

The
AUDACITY
of
HOPE

*Thoughts on Reclaiming
the American Dream*

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Prologue

IT'S BEEN ALMOST ten years since I first ran for political office. I was thirty-five at the time, four years out of law school, recently married, and generally impatient with life. A seat in the Illinois legislature had opened up, and several friends suggested that I run, thinking that my work as a civil rights lawyer, and contacts from my days as a community organizer, would make me a viable candidate. After discussing it with my wife, I entered the race and proceeded to do what every first-time candidate does: I talked to anyone who would listen. I went to block club meetings and church socials, beauty shops and barbershops. If two guys were standing on a corner, I would cross the street to hand them campaign literature. And everywhere I went, I'd get some version of the same two questions.

“Where'd you get that funny name?”

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

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

It was a pretty convincing speech, I thought. And although I'm not sure that the people who heard me deliver it were similarly impressed, enough of

them appreciated my earnestness and youthful swagger that I made it to the Illinois legislature.

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

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

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

But the years had also taken their toll. Some of it was just a function of my getting older, I suppose, for if you are paying attention, each successive year will make you more intimately acquainted with all of your flaws—the blind spots, the recurring habits of thought that may be genetic or may be environmental, but that will almost certainly worsen with time, as surely as the hitch in your walk turns to pain in your hip. In me, one of those flaws had proven to be a chronic restlessness; an inability to appreciate, no matter how well things were going, those blessings that were right there in front of me.

It's a flaw that is endemic to modern life, I think—endemic, too, in the American character—and one that is nowhere more evident than in the field of politics. Whether politics actually encourages the trait or simply attracts those who possess it is unclear.

Someone once said that every man is trying to either live up to his father's expectations or make up for his father's mistakes, and I suppose that may explain my particular malady as well as anything else.

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

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

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

“Hell of a thing, isn’t it?” he said, shaking his head. “Really bad luck. You can’t change your name, of course. Voters are suspicious of that kind of thing. Maybe if you were at the start of your career, you know, you could use a nickname or something. But now...”

His voice trailed off and he shrugged apologetically before signaling the waiter to bring us the check.

I suspected he was right, and that realization ate away at me. For the first time in my career, I began to experience the envy of seeing younger politicians succeed where I had failed, moving into higher offices, getting more things done. The pleasures of politics—

the adrenaline of debate, the animal warmth of shaking hands and plunging into a crowd—began to pale against the meaner tasks of the job: the begging for money, the long drives home after the banquet had run two hours longer than scheduled, the bad food and stale air and clipped phone conversations with a wife who had stuck by me so far but was pretty fed up with raising our children alone and was beginning to question my priorities. Even the legislative work, the policy making that had gotten me to run in the first place, began to feel too incremental, too removed from the larger battles—over taxes, security, health care, and jobs—that were being waged

on a national stage. I began to harbor doubts about the path I had chosen; I began feeling the way I imagine an actor or athlete must feel when, after years of commitment to a particular dream,

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after years of waiting tables between auditions or scratching out hits in the minor leagues, he realizes that he's gone just about as far as talent or fortune will take him.

The dream will not happen, and he now faces the choice of accepting this fact like a grownup and moving on to more sensible pursuits, or refusing the truth and ending up bitter, quarrelsome, and slightly pathetic.

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

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

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

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

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

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

sit through a church service and the pastor would forget to recognize me, or the head of the union local would let me speak to his members just before announcing that the union had decided to endorse someone else.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

policy and performance or, worse, a means of muffling the complaints of those who feel ill served by our current institutional arrangements.

My argument, however, is that we have no choice. You don't need a poll to know that the vast majority of Americans—Republican, Democrat, and independent—are weary of the dead zone that politics has become, in which narrow interests vie for advantage and ideological minorities seek to impose their own versions of absolute truth. Whether we're from red states or blue states, we feel in our gut the lack of honesty, rigor, and common sense in our policy debates, and dislike what appears to be a continuous menu of false or cramped choices. Religious or secular, black, white, or brown, we sense—

correctly—that the nation's most significant challenges are being ignored, and that if we don't change course soon, we may be the first generation in a very long time that leaves behind a weaker and more fractured America than the one we inherited. Perhaps more than any other time in our recent history, we need a new kind of politics, one that can excavate and build upon those shared understandings that pull us together as Americans.

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

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

Instead what I offer is something more modest: personal reflections on those values and ideals that have led me to public life, some thoughts on the ways that our current political discourse unnecessarily divides us, and my own best assessment—based on my experience as a senator and lawyer,

husband and father, Christian and skeptic—of the ways we can ground our politics in the notion of a common good.

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

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

But that is not all that I am. I also think my party can be smug, detached, and dogmatic at times. I believe in the free market, competition, and entrepreneurship, and think no small number of government programs don't

work as advertised. I wish the country had fewer lawyers and more engineers. I think America has more often been a force for good than for ill in the world; I carry few illusions about our enemies, and revere the courage and competence of our military. I reject a politics that is based solely on racial identity, gender identity, sexual orientation, or victimhood generally. I think much of what ails the inner city involves a breakdown in culture that will not be cured by money alone, and that our values and spiritual life matter at least as much as our GDP.

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

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

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

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

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Chapter One

Republicans and Democrats

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

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

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

But these moments fade quickly. Except for the few minutes that it takes to vote, my colleagues and I don't spend much time on the Senate floor. Most of the decisions—

about what bills to call and when to call them, about how amendments will be handled and how uncooperative senators will be made to cooperate—have been worked out well in advance by the majority leader, the relevant committee chairman, their staffs, and (depending on the degree of controversy involved and the magnanimity of the Republican handling the bill) their Democratic counterparts. By the time we reach the floor and the clerk starts calling the roll, each of the senators will have determined—in consultation with his or her staff, caucus leader, preferred lobbyists, interest groups, constituent mail, and ideological leanings—just how to position himself on the issue.

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

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

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

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

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

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

contestable, whether it was the cause of climate change or the fact of climate change, the size of the deficit or the culprits to blame for the deficit.

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

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Bork nomination and Willie Horton, Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill, the Clinton election and the Gingrich Revolution, Whitewater and the Starr investigation, the government shutdown and impeachment, dangling chads and *Bush v. Gore*. With the rest of the public, I had watched campaign culture metastasize throughout the body politic, as an entire industry of insult—both perpetual and somehow profitable—

emerged to dominate cable television, talk radio, and the *New York Times* best-seller list.

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

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

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

There was just one problem: My campaign had gone so well that it looked like a fluke.

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

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before his campaign could get off the ground, he was felled by a divorce scandal of his own. For the better part of a month, I traveled Illinois without

drawing fire, before being selected to deliver the keynote address at the Democratic National Convention—

seventeen minutes of unfiltered, uninterrupted airtime on national television. And finally the Illinois Republican Party inexplicably chose as my opponent former presidential candidate Alan Keyes, a man who had never lived in Illinois and who proved so fierce and unyielding in his positions that even conservative Republicans were scared of him.

Later, some reporters would declare me the luckiest politician in the entire fifty states.

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

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

They told me about their fallen leader, Tom Daschle of South Dakota, who had seen millions of dollars' worth of negative ads rain down on his head—full-page newspaper ads and television spots informing his neighbors day after day that he supported baby-killing and men in wedding gowns, a few even suggesting that he'd treated his first wife badly, despite the fact that she had traveled to South Dakota to help him get reelected.

They recalled Max Cleland, the former Georgia incumbent, a triple-amputee war veteran who had lost his seat in the previous cycle after being accused of insufficient patriotism, of aiding and abetting Osama bin Laden.

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

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

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But whatever conditions might have been required for such a *détente*, they did not exist in 2005. There would be no concessions, no gestures of goodwill. Two days after the election, President Bush appeared before cameras and declared that he had political capital to spare and he intended to use it. That same day, conservative activist Grover Norquist, unconstrained by the decorum of public office, observed, in connection with the Democrats' situation, that "any farmer will tell you that certain animals run around and are unpleasant, but when they've been fixed, then they are happy and sedate." Two days after my swearing in, Congresswoman Stephanie Tubbs Jones, out of Cleveland, stood up in the House of Representatives to challenge the certification of Ohio electors, citing the litany of voting irregularities that had taken place in the state on Election Day.

Rank-and-file Republicans scowled ("Sore losers," I could hear a few mutter), but Speaker Hastert and Majority Leader DeLay gazed stone-faced from the heights of the dais, placid in the knowledge that they had both the votes and the gavel. Senator Barbara Boxer of California agreed to sign the challenge, and when we returned to the Senate chamber, I found myself

casting my first vote, along with seventy-three of the seventy-four others voting that day, to install George W. Bush for a second term as president of the United States.

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

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

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