

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 spending my two terms during which I labored in the minority, Democrats had gained control of the state senate, and I had subsequently passed a slew of bills, from reforms of the Illinois death penalty system to an expansion of the state's health program for kids. I had continued to teach at the University of Chicago Law School, a job I enjoyed, and was frequently invited to speak around town. I had preserved my independence, my good name, and my marriage, all of which, statistically speaking, had been placed at risk the moment I set foot in the state capital.

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

In any event, it was as a consequence of that restlessness that I decided to challenge a sitting Democratic incumbent for his congressional seat in the 2000 election cycle. It was an ill-

considered race, and I lost badly—the sort of drubbing that awakens you to the fact that life is not obliged to work out as you'd planned. A year and a half later, the scars of that loss sufficiently healed, I had lunch with a media consultant who had been encouraging me for some time to run for statewide office. As it happened, the lunch was scheduled for late September 2001.

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

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

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

I suspected he was right, and that realization ate away at me. For the first time in my career, I began to experience the envy of seeing younger politicians succeed where I had failed, moving into higher offices, getting more things done. The pleasures of politics—the adrenaline of debate, the animal warmth of shaking hands and plunging into a crowd—began to pale against the meaner tasks of the job: the begging for money, the long drives home after the banquet had run two hours longer than scheduled, the bad food and stale air and clipped phone conversations with a wife who had stuck by me so far but was pretty fed up with raising our children alone and was beginning to question my priorities. Even the legislative work, the policy-making that had gotten me to run in the first place, began to feel too incremental, too removed from the larger battles—over taxes, security, health care, and jobs—that were being waged on a national stage. I began to harbor doubts about the path I had chosen; I began feeling the way I imagine an actor or athlete must feel when, after years of commitment to a particular dream, after years of waiting tables between auditions or scratching out hits in the minor leagues, he realizes that he's gone just about as far as talent or fortune will take him. The dream will not happen, and he now faces the choice of accepting this fact like a grown-up 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 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 that my ten volunteers and I found ourselves marching just a few paces ahead of the city's sanitation trucks, waving to the few stragglers who remained on the route while workers swept up garbage and peeled green shamrock stickers off the lampposts.

Mostly, though, I just traveled, often driving alone, first from ward to ward in Chicago, then from county to county and town to town, eventually up and down the state, across 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 who ever might come, or to arrange for my visit to their church, union hall, bridge group, or Rotary Club. Sometimes, after several hours of driving, I would find just two or three people waiting for me around a kitchen table. I would have to assure the hosts that the turnout was fine and compliment them on the refreshments they'd prepared. Sometimes I would sit through a church service and the pastor would forget to recognize me, or the head of the union local would let me speak to his members just before announcing that the union had decided to endorse someone else.

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

No blinding insights emerged from these months of conversation. If anything, what struck me

was just how modest people's hopes were, and how much of what they believed seemed to hold constant across race, region, religion, and class. Most of them thought that anybody willing to work should be able to find a job that paid a living wage. They figured that people shouldn't have to file for bankruptcy because they got sick. They believed that every child should have a genuinely good education—that it shouldn't just be a bunch of talk—and that those same children should be able to go to college even if their parents weren't rich. They wanted to be safe, from criminals and from terrorists; they wanted clean air, clean water, and time with their kids. And when they got old, they wanted to be able to retire with some dignity and respect.

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

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

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

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 naive, if not downright dangerous—an attempt to gloss over serious differences over policy and performance or, worse, a means of muffling the complaints of those who feel ill served by our current institutional arrangements.

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

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

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

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

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

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

But that is not all that I am. I also think my party can be smug, detached, and dogmatic at times. I believe in the free market, competition, and entrepreneurship, and think no small number of government programs don’t work as advertised. I wish the country had fewer lawyers and more engineers. I think America has more often been a force for good than for ill in the world; I carry few illusions about our enemies, and revere the courage and competence of our military. I reject a politics that is based solely on racial identity, gender identity, sexual

orientation, or victimhood generally. I think much of what ails the inner city involves a breakdown in culture that will not be cured by money alone, and that our values and spiritual life matter at least as much as our GDP.

Undoubtedly, some of these views will get me in trouble. I am new enough on the national political scene that I serve as a blank screen on which people of vastly different political stripes project their own views. As such, I am bound to disappoint some, if not all, of them. Which perhaps indicates a second, more intimate theme to this book—namely, how I, or anybody in public office, can avoid the pitfalls of fame, the hunger to please, the fear of loss, and thereby retain that kernel of truth, that singular voice within each of us that reminds us of our deepest commitments.

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

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