

Part I

FEELING CONFLICTED

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Excerpt
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1 TRUMP'S ARRIVAL

Hillary Clinton had a thousand reasons to be upset by the 2016 presidential election. Her book, *What Happened*, lists them all. In Chapter 16 (helpfully entitled *Why*), Clinton lays out her reasons in 120 well-crafted paragraphs. FBI director James Comey is her star performer, far outdistancing Vladimir Putin & Co. Clinton also acknowledges her own shortcomings as a candidate and recounts other popular explanations for the election's outcome – angry blue-collar workers in the Midwest, a disorganized Democratic Party, fear of immigrants swarming the southern border, etc.¹ *What Happened* is a conflicted book, as Clinton tries to explain “how sixty-two million people – many of whom agreed Trump was unfit for the job – could vote for a man so manifestly unqualified to be President.”²

Feeling conflicted is surely an appropriate emotion when one wins a popularity contest by 2.9 million votes but gets only 43 percent of the Electoral College's delegates. But it is not the former secretary of state and U.S. senator we find seething in *What Happened*; it is the left-brained Wellesley College political science major. How, Mrs. Clinton asks, could she have lost to a man who bragged “about repeated sexual assault,” who attacked “immigrants, Muslims, Mexican Americans, prisoners of war, [and] people with disabilities,” who was “accused of scamming countless small businesses, contractors, students, and seniors,” and who took advantage of the media's silly fascination with her emails?³ Armed though she is with a raft of statistical, demographic, and sociological facts about the election, Clinton concludes her book where she began – mystified by the sheer illogicality of the 2016 campaign.

4 / Trump and Us

Hillary Clinton has written an honest, if incomplete, account of one of the most tortured elections in American history. But two things are missing in her story: (1) what Donald Trump said during the campaign and (2) why people listened to him. When quoting Trump (a rare occurrence), Clinton features his misogyny and bombast and, when describing Trump voters, she showcases their irredeemable biases, but she mostly ignores the campaign's rhetorical and emotional dynamics. In doing so, Mrs. Clinton reflects mainstream media coverage as well.

I take a different approach in this book although I share Clinton's question: How could 62 million Americans – half the nation (or at least half of those who voted) – vote for Donald Trump? But rather than focus on what the media calls "Trump's base," I seek a broader, cultural understanding of the American polity and of those who support the Trump presidency.

To do so, I examine a large swath of materials – campaign speeches, press conferences, media interviews, letters to the editor, open-ended polls, political news coverage, person-on-the-street interviews, Trump's tweets, and citizens' reactions to social media. Throughout the book, I will offer alternative explanations for the Trump phenomenon. To do so, I will take political language seriously, placing special faith in *word patterns* that go unnoticed by the casual observer and even by seasoned White House reporters. Crass though he can be, Trump's language shows a surprising cultural awareness. We need to learn what his gut tells him.

What Happened is a homunculus for the Clinton campaign itself. In both cases, voters' feelings, especially their inchoate feelings, are rarely discussed. To be fair, Mrs. Clinton claims throughout her book that she enjoyed chance meetings with her fellow citizens, but the effects of those encounters seem to fade into the mist for her. As a result, *What Happened* is a brittle book, written by a consummately intelligent and well-intentioned person who does not relate easily to ordinary people. In that way and more she provides a sharp contrast to her husband, he of the legendary interpersonal skills. Hillary Clinton is all cognition – briefing papers, polling reports, policy options, and the sociology of the fifth Congressional district.

Although *What Happened* frequently mentions Mr. Trump's bigoted fans, it fails to explain why a retired high school teacher married to a Methodist choir director in Omaha would vote for him.

5 / Trump's Arrival

I shall attempt that feat here. In the chapters to follow, I explore four primary emotions that drove many voters into the Trump camp, emotions that continued to hold sway four years later. For example, Donald Trump knew that many Americans felt *ignored* so he acknowledged them with an accessible, populist style. He knew that some folks felt *trapped* and he uplifted them via emotion-filled storytelling. Others of his constituents felt *besieged* – by elites, especially by the media – so he offered them public therapy by becoming an alternative news source for them. Mr. Trump also sensed that many Americans were *weary* of the political establishment so he used his distinct personality and a barrage of tweets to energize them. The Trump presidency cannot be understood, I shall argue, without understanding this comingling of words and emotions.

Before getting into such details, let us reflect on the questions posed by the 2016 presidential race. Was it the worst political contest in history or did it do what all good campaigns do – activate the citizenry? Was the emergence of Donald Trump a mere fluke or did it provide broad hints about where the nation was heading? What made Trump so different from other politicians and, pivotally, why does he continue to stir up such intense emotions among his fellow citizens? And what about his supporters? Where had such people been hiding in the past and why did they suddenly emerge – full-throated and unrelenting? The 2016 presidential campaign and its aftermath are indeed mysterious.

A Useful Campaign?

“Friends stopped talking to one another. Husbands and wives broke up. Parent groups at schools frayed as people looked anew at neighbors and said ‘I thought I knew you.’”⁴ According to many, the 2016 presidential campaign was horrific. Columnist Leonard Pitts, Jr., explains why: “Donald Trump is a lying, narcissistic, manifestly incompetent child man who is as dumb as a sack of mackerel.”⁵ “This is a fundamental rewriting of the map,” said CNN’s John King on election night,⁶ and the pollsters, it seems, were to blame: “It’s a debacle on the order of Dewey defeats Truman,” opined the University of Virginia’s Larry Sabato.⁷ “A lot of people feel more emboldened – because someone like Trump is in the White House – to speak their minds on topics that formerly had been taboo,” observed secessionist Michael Hill.⁸ “People feel it is not their country anymore,” noted the University of

6 / Trump and Us

Georgia's Cas Mudde and, "to a certain extent, it is not their country anymore."⁹ "I don't care what [Trump] says, you're attacking Muslims here," declared Iowan Steventjie Hasna, "and that's not American at all. We stand for American values and that's the exact opposite of what he stands for."¹⁰

The post-campaign rhetoric ranged from the heartfelt to the histrionic. A sense of urgency filled the air and broad, cultural questions emerged: What did the campaign say about us? Who is an American, really? Will the center hold? The country's very essence, its comprehensiveness, seemed at stake:

- "In my opinion, unless the country gets back together, things just can't work the way they should" (Queen Jones, retired teacher's assistant, Mount Pleasant, North Carolina).¹¹
- "The most troubling outcome could be our willingness to retreat deeper into self-interested and self-idolizing divisions that pay little attention to our 'other' neighbors" (Thabiti Anyabwile, church planter, Washington, DC).¹²
- "The results of the 2016 elections bring to mind the words of abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, who once condemned the slaveholder-dominated American government as 'a covenant with death and an agreement with hell'" (Manisha Sinha, college professor, Storrs, Connecticut).¹³

Eight years earlier, things were different; the country had validated its birthright. One might have expected former secretary of state Colin Powell to be upbeat about that election ("The world wondered, can America really do this? Aren't they too divided? Can they really pull something like this off? And we said to the world, yes, we can, and we did"), but a broader sense of coherence also existed.¹⁴ If the United States was on the brink of collapse in 2016, the nation had found its storied self eight years earlier. Everyone, it seemed, felt the change:

- "[Barack Obama's] campaign of hope and change really stuck with folks, and you see it in the designs that are being fed back. It's as if folks are already nostalgic about this time" (Amy Maniatis, marketing executive, San Francisco, California).¹⁵
- "The inauguration represents a tangible example of the American spirit, testimony to the indisputable fact that our nation is the greatest on earth" (Patrick Gendron, attorney, Bryan, Texas).¹⁶

7 / Trump's Arrival

- “I really didn’t think the country was ready for an African-American president, but they fooled me, for which I’m glad. We have really come a long way” (Merlin Bragg, administrative assistant, Linden, New Jersey).¹⁷

Two different elections, two different countries? To be sure, many Americans felt uneasy when Barack Obama became president in 2008 but the 2016 campaign seemed different, as if half the citizenry had suddenly emerged full-form and crazed, demanding that their nation be returned to them. These denizens of the dark – racists, sexists, homophobes, nationalists – seemed constituents of a nation reinvented.

The reality, of course, is that Donald Trump won the presidency in a squeaker. A few more miners in western Pennsylvania, a few more industrial workers in Michigan, and the United States would have had its first female president. That, too, would have been heralded as apocalyptic by some, the full-flowering of the American planting by others. As *Washington Post* columnist Robert Pierre observed, “Whether Donald Trump is impeached or serves out a full term or two, what happens with our nation depends more on how we deal with one another in our divided nation. Barack Obama is who we are. Donald Trump is who we are.”¹⁸

Americans have always cast a furtive eye on one another. Fourth of July celebrations try to paper over that fact but the 9/11 tragedy, and the church bombings, and the Nazis marching remind us it is true. If, as Walt Whitman said, we as individuals contain multitudes, things are far more complicated at the level of the nation-state: Religious freedom as long as it is Christian. Public disclosure accepted, a prying press denounced. Patriotism yes, socialism no, unless the latter includes health coverage. Refuge for the world’s oppressed . . . as long as they stand in line.

Donald Trump stirred up all these contrarities. He was an iconoclast who worshipped Wall Street, a renegade who lived in Trump Tower, an evangelist who never went to church. Trump was a Democrat at times, a Republican more often, but a fellow devoid of political discipline. He had the attention span of a gnat and no moral depth, but he appealed to seniors hooked on Fox News. Trump promised to drain the swamp but he dined with lobbyists. He wanted the unions to rebuild the roads even as he made the Supreme Court more ideological. Multitudes met their match in Donald Trump.

8 / Trump and Us

In many ways, though, the 2016 presidential campaign was fairly normal. Two establishment figures squared off, tempers were lost, outrageous statements made, and then it was over. All U.S. elections involve such soul-searching because identity is such a malleable thing in a nation housing roughly 330 million people, each with a short fuse. So Americans conduct a fresh introspection every four years: Truman populism, Nixon globalism, Carter moralizing, Reagan nationalism, Clinton progressivism, Bush belligerence, Trump protectionism. All these changes invited controversy.

But wasn't the 2016 presidential election especially dispiriting? Judged by conventional standards, perhaps so. In their book *Evaluating Campaign Quality*, Sandy Maisel, Darrell West, and Brett Clinton lay out a number of sensible criteria for judging a campaign's worth: Did it focus on fundamental issues? Did voters know what was going on? Was the discourse civil? Did the campaign inspire greater trust in government officials? Did the media referee the contest appropriately?¹⁹

Judged by these standards, the 2016 campaign did not measure up well. As ABC and the *Washington Post* reported in August of 2016, candidates Clinton and Trump were considered the most disliked candidates in the thirty years the poll had been conducted.²⁰ Each day, it seemed, a new low was reported in the press.

But as will be stressed throughout this book, the 2016 campaign is far too complicated – and far too important – to be dismissed easily. In many ways, it was a fine contest, especially when assessed via these standards:

- *Did the campaign expand communication networks?* Harry Truman's train trek in 1948; televising of the national conventions in 1952; live presidential debates in 1960; fresh political ads in 1972; satellite uplinks in 1980; digital canvassing in 2008.
- *Did the campaign foster partisan rumination?* The Goldwater revolution of 1964; the McCarthy and Perot challenges in 1968 and 1992; the emergence of "new Democrats" in 1992; "Reagan's third term" in 1988.
- *Did the campaign inspire serious moral interrogation?* Vietnam and civil rights in 1968; the Watergate purgation of 1976; women's rights in 1984; the Willie Horton ads of 1988; sexual impropriety in 1996.
- *Did the campaign expand the leadership pool?* An Army general in 1952; a movie actor in 1980; an African-American preacher in 1984;

9 / Trump's Arrival

a businessman in 1992; a female governor in 2008; a Mormon in 2012.

- *Did the campaign enfranchise new voters?* The Catholic voting bloc in 1960; McGovern's youth brigade in 1972; evangelical Republicans in 1980; African-American turnout in 2008.
- *Did the campaign widen the policy agenda?* The Soviet threat in 1956; the space race in 1960; the War on Poverty in 1964; Soviet decline in 1984; Middle East adventurism in 2000; national health-care in 2008.
- *Did the campaign foster international rapprochement?* The possibility of the United Nations in 1944; postwar reconstruction in 1952; China and Nixon in 1972; the potential for Middle East accords in 1976; the prospect of NAFTA in 1992.
- *Did the campaign increase economic stability?* Strong post-election years: 1965, 1969, 1989, 1997, 2005; weak post-election years: 1949, 1957, 1981, 1993, 2001, 2009.

When examined via these criteria, the 2016 campaign looks rather good. For example, new ways of engaging the citizenry were found – cable channels got their share of the debates; stand-alone news sites (e.g., *Politico*, the *Drudge Report*, *HuffPost*) had some bite; vigorous social media outlets brought new consumers into the mix. In addition, partisan rumination starkly increased for both political parties, as Trump vanquished fifteen other Republicans and as Bernie Sanders gave Hillary Clinton a run for her money. Moral interrogation unquestionably took center stage for Republicans (Trump's treatment of women, the biases of "fake news," Russian interference in the election, the savaging of immigrants) and for Democrats (Benghazi, Hillary's emails, "baskets of deplorables," and the reemergence of Bill Clinton's liaisons).

The talent pool obviously expanded in 2016, as the first woman ever nominated by a major political party took on a corporate-titan-turned-TV-star. New voters were found in the Rust Belt by Republicans and in Texas and Georgia by Democrats, and new battleground states emerged (Virginia, Nevada, Colorado, West Virginia, and North Carolina). The campaign also brought old-but-new debates out into the open – healthcare, immigration, global trade, tax reform – but the campaign failed miserably when it came to furthering international rapprochement (largely because of Mr. Trump, a trend he continued

10 / Trump and Us

once in office). In the economic short term, at least, GDP growth, unemployment levels, and the Dow all sent positive signals during 2017 and 2018.

In many ways, then, the 2016 campaign served the needs of democracy and did so surprisingly well. The women who marched wearing pink hats on January 21, 2017, the day after Donald Trump's inauguration, would have been otherwise occupied if Hillary Clinton had become president. Similarly, blue-collar workers who had been downsized and ostracized would not have turned out to vote unless Donald Trump had given them hope. As former White House advisor Eric Liu reports, the 2016 campaign triggered a "systemic immune response in the body politic, producing a surge in engagement among" Trump opponents.²¹ Indeed, says Shaun Harper, then of the University of Pennsylvania's Center for Race and Equity in Education, one might even express a "painful gratitude" for Donald Trump's ability to galvanize a Democratic counter-force in 2018 and 2020 headed by young people, African-Americans, Hispanics, and other marginalized groups; the "gift of Trump," says Harper, has the capacity to change American politics for years to come.²² Agreeing, columnist E. J. Dionne observes, "it's hard to imagine a president more likely to inspire Obama Nostalgia than Donald Trump."²³

In short, the 2016 presidential election had considerable vitality. It inspired populist Republicans to rally against their establishment overseers and insurgent Democrats to question (via Bernie Sanders) their party's ideological homogeneity.²⁴ Presidential campaigns almost always energize the electorate, and the 2016 race was no exception. As this book was being written, most Americans were angry at something – at the President's detractors, at the aimlessness of the Democratic Party, at one of the cable news channels. These kinds of anger are the very stuff out of which democratic engagement has long been fashioned.

A Native Son?

Try as she might, Hillary Clinton rarely made it "above the fold" in the morning newspapers in 2016. That spot was almost always reserved for Donald Trump. This book asks why. What was it about Trump that so commanded the press's attention? Why did Candidate Clinton spend so much time attacking him personally rather than following her own game plan? Why were the elite media unable to resist