

Kansas doesn't have a brand while New York does?



- 1 Here's a three-word response to New York City Mayor Eric Adams' claim last week that Kansas doesn't have a brand. Sunflowers, tornadoes and abolitionists. Here are a few more, for the sake of completeness. Bison, chili with cinnamon rolls, and the "Wizard of Oz."
- 2 With that out of the way, it's worth asking why the mayor of our country's premier city felt a need to take a swipe at the Sunflower State (see, it's even in our nickname). He was speaking about international travel and the known quantity that is the Big Apple. "We have a brand. And when people see it, it means something," Adams said, the Wichita Eagle reported. "Kansas doesn't have a brand. When you go there, OK, you're from Kansas. But New York has a brand."
- 3 The backlash was swift and ferocious and expected. We Kansans have a bit of a chip on our shoulder about this state. We might criticize the political scene, sigh at the multi-hour drives or make fun of the "Wizard of Oz," 12 That's a step too far, buddy.
- 4 In my own drives across the state, I've seen Kansans reckon with their community's history of racial terror. I've seen small towns reinvigorate themselves to attract young families. I've heard story after story, from person after person, that proves this state as deep and varied as the layered limestone of its Flint Hills.
- 5 Given that we're rapidly approaching the election of a new governor, I decided to check in with the campaigns for their takes. Kansas Gov. Laura Kelly's campaign sent along this painstakingly airbrushed statement: "Kansas is the best state in America and I welcome anyone to come enjoy the natural beauty of the rolling Flint Hills, our farms and ranches that feed the world, business and family-friendly policies, and our rich history of fighting for freedom. After all, it is no coincidence that we've attracted over \$14 billion in new business investments to Kansas, including

Panasonic, along with the FIFA World Cup.” You’ll notice what she did there, 14 a response to a softball question. That’s politics, folks!

- 6 Attorney General Derek Schmidt’s folks pointed me to a clip of him appearing on NewsMax. “My first reaction was Mayor who?” Schmidt said jovially. “This is not an everyday name out here in God’s country, in the heartland. We’re out here living our lives and pursuing our conservative values and making sure our kids get a good education and just generally loving life. The mayor’s just wrong and everybody knows it. He doesn’t know what he’s talking about. This is a great place out here on the Great Plains, out in the middle of the country. And look, we love New York and the people in New York, but we don’t want to be in New York. And we certainly don’t want to be in New York under its current left-progressive leadership that has just sort of driven that place off into the ditch.”
- 7 He then transitioned to making his pitch against Kelly’s campaign, tying the democratic governor’s birth in New York to Adams’ supposedly disastrous policies. As noted, that’s the game, folks.
- 8 Whatever the candidate and whatever their answer, Adams’ statement goes beyond the stupid or uninformed. It misses the point of cities and states, of towns and regions. New York City and Kansas aren’t “brands.” That’s anti-human marketing speak. New York City and Kansas are places, full of history and different kinds of people. Some of that history deserves celebration and some of it deserves condemnation. It’s the same with the people. But I wouldn’t want to live in a country that didn’t both have Times Square and Lawrence, or the Statue of Liberty and the Flint Hills.
- 9 If you want to know the real spirit of this state and its people, and how that connects to New York, I’d like to remind you of a story from March and April 2020. During those scary early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, retired farmer Dennis Ruhnke of Troy sent a single N95 respirator mask to Andrew Cuomo, then the governor of New York state. “Dear Mr. Cuomo,” Ruhnke’s letter read, “I seriously doubt that you will ever read this letter as I know you are busy beyond belief with the disaster that has befallen our country.” He enclosed the mask after keeping four for his family. “If you could, would you please give this mask to a nurse or doctor in your city,” he asked.
- 10 “Everybody is so surprised how someone can just do this for a city they’ve never been to, people they’ve never met. We have no connections to New York in any sense of the word,” the farmer’s son, Josh Ruhnke explained. “But this is just something Dad does.” Beyond everything, beyond the sunflowers and bison, that’s the Kansas brand.

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