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### MISTRUST

When I was writing my doctoral dissertation on the 1980 presidential campaign, I had no idea what a momentous election it would become. Ronald Reagan's triumph that year would usher in a transformative "Reagan Revolution" that would cut taxes, reduce domestic spending, alter social policy, and force the Soviet Union into an expensive arms race that would eventually bring down the Berlin Wall.<sup>1</sup>

But Reagan's actions seem mild compared with those of his successors. Over the next few decades, the country would gyrate from Reagan (and his successor, George H. W. Bush) to Bill Clinton to George W. Bush to Barack Obama to Donald Trump, and each leader would shift America in startling directions. This forty-year time period would become a tumultuous era in American history. Conflict during each administration would add to the country's profound mistrust and antagonism.

Each of these presidents provoked strong reactions from opponents. In speaking with family members, colleagues, and friends at various points in time, I could see polarization and partisanship

intensify during each presidency. People reacted in highly personal ways to each leader's term in office. They did not trust any president from the opposite party, and they feared that he was destroying the America they loved. James Stewart notes that politics during this era became a "blood sport," with high levels of personal conflict and antipathy. That was an apt metaphor for this contentious time period.<sup>2</sup>

### ***The Reagan Revolution***

My father loved Ronald Reagan. A dairy farmer with thirty cows to milk twice a day, he wanted a Republican who was tough on defense, opposed to big government, and committed to morality, school prayer, and the sanctity of life. Reagan was an ideal leader for him because he understood the values of small-town America and did not talk down to ordinary folks the way, in his view, coastal elites and liberal politicians did.

Dad had several experiences that pushed him to the right. As a dairy farmer, he was subject to periodic and unannounced visits from milk inspectors, whose job was to ensure the quality and safety of the food supply. They would visit our farm and inspect our barns and dairy equipment. Anything that was unclean would be written up on a sheet and left in our milk house. If a farmer got flagged for the same violations several times in a row, the inspector had the power to close down the dairy operation and prevent the milk from being sold to processing plants. This was the nuclear option for milk inspectors, and sometimes they invoked it to make sure farmers took cleanliness seriously.

My father had regular run-ins with these overseers. They took positions he found hard to fathom. Early in my life, we raised both pigs and cows. This came to an end one day when a milk inspector informed us that pigs and cows could not graze on the same fields for fear of cross-species contamination.

On a family farm of 160 acres, it was impossible to separate these animals. We simply didn't have sufficient acreage to isolate our cows

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from the pigs. My father complained bitterly about this decision and thought it was an unwarranted intrusion into our business operations. It personified for him all that was wrong with government. “Milk inspectors should not tell farmers how to run their operations,” he argued vehemently.

But the inspector was inflexible. “Sell the pigs and keep the cows,” he warned, or vice versa. He didn’t care which we did as long as one set of animals disappeared from our farm. My father’s appeal of this draconian decision fell on deaf ears, and we sold the pigs and became dairy specialists.

These inspectors also objected to open milk cans. In the barn parlor where we milked the cows, we had buckets into which we would pour the milk. Inspectors insisted that these buckets have lids to keep dirt out. My father purchased a tall, stainless steel bucket with a perfectly fitting lid that he kept in our milk house so the inspector could see we were in compliance with the rules.

Of course, we never actually used this steel bucket, except to make large batches of fruit punch for family reunions. We continued to use the old buckets with no lids to carry our dairy milk as they were more convenient to use. Having lids on cans made it difficult to pour milk into the cans from our milking machines. But at least we were in technical compliance with the rules.

This is not to say that the inspectors had no legitimate concerns about the cleanliness of our dairy operation. When the cows walked into our milking parlor, they strode right past the open milk containers. One day, I saw a cow shit directly into a bucket full of milk. Asking my father what we should do, he walked over and scooped the fresh ball of manure out of the bucket with his bare hands. “Nothing,” he said and dumped that bucket in with the rest of our milk. I made sure I did not drink any milk that night or for the next several days. Privately, I became a little more sympathetic to the government’s position on food safety.

My mother was as conservative as my father. She knitted baby quilts for Birthright and the Pregnancy Care Center—organizations

whose missions were to provide caring support to those with unplanned pregnancies. The groups would offer alternatives to abortion, such as adoption.

She furthermore was not a big fan of evolution as an explanation for natural phenomena. On one trip to Boston, my then-wife, Annie, and I took her to visit the Comparative Zoology Museum at Harvard University. It had a famous “glass flowers” exhibit in which German craftsman had created life-like models of numerous flowers showing all the details of each plant.

As we walked through the museum, we passed an exhibit on a prehistoric fish known as the coelacanth. This is thought to be the closest tie to the first amphibians, which crawled from sea to land during the Devonian stage 400 million years ago and thereby paved the way for human beings. Biologists love the fish because of its prehistoric roots and the fact that it is the only contemporary fish that dates back to that formative time period.

Seeing the description on evolutionary principles, my mother leaned over to Annie and said, “You know, I still don’t believe all this evolution stuff.” Annie taught in the department of ecology and evolutionary biology at Brown University, but she didn’t say anything. She thought it best to stay quiet regarding her work on plant evolution. But we gave each other knowing looks about the clash of cultures. We understood about blue and red states long before that framework became popular in American politics.

Not surprisingly for a rural community, conservative organizations had a firm foothold in my hometown. When I was young, the local Women’s Christian Temperance Union was overseen by a neighbor and fellow churchgoer. She railed against the dangers of alcohol and the need to outlaw liquor production. It was a grim irony that in later years her only son became an alcoholic, developed cirrhosis of the liver, and died a premature death.

Other neighbors were active in the John Birch Society. This was a right-wing organization named after an American intelligence officer and Baptist missionary who was murdered by Chinese communists

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in 1945. Founded in 1958, the group's motto was "Less government, more responsibility, and—with God's help—a better world." It advocated a strong Judeo-Christian framework for American government and bitterly opposed the United Nations and other multilateral world organizations. The group fought the civil rights movement and opposed communism everywhere.<sup>3</sup>

My aunt Martha had a more local concern—the fluoridation of water. A registered nurse who lived in Cincinnati, she was convinced the government's plan to put fluoride in the water to prevent tooth decay, as recommended by expert medical panels, was a communist plot to undermine America. At any mention of fluoridation, she would go off on long tirades concerning her deep mistrust of the government. Her recipe for a long life was avoiding fluoridated water and giving herself a daily enema (what today is referred to as "colon cleansing").

Her views on fluoridation paralleled those of General Jack D. Ripper in the famous 1964 Cold War movie *Dr. Strangelove*. General Ripper explains to Group Captain Lionel Mandrake regarding the simultaneous dangers of communism and fluoridating water,

I can no longer sit back and allow Communist infiltration, Communist indoctrination, Communist subversion and the international Communist conspiracy to sap and impurify all of our precious bodily fluids. . . . It's incredibly obvious, isn't it? A foreign substance is introduced into our precious bodily fluids without the knowledge of the individual. Certainly without any choice. That's the way your hard-core Commie works.<sup>4</sup>

As our only family member living in a large city, Aunt Martha also stood as our personal authority on racial matters. Our community was 100 percent white, but she worked with African Americans in several city hospitals, which gave her an experience none of us had. Yet she did not speak kindly about her minority colleagues and

complained they were lazy. She was single and worried constantly about crime, especially attacks from those she called “the darkies.”

I was perplexed at my aunt’s racist attitudes and strange personal behaviors. I never understood why she hated African Americans and said such nasty things about them. As someone who had never met any racial minority before going to college, I found the the deep fears that many people felt about race hard to fathom.

When I went to graduate school at Indiana University, I decided to focus on campaigns for my doctoral dissertation. I loved political strategy and the way candidates mobilized voter support and built electoral coalitions. With the 1980 presidential contest coming up, I chose to study the tactics Republican and Democratic candidates used to win elections. If politics was the art of persuasion, I wanted to understand how they did it.

Using a grant from the National Science Foundation, I traveled around the country following the various candidates. On the Democratic side, I talked with top advisers to President Jimmy Carter, challenger Ted Kennedy, and upstart Jerry Brown. Kennedy was waging an effort to dethrone a sitting president from his own party. But his campaign was the most disorganized of all those I observed, and his staffers never seemed on top of their messaging or strategy.

Carter used all the perquisites of his office and cited the Iranian hostage crisis as the excuse for a “Rose Garden strategy” of not campaigning outside of the White House. Instead, he derided the personal character of Kennedy and broadcast ads about his family, while operatives snickered privately about Kennedy’s womanizing and lack of family values.

One day at a Jerry Brown for President rally in New Hampshire, I sat next to rock star Linda Ronstadt. She was campaigning for her boyfriend Jerry, who was running for president. I took it as a bad sign for his candidacy when after his speech, many more people gathered around her than him.

Early in the campaign, I shook Ronald Reagan’s hand at a small New Hampshire gathering. In spite of all those pictures of him chop-

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ping wood, my conclusion from this brief encounter was the guy did little physical labor as he had the softest hands of anyone I'd ever met. Later, during his presidency, I would see images of him working on his ranch and clearing brush, but judging from his uncallused hands, it clearly was not a frequent activity for him.

Along with a small crowd, I attended a party celebrating George H. W. Bush's announcement speech at his Virginia headquarters. While there, I met a distinguished-looking gentleman from Houston named Jim Baker who was running Bush's campaign. I didn't know much about him but was impressed with his smooth talk and smart insights into the political process. I had no idea he would emerge as one of President Reagan's top advisers and a future secretary of state.

Following Reagan's historic triumph, the Californian would preside over a dramatic transformation of the country's orientation. He would tilt the balance in American politics in a conservative direction. Along with his congressional allies, Reagan would cut taxes, reduce the federal bureaucracy, and slow the rate of growth in social welfare benefits.

He demonstrated the ability to forge an effective coalition of conservative Republicans, independents, and Democrats disenchanted with their party's stance on social issues and foreign policy. The chief executive was able to knit these individuals together into a movement that would force Democrats to shift to the center and allow Republicans to pursue an even more conservative policy agenda. The Soviet Union would be confronted by a massive military buildup that eventually bankrupted that country and led to the collapse of communism. This ended the Cold War and ushered in a period of American dominance in world affairs.

In contrast to my rural Ohio family, who were thrilled with Reagan's ascendancy, my Brown University colleagues hated Reagan and thought he represented the worst elements in American politics. Most of the people I knew there saw him as bigoted, uncaring, and stupid. In their minds he was a charlatan who beguiled voters with a folksy style but deep down was a dangerous and mean-spirited leader.

Seeking to organize public opposition to this administration, students came up with creative ways to criticize Reagan. One entrepreneurial pupil named Jason Saltzman, worried about the risk of nuclear war under the bellicose Reagan, organized a student referendum (Students for Suicide Tablets) asking the university administration to stock “suicide pills” for optional use in case the GOP president pushed the nuclear button.

If people were going to die from the blast, he reasoned, they might as well be allowed to take the painless way out. He explained that “college students have been silent about the arms race. But it’s our world that is going to be destroyed.” When asked about the suicide option, Jason indicated that he came up with the idea “to shock people into taking action. When you confront people with their own suicide, then they think about the suicidal nature of nuclear war.”<sup>5</sup>

The vote was a symbolic expression in the middle of the Cold War of young people’s worry about nuclear annihilation and the dangers of President Ronald Reagan’s militaristic policy. Based on my childhood anxiety regarding the Cuban missile crisis, I definitely understood student fears about the destructive power of nuclear weapons.

Yet to the outside world, Brown University students were lunatics who thought nuclear war was imminent and wanted to commit suicide. Every major newspaper in the nation sent reporters asking what was happening at Brown and why the university’s students were planning to take their own lives.

An editorial in the student newspaper opined that “a strong yes vote on the suicide pill referendum might rattle a lot of people’s beliefs about college students. No, it would say, we are not just grade-grubbing pre-pro pre-yep resume packers. And yes, we do care about something beyond whether mommy will let us have the car this year.”<sup>6</sup>

When the referendum passed with 60 percent of the student vote, university president Howard Swearer was forced to issue a statement saying Brown would not stock cyanide pills at the health center. In-

stead, the school would provide courses, forums, and lectures that would explore feelings about nuclear war.<sup>7</sup>

### *The Clinton Period*

The Reagan-Bush years closed with a deep recession that gave an unknown governor from Arkansas named Bill Clinton the opportunity to usher Democrats back into power. With a deft political touch, Clinton rallied his party and won majorities in the House and Senate.<sup>8</sup> For a brief time, it looked as though the Reagan era represented a temporary blip in the political landscape, not a long-term transformation.

But conservatives had a plan to make sure Clinton did not succeed. He had a charming personality that liberals loved and conservatives hated. His supporters felt he connected well with typical voters and “understood their pain.” He didn’t talk down to people and was great at personalizing arguments in ways they could understand. Conservatives, however, saw him as a liberal charlatan who was fake and deceitful and had deep character flaws. They worked hard to make sure he was not successful.

Clinton made health care the centerpiece of his domestic agenda and argued it was time for the federal government to provide “health security” for the uninsured. As a so-called New Democrat, he felt that there were too many guns in America, and he hoped his Health Security Act would do for workers what Franklin Roosevelt’s Social Security had accomplished in the 1930s. It would provide needed social benefits for the poor and cement the Democrats’ grip on power.

Advising him on health care was Rhode Island resident Ira Magaziner, author of Brown’s successful New Curriculum, which removed course distribution requirements. I knew Ira would either succeed or fail big on health care because he was a visionary who pushed bold ideas. He was never content with incremental reform.

In 1993, First Lady Hilary Clinton came to Brown University to

promote the president's health care plan. I moderated the televised forum on health care reform, which featured Clinton along with Rhode Island's two senators (Claiborne Pell and John Chafee) and two representatives (Jack Reed and Ron Machtley).

The event was designed to show how the president's plan worked and what it would do for ordinary people. Following themes laid out by the White House, I interviewed several people from business about their health care problems. After hearing these tales of distress, Clinton explained how her husband's program would solve the problem, and the Rhode Island political leaders would chime in with their perspectives on the issue.

The event was like a rock concert. Six hundred people crowded into a university lecture hall, along with a gaggle of reporters. A husband and wife who ran a small trucking company in New Hampshire complained about the high cost of health care for their employees. After listening attentively to their story, the First Lady replied with great empathy, "This is how the president's plan would take care of that."

Seeing her up close, I saw she was smart, articulate, and knowledgeable about health matters. Throughout the evening, she repeated her constant refrain about "the president's plan" or "Bill's program." Not once did she talk about "my plan" or "the ideas I drafted," even though she and Ira were the major intellectual forces behind the proposal.

Despite the efforts of the president and First Lady, the Clinton health care proposal died ignominiously. Republicans attacked the plan as a federal takeover of health care and a big bureaucracy that would interfere with the private relationship between doctor and patient. Worried interest groups ran millions in television ads blasting the reform. A fictional couple named Harry and Louise became household names with their kitchen-table patter complaining about Clinton's effort. Along with Magaziner, the Clintons' bold initiative ended in embarrassing defeat.

As often happens in politics, every attempt at revolution stimu-

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lates a counterrevolution. Across the country, a growing movement began to gather intensity. Angry conservatives, upset over the president's health care reform, tax surcharges on the wealthy, and restrictions on assault weapon purchases, fought back.

During the 1994 midterm elections, conservative forces demonstrated that the Reagan Revolution was no blip. It was a movement with legs that would seize control of the House of Representatives for the first time in fifty years. This new force, known as the Gingrich Revolution, would make fire-brand Newt Gingrich Speaker of the House and put Democrats on the defensive for more than a decade.

While Reagan had pushed major changes through Congress, Gingrich and his fellow zealots brought a sharper edge to political conflict and polarized the nation along ideological lines. Reagan had been conservative, but Gingrich was a radical reformer. He saw himself as the leader who would carry Reaganism to new heights. His goal was to create what he called an "opportunity society" in which entrepreneurial talent would be rewarded and people who did well would not have to pay high taxes to the government to support public assistance and other programs for the poor and needy.

His bare-knuckle tactics helped the GOP gain control of Congress and use its new power to solidify a conservative coalition in American politics. Gingrich sought to divide the opposition party using wedge issues such as abortion, gay rights, and evolution. The new Speaker was not reluctant to use emotional rhetoric and divisive tactics to implement his policy agenda.

Republicans scored several legislative victories on tax cuts, welfare reform, and some entitlement cutbacks, yet they were unable to derail Clinton's reelection. They had nominated Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole to head their party slate. Dole's 1996 campaign confirmed my impressions of the Kansan's 1980 presidential bid: it was disorganized, strayed off message, and suffered from his close association with the divisive Gingrich. He wasn't warm and cuddly and did not have the political skills or rhetorical talent to defeat even a wounded Clinton.

The president coasted to an easy reelection but soon thereafter ended up in a personal predicament that would tarnish his legacy and undermine Democratic efforts to retain the presidency. During the dark days in 1995, when the government had been shut down and nonessential employees ordered home in a funding dispute with Republicans, a young intern named Monica Lewinsky was pressed into service to deliver food to the Oval Office. Flashing her thong at a president still reeling from his party's overwhelming defeat the previous year, the two began an affair that lasted a year.

When news leaked out about the relationship, the country was pitted in a red state–blue state divide that I knew all too well from my agrarian roots. Conservative midwesterners and southerners were outraged at adulterous oral sex in the White House, while coastal liberals decried the private behavior but claimed his personal misdeeds had no relevance for his job performance. Right after the news broke, my sister Joanne wrote me, “I don’t think this will die down overnight. I think he’s in trouble.”<sup>9</sup>

Two months later, she still was upset about the scandal. “It’s horrible all the jokes they say on late night television and everywhere else about him. It’s an embarrassment to our country.”<sup>10</sup> Conservatives thought liberals were being hypocritical in minimizing this ethical transgression, while liberals didn’t understand how upsetting Clinton’s personal behavior was to people in the Bible Belt. When the First Family had the family dog fixed, my hometown friends joked, Hillary had neutered the wrong Clinton.

The president was impeached by the House but retained in office by the Senate. Nearly everyone around the country seethed over the result. Liberals could not understand the millions spent investigating the president’s private life, while conservatives were shocked the chief executive lied under oath about the affair. It spawned ugly feelings from everyone who followed the proceedings.

The following year, I got an up-close look at the scene of the affair. My former student Justin Coleman worked in the White House helping to manage the presidential paper flow. For years, he

had been inviting me to come to Washington to have lunch in the White House dining room. I was in D.C. releasing the results of an e-government study and set up a lunch.

Before we dined, Justin showed me his office on the floor below the president's office. Although many years earlier I had taken the official tour of the White House, this was my first look at the inner sanctuary itself, the part not shown to tourists. In walking around that area, I was surprised at the close quarters within the West Wing. Befitting a place built in the nineteenth century, it was not a sleek office building with spacious offices and room to spread out. Space was at such a premium that nearly everyone virtually sat on top of one another. Justin shared a tiny cubbyhole with two co-workers.

Upstairs, I was surprised at the small size of the Oval Office. On television, it looked much more expansive than in person. Seeing the infamous desk and the carpet on which Lewinsky had performed oral sex on the president, I thought to myself that whoever became president in 2000 was going to have this carpet cleaned. When Republicans regained control of the White House that year, I was not surprised by the quiet announcement that newly elected president George W. Bush had replaced the entire Oval Office carpet.

In the end, Clinton's presidency barely dented the movement toward conservatism in America. After he shifted Democrats toward the political center, Republicans simply tacked further to the right. The gap between the two parties remained the same, only there was no true liberal voice anymore, and the GOP was able to pursue more radical policies well to the right of Democrats. The next president would demonstrate how to govern the country in a much more conservative direction.

### *Bush and the War on Terror*

The Bush-Gore race of 2000 did nothing to ease the polarization and ill feelings unleashed by the Gingrich Revolution and Clinton's affair. With a strong economy, Vice President Al Gore should have

won the campaign. Judging from past elections, Democrats were well positioned by the robust economic performance and budget surplus of the late 1990s.

Yet Gore suffered two major liabilities. First, he was not good at communicating with the general public and looked stiff next to the man he was attempting to succeed. There was none of the personal charm that had allowed voters to overlook his boss's imperfections. Bush had a folksy manner that appealed to the average person.

Second, Clinton's sex affair had energized the GOP base and elevated moral issues in American politics. Repeatedly, throughout the campaign, Bush promised to restore dignity to the office of the president. Everyone understood that the word "dignity" meant no more adulterous sex in the Oval Office. Although the campaign outcome remained in doubt for six weeks after Election Day while the courts reviewed Florida's voting disputes, Republicans in the end were aided by a friendly U.S. Supreme Court decision to stop counting contested votes.

If Reagan and Gingrich had been agents of change, both paled in comparison with a GOP led by an activist president with congressional majorities. Bush had campaigned on massive tax cuts, and he stayed true to his word. It was a tight vote, but the Republican Congress passed the biggest tax cut in the history of the country. Rather than secure Social Security, as Gore had proposed, much of that money went for tax relief targeted on the wealthy.

But it would be the extraordinary terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, that marked the Bush presidency. I taught a 9 a.m. class that day on politics and mass media and had no idea of the horror that was unfolding in New York City and Washington, D.C. These were the days before mobile phones kept everyone constantly in touch with the outside world.

Returning mid-morning to my office after class, I was startled to find a dozen colleagues gathered around a television set watching the screen. Quickly, I learned that one World Trade Center building had collapsed and the other was about to fall; all this was broadcast live

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on national television before a horrified country. Writing to me the next day, Joanne said, “What a horrible thing . . . happened yesterday. . . . We will never forget that day. . . . I’ve never seen anything like this in my lifetime.”<sup>11</sup>

In the short run, the nation pulled together in furor over the unjustified attack. Bush’s job approval rating soared into the 80s. Virtually everyone except the most rabid liberals appreciated his firm leadership in the wake of the attacks. Expressions of sympathy poured into the country from all around the world. My mother said, “The President gave a wonderful speech the other night, but I think it will be impossible to catch all of these critters.”<sup>12</sup>

Within the White House, Bush adviser Karl Rove formulated a new strategy for the administration. Rather than following the bipartisan strategy they had pioneered with the No Child Left Behind education legislation, which was co-written with liberal icon Ted Kennedy, the White House sought partisan advantage through this national crisis. The administration would launch a war on terrorism that evoked strong feelings from many corners of the country.

Moving quickly, the administration passed the so-called Patriot Act, which gave the government extraordinary power to gather intelligence information and compile data on phone calls, library book checkouts, and electronic communications. In foreign policy, Bush declared war on Afghanistan, the home of al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. American military forces quickly overthrew the country’s Taliban leadership and installed a regime more friendly to the United States.

Around the same time, the president’s hawkish advisers targeted Iraq as a nation they claimed harbored terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. After a vote in the Senate supporting military actions, U.S. forces invaded. Quickly, American troops overran Baghdad and took control of the country. Saddam Hussein was forced into hiding and was eventually captured and executed. Bush flew to an aircraft carrier in the region and spoke under a sign declaring “Mission Accomplished.”

That sign turned out to be woefully premature. The president and his team thought Iraq was going to be like Eastern Europe after the Iron Curtain fell: get rid of the dictator, they assumed, and there would be rejoicing in the streets. Before long, capitalism and democracy would flourish, and Bush would be the hero who transformed the Middle East and brought democracy to that troubled region.

Of course, what that optimistic scenario neglected was the generations of ethnic, religious, and class conflict in Iraq. As soon as Saddam Hussein was gone, many Iraqis reverted to their Sunni, Shiite, or Kurdish roots and pursued long-standing grievances against their fellow country people.

Given the history of ethnic hatred, the Iraq War dragged on with extensive violence inside that nation and became a contentious issue within the United States. Democrats accused the administration of lying and deceit in getting the country involved in an unwinnable war based on a manufactured rationale, while Republicans complained that Democrats only wanted to “cut and run” and were soft on terrorism.

In 2006 the country repudiated Bush and his Iraq War policies. In a stunning reversal, Democrats regained majority control of the House and Senate. For the first time in twelve years, Democrats would be in control of Congress. The Reagan-Bush-Gingrich revolution seemingly was over, and Democrats had a platform from which to pursue a more progressive agenda.

For me, our country’s polarization between red and blue states on Bush and the Iraq War hit very close to home. My family remained sharply divided when it came to politics. Ken was no fan of the Bush presidency. He sent me liberal jabs that read “January 20, 2009, the end of an error,” “Bush. Like a Rock. Only Dumber,” and “When Fascism Comes to America, It Will Be Wrapped in a Flag, Carrying a Cross.” And in a precursor to Donald Trump’s chants about Hillary Clinton in 2016, he passed along a popular Democratic meme about Bush, calling for “jail to the chief.”

Not to be outdone, Shirley sent me a birthday card from the Mid-

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west showing a smiling picture of “President Hillary Clinton” sitting in the Oval Office. On the next page, the punch line announced, “See? There are some things scarier than turning a year older.” Understanding that my political predispositions didn’t match her own, Shirley added her own personal note to the birthday card: “Happy Birthday, Darrell! I’m sure you didn’t find this card as funny or scary as we did!!!”

During this time, my brother-in-law Tim told me that he had discovered definitive proof in the Bible that God was a Republican. When I asked for the evidence, he referred me to the New American Standard Bible verse from Ecclesiastes 10:2, which read that “a wise man’s heart directs him toward the right, but the foolish man’s heart directs him toward the left.”

I was not surprised at our family schism over politics and religion. When I went home to Ohio, I heard rantings about the dangers of terrorism, the virtue of Bush, and the importance of firm moral values in national policymaking. Back at Brown, nearly all my students and colleagues hated Bush, blamed him for an unpopular war, and thought the administration was filled with liars. A number believed Bush should be impeached or tried for war crimes.

All of the political conflict illustrated the enormous gulf that existed between midwestern and East Coast communities. One Christmas, we went to Shirley’s house for dinner. During the course of the meal, someone brought up the issue of Iraq and George W. Bush’s handling of the war. My two brothers-in-law, Jim and Tim, gave a rousing defense of Bush’s policies and said how unfair it was that Bush was being criticized for American troops who tortured foreign prisoners.

I was astounded that anyone in my family would justify the use of torture. Not only would this violate the New Testament dictum to love thy neighbor, but also there was the logistical problem that if we torture, how can we condemn other nations that do the same thing or expect them not to do the same to us? As Annie listened to this conversation, she could not believe what she heard. Knowing

my Ohio family was very religious, she posed a sly question. “What would Jesus say about torture?” she plaintively asked.<sup>13</sup>

Much to our surprise, though, both of my brothers-in-law who were devout Christians said that Jesus would torture terrorists and Iraqi prisoners because those people were barbaric. Jim made the further point that Jesus would “use nuclear weapons in Iraq and get rid of the whole damn country.” This spurred a vigorous dinner debate over whether Jesus would or would not use nuclear weapons in Iraq. My nephew Jeff took the more progressive view that Jesus would not torture prisoners and would not use nuclear weapons, while several others argued he would.

These family arguments were illuminating and helped me understand conservative viewpoints. In 2004 this exposure enabled me to see why at a time of continuing worry over terrorism, President Bush was likely to be reelected. The economy was strong, voters remained concerned about terrorism, and Bush ran a stronger campaign than his Democratic rival, John Kerry.

Having some grasp of midwestern sentiments also helped me in my role as a national media commentator. When peace activist Cindy Sheehan protested Bush’s war policies, Bill O’Reilly, of the Fox News show *The O’Reilly Factor*, invited me onto his program to discuss what he saw as media liberalism in her favor.

O’Reilly started speechifying from the beginning of the interview. “Most of the media in this country doesn’t like President Bush. It was obvious in the presidential campaign. . . . You have the most radical elements in the country controlling Cindy Sheehan. . . . Why do you think the press is so overwhelmingly on her side?” he asked nonchalantly.<sup>14</sup> It wasn’t an actual question, more a statement of his own personal opinion.

I agreed with him that Sheehan was getting favorable treatment from the national press but disagreed with his attribution of responsibility to a liberal media. I set up an alternative reason for the coverage: “The media have sided with Cindy Sheehan just because public opinion drives the press coverage. We’ve seen public support for the

war starting to decline. And when you look at past wars, when the polls start to turn against a war, oftentimes the press coverage follows," I argued. "Cindy Sheehan is the perfect antiwar symbol. She's a mother who's grieving for her lost son."<sup>15</sup>

Through all these family, university, and media conversations, it was clear that dangerous forces were being unleashed in American politics. The country was becoming polarized, and it was becoming harder and harder to have reasoned discussions of national events. People were doubting their adversaries and feeling they were not trustworthy. The Obama presidency would elevate these sentiments to new heights.

### *The Obama Years*

Two years before Barack Obama's election, many people thought Hillary Clinton would be the next president. She had strong support from the Democratic establishment, while he was a young and relatively unknown Illinois senator. He had given an inspiring speech at the 2004 Democratic convention, but that seemed to be his only credential.

But in 2006, Clinton returned to Brown University to speak at a forum on women's leadership, and her visit revealed the deep problems she faced within the progressive base. Since I introduced the forum, I got to spend time with her before the event. Knowing I was a pollster and political analyst, she asked me how the U.S. Senate race in Rhode Island was shaping up. I told her I thought the incumbent, Republican senator Lincoln Chafee, was going to lose the general election to Sheldon Whitehouse, and 2006 would be a big Democratic year. She said she hoped so because even though she liked Chafee personally, he represented one of the seats standing in the way of Democratic control of the Senate.

We joked about the fact that two of her past press secretaries had been former students of mine: Lisa Caputo had worked for her in the White House, and Karen Dunn had been her Senate press secretary.

Both had moved on to other jobs, but Mrs. Clinton recalled how great Brown students had been in her office. “They are so wonderful,” she cooed. “You always can count on good students coming out of Brown.”

When she came out to speak, Senator Clinton received a hero’s welcome. There was a standing ovation at the beginning and rounds of applause thereafter, especially when she criticized the Bush administration for talking tough but not taking effective action to solve the nation’s problems.

Midway into her speech, though, several students and community activists began heckling her at the top of their voices. “Is it leadership to support the war?” one man shouted. Others unfurled an anti-Iraq War banner that proclaimed her “Clinton War Senator” in honor of her votes to approve the Iraq War and provide funding for its continuation.<sup>16</sup>

Although Senator Clinton ignored the protesters and continued with her speech, it was a significant moment in her presidential aspirations. The protests would signal the unease and dissatisfaction her 2008 presidential campaign would unleash within the progressive community. Activists across the country would accuse Hillary Clinton of not being liberal enough. In most places throughout the Midwest, people considered her far too liberal to serve as president. Many of my students, though, thought she wasn’t critical enough of Bush’s foreign policy.

In the days after the speech, protesters justified their attempt to shout down Clinton through rationales that sounded totalitarian. Writing in the *Brown Daily Herald*, International Socialist Organization representatives Alden Eagle and Shaun Joseph argued that “when the ordinary machinery of democracy produces no results, it is your right to disrupt the operation of tyrannical government by any means necessary. When anyone encroaches on the civil rights of others, as Clinton did when she voted for the USA Patriot Act, their own rights are forfeit.”<sup>17</sup>

While Senator Clinton was speaking at Brown, former president

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Bill Clinton was across town having dinner at Providence Prime restaurant with several political friends.<sup>18</sup> A journalist friend of mine who was at the dinner noticed a beautiful woman, wearing a low-cut dress, go up to Clinton to request an autograph, which the former president gave. A few moments later, he noticed Clinton talking and laughing with someone else. He later asked that person what the two had been discussing. He was told that right after the woman left, Clinton leaned over and asked whether his friend thought the woman's breasts were real.<sup>19</sup> Less than a decade after his own impeachment over lying about an affair, Clinton had not given up his eye for women.

Later that year, I got a chance to meet Senator Barack Obama and see the contrast with Clinton. We ran a lecture series featuring prominent leaders, and he agreed to speak. However, his flight from Newark, New Jersey, got canceled and he had to rent a car and drive himself to Providence. He showed up by himself in the rental car, several hours late, but no one had left the auditorium. If the Brown community had a certain unease with Hillary Clinton's muscular foreign policy, they idolized Senator Obama.

At the lecture, he talked about the importance of hope in American politics and repeatedly received standing ovations from the crowd. "Cynicism is the lazy way out—you guys are too young to feel that way," he announced. "When we get in trouble in democracy, it's because nobody's paying attention."<sup>20</sup>

My only personal regret at this gathering was that before we went on stage, Obama asked to use a bathroom. Because we were running so late, I made up some excuse that there wasn't one nearby. Looking back on that, I could not believe how inconsiderate my behavior was. Every time now when I have to go to the bathroom and don't have access to a restroom, I recall my disrespectful treatment of Obama and assume my bladder discomfort represents bad karma over my personal rudeness.

In 2009, after he had been elected president and I had moved to the Brookings Institution, I got invited to the White House to

attend the unveiling of the Obama-Biden Middle Class Taskforce. It was designed to help people hurting from the Great Recession and strengthen economic prosperity among average workers. At the end of his speech, he shook many hands and worked his way back to the row where I was seated. I shook his hand and reminded him we had met at Brown right before he had gone onto Tim Russert's television show, *Meet the Press*, to announce he was running for president. Obama remembered the visit and joked that "that is where this all started."<sup>21</sup> Fortunately for me, he didn't seem to remember the bathroom denial.

While Obama delighted my liberal friends with his progressive values and being the first African American president, most of my Ohio family and friends seethed at his victory. Nearly all of them hated him and thought he had no respect for mainstream values. When Joanne heard I was going to the White House, she told me to "talk some sense into them." My nephew Doug was even more blunt. He asked me to tell Obama to "stop being an idiot."<sup>22</sup>

Most of my conservative friends condemned his economic stimulus package and thought his Affordable Care Act would destroy individual choice in health care. One of my hometown friends named Cindy wrote on my Facebook page after I advertised a radio appearance dealing with Martin Luther King Day that "you can thank the Obamas for the racial divide. . . . In my 58 years of life, the 8 years he was in office is the most divided this country has ever been."

Doug, the husband of one of my nieces, informed me of the only upside he saw to the Obama presidency. Realizing that talk of gun control under Obama would drive up the prices of guns and ammunition, he invested in them right after the election and then sold later when prices were much higher, making a profit. I was impressed at his clear foresight on how rural America would respond to a liberal Democrat in the White House and his skill at monetizing that insight.

His uncanny perception turned out to be just the tip of the iceberg. Having an African American leader sparked an intense backlash from many quarters around the country. Many whites didn't like

having a black president. Some Christians complained that Obama was a secret Muslim who would sell American interests down the river. Republicans in Washington voted against everything Obama proposed, while their base cheered their obvious partisanship and obstructionism.

Yet the strangest response came from New York real estate billionaire Donald Trump. He argued that Obama was not an actual American because he had not been born in the United States. In a move that many at the time dismissed as vaudeville behavior, Trump demanded to see the original copy of Obama's Hawaii birth certificate—not the short form or a photocopy but the actual long form.

Obama did not take this attack very seriously. At the White House Correspondents' Dinner in 2011, he joked, "No one is happier—no one is prouder—to put this birth certificate matter to rest than The Donald. And that's because he can finally get back to focusing on the issues that matter: like did we fake the moon landing?"<sup>23</sup> But Trump had the last laugh. Through this and other efforts to undermine President Obama, he would become the new star of the Republican party.

### *Shock and Awe under Trump*

Trump ran an unconventional campaign for the presidency. In a scene that was considered a publicity stunt, he came down a long escalator at Trump Tower in New York City in 2015 and announced he was running for president. The country was in crisis, he intoned, and beset by crime and violence.

At first, few people on the East Coast took Trump seriously. He was saying outrageous things and had a checkered past in terms of his behavior with women, investors, and the media. He had been married three times, in two cases to immigrants, and comedians joked his proclivity for foreign women "was because no American would take the job."

During the campaign, Trump vanquished one Republican rival after another. He assigned mocking monikers to them: “low-energy Jeb,” “little Marco,” and “lyin’ Ted.” When Lindsay Graham made critical remarks about Trump, the billionaire publicized Graham’s personal cell phone number on national television, forcing the South Carolinian to get a new number.

After he gained the GOP nomination, he turned his attention to the Democratic nominee, Hillary Clinton. Seeking to undermine her credibility and raise her negatives as high as his own, he dubbed her “crooked Hillary.” She should not be trusted, he proclaimed, because she used a private e-mail server and had been secretary of state when American diplomats were killed in Benghazi, Libya. Her charitable foundation, the Clinton Foundation, had accepted foreign money. Trump encouraged his supporters to chant “Lock her up!” at his rallies.

His victory revealed deep divisions across the communities where I had lived. In Preble County, Ohio, where I had been raised, Trump won 75 percent of the vote, compared with 21 percent for Clinton.<sup>24</sup> In Washington, D.C., where I currently live, Clinton trounced Trump by an astonishing 87-point margin (91 percent to Trump’s 4 percent of the vote).<sup>25</sup> And at Brown University, where I had taught for many years, an October 2016 poll of undergraduates undertaken by the *Brown Daily Herald* found 85 percent supported Clinton while a paltry 1.8 percent favored Trump.<sup>26</sup>

Eighty percent of white evangelicals voted for Trump, but the billionaire’s victory also galvanized many into intense opposition.<sup>27</sup> The day after his inauguration, millions of women marched on Washington in an extraordinary display of discontent toward his administration. People who I knew who hadn’t been particularly political showed up to march.

At Brookings, one of my colleagues sued Trump for ethics violations at his business properties. Others drew parallels to the rise of Adolf Hitler in Germany during the 1930s and worried that Trump’s scapegoating of adversaries and bellicose behavior would move the

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United States toward a calamitous future. Still others called on voters to boycott the Republican Party on grounds that it represented “a threat to democratic values and the rule of law.”<sup>28</sup>

My second wife, Karin, was German and was particularly concerned about Trump’s authoritarian tendencies. As a student of her own country’s history, she appreciated that “the unthinkable can happen” and that sometimes people don’t realize what is going on until it is too late. Her fears about democracy were not assuaged when President Trump criticized Democrats for being “un-American” and “treasonous” in not applauding his comments about low unemployment during a State of the Union address.<sup>29</sup>

After Nikolaus Cruz killed seventeen students in a Florida school in 2018, my brother Ken shared a Facebook post from the liberal group Occupy Democrats. It said, “He is not a Muslim. He is not in ISIS. He is a terrorist with an AR-15. We don’t need a stupid wall to keep us safe. We need REAL GUN CONTROL!”<sup>30</sup>

Many of my hometown relatives and friends, though, did not share that view. My high school friend Bob wrote on Facebook, “It’s amazing how our media can make random acts of terror, foreign or domestic, into a political agenda within hours of the occurrence. Keep your guns, folks. You’re going to need them.”<sup>31</sup> Another friend named Carolyn shared a Facebook missive that said, “Dear God, Why do you allow so much violence in our schools? Signed, a Concerned Student. Dear Concerned Student, I’m not allowed in school. God.”<sup>32</sup>

Most of my high school friends and relatives who lived in the Midwest voted for Trump. It wasn’t that they were especially thrilled with him. As moralists, they disliked his womanizing and the fact he had been married three times. Shirley did not approve of his supposed affair with pornography star Stormy Daniels. My sister shared the sentiment expressed by Robert Jeffress of First Baptist Church in Dallas that “evangelicals knew they were not electing an altar boy. Forgiveness is part of the evangelical gospel message. We all are sinners.”<sup>33</sup>

But the prospect of a Hillary Clinton presidency was completely

unacceptable to them. The former senator was dishonest and not trustworthy, they felt, and would take America in the wrong direction. Shirley explained to me one day, “I wish the liberal media would accept Trump and quit trying to find something to impeach him on. Obama and Clinton did worse and nobody said a word.”

A year into his presidency, I asked Joanne why she liked Trump, and she told me, “He thinks outside the box.” By that, she meant he took unconventional positions and did not necessarily accept the perceived wisdom of past approaches. Shirley meanwhile felt the news media were not giving him a fair chance. “The media are corrupt,” she argued. But good things were happening under Trump, she felt, because “God is using him.”

Ken did not share this view of the Trump presidency. He forwarded a Bette Midler tweet that said, “The *Washington Post* says in his 1st year as Prez, Trump made 2,140 false claims & this year he’s more than doubled that in just 6 months. In a way it’s a miracle. Nobody’s ever seen that much bullshit come out of a horse’s ass.”<sup>34</sup>

On the evening of his 2018 State of the Union address, I asked my Facebook followers a simple question I knew would trigger intense divisions: “Do you think Trump has made America great again?” I was not disappointed when nearly 150 people responded.<sup>35</sup> From my more liberal friends, I received the following comments:

“Trump has made America grate again . . . as in our teeth.”  
(*Kelly, a Rhode Island resident*)

“He’s made America hate again.” (*Dan, a former graduate student*)

“I feel the need to apologize for being American.” (*Liz, a Rhode Island resident*)

“He is slowly but surely destroying our country and our democracy.” (*Nancy*)

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“I refuse to accept him ever!! I do have to move on from the hangover left from realizing 63 million people voted for this moronic fool.” (*Mary, a Rhode Island friend*)

“He’s made Amerika, the Kleptocracy more potent.” (*Jonathan, a Rhode Island resident*)

“He will aid in the decline of America and of democracy.” (*Tom, my brother-in-law*)

“This is horrifying to watch. Fear and hate mongering, and shameless plugging of HOW MANY families to push his hatred agenda!” (*Kim, a former Brookings colleague*)

“Our democratic institutions and norms, the rule of law, respect for science, and basic civility and decency have been under constant siege from a pathological narcissist, liar, and race baiter in the White House. The country is more divided than at any time since the Civil War, [there is] creeping Erdogan/Putin-esque authoritarianism, and continuing obsequiousness towards the Kremlin.” (*Chip, a former Brown University student*)

“He sullies everything that’s great about this country, starting with the rule of law and respect for all people.” (*a D.C. colleague*)

“He changes his mind daily, he’s a bully, our nation has not been so divided since the civil war.” (*Joe*)

“He’s turned the Republicans into blind fools, but that wasn’t hard.” (*Matthew, a friend from Paris*)

“I continue to be embarrassed. The man has absolutely no class; how could we have elected him to run our country?” (*Alison*)

“The trope of American greatness is ethnocentric at best, and has the potential to be twisted into ideas that are downright creepy.” (*Laurel, a Rhode Island friend*)

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“His hateful tweets speak for themselves as they imply that he is the President of mostly his base of supporters, not of the entire country.” (*Mitch, a Brookings friend*)

But at the same time, many of my conservative friends stood behind the president. They responded to Trump’s speech in the following manner:

“He reduced unemployment almost as much in his first year as Obama did in any of his last five.” (*Tim*)

“I like Trump and he’s doing exactly what I had hoped he would do. Everybody liberal-minded hates him and most hard working Americans love him. I say keep up the good work.” (*Bob, a childhood friend*)

“Greatest State of the Union speech I have ever seen. . . . Like him or not he was measured and clearly set the agenda . . . and the economy is moving. The haters are going to hate.” (*Mike, a Rhode Island Republican*)

“I don’t like the man but I like the fact that he is not a status quo politician and that he’s doing exactly what we elected him to do.” (*Scott, a childhood friend*)

“Better than it was under Obama.” (*Steve, a Rhode Island conservative*)

“Great job. . . . Stuff gets done.” (*Lorna*)

“I learned a long time ago that you can’t reason with liberals. They simply don’t care about the facts. Trump is making America great again and in just one year has corrected much of the harm done to our country by the previous, communist minded administration.” (*Scott, a childhood friend*)

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“Mostly last night I was disgusted with the Dems. I understand they don’t like Trump but to not stand for our military?? Not to stand for the DACA kids? Infrastructure which is their baby? Pelosi looked like she ate a lemon.” (*Carolyn, a childhood friend*)

“We are guilty of allowing others to take advantage of our generosity. The media was biased even before Trump arrived on the political scene.” (*Scott, a Rhode Island GOP official*)

“On his way. Takes time to fix 8 years of screw-ups.” (*Scott, a childhood friend*)

“He has done some things to make this country better, I wouldn’t say great. If he knew how to treat people with love and tact maybe he could accomplish a lot more.” (*Richard, a childhood friend*)

“Wow, Darrell. You need a bunch of new friends.” (*Tim, a childhood friend*)

Almost all of these comments came from people I had known well at various points in my life, but they were remarkable in their range and intensity of sentiments. Trump elicited strong reactions from all parts of the political spectrum. There were clear disagreements based on where people lived, what they did, and their political viewpoints. But the comments were heartfelt in conveying their anger at the opposition.

Around that time, my Ohio friend Cindy wrote me an impassioned e-mail complaining about Democrats: “Obamacare should have never even been created. I know from one of my own family members it is NOT affordable. She still has no insurance and pays the government a penalty. In my eyes that’s our own government is robbing us.” Continuing, she asked me, “Why were the Obamas and the Clintons never investigated for what I feel was criminal?”

From her perspective, Trump was far preferable to the Democrats.

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She said, "I believe God has put President Trump in office. He has used all kinds of people to do His work. He did not only use so called 'good' people. These facts are backed up in the Holy Bible." She closed by noting, "None of this is aimed directly at you in any way. We can just agree to disagree. Make America Great Again."