

THE  
UNWINDING

AN INNER HISTORY  
OF THE NEW AMERICA

GEORGE PACKER

AUTHOR OF THE ASSASSINS' GATE



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**FOR LAURA, CHARLIE, AND JULIA**

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# PROLOGUE

No one can say when the unwinding began—when the coil that held Americans together in its secure and sometimes stifling grip first gave way. Like any great change, the unwinding began at countless times, in countless ways—and at some moment the country, always the same country, crossed a line of history and became irretrievably different.

If you were born around 1960 or afterward, you have spent your adult life in the vertigo of the unwinding. You watched structures that had been in place before your birth collapse like pillars of sand across the vast visible landscape—the farms of the Carolina Piedmont, the factories of the Mahoning Valley, Florida subdivisions, California schools. And other things, harder to see but no less vital supporting the order of everyday life, changed beyond recognition—ways and means in Washington caucus rooms, taboos on New York trading desks, manners and morals everywhere. When the norms that made the old institutions useful began to unwind, and the leaders abandoned their posts, the Roosevelt Republic that had reigned for almost half a century came undone. The void was filled by the default force in American life, organized money.

The unwinding is nothing new. There have been unwindings every generation or two: the fall of the earth of the Founders' heavenly Republic in a noisy marketplace of quarrelsome factions; the war that tore the United States apart and turned them from plural to singular; the crash that laid waste to the business of America, making way for a democracy of bureaucrats and everymen. Each decline brought renewal, each implosion released energy, out of each unwinding came a new cohesion.

The unwinding brings freedom, more than the world has ever granted, and to more kinds of people than ever before—freedom to go away, freedom to return, freedom to change your story, get your facts, get hired, get fired, get high, marry, divorce, go broke, begin again, start a business, have it blow away, take it to the limit, walk away from the ruins, succeed beyond your dreams and boast about it, fail abjectly and try again. And with freedom the unwinding brings its illusions, for all these pursuits are as fragile as thought balloons popping against circumstances. Winning and losing are all American games, and in the unwinding winners win bigger than ever, floating away like bloated dirigibles, and losers have a long way to fall before they hit bottom, and sometimes they never do.

This much freedom leaves you on your own. More Americans than ever before live alone, but even a family can exist in isolation, just managing to survive in the shadow of a huge military base without a soul to lend a hand. A shiny new community can spring up overnight miles from anywhere, then fade away just as fast. An old city can lose its industrial foundation and two-thirds of its people, while all its mainstays—churches, government, businesses, charities, unions—fall like building flats in a strong wind, hardly making a sound.

Alone on a landscape without solid structures, Americans have to improvise their own destinies, plot their own stories of success and salvation. A North Carolina boy clutching a Bible in the sunlight grows up to receive a new vision of how the countryside could be resurrected. A young man goes to Washington and spends the rest of his career trying to recall the idea that drew him there in the first place. An Ohio girl has to hold her life together as everything around her falls apart, until, in middle

age, she finally seizes the chance to do more than survive.

~~As these obscure Americans find their way in the unwinding, they pass alongside new monuments where the old institutions once stood—the outsized lives of their most famous countrymen, celebrities who only grow more exalted as other things recede. These icons sometimes occupy the personal place of household gods, and they offer themselves as answers to the riddle of how to live a good or better life.~~

In the unwinding, everything changes and nothing lasts, except for the voices, American voices open, sentimental, angry, matter-of-fact; inflected with borrowed ideas, God, TV, and the dimly remembered past—telling a joke above the noise of the assembly line, complaining behind window shades drawn against the world, thundering justice to a crowded park or an empty chamber, closing a deal on the phone, dreaming aloud late at night on a front porch as trucks rush by in the darkness.



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# PART I

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# 1978

I want to have a frank talk with you tonight about our most serious domestic problem. That problem is inflation.... *twenty-twenty-twenty-four hours to go / I wanna be sedated* ... We must face a time of national austerity. Hard choices are necessary if we want to avoid consequences that are even worse than we intend to make those hard choices.... *nothin to do nowhere to go-o-o / I wanna be sedated* ... Seven years of college down the drain. Might as well join the fucking Peace Corps.... **CARTER DEALS MAJOR DEFEAT ON CONSUMER BILLS** ... I don't know if the people of Mahoning Valley realize that the closing of the Youngstown Sheet and Tube Campbell Works not only affects the steelworkers and their families, but the community ... **THE LURE OF OUR MANY CULTS** ... The communards, most of them over the age of fifty, subsisted on a meager diet of rice and beans. They worked the fields from dawn to dusk while Jones harangued them with lectures and sermons over a public address system.... What man could afford to pay for all the things a wife does, when she's a cook, a mistress, a chauffeur, a nurse, a babysitter? But because of all this, I feel women ought to have equal rights.... Unfortunately, most low tar cigarettes tasted like nothing. Then I tried Vantage. Vantage gives me the taste I enjoy. And the low tar I've been looking for. ... **FILIBUSTER DEFEATS UNION ORGANIZING BILL** ... The leaders of industry, commerce and finance in the United States have broken and discarded the fragile, unwritten compact previously existing during the past period of growth and progress.... **ELVIS LOVE LETTERS Fans pour out their hearts; Plus Super Color Special: The day Elvis's home became a shrine** ... Noise pollution in a New York slum! People are being mugged right and left, children are being bitten by rats, junkies are ripping open the plumbing of decaying tenements—and the EPA is worried about noise pollution! These same EPA officials, of course, go home at night and tranquilly observe their children doing homework to the accompaniment of thumping, blaring ... **CALIFORNIA VOTERS APPROVE A PLAN TO CUT PROPERTY TAX \$7 BILLION** “The hell with county employees,” said one man as he left a precinct polling place in a Los Angeles suburb.

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# DEAN PRICE

At the turn of the millennium, when he was in his late thirties, Dean Price had a dream. He was walking to his minister's house on a hard-surface road, and it veered off and became a dirt road, and that road veered off again and became another dirt road, with tracks where wagon wheels had worn the ground bare, but the grass between the tracks grew chest high, as if it had been a long time since anybody had gone down the road. Dean walked along one of the wagon tracks holding his arms out spread-eagle and he felt the grass on either side hitting the underneath of his arms. Then he heard a voice—it came from within, like a thought: "I want you to go back home, and I want you to get your tractor, and I want you to come back here and bush-hog this road, so that others can follow where it's been traveled down before. You will show others the way. But it needs to be cleared again." Dean woke up in tears. All his life he had wondered what he was put on earth for, while going in circles like a rudderless ship. He didn't know what the dream meant, but he believed that it contained his calling, his destiny.

At the time, Dean had just gotten into the convenience store business, which was no calling at all. It would be another five years before he would find one. He had pale freckled skin and black hair, with dark eyes that crinkled up when he smiled or laughed his high-pitched giggle. He got the coloring from his father and the good looks from his mother. He'd been chewing Levi Garrett tobacco since age twelve, and he spoke with the soft intensity of a crusader who never stopped being a country boy. His manner was gentle, respectful, with a quality of refinement that made the men drinking vodka out of plastic cups down at the local Moose Lodge question whether Dean could properly be called a redneck. From childhood on, his favorite Bible verse was Matthew 7:7: "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you." What he sought his whole life was independence—especially financial independence. His greatest fears, which haunted him all his life, were poverty and failure. He came by them naturally.

His grandparents on both sides had been tobacco farmers, and so had their grandparents, and their grandparents, back to the eighteenth century, all of them on the same few square miles of Rockingham County, North Carolina. They all had Scotch-Irish names that fit neatly on a tombstone: Price, Neal, Hall. And they were all poor. "It's like if I were to walk down to the creek, I'm going to wear a path," Dean said. "And every day I'm going to go the same way. That's how the roads in this country were built, basically. The people that built the roads followed the animals' paths. And once that path is set, it takes a tremendous amount of effort and energy to take another path. Because you get in that set pattern of thinking, and it's passed down generation to generation to generation."

When Dean was a boy, tobacco grew fencepost to fencepost. From April till October you could smell it all over Rockingham County. He was raised in Madison, forty minutes' drive up Route 22 from Greensboro, and though the Prices lived in town, Dean's real life was spent out on the tobacco farm of his grandfather Norfleet Price. Norfleet got his name when his daddy, Dean's great-grandfather, brought a load of tobacco on a two-horse wagon to Winston-Salem, where a man by the last name gave him a very good price. Dean's father was born on the family land, in a clapboard shack with a front porch, at the edge of a clearing in the hardwood trees. A few feet away was the tobacco

barn, a cabin of oak logs cross-stacked with dovetail joints, which Norfleet built with an ax. When Dean was a boy, during the late-summer days when the bright leaf tobacco was primed and hung in the barn for flue curing, he would beg to be allowed to stay there overnight with his grandfather and walk up every hour or two to check that none of the tobacco leaves had fallen into the flames of the oil fire. Priming was backbreaking work, but he loved the smell of tobacco, the big yellowing leaves that grew as heavy as leather on stalks four feet high, the way his hands were stained black with sticky tar during the priming, the rhythm of looping the leaves through the stringer and hanging them in bundles like dried flounder from tobacco sticks across the rafters in the barn, the family togetherness. The Prices raised their own meat and grew their own vegetables and got their buttermilk from a lady with a milk cow down the road. School was delayed if the crop came in late, and in the early fall the auction warehouses in Madison burst into life with the harvest jubilee and the brass band parades, a celebration for families that now had their cash for the year, leading up to the holiday feasts. Dean thought that he would grow up to be a tobacco farmer and raise his kids the same way.

Dean's best friend was his grandfather. Norfleet Price cut wood until the fall before he died, at age eighty-nine, in 2001. Near the end Dean visited him in the rest home and found him strapped to a wheelchair. "Hoss, you got your pocketknife?" his grandfather said.

"Pa, I can't do that."

Norfleet wanted to be cut out of the wheelchair. He lasted just a month and a half in the rest home. He was buried in the Price family plot, on a gentle rise in the red clay fields. Norfleet had always worked two or three jobs to get away from his wife, but the name Ruth was carved right next to his on the same headstone, waiting for the body and date of death.

Dean's father had a chance to break the spell of the family's poverty thinking. Harold Dean Price, called Pete, was bright and liked to read. Three blank pages at the back of his copy of Merriam-Webster's dictionary were filled with handwritten definitions of words like "obtuse," "obviate," "transpontine," "miscegenation," "simulacrum," "pejorative." He was a good talker, a fervent hard-shell Baptist, and a bitter racist. Once, Dean visited the civil rights museum in the old Woolworth building in downtown Greensboro, where the first sit-ins took place at the lunch counter in 1960. There was a blown-up picture of the four black students from North Carolina A&T walking out on the street past a mob of white youths who stared them down—hot rods with their hands in their pockets, T-shirts and rolled-up jeans, slicked-back hair, cigarettes hanging from angry mouths. That was Dean's father. He hated the defiance of the civil rights people, though he never felt that way about Charlie and Adele Smith, the black tenant farmers on the Price land who took care of him when Dean's grandmother was working at the mill. They were kindhearted and full of humor and understood their place in the scheme of things.

Pete Price met Barbara Neal at a local dance hall and married her in 1961, the year he graduated from Western Carolina College—the first person in his family to get that far. Harold Dean Price was born in 1963, followed by three sisters. The family moved into a small brick house in Madison around the corner from the Sharp and Smith tobacco warehouse. Madison and its neighbor Mayodan were textile towns, and in the sixties and seventies the mills had jobs for any young man coming out of high school who wanted one, and if you had a college degree you could take your pick. The brick storefronts on Main Street—pharmacies and haberdasheries and furniture stores and luncheonettes—were full of shoppers, especially on days when the textile warehouses held their sales. "Our county probably prospered as much as it's ever going to prosper, right there in that era," Dean said. "They had cheap energy, they had oil in the ground, they had working farms in the surrounding countryside, they had a people that didn't mind working, they knew what work was about. There was money to be

made.”

Dean's father went to work for the big DuPont plant that manufactured nylon up in Martinsville just across the Virginia state line. In the late sixties, he fell for the era's version of a snake oil salesman in the person of Glenn W. Turner, the semiliterate son of a South Carolina sharecropper who wore shiny three-piece suits and calfskin boots and spoke with the bad lisp of a harelip. In 1966 Turner started a company, Koscot Interplanetary, that sold cosmetics distributorships for five thousand dollars apiece, with the promise of a finder's fee for every new subfranchisee that the distributor signed up. His followers were also lured into purchasing a black briefcase full of Glenn W. Turner motivational cassette tapes, called "Dare to Be Great," that went for up to five thousand dollars, with a similar view to getting rich off selling the rights to sell the program. The Prices paid for a distributorship and hosted rousing "Dare to Be Great" parties at their house in Madison: a movie projector showed a film on Turner's rags-to-riches life story, then the prospects shouted Turner lines about standing on your tiptoes and reaching for the stars. By 1971, "Dare to Be Great" had swept through blue-collar neighborhoods across the country, and Turner was profiled in *Life* magazine. Then he was investigated for running a pyramid scheme and ultimately served five years in prison, and the Prices lost their money.

In the early seventies, Pete Price got a job as a supervisor at the Duke Energy power station at Belews Creek. After that, he became a vice president at Gem-Dandy in Madison, which made men's accessories like suspenders for socks. Later still, he was a shift supervisor at the Pine Hall brickyard on the Dan River near Mayodan. But every time, he got fired by a boss he considered less intelligent than himself, or, more likely, he quit. Quitting became a habit, "just like a crease in your britches," Dean said. "Once that crease is there it's virtually impossible to get it out. That's the way it was with failure to him, and you could not get it out of him. He thought it, he breathed it, he lived it." The crease started on the Price tobacco farm, where Dean's father received a disadvantaged piece of land that had no road frontage. Dean's uncles ended up doing much better in farming. He also suffered from little man's disease—he stood five seven and a half—and it didn't help that he lost his hair early. But the biggest failure came in the work that meant the most to Pete Price.

Decades later, Dean kept a black-and-white picture in a frame on his fireplace mantel. A boy with a bowl of shiny black hair cut straight above his eyes, wearing a dark suit with narrow pants that were too short for him, was squinting in the sunlight and hugging a Bible against his chest with both arms, as if for protection. Next to him stood a little girl in a lace-collared dress. It was April 6, 1971. Dean was a few weeks shy of eight, and he was about to give his life to Jesus and be saved. During the seventies, Dean's father had a series of small churches in little towns, and in each church his dogmatism and rigidity created a rift in the congregation. Each time, the church members voted on whether to keep him as their preacher, and sometimes they went for him and sometimes against him, but he always ended up leaving (for he would get restless, he wanted to be a Jerry Falwell, leading a church that had thousands of members) with hard feelings on all sides. Eventually he had trouble getting another church. He would visit a new town and try out for the job by preaching a sermon that was always fire and brimstone, only to be voted down. There was one church in particular, Davidson Memorial Baptist Church, down in Cleveland County, which he'd had his heart set on, and after failing to get that pulpit he never really recovered.

From his father Dean acquired ambition and a love of reading. He went straight through the family's set of World Book encyclopedias from beginning to end. One night at dinner, when he was around nine or ten, the subject of his ambitions for the future came up. "Well, what do you want to do?" Dean's father said with a sneer.

“I’d like to be a brain surgeon, a neurologist,” Dean said. It was a word he’d learned in the encyclopedia. “That’s really what I think I’d like to do.”

His father laughed in his face. “You got as much chance of being a neurologist as I’ve got to flying to the moon.”

Dean’s father could be funny and kindhearted, but not with Dean, and Dean hated him for being quitter and for being cruel. He heard his father preach many sermons, even a few on street corners in Madison, but on some level he didn’t believe them because the meanness and the beatings at home made his father a hypocrite in the pulpit. As a boy, Dean loved baseball more than anything else. In seventh grade he was intimidated by girls, and at ninety pounds soaking wet he was too skinny to play football, but he was a pretty good shortstop at Madison-Mayodan Middle School. In 1976 there were black and white boys on the team, and his father didn’t want him around the black boys. To get Dean away from them, and to win points with his congregation of the moment, Dean’s father pulled him out of public school (Dean begged him not to) and sent him to Gospel Light Christian, a strict, all-white Independent Fundamental Baptist school in Walkertown, a two-hour bus ride from the parsonage on Mayodan Mountain where the Prices then lived. That was the end of Dean’s baseball career, and of his black friends. When Dean was in tenth grade, his father started teaching American and Bible history at Gospel Light, and it would have been easy enough for him to let Dean play baseball after school and then drive the boy home at the end of the day, but his father insisted on leaving school at three o’clock so he could go home and read in his study. It was as if Dean was the competition in the family, and his father had the upper hand and wouldn’t give an inch.

When Dean was seventeen, his father quit the church on Mayodan Mountain and moved the family out to the eastern part of the state, near Greenville, where he took the pulpit of a small church in the town of Ayden. It was his last one. After four months there, Minister Price was sent packing, and the family went back to Rockingham County. They had very little money and moved into Dean’s mother’s family house on Route 220, outside the little town of Stokesdale, a few miles south of Madison. Dean’s grandmother Ollie Neal lived in an apartment they had built in back, and behind the house was the tobacco farm that his grandfather, Birch Neal, had won in a card game in 1932, when Route 220 was a dirt road.

By then, Dean wanted only to escape his father’s dominion. When he turned eighteen, he drove to Winston-Salem and met with a Marine recruiter. He was supposed to return the next morning to enlist, but overnight he changed his mind. He wanted to see the world and live life to its fullest, but he would do it on his own.

At the time Dean graduated from high school, in 1981, the best job around was making cigarettes at the huge R.J. Reynolds factories in Winston-Salem. If you got a job there you were set for life, with good pay and benefits plus two cartons of cigarettes a week. That’s where the B students ended up. The C and D students went to work at the textile mills, where the pay was lower—DuPont and Tultex in Martinsville, Dan River in Danville, Cone in Greensboro, or one of the smaller mills around Madison—or in the furniture factories down in High Point and up in Martinsville and Bassett, Virginia. The A students—three in his class—went to college. (Thirty years later, at his high school reunion, Dean found that his classmates had grown fat and were working in pest control or peddling T-shirts at carnivals. One guy, a career employee at R.J. Reynolds, had lost a job he’d believed to be secure and never got over it.)

Dean never applied himself in school, and the summer after graduating he got a job in the shipping department of a copper tube factory in Madison. He made damn good money for 1981, but it was the kind of job he’d always feared ending up in—the lifers around him with no ambition, spending the

days talking about drinking, racing, and fucking. Dean hated it so much that he decided to go to college.

The only one his father would help pay for was Bob Jones University, a Bible school in South Carolina. Bob Jones barred interracial dating and marriage, and in early 1982, a few months after Dean enrolled, the school became national news when the Reagan administration challenged an IRS decision that had denied Bob Jones tax-exempt status. After a storm of criticism, Reagan reversed himself. According to Dean, Bob Jones was the only college in the world where the barbed wire around the campus was turned inward, not outward, like at a prison. The boys had to keep their hair above their ears, and the only way to communicate with the girls on the other side of campus was to write a note and put it in a box that a runner would take from dorm to dorm. The only thing Dean liked about Bob Jones was singing old hymns in morning chapel, like “Praise God, from Whom All Blessings Flow.” He stopped going to class and failed every course his first semester.

At Christmas, he came home and told his father that he was quitting school and moving out of the house. His father slapped him silly, knocked him to the floor. Dean got up and said, “If you ever touch me again I will kill you, I promise you that.” It was the last time he ever lived under his father’s roof.

After Dean moved out, his father went into a downward spiral. He took oxycodone pills by the handful, for back pain, headaches, and other real or invented ailments, prescribed by a dozen different doctors who didn’t know about the others. Dean’s mother found pills hidden in his suit pocket or stashed away in garbage bags. They gave his father a vacant look and wore away his stomach lining. He would retreat into his study as if to read one of his religious books, but that was where he’d pop some oxycodone and zone out. He was admitted into rehab several times.

Out in the world, Dean went hog wild. He quickly discovered the pleasures of alcohol, gambling, marijuana, fighting, and women. His first girl was a minister’s daughter, and he lost his virginity right under the church piano. He was full of rebellion and wanted no part of his father’s God. “I was a shit-ass,” Dean said. “I had no respect for anybody.” He moved to Greensboro and shared a house with a pothead. For a while he had a job as the assistant golf pro at the Greensboro Country Club for a hundred twenty dollars a week. In 1983, when he was twenty, he decided to go back to college and enrolled at the state university in Greensboro. It took Dean six years of bartending to graduate—at one stage his education was interrupted by a five-month trip with his best friend, Chris, to California where they lived in a VW bus and pursued girls and good times—but in 1989 he finally earned his degree, in political science.

Dean was a registered Republican, and Reagan was his idol. To Dean, Reagan was like a soothing grandfather: he had that ability to communicate and inspire people, like when he spoke about “a city upon a hill.” It was something Dean thought he could do as well, since he was a good speaker and came from a family of preachers. When Reagan talked, you trusted him, and he gave you hope that America could be great again. He was the only politician who ever made Dean want to become one himself—an idea that ended the week he was busted for smoking pot on the steps of a campus building and arrested a few days later for driving under the influence.

He had told himself that he would see the world, and after graduating, Dean bummed around Europe for a few months, sleeping in hostels and sometimes even on park benches. But he was still ambitious—“insanely ambitious,” he liked to say. When he came home, he decided to look for the best job with the best company that he could find.

In his mind, that had always been Johnson & Johnson, up in New Jersey. The employees at Johnson & Johnson wore blue suits, they were clean, articulate, well paid, they drove company cars and had health benefits. Dean moved to Philadelphia with a girlfriend and set out to meet anyone who worked

at the company. His first contact was a fellow with perfectly combed blond hair, in a blue seersucker suit, white shoes, and a bow tie—the sharpest dresser Dean had ever seen. He called the corporate offices almost every day of the week, he went in for seven or eight interviews, he spent a year trying to will himself into a job, and in 1991 Johnson & Johnson finally submitted and made him a pharmaceutical rep in Harrisburg. Dean bought a blue suit and cut his hair short and tried to lose his southern accent, which he thought would be taken for backwardness. He was given a pager and a computer, and he drove around in a company car from one doctor's office to another, sometimes eight hours a day, with samples of drugs, explaining the benefits and side effects.

It didn't take him long to realize that he hated the job. At the end of every day, he had to report back to the office about every stop he'd made. He was a robot, a number, and the company was Big Brother watching. Any personal initiative was frowned on if it didn't fit the Johnson & Johnson mold. After eight months, less time than he'd spent trying to get the position, Dean quit.

He had bought into a lie: go to college, get a good education, get a job with a Fortune 500 company and you'd be happy. He had done all that and he was miserable. He'd gotten out of his father's house only to find another kind of servitude. He decided to start over and do things his own way. He would become an entrepreneur.



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# TOTAL WAR: NEWT GINGRICH

Big Newt McPherson was a bar brawler in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, during World War II. On the third morning after he married Kit Daugherty, a sixteen-year-old housecleaner, Big Newt's young bride tried to wake him up from a hangover, and he punched her. That was the end of the marriage, but it had lasted just long enough for Kit to get pregnant. In 1943 she gave birth to a boy and, in spite of everything, named him after her soon-to-be-ex-husband. Three years later, Kit married an army officer named Robert Gingrich, and Big Newt allowed him to adopt Little Newtie to get out of paying child support. "Isn't it awful," Kit said years later, "a man willing to sell off his own son?"

Long after Little Newtie became a politician, when he was nearly seventy and grasping for his life's ambition, he would say, "I grew up in kind of an idyllic children's background," but that was on a presidential campaign video. The Gingriches lived above a gas station on the main square in lower middle-class Hummelstown, and life was narrow and harsh and unforgiving. Little Newtie's maternal relatives—farmers, industrial laborers, highway workers—were hard, physical men. His stepfather (also adopted, like Little Newtie, like Big Newt) was a tyrant around the house, silent and intimidating. Little Newtie absorbed his stepfather's code of toughness, but the pudgy, garrulous boy could never talk his way into the affections of Lieutenant Colonel Bob Gingrich, so they fought constantly. Kit was a manic depressive, spending most of her life tranquilized. Little Newtie was a weird, myopic kid with no close friends. He sought out the older women around him, who fed him sugar cookies and encouraged him to read. The boy who would seem like a nine-year-old at fifty seemed fifty years old at nine. He escaped from life into books and movies. He passionately loved animals, dinosaurs, ancient history, and John Wayne heroes.

On a bright summer's afternoon when Newt was ten, while his stepfather was stationed in Korea, his mother let him ride the bus by himself into Harrisburg, where he watched a double feature of African safari films. Newt came out into the sunlight at four in the afternoon under the spell of crocodiles and rhinos and adventure, looked up, and noticed a sign pointing down an alley: CITY HALL. Being mature beyond his years, he knew about the importance of citizenship. He was directed to the Parks Department and tried to persuade an official that Harrisburg should set aside money to build a zoo. The story made it onto the front page of the local paper. That was the moment when Newt knew he was destined for leadership.

It took another five years before his mission became clear. At Easter in 1958, while Newt's stepfather was serving in France, the Gingriches visited Verdun—*l'enfer de Verdun*, total war. For years after World War I, the city still bore artillery wounds. Newt wandered around the scarred battlefield and picked up a couple of rusted helmets he found lying on the ground, which eventually made it onto his bedroom wall along with a grenade fragment. He peered through a window into the Ossuary, where the bones of more than a hundred thousand French and German soldiers lay in huge piles. He saw that life was real. He saw that civilizations could die. He saw what could happen when bad leaders failed to keep their countries safe. He realized that some people had to be willing to give up their lives in order to protect their way of life.

He read Toynbee and Asimov, and his mind filled with visions of civilization in decay. It could happen to America. He decided that he would not be a zoo director or paleontologist after all. His future was in politics. Not as county administrator, or chairman of the transportation committee, secretary of defense, or even just as president. He was going to be a Great Leader of his people. The models were Lincoln, Roosevelt, and Churchill. (There would be a fourth, but he was still an exacting host at the *General Electric Theater* when Newt walked around Verdun.) He resolved to spend his life figuring out three things: what America needed to survive, how he would persuade the American people to let him provide it, and how he would keep his country free.

Decades later, Gingrich scrawled his destiny in notes on a classroom easel, like ancient hieroglyphs in praise of a conquering warrior:

Gingrich—primary mission  
Advocate of civilization  
Definer of civilization  
Teacher of the Rules of Civilization  
Arouser of those who Fan Civilization  
Organizer of the pro-civilization activists  
Leader (Possibly) of the civilizing forces  
A universal rather than an optimal Mission

But first, he had to get through the sixties.

When Bob Gingrich was sent home in 1960, Kit and her son joined him at Fort Benning, Georgia, where Newt campaigned for Nixon against Kennedy. Nixon was his first political interest, and Gingrich read everything he could find on him—another son of the lower middle class, after another brooding loner with a hard father and more resentments than friends, nurturing dreams of greatness. In November, Gingrich spent one of the longest nights of his life by the radio listening to Nixon lose to Kennedy.

In high school he secretly dated his geometry teacher, Jackie Battley—seven years his senior and another doting older woman. When Gingrich was nineteen, they married (Bob Gingrich refused to attend), then had two daughters.

As a family man he wasn't drafted, didn't enlist, and never set foot in Vietnam. His stepfather despised him for it: "He couldn't see across the room. Flattest feet I've ever seen. He's physically incapable of doing military service."

While Jackie worked, Gingrich studied history at Emory, went to Tulane for his Ph.D., became a campus activist. When the Tulane administration banned two pictures it considered obscene from the school paper, Gingrich organized protests against the decision and joined a sit-in. He was still a Republican, but he had reformist views on civil rights, the environment, ethics in government. He read the Tofflers and became a futurist nerd, a cheerleader for the information revolution. Most of all, he liked throwing verbal rocks at established institutions. He had a favorite phrase, "corrupt elite," that could be hurled in any direction, and for the rest of his life he kept it in his pocket. He would read it with power denouncing the cesspool of the sixties and the liberals who swam there, but the decade made him, too.

In 1970 he went back to Georgia and started teaching history at West Georgia College, outside Atlanta. Immediately offered himself for the college presidency—was turned down. In 1971 he challenged the conservative Democrat in a district that had never sent a Republican to Congress—lost.

in the Watergate wipeout. Ran again in 1976—lost again, while a peanut farmer from Plains was elected president. “Gerald Ford personally cost me a congressional seat,” he fumed. But Gingrich wasn’t about to run low on ambition. And he was getting closer. When the incumbent announced his retirement, 1978 began to look like Gingrich’s year. Gingrich and 1978 were made for each other.

He was something new in politics—a man of the New South (not really a southerner at all), the modern, middle-class South of the space program and the gated community. He didn’t make racial appeals, didn’t seem very religious. The suburbs north of Atlanta were a mix of Norman Rockwell and fiber optics, the incarnation of a trend forecast a decade earlier in Nixon’s 1968 campaign: an emerging Republican majority concentrated in the Sunbelt. Gingrich, who loved aircraft carriers, moon launches, and personal computers, understood these people.

In 1978, with vandalism in the cities, stagflation across the country, and a humorless moralizer at the White House preaching sacrifice, the public’s mood was sour, frustrated, suspicious of bureaucracies and special interests, antigovernment, antitax—populist and conservative. Gingrich’s Democratic opponent was made to order, a wealthy liberal female state senator originally from New York. Gingrich knew exactly what to do. He moved to the right and went after her on welfare and taxes. He had a new rock in his pocket, “the corrupt liberal welfare state,” and he nailed her between the eyes with it. The Moral Majority was about to take Washington by storm, and Gingrich talked about family values, said that his opponent would break her family up if she went to Washington, and featured Jackie and the girls in his ads.

But Jackie looked fat and unattractive, and it was an open secret in political circles that Newt was cheating on her. Like most Arousers of those who Fan Civilization, he had powerful appetites, but he had not grown up to be the most desirable of men—big head under big graying helmet, cold cleft chin, belly pushing against his sky-blue waistline—and his successes were limited. He tried to keep to oral sex so he could claim literal fidelity if anyone asked, but within two years the marriage was over, another adoring woman about to become the next Mrs. Gingrich, the Advocate of civilization standing at Jackie’s hospital bed as she lay recovering from uterine cancer, a yellow legal pad with divorce terms in his hand. Years later, Gingrich would attribute his indiscretions to hard work brought on by patriotic zeal.

Gingrich won easily in 1978, and his party picked up fifteen seats in the House (the freshman class included Dick Cheney). It was a sign of what was coming in 1980.

The Organizer of the pro-civilization activists arrived in Washington with a plan. He would kick over the old order, put fear in the ruling Democrats, call them a “corrupt left-wing machine” (another rock—his pocket was bottomless), go after committee chairmen, bait Speakers of the House until they were red-faced with rage. He would shake up the timid Republicans, too, shame their leaders, create a cadre of young fighters, teach them the ways of politics (he liked to quote Mao: “war without blood”), give them a new language, an ecstatic vision, until the party would turn to its terrible child for deliverance. Then he would save the country—Speaker—President—Leader (Possibly) of the civilizing forces.

And Gingrich did most of it.

He saw all the available weapons on the battlefield, some never used before. Two months after his arrival, C-SPAN switched on its cameras in the House of Representatives, broadcasting Congress to the public for the first time. Gingrich immediately knew what to do—take the floor after regular order was over and give incendiary speeches to an empty chamber that would bring media attention and slowly build a devoted TV following. (Regardless of the rock labeled “elite liberal media,” he knew they loved a fight more than anything else.) In 1984, a speech calling the Democrats appease

brought down the wrath of Tip O'Neill—"It's the lowest thing that I've ever seen in my thirty-two years here!" But the Speaker's remarks, being personal, were stricken from the record, and the incident landed Gingrich on the nightly news. "I am now a famous person," he crowed, understanding the new rules of celebrity—that it would not be a bad thing to say, for example, "I have an enormous personal ambition. I want to shift the entire planet. And I'm doing it."

The old party system had become obsolete, snuffed out by high-minded reformers who wanted to end patronage and political bosses in smoke-filled rooms. Gingrich saw this happening, too—how politicians were turning into entrepreneurs who depended on special-interest PACs, think tanks, media, and lobbyists more than on the party hierarchy. So he gave speeches around Washington, wrote a book (financed by supporters), and created his own power base, with a fundraising apparatus and a political action committee. He recruited Republican candidates around the country and trained them with his own words and ideas on videotapes and cassettes, like a motivational speaker, understanding that language was the key to power. His memos included vocabulary lessons: if you discussed your opponent with words like *betray bizarre bosses bureaucracy cheat corrupt crisis cynicism decay destroy disgrace impose incompetent liberal lie limit(s) obsolete pathetic radical shame stagnation status quo steal taxes they/them threaten traitors unionized waste welfare*, you had him on the defensive, and if you described your side with *change children choice/choose common sense courage crusade dream duty empower(ment) family freedom hard work lead liberty light more opportunity pro-(issue) proud/pride reform strength success tough truth vision we/us/our*, you had already won the argument. The Gingrich lexicon could be arranged into potent sentences regardless of context, or even meaning: "*We can empower our children and families to dream by leading a moral crusade for liberty and truth if only we are tough and have common sense.*" "*Corrupt liberal bosses cheat, lie, and steal to impose their sick pathetic cynicism and bizarre radical stagnation in order to destroy America.*" Thus a whole generation of politicians learned to sound like Newt Gingrich.

And he saw that the voters no longer felt much connection to the local parties or national institutions. They got their politics on TV, and they were not persuaded by policy descriptions or rational arguments. They responded to symbols and emotions. They were growing more partisan, too, living in districts that were increasingly Democratic or Republican, liberal or conservative. Donors were more likely to send money if they could be frightened or angered, if the issues were framed as simple choices between good and evil—which was easy for a man whose America stood forever at historic crossroads, its civilization in perpetual peril.

By the end of the eighties, Gingrich was radically changing Washington and the Republican Party. Maybe more than Reagan—maybe more than anyone else. Then history went into high gear.

In 1989 he bagged his biggest prey when Jim Wright, the Democratic Speaker, resigned because of ethics charges that had been relentlessly pressed by backbencher Gingrich. Seeing what total war could achieve, the Republicans made him one of their leaders, and the Teacher of the Rules of Civilization did not fail them. In 1994 he nationalized the midterms by getting nearly every Republican candidate to sign his Contract with America in front of the Capitol, pronouncing it "a first step towards renewing American civilization." In November his party took both houses of Congress for the first time since that African safari double feature. It was the Gingrich revolution, and he became its Robespierre—Speaker of the House, media obsession, equal ruler with the red-cheeked Arkansas boy in the White House, whose origins and desires bore such a striking resemblance to his own.

Gingrich called Clinton a "counterculture McGovernik" and "the enemy of normal Americans." He thought he could bend the president to his will: Clinton wanted to be loved, Gingrich wanted to be

feared. They spent 1995 circling around the budget. When they met in the White House, Gingrich dictated terms, while Clinton studied Gingrich. He saw the nine-year-old's insecurities writ large beneath the fiery words. He understood why none of Gingrich's colleagues could stand him. He saw how to exploit the grandiosity. Clinton's need for love gave him insight, and he used it to seduce his adversary while setting traps for him, and when at the end of the year the United States of America was forced to close for business, it was Gingrich who got the blame.

And that was the end of the primary mission.

Gingrich remained Speaker for three more years. He achieved things that the media would never give him credit for—credit went to the boy from Arkansas (he always got the hottest women, they wanted him even before he came to power). Then the logic of total war caught up with both men. In 1997, Gingrich was reprimanded by the House and fined a record three hundred thousand dollars for laundering political contributions through his various nonprofits (some of his allies wanted to escort him to the guillotine). In 1998 there was only one thing, and that was Monica. When oral sex and lying failed to destroy Clinton, and the Democrats defied history by picking up seats in the midterms, the Gingrich revolutionaries turned on their leader. He resigned the Speakership and his seat, saying, "I'm not willing to preside over people who are cannibals." The last vote he ever cast was to impeach his rival. Later, he admitted to carrying on an affair throughout his time as Speaker with a woman twenty-three years his junior. He left Congress after two decades but stayed on in Washington.

By then it was Newt Gingrich's city as much as anyone's. Whether he ever truly believed his own rhetoric, the generation he brought to power fervently did. He gave them mustard gas and they used it on every conceivable enemy, including him. At the millennium the two sides were dug deep in opposing trenches, the positions forever fixed, bodies piling up in the mud, last year's corpses this year's bones, a war whose causes no one could quite explain, with no end in sight: *l'enfer est à Washington*.

Perhaps he had wanted it this way all along. Politics without war could be rather boring.

The young Tiffany-wearing congressional aide with whom he had been cheating on the second Mrs. Gingrich became the third. Washington's think tanks and partisan media made a place for him because he had helped make theirs. Like his rival, he spent his time out of office with rich people. Never having had money (he was in debt throughout most of his career), he set out to make a lot of it selling his connections and influence—for shifting the entire planet required him to grab every opportunity in the bipartisan lobbying industry. And his books came out in frantic conveyor-belt fashion, seventeen in eight years—for America's decay kept growing deeper, its elite liberal media more destructive, its secular-socialist machine more radical, the Democrat in the White House more alien, and the desire to save America was undimmed, and the need to be heard was unquenchable.

He finally ran for president when it was much too late, but the old man in the white helmet with the cold clever boyish grin still found what he wanted whenever he reached into his pocket.

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# JEFF CONNAUGHTON

Jeff Connaughton first saw Joe Biden in 1979. Biden was thirty-six, the sixth-youngest person ever elected to the United States Senate. Connaughton was nineteen, a business major at the University of Alabama. His parents lived up in Huntsville, where his father worked for thirty years as a chemical engineer with the Army Missile Command, a job he'd landed after flying forty-seven missions over Europe, China, and Japan with the Army Air Corps, then attending Tuscaloosa on the GI Bill, then going from a dollar an hour in a Birmingham steel mill to an Arkansas furniture factory to National Gypsum in Mobile to the booming postwar defense industry. Working on small-rocket propulsion was a good middle-class job, topping out at fifty-five thousand a year, underwritten by the federal government and the Cold War, but Mr. and Mrs. Connaughton had both grown up in poverty. Jeff's father had watched his father march through Washington, D.C., with the Bonus Army in 1932. Jeff's mother was from Town Creek, Alabama, and as a little girl she and her sisters had helped out during the hard times by picking cotton on her grandmother's farm. When she was five, she saved a nickel to buy her mother a birthday present. One day, the little girl fell ill with a 104-degree fever, and when the ice truck passed outside and her mother wanted to buy a block of ice to cool her fever, she refused because her five cents was the only money in the house. It was a story Jeff always thought he'd tell when he ever ran for office.

The Connaughtons split their vote. Jeff's mother could remember the day FDR came to Town Creek to open the Wheeler Dam, and all the children ran down to the station and watched in a solemn hush as the president was lifted from the train into a car. She would vote Democrat all her life. The first time Jeff's father went to vote, in Alabama after the war, and asked how to do it, the poll worker said, "Just vote for the names beneath the rooster," which was the symbol of the Alabama Democratic Party, the only one that mattered back then. On the spot Mr. Connaughton became a Republican, and he remained one over the following decades as the rest of the white South caught up with him. But years later, after Jeff went to Washington to work for Biden and became what he would call a Professional Democrat, his dad voted for Clinton—even for Obama. By then, most everyone in their suburb was staunchly Republican, and someone stole the Obama-Biden signs right out of the Connaughtons' front yard. Mr. Connaughton was voting for his son.

Jeff Connaughton was short and sandy-haired, smart and hardworking, with the lifelong inferiority complex that's bred into boys from Alabama. Growing up, he had no clear political views. In 1976 he was inspired when Ronald Reagan spoke at the Republican convention about "the erosion of freedom that has taken place under Democratic rule in this country"; in 1979, when Jimmy Carter diagnosed a "crisis of confidence" in America, warning that "too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption," Connaughton defended what came to be called the "malaise" speech in an opinion piece for *The Tuscaloosa News*. He was a swing voter until he moved to Washington; he also revered the Kennedys. Once, in 1994, he attended a fundraiser at Hickory Hill for Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, with Ethel and other Kennedys graciously welcoming every guest on the front lawn of the manor. Connaughton slipped off into the study, where he wasn't supposed to go, and took from the

shelf a bound volume of Robert F. Kennedy's speeches—the original manuscripts, with handwritten notes. Connaughton's eyes fell on a sentence that read, "We should do better." Kennedy had crossed out "should" and replaced it with "must." Connaughton was holding holy scripture. That was his first idea of politics: great speeches, historic events (the assassinations), black-and-white portraits of JFK in the Oval Office and the Rose Garden. He was that overlooked and necessary thing in the annals of Washington, not Hamlet but Rosencrantz, not a principal but a follower—years later he would say, "I am the perfect number two guy"—drawn to the romance of public service and to power, which eventually became inextricable.

In early 1979, when Connaughton was a sophomore, a friend at the University of Pennsylvania asked him to be Alabama's delegate to the annual meeting of the National Student Congress, in Philadelphia. The plane ticket would cost a hundred fifty dollars. Connaughton was granted twenty-five bucks from the student government's budget, and *The Tuscaloosa News* offered to give him seventy-five dollars for a story based on the experience. The last fifty dollars came out of the cash register at a Wendy's where Connaughton ate a couple of meals a week—the manager was touched by the story of a college student trying to pay his way to a national assembly whose purpose was to combat apathy on campus and restore faith in politics a few years after Watergate and Vietnam.

The first speaker at the meeting in Philadelphia was an ultraconservative Republican congressman from Illinois named Dan Crane, one of the many thousands of men and women who go to Washington as the elected representatives of the American people and serve out their time in the halls of Congress without leaving a trace. The second was Joe Biden. He began by saying, "If Representative Crane has just given you the liberal point of view, this would be the conservative view: You're all under arrest." The line brought down the house. The rest of the speech didn't leave a mark on Connaughton's memory, but the speaker did. Biden was youthful, he was witty, he knew how to talk to college students. Connaughton never forgot the moment.

Back in Tuscaloosa, he started the Alabama Political Union, and for its first event in the fall he invited Biden and Senator Jake Garn, a Republican from Utah, to debate the SALT II arms control treaty. Both senators accepted (in 1979 there was no ban on accepting the five-hundred-dollar honorarium the university was offering—just a restriction limiting outside income to 15 percent of the senator's \$57,500 salary, which had taken effect on January 1), but then Garn backed out. The debate threatened to be reduced to a mere speech.

Connaughton got in his Chevy Nova with a friend who was visiting from Brigham Young University and who, like Garn, was a Mormon. They drove fourteen hours to the nation's capital to change Senator Garn's mind. Connaughton had never been to Washington, and the Beltway offered no obvious exits into the city—it was more of a moat than a conduit—and the Capitol dome kept appearing in the distance and then disappearing. Finally they found their way onto backstreets that led toward Capitol Hill. This was poor, black Washington, blighted Washington, the Washington of the inner city district's 80 percent, neighborhoods that Connaughton would rarely see again in the two decades he would live and work in the city.

In the morning, they found Garn's office in the Russell Senate Office Building, along one of the long, lofty and immensely long corridors, behind one of the high, forbidding mahogany doors. Because he had brought a Utah Mormon with him, Connaughton was granted an unscheduled audience right then in the waiting room with the senator himself, but he was unable to change Garn's mind—he had another commitment the day of the debate. So Connaughton and the Mormon friend left and wandered around Russell—two young out-of-towners dwarfed by the white Vermont marble and Concord granite and dark mahogany and the clubby, bipartisan institutional dignity that was still intact, though

it would soon begin to crack and then crumble—looking for a Republican senator to sign up. But the halls were nearly empty, in an undemocratic hush, and Connaughton barely knew what any senator looked like. He might have glimpsed Howard Baker, Jacob Javits, Chuck Percy, or Barry Goldwater. Among the Democrats, Hubert Humphrey had died recently, but Edmund Muskie was still there, and Frank Church, Birch Bayh, Gaylord Nelson, George McGovern. All of them soon to be swept away.

Suddenly a buzzer went off, and out of nowhere the corridor filled with tall, gray-haired, distinguished-looking men. Connaughton and his friend followed them into an elevator (wasn't that little Japanese man in the tam-o'-shanter S. I. Hayakawa?), down to the basement and the subterranean electric cars that shuttled back and forth along a thirty-second track between Russell and the Capitol. Among the senators striding toward the next car was Ted Kennedy, who smiled at being recognized and shook hands with the friend, who had stepped forward. As for Connaughton, he was too awestruck to move. (The public didn't know it, but Kennedy was preparing to challenge President Carter for the 1980 Democratic nomination: it was Biden who had first alerted Carter, in early 1978, that Kennedy was coming after him.)

Connaughton returned to Tuscaloosa without a Republican to debate SALT II. It didn't matter. Biden arrived that September wearing one of his tailored suits and power ties, trim and flashing his white-toothed smile, and he charmed the hell out of the lovely coeds over dinner at Phi Mu or Sorority Row (Connaughton's girlfriend was a member), with Jeff attached to the senator's elbow as his adjutant for the evening and now seriously considering a political career. Two hundred people filled the student center for Biden's speech. Connaughton made the introduction, then took his seat in the front row as Biden came to the lectern.

"I know you're all here tonight because you've heard what a great man I am," Biden began. "Yes, I'm widely known as what they call 'presidential timber.'" The crowd laughed nervously, thrown by his sense of humor. "Why, just earlier tonight I spoke to a group of students who had put up a great big sign, 'Welcome Senator Biden.' And then when I walked under the sign I heard someone say, 'That must be Senator Bidden.'" The laughter rose. Now Biden had the crowd, and he turned to his subject and spent ninety minutes arguing lucidly and without notes for the importance of reducing the American and Soviet nuclear arsenals, while he dismantled the arguments of SALT II's opponents in the Senate. The day before, the treaty had suffered a blow with the supposed revelation of a brigade of Soviet troops in Cuba. "Folks, I'm going to let you in on a little secret," Biden whispered, and he took the microphone and walked toward his audience, gesturing for the crowd to lean in and listen. "Those troops have been in Cuba all along!" he shouted. "And everyone knows it!" At the end of the lecture the applause was loud and long. When Connaughton got up to approach Biden and thank him, he accidentally started a standing ovation.

A campus security guard drove Biden back to the Birmingham airport, and Connaughton went along. Biden looked tired from his speech, but he answered every beginner's question from the guard ("What's the difference between a Democrat and a Republican?") as thoughtfully as if it had come from David Brinkley. When Connaughton asked Biden why he rode the train from Wilmington to Washington every day, the senator calmly told the story of the car accident that had nearly wiped out his young family in December 1972, just a month after his election to the Senate. "My wife and baby girl were killed," Biden said, "and my sons were badly injured. So I stayed with my sons at the hospital. I really didn't want to be a senator. But eventually I was sworn in at my son's bedside. And I served, but I went home every night to be with my sons. And over the years, Delaware just got used to having me home every day. And so I really can't ever move to Washington."

That was the moment Jeff Connaughton was hooked by Joe Biden. Here was tragedy, here was



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