PART I

Fact-Checking a Fractured Irish Fairy Tale

1

They've got cars big as bars,
They've got rivers of gold
—The Pogues, "Fairytale of New York"

In my earliest memories, New York is a landscape of graceful bridges spanning shimmering rivers and landmarks soaring above crowded sidewalks, glimpsed through the window of a boxy, blue '55 Chevy as my father ferried us around to visit our large family. A lot of those bridges and landmarks came with a story about our relatives. The Statue of Liberty welcomed my grandparents from Cork, Ireland, to Ellis Island. The Empire State Building provided my Irish grandfather, a steamfitter, with his first real job. My mother's Irish grandfather painted the Brooklyn Bridge. My grandmother still worked at Macy's in Herald Square, which was, back then, the world's largest store. They were all proud of their work, as if those landmarks belonged to them a little bit, and I grew up feeling that way, too.

My father also made sure that I saw the scaffolding beneath our family, the help they had climbing out of poverty. I knew we were responsible to help those coming up behind us. In New York, the capital of liberalism, strong unions, churches, neighborhood groups, and extended family helped my grandparents rise. In my parents' generation, the invisible hand of government felt like wind at our backs, guiding all of us gently but steadily into the middle class.

It turned out that I was growing up at the dreamiest moment of the American Dream. My family's move to Long Island—to the

humble town of Oceanside, used by Tom Wolfe to symbolize downscale suburban dowdiness in his tales of radical chic—was subsidized by a government-powered building boom and highway construction. Government helped my parents and aunts and uncles buy homes; my father and uncles, almost all of them veterans, benefited from the GI Bill. The oldest commuter train system in the country, the Long Island Railroad, shuttled my father to and from work.

I went to great public schools, as well as Catholic schools. I paid almost no tuition to get a fantastic college education at the University of Wisconsin. Having started school on the eve of the Great Society, I graduated in the age of Ronald Reagan. I'm part of the last generation of young people to whom the nation kept its promises, but we didn't know that as I was growing up.

I was raised to understand that government helped my family rise, that the nation, led by Democrats, made political decisions to spread prosperity and build the middle class. Sometimes I think that knowledge itself makes me unusual. I didn't grow up seeing the American Dream as some modern-day Garden of Eden, from which we've now been cast; we built it. That makes me think we can do it again.

The fact is, on the eve of the Great Depression, we had historic income inequality (which was matched only in 2007, on the eve of the Wall Street crash), and for a long time people drew the conclusion that such radical economic disparities were dangerous, for everyone. From 1947 through 1973, we had tax policies that flattened income inequality. It was a political decision. The earnings of people at the bottom and in the middle grew faster than those at the top. That progressive tax policy brought in the public resources to pay for the scaffolding of the American Dream that helped my family and created the middle class.

The white middle class, anyway.

Going back to the New Deal, from Social Security to the Wagner Act empowering unions and continuing with the GI Bill, few, if any, new programs to build the middle class prohibited racial discrimination; many openly or cagily excluded people who weren't white. FDR's great reforms didn't cover agricultural workers,

another way African Americans were left out. Then, as the great white middle class grew and left the cities, banks redlined minority neighborhoods and kept residents from borrowing, while restrictive covenants kept black people out of many suburbs. (I am mainly talking about the American North here; the Jim Crow South had crueler and more obvious methods to lock out African Americans.)

Our failure to understand how government built the middle class creates two big political problems for us. First, too many white people think they didn't have help, that they did everything on their own. Then, predictably, they reject the idea that they got something African Americans and Latinos didn't get. It makes a kind of sense: If I believe I didn't get help, how can you say you didn't get something I don't even know that I got?

We have to talk about that.

I took another practical political lesson from my childhood immersion in American liberalism: I can tell you from experience that it was genuinely terrifying when the country began to come apart in the 1960s, starting with the assassination of John F. Kennedy. The nation is still coping politically with the decade's trauma today.

Kennedy was a shining hero to my family, to millions of Irish Catholics, and to millions more beyond our clan. Clearly, my father's black-Irish history lesson exaggerated Kennedy's civil rights activism. The canny Irish pol balanced the moral imperative to put the federal government on the side of black people, as Southern racism got more violent, against his political need to keep Southerners on the side of the Democrats. Kennedy did eventually move, with a rousing civil rights speech five months before he died, declaring: "We preach freedom around the world, and we mean it, and we cherish our freedom here at home, but are we to say to the world, and much more importantly, to each other that this is the land of the free except for the Negroes; that we have no second-class citizens except Negroes; that we have no class or caste system, no ghettoes, no master race except with respect to Negroes?"

It was Lyndon Johnson who won the era's great civil rights and antipoverty reforms, partly in Kennedy's memory. Johnson presided over the greatest expansion of government in history, with the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act, Medicare and Medicaid, the Economic Opportunity Act, and much more. That's when all hell broke loose, or so it seemed. At least, that is the point in my life when America seemed to splinter, and the long-standing race and working-class conflicts that would so affect my political identity began to make themselves known to me.

Just five days after Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act, my family watched on television as the low-income African American neighborhood of Watts in Los Angeles exploded in days of rioting. There was no connection between Johnson's long-overdue civil rights measures and the chaos that followed, first in Watts, then in almost every major American city during the next few years. Yet right away, the right and even some conservative Democrats tried to fuse them. L.A.'s notorious police chief, William Parker, claimed the Watts violence became unavoidable once "you keep telling people they are unfairly treated." The problem wasn't racism, poverty, and police brutality, in the conservative view; it was people *talking about* racism. The right argued that the chaos resulted from Johnson doing too much, too soon; in fact, we did too little, too late.

New York, our home, became ground zero for liberalism's implosion. Driving around the five boroughs to visit family, we couldn't miss the crime and poverty: vacant lots strewn with garbage in Brooklyn, my father's family homes charred by the arson that blighted the Bronx; idle men on street corners, in a world where blue-collar jobs were disappearing. Most of my working-class family drifted to the right, including my mother. Her two brothers, a cop and a firefighter, still worked in the decaying, dangerous city. She flinched and said a prayer every time she heard a siren, though we lived far from her brothers' threatening beats.

Eventually, my mother, who had adored John F. Kennedy, became a reluctant convert to the law-and-order politics of Richard Nixon. She made me understand that "Nixonland," the state of fracture over which our divisive president proudly reigned, was defined by

genuine fear, not merely by racism. My father stayed the course with civil rights liberalism, but he watched appalled as the nonviolent multiracial civil rights and antiwar movements gave way to Black Power, separatism, and violence. He did not hold "our side" blameless in the unraveling of liberalism. We did too much shouting and not enough listening to the people who disagreed with what we had to say.

Because Democrats were in charge when the country came undone in the 1960s, Democrats got blamed. Since then, I've watched a parade of party leaders try to outdo one another in denouncing their party's past—and the causes and commitments that I grew up believing in. "Big government" became the enemy as Democrats fumbled to rewrite their own history and erase their liberalism. In 1974, "New Democrat" senator Gary Hart declared "the end of the New Deal." President Jimmy Carter proclaimed that "government cannot solve our problems, it can't set our goals, it cannot define our mission." Bill Clinton famously announced, "The era of big government is over," although he stealthily used the tax code to provide credits that made millions of low-wage workers better off and helped many more families afford college.

Barack Obama stated flatly during the 2008 campaign, "I come from a new generation of Americans. I don't want to fight the battles of the sixties." After the crushing 2011 debt-ceiling battle, as Obama tried to sell the deal of slashing public spending to the American public, he announced that it would bring the United States to "the lowest level of annual domestic spending since Dwight Eisenhower was president."

Dwight Eisenhower: the Republican who was president in the 1950s, when I was born. Our first black president was taking us back to the soothing fifties, back before the Civil Rights or Voting Rights Acts; the Clean Air, Clean Water, or Occupational Safety and Health Acts; the Economic Opportunity Act; Medicare and Medicaid. Back before the country came unraveled, and Democrats got the blame.

I understand why Democratic leaders ran from the destruction of the sixties, as though they sought a witness protection program that would change their identities and keep them alive.

I also know that it didn't work. The GOP continues to make white voters believe Democrats are the party of big government—a corrupt big government that doesn't work for white people, only for undeserving minorities. Forty years of running hasn't left those lies behind.

Democrats have been left with two versions of their own history, a pair of too-simplistic stories of their party's legacy. They have attempted to either obliterate the sixties or depict it as a thrilling time, when we fought racism, sexism, and an unjust war and made everything right. What they don't do is acknowledge how scary it was for most Americans back then, how liberalism seemed to lead to chaos or worse. Republicans seized the day and used that fear for their own divisive purposes, but it was a fear that was very real, very much a part of my earliest political consciousness, and very much at the heart of my extended family's turn to the right.

I saw three presidents toppled before I turned sixteen: Kennedy by an assassin, Johnson by a mostly peaceful but sometimes violent antiwar movement, and Nixon by his own paranoia and lawlessness in Watergate. How did the unraveling start? No one knows exactly why, but 1965, when I turned seven, was not only the year of the Voting Rights Act and the Watts riots; it was also the year crime and divorce rates began to steadily rise and membership in mainline churches declined, along with Americans' affiliation with political parties, according to Bill Bishop's *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart*. Trust in government plummeted. The trauma of the mid- to late 1960s—riots and crime, drugs and divorce, black and white faux-revolutionaries taking up arms, the assassinations of President Kennedy, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., and Bobby Kennedy—scared the hell out of a lot of people, not only racist reactionaries. We are living in the shadow of that fear to this day.

Republicans seized our anxiety about change, shaped it, manipulated it, and stoked it into rage, all to drive people apart. Meanwhile, the economy began to sputter. Asking the white working class

to share what it had with others might have worked in a time of affluence—the very sort of time, in fact, during which the Great Society was designed and launched. Yet it proved painfully divisive as the economy began to rattle and then go off the rails in the 1970s. Wily Republicans depicted those economic dislocations as having a lot to do with race, too—they didn't, as I will explore in the coming pages—and drove a wedge between the beleaguered working class and its old party, the Democrats, which the GOP now depicted as the party of everyone but white workers. I watched these old tensions arise again during the 2008 campaign, but we've hesitated to examine their roots for so long, we have only one word for them: *racism*.

I have been a witness, during my political coming of age, to Democrats running away from the sixties, from the truth and accomplishments of their own story. It's a story of how government, under Democrats, expanded economic equality and built the white middle class—and how we just might be able to do it again. Yet we Democrats have sold ourselves out, helped dirty the image of liberalism, and, in the process, have helped enable Americans, particularly the middle class, to live in a dream world where their rise was entirely their own making: real Americans don't get government help. But my parents did, and so did their entire generation. So did my generation, at least until now. The result of this dysfunctional strategy is a practical and political impotence that's been particularly debilitating since 2008, as the country has struggled to emerge from economic catastrophe, yet for a while President Obama resisted both the language as well as the measures used by FDR and those who came after him, to show how government can fix the economy and fix itself.

And by the way, none of this maneuvering succeeded. Conflict reigns; manufactured battles dominate the political landscape, and polls show that despite the revisionism of a generation of Democrats, Americans still consider them the party of overgrown, ineffective government that is bigger than ever—and that still hasn't fixed the economy. Running away from the truth has robbed my party of its accomplishments—and made us look sneaky as well as incompetent.

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The most important thing I learned, as I examined the myths and the truths about my childhood political indoctrination: Our troubles didn't start in the sixties, anyway; they go all the way back to our founding. Rick Perlstein's wisdom about "Nixonland" aside, Americans didn't start hating one another in the sixties; Nixon just updated hate for the twentieth century. Enmity was baked into the American experiment by Founders who disagreed with one another about crucial issues—slavery, religion, equality, freedom—but made common cause around independence from England. They left an awful lot of problems to be solved by those of us who came after them.

By ceding American history to the right wing, the left looks as if its conceding their claim that we're un-American or not proud of our country. In fact, they're the ones who have given up on some core beliefs: that this is where the people of the world come together, to make a nation that's stronger than the sum of its parts; that diversity and tolerance make us exceptional; that we can afford to create opportunity for everyone. Their Tea Party pageantry and "constitutional conservatism" represent the right's crisis of faith: that our flesh-and-blood Founders, flaws and all, left us not a tablet of Ten Commandments, nor a fully formed and perfect union, but an unfinished American experiment.

If the right seems to be giving up on that experiment, the rest of us have to rise to the challenge. But first we have to understand how we got here. It turns out that my father's black-Irish fairytale was misleading, to say the least. At the same time, I still believe he was on to something.