

*The*  
AUDACITY  
*of*  
HOPE

—  
*Thoughts on Reclaiming  
the American Dream*  
—

BARACK OBAMA



CROWN PUBLISHERS  
NEW YORK

# *Contents*

*Title Page*

*Dedication*

Prologue

CHAPTER ONE: Republicans and Democrats

CHAPTER TWO: Values

CHAPTER THREE: Our Constitution

CHAPTER FOUR: Politics

CHAPTER FIVE: Opportunity

CHAPTER SIX: Faith

CHAPTER SEVEN: Race

CHAPTER EIGHT: The World Beyond Our Borders

CHAPTER NINE: Family

Epilogue

*Acknowledgments*

*About the Author*

*Also by Barack Obama*

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## *Prologue*

**I**T'S BEEN ALMOST ten years since I first ran for political office. I was thirty-five at the time, four years out of law school, recently married, and generally impatient with life. A seat in the Illinois legislature had opened up, and several friends suggested that I run, thinking that my work as a civil rights lawyer, and contacts from my days as a community organizer, would make me a viable candidate. After discussing it with my wife, I entered the race and proceeded to do what every first-time candidate does: I talked to anyone who would listen. I went to block club meetings and church socials, beauty shops and barbershops. If two guys were standing on a corner, I would cross the street to hand them campaign literature. And everywhere I went, I'd get some version of the same two questions.

“Where'd you get that funny name?”

And then: “You seem like a nice enough guy. Why do you want to go into something dirty and nasty like politics?”

I was familiar with the question, a variant on the questions asked of me years earlier, when I'd first arrived in Chicago to work in low-income neighborhoods. It signaled a cynicism not simply with politics but with the very notion of a public life, a cynicism that—at least in the South Side neighborhoods I sought to represent—had been nourished by a generation of broken promises. In response, I would usually smile and nod and say that I understood the skepticism, but that there was—and always had been—another tradition to politics, a tradition that stretched from the days of the country's founding to the glory of the civil rights movement, a tradition based on the simple idea that we have a stake in one another, and that what binds us together is greater than what drives us apart, and that if enough people believe in the truth of that proposition and act on it, then we might not solve every problem, but we can get something meaningful done.

It was a pretty convincing speech, I thought. And although I'm not sure that the people who heard me deliver it were similarly impressed, enough of them appreciated my earnestness and youthful swagger that I made it to the Illinois legislature.

**SIX YEARS LATER**, when I decided to run for the United States Senate, I wasn't so sure of myself.

By all appearances, my choice of careers seemed to have worked out. After two terms during which I labored in the minority, Democrats had gained control of the state senate, and I had subsequently passed a slew of bills, from reforms of the Illinois death penalty system to an expansion of the state's health program for kids. I had continued to teach at the University of Chicago Law School, a job I enjoyed, and was frequently invited to speak around town. I had preserved my independence, my good name, and

my marriage, all of which, statistically speaking, had been placed at risk the moment I set foot in the state capital.

But the years had also taken their toll. Some of it was just a function of my getting older, I suppose, for if you are paying attention, each successive year will make you more intimately acquainted with all of your flaws—the blind spots, the recurring habits of thought that may be genetic or may be environmental, but that will almost certainly worsen with time, as surely as the hitch in your walk turns to pain in your hip. In me, one of those flaws had proven to be a chronic restlessness; an inability to appreciate, no matter how well things were going, those blessings that were right there in front of me. It's a flaw that is endemic to modern life, I think—endemic, too, in the American character—and one that is nowhere more evident than in the field of politics. Whether politics actually encourages the trait or simply attracts those who possess it is unclear. Someone once said that every man is trying to either live up to his father's expectations or make up for his father's mistakes, and I suppose that may explain my particular malady as well as anything else.

In any event, it was as a consequence of that restlessness that I decided to challenge a sitting Democratic incumbent for his congressional seat in the 2000 election cycle. It was an ill-considered race, and I lost badly—the sort of drubbing that awakens you to the fact that life is not obliged to work out as you'd planned. A year and a half later, the scars of that loss sufficiently healed, I had lunch with a media consultant who had been encouraging me for some time to run for statewide office. As it happened, the lunch was scheduled for late September 2001.

“You realize, don't you, that the political dynamics have changed,” he said as he picked at his salad.

“What do you mean?” I asked, knowing full well what he meant. We both looked down at the newspaper beside him. There, on the front page, was Osama bin Laden.

“Hell of a thing, isn't it?” he said, shaking his head. “Really bad luck. You can't change your name, of course. Voters are suspicious of that kind of thing. Maybe if you were at the start of your career, you know, you could use a nickname or something. But now...” His voice trailed off and he shrugged apologetically before signaling the waiter to bring us the check.

I suspected he was right, and that realization ate away at me. For the first time in my career, I began to experience the envy of seeing younger politicians succeed where I had failed, moving into higher offices, getting more things done. The pleasures of politics—the adrenaline of debate, the animal warmth of shaking hands and plunging into a crowd—began to pale against the meaner tasks of the job: the begging for money, the long drives home after the banquet had run two hours longer than scheduled, the bad food and stale air and clipped phone conversations with a wife who had stuck by me so far but was pretty fed up with raising our children alone and was beginning to question my priorities. Even the legislative work, the policy making that had gotten me to run in the first place, began to feel too incremental, too removed from the larger battles—over taxes, security, health care, and jobs—that were being waged on a national stage. I began to harbor doubts about the path I had chosen; I began feeling the way I imagine an actor or athlete must feel when, after years of commitment to a particular dream,

after years of waiting tables between auditions or scratching out hits in the minor leagues, he realizes that he's gone just about as far as talent or fortune will take him. The dream will not happen, and he now faces the choice of accepting this fact like a grownup and moving on to more sensible pursuits, or refusing the truth and ending up bitter, quarrelsome, and slightly pathetic.

DENIAL, ANGER, bargaining, despair—I'm not sure I went through all the stages prescribed by the experts. At some point, though, I arrived at acceptance—of my limits, and, in a way, my mortality. I refocused on my work in the state senate and took satisfaction from the reforms and initiatives that my position afforded. I spent more time at home, and watched my daughters grow, and properly cherished my wife, and thought about my long-term financial obligations. I exercised, and read novels, and came to appreciate how the earth rotated around the sun and the seasons came and went without any particular exertions on my part.

And it was this acceptance, I think, that allowed me to come up with the thoroughly cockeyed idea of running for the United States Senate. An up-or-out strategy was how I described it to my wife, one last shot to test out my ideas before I settled into a calmer, more stable, and better-paying existence. And she—perhaps more out of pity than conviction—agreed to this one last race, though she also suggested that given the orderly life she preferred for our family, I shouldn't necessarily count on her vote.

I let her take comfort in the long odds against me. The Republican incumbent, Peter Fitzgerald, had spent \$19 million of his personal wealth to unseat the previous senator, Carol Moseley Braun. He wasn't widely popular; in fact he didn't really seem to enjoy politics all that much. But he still had unlimited money in his family, as well as a genuine integrity that had earned him grudging respect from the voters.

For a time Carol Moseley Braun reappeared, back from an ambassadorship in New Zealand and with thoughts of trying to reclaim her old seat; her possible candidacy put my own plans on hold. When she decided to run for the presidency instead, everyone else started looking at the Senate race. By the time Fitzgerald announced he would not seek reelection, I was staring at six primary opponents, including the sitting state comptroller; a businessman worth hundreds of millions of dollars; Chicago Mayor Richard Daley's former chief of staff; and a black, female health-care professional who the smart money assumed would split the black vote and doom whatever slim chances I'd had in the first place.

I didn't care. Freed from worry by low expectations, my credibility bolstered by several helpful endorsements, I threw myself into the race with an energy and joy that I'd thought I had lost. I hired four staffers, all of them smart, in their twenties or early thirties, and suitably cheap. We found a small office, printed letterhead, installed phone lines and several computers. Four or five hours a day, I called major Democratic donors and tried to get my calls returned. I held press conferences to which nobody came. We signed up for the annual St. Patrick's Day Parade and were assigned the parade's very last slot, so my ten volunteers and I found ourselves marching just a few paces ahead of the city's sanitation trucks, waving to the few stragglers who remained on the route while workers swept up garbage and peeled green shamrock stickers off the lampposts.

Mostly, though, I just traveled, often driving alone, first from ward to ward in Chicago, then from county to county and town to town, eventually up and down the state, past miles and miles of cornfields and beanfields and train tracks and silos. It wasn't an efficient process. Without the machinery of the state's Democratic Party organization, without any real mailing list or Internet operation, I had to rely on friends or acquaintances to open their houses to whoever might come, or to arrange for my visit to their church, union hall, bridge group, or Rotary Club. Sometimes, after several hours of driving, I would find just two or three people waiting for me around a kitchen table. I would have to assure the hosts that the turnout was fine and compliment them on the refreshments they'd prepared. Sometimes I would sit through a church service and the pastor would forget to recognize me, or the head of the union local would let me speak to his members just before announcing that the union had decided to endorse someone else.

But whether I was meeting with two people or fifty, whether I was in one of the well-shaded, stately homes of the North Shore, a walk-up apartment on the West Side, or a farmhouse outside Bloomington, whether people were friendly, indifferent, or occasionally hostile, I tried my best to keep my mouth shut and hear what they had to say. I listened to people talk about their jobs, their businesses, the local school; their anger at Bush and their anger at Democrats; their dogs, their back pain, their war service, and the things they remembered from childhood. Some had well-developed theories to explain the loss of manufacturing jobs or the high cost of health care. Some recited what they had heard on Rush Limbaugh or NPR. But most of them were too busy with work or their kids to pay much attention to politics, and they spoke instead of what they saw before them: a plant closed, a promotion, a high heating bill, a parent in a nursing home, a child's first step.

No blinding insights emerged from these months of conversation. If anything, what struck me was just how modest people's hopes were, and how much of what they believed seemed to hold constant across race, region, religion, and class. Most of them thought that anybody willing to work should be able to find a job that paid a living wage. They figured that people shouldn't have to file for bankruptcy because they got sick. They believed that every child should have a genuinely good education—that it shouldn't just be a bunch of talk—and that those same children should be able to go to college even if their parents weren't rich. They wanted to be safe, from criminals and from terrorists; they wanted clean air, clean water, and time with their kids. And when they got old, they wanted to be able to retire with some dignity and respect.

That was about it. It wasn't much. And although they understood that how they did in life depended mostly on their own efforts—although they didn't expect government to solve all their problems, and certainly didn't like seeing their tax dollars wasted—they figured that government should help.

I told them that they were right: government couldn't solve all their problems. But with a slight change in priorities we could make sure every child had a decent shot at life and meet the challenges we faced as a nation. More often than not, folks would nod in agreement and ask how they could get involved. And by the time I was back on the road, with a map on the passenger's seat, on my way to my next stop, I knew once again just why I'd gone into politics.

I felt like working harder than I'd ever worked in my life.

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THIS BOOK GROWS directly out of those conversations on the campaign trail. Not only did my encounters with voters confirm the fundamental decency of the American people, they also reminded me that at the core of the American experience are a set of ideals that continue to stir our collective conscience; a common set of values that bind us together despite our differences; a running thread of hope that makes our improbable experiment in democracy work. These values and ideals find expression not just in the marble slabs of monuments or in the recitation of history books. They remain alive in the hearts and minds of most Americans—and can inspire us to pride, duty, and sacrifice.

I recognize the risks of talking this way. In an era of globalization and dizzying technological change, cutthroat politics and unremitting culture wars, we don't even seem to possess a shared language with which to discuss our ideals, much less the tools to arrive at some rough consensus about how, as a nation, we might work together to bring those ideals about. Most of us are wise to the ways of admen, pollsters, speechwriters, and pundits. We know how high-flying words can be deployed in the service of cynical aims, and how the noblest sentiments can be subverted in the name of power, expedience, greed, or intolerance. Even the standard high school history textbook notes the degree to which, from its very inception, the reality of American life has strayed from its myths. In such a climate, any assertion of shared ideals or common values might seem hopelessly naïve, if not downright dangerous—an attempt to gloss over serious differences in policy and performance or, worse, a means of muffling the complaints of those who feel ill served by our current institutional arrangements.

My argument, however, is that we have no choice. You don't need a poll to know that the vast majority of Americans—Republican, Democrat, and independent—are weary of the dead zone that politics has become, in which narrow interests vie for advantage and ideological minorities seek to impose their own versions of absolute truth. Whether we're from red states or blue states, we feel in our gut the lack of honesty, rigor, and common sense in our policy debates, and dislike what appears to be a continuous menu of false or cramped choices. Religious or secular, black, white, or brown, we sense—correctly—that the nation's most significant challenges are being ignored, and that if we don't change course soon, we may be the first generation in a very long time that leaves behind a weaker and more fractured America than the one we inherited. Perhaps more than any other time in our recent history, we need a new kind of politics, one that can excavate and build upon those shared understandings that pull us together as Americans.

That's the topic of this book: how we might begin the process of changing our politics and our civic life. This isn't to say that I know exactly how to do it. I don't. Although I discuss in each chapter a number of our most pressing policy challenges, and suggest in broad strokes the path I believe we should follow, my treatment of the issues is often partial and incomplete. I offer no unifying theory of American government, nor do these

pages provide a manifesto for action, complete with charts and graphs, timetables and ten-point plans.

Instead what I offer is something more modest: personal reflections on those values and ideals that have led me to public life, some thoughts on the ways that our current political discourse unnecessarily divides us, and my own best assessment—based on my experience as a senator and lawyer, husband and father, Christian and skeptic—of the ways we can ground our politics in the notion of a common good.

Let me be more specific about how the book is organized. Chapter One takes stock of our recent political history and tries to explain some of the sources for today's bitter partisanship. In Chapter Two, I discuss those common values that might serve as the foundation for a new political consensus. Chapter Three explores the Constitution not just as a source of individual rights, but also as a means of organizing a democratic conversation around our collective future. In Chapter Four, I try to convey some of the institutional forces—money, media, interest groups, and the legislative process—that stifle even the best-intentioned politician. And in the remaining five chapters, I suggest how we might move beyond our divisions to effectively tackle concrete problems: the growing economic insecurity of many American families, the racial and religious tensions within the body politic, and the transnational threats—from terrorism to pandemic—that gather beyond our shores.

I suspect that some readers may find my presentation of these issues to be insufficiently balanced. To this accusation, I stand guilty as charged. I am a Democrat, after all; my views on most topics correspond more closely to the editorial pages of the *New York Times* than those of the *Wall Street Journal*. I am angry about policies that consistently favor the wealthy and powerful over average Americans, and insist that government has an important role in opening up opportunity to all. I believe in evolution, scientific inquiry, and global warming; I believe in free speech, whether politically correct or politically incorrect, and I am suspicious of using government to impose anybody's religious beliefs—including my own—on nonbelievers. Furthermore, I am a prisoner of my own biography: I can't help but view the American experience through the lens of a black man of mixed heritage, forever mindful of how generations of people who looked like me were subjugated and stigmatized, and the subtle and not so subtle ways that race and class continue to shape our lives.

But that is not all that I am. I also think my party can be smug, detached, and dogmatic at times. I believe in the free market, competition, and entrepreneurship, and think no small number of government programs don't work as advertised. I wish the country had fewer lawyers and more engineers. I think America has more often been a force for good than for ill in the world; I carry few illusions about our enemies, and revere the courage and competence of our military. I reject a politics that is based solely on racial identity, gender identity, sexual orientation, or victimhood generally. I think much of what ails the inner city involves a breakdown in culture that will not be cured by money alone, and that our values and spiritual life matter at least as much as our GDP.

Undoubtedly, some of these views will get me in trouble. I am new enough on the national political scene that I serve as a blank screen on which people of vastly different political stripes project their own views. As such, I am bound to disappoint some, if not all, of them. Which perhaps indicates a second, more intimate theme to this book—



namely, how I, or anybody in public office, can avoid the pitfalls of fame, the hunger to please, the fear of loss, and thereby retain that kernel of truth, that singular voice within each of us that reminds us of our deepest commitments.

Recently, one of the reporters covering Capitol Hill stopped me on the way to my office and mentioned that she had enjoyed reading my first book. “I wonder,” she said, “if you can be that interesting in the next one you write.” By which she meant, I wonder if you can be honest now that you are a U.S. senator.

I wonder, too, sometimes. I hope writing this book helps me answer the question.

## *Chapter One*

### **Republicans and Democrats**

**O**N MOST DAYS, I enter the Capitol through the basement. A small subway train carries me from the Hart Building, where my office is located, through an underground tunnel lined with the flags and seals of the fifty states. The train creaks to a halt and I make my way, past bustling staffers, maintenance crews, and the occasional tour group, to the bank of old elevators that takes me to the second floor. Stepping off, I weave around the swarm of press that normally gathers there, say hello to the Capitol Police, and enter, through a stately set of double doors, onto the floor of the U.S. Senate.

The Senate chamber is not the most beautiful space in the Capitol, but it is imposing nonetheless. The dun-colored walls are set off by panels of blue damask and columns of finely veined marble. Overhead, the ceiling forms a creamy white oval, with an American eagle etched in its center. Above the visitors' gallery, the busts of the nation's first twenty vice presidents sit in solemn repose.

And in gentle steps, one hundred mahogany desks rise from the well of the Senate in four horseshoe-shaped rows. Some of these desks date back to 1819, and atop each desk is a tidy receptacle for inkwells and quills. Open the drawer of any desk, and you will find within the names of the senators who once used it—Taft and Long, Stennis and Kennedy—scratched or penned in the senator's own hand. Sometimes, standing there in the chamber, I can imagine Paul Douglas or Hubert Humphrey at one of these desks, urging yet again the adoption of civil rights legislation; or Joe McCarthy, a few desks over, thumbing through lists, preparing to name names; or LBJ prowling the aisles, grabbing lapels and gathering votes. Sometimes I will wander over to the desk where Daniel Webster once sat and imagine him rising before the packed gallery and his colleagues, his eyes blazing as he thunderously defends the Union against the forces of secession.

But these moments fade quickly. Except for the few minutes that it takes to vote, my colleagues and I don't spend much time on the Senate floor. Most of the decisions—about what bills to call and when to call them, about how amendments will be handled and how uncooperative senators will be made to cooperate—have been worked out well in advance by the majority leader, the relevant committee chairman, their staffs, and (depending on the degree of controversy involved and the magnanimity of the Republican handling the bill) their Democratic counterparts. By the time we reach the floor and the clerk starts calling the roll, each of the senators will have determined—in consultation with his or her staff, caucus leader, preferred lobbyists, interest groups, constituent mail, and ideological leanings—just how to position himself on the issue.

It makes for an efficient process, which is much appreciated by the members, who are juggling twelve- or thirteen-hour schedules and want to get back to their offices to meet constituents or return phone calls, to a nearby hotel to cultivate donors, or to the television studio for a live interview. If you stick around, though, you may see one lone senator standing at his desk after the others have left, seeking recognition to deliver a statement on the floor. It may be an explanation of a bill he's introducing, or it may be a broader commentary on some unmet national challenge. The speaker's voice may flare

with passion; his arguments—about cuts to programs for the poor, or obstructionism on judicial appointments, or the need for energy independence—may be soundly constructed. But the speaker will be addressing a near-empty chamber: just the presiding officer, a few staffers, the Senate reporter, and C-SPAN's unblinking eye. The speaker will finish. A blue-uniformed page will silently gather the statement for the official record. Another senator may enter as the first one departs, and she will stand at her desk, seek recognition, and deliver her statement, repeating the ritual.

In the world's greatest deliberative body, no one is listening.

I REMEMBER January 4, 2005—the day that I and a third of the Senate were sworn in as members of the 109th Congress—as a beautiful blur. The sun was bright, the air unseasonably warm. From Illinois, Hawaii, London, and Kenya, my family and friends crowded into the Senate visitors' gallery to cheer as my new colleagues and I stood beside the marble dais and raised our right hands to take the oath of office. In the Old Senate Chamber, I joined my wife, Michelle, and our two daughters for a reenactment of the ceremony and picture-taking with Vice President Cheney (true to form, then six-year-old Malia demurely shook the vice president's hand, while then three-year-old Sasha decided instead to slap palms with the man before twirling around to wave for the cameras). Afterward, I watched the girls skip down the east Capitol steps, their pink and red dresses lifting gently in the air, the Supreme Court's white columns a majestic backdrop for their games. Michelle and I took their hands, and together the four of us walked to the Library of Congress, where we met a few hundred well-wishers who had traveled in for the day, and spent the next several hours in a steady stream of handshakes, hugs, photographs, and autographs.

A day of smiles and thanks, of decorum and pageantry—that's how it must have seemed to the Capitol's visitors. But if all of Washington was on its best behavior that day, collectively pausing to affirm the continuity of our democracy, there remained a certain static in the air, an awareness that the mood would not last. After the family and friends went home, after the receptions ended and the sun slid behind winter's gray shroud, what would linger over the city was the certainty of a single, seemingly inalterable fact: The country was divided, and so Washington was divided, more divided politically than at any time since before World War II.

Both the presidential election and various statistical measures appeared to bear out the conventional wisdom. Across the spectrum of issues, Americans disagreed: on Iraq, taxes, abortion, guns, the Ten Commandments, gay marriage, immigration, trade, education policy, environmental regulation, the size of government, and the role of the courts. Not only did we disagree, but we disagreed vehemently, with partisans on each side of the divide unrestrained in the vitriol they hurled at opponents. We disagreed on the scope of our disagreements, the nature of our disagreements, and the reasons for our disagreements. Everything was contestable, whether it was the cause of climate change or the fact of climate change, the size of the deficit or the culprits to blame for the deficit.

For me, none of this was entirely surprising. From a distance, I had followed the escalating ferocity of Washington's political battles: Iran-Contra and Ollie North, the

Bork nomination and Willie Horton, Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill, the Clinton election and the Gingrich Revolution, Whitewater and the Starr investigation, the government shutdown and impeachment, dangling chads and *Bush v. Gore*. With the rest of the public, I had watched campaign culture metastasize throughout the body politic, as an entire industry of insult—both perpetual and somehow profitable—emerged to dominate cable television, talk radio, and the *New York Times* best-seller list.

And for eight years in the Illinois legislature, I had gotten some taste of how the game had come to be played. By the time I arrived in Springfield in 1997, the Illinois Senate's Republican majority had adopted the same rules that Speaker Gingrich was then using to maintain absolute control of the U.S. House of Representatives. Without the capacity to get even the most modest amendment debated, much less passed, Democrats would shout and holler and fulminate, and then stand by helplessly as Republicans passed large corporate tax breaks, stuck it to labor, or slashed social services. Over time, an implacable anger spread through the Democratic Caucus, and my colleagues would carefully record every slight and abuse meted out by the GOP. Six years later, Democrats took control, and Republicans fared no better. Some of the older veterans would wistfully recall the days when Republicans and Democrats met at night for dinner, hashing out a compromise over steaks and cigars. But even among these old bulls, such fond memories rapidly dimmed the first time the other side's political operatives selected them as targets, flooding their districts with mail accusing them of malfeasance, corruption, incompetence, and moral turpitude.

I don't claim to have been a passive bystander in all this. I understood politics as a full-contact sport, and minded neither the sharp elbows nor the occasional blind-side hit. But occupying as I did an ironclad Democratic district, I was spared the worst of Republican invective. Occasionally, I would partner up with even my most conservative colleagues to work on a piece of legislation, and over a poker game or a beer we might conclude that we had more in common than we publicly cared to admit. Which perhaps explains why, throughout my years in Springfield, I had clung to the notion that politics could be different, and that the voters wanted something different; that they were tired of distortion, name-calling, and sound-bite solutions to complicated problems; that if I could reach those voters directly, frame the issues as I felt them, explain the choices in as truthful a fashion as I knew how, then the people's instincts for fair play and common sense would bring them around. If enough of us took that risk, I thought, not only the country's politics but the country's policies would change for the better.

It was with that mind-set that I had entered the 2004 U.S. Senate race. For the duration of the campaign I did my best to say what I thought, keep it clean, and focus on substance. When I won the Democratic primary and then the general election, both by sizable margins, it was tempting to believe that I had proven my point.

There was just one problem: My campaign had gone so well that it looked like a fluke. Political observers would note that in a field of seven Democratic primary candidates, not one of us ran a negative TV ad. The wealthiest candidate of all—a former trader worth at least \$300 million—spent \$28 million, mostly on a barrage of positive ads, only to flame out in the final weeks due to an unflattering divorce file that the press got unsealed. My Republican opponent, a handsome and wealthy former Goldman Sachs partner turned inner-city teacher, started attacking my record almost from the start, but

before his campaign could get off the ground, he was felled by a divorce scandal of his own. For the better part of a month, I traveled Illinois without drawing fire, before being selected to deliver the keynote address at the Democratic National Convention—seventeen minutes of unfiltered, uninterrupted airtime on national television. And finally the Illinois Republican Party inexplicably chose as my opponent former presidential candidate Alan Keyes, a man who had never lived in Illinois and who proved so fierce and unyielding in his positions that even conservative Republicans were scared of him.

Later, some reporters would declare me the luckiest politician in the entire fifty states. Privately, some of my staff bristled at this assessment, feeling that it discounted our hard work and the appeal of our message. Still, there was no point in denying my almost spooky good fortune. I was an outlier, a freak; to political insiders, my victory proved nothing.

No wonder then that upon my arrival in Washington that January, I felt like the rookie who shows up after the game, his uniform spotless, eager to play, even as his mud-splattered teammates tend to their wounds. While I had been busy with interviews and photo shoots, full of high-minded ideas about the need for less partisanship and acrimony, Democrats had been beaten across the board—the presidency, Senate seats, House seats. My new Democratic colleagues could not have been more welcoming toward me; one of our few bright spots, they would call my victory. In the corridors, though, or during a lull in the action on the floor, they'd pull me aside and remind me of what typical Senate campaigns had come to look like.

They told me about their fallen leader, Tom Daschle of South Dakota, who had seen millions of dollars' worth of negative ads rain down on his head—full-page newspaper ads and television spots informing his neighbors day after day that he supported baby-killing and men in wedding gowns, a few even suggesting that he'd treated his first wife badly, despite the fact that she had traveled to South Dakota to help him get reelected. They recalled Max Cleland, the former Georgia incumbent, a triple-amputee war veteran who had lost his seat in the previous cycle after being accused of insufficient patriotism, of aiding and abetting Osama bin Laden.

And then there was the small matter of the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth: the shocking efficiency with which a few well-placed ads and the chants of conservative media could transform a decorated Vietnam war hero into a weak-kneed appeaser.

No doubt there were Republicans who felt similarly abused. And perhaps the newspaper editorials that appeared that first week of session were right; perhaps it was time to put the election behind us, for both parties to store away their animosities and ammunition and, for a year or two at least, get down to governing the country. Maybe that would have been possible had the elections not been so close, or had the war in Iraq not been still raging, or had the advocacy groups, pundits, and all manner of media not stood to gain by stirring the pot. Maybe peace would have broken out with a different kind of White House, one less committed to waging a perpetual campaign—a White House that would see a 51–48 victory as a call to humility and compromise rather than an irrefutable mandate.

But whatever conditions might have been required for such a *détente*, they did not exist in 2005. There would be no concessions, no gestures of goodwill. Two days after the election, President Bush appeared before cameras and declared that he had political capital to spare and he intended to use it. That same day, conservative activist Grover Norquist, unconstrained by the decorum of public office, observed, in connection with the Democrats' situation, that "any farmer will tell you that certain animals run around and are unpleasant, but when they've been fixed, then they are happy and sedate." Two days after my swearing in, Congresswoman Stephanie Tubbs Jones, out of Cleveland, stood up in the House of Representatives to challenge the certification of Ohio electors, citing the litany of voting irregularities that had taken place in the state on Election Day. Rank-and-file Republicans scowled ("Sore losers," I could hear a few mutter), but Speaker Hastert and Majority Leader DeLay gazed stone-faced from the heights of the dais, placid in the knowledge that they had both the votes and the gavel. Senator Barbara Boxer of California agreed to sign the challenge, and when we returned to the Senate chamber, I found myself casting my first vote, along with seventy-three of the seventy-four others voting that day, to install George W. Bush for a second term as president of the United States.

I would get my first big batch of phone calls and negative mail after this vote. I called back some of my disgruntled Democratic supporters, assuring them that yes, I was familiar with the problems in Ohio, and yes, I thought an investigation was in order, but yes, I still believed George Bush had won the election, and no, as far as I could tell I didn't think I had either sold out or been co-opted after a mere two days on the job. That same week, I happened to run into retiring Senator Zell Miller, the lean, sharp-eyed Georgia Democrat and NRA board member who had gone sour on the Democratic Party, endorsed George Bush, and delivered the blistering keynote address at the Republican National Convention—a no-holds-barred rant against the perfidy of John Kerry and his supposed weakness on national security. Ours was a brief exchange, filled with unspoken irony—the elderly Southerner on his way out, the young black Northerner on his way in, the contrast that the press had noted in our respective convention speeches. Senator Miller was very gracious and wished me luck with my new job. Later, I would happen upon an excerpt from his book, *A Deficit of Decency*, in which he called my speech at the convention one of the best he'd ever heard, before noting—with what I imagined to be a sly smile—that it may not have been the most effective speech in terms of helping to win an election.

In other words: My guy had lost. Zell Miller's guy had won. That was the hard, cold political reality. Everything else was just sentiment.

MY WIFE WILL tell you that by nature I'm not somebody who gets real worked up about things. When I see Ann Coulter or Sean Hannity baying across the television screen, I find it hard to take them seriously; I assume that they must be saying what they do primarily to boost book sales or ratings, although I do wonder who would spend their precious evenings with such sourpusses. When Democrats rush up to me at events and insist that we live in the worst of political times, that a creeping fascism is closing its grip around our throats, I may mention the internment of Japanese Americans under FDR, the Alien and Sedition Acts under John Adams, or a hundred years of lynching under several dozen administrations as having been possibly worse, and suggest we all

take a deep breath. When people at dinner parties ask me how I can possibly operate in the current political environment, with all the negative campaigning and personal attacks, I may mention Nelson Mandela, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, or some guy in a Chinese or Egyptian prison somewhere. In truth, being called names is not such a bad deal.

Still, I am not immune to distress. And like most Americans, I find it hard to shake the feeling these days that our democracy has gone seriously awry.

It's not simply that a gap exists between our professed ideals as a nation and the reality we witness every day. In one form or another, that gap has existed since America's birth. Wars have been fought, laws passed, systems reformed, unions organized, and protests staged to bring promise and practice into closer alignment.

No, what's troubling is the gap between the magnitude of our challenges and the smallness of our politics—the ease with which we are distracted by the petty and trivial, our chronic avoidance of tough decisions, our seeming inability to build a working consensus to tackle any big problem.

We know that global competition—not to mention any genuine commitment to the values of equal opportunity and upward mobility—requires us to revamp our educational system from top to bottom, replenish our teaching corps, buckle down on math and science instruction, and rescue inner-city kids from illiteracy. And yet our debate on education seems stuck between those who want to dismantle the public school system and those who would defend an indefensible status quo, between those who say money makes no difference in education and those who want more money without any demonstration that it will be put to good use.

We know that our health-care system is broken: wildly expensive, terribly inefficient, and poorly adapted to an economy no longer built on lifetime employment, a system that exposes hardworking Americans to chronic insecurity and possible destitution. But year after year, ideology and political gamesmanship result in inaction, except for 2003, when we got a prescription drug bill that somehow managed to combine the worst aspects of the public and private sectors—price gouging and bureaucratic confusion, gaps in coverage and an eye-popping bill for taxpayers.

We know that the battle against international terrorism is at once an armed struggle and a contest of ideas, that our long-term security depends on both a judicious projection of military power and increased cooperation with other nations, and that addressing the problems of global poverty and failed states is vital to our nation's interests rather than just a matter of charity. But follow most of our foreign policy debates, and you might believe that we have only two choices—belligerence or isolationism.

We think of faith as a source of comfort and understanding but find our expressions of faith sowing division; we believe ourselves to be a tolerant people even as racial, religious, and cultural tensions roil the landscape. And instead of resolving these tensions or mediating these conflicts, our politics fans them, exploits them, and drives us further apart.

Privately, those of us in government will acknowledge this gap between the politics we have and the politics we need. Certainly Democrats aren't happy with the current situation, since for the moment at least they are on the losing side, dominated by Republicans who, thanks to winner-take-all elections, control every branch of government and feel no need to compromise. Thoughtful Republicans shouldn't be too sanguine, though, for if the Democrats have had trouble winning, it appears that the Republicans—having won elections on the basis of pledges that often defy reality (tax cuts without service cuts, privatization of Social Security with no change in benefits, war without sacrifice)—cannot govern.

And yet publicly it's difficult to find much soul-searching or introspection on either side of the divide, or even the slightest admission of responsibility for the gridlock. What we hear instead, not only in campaigns but on editorial pages, on bookstands, or in the ever-expanding blog universe, are deflections of criticism and assignments of blame. Depending on your tastes, our condition is the natural result of radical conservatism or perverse liberalism, Tom DeLay or Nancy Pelosi, big oil or greedy trial lawyers, religious zealots or gay activists, Fox News or the *New York Times*. How well these stories are told, the subtlety of the arguments and the quality of the evidence, will vary by author, and I won't deny my preference for the story the Democrats tell, nor my belief that the arguments of liberals are more often grounded in reason and fact. In distilled form, though, the explanations of both the right and the left have become mirror images of each other. They are stories of conspiracy, of America being hijacked by an evil cabal. Like all good conspiracy theories, both tales contain just enough truth to satisfy those predisposed to believe in them, without admitting any contradictions that might shake up those assumptions. Their purpose is not to persuade the other side but to keep their bases agitated and assured of the rightness of their respective causes—and lure just enough new adherents to beat the other side into submission.

Of course, there is another story to be told, by the millions of Americans who are going about their business every day. They are on the job or looking for work, starting businesses, helping their kids with their homework, and struggling with high gas bills, insufficient health insurance, and a pension that some bankruptcy court somewhere has rendered unenforceable. They are by turns hopeful and frightened about the future. Their lives are full of contradictions and ambiguities. And because politics seems to speak so little to what they are going through—because they understand that politics today is a business and not a mission, and what passes for debate is little more than spectacle—they turn inward, away from the noise and rage and endless chatter.

A government that truly represents these Americans—that truly serves these Americans—will require a different kind of politics. That politics will need to reflect our lives as they are actually lived. It won't be prepackaged, ready to pull off the shelf. It will have to be constructed from the best of our traditions and will have to account for the darker aspects of our past. We will need to understand just how we got to this place, this land of warring factions and tribal hatreds. And we will need to remind ourselves, despite all our differences, just how much we share: common hopes, common dreams, a bond that will not break.



ONE OF THE first things I noticed upon my arrival in Washington was the relative cordiality among the Senate's older members: the unfailing courtesy that governed every interaction between John Warner and Robert Byrd, or the genuine bond of friendship between Republican Ted Stevens and Democrat Daniel Inouye. It is commonly said that these men represent the last of a dying breed, men who not only love the Senate but who embody a less sharply partisan brand of politics. And in fact it is one of the few things that conservative and liberal commentators agree on, this idea of a time before the fall, a golden age in Washington when, regardless of which party was in power, civility reigned and government worked.

At a reception one evening, I started a conversation with an old Washington hand who had served in and around the Capitol for close to fifty years. I asked him what he thought accounted for the difference in atmosphere between then and now.

"It's generational," he told me without hesitation. "Back then, almost everybody with any power in Washington had served in World War II. We might've fought like cats and dogs on issues. A lot of us came from different backgrounds, different neighborhoods, different political philosophies. But with the war, we all had something in common. That shared experience developed a certain trust and respect. It helped to work through our differences and get things done."

As I listened to the old man reminisce, about Dwight Eisenhower and Sam Rayburn, Dean Acheson and Everett Dirksen, it was hard not to get swept up in the hazy portrait he painted, of a time before twenty-four-hour news cycles and nonstop fund-raising, a time of serious men doing serious work. I had to remind myself that his fondness for this bygone era involved a certain selective memory: He had airbrushed out of the picture the images of the Southern Caucus denouncing proposed civil rights legislation from the floor of the Senate; the insidious power of McCarthyism; the numbing poverty that Bobby Kennedy would help highlight before his death; the absence of women and minorities in the halls of power.

I realized, too, that a set of unique circumstances had underwritten the stability of the governing consensus of which he had been a part: not just the shared experiences of the war, but also the near unanimity forged by the Cold War and the Soviet threat, and perhaps more important, the unrivaled dominance of the American economy during the fifties and sixties, as Europe and Japan dug themselves out of the postwar rubble.

Still, there's no denying that American politics in the post-World War II years was far less ideological—and the meaning of party affiliation far more amorphous—than it is today. The Democratic coalition that controlled Congress through most of those years was an amalgam of Northern liberals like Hubert Humphrey, conservative Southern Democrats like James Eastland, and whatever loyalists the big-city machines cared to elevate. What held this coalition together was the economic populism of the New Deal—a vision of fair wages and benefits, patronage and public works, and an ever-rising standard of living. Beyond that, the party cultivated a certain live-and-let-live philosophy: a philosophy anchored in acquiescence toward or active promotion of racial oppression in the South; a philosophy that depended on a broader culture in which social norms—the nature of sexuality, say, or the role of women—were largely unquestioned; a culture that did not yet possess the vocabulary to force discomfort, much less political dispute, around such issues.

Throughout the fifties and early sixties, the GOP, too, tolerated all sorts of philosophical fissures—between the Western libertarianism of Barry Goldwater and the Eastern paternalism of Nelson Rockefeller; between those who recalled the Republicanism of Abraham Lincoln and Teddy Roosevelt, with its embrace of federal activism, and those who followed the conservatism of Edmund Burke, with its preference of tradition to social experimentation. Accommodating these regional and temperamental differences, on civil rights, federal regulation, or even taxes, was neither neat nor tidy. But as with the Democrats, it was mainly economic interests that bound the GOP together, a philosophy of free markets and fiscal restraint that could appeal to all its constituent parts, from the Main Street storekeeper to the country-club corporate manager. (Republicans may have also embraced a more fervid brand of anticommunism in the fifties, but as John F. Kennedy helped to prove, Democrats were more than willing to call and raise the GOP on that score whenever an election rolled around.)

It was the sixties that upended these political alignments, for reasons and in ways that have been well chronicled. First the civil rights movement arrived, a movement that even in its early, halcyon days fundamentally challenged the existing social structure and forced Americans to choose sides. Ultimately Lyndon Johnson chose the right side of this battle, but as a son of the South, he understood better than most the cost involved with that choice: upon signing the Civil Rights Act of 1964, he would tell aide Bill Moyers that with the stroke of a pen he had just delivered the South to the GOP for the foreseeable future.

Then came the student protests against the Vietnam War and the suggestion that America was not always right, our actions not always justified—that a new generation would not pay any price or bear any burden that its elders might dictate.

And then, with the walls of the status quo breached, every form of “outsider” came streaming through the gates: feminists, Latinos, hippies, Panthers, welfare moms, gays, all asserting their rights, all insisting on recognition, all demanding a seat at the table and a piece of the pie.

It would take several years for the logic of these movements to play itself out. Nixon’s Southern strategy, his challenge to court-ordered busing and appeal to the silent majority, paid immediate electoral dividends. But his governing philosophy never congealed into a firm ideology—it was Nixon, after all, who initiated the first federal affirmative action programs and signed the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration into law. Jimmy Carter would prove it possible to combine support for civil rights with a more traditionally conservative Democratic message; and despite defections from their ranks, most Southern Democratic congressmen who chose to stay in the party would retain their seats on the strength of incumbency, helping Democrats maintain control of at least the House of Representatives.

But the country’s tectonic plates had shifted. Politics was no longer simply a pocketbook issue but a moral issue as well, subject to moral imperatives and moral absolutes. And politics was decidedly personal, insinuating itself into every interaction—whether between black and white, men and women—and implicating itself in every assertion or rejection of authority.

Accordingly, liberalism and conservatism were now defined in the popular imagination less by class than by attitude—the position you took toward the traditional culture and counterculture. What mattered was not just how you felt about the right to strike or corporate taxation, but also how you felt about sex, drugs, and rock and roll, the Latin Mass or the Western canon. For white ethnic voters in the North, and whites generally in the South, this new liberalism made little sense. The violence in the streets and the excuses for such violence in intellectual circles, blacks moving next door and white kids bused across town, the burning of flags and spitting on vets, all of it seemed to insult and diminish, if not assault, those things—family, faith, flag, neighborhood, and, for some at least, white privilege—that they held most dear. And when, in the midst of this topsy-turvy time, in the wake of assassinations and cities burning and Vietnam's bitter defeat, economic expansion gave way to gas lines and inflation and plant closings, and the best Jimmy Carter could suggest was turning down the thermostat, even as a bunch of Iranian radicals added insult to OPEC's injury—a big chunk of the New Deal coalition began looking for another political home.

I'VE ALWAYS FELT a curious relationship to the sixties. In a sense, I'm a pure product of that era: As the child of a mixed marriage, my life would have been impossible, my opportunities entirely foreclosed, without the social upheavals that were then taking place. But I was too young at the time to fully grasp the nature of those changes, too removed—living as I did in Hawaii and Indonesia—to see the fallout on America's psyche. Much of what I absorbed from the sixties was filtered through my mother, who to the end of her life would proudly proclaim herself an unreconstructed liberal. The civil rights movement, in particular, inspired her reverence; whenever the opportunity presented itself, she would drill into me the values that she saw there: tolerance, equality, standing up for the disadvantaged.

In many ways, though, my mother's understanding of the sixties was limited, both by distance (she had left the mainland of the United States in 1960) and by her incorrigible, sweet-natured romanticism. Intellectually she might have tried to understand Black Power or SDS or those women friends of hers who had stopped shaving their legs, but the anger, the oppositional spirit, just wasn't in her. Emotionally her liberalism would always remain of a decidedly pre-1967 vintage, her heart a time capsule filled with images of the space program, the Peace Corps and Freedom Rides, Mahalia Jackson and Joan Baez.

It was only as I got older, then, during the seventies, that I came to appreciate the degree to which—for those who had experienced more directly some of the sixties' seminal events—things must have seemed to be spinning out of control. Partly I understood this through the grumblings of my maternal grandparents, longtime Democrats who would admit that they'd voted for Nixon in 1968, an act of betrayal that my mother never let them live down. Mainly my understanding of the sixties came as a result of my own investigations, as my adolescent rebellion sought justification in the political and cultural changes that by then had already begun to ebb. In my teens, I became fascinated with the Dionysian, up-for-grabs quality of the era, and through books, film, and music, I soaked in a vision of the sixties very different from the one my mother talked about: images of Huey Newton, the '68 Democratic National Convention, the Saigon airlift, and the Stones at Altamont. If I had no immediate reasons to pursue revolution, I

decided nevertheless that in style and attitude I, too, could be a rebel, unconstrained by the received wisdom of the over-thirty crowd.

Eventually, my rejection of authority spilled into self-indulgence and self-destructiveness, and by the time I enrolled in college, I'd begun to see how any challenge to convention harbored within it the possibility of its own excesses and its own orthodoxy. I started to reexamine my assumptions, and recalled the values my mother and grandparents had taught me. In this slow, fitful process of sorting out what I believed, I began silently registering the point in dorm-room conversations when my college friends and I stopped thinking and slipped into cant: the point at which the denunciations of capitalism or American imperialism came too easily, and the freedom from the constraints of monogamy or religion was proclaimed without fully understanding the value of such constraints, and the role of victim was too readily embraced as a means of shedding responsibility, or asserting entitlement, or claiming moral superiority over those not so victimized.

All of which may explain why, as disturbed as I might have been by Ronald Reagan's election in 1980, as unconvinced as I might have been by his John Wayne, *Father Knows Best* pose, his policy by anecdote, and his gratuitous assaults on the poor, I understood his appeal. It was the same appeal that the military bases back in Hawaii had always held for me as a young boy, with their tidy streets and well-oiled machinery, the crisp uniforms and crisper salutes. It was related to the pleasure I still get from watching a well-played baseball game, or my wife gets from watching reruns of *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. Reagan spoke to America's longing for order, our need to believe that we are not simply subject to blind, impersonal forces but that we can shape our individual and collective destinies, so long as we rediscover the traditional virtues of hard work, patriotism, personal responsibility, optimism, and faith.

That Reagan's message found such a receptive audience spoke not only to his skills as a communicator; it also spoke to the failures of liberal government, during a period of economic stagnation, to give middle-class voters any sense that it was fighting for them. For the fact was that government at every level had become too cavalier about spending taxpayer money. Too often, bureaucracies were oblivious to the cost of their mandates. A lot of liberal rhetoric did seem to value rights and entitlements over duties and responsibilities. Reagan may have exaggerated the sins of the welfare state, and certainly liberals were right to complain that his domestic policies tilted heavily toward economic elites, with corporate raiders making tidy profits throughout the eighties while unions were busted and the income for the average working stiff flatlined.

Nevertheless, by promising to side with those who worked hard, obeyed the law, cared for their families, and loved their country, Reagan offered Americans a sense of a common purpose that liberals seemed no longer able to muster. And the more his critics carped, the more those critics played into the role he'd written for them—a band of out-of-touch, tax-and-spend, blame-America-first, politically correct elites.

WHAT I FIND remarkable is not that the political formula developed by Reagan worked at the time, but just how durable the narrative that he helped promote has proven to be. Despite a forty-year remove, the tumult of the sixties and the subsequent

backlash continues to drive our political discourse. Partly it underscores how deeply felt the conflicts of the sixties must have been for the men and women who came of age at that time, and the degree to which the arguments of the era were understood not simply as political disputes but as individual choices that defined personal identity and moral standing.

I suppose it also highlights the fact that the flash-point issues of the sixties were never fully resolved. The fury of the counterculture may have dissipated into consumerism, lifestyle choices, and musical preferences rather than political commitments, but the problems of race, war, poverty, and relations between the sexes did not go away.

And maybe it just has to do with the sheer size of the Baby Boom generation, a demographic force that exerts the same gravitational pull in politics that it exerts on everything else, from the market for Viagra to the number of cup holders automakers put in their cars.

Whatever the explanation, after Reagan the lines between Republican and Democrat, liberal and conservative, would be drawn in more sharply ideological terms. This was true, of course, for the hot-button issues of affirmative action, crime, welfare, abortion, and school prayer, all of which were extensions of earlier battles. But it was also now true for every other issue, large or small, domestic or foreign, all of which were reduced to a menu of either-or, for-or-against, sound-bite-ready choices. No longer was economic policy a matter of weighing trade-offs between competing goals of productivity and distributional justice, of growing the pie and slicing the pie. You were for either tax cuts or tax hikes, small government or big government. No longer was environmental policy a matter of balancing sound stewardship of our natural resources with the demands of a modern economy; you either supported unchecked development, drilling, strip-mining, and the like, or you supported stifling bureaucracy and red tape that choked off growth. In politics, if not in policy, simplicity was a virtue.

Sometimes I suspect that even the Republican leaders who immediately followed Reagan weren't entirely comfortable with the direction politics had taken. In the mouths of men like George H. W. Bush and Bob Dole, the polarizing rhetoric and the politics of resentment always seemed forced, a way of peeling off voters from the Democratic base and not necessarily a recipe for governing.

But for a younger generation of conservative operatives who would soon rise to power, for Newt Gingrich and Karl Rove and Grover Norquist and Ralph Reed, the fiery rhetoric was more than a matter of campaign strategy. They were true believers who meant what they said, whether it was "No new taxes" or "We are a Christian nation." In fact, with their rigid doctrines, slash-and-burn style, and exaggerated sense of having been aggrieved, this new conservative leadership was eerily reminiscent of some of the New Left's leaders during the sixties. As with their left-wing counterparts, this new vanguard of the right viewed politics as a contest not just between competing policy visions, but between good and evil. Activists in both parties began developing litmus tests, checklists of orthodoxy, leaving a Democrat who questioned abortion increasingly lonely, any Republican who championed gun control effectively marooned. In this Manichean struggle, compromise came to look like weakness, to be punished or purged. You were with us or against us. You had to choose sides.

It was Bill Clinton's singular contribution that he tried to transcend this ideological deadlock, recognizing not only that what had come to be meant by the labels of "conservative" and "liberal" played to Republican advantage, but that the categories were inadequate to address the problems we faced. At times during his first campaign, his gestures toward disaffected Reagan Democrats could seem clumsy and transparent (what ever happened to Sister Souljah?) or frighteningly coldhearted (allowing the execution of a mentally retarded death row inmate to go forward on the eve of an important primary). In the first two years of his presidency, he would be forced to abandon some core elements of his platform—universal health care, aggressive investment in education and training—that might have more decisively reversed the long-term trends that were undermining the position of working families in the new economy.

Still, he instinctively understood the falseness of the choices being presented to the American people. He saw that government spending and regulation could, if properly designed, serve as vital ingredients and not inhibitors to economic growth, and how markets and fiscal discipline could help promote social justice. He recognized that not only societal responsibility but personal responsibility was needed to combat poverty. In his platform—if not always in his day-to-day politics—Clinton's Third Way went beyond splitting the difference. It tapped into the pragmatic, nonideological attitude of the majority of Americans.

Indeed, by the end of his presidency, Clinton's policies—recognizably progressive if modest in their goals—enjoyed broad public support. Politically, he had wrung out of the Democratic Party some of the excesses that had kept it from winning elections. That he failed, despite a booming economy, to translate popular policies into anything resembling a governing coalition said something about the demographic difficulties Democrats were facing (in particular, the shift in population growth to an increasingly solid Republican South) and the structural advantages the Republicans enjoyed in the Senate, where the votes of two Republican senators from Wyoming, population 493,782, equaled the votes of two Democratic senators from California, population 33,871,648.

But that failure also testified to the skill with which Gingrich, Rove, Norquist, and the like were able to consolidate and institutionalize the conservative movement. They tapped the unlimited resources of corporate sponsors and wealthy donors to create a network of think tanks and media outlets. They brought state-of-the-art technology to the task of mobilizing their base, and centralized power in the House of Representatives in order to enhance party discipline.

And they understood the threat Clinton posed to their vision of a long-term conservative majority, which helps explain the vehemence with which they went after him. It also explains why they invested so much time attacking Clinton's morality, for if Clinton's policies were hardly radical, his biography (the draft letter saga, the marijuana puffing, the Ivy League intellectualism, the professional wife who didn't bake cookies, and most of all the sex) proved perfect grist for the conservative base. With enough repetition, a looseness with the facts, and the ultimately undeniable evidence of the President's own personal lapses, Clinton could be made to embody the very traits of sixties liberalism that had helped spur the conservative movement in the first place. Clinton may have fought that movement to a draw, but the movement would come out stronger for it—and

in George W. Bush's first term, that movement would take over the United States government.

THIS TELLING OF the story is too neat, I know. It ignores critical strands in the historical narrative—how the decline of manufacturing and Reagan's firing of the air traffic controllers critically wounded America's labor movement; the way that the creation of majority-minority congressional districts in the South simultaneously ensured more black representatives and reduced Democratic seats in that region; the lack of cooperation that Clinton received from congressional Democrats, who had grown fat and complacent and didn't realize the fight they were in. It also doesn't capture the degree to which advances in political gerrymandering polarized the Congress, or how efficiently money and negative television ads have poisoned the atmosphere.

Still, when I think about what that old Washington hand told me that night, when I ponder the work of a George Kennan or a George Marshall, when I read the speeches of a Bobby Kennedy or an Everett Dirksen, I can't help feeling that the politics of today suffers from a case of arrested development. For these men, the issues America faced were never abstract and hence never simple. War might be hell and still the right thing to do. Economies could collapse despite the best-laid plans. People could work hard all their lives and still lose everything.

For the generation of leaders who followed, raised in relative comfort, different experiences yielded a different attitude toward politics. In the back-and-forth between Clinton and Gingrich, and in the elections of 2000 and 2004, I sometimes felt as if I were watching the psychodrama of the Baby Boom generation—a tale rooted in old grudges and revenge plots hatched on a handful of college campuses long ago—played out on the national stage. The victories that the sixties generation brought about—the admission of minorities and women into full citizenship, the strengthening of individual liberties and the healthy willingness to question authority—have made America a far better place for all its citizens. But what has been lost in the process, and has yet to be replaced, are those shared assumptions—that quality of trust and fellow feeling—that bring us together as Americans.

So where does that leave us? Theoretically the Republican Party might have produced its own Clinton, a center-right leader who built on Clinton's fiscal conservatism while moving more aggressively to revamp a creaky federal bureaucracy and experiment with market- or faith-based solutions to social policy. And in fact such a leader may still emerge. Not all Republican elected officials subscribe to the tenets of today's movement conservatives. In both the House and the Senate, and in state capitals across the country, there are those who cling to more traditional conservative virtues of temperance and restraint—men and women who recognize that piling up debt to finance tax cuts for the wealthy is irresponsible, that deficit reduction can't take place on the backs of the poor, that the separation of church and state protects the church as well as the state, that conservation and conservatism don't have to conflict, and that foreign policy should be based on facts and not wishful thinking.

But these Republicans are not the ones who have driven the debate over the past six years. Instead of the “compassionate conservatism” that George Bush promised in his 2000 campaign, what has characterized the ideological core of today’s GOP is absolutism, not conservatism. There is the absolutism of the free market, an ideology of no taxes, no regulation, no safety net—indeed, no government beyond what’s required to protect private property and provide for the national defense.

There’s the religious absolutism of the Christian right, a movement that gained traction on the undeniably difficult issue of abortion, but which soon flowered into something much broader; a movement that insists not only that Christianity is America’s dominant faith, but that a particular, fundamentalist brand of that faith should drive public policy, overriding any alternative source of understanding, whether the writings of liberal theologians, the findings of the National Academy of Sciences, or the words of Thomas Jefferson.

And there is the absolute belief in the authority of majority will, or at least those who claim power in the name of the majority—a disdain for those institutional checks (the courts, the Constitution, the press, the Geneva Conventions, the rules of the Senate, or the traditions governing redistricting) that might slow our inexorable march toward the New Jerusalem.

Of course, there are those within the Democratic Party who tend toward similar zealotry. But those who do have never come close to possessing the power of a Rove or a DeLay, the power to take over the party, fill it with loyalists, and enshrine some of their more radical ideas into law. The prevalence of regional, ethnic, and economic differences within the party, the electoral map and the structure of the Senate, the need to raise money from economic elites to finance elections—all these things tend to prevent those Democrats in office from straying too far from the center. In fact, I know very few elected Democrats who neatly fit the liberal caricature; the last I checked, John Kerry believes in maintaining the superiority of the U.S. military, Hillary Clinton believes in the virtues of capitalism, and just about every member of the Congressional Black Caucus believes Jesus Christ died for his or her sins.

Instead, we Democrats are just, well, confused. There are those who still champion the old-time religion, defending every New Deal and Great Society program from Republican encroachment, achieving ratings of 100 percent from the liberal interest groups. But these efforts seem exhausted, a constant game of defense, bereft of the energy and new ideas needed to address the changing circumstances of globalization or a stubbornly isolated inner city. Others pursue a more “centrist” approach, figuring that so long as they split the difference with the conservative leadership, they must be acting reasonably—and failing to notice that with each passing year they are giving up more and more ground. Individually, Democratic legislators and candidates propose a host of sensible if incremental ideas, on energy and education, health care and homeland security, hoping that it all adds up to something resembling a governing philosophy.

Mainly, though, the Democratic Party has become the party of reaction. In reaction to a war that is ill conceived, we appear suspicious of all military action. In reaction to those who proclaim the market can cure all ills, we resist efforts to use market principles to tackle pressing problems. In reaction to religious overreach, we equate tolerance with secularism, and forfeit the moral language that would help infuse our policies with a



larger meaning. We lose elections and hope for the courts to foil Republican plans. We lose the courts and wait for a White House scandal.

And increasingly we feel the need to match the Republican right in stridency and hardball tactics. The accepted wisdom that drives many advocacy groups and Democratic activists these days goes something like this: The Republican Party has been able to consistently win elections not by expanding its base but by vilifying Democrats, driving wedges into the electorate, energizing its right wing, and disciplining those who stray from the party line. If the Democrats ever want to get back into power, then they will have to take up the same approach.

I understand the frustration of these activists. The ability of Republicans to repeatedly win on the basis of polarizing campaigns is indeed impressive. I recognize the dangers of subtlety and nuance in the face of the conservative movement's passionate intensity. And in my mind, at least, there are a host of Bush Administration policies that justify righteous indignation.

Ultimately, though, I believe any attempt by Democrats to pursue a more sharply partisan and ideological strategy misapprehends the moment we're in. I am convinced that whenever we exaggerate or demonize, oversimplify or overstate our case, we lose. Whenever we dumb down the political debate, we lose. For it's precisely the pursuit of ideological purity, the rigid orthodoxy and the sheer predictability of our current political debate, that keeps us from finding new ways to meet the challenges we face as a country. It's what keeps us locked in "either/or" thinking: the notion that we can have only big government or no government; the assumption that we must either tolerate forty-six million without health insurance or embrace "socialized medicine."

It is such doctrinaire thinking and stark partisanship that have turned Americans off of politics. This is not a problem for the right; a polarized electorate—or one that easily dismisses both parties because of the nasty, dishonest tone of the debate—works perfectly well for those who seek to chip away at the very idea of government. After all, a cynical electorate is a self-centered electorate.

But for those of us who believe that government has a role to play in promoting opportunity and prosperity for all Americans, a polarized electorate isn't good enough. Eking out a bare Democratic majority isn't good enough. What's needed is a broad majority of Americans—Democrats, Republicans, and independents of goodwill—who are reengaged in the project of national renewal, and who see their own self-interest as inextricably linked to the interests of others.

I'm under no illusion that the task of building such a working majority will be easy. But it's what we must do, precisely because the task of solving America's problems will be hard. It will require tough choices, and it will require sacrifice. Unless political leaders are open to new ideas and not just new packaging, we won't change enough hearts and minds to initiate a serious energy policy or tame the deficit. We won't have the popular support to craft a foreign policy that meets the challenges of globalization or terrorism without resorting to isolationism or eroding civil liberties. We won't have a mandate to overhaul America's broken health-care system. And we won't have the broad political support or the effective strategies needed to lift large numbers of our fellow citizens out of poverty.

I made this same argument in a letter I sent to the left-leaning blog Daily Kos in September 2005, after a number of advocacy groups and activists had attacked some of my Democratic colleagues for voting to confirm Chief Justice John Roberts. My staff was a little nervous about the idea; since I had voted against Roberts's confirmation, they saw no reason for me to agitate such a vocal part of the Democratic base. But I had come to appreciate the give-and-take that the blogs afforded, and in the days following the posting of my letter, in true democratic fashion, more than six hundred people posted their comments. Some agreed with me. Others thought that I was being too idealistic—that the kind of politics I was suggesting could not work in the face of the Republican PR machine. A sizable contingent thought that I had been “sent” by Washington elites to quell dissent in the ranks, and/or had been in Washington too long and was losing touch with the American people, and/or was—as one blogger later put it—simply an “idiot.”

Maybe the critics are right. Maybe there's no escaping our great political divide, an endless clash of armies, and any attempts to alter the rules of engagement are futile. Or maybe the trivialization of politics has reached a point of no return, so that most people see it as just one more diversion, a sport, with politicians our paunch-bellied gladiators and those who bother to pay attention just fans on the sidelines: We paint our faces red or blue and cheer our side and boo their side, and if it takes a late hit or cheap shot to beat the other team, so be it, for winning is all that matters.

But I don't think so. They are out there, I think to myself, those ordinary citizens who have grown up in the midst of all the political and cultural battles, but who have found a way—in their own lives, at least—to make peace with their neighbors, and themselves. I imagine the white Southerner who growing up heard his dad talk about niggers this and niggers that but who has struck up a friendship with the black guys at the office and is trying to teach his own son different, who thinks discrimination is wrong but doesn't see why the son of a black doctor should get admitted into law school ahead of his own son. Or the former Black Panther who decided to go into real estate, bought a few buildings in the neighborhood, and is just as tired of the drug dealers in front of those buildings as he is of the bankers who won't give him a loan to expand his business. There's the middle-aged feminist who still mourns her abortion, and the Christian woman who paid for her teenager's abortion, and the millions of waitresses and temp secretaries and nurse's assistants and Wal-Mart associates who hold their breath every single month in the hope that they'll have enough money to support the children that they did bring into the world.

I imagine they are waiting for a politics with the maturity to balance idealism and realism, to distinguish between what can and cannot be compromised, to admit the possibility that the other side might sometimes have a point. They don't always understand the arguments between right and left, conservative and liberal, but they recognize the difference between dogma and common sense, responsibility and irresponsibility, between those things that last and those that are fleeting.

They are out there, waiting for Republicans and Democrats to catch up with them.

## Chapter Two

### Values

**T**HE FIRST TIME I saw the White House was in 1984. I had just graduated from college and was working as a community organizer out of the Harlem campus of the City College of New York. President Reagan was proposing a round of student aid cuts at the time, and so I worked with a group of student leaders—most of them black, Puerto Rican, or of Eastern European descent, almost all of them the first in their families to attend college—to round up petitions opposing the cuts and then deliver them to the New York congressional delegation.

It was a brief trip, spent mostly navigating the endless corridors of the Rayburn Building, getting polite but cursory audiences with Hill staffers not much older than I was. But at the end of the day, the students and I took the time to walk down to the Mall and the Washington Monument, and then spent a few minutes gazing at the White House. Standing on Pennsylvania Avenue, a few feet away from the Marine guard station at the main entrance, with pedestrians weaving along the sidewalk and traffic whizzing behind us, I marveled not at the White House's elegant sweep, but rather at the fact that it was so exposed to the hustle and bustle of the city; that we were allowed to stand so close to the gate, and could later circle to the other side of the building to peer at the Rose Garden and the residence beyond. The openness of the White House said something about our confidence as a democracy, I thought. It embodied the notion that our leaders were not so different from us; that they remained subject to laws and our collective consent.

Twenty years later, getting close to the White House wasn't so simple. Checkpoints, armed guards, vans, mirrors, dogs, and retractable barricades now sealed off a two-block perimeter around the White House. Unauthorized cars no longer traveled Pennsylvania Avenue. On a cold January afternoon, the day before my swearing in to the Senate, Lafayette Park was mostly empty, and as my car was waved through the White House gates and up the driveway, I felt a glancing sadness at what had been lost.

The inside of the White House doesn't have the luminous quality that you might expect from TV or film; it seems well kept but worn, a big old house that one imagines might be a bit drafty on cold winter nights. Still, as I stood in the foyer and let my eyes wander down the corridors, it was impossible to forget the history that had been made there—John and Bobby Kennedy huddling over the Cuban missile crisis; FDR making last-minute changes to a radio address; Lincoln alone, pacing the halls and shouldering the weight of a nation. (It wasn't until several months later that I would get to see the Lincoln Bedroom, a modest space with antique furniture, a four-poster bed, an original copy of the Gettysburg Address discreetly displayed under glass—and a big flat-screen TV set atop one of the desks. Who, I wondered, flipped on *SportsCenter* while spending the night in the Lincoln Bedroom?)

I was greeted immediately by a member of the White House's legislative staff and led into the Gold Room, where most of the incoming House and Senate members had already gathered. At sixteen hundred hours on the dot, President Bush was announced and walked to the podium, looking vigorous and fit, with that jaunty, determined walk

that suggests he's on a schedule and wants to keep detours to a minimum. For ten or so minutes he spoke to the room, making a few jokes, calling for the country to come together, before inviting us to the other end of the White House for refreshments and a picture with him and the First Lady.

I happened to be starving at that moment, so while most of the other legislators started lining up for their photographs, I headed for the buffet. As I munched on hors d'oeuvres and engaged in small talk with a handful of House members, I recalled my previous two encounters with the President, the first a brief congratulatory call after the election, the second a small White House breakfast with me and the other incoming senators. Both times I had found the President to be a likable man, shrewd and disciplined but with the same straightforward manner that had helped him win two elections; you could easily imagine him owning the local car dealership down the street, coaching Little League, and grilling in his backyard—the kind of guy who would make for good company so long as the conversation revolved around sports and the kids.

There had been a moment during the breakfast meeting, though, after the backslapping and the small talk and when all of us were seated, with Vice President Cheney eating his eggs Benedict impassively and Karl Rove at the far end of the table discreetly checking his BlackBerry, that I witnessed a different side of the man. The President had begun to discuss his second-term agenda, mostly a reiteration of his campaign talking points—the importance of staying the course in Iraq and renewing the Patriot Act, the need to reform Social Security and overhaul the tax system, his determination to get an up-or-down vote on his judicial appointees—when suddenly it felt as if somebody in a back room had flipped a switch. The President's eyes became fixed; his voice took on the agitated, rapid tone of someone neither accustomed to nor welcoming interruption; his easy affability was replaced by an almost messianic certainty. As I watched my mostly Republican Senate colleagues hang on his every word, I was reminded of the dangerous isolation that power can bring, and appreciated the Founders' wisdom in designing a system to keep power in check.

“Senator?”

I looked up, shaken out of my memory, and saw one of the older black men who made up most of the White House waitstaff standing next to me.

“Want me to take that plate for you?”

I nodded, trying to swallow a mouthful of chicken something-or-others, and noticed that the line to greet the President had evaporated. Wanting to thank my hosts, I headed toward the Blue Room. A young Marine at the door politely indicated that the photograph session was over and that the President needed to get to his next appointment. But before I could turn around to go, the President himself appeared in the doorway and waved me in.

“Obama!” the President said, shaking my hand. “Come here and meet Laura. Laura, you remember Obama. We saw him on TV during election night. Beautiful family. And that wife of yours—that's one impressive lady.”

“We both got better than we deserve, Mr. President,” I said, shaking the First Lady’s hand and hoping that I’d wiped any crumbs off my face. The President turned to an aide nearby, who squirted a big dollop of hand sanitizer in the President’s hand.

“Want some?” the President asked. “Good stuff. Keeps you from getting colds.”

Not wanting to seem unhygienic, I took a squirt.

“Come over here for a second,” he said, leading me off to one side of the room. “You know,” he said quietly, “I hope you don’t mind me giving you a piece of advice.”

“Not at all, Mr. President.”

He nodded. “You’ve got a bright future,” he said. “Very bright. But I’ve been in this town awhile and, let me tell you, it can be tough. When you get a lot of attention like you’ve been getting, people start gunnin’ for ya. And it won’t necessarily just be coming from my side, you understand. From yours, too. Everybody’ll be waiting for you to slip, know what I mean? So watch yourself.”

“Thanks for the advice, Mr. President.”

“All right. I gotta get going. You know, me and you got something in common.”

“What’s that?”

“We both had to debate Alan Keyes. That guy’s a piece of work, isn’t he?”

I laughed, and as we walked to the door I told him a few stories from the campaign. It wasn’t until he had left the room that I realized I had briefly put my arm over his shoulder as we talked—an unconscious habit of mine, but one that I suspected might have made many of my friends, not to mention the Secret Service agents in the room, more than a little uneasy.

SINCE MY ARRIVAL in the Senate, I’ve been a steady and occasionally fierce critic of Bush Administration policies. I consider the Bush tax cuts for the wealthy to be both fiscally irresponsible and morally troubling. I have criticized the Administration for lacking a meaningful health-care agenda, a serious energy policy, or a strategy for making America more competitive. Back in 2002, just before announcing my Senate campaign, I made a speech at one of the first antiwar rallies in Chicago in which I questioned the Administration’s evidence of weapons of mass destruction and suggested that an invasion of Iraq would prove to be a costly error. Nothing in the recent news coming out of Baghdad or the rest of the Middle East has dispelled these views.

So Democratic audiences are often surprised when I tell them that I don’t consider George Bush a bad man, and that I assume he and members of his Administration are trying to do what they think is best for the country.

I say this not because I am seduced by the proximity to power. I see my invitations to the White House for what they are—exercises in common political courtesy—and am mindful of how quickly the long knives can come out when the Administration's agenda is threatened in any serious way. Moreover, whenever I write a letter to a family who has lost a loved one in Iraq, or read an email from a constituent who has dropped out of college because her student aid has been cut, I'm reminded that the actions of those in power have enormous consequences—a price that they themselves almost never have to pay.

It is to say that after all the trappings of office—the titles, the staff, the security details—are stripped away, I find the President and those who surround him to be pretty much like everybody else, possessed of the same mix of virtues and vices, insecurities and long-buried injuries, as the rest of us. No matter how wrongheaded I might consider their policies to be—and no matter how much I might insist that they be held accountable for the results of such policies—I still find it possible, in talking to these men and women, to understand their motives, and to recognize in them values I share.

This is not an easy posture to maintain in Washington. The stakes involved in Washington policy debates are often so high—whether we send our young men and women to war; whether we allow stem cell research to go forward—that even small differences in perspective are magnified. The demands of party loyalty, the imperative of campaigns, and the amplification of conflict by the media all contribute to an atmosphere of suspicion. Moreover, most people who serve in Washington have been trained either as lawyers or as political operatives—professions that tend to place a premium on winning arguments rather than solving problems. I can see how, after a certain amount of time in the capital, it becomes tempting to assume that those who disagree with you have fundamentally different values—indeed, that they are motivated by bad faith, and perhaps are bad people.

Outside of Washington, though, America feels less deeply divided. Illinois, for example, is no longer considered a bellwether state. For more than a decade now, it's become more and more Democratic, partly because of increased urbanization, partly because the social conservatism of today's GOP doesn't wear well in the Land of Lincoln. But Illinois remains a microcosm of the country, a rough stew of North and South, East and West, urban and rural, black, white, and everything in between. Chicago may possess all the big-city sophistication of L.A. or New York, but geographically and culturally, the southern end of Illinois is closer to Little Rock or Louisville, and large swaths of the state are considered, in modern political parlance, a deep shade of red.

I first traveled through southern Illinois in 1997. It was the summer after my first term in the Illinois legislature, and Michelle and I were not yet parents. With session adjourned, no law school classes to teach, and Michelle busy with work of her own, I convinced my legislative aide, Dan Shomon, to toss a map and some golf clubs in the car and tool around the state for a week. Dan had been both a UPI reporter and a field coordinator for several downstate campaigns, so he knew the territory pretty well. But as the date of our departure approached, it became apparent that he wasn't quite sure how I would be received in the counties we were planning to visit. Four times he reminded me how to pack—just khakis and polo shirts, he said; no fancy linen trousers or silk shirts. I assured him that I didn't own any linens or silks. On the drive down, we

stopped at a TGI Friday's and I ordered a cheeseburger. When the waitress brought the food I asked her if she had any Dijon mustard. Dan shook his head.

"He doesn't want Dijon," he insisted, waving the waitress off. "Here"—he shoved a yellow bottle of French's mustard in my direction—"here's some mustard right here."

The waitress looked confused. "We got Dijon if you want it," she said to me.

I smiled. "That would be great, thanks." As the waitress walked away, I leaned over to Dan and whispered that I didn't think there were any photographers around.

And so we traveled, stopping once a day to play a round of golf in the sweltering heat, driving past miles of cornfields and thick forests of ash trees and oak trees and shimmering lakes lined with stumps and reeds, through big towns like Carbondale and Mount Vernon, replete with strip malls and Wal-Marts, and tiny towns like Sparta and Pinckneyville, many of them with brick courthouses at the center of town, their main streets barely hanging on with every other store closed, the occasional roadside vendors selling fresh peaches or corn, or in the case of one couple I saw, "Good Deals on Guns and Swords."

We stopped in a coffee shop to eat pie and swap jokes with the mayor of Chester. We posed in front of the fifteen-foot-tall statue of Superman at the center of Metropolis. We heard about all the young people who were moving to the big cities because manufacturing and coal-mining jobs were disappearing. We learned about the local high school football teams' prospects for the coming season, and the vast distances veterans had to drive in order to reach the closest VA facility. We met women who had been missionaries in Kenya and greeted me in Swahili, and farmers who tracked the financial pages of the *Wall Street Journal* before setting out on their tractors. Several times a day, I pointed out to Dan the number of men we met sporting white linen slacks or silk Hawaiian shirts. In the small dining room of a Democratic party official in Du Quoin, I asked the local state's attorney about crime trends in his largely rural, almost uniformly white county, expecting him to mention joy-riding sprees or folks hunting out of season.

"The Gangster Disciples," he said, munching on a carrot. "We've got an all-white branch down here—kids without jobs, selling dope and speed."

By the end of the week, I was sorry to leave. Not simply because I had made so many new friends, but because in the faces of all the men and women I'd met I had recognized pieces of myself. In them I saw my grandfather's openness, my grandmother's matter-of-factness, my mother's kindness. The fried chicken, the potato salad, the grape halves in the Jell-O mold—all of it felt familiar.

It's that sense of familiarity that strikes me wherever I travel across Illinois. I feel it when I'm sitting down at a diner on Chicago's West Side. I feel it as I watch Latino men play soccer while their families cheer them on in a park in Pilsen. I feel it when I'm attending an Indian wedding in one of Chicago's northern suburbs.

Not so far beneath the surface, I think, we are becoming more, not less, alike.

I don't mean to exaggerate here, to suggest that the pollsters are wrong and that our differences—racial, religious, regional, or economic—are somehow trivial. In Illinois, as is true everywhere, abortion vexes. In certain parts of the state, the mention of gun control constitutes sacrilege. Attitudes about everything from the income tax to sex on TV diverge wildly from place to place.

It is to insist that across Illinois, and across America, a constant cross-pollination is occurring, a not entirely orderly but generally peaceful collision among people and cultures. Identities are scrambling, and then cohering in new ways. Beliefs keep slipping through the noose of predictability. Facile expectations and simple explanations are being constantly upended. Spend time actually talking to Americans, and you discover that most evangelicals are more tolerant than the media would have us believe, most secularists more spiritual. Most rich people want the poor to succeed, and most of the poor are both more self-critical and hold higher aspirations than the popular culture allows. Most Republican strongholds are 40 percent Democrat, and vice versa. The political labels of liberal and conservative rarely track people's personal attributes.

All of which raises the question: What are the core values that we, as Americans, hold in common? That's not how we usually frame the issue, of course; our political culture fixates on where our values clash. In the immediate aftermath of the 2004 election, for example, a major national exit poll was published in which voters ranked "moral values" as having determined how they cast their ballot. Commentators fastened on the data to argue that the most controversial social issues in the election—particularly gay marriage—had swung a number of states. Conservatives heralded the numbers, convinced that they proved the Christian right's growing power.

When these polls were later analyzed, it turned out that the pundits and prognosticators had overstated their case a bit. In fact, voters had considered national security as the election's most important issue, and although large numbers of voters did consider "moral values" an important factor in the way they voted, the meaning of the term was so vague as to include everything from abortion to corporate malfeasance. Immediately, some Democrats could be heard breathing a sigh of relief, as if a diminution in the "values factor" served the liberal cause; as if a discussion of values was a dangerous, unnecessary distraction from those material concerns that characterized the Democratic Party platform.

I think Democrats are wrong to run away from a debate about values, as wrong as those conservatives who see values only as a wedge to pry loose working-class voters from the Democratic base. It is the language of values that people use to map their world. It is what can inspire them to take action, and move them beyond their isolation. The postelection polls may have been poorly composed, but the broader question of shared values—the standards and principles that the majority of Americans deem important in their lives, and in the life of the country—should be the heart of our politics, the cornerstone of any meaningful debate about budgets and projects, regulations and policies.



“WE HOLD THESE truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

Those simple words are our starting point as Americans; they describe not only the foundation of our government but the substance of our common creed. Not every American may be able to recite them; few, if asked, could trace the genesis of the Declaration of Independence to its roots in eighteenth-century liberal and republican thought. But the essential idea behind the Declaration—that we are born into this world free, all of us; that each of us arrives with a bundle of rights that can’t be taken away by any person or any state without just cause; that through our own agency we can, and must, make of our lives what we will—is one that every American understands. It orients us, sets our course, each and every day.

Indeed, the value of individual freedom is so deeply ingrained in us that we tend to take it for granted. It is easy to forget that at the time of our nation’s founding this idea was entirely radical in its implications, as radical as Martin Luther’s posting on the church door. It is an idea that some portion of the world still rejects—and for which an even larger portion of humanity finds scant evidence in their daily lives.

In fact, much of my appreciation of our Bill of Rights comes from having spent part of my childhood in Indonesia and from still having family in Kenya, countries where individual rights are almost entirely subject to the self-restraint of army generals or the whims of corrupt bureaucrats. I remember the first time I took Michelle to Kenya, shortly before we were married. As an African American, Michelle was bursting with excitement about the idea of visiting the continent of her ancestors, and we had a wonderful time, visiting my grandmother up-country, wandering through the streets of Nairobi, camping in the Serengeti, fishing off the island of Lamu.

But during our travels Michelle also heard—as I had heard during my first trip to Africa—the terrible sense on the part of most Kenyans that their fates were not their own. My cousins told her how difficult it was to find a job or start their own businesses without paying bribes. Activists told us about being jailed for expressing their opposition to government policies. Even within my own family, Michelle saw how suffocating the demands of family ties and tribal loyalties could be, with distant cousins constantly asking for favors, uncles and aunts showing up unannounced. On the flight back to Chicago, Michelle admitted she was looking forward to getting home. “I never realized just how American I was,” she said. She hadn’t realized just how free she was—or how much she cherished that freedom.

At its most elemental level, we understand our liberty in a negative sense. As a general rule we believe in the right to be left alone, and are suspicious of those—whether Big Brother or nosy neighbors—who want to meddle in our business. But we understand our liberty in a more positive sense as well, in the idea of opportunity and the subsidiary values that help realize opportunity—all those homespun virtues that Benjamin Franklin first popularized in *Poor Richard’s Almanack* and that have continued to inspire our allegiance through successive generations. The values of self-reliance and self-improvement and risk-taking. The values of drive, discipline, temperance, and hard work. The values of thrift and personal responsibility.





























































































































































































































































































































































































































