

CODE RED

**HOW PROGRESSIVES
AND MODERATES CAN UNITE
TO SAVE OUR COUNTRY**

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2020



**ST. MARTIN'S
PRESS
NEW YORK**

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INTRODUCTION

THE OPPORTUNITY WE DARE NOT MISS

*The Uprising Against Trump and the
Rendezvous with Dignity*

WILL PROGRESSIVES AND MODERATES FEUD WHILE AMERICA burns?

Or will these natural allies take advantage of a historic opportunity to strengthen American democracy and defeat an increasingly radical form of conservatism?

The choice in our politics is that stark. This book is offered in a spirit of hope, but with a sense of alarm.

My hope is inspired by the broad and principled opposition that Donald Trump's presidency called forth. It is a movement that can and should be the driving force in our politics long after Trump is gone. His abuses of office, his divisiveness, his bigotry, his autocratic habits, and his utter lack of seriousness about the responsibilities of the presidency drew millions of previously disengaged citizens to the public square and the ballot box. The danger he represented inspired young Americans to participate in our public life at unprecedented levels. Tens of thousands of Americans, especially women, have gathered in libraries, diners, and church basements to share wisdom, to organize, and, in many cases, to run for office themselves. These newly engaged citizens have created an opportunity to build a broad alliance for practical

and visionary government as promising as any since the Great Depression gave Franklin Roosevelt the chance to build the New Deal coalition.

To seize this opening, progressives and moderates must realize that they are allies who have more in common than they sometimes wish to admit. They share a commitment to what public life can achieve and the hope that government can be decent again. They reject the appeals to racism that have been Trump's calling card and the divisiveness at the heart of his electoral strategy. Together, they long for a politics focused on freedom, fairness, and the future. This new politics would be rooted in the economic justice that has always been the left's driving goal and in the problem-solving approach to government that moderates have long championed.

It's true that these camps often battle over whether the nation should seek restoration or transformation in the years after Trump. In fact, our country needs both. To restore the democratic norms we have always valued, we must begin to heal the social and economic wounds that led to Trump's presidency in the first place. Yet there is resistance to common ground among progressives and moderates alike. They often mistrust each other's motives, battle fiercely over tactics, argue over how much change the country needs, and squabble over whether specific policy ideas go too far, or not far enough.

The moderate says: "Hey, progressive, you think that if you just lay out the boldest and most ambitious approach to any given problem, the people will rally to your side. Really? For one thing, people may like your objective but think you're changing things way more than we have to. And we can battle to the death over, say, a Democratic Party platform plank or the first draft of a bill, but without the hard negotiating and compromising that legislative politics requires, a bold idea will remain just a platform plank. That really doesn't do anyone any good. You subject everyone to so many litmus tests that we might as well be in

chemistry class. And God save us from your abuse on Twitter if we disagree with you. You lefties have no idea how to win elections outside of Berkeley or Brooklyn, and some of your ideas are so sweeping that they will scare potential voters and allies away." At this point, the moderate is likely to wield the sturdy old punch line: "Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good."

"But hold on," says the progressive, "you moderates spend so much time negotiating with yourselves that you compromise away goals and priorities before the real battle even begins. Your ideas get so soggy and complicated that they mobilize no one and mostly put people to sleep. Better to have the courage of your convictions, lay out your hopes plainly and passionately, and inspire voters to join you. Besides, you middle-of-the-roaders were so petrified of Ronald Reagan and the right wing that you caved in to the Gipper's economic ideas, let inequality run wild, and gave us a racist and grossly unfair criminal justice system. The extremists have pulled the political center so far right that the only way back to sanity is to show our fellow citizens what a real progressive program looks like."

At the risk of sounding like a perhaps unwelcome counselor attempting to ease a family quarrel, I would plead with moderates and progressives to listen to each other carefully. If the events since 2016 do not teach moderates and progressives that they must find ways of working together, nothing will. If they fail to heed each other's advice and take each other's concerns seriously, they will surrender the political system to an increasingly undemocratic right with no interest in any of their shared goals, priorities, and commitments.

Moderates are right about the complexity of getting things done in a democracy. Even when the boldest ideas have prevailed, they did so because complex coalitions were built, important (and, it should be said, often legitimate) interests were accommodated, and some lesser goals were left by the wayside, to be fought for another day. Moderates are also right that democracy

requires persuading those who are open to change but worry about how this or that reform might work in practice or affect them personally. (Think: losing their private health insurance.) Disdaining as sellouts those who raise inconvenient questions or express qualms is not the way to build a majority for reform. Moderates are also right that Americans in large numbers are tired of a politics that involves more yelling than dialogue, more demonizing than understanding.

But progressives are right to say that for the last three decades, moderates *have* spent too much time negotiating with themselves. Consider all the effort Democrats put into wooing Republicans by responding to their proposals to amend Obamacare, only to have the GOP oppose it anyway and spend a decade trying to repeal it. Much the same happened with the 2010 Dodd-Frank financial services reform act. Moderates have too readily accepted the assumptions of their opponents, wasting energy and squandering opportunities by trying to accommodate a right wing that will never be appeased. Progressives are also right in saying that our political system tilts toward the wealthy and the connected. And whether they call themselves socialists or not, progressives have the intellectual high ground when they say that today's capitalism—a radical form of the market economy shaped in the 1980s that is quite different from earlier incarnations—is failing to serve the needs of Americans in very large numbers.

As I hope is already clear, this book does not make the standard centrist argument that progressives can't win unless they become more moderate. But neither does it make a claim, often heard among progressives, that moderation is hopeless and the only way to prevail in a deeply divided country is to mobilize your own base.

Each of these claims is incomplete. The problems with the first were underscored by the outcome of the 2016 election: Moderation alone does not guarantee victory, and the progressive critique of the center has become more persuasive as eco-

nomic inequality has widened. The problem with the second is that every electoral contest involves *both* mobilization *and* persuasion. The important question is to establish where the balance between the two lies at a given moment. Neither can be ignored.

Democrats certainly got that balance right in the 2018 elections. Moderates and progressives came together behind a remarkably diverse set of candidates, winning important governor's races in states that voted for Trump and taking control of the House. It was this victory that enabled House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to begin a formal impeachment inquiry after it was learned that Trump tried to enlist the Ukrainian government in an effort to smear former vice president Joe Biden. A coalition for change produced a coalition for accountability. Maintaining and expanding this sense of unity, I will argue, requires a shared commitment to a set of goals and principles that I describe as a Politics of Remedy, a Politics of Dignity, and a Politics of More.

Remedy—solving problems, resolving disputes, moving forward—is the core purpose of democratic politics. Dignity is at the heart of demands for justice from long-marginalized groups as well as members of a once secure multiracial working class displaced by deindustrialization, trade, and technological change. And while moderates and progressives may differ on specifics (single-payer health care versus improvements on Obamacare, for example), they agree that energetic public action can provide more Americans with affordable health insurance, more with decent wages and benefits, more with family-friendly workplaces, more with good schools, more with affordable paths to college and effective training programs, more with unimpeded access to the ballot, more with adequate provision for retirement, more with security from gun violence. And, yes, we need to do much more to combat climate change.

But to forge the alliance American politics needs, moderates and progressives will have to abandon an unseemly moralism that feeds political superiority complexes.

Progressives are not the impractical visionaries many moderates suspect them to be, with no concern for how programs work or how change happens. On the contrary, there are times when progressives are *more* practical than their critics in seeing that piecemeal reforms can be too narrow to solve the problem at hand, too stingy to create systems that inspire broad-based political support, and too accommodating to narrow interest groups. It should always be remembered that without the vision progressives offer, many reforms would never have been undertaken. The abolitionists agitated against slavery when most of the country was indifferent, opening the way for more moderate and cautious politicians such as Abraham Lincoln to end the nation's moral scourge. Laws regulating wages and hours were viewed as violations of property rights—until they weren't. Racial equality was a radical demand until it became mainstream in the civil rights years. Gay marriage was opposed as recently as 2012 by a Democratic president.

Progressives continue to broaden a political debate long hemmed in by the dominance of conservative assumptions and the stifling of progressive aspirations. Bernie Sanders moved single-payer health care onto the political agenda, giving the lie to the idea that Obamacare was socialist and radical. Elizabeth Warren has suggested far-reaching reforms to capitalism, proposing aggressive action against monopolies and a wealth tax that would directly address concentrations of economic power. Warren, Sanders, and their supporters have thus expanded our policy imaginations. Ideas once cast as “leftist” (an increase in the capital gains tax comes to mind) were suddenly seen as “moderate” alternatives.

Moderates are not, as some progressives suspect, agents of influence for the status quo seeking to channel reformist energy into safe pathways that leave the powerful undisturbed. Moderates are often as fed up with existing distributions of power and ways of doing business as are their friends to their left. But,

yes, moderates do counsel reformers to be on the lookout for the unintended consequences of their proposals. They hold out the hope that one step forward today can be followed by another step tomorrow—and they can point to Social Security and advances in health insurance coverage as examples of when modest first steps eventually led to more sweeping victories.

Moderation itself embodies specific virtues that any democratic system needs. The political scientist Aurelian Craiutu defines them well in his book *Faces of Moderation*. He notes that moderation “promotes social and political pluralism,” has a “propensity to seek conciliation and find balance between various ideas, interests and groups,” and does not assume there is “only one single correct (or valid) way of life on which we all might agree.” Moderates recognize that “most political and social issues often involve tough trade-offs and significant opportunity costs, and require constant small-scale adjustments and gradual steps.” Moderation is “a form of opposition to extremism, fanaticism and zealotry,” teaches the virtues of “self-restraint and humility,” and seeks to keep the conversation open with “friends, critics and opponents.” All these are habits and dispositions that progressives and humane conservatives—no less than moderates themselves—value more highly than ever after our unfortunate national experiment with their opposite under Trump.¹

Yes, moderates and progressives can drive each other crazy by being, respectively, too cautious and too rash, and I am not trying to wish away what are genuine differences between them. They can disagree over principle (how large a role should the state play?), over questions of political efficacy (which sorts of programs can draw majority support?), over practical concerns (do certain approaches work better than others?), and over the proper balance of influence in a democracy between experts and mass movements.

But what they share is, at this moment especially, more important: a deep belief in democracy and freedom, a commitment to

public problem solving, a frustration over the collapse of norms that promote basic decency, and a desire for a fairer economy that allows all citizens to live in dignity and hope.

As I write, the Trump presidency confronts an impeachment crisis. Its causes were particular to his abuses—a hangover of deep mistrust created by Special Counsel Robert Mueller’s findings, Trump’s subordination of the country’s interests to his own selfish needs in pressuring the Ukrainian government to help his reelection, and extravagant and dangerous claims of presidential immunity from any form of accountability. His refusal to separate himself fully from his own companies bred constant suspicion that his every action (including the profoundly destructive green light he gave Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to invade Syria and attack the Kurds) might be linked to his narrow economic interests. Until his efforts to get a foreign government to smear Joe Biden became public, moderate and progressive Democrats in the House were divided over whether to pursue impeachment. They came together in mutual revulsion. They were united by shared values and by a common strategic sense that only an impeachment inquiry would make clear to the country how aberrant and destructive his behavior was. The reluctance of most Republicans to take on Trump, in turn, underscored how deeply the party had been infected by Trumpism. A fear of the effects of speaking out gripped large parts of the party.

In the face of this radicalized and deformed Republicanism, the urgency of the progressive/moderate alliance I call for in these pages will long outlive the Trump presidency. The damage Trump has done to conservatism (and that conservatives have done to themselves) will not be suddenly repaired by his departure. Trump triumphed by exploiting public disaffection with a political system that many Americans saw as infested with sleaze and controlled by forces operating entirely for their own benefit. Rather than being the cure for such maladies, he was their apotheosis, the culmination of all that has gone wrong in our politics. Trump’s presidency

underscored how desperately our system needs reform and our country needs repair. In the post-Trump era, progressives and moderates must be prepared to take on these tasks—together.

Political labels are inherently vexing, especially since most voters don’t care about them very much. They can also change meaning over time, and they go in and out of style. So a word on why I have chosen the terms I have.

I use “progressives” to refer to broad left-of-center opinion because that is the current term of choice among those who hold such views. I also use it because the word “liberal” is packed with many different meanings now, given, for example, the widespread use of “neoliberal” to refer to those who favor a less regulated economy. Broadly, progressives in these pages are those who favor far-reaching reforms to remedy inequalities related to class, race, gender, immigration status, and sexual orientation.

The word “moderate” is even more difficult to pin down, and a large share of the political science profession is skeptical that the word has any functional meaning in describing voters. Public opinion researchers have noted that those labeled as moderates are not necessarily middle-of-the-road. They often have a mix of views that can fall at the far ends of opinion on both sides of the conventional political spectrum. As the political scientist David Broockman told Vox’s Ezra Klein, a voter who favors single-payer health care and the deportation of all illegal immigrants might be deemed a “moderate” because the average of these two positions lands him or her at some midpoint on a scale. But neither position can be described as “centrist” or “moderate.” Moreover, as Klein noted, voters who fall into the moderate category might well disagree with each other fundamentally. For the sake of simplicity, imagine one voter who favors legal abortion but strongly opposes labor unions and another who supports unions but would ban abortion. Two voters who hold very different worldviews

might end up in the same hypothetical middle ground because neither is conventionally “liberal” or “conservative.”²

While acknowledging these difficulties, I persist in using the word “moderate” not only because it has currency among politicians and other political actors but also because I still find it to be the best description of a significant swath of the electorate. Among Democrats and Independents, it would apply to those who see themselves as more on the center-left than the left. They might be more sympathetic to expanding health insurance coverage through reforms to the Affordable Care Act than to the creation of a single-payer system, or open to large-scale expansion of college access without making college free. Before the radicalization of the Republican Party, supporters of the GOP embraced the term “moderate” in significant numbers. They often found themselves in agreement with more liberal Democrats on reformist goals related to poverty, education, or neighborhood renewal but favored alternative solutions that they saw as more fiscally prudent or market friendly. That many of these onetime Republican moderates are now politically homeless is a central reason why they have far more in common with progressives than with a radicalized form of conservatism.

I prefer the term “moderate” to “centrist” not only because political moderation involves the dispositional virtues Craiutu describes but also because self-conscious “centrists” have often found themselves chasing a hypothetical middle ground that has shifted steadily rightward with the GOP’s embrace of ever more extreme views. Principled moderates are now on the left side of politics because the right wing that controls the Republican Party gives them no quarter.

Which brings us to one thing this book is not: a call for a return to “bipartisanship.” The rise of the radical right in the GOP means that, for now, the Democratic Party is missing a reasonable interlocutor. This shift toward a radicalized conservatism married

to Trumpism up and down the party is also one reason why anti-Trump Republicans loomed larger among writers and commentators than among the party’s politicians. Unlike GOP politicians, those honorable Never Trump conservative intellectuals and commentators didn’t have to worry about primaries.

Democrats face formidable coalition-management challenges because they now provide a home to millions of voters (and scores of elected officials) who in earlier times might well have been moderate Republicans. This only increases the urgency of common action by progressives and moderates. They should welcome the rank-and-file defectors from the Republican Party as allies against Trumpian politics and a right-wing radicalism that has turned its back on many of the most constructive strains of the old GOP.

I am asking progressives and moderates to put aside their differences not just for one election, but for the larger purpose of moving the country forward.

My plea to progressives is to understand the difference between long-term goals and immediate needs, to see that Martin Luther King Jr.’s “fierce urgency of now” makes demands on all advocates of justice. At times, it is indeed a rebuke to those who evade the need for transformational change and are addicted to what King memorably called “the tranquilizing drug of gradualism.” But at other moments, it is a call for negotiation and coalition building that focuses on the importance of making progress today—*now*—that can be built on tomorrow.³

We need, for example, to get affordable health insurance to all Americans as soon as possible, to move quickly to expand access to college or training after high school, and to raise incomes among the least advantaged. Progressives should be open to big steps toward all these goals, even steps that don’t conform to their first-choice solutions (single-payer or free college, for example).

And we need, urgently, to end Trump's cruel border policies and the demonization of newcomers. We need immigration reform to give roughly 11 million undocumented immigrants a path to citizenship, and agreement on future immigration flows. We need our country to be open to refugees. Playing into Trump and his followers' hands by seeming to downplay the need for border security or offering proposals that make it easier for them to cast reformers—falsely—as advocate for “open borders” will make reaching agreement on such proposals far harder at a moment when morality demands action.⁴

In a democracy, persuasion is an imperative. Considering the views of your fellow citizens who might be on the fence is not timidity. It's a democratic obligation. And let's all face the obvious: Defeating Trumpism is a precondition to progress of any kind. Building the broadest possible coalition to bring this about means welcoming allies with whom we might have disagreements on matters that are important but, for now, are less urgent.

Moderates, in turn, need to acknowledge that in reacting to the long Reagan era, middle-of-the-road politicians (and liberals who wanted to look middle-of-the-road) made mistakes bred by excessive caution and, at times, abandoned principle.

As I will show in more detail, they were too quick to capitulate to the Reagan economic consensus, too eager to buy into the idea of market supremacy, too quick to deregulate financial markets, and too keen on winning the approval of financiers. Yes, the 1994 crime bill was a response to legitimate fears about a crime wave, but it was absurdly punitive and had disastrous consequences for African Americans. Along with similarly draconian laws at the state level, it helped lead us toward what Michelle Alexander has called “the new Jim Crow” and created, as Chris Hayes has written, “a colony in a nation.” Moderates need to recognize that younger progressives are frustrated with liberals and Democrats who never quite got over the setbacks of the 1980s and now act, as K. Sabeel Rahman, the president

of the think tank Demos, observed, from “a caution borne out of fear of the right and out of a progressivism chastened by recurring defeat.”⁵

It is not an excess of wokeness to ask those who are privileged to ponder how their privilege influences the political choices they make. And pretending that achieving bipartisan outcomes is only a matter of will and better personal relationships is to ignore three decades of Republican obstruction and rejectionism.

Moreover, going big, as progressives typically suggest, can often be *more* politically effective than going small and careful. Big universal programs (think: Social Security, Medicare, and the GI Bill) often muster far more support than modest, targeted schemes. Acting boldly, even stubbornly, on behalf of the rights of the oppressed and excluded has often been the only way to sway public opinion in a new direction. History looks kindly on early advocates of abolition, labor rights, civil rights, and, more recently, LGBTQ rights.

If our country is to move forward, both sides must be willing to look to each other for guidance. The theologian Reinhold Niebuhr was right to teach us to seek the truth in our opponent's error, and the error in our own truth.

Both sides should also remember that successful political movements often define what they affirmatively believe after first coming together in opposition to a status quo they deplore. Call it the power of negative thinking.

Ronald Reagan used what he opposed—big government, taxes, and Soviet Communism—to develop his agenda for change: smaller government, lower taxes, and a forceful foreign policy. In doing so, he redefined our politics, and his ideas exercised broad sway for nearly three decades.

Trump similarly clarified what moderates and progressives alike abhor: racial and ethnic intolerance; a disdain for democratic values; corruption married to corporate dominance; and the pursuit of brutally divisive politics as a substitute for problem

solving. As a result, Trump brought the left and moderates together in support of an open society and democracy, political reform, and limits on corporate power. Both favor forceful steps against rising inequality that are a necessary prelude to a more harmonious republic.

They also share something important with civil rights hero Fannie Lou Hamer: They are sick and tired of being sick and tired. They know the costs of remaining on our current path. They know this is a Code Red moment, for democracy and for decency. They must act—together—so we can put Trumpism behind us and build something better.

The political approach I describe is not a fantasy. The popular uprising against Trump led to the verdict American voters rendered in the 2018 midterm elections. Democratic candidates for the House of Representatives outpolled Republicans by nearly *10 million votes*—a margin roughly 7 million votes larger than Hillary Clinton's popular vote lead just two years earlier. As a revolt of progressive and moderate voters led by progressive and moderate candidates, 2018 offers the prototype of an enduring majority. This is why I devote chapter 1 to an analysis of what happened in 2018 and what it means for the future.⁶

In the following two chapters, I turn to history to explain how we reached this point. They examine the long-term forces at work in our politics pushing moderates and progressives together, and suggest lessons the left and the center can learn from the past.

The Democrats won in 2018 for the same reason that their party is the staging ground for nearly all of the difficult debates over pressing economic and social problems: The radicalization of the Republican Party has left moderates with no alternative but to find common ground with progressives. This is the focus of chapter 2, which looks at history to show how far the GOP has strayed.

I have dubbed chapter 3 “a short history of circular firing squads and enduring achievements.” It looks at how liberals and progressives, moderate reformers and socialists, have alternately battled each other and worked together since the Progressive Era. The larger story of American reform helps explain both current tensions and the renewal of energy on the left. This history also points to earlier mistakes worth avoiding and successful strategies still worth pursuing.

Chapter 4 takes on what many might regard as the most unexpected development in American politics: the resurgence of democratic socialism. It turns out that what socialism means to many who embrace it is, not surprisingly, quite different from the caricature presented by the right. Its emergence reflects the collapse of the Reagan economic consensus, progressives' frustrations with neoliberalism, and the continued rise of inequality even after the Clinton and Obama years.

I will argue that while Republicans will seek to weaponize the S-word against Democrats (as the GOP has done since the days of the New Deal), the new interest in socialism reflects a larger yearning across a broad range of opinion for an economy in which morality plays a larger role, the powerful are held accountable, and wage and salary workers are protected.

Moving forward in politics requires coming to a settlement about the past—and, on the broad center-left, this means coming to terms with the legacies of Bill Clinton and Barack Obama. In chapter 5, I argue that they had important successes in grappling with the immediate problems facing the country, but neither overturned the broad assumptions that had governed American economic policy since the 1980s. The former is why most moderates and—especially in Obama's case—many progressives still honor their presidencies. The latter is why many progressives see both as falling short. It's essential, I argue, to see their presidencies whole: to recognize their achievements, and to turn now to the work they left unfinished. It is a political and historical error

to leave their legacies undefended. It is also a mistake to ignore the reasons why they left many progressives frustrated.

Over the next several chapters, I deal with four issues that have been particularly vexing for progressives and moderates alike: the structure of the economy, the renewed political power of identity, the rise of nationalism, and the United States' role in the world. In all these areas, moderates and progressives have often allowed themselves to become too preoccupied with internecine battles, casting many issues as either/or choices that obscured more than they clarified, and privileged the hunt for heretics over the search for converts. In these chapters, I engage with the thinking of intellectuals, policy specialists, and activists, and also of politicians, including many of the 2020 Democratic presidential candidates, some of whom are no longer in the contest. This book is absolutely *not* an effort to pick winners or losers. The candidates I bring into the story are mentioned because their arguments and proposals help illuminate the debates I describe.

Chapter 6 shows how adventurous proposals—among them single-payer health care, free college, and the Green New Deal—have opened space for new policy advances. At the same time, I argue for a focus on goals rather than specific policies. Universal health insurance coverage is a legitimate litmus test, for example, but single-payer health care should be seen as simply one path toward achieving it. I also show that free college and the Green New Deal are not nearly as radical as you might think. And I make the case that dignity—a focus on empowering individuals in their professional, family, and community lives—should be the focal point of economic policy.

Donald Trump's explicit racism deepened conflicts around race, gender, religion, culture, and sexuality, with sharp divisions along generational lines. What would a constructive approach to what is often called "identity politics" (usually by its foes) look like? Can progressives link workers' rights with civil rights, racial and gender equality with social justice more broadly? Chapter 7

argues that there is no escaping the need for both a politics of distribution *and* a politics of recognition. They can and must be brought together as equally essential components of all struggles for social justice and enhanced democracy—and against bigotry, racism, and exclusion.

Chapter 8 explores the rise of nationalism, the advantage for progressives in advancing an inclusive patriotism as an alternative to Trump's narrow "America First" approach, and the role of immigration in fostering nationalist feeling. I also discuss how community and social breakdown have created fertile ground for ethno-nationalist appeals.

In chapter 9, I argue that the architects of a post-Trump internationalist foreign policy will have to pay far closer attention to the economic interests of average Americans, as Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman did in their time, and link the battle for democracy to the fight against kleptocracy and corruption. They should also revisit the idea of containment as an approach to China and Russia while acknowledging in China's case that a pure replay of the Cold War is neither in America's interests nor the world's. Our citizens will embrace an active American role in the world only if the stewards of foreign policy accept their own duties to those who do the nation's work and, when necessary, fight its wars. I argue that foreign policy is, perhaps surprisingly, an area of particular promise for synthesis and dialogue between moderates, who tend to support a traditional liberal internationalism, and progressives, who insist that economic justice and shared prosperity should be central goals of the United States' approach to the world.

The book concludes, in chapter 10, with a discussion of values that could bring Americans back together. It imagines what can be accomplished if progressives and moderates create a new politics. Politics alone certainly cannot cure all that ails us. But we have, at the least, a right to expect that it can do much less harm than it's doing now. And making politics less fractious and

more welcoming could help restore our faith in the possibilities of mutual understanding and common action.

Donald Trump's misdeeds created an immediate crisis for the nation. But his rise also reflected a longer-term crisis of national self-confidence. Americans have drawn apart from one another politically, socially, and economically. It falls to progressives and moderates, working in concert, to find a path toward solidarity, empathy, and hope. They will meet this responsibility only by challenging themselves to act more strategically, think more clearly, and accept the responsibilities that history now imposes upon them.

NOTES

Introduction

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TEN

WHY CHANGE CAN'T WAIT

*And Why It Takes a Coalition to
Save a Country*

WE ARE AT A POINT IN OUR COUNTRY'S HISTORY WHEN IT seems that the biggest lie a politician can tell is: "I will bring Americans together."

Perhaps there are candidates who truly believe in their capacity to unite a nation torn by race and region, class and culture, age and gender, religion, ideology, and party. But it has not been a good bet since we began to come apart in the 1960s. We sharply polarized across party lines in the 1990s, came together briefly after September 11, 2001, and then divided again over the Iraq War. We have found ourselves in a profoundly surly mood since the economic meltdown of 2008. Americans in metropolitan areas and those in small towns and the countryside regard each other with mistrust. A large swath of white America sees its dominance and its values threatened by immigration and cultural change. Americans of color, immigrants especially, feel under siege.

Donald Trump's rise to power was the culmination of this long distemper, the conflagration set off by unresolved contradictions, built-up racial and generational resentments, the economic fallout from globalization and radical market policies, and

the increasing lack of fit between our electoral institutions and a changing country. Trump was the second president in 16 years to take the White House after losing the popular vote. This underscored the growing disconnect between an Electoral College (and also a U.S. Senate) ill suited to representing a population increasingly crowded into metropolitan areas.¹

He also connected with a global sense of alienation that has created a crisis for liberal democracies around the world. Economic globalization and large flows of immigrants and refugees—pushed to emigrate by war and political crisis in the Middle East and North Africa and by crime and economic crisis in Latin America—have created an ethno-nationalist backlash. Europe is riven by many of the same forces that are pushing Americans apart: great cities against small towns and rural areas, the cosmopolitan against the local, the well-off against those on the economic margins, white against nonwhite, Christian against Muslim. During past crises of democracy, particularly in the 1930s and 1940s, the United States was on the side of the democrats. At this moment, we are not.²

For all the lies Trump has told, there is one he has largely avoided: He did not base his claim to leadership on his capacity to bridge the gulfs that divide us. On the contrary, he has built his movement by keeping us outraged and riven. He speaks only to and for a “base” that represents, at most, 4 Americans in 10. It is an approach that has bred a backlash against him that has few precedents. The premise of this book is that the majority that spoke in the elections held on November 6, 2018, can be durable—and can grow—if those who built it understand who came together on that day.

They were Americans fed up with Trump’s divisiveness and indecency, his racism and his sexism, his love of strongmen abroad, and his autocratic tendencies at home. They were citizens who wanted a president who took his job seriously, who was not in their face all the time, who was not a narcissist, and who

did not put his own personal and economic interests above just about everything else. They wanted an end to the ad hoc chaos of a president who seemed to govern by whim.

They were also tired of a Republican Party and a conservative movement that refused to understand that some problems require public solutions, that our economic system will not work properly or fairly without the countervailing rule-making power of government, that the public sector needs to step in when the market fails—and that its intervention is especially urgent in guaranteeing everyone affordable health insurance that can’t be threatened by past or current illness. These Americans think that government ought to be able to do what it always did in the past: build and fix the damn roads, expand our transit systems, educate our children, and bring new technologies and growth to the parts of the country being left behind. They are furious at those who acquiesce to the gun lobby and block every effort to reform our weapons laws, no matter how many people die in mass shootings. They supported a \$15-an-hour minimum wage and saw little benefit in enormous tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy. They worried about a Supreme Court packed with conservatives aspiring to bring jurisprudence back to the days before FDR. Although they may have moral differences about abortion, they saw grave dangers in criminalizing it. They were resolutely opposed to discrimination against an LGBTQ community that is made up of their friends, relatives, and co-workers, their sons and their daughters—and their fellow citizens in the armed services risking their lives for our nation.

They were Americans who looked toward a new era of progressive reform that would right capitalism’s injustices; prevent our planet’s death from climate change; turn minimum wages into living wages; act decisively to contain gun violence; and reform our systems for delivering health care, paying for higher education, and preparing workers for a new economy. They include those who admire capitalism’s inventiveness and those

who are skeptical of how the system concentrates economic power. Yet across both groups, there is a desire to rein in monopoly, distribute wealth more fairly, create a universal system of child care, give those in the gig economy and irregular service jobs the protections enjoyed by those in traditional employment, and make the responsibilities of work compatible with the responsibilities of parenthood.

They were, in short, moderates and progressives. They were pragmatists and visionaries. They were capitalists, socialists, and social democrats. They came from all races. They were religious and secular. They were poor and working class, middle class and well-off. Some of them had even voted for Donald Trump in 2016 hoping he would shake things up and then came to realize that Trumpian chaos and corruption were antithetical to draining the swamp. Implicitly, they all understood Stacey Abrams's rule about coalition politics: "We do not succeed alone."³

This book offers what might be called articles of conciliation, ways in which members of this coalition for dignity, decency, democracy, and fairness might reason together. I have argued that moderates will not find a comfortable home on the right end of our politics because the radicalization of conservatism and the Republican Party has gone too far. Moderates are repelled by both the acrimony embedded in Trumpism and the wholesale rejection of public action that is, against the party's own history, at the heart of the current Republican creed. I have also argued that progressives need moderates, not only because their votes are required to build a majority but also because the virtues moderates embrace—conciliation, balance, pluralism, and an allergy to extremism—are virtues that any successful democracy requires. Moderates, in turn, need progressives for the activism and energy they bring, the moral challenges they pose to the privileged and the comfortable, and the space they have opened

up in a political debate that was hemmed in too long by conservative assumptions.

Similarly, I have insisted that the last thing we need across the center and the left is a war over "identity politics." We should acknowledge that identity politics was imposed on subordinate groups by long histories of discrimination and exclusion. Recognizing the injuries of status—linked to race, gender, religion, and sexual orientation—in no way precludes recognizing the related but separate injuries of class. We needed both the Wagner Act and the civil rights bills. We need to address both forms of inequality.

This is one reason why I have laid so much stress on the idea of dignity. The quest for dignity and equal recognition animates struggles around both civil rights and workers' rights. When these two causes link arms, they can push aside racial animosity and transform a nation. This is what the organizers of the Jobs and Freedom march in 1963 understood and what Robert F. Kennedy demonstrated in his tragically short-lived 1968 campaign.

For all who would move forward, there is no other option but to defeat Trumpism and a radicalized conservatism.

But, yes, there will be an ongoing struggle beyond 2020. Barack Obama's hope—I admit I shared it—was that his reelection in 2012 would "break the fever" in Washington. It proved false. It is equally unrealistic to imagine that simply bringing Trump's presidency to a close will write an abrupt and happy ending to this chapter in our history. The changes in the Republican Party and the divisions in the nation run too deep. The power of the right-wing media, which has an interest in stoking bitterness, is too strong. Resistance to serious reforms in our economic system will be well financed and well organized. This is why promises to bring Americans together in the short run should be heard with great skepticism.⁴

What of the long run? Must we remain this divided? Can we thrive as a successful democratic nation if we do?

The easiest answer is that demography will solve our problem. The rising generation is far more tolerant, open, adventurous, and reform-minded than are its elders. It is also more diverse. Seen this way, the Trump movement is the last gasp of an older America about to pass on. This is certainly something the Republican Party must think about as it places its bets on an America that will no longer exist in a generation. A decisive defeat in 2020 might encourage the party to speed its transformation.

The world, however, will continue to move on as we Americans sort through our difficulties. Ayanna Pressley's 2018 campaign slogan, "Change Can't Wait," comes to mind. Thus, the task of the victorious coalition of progressives and moderates I have in mind is not simply to begin righting the injustices in our country that led to Trump's election. It is also to make clear that the United States will take on the task of once again leading the democratic world by example—to show that a racially, ethnically, and religiously diverse society can find common purpose, that the opportunity and mobility our country has always claimed to embody can be made a reality for those who are now sidelined and see themselves as forgotten, that a globalized economy does not have to leave large numbers of our fellow citizens behind. We must show that we are capable of reforming outdated structures that make our country far less democratic than we claim it to be. We must demonstrate that we can meet new challenges in a world where the forces of liberal democracy are weaker than they were two decades ago. We need to build a new model of a thriving, competitive, and fair economy now that the assumptions of the 1980s have collapsed.

We also need to have arguments worthy of a nation that has long seen itself as exceptional in modeling what a democratic republic is supposed to look like. I have strong political views, but I would not want to live in a country where everyone agreed with me. I doubt you would, either. I long for a very different sort of debate, one in which remedy supplants rancor as its driving

force and empathy becomes a social and not simply an individual virtue. We need to rediscover the first word of our Constitution. We must learn to say "We" about *all* of our fellow citizens—and mean it.

How, you might fairly ask, does such a plea square with an argument that has been unabashedly critical of one side of our politics, and of the man who became our president in 2017? Aren't those I take to task also part of that "We"?

Of course they are. And they must be defeated precisely because at this point in our history, their approach to politics embodies a denial of the capacious "We" our nation requires. Trump undercut our sense of common citizenship, common obligation, and common humanity on a daily basis. His party not only enabled him but has also put itself on a course to sustain levels of inequality that are incompatible with both successful republican government and our obligations to each other. One can hope that they will abandon this path and reengage with the honorable chapters of their own history. The country would be better for it. But this will not happen without struggle.

Which leaves it up to the progressives and the moderates. A time of crisis never allows for a simple return to where we started. It can end in catastrophe and decline, or lead to recovery and renewal. This generation's task is to restore progress—to get the country moving again by demonstrating anew our nation's capacity for self-correction, social reconstruction, and democratic self-government.

Chapter 10

1. For more on unrepresentative institutions, see Jamelle Bouie, "The Electoral College Is the Greatest Threat to Our Democracy," *New York Times*, February 28, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/28/opinion/the-electoral-college.html>; David Leonhardt, "The Senate: Affirmative Action for White People," *New York Times*, October 14, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/14/opinion/dc-puerto-rico-statehood-senate.html>.
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