

Opinion: California is hard to define

By Victor Davis Hanson

Driving across California is like going from Mississippi to Massachusetts without ever crossing a state line.

Consider the disconnects: California's combined income and sales taxes are among the nation's highest, but the state's deficit is still about \$16 billion. It's estimated that more than 2,000 upper-income Californians are leaving per week to flee high taxes and costly regulations, yet California wants to raise taxes even higher; its business climate already ranks near the bottom of most surveys. Its teachers are among the highest paid on average in the nation, but its public school students consistently test near the bottom of the nation in both math and science.

The state's public employees enjoy some of the nation's most generous pensions and benefits, but California's retirement systems are underfunded by about \$300 billion. The state's gas taxes – at over 49 cents per gallon – are among the highest in the nation, but its once unmatched freeways, like 101 and 99, for long stretches have degenerated into potholed, clogged nightmares unchanged since the early 1960s.



Victor Davis
Hanson

The state wishes to borrow billions of dollars to develop high-speed rail, beginning with a little-traveled link between Fresno and Corcoran – a corridor already served by money-losing Amtrak. Apparently, coastal residents like the idea of European high-speed rail – as long as noisy and dirty construction does not begin in their backyards.

As gasoline prices soar, California chooses not to develop millions of barrels of untapped oil and even more natural gas off its shores and beneath its interior. Home to bankrupt green companies like Solyndra, California has mandated that a third of all the energy provided by state utilities soon must come from renewable energy sources – largely wind and solar, which presently provide about 11 percent of its electricity and almost none of its transportation fuel.

How to explain the seemingly inexplicable? There is no California, which is a misnomer. There is no such state. Instead there are two radically different cultures and landscapes with little in common, each equally dysfunctional in quite different ways. Apart they are unworldly, together a disaster.

A postmodern narrow coastal corridor runs from San Diego to Berkeley, where the weather is ideal, the gentrified affluent make good money, and values are green and left-wing. This Shangri-La is juxtaposed to a vast impoverished interior, from the southern desert to the northern Central Valley, where life is becoming premodern.

On the coast, blue-chip universities like Cal Tech, Berkeley, Stanford and UCLA in pastoral landscapes train the world's doctors, lawyers, engineers and businesspeople. In the hot interior of blue-collar Sacramento, Turlock, Fresno and Bakersfield, well over half the incoming freshman in the California State University system must take remedial math and science classes.

In postmodern Palo Alto or Santa Monica, a small cottage costs more than \$1 million. Two hours away, in premodern and now-bankrupt Stockton, a bungalow the same size goes for less than \$100,000.

In the interior, unemployment in many areas peaks at over 15 percent. The theft of copper wire is reaching epidemic proportions. Thousands of the shrinking middle class flee the interior for the coast or nearby no-income-tax states. To fathom the state's nearly unbelievable statistics – as the state population grew by 10 million from the mid-1980s to 2005, its number of Medicaid recipients increased by 7 million during that period; one-third of the nation's welfare recipients now reside in California – visit the state's hinterlands.

But in the Never-Never Land of Apple, Facebook, Google, Hollywood and the wine country, millions live in an idyllic paradise. Coastal Californians can afford to worry about the state's trivia – as their legislators seek to outlaw foie gras, shut down irrigation projects to save the 3-inch delta smelt, and allow children to have legally recognized multiple parents.

But in the less feel-good interior, crippling regulations curb timber, gas and oil, and farm production. For the most part, the rules are mandated by coastal utopians who have little idea where the gas for their imported cars comes from, or how the redwood is cut for their decks, or who grows the ingredients for their Mediterranean lunches of arugula, olive oil and pasta.

On the coast, it's politically incorrect to talk of illegal immigration. In the interior, residents see first-hand the bankrupting effects on schools, courts and health care when millions arrive illegally without English-language fluency or a high school diploma – and send back billions of dollars in remittances to Mexico and other Latin American countries.

The drive from Fresno to Palo Alto takes three hours, but you might as well be rocketing from Earth to the moon.

Victor Davis Hanson is a classicist and historian at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University, and a recipient of the 2007 National Humanities Medal.