouted disconnectedly. People moved away. The homeless barely threaten the panorama of prosperity secured in Santa Monica by a burgeoning multimedia and software industry, which the well-dressed, thirtyish crowd reflected.

Over the next few days I drove through the suburban San Fernando Valley bordering Santa Monica to the north, which is equally prosperous. Unlike Santa Monica, the San Fernando Valley is part of the City of Los Angeles. Its business and political leaders want to secede. With 1.3 million inhabitants, the San Fernando Valley would constitute the nation's sixth largest urban area, and one of its richest. This is not white flight -- 40 percent of the valley's residents are Latino or Asian. Among the white population, Jews are the largest ethnic group. These people want to duplicate the prosperity of incorporated post-urban dynamos in northern Los Angeles such as Burbank -- now the home of the Walt Disney Company, Warner Brothers, and NBC -- and Glendale, 45 percent of whose population is foreign-born Latinos, Asians, and Armenians. Joel Kotkin, a Los Angeles-based urban-affairs specialist, calls the secessionist trend that has already Balkanized St. Louis and other American cities the "urban confederacy movement." Unlike the original secessionists, these activists will win, he thinks, because cities are now too big to work -- they can function only as a league of smaller, incorporated pieces.

A third of all U.S.-born middle-class Latinos and more than a quarter of all U.S.-born middle-class Asians in the five-county greater Los Angeles region marry someone of another race. Even the notion of white versus black is losing relevance here, with Latinos constituting 38 percent of the Los Angeles County population and Asians and blacks 11 percent each. The racial polarization that divides Washington, D.C., for example, where white suburbs surround what is, in effect, a black urban homeland, is little apparent in L.A. Even within the Los Angeles city limits blacks make up only 14 percent of the population, whereas they make up 29 percent in New York City. For ten days I drove throughout greater Los Angeles, stopping often to walk in different neighborhoods. Media images of the L.A. riots and the O. J. Simpson trial had prepared me for a city as divided as Washington. But in L.A., where more than eighty languages are spoken, that's not what I found.

Zaheer Virji is a twenty-seven-year-old ethnic-Indian immigrant from the East African nation of Tanzania. He wore a blue-velvet baseball cap, a white T-shirt, jeans, and running shoes when I met him and his American wife in a Santa Monica hotel lobby. Virji's family, which imports goods from Hong Kong to Tanzania, is part of a merchant community from the Indian subcontinent which forms the middle class in Tanzania, along with several other African countries. Virji remembers the times when police thugs under the control of the former Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere harassed his relatives and arrested his uncle. He told me that race relations are "so much better" in southern
California than in Africa, where Indians and Africans completely stereotype each other: "I came here to escape not just Africans but Indians, too." (The name Virji is an alias.) He went first to England and then to Canada, where there are large Indian communities. But he didn't feel free. "In those places the community is what is happening. Here in the U.S., it's you that is happening. There is less of system here, fewer laws to restrict you."

Virji came to the United States six years ago, and has no college degree or green card -- yet. In the six months before we spoke, he had earned more by investing in the stock market than his wife had made at her job -- a reflection not only of his skill but also of an economy in which stocks and other assets have risen but wages have not. With this money, along with funds from his family in Tanzania, he was looking to buy a business: a flower shop, a gas station, whatever he could get the best deal on. He was using a broker; if the business was a gas station, he told me, he would need to know about underground tanks and environmental regulations. He wanted to go into partnership with the current owner for a three-year transition period, to secure part of his investment if the business did not turn out as advertised. Ten years from now, he explained, he wants to be the owner of a small business with able employees, so that he can spend his time investing the profits in the stock market.

Los Angeles is full of Asian and Latino immigrants creating their own civilization, just as European immigrants did a hundred years ago. Because these new immigrants bring different historical and cultural experiences, and because they are integrating into American society under more-advanced technological conditions than did immigrants in the past, they will further reduce the distance between America and the rest of the world.

I WENT east from Santa Monica across the City of Los Angeles to the suburbs of Monterey Park and San Gabriel. As I drove, I saw a sprawling metropolis in transition. The official, ceremonial downtown, composed of the convention center, courts, government offices, and the Los Angeles Times building, looked less vibrant than the new, pedestrian-packed downtowns I saw on the way -- Westwood and Beverly Hills, a contiguous area marked by the office buildings of City National Bank, Occidental Petroleum, and others; a Korean church; a Mexican-American real-estate agency; and one of the largest schools in the country that teaches English to foreigners. Several real-estate agents told me that the 1992 riots in heavily black South Central Los Angeles had quickened the exodus of corporations toward the wealthier western part of the city.

I passed through West Hollywood, an area of gays, elderly Jews, and Russian immigrants; Koreatown; and the "Banana Republic," a neighborhood populated by Central American immigrants. The notorious Watts and South Central neighborhoods were one-story encampments of poor blacks encroached upon by the Latino immigrants who make up two thirds of the population of those areas. Upwardly mobile blacks are moving from here to the Moreno Valley and other inexpensive suburbs in an eastern area of greater Los Angeles called the Inland Empire. Watts and South Central are, in ethnic and racial terms, being annexed to Mexican East Los Angeles. Demographers say that in coming years Latinos will dilute the presence of blacks in Los Angeles, as they have already done in Miami. Latinos are now the majority of the region's industrial work force.
The number of Latino- and Asian-owned businesses in Los Angeles County has increased from 70,000 to 220,000 since the early 1980s, while the number of black-owned businesses has remained static at 20,000.

I parked in East Los Angeles and walked about a mile past small stores selling furniture and other household goods. I noticed many bridal shops, suggestive of strong family patterns, and many pedestrians, too. Los Angeles, I had begun to realize, was very much a vibrant pedestrian city -- in parts. One part I had seen was the largest garment district in North America, whose narrow alleys are packed with Latinos, Asians, and Middle Easterners, a throwback to early-twentieth-century New York. This vast confederation teems with successful commercial and residential areas like the Third Street Promenade and East Los Angeles. But you need a car to travel between them.

From the "Mexico" of East Los Angeles I crossed into "Asia": Monterey Park and San Gabriel, once gray and run-down and now booming with glittering banks, supported by Hong Kong Chinese and Chinese-American immigrant money, and many new malls, among them San Gabriel Square.

At this mall, which is decorated with Spanish colonnades, I entered the 99 Ranch Market, part of a California Chinese supermarket chain. At first it seemed like any other enormous American supermarket, with dozens of aisles and too much air-conditioning. But nearly every product in the store was an Asian specialty item, either imported or grown in the Los Angeles area. Chinese food stores are common in the nation's various Chinatowns, and so, increasingly, are supermarkets like this one. But never before had I seen forty aisles, each a hundred yards long, devoted to noodles, pork, taro, tofu, pea sprouts, dried shrimp, soybean paste, spicy bean cabbage, dried seaweed, rice spirits, and also Thai, Korean, and Japanese items. Next door was a Chinese restaurant with an overabundance of employees and an absence of Western cutlery or Caucasian customers. Women crossed the red floor pushing food trolleys filled with saucers of chicken feet and other dishes.

An all-new Asian-American civilization is forming here, and flourishing, too. Pacific Rim cultures that were antagonistic for centuries are cooperating in the California marketplace. Traditionally nations rise and fall; but at the 99 Ranch Supermarket I wondered if America might escape that fate by shedding its skin as a nation to reveal an international civilization.

I visited another pan-Asian supermarket, this one to the south -- in Cerritos, once a dairy-farming district but now a planned, incorporated community 45 percent of whose inhabitants are Asian. The checkout counters are manned by Latinos, and the customers are mainly Chinese. A few blocks away I called on Vincent Diau, a forty-four-year-old who emigrated from Taiwan in 1981. Though ethnic Chinese account for only 2.7 percent of Los Angeles County's population, one in five home buyers in the county is Chinese, and such top Los Angeles hotels as the Beverly Wilshire and the Los Angeles Biltmore are Chinese-owned. Diau wore expensive glasses and casual clothes; there were two cars in his driveway and new appliances in his house. Everything was in perfect order, almost
as though nobody lived there, although Diau and his Chinese-American wife, Alice, a schoolteacher, share the house with their two children. The children's academic awards were framed near a violin and a piano, and their schedule for music lessons and other after-school activities was posted on a wall beside charts of the English alphabet and Chinese characters. The Diaus own a computer, as do 72 percent of Chinese-Americans; 53 percent of Chinese-American families are linked to the Internet, in contrast to 11 percent of all families. (Forty percent of Asian-American adults hold college degrees -- almost twice the percentage of Caucasians.)

Diau told me, "I moved to Cerritos for the same reason that many Chinese and Korean immigrants have -- because Whitney High School is one of the best public high schools in the state." Diau has law and political-science degrees from universities in Taiwan, and a law degree from Tulane; he is a consultant on Asia with the Hughes Corporation. People complain about the American legal system, he told me, but compared with those in Asia it is straightforward: "If you have discipline and determination and a strategic goal, this country is simple; only the language and alphabet are hard." Because Americans are clear and informal, "you can cut through issues quickly," he said. "In Taiwan everyone wants to control you: there is so much social pressure. Here, among people who are not Chinese, I can truly be myself." Diau told me that he mixes with all kinds of people -- Latinos, Middle Easterners, Indians -- but unfortunately not with blacks. This was less choice than adherence to tradition, he explained. Chinese families favor intermarriage with Caucasians but not with blacks. "I hope that changes," he said.

Why, I asked myself, worry about "the Asian threat"? The best way to contain Asian dynamism is to absorb it -- which is exactly what the United States is doing.

As I drove through greater Los Angeles, the term "city-state" was foremost in my mind, not because L.A. is similar to ancient Athens or Sparta but because of the very size and eye-popping variety of this thriving urban confederation, with its hinterland of oil refineries and agricultural valleys. Santa Monica has the ambiance of a beach resort, East Los Angeles is like Mexico, Monterey Park is like Asia, and Cerritos is an Asian Levittown for the nineties. Except for the prevalence of home-security systems, the winding streets near Dodger Stadium, north of downtown, have almost a rustic, Southern European aspect, with their vine-covered houses and steep hills. Going from one township to another, I often felt as if I had journeyed far and wide. The freeway system makes this compression of distance possible, and climate abets the system's expansion: because Los Angeles gets little rain or frost, road surfaces are cheap and easy to maintain.

"I'm middle-class," Gregory Rodriguez, a researcher who lives on a steep street near Dodger Stadium, told me when I visited him. "But there are also working-class and poor people a block away, and some wealthy entrepreneurs: Jews, Anglos, Mexicans, Chinese, you name it. It's an Old World neighborhood of immigrants, like neighborhoods in Manhattan." I sought out Rodriguez, a thirty-one-year-old third-generation Mexican-American, to learn more about ethnicity in southern California, and particularly about the culture of "Latinos" -- a word Rodriguez prefers to "Hispanics," which he calls "cold and generic." "'Hispanic' is a term people in the East use," he said, "but here no one does."
Had I relied merely on my East Coast impressions, the figures Rodriguez presented would have startled me. In the Northeast, "Hispanics" are often Puerto Ricans and Dominicans, who have not assimilated as successfully as Mexicans; yet nationwide, Mexicans account for 60 percent of all Latinos.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Rodriguez told me, 55 percent of Latinos are bilingual in English and Spanish. In greater Los Angeles four times as many U.S.-born Latinos are in the middle class as live in poverty. A quarter of all middle-class families in southern California are Latinos, and in economic performance U.S.-born Latinos living in greater Los Angeles are not far behind whites and Asians: about half of U.S.-born Latinos here are in the middle class, whereas 58 percent of white or Asian households are. Among black households in the area 38 percent are in the middle class; the national average is 26 percent. Perhaps the most telling distinction among Latinos, Asians, and blacks is in the percentage that are government employees in an increasingly entrepreneurial economy. While 28 percent of middle-class blacks in greater Los Angeles work for the federal, state, or municipal government, only about 14 percent of middle-class Asians and 10 percent of middle-class Latinos do.

Rodriguez used his own term, "mestizo-ization," for a dual perspective prevalent among Latinos: they maintain a firm belief in some degree of bilingualism while welcoming U.S. citizenship and often intermarrying. David E. Hayes-Bautista, a medical sociologist at the University of California at Los Angeles, told me that the Latino experience suggests that "being American simply means buying a house with a mortgage and getting ahead -- there is no agreement anymore on culture, only on economics." Seventy-five years ago D. H. Lawrence called America a homeland "of the pocket" and not "of the blood."

Immigrant dynamism coupled with Asian as well as Latino mestizo-ization are the central facts of late-twentieth-century Los Angeles. And the reality is richer still, as Indian immigrants buy up Artesia, next to Cerritos, and Iranian immigrants, after buying many properties in Beverly Hills, buy now in nearby Westwood. "South Central is no longer a burnt-out core, and that is partly because of Latino immigrants," Rodriguez said. "Because Latinos came in at the bottom, a pool of home buyers existed for upwardly mobile blacks who needed to sell their properties and escape South Central and Watts for racially mixed, middle-class areas. Leftists talk of blacks being 'displaced,' but that disparages the very blacks who have succeeded. Is it 'displacement' to climb your way out of the ghetto?"

**Orange County: Among the World's Biggest Economies**

Orange County, which forms the southern part of greater Los Angeles, is, along with Westchester, Marin, and Dade, among the few counties in America that are household names. Orange County is America's most fully evolved urban pod, in which alliances are based on technology rather than geography and classic definitions of city and suburb no longer apply. Perhaps the county -- larger and less dense than the largest cities but smaller than the smallest states -- will replace the city as the civic center of the future. Already the western Kansas City suburbs, which I had visited earlier, are
called Johnson County, and the prosperous Maryland suburbs of Washington, D.C., are called Montgomery County.

Orange County -- "a major airport in search of a city" -- stands for what everybody hates about the suburbs, with their crass affluence and neither-nor landscape. It is often described as 782 square miles of dull residential streets, malls, and office parks without a downtown. And it is notorious for the 1994 bankruptcy of its treasury, the result of trying to fund its operations not through high taxes but through risky investments. I was prepared to hate Orange County. I came away respecting it, more intrigued than I had been by many "exotic" and "romantic" cities.

Parts of Orange County are beautiful, and the county works. If it were a state, its economy would be roughly equal to Arizona's; if it were a country, its economy would rank among the top thirty or so in the world. About a third of the firms in the county are involved in international trade, and they run the gamut of high-technology products. Orange County is now what Johnson County and other suburban pods I visited in the Midwest could become: a multiracial world trade center linked to overseas cities by direct flights -- say, between Omaha and Beijing and Kansas City and Paris. (Since the late 1980s the export sectors of many local economies in America have grown dramatically; from 1987 to 1995 by 200 percent in California, 250 percent in Utah, and 375 percent in Idaho.)

The received impression that Orange County's 2.6 million residents are "white bread" is false. Almost a quarter of the county's population is Latino, two and a half times the national average; 11 percent is Asian, nearly three times the national average. Only two percent of the population is black -- one sixth the national average.

Another false perception of Orange County is that there is no there there. In fact there are many theres there. The county comprises twenty-eight separate municipalities, many with their own centers. The term "suburb" does not properly describe this advanced, polycentric urban pod. Because these centers do not resemble traditional downtowns, they are overlooked by people whose eyes have yet to adjust to the post-industrial age.

I DROVE first to Newport Beach, one of Orange County's municipalities, to see Dennis Macheski, a real-estate consultant who worked in a well-appointed two-story office complex beside the Pacific. "The myth that people in places like Orange County spend an inordinate amount of time in their cars is wrong," Macheski began. "The average commute in the United States is twenty-two minutes. In southern California it is twenty-five minutes -- almost the average. That's because almost everyone in the area works close to home. The jobs are no longer in the city -- they're right here, in post-suburbia, or whatever you want to call it. Even in the Inland Empire, whose suburbs are the least developed and attractive, seventy percent of the residents work locally. Nobody in the suburbs needs to drive more than thirty minutes to a great restaurant or a theater." In fact, established post-suburban regions like Orange County and northern New Jersey rank high nationally on availability of cultural venues. "We're no longer a suburb. Affluent New York City bedroom communities average fifteen hundred persons per
square mile. Orange County's average density is six thousand. So we're far more urban in many respects than parts of New York."

"Tell me about the future of greater Los Angeles and the United States in terms of real-estate patterns," I said.

"Fifteen years hence we will be bigger. Nothing will stop us. Instead of fifteen million in greater Los Angeles we'll be eighteen million. Two thirds of the new people will be in outlying areas as the urban region spreads farther. The same will be true for Las Vegas, Phoenix, Portland, Sacramento, cities in Colorado, and elsewhere. Two thirds will be homeowners, but only one quarter will be married with children. There will be more and more nontraditional families and singles.

"The number who work at home and telecommute may double, from two to three percent of homeowners to six percent. But so what? It's still just six percent. Because media people travel in the same circles as telecommuters, they exaggerate their importance, but in the real-estate business we know that most people -- no matter what wonders technology brings -- want to be reasonably close to the action in urban regions.

"Otherwise the two big immigrations will continue, because the economy requires highly educated Asians to work in high tech, and low-skilled Latinos to be the housekeepers and gardeners, among other jobs, for the high-tech people. These are the people who will largely account for the increased growth of urban regions across America. In greater Los Angeles the black population grows at one percent a year, but the Asian-Latino population grows at three percent. Even in California politicians have proved that they lack the will and the ability to stop immigration. Proposition 187 [an effort to deny benefits to noncitizens] was directed against the poor -- nobody thought the worse of Asians or middle-class Latinos. The result, of course, was merely to encourage more Latinos to apply for citizenship. Corporations will determine immigration: if they need highly skilled workers in defense and software industries, they will recruit them in one form or another from Asia and other places."

As I had been told over and over again by businesspeople and other experts, it is far more cost-efficient to import the rest of the world's talent than to train citizens at home, especially when weak or nonexistent national education standards and insufficient tax revenues have been the ruination of many local schools. For the low-skilled worker, U.S. citizenship confers less advantage than it used to, because those with higher skills will get the well-paying jobs anyway and become citizens in the process.

Macheski's analysis does not contradict Gregory Rodriguez's. The housekeepers and gardeners Macheski referred to are first-generation Mexican-American; the skilled Latino middle-class workers Rodriguez documents are usually second- or third-generation.

BEFORE you leave Newport Beach, go see the Fashion Island Mall," Macheski suggested.
"But I've seen malls before," I told him.

"See this one -- it's really affluent and evolved. Believe me, it's worth it."

It was. From Macheski's office I drove past two more office campuses and then into a large parking lot. I ascended a wide stairway and entered the mall -- an outdoor labyrinth of crowded pedestrian streets punctuated with large clay pots full of bright-red geraniums, and storefronts that mixed neoclassical and baroque styles with red-tiled roofs. There was a fountain shooting pellets of ice, and jewelry carts made of hand-tooled wood painted in rich earthen shades standing in the middle of a sidewalk that was laid with brilliant tiles. The geometric sweep of marble, sea-green wrought iron, and terra-cotta partially obscured by bougainvillea vines made for a brilliant mixture of late-twentieth-century abstractions and nineteenth-century intimacy and rusticity; I was as impressed as I had been when I saw the great squares of medieval Bukhara and Samarkand. I stood in an atrium made of pink and cream stone, veined marble, terra-cotta, what looked like malachite, and chrome alloys. Here postmodernism, the architectural style characterized by eclectic juxtapositions, was fully articulated. Malls in affluent pods of the Midwest may soon look like this.

Of course, the year-round warmth of southern California helps: it allows for the outdoor setting, and for the flowers that soften industrial aspects of the architecture. Still, I thought about what Joel Garreau suggests in _Edge City_ (1991): a beautiful urban setting like Venice once seemed crass too, to sophisticated people of the age; malls and office parks are only early phases of an architecture that might become equally lovely as it develops. Are the souks of Damascus or Fez truly more beautiful than the Fashion Island Mall? Not to me. But the Damascus and Fez souks do have one feature they share with ancient and medieval marketplaces and not with this one: they bustle with activity and chatter. The shoppers at Fashion Island Mall, unlike the less-wealthy crowd at Santa Monica's Third Street Promenade, were quiet. Conversations were so few as to be memorable. I recall a group of men and women in business attire at a café table with open account books and spreadsheets, talking softly about a building plan. Otherwise, smooth elevator music was all I heard.

Alladi Venkatesh, of the Graduate School of Management at the University of California at Irvine, describes the Nordstrom's at nearby South Coast Plaza as "both a shopping complex and a fantasy land," where a shopper can try on a pair of Italian shoes while a live pianist plays Chopin. I saw similar scenes at Fashion Island Mall. The pursuit of style, whether in art, architecture, or the flesh (and physical comfort and high fashion are now much more widely available than in the past), may be the ultimate goal of the good life. But its side effect is social fragmentation: the threatening and unsightly poor are kept out of sight, and, as usual, people choose to live in exclusive residential areas.

Libertarianism -- the politics of many Orange County residents -- is the ideological companion of such fragmentation, favoring individual choice on such social issues as abortion and marijuana use along with fiscal conservatism and tax cuts. Libertarians say,
"Leave me alone to live my life and don't bother me with paying to help less-fortunate citizens." Fashion Island Mall suggested how the urban pods I saw in western St. Louis and western Omaha could one day be as aesthetically agreeable as they were already economically efficient. But I wondered whether the new urban civilization evinced by this mall could also foster traditional patriotism or civic virtue.

Near the airport in Irvine, in another office park, was the Orange County Business Journal. When I had phoned for an appointment, the editor, Rick Reiff, offered to take me to lunch. I assumed he preferred to talk over lunch rather than in his office. I was wrong. Reiff took me to lunch to show me what really goes on in Orange County.

Reiff, who won a Pulitzer Prize for local reporting in Akron, Ohio, has run the editorial side of the Business Journal since 1990. He wore a blazer and a stylish collarless shirt without a tie. He drove me from his own office park to one just like it, where he led me to a restaurant, Bistango, next to a Japanese bank. Inside, amid sculptures, tinted glass, metal alloys, spotlights, canopies, and a black see-through pyramid stacked with expensive bottles of wine that reached almost to the ceiling, I heard the hum of conversation that had been absent at the Fashion Island Mall. The men and women who crowded the tables wore flashy ties and dazzling jewelry. I saw brown and yellow faces everywhere, and noticed many more cups of coffee and glasses of iced tea than alcoholic drinks. "That's because real business is occurring here," Reiff said, in his warm and rough Chicago accent, as we sat down to eat. "Millions of dollars are being transacted all around you." During the country's extraordinary urban growth of the 1880s Rudyard Kipling observed that in America "men were babbling about money, town lots, and again money."

Where's the power? John Gunther always asked in his travelogue of mid-twentieth-century America, Inside U.S.A. In the late 1940s the answer was often the local party machine. In the late 1990s power was here, in this restaurant, dispersed among many more people, who were much less accountable. The issue was simply profit, disconnected from political promises or even geography. Orange County was merely a home base for the headquarters of global corporations, which could be moved in an instant -- for example, in response to a tax increase.

"What kind of business is being transacted?" I asked.

"Biomedical, pharmaceutical, a little genetic engineering, international investment, precision manufacturing, apparel, computer chips, and all kinds of software multimedia," Reiff told me. "Global trade and work forces are everything for us. Orange County is roughly one percent of the U.S. population, but it has three percent of Fortune 500 companies. Every time there is a conflation of the publishing and multimedia industries, power shifts slightly to California from New York, because the future will favor multimedia over mere books."

Later, back at Reiff's office, I leafed through recent editions of the Business Journal.
There were stories about this group of Iranians or that group of Taiwanese or Pakistanis or Mexicans from Sonora buying this or that technology company. Some years ago the Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski, seeing Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, and Mexican faces in an Orange County computer factory owned by a Pakistani and two Chinese, wrote that the culture of the southern California work force is "a mix of Hispanic-Catholic family values and Asian-Confucian group loyalty," with hiring done through family networks. One quarter of science-degree holders in the United States were born abroad, with Indians and Chinese predominating.

"Mexico has become both our cheap labor force and our export platform," Reiff went on. "Companies that are moving factories to Mexico would have left the U.S. anyway -- and gone to Malaysia, for instance. The nation-state cannot keep them here if cheap, competent labor exists abroad. With NAFTA [the North American Free Trade Agreement], at least we can keep much of the work in North America."

I asked about Orange County's credit collapse in 1994, after officials had made bad investments with public money. "A blip on the screen -- in historical terms just a rainy day," Reiff said. "Roads are still being paved. No police have been fired. What I'm saying is that the Orange County phenomenon is intact. Imagine the effect on Cleveland, for instance, if it lost two billion dollars in bad investments, the way Orange County did. If in twenty years all this glitter around you fades, historians will look back on the 1980s and 1990s here as a golden age, with the credit crash a minor theme."

Reiff continued, "I'm originally a city kid. I played baseball in the alleys in Chicago. I know what is urban and suburban, and this" -- his eyes wandered around the room -- "is neither; it's something new."

Reiff told me that the reason there are so many malls is that "with 'income tax' a dirty word, the only way for municipalities to raise revenue is through sales taxes, so they encourage mall building; some of these malls will go bust."

"Will this place fight for its country?" I asked. "Are these people loyal to anything except themselves?"

"Loyalty is a problem," Reiff said. "Only about half the baseball fans in Orange County root for the California Angels [whose stadium is in Anaheim, a county municipality]. I root for the Chicago White Sox. So many people here are from somewhere else, whether the U.S. or the world. People came here to make money and enjoy the good life. In the future patriotism will be more purely and transparently economic. Perhaps patriotism will survive in the form of prestige, if America remains the world economic leader."

After I left Reiff, I drove through Santa Ana, Garden Grove, and Anaheim, ending up in the northeasternmost township of Orange County: Yorba Linda, birthplace of Richard Nixon. The little wooden house that Nixon's father, Francis, built in 1912 with materials from a mail-order catalogue still stands. The President and his wife, Pat, are buried a few steps away. The memorial, which includes a museum and a library, was packed with
visitors. The multiracial crowd at the site, like the people I saw on the streets of Yorba Linda, appeared to represent Nixon's "silent majority." Yorba Linda is the original, sepia-toned California -- Iowa in the Sunbelt. The Latinos and Asians here looked wholesome and self-assured; they looked American, lacking the worldly flair of their compatriots at Bistango.

From Yorba Linda I headed southwest, back through Anaheim and Garden Grove, into the heavily Vietnamese Orange County municipality of Westminster. Amid miles of one-story tract homes I pulled into a shingle-and-Sheetrock strip mall named Saigon Plaza to look for a place to eat dinner. I entered a run-down café where men were playing cards and listening to Vietnamese music. The atmosphere was thick with the smoke of unfiltered cigarettes. I felt that I was in Southeast Asia. Then somebody switched off the Vietnamese music and put on the NBA playoffs.

Canada: The Wild Card

WHEREAS in southern California I focused on how the transformation of the city was changing the face of America, in the Pacific Northwest I focused on the idea of nationhood itself.

Dismissing Canada as irrelevant, boring, or a joke comes easily to Americans, and occasionally to Canadians as well. The Canadian novelist Mordecai Richler says that Canada is "not so much a country as a continental suburb, where Little Leaguers govern ineffectually, desperate for American approval." Canada has a population one ninth that of the United States (29 million as opposed to 261 million). Canada did not have to struggle for independence from Britain -- Britain approved confederation in 1867, forcing disparate provinces to unite as a way to contain the United States after the reconsolidation of the Union. Whereas the United States represented the most daring political experiment since Athenian democracy (one that would succeed beyond imagining), Canada never had a clear-cut historical mission -- except, perhaps, providing for its own survival. Polls show that Canada's sense of identity rests heavily on the country's social-service institutions, including national health care, and even those are deteriorating.

Yet to ignore Canada's fate is to miss the point of North American history. Military events in Canada may have set the stage for American independence in the first place. Had the French held on to Canada through the eighteenth century, they might well have constrained the thirteen colonies to retain a protective bond with Britain. The nineteenth-century historian Francis Parkman wrote, "So long as an active and enterprising enemy threatened [the colonists'] borders, they could not break with the mother-country, because they needed her help ... [thus] there would have been no Revolutionary War; and for a long time, no independence." But, as it happened, the French and Indian War, part of a worldwide struggle among the European powers called the Seven Years War, ended in 1763 with a British victory over French forces in Canada, which encouraged France's withdrawal from North America, obviating the English-speaking colonies' dependence on Britain. During the War of 1812 New England actually debated secession and a closer link to British North America, and this threat hastened the rise of American nationalism.
under President Andrew Jackson. The relationship is still symbiotic: the dissolution of Canada would affect the United States more than any imaginable crisis overseas.

Moreover, Canada, which along with Switzerland is already among the most decentralized countries in the post-industrial world, is split by a blood-and-soil linguistic nationalism that threatens to dismember it. When I asked the president of one of America's most powerful international corporations what was the most important issue the Washington foreign-policy elite was ignoring, he responded, "The eventual breakup of the Canadian federation and its effect" on our own nationhood.

Though Canada is the largest country in the Western Hemisphere, stretching to the polar ice cap, the habitable part of it looks like Chile laid on its side. Almost all Canadians live within a hundred miles of the U.S. border, so it is reasonable to imagine that they might merge politically with the rest of North America's temperate-zone population. In Canada's early days, before bridges and motorized boats, the Saint Lawrence River and the Great Lakes formed enough of a natural boundary for an Atlantic-oriented nation to take root. Even west of the Great Lakes, along the arbitrary border formed by the Forty-ninth Parallel, the fact that the fur trade was so much more important to the people north of that line than to those south of it made for some semblance of an organic division. But with expressways and ferries now crossing the waters, and the inexorable merging of the two countries' economies (four fifths of Canada's export trade and two thirds of its import trade are with the United States), Canada is increasingly like the northern United States.

However, as the frigid tundra keeps Canada's population from spreading northward, America's loud materialism, unruly style, and social problems keep Canadians from straying south. That hundred-mile-wide belt of population from the Atlantic to the Pacific has evolved as a subtly distinctive community, one that many citizens want to preserve. English and French Canadians might not mind separating from each other, but immigrants from throughout the world may demand Canada's continued existence. For them, Canada provides unlimited freedom and economic opportunity while offering protection from the ruthless laissez-faire capitalism of the United States.

The psychological importance for Canadians of their country's style and separate evolution should not be underestimated. Canadian resentment of the United States is clear in the way that Canadians smugly disapprove of those who attempt great endeavors. Indeed, says the Canadian writer Margaret Atwood, "Canadian rebellions have never become revolutions precisely because they have never received popular support. 'Prophets' here don't get very far against the civil service." Canada never had a Wild West, because Canadians love law and order -- the Mounties are a national symbol. Canada's society prefers collective heroes, like the builders of the transcontinental railroad, over individual ones.

Not a stimulating place, perhaps, but one different enough that parts of English Canada are not eager to merge with parts of the United States; they would do so only if the Canadian federation fractured first. Such a dissolution may be as likely to begin in Canada's westernmost province, British Columbia, as in Francophone Quebec.
British Columbia and its urban dynamo, Vancouver, which is linked more closely to the Pacific Rim than to most of the rest of Canada, are animating North American regionalism. Strengthened by NAFTA, regionalism may yet undo the current divisions of sovereignty, which have their origins in the 1763 Treaty of Paris. Margaret Ormsby, a local historian, writes that "British Columbia was in, but not of, Canada." Canada did not grow westward in the same organic manner as the United States. British Columbia joined the Canadian federation only in 1871, four years after the British forced the other provinces to unite. Out here, Ormsby writes, the Canadian Union was based not on "sentiment" but on "material advantage." The economic benefits of the transcontinental Canadian Pacific Railway in effect bribed British Columbia to join Canada. Even so, the British part of Columbia, which in 1846 split from the part that became the state of Washington, retained strong cultural and economic links to a region whose center was San Francisco. Today British Columbia's economy is separate, and the highway to Seattle and Portland and the air routes across the Pacific matter more than links to the rest of Canada. The province exports an amazing 40 percent of its goods to the Pacific Rim, and 50 percent to the United States; 80 percent of exports from Canada as a whole go to the United States. It is the only Canadian province that would surely do better, not worse, were the country to disintegrate. "Canada ends at the Rockies" is an expression I heard repeatedly.

This is not to say that British Columbia identifies with the United States. When I crossed the border at Osoyoos, the differences between the two countries were what I first noticed. Not only were the money, the measurement units, the shapes of the signs, the construction materials, and the flag (with the soft imagery of the maple leaf replacing the overtly political stars and bars) different in Canada but so were the accents, which were sharper and vaguely British. "Schedule," for instance, was pronounced without the c. But compared with the Third World-First World division I saw on the Mexican border, these differences were trivial.

I set out for Vancouver, a leisurely day's journey. Halfway there I reached Manning Provincial Park -- across the border from North Cascades National Park. Manning Park marks the beginning of the Cascade Range, a north-south line of powder-white volcanoes and glaciers, tinted blue and garlanded by cold rain forests, which more than any other geographical feature -- to say nothing of any state or national border -- defines the Pacific Northwest. It is a magical frontier, breathtaking even when seen from the air. To fly from the eastern United States to Portland, Oregon, and see the "Ring of Fire" -- the glacier-mantled peaks of Mount Baker, Mount Rainier, Mount Hood, and Mount St. Helens soaring over brooding, cathedral-dark forests -- is to arrive in a distinct place, or almost nation.

I met Pacific mists, sparkling snow, moist and glistening spruce and fir forests, tumbling streams, and silvery lakes, beside one of which I watched an Indian immigrant family fishing for rainbow trout. The parents spoke in the accents of the subcontinent, the children in the hard-edged English of Pacific Canada. Harlequin ducks and gray-and-white belted kingfishers flipped off the water.
Farther west, close to Vancouver, the Fraser River was choked with massive logs, chained together and about to be dispatched, perhaps to the Far East. Vancouver appeared rather suddenly -- a lesson in how compact the cities of the Pacific Northwest are compared with others on the continent. Here, even for urbanites, nature is close by.

**Vancouver and "Cascadia"

It was late afternoon when I arrived in Vancouver and checked into a bed-and-breakfast in a residential neighborhood with flame-red hawthorn trees. Traffic islands at each crossing slowed cars. The cost of parking downtown was exorbitant, so I rode the bus. As in Portland and elsewhere in the Pacific Northwest, the nearby glaciers and volcanoes, visible from many an urban street, have led to a preoccupation with conservation, which has in turn generated penalties for automobile use.

The bus heading downtown was clamorous with conversation and filled with well-dressed people -- so different from buses in many parts of the United States, whose riders are mostly silent and poor. (Portland buses, I would discover, are like Vancouver's.) Like the bus, the shiny stone benches on rose-bedecked Robson Street were filled not with the poor and homeless but with well-dressed people, talking. The only cell phone I saw belonged to a man with a New York accent who was telling someone that he would "be home in three days." There were many benches, and also a profusion of cafés, buzzing and crowded, set against buildings made of glass, marble, unusual metals, and polymers. As at the Fashion Island Mall, the trees and flowers that were planted beside new buildings in the 1970s and 1980s, and constant architectural refinements, have made for fine urban landscapes. But unlike the Fashion Island Mall, Vancouver had a true urban life. Even in newspaper-and-candy stores knots of people were talking by the counters.

Many of the faces were Asian. A third of greater Vancouver's 1.81 million people are Asian, with Chinese alone making up nearly 20 percent of the population. Asian immigrants account for much of the population growth of 2.5 percent a year. One local joke had it that "the Japanese want to buy Vancouver, but the Chinese won't sell it." I saw many signs in Punjabi, Hindi, Farsi, Arabic, and Khmer -- but almost none in French, an official Canadian language. In the schools here Mandarin is spoken more commonly than French. Vancouver, with its glitzy, visually lively high-rise condominiums, is becoming an Asianized city on the Pacific Rim of North America, dedicated to global materialism; a real East-West hybrid culture is emerging here.

The next morning I visited Warren Gill, an urban geographer and the executive director of the Harbour Centre campus of Simon Fraser University, an institution founded in 1965 and named for a nineteenth-century Vermont-born explorer and Northwest fur trader. The campus consisted of a single building with green and blue glass interiors. Finished in 1989, the building conjured for me "the future" -- that is, it made me aware of transition and change. As the Ringstrasse in turn-of-the-century Vienna illustrates, social and economic change, often revealed through architecture, precedes political change. What the architecture here revealed was the abstract and urban character of our collective future, and the emergence of the city-state.
"There, you see it all -- isn't it great?" Gill said. He waved his hand toward his office window, indicating the panorama of the Burrard Inlet, a belt of blue water crowded with seaplanes and set against the snow-capped peaks of the Coast Range, with Vancouver's bustling harbor, heliport, and nexus of railroad tracks in the foreground. "With a dynamic and highly educated population and strategic transport links," Gill said, "this is all you need to be sovereign in the phase of history we are entering. Cities and their environs provide garbage collection, schools, and even your neighborhood -- but they get the least of your taxes. The bulk of your tax money still goes to the state or province and the federal government, and what do they do for you? Isn't it antiquated? But that will change. In the coming decades your tax money will increasingly go to the place you really care about." Gill's tone was enthusiastic and consciously provocative. "Though I guess we should all pay taxes to that Information Age military you are creating in Washington, D.C. They'll in effect sell us the protection we will need against terrorists and other bad people. You see, we don't need you[he meant America], and we certainly don't need Canada. What we need is your military!"

I didn't try to interrupt.

"The miracle is that Canada has lasted as long as it has. It makes no sense. Oh, yes, I'm fond of Canada. Canada is something you're fond of, like a drunken old uncle. And I'm proud to be a Canadian. We all are, in the sense that Canada is more aesthetically pleasing than the United States. It's cleaner and less unruly. But the nation-state is gone in Vancouver."

Gill called Vancouver "a beautiful setting in search of a city." He said, "Did you know that after L.A., Vancouver has one of the biggest entertainment industries in North America -- seven hundred million dollars a year in revenue. Hollywood makes The X-Files here. The Canadian dollar is cheap, and we're in the same time zone as Los Angeles, so Hollywood finds us useful, especially since Vancouver looks like anywhere: it's a generic, modern-postmodern global place. But it's still not a real city in the sense of true creativity and economic dynamism -- yet. It's not L.A. or New York."

Vancouver, as Gill and others told me, began as a real-estate venture in the 1880s once the Canadian Pacific Railway was in place, and it is still very much a boom-and-bust town, floating now on a real-estate bubble created by the Hong Kong Chinese, who in the 1980s and 1990s bought $2 billion worth of local real estate. In addition to real estate and the money that immigration brings -- on average, each Asian immigrant will, over a lifetime, pay $30,000 more in taxes than he or she will use in the form of social services - - there are the Hollywood-run movie industry, a cruise-ship industry, and North America's closest air and sea links to Asia. Vancouver is one of the largest bulk-shipping ports on the continent, shipping out coal, sulfur, potash, natural gas, wheat, and timber products. But this economy, powered by real estate and natural resources, lacks the self-sustaining entrepreneurial and creative spirit of Seattle or Portland, San Francisco or Los Angeles. There are relatively few software and multimedia companies here, for instance. Most are scared away by the high taxes necessary to support the social-welfare system.
The frontier, though, has always produced more commerce and trade than books and art. "The distinctive element of the West Coast, from Alaska to Baja, is newness," Gill told me. "Many of these places have been built not to last. There are streets in my neighborhood that have been three different things in my lifetime. At the moment the element of newness has to do with race. Interracialness is walking down the street, arm in arm. Without the Asians we'd be a narrow-minded English town. In Portland they look to Vancouver to see the outer, Pacific world -- not to California or even to Seattle." Asians "are in the process of re-WASPing us," Gill explained. "Through their driven work ethic they are allowing us to rediscover our Calvinistic WASP roots. In the twenty-first century hundreds of millions of Chinese and other Asians will become middle-class, tying themselves closer to North America. That will change Vancouver and the Pacific Northwest more than any development in North America itself."

GORDON Price, a member of the Vancouver City Council, picked up on that idea when we met in his apartment, in Vancouver's West End. "The Asian-British -- that is to say, Asian-WASP -- cultural mix," he told me, "is the most potent in the history of capitalism," notwithstanding the current Asian economic turmoil that has followed decades of economic growth. "Hong Kong and Singapore have represented the combination of British engineering, accounting, honest bureaucracy, and meritocratic government with Asian economic aggression. And it will work its magic here." Here we may be seeing something else, too: the erotization of race. As one Vancouverite told me, a walk down the street to see who's holding hands will show that whites find Asians, particularly Asian women, highly desirable.

Price took me to the city library, a multi-story maze of concrete and glass designed by the world-renowned Israeli-Canadian architect Moshe Safdie. From nearby designer shops and espresso cafés one can look into the library and see people studying. Many of them are Asian. "Vancouver is attracting the young of the world's most dynamic middlemen minorities," Price told me. "If this happens across North America, the continent will rule the world's economy. Look at these Asian kids -- many of them are sent here to study by their families. For them, Vancouver must be like Paris in the twenties -- an earlier, modern capitalist culture, compared with the overnight glitz of the rest of the Pacific Rim."

What struck me was the urbanity, the roar of many conversations, and the crowded cafés and walkways. Safdie's glass-wall design, which encourages people to look at one another, contributes to this, but the library seems to celebrate what is apparent everywhere in the city. Vancouver is a rebuke to Orange County, downtown St. Louis, and most other places in the United States, where the automobile rules and often the only people on sidewalk benches are homeless. The sea and the mountains and the international border prevent sprawl, and the Canadian social-welfare system prevents widespread poverty. The other part of the explanation for Vancouver's urbanity is a unified elite of investors and urban planners.
Paraphrasing Jane Jacobs, the classic writer on urbanism, Price told me, "People have confused overcrowding with high density. High density is actually desirable, because it means lively, safe, convenient, and interesting places in which to live." From 1956 to 1972 Price's West End neighborhood, for example, which had been overcrowded, transformed itself into a high-density area. Its population increased by about half, and the number of apartments quintupled: spacious one-bedroom apartments replaced teeming tenements. The West End now has the liveliness and sophisticated feel of Manhattan's Upper West Side. The ostensible reason for the neighborhood's success is that big businessmen took risks and built apartment blocks, while small tradesmen opened shops. Hong Kong Chinese culture, comfortable with high density, helped too. But business and culture operated within a framework of deliberate planning choices. In the United States in 1956, the same year that the West End was rezoned for taller apartment buildings, President Eisenhower signed the Federal-Aid Highway Act, which created the interstates. Consultants from Los Angeles advised Vancouver to build a freeway-and-tunnel system through the city. Vancouver citizens rejected that advice. The nineteenth-century grid pattern of narrow streets laid down by British engineers remained intact, and parks and benches, a profusion of cafés, and an explosion of tall residential buildings all followed.

"The automobile is the perfect metaphor for pure democracy," Warren Gill told me, "and pure individual freedom just does not work in an urban setting. The more urban the environment, the more controls you will need to make it work. Imagine how much more vibrant and crime-free Washington, D.C., would be with more planning but without the Beltway. Imagine how if Washington had prohibited a beltway, it would have had to build a whole new layer of public transport within the city, keeping many more people on the streets at all hours."

Vancouver, of course, is not perfect. More and more affluence on display means more iron bars, break-ins, and private security. "You're in a gated community right now, though it doesn't look like one," Price told me, referring to the electronic entry system of his West End apartment block. "Much of North America, metaphorically speaking, is becoming a privatized, gated community where the only urban reality that many well-off kids see is through the sensationalism of local TV news."

Still, Vancouver has something special -- a cohesiveness evinced by the never-empty streets and the interracial couples. People would fight for this, I thought. No one would fight for Orange County. Put another way, an America of Orange Counties might for a time be a thriving continental archipelago of rising real-estate values, but without the spirit of patriotism that grows out of communal affection.

LAN F.J. Artibise is the founder of the Cascadia Planning Group, an organization that assumes, without proclaiming it, the eventual breakup of Canada. Artibise, who is from Canada's heartland province of Manitoba, is a former president of the Association for Canadian Studies and a planning professor at the University of British Columbia. He has served on numerous planning commissions. His short gray hair is receding, and his voice is soft. His expensively furnished office overlooks the harbor.
There is nothing radical or even vaguely counterestablishment about him.

For years "Cascadia," formerly a geographic term for the Cascade Mountain region stretching from central Oregon to British Columbia, has been a trendy political concept in the Pacific Northwest. A 1975 novel, Ecotopia, by Ernest Callenbach, envisioned an independent nation in the Pacific Northwest; it has sold 650,000 copies. Cascadia is united by its wet, rather drowsy climate, which may account in part for the profusion of coffee bars and bookstores, and its unique ecology -- a temperate rain forest boasting some of the world's largest firs, cedars, spruces, and hemlocks. Temperate rain forests are found only in slivers of coastal terrain in Japan, Chile, Scandinavia, New Zealand, and a few other places. In 1989 sixty legislators from both sides of the border formed the Pacific Northwest Economic Region; business leaders from both sides formed a group called Pacific Corridor Enterprise. More organizations, including Artibise's, followed.

What has emerged is nothing less than a strategic alliance of the business elite from Portland to Vancouver along "Portcouver," an urban corridor linked by the "I-5 Main Street" (Interstate 5 and Highway 99) and eventually to be connected by high-speed rail. (Passenger trains between Eugene, Oregon, and Vancouver already operate at 90 percent of capacity.) Cascadia would constitute a giant high-tech trading bloc, with major bulk-shipping ports in Portland and Vancouver and a container-shipping port in the Seattle-Tacoma area. Artibise said, "Cascadia is more talked about in Oregon and Washington than it is here. Because of the fragility of the Canadian federation, people are more sensitive on this side of the border -- they know how possible Cascadia really is. If Quebec goes, all it would take is one skilled politician to take us out of the federation. It could happen very quickly. Though they rarely admit it, many British Columbians would probably be relieved if Quebec seceded." An unnerving one in three Canadians favors the use of force to seize Quebec's English and Native areas should the province leave. "All my students have been to Seattle and Portland, but never to Toronto," Artibise told me. "However, more sovereignty for British Columbia is not the answer. The province does even less for Vancouver than Ottawa does."

**Portland: Orange County North?**

Portland has perhaps the most architecturally pleasing and meticulously planned downtown of any major city in the United States. The city has been lionized by liberal national magazines, while its Metro 2040 Plan -- designed to extend a vital city center and prevent sprawl -- has been attacked by conservative free-marketeers. In three visits to Portland I realized that although the view of liberal urban planners is the wiser one here, the conservative vision of unlimited growth is likely to triumph almost everywhere else on the continent. Beyond mere good design, culture and geography have made the cities of the Pacific Northwest more exceptional than local planners admit.

With its neat trolley lanes, geometric parks, rustic flowerpots beside polymer-and-glass buildings, crowded sidewalk benches, and cafés with modish awnings that hang from sandblasted stone and marble façades, Portland exudes a stagy perfection. "View corridors" regulated by municipal ordinances keep new construction from blocking the
vistas from downtown of the Cascades and, in particular, Mount Hood. People speak in clipped accents similar to those in British Columbia. I even saw them wait in single file to cross the street at red lights. Eighty-nine percent of the population in the metro area is white: the percentage of minorities is less than half the national average, though the percentage of Asians is more than 1.5 times the national average. Portland -- like Minneapolis, to which it is often compared -- has the political and cultural atmosphere of a Scandinavian country, where almost everyone shares a background and values, and trusts the centralizing and controlling force of local government to preserve these things.

Not only was Portland, with its Florentine and Gothic façades, built before the car, unlike most of Los Angeles, but it was built even before the arrival of the transcontinental railroad. Abutting the city on three sides, the natural environment of mountains and rivers is ever-present in Portland and essential to its economy. Maintaining this pristine landscape is politically acceptable. Carl Abbott, an urban-affairs expert, described the city's liberal environmental politics as "status quo conservatism," because it seeks to preserve the past rather than create a future.

Ethan Seltzer, the director of the Institute of Portland Metropolitan Studies, told me, "The whole point of our development plan is not to screw up our pastoral landscape, which is central to local history and culture. We seek a mythic, Native adaptation to place. The Natives burned the fields in the Willamette Valley once a year to keep the forest from encroaching; we must do something analogous to keep the suburbs from encroaching any more on the natural environment. And the only way to preserve the Cascade landscape while making economic use of it is to shift the economy further from agriculture and logging to high tech."

The Cascade landscape keeps Portland's new high-tech economy competitive, by providing cheap Columbia River water power for washing silicon, and the natural beauty attracts people with university degrees. High-tech products have already surpassed timber as Oregon's chief export. Twenty percent of Portland's economy is based on foreign trade, and that figure, along with high-tech production and the population of the metropolitan area, is expected to rise dramatically. By 2010 the four-county region that includes Portland and a portion of Washington just over the Columbia River will have some 1.9 million inhabitants, whereas last year it had 1.6 million.

The policy mechanism by which this rapid population growth can be accommodated is the "urban growth boundary," which delineates a belt around the metropolitan area and ultimately forces developers inside it to build higher-density neighborhoods, as in Vancouver's West End. Such a plan requires a regional government. "To preserve the environment," Seltzer told me, "we are making a transition away from city hall toward the urban region. In any case, very few urbanites in North America live their lives in one jurisdiction anymore. They live in one municipality and work in another; it's especially true with two-career couples."

This is another reason why, although the urban federation may be the future, traditional cities are fading. Manhattan, the twentieth century's premier urban location, has in recent years generated relatively few new businesses despite an impressive drop in crime and a
popular Republican mayor, Rudolph Giuliani. Corporations appear to prefer post-urban pods like western Omaha. It is unclear whether Manhattan has made an authentic comeback as a twenty-first-century global meeting place or, in the words of one historian, is experiencing a beautiful Venetian sunset.

But the fading of the traditional city is not necessarily a social disaster, since all it may mean eventually is that instead of one downtown there will be many within a sprawling urban region, each performing the same socially unifying functions as the old downtowns. Even the Orange County real-estate expert Dennis Macheski said that despite our increasing ability to work at home by means of the computer, most people will want social venues close by. It is our very humanity -- our need for others -- that will help us through these troubling transitions. Denver, for instance, which I recently visited, now has three thriving downtowns -- Cherry Creek, "LoDo," and downtown Denver -- as it transforms itself into an urban confederation.

Seltzer and others told me that even if Metro 2040 succeeds -- even if suburban sprawl in the Willamette Valley, to the south, is contained, and well-educated migrants move into high-density townhouses and "bungalows" -- Portland will change dramatically in other ways. "The early settlers here re-created the New England village," Seltzer explained. "Since then we've been good at space arrangement and streetscapes. Our next challenge is to get along with each other." The white population is aging, and twenty years hence Portland will be like greater L.A. in terms of ethnicity.

The Pacific Northwest is, statistically, one of the last Caucasian bastions in the United States. Even the city of Seattle, which in 1993 elected a black mayor, Norm Rice, for a second term, has a minority population of only 15 percent -- well below the national average of 25 percent. Washington and Oregon have among the lowest percentages of African-Americans in the country (3.1 percent and 1.6 percent of the population, respectively). Racism has a long history in Oregon. The state banned black immigration in 1849, to avoid the slavery question, and real-estate agents redlined the northeastern part of Portland after the Second World War, to keep blacks away from well-off whites. Given the emphasis on high tech, what is likely to happen -- and what people here admit only reluctantly -- is that few blacks will migrate to the Pacific Northwest but many Asians will. In effect, economic factors will enforce racial segregation, nudging Seattle and Portland in Vancouver's direction as they trade more with the Pacific Rim.

But although Portland will become more Asian, its urban layout will come to more closely resemble that of Orange County, as Portland grows because of the semiconductor boom, and decentralized workplaces and production centers increase the role of the car. Moreover, a recent statewide tax revolt may indicate what Metro 2040 can and cannot spend to ensure aesthetic zoning. The revolt also widened the chasm between a generally conservative state and a liberal urban-area federation in the making. Similarly, the distance between Portland and Washington, D.C., continues to grow, as is made clear by vocal criticism of Department of Housing and Urban Development regulations -- "designed for East Coast cities," in the words of a local expert, and "forced on us."
As I contemplated the future of Cascadia, I recalled once more that during the War of 1812, New England debated seceding from the United States. Future secessions of regions and post-urban pods will be more likely to succeed, because they won't have to be acknowledged. Our subtle new regionalism will be largely invisible. Meanwhile, the two forms of urban confederation under this refined continental imperialism -- the Portland form and the Orange County form -- will compete for ascendancy. Hybrid forms will emerge, perhaps even within Portland and Orange County themselves, but the Orange County model will dominate.

As a number of experts told me, we cannot ultimately control these social and economic forces. The whole New World -- all of the United States, certainly -- has been one big subdivision marketed for most of our history to Europeans. American cities have been built and humanized not by idealists but by tacky carpetbaggers and get-rich-quick guys. The twist has been that in some places, like Portland, this greed has had to conform to existing cultural expectations. In many other places in America the communal culture is too thin for that.

Comparing the United States to Rome, Henry Adams wrote in 1906, "The climax of empire could be seen approaching, year after year, as though Sulla were a President or McKinley a Consul. Nothing annoyed Americans more than to be told this simple and obvious -- in no way unpleasant -- truth." Perhaps Adams was wrong only in his timing; the climax may come sometime in the early twenty-first century, a minor detail in the long span of history. Adams's belief that the end of American empire was "in no way unpleasant" dovetails with the gist of what people told me in my travels, from Rick Reiff, the gregarious journalistic booster of Orange County, to Ethan Seltzer, who wants to preserve the New England qualities of Portland. They all believe that the federal power structure is waning. The massive ministry buildings of Washington, D.C., with their oxen armies of bureaucrats, are the products of the Industrial Age, when American society reached a level of sheer size and complexity that demanded such institutions. This leaden federal colossus must somehow slowly evolve into a new, light-frame structure of mere imperial oversight -- for the sake of defense, conservation, and the rationing of water and other natural resources. The evolution may allow for a political silver age, though not another golden one.

Robert D. Kaplan is a contributing editor of The Atlantic. His article in this issue will appear, in somewhat different form, in his new book, An Empire Wilderness: Travels Into America's Future, to be published by Random House in late summer.