

Go west to discover the true America

A trip to Arizona reminds **Irwin Stelzer** that Washington is not America: outside the Beltway there is a country rooted in patriotism, civility, hard work and suspicion of big government

Go West, young man, go West,' newspaper editor Horace Greeley advised ambitious 19th-century Americans as the nation pursued its Manifest Destiny. Well, it might have been Greeley, or perhaps John Babson Lane Soule, editor of the *Terre Haute (Indiana) Daily Express*. No matter the author: the advice is as applicable today as it was 150 years ago — and not only for young men.

After a stint in the rancorous atmosphere of our nation's capital, where resurgent Democrats are out to prove that another surge, this one in Iraq, is doomed to failure, I headed west on a business trip. America's Manifest Destiny, of course, has already been fulfilled. We long ago 'overspread the continent allotted by Providence', to borrow from John L. O'Sullivan, who coined the phrase in 1845.

My reason for heading west was to fulfil a number of speaking engagements, and attend meetings at Arizona's most venerable and prestigious law firm (a client), Snell & Wilmer, famous for having won the lawsuit that brought Colorado River water to Phoenix and made it possible for this city of hundreds of verdant fairways and millions of air-conditioners (it was 104°F when we arrived) to grow into the nation's fifth largest (behind only New York, Los Angeles, Chicago and Houston).

At one of those meetings I was reminded that Washington D.C. is not America, that patriotism and civility remain dominant strains in American life, and that the American West is not the same as the West Side of Manhattan, where love of country is confined to an appreciation of the virtues of country houses scattered around Long Island.

The audience for my talk included some 400 lawyers and a smattering of spouses; with more than half of all new law school graduates women, the term 'spouse' at meetings such as this includes almost as many men as women. It was not so long ago that organisers of these meetings could be confident that they had adequately arranged to amuse spouse tag-alongs by arranging embroidery and cooking classes. No longer.

The session's chairman began by welcoming back a partner who had been serving with the Marines in Iraq. With no prompt-

ing, the entire audience sprang to its feet and bathed the returnee in waves of applause. Some wept. I later found that the firm had made up the difference between the partner's military pay and what he would have earned at the firm, and that it is doing the same for a young woman now serving as a captain in the army in Iraq.

Flash back to Washington. Newspapers report atrocities American soldiers are allegedly committing in Iraq; Democratic politicians speechify on the uselessness of the sacrifices of our troops; and it takes a mighty battle by President Bush to prise funds from Congress to pay for the armour and ammunition needed by American servicemen and women. In Phoenix and the West (for these purposes Hollywood and San Francisco count as part of the East), patriotism is considered a virtue; in some Washington circles it is thought to be the last refuge of scoundrels, or at minimum something practised only by uncool rednecks.

Differences over Iraq are only the most obvious manifestation of the East-West divide. Go west and you get a sense of the possible, a sense that deserts can become town houses, country clubs and shopping malls; that families matter so much that the baseball field includes an adjacent swimming pool for use by children too young to appreciate the choreography of a game devoid of pace and violence; that a massive increase in population represents hands to work rather than bodies to hasten global warming.

But you also understand why Congress's popularity rating languishes in the 25 per cent range, down there with President Bush's. The President and Congress are pushing an immigration bill that includes a form of amnesty for the 11, or 12, or 13 million illegal aliens, most of whom have slipped across our border with Mexico in pursuit of jobs that pay little by US standards, but handsomely by the standards of Mexico's

mismanaged economy. Most would dearly love what Brits call 'indefinite leave to remain'. The proposed legislation puts that status within reach of the latest wave of immigrants, many of whom are members of what in Britain is known as the aspirational class.

Arizonans are outraged. Washington lawmakers see downtrodden workers; Washington lobbyists see a source of willing, cheap labour for their business clients. Arizonans see crowded schools, increased pressure on hospital facilities, rising crime, and politicians out of touch with reality. But they nevertheless create water stations in the desert to prevent illegals from dying of dehydration. They would be more generous to these strangers in a strange land if experience with prior amnesties hadn't proved that such generosity serves as an invitation to the next wave of immigrants. So they want a fence, 2,000 miles long and virtually impenetrable. They are fans of minimal, don't-fence-me-in government, but great believers that government's job is to fence out illegal immigrants — with the help of private citizens who form local groups to hunt for illegals crossing the border.

But in the end, when it comes down to one-on-one relationships, the folks we met in Phoenix are welcoming to the new wave of immigrants. That's because immigrants work, and westerners are about wealth creation — building houses, shopping malls, stadiums, businesses, new schools. Contrast this with most Washingtonians, who are about redistributing the wealth that others create. When people take a long view and see a pie that is growing, they have no need to fight over the crumbs. But Washington's politicians and the lobbyists who populate K Street's Gucci Gulch (home of thousands of lobbyists) have a short-term view. For them the pie is fixed, and their job is to rob Peter to pay Paul, who is probably planning to rob Frank, or Joe. Wealth-creation energises, redistribution saps pride. At the end of the day, when asked, 'What did you do at the office today, Daddy?' I can't believe it is as satisfying to say, 'I slipped a clause in a bill, creating a tax break for a constituent,' as it is to answer, 'We completed construction of 100 more homes today,' or 'I negotiated a favourable deal with the bank for our client.'

No trip we take is complete without a tour of the local bookstore, in this case a branch of a national chain. We expected a duplicate of the chain's store near our Washington office. Surprise. In Washington the serious books on history and policy, and the less than serious biographies of political figures, dominate prime display space. In Phoenix, that space is devoted to religious works, the kind of books that make Washington's politicians, journalists and others fear for the future of secular America. One more reason why Greeley (or Soule) had it right.

Irwin Stelzer is director of economic policy studies at the Hudson Institute and a columnist for the Sunday Times.