



I HEARD
MY COUNTRY
CALLING

★ A MEMOIR ★

JAMES WEBB

AUTHOR OF *BORN FIGHTING* AND *FIELDS OF FIRE*

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I HEARD
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** A Memoir **

SIMON & SCHUSTER

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

Author's Note

Epigraph

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For Hong Le

Who was not a part of my life during the period covered by this book, but whose wisdom, encouragement, and inspiration are forever on every page. Anh Yeu Em.

Author's Note

This book is a memoir. As I write about the early years of my life I mention many historical events. But I would like to emphasize that the book is not intended in any way to be an historical polemic, and that the events are mentioned in order to outline how the societal momentum and the foreign policy actions of those years affected me and my family. I have made considerable effort to ensure that each historical detail is properly documented and it is my belief as well as my hope that such documentation is precise.

The book also contains a lengthy quote from *Born Fighting*, an earlier book I wrote. The bulk of this quote is from a government report on the economic conditions of the American South during the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt. I wish to express my appreciation to Random House, my earlier publisher, for their cooperation.

Descriptive phrases regarding the terrain and challenges in the An Hoa Basin in Vietnam similar to those on pages 268 and 269 were first used in an article entitled "Heroes of the Vietnam Generation," which I wrote for *The American Enterprise Magazine* in August 2000, and which has been frequently quoted in other publications.

I vow to thee, my country, all earthly things above,
~~Entire and whole and perfect, the service of my love;~~

The love that asks no questions, the love that stands the test,
That lays upon the altar the dearest and the best;
The love that never falters, the love that pays the price,
The love that makes undaunted the final sacrifice.

I heard my country calling, away across the sea,
Across the waste of waters, she calls and calls to me.
Her sword is girded at her side, her helmet on her head,
And round her feet are lying the dying and the dead.
I hear the noise of battle, the thunder of her guns,
I haste to thee my mother, a son among thy sons.

—From Sir Cecil Spring-Rice, “I Vow to Thee, My Country,” 1912

JANUARY 3, 2013

The Senate wing of the U.S. Capitol was completed in 1800, renovated in 1811, burned by British troops during their rampage of Washington in 1814, and reconstructed for the first time in 1826. In 1850 Senator Jefferson Davis of Mississippi introduced legislation to significantly enlarge the Capitol. This enlargement was finally finished in 1868, following the Civil War, during which then former senator Jefferson Davis rather ironically had become president of the Confederacy. As the country has grown and evolved from that time, so has the Capitol, as well as the sprawling grounds that surround it. A series of modernizations moved the Library of Congress and the Supreme Court out of the Capitol building into their own mammoth neoclassical structures. These modernizations also brought about a vast complex of six separate office buildings where the members of the House and Senate and their ever-growing staffs now carry out their obligations, and where every now and then, one of them becomes forever remembered for some embarrassing personal escapade or political scheme.

The building and the grounds that surround it are a wonder to behold, extending eastward beyond the Supreme Court building and westward past the Washington Monument, all the way across the Mall to the Lincoln Memorial and the very edge of the Potomac River. There are few places in the world that can match the quiet splendor of these landmarks, especially when they are lit up in the dark of night for the world to see. This is not a craven political statement; rather it is the frank, almost unwilling admission of one who was raised from his earliest days to mistrust any form of elitism and to make fun of pretentious symbols.

Even the deepest cynic cannot deny the transcendent power of this place. It is almost as if those who designed and built the Capitol had opened up their hearts in a form of romantic innocence, risking the chance that they would be rejected by future generations for having been corny Harlequin-romancers if they were proved wrong, in the gamble that they might remake the world's comprehension of American-style democracy if they were shown to be right.

And they were not wrong.

If you are a thinking American, it is a humbling experience to spend time inside the dark, cool confines of the building itself. During my time in the Senate I walked through this building every day, indeed sometimes half-dozen times a day, and still after all those years its majesty overwhelms me. No matter how many times I traversed its passages, no matter how burdened I felt under the weight of the laborious or silly issues of day-to-day politics, the history that lives inside this building always rescued me from the temptation to feel as though we in the Senate were mindlessly treading water rather than working to solve the problems of the country. History was being made here, whether or not we felt the truth of that as we barked and quibbled among ourselves on any given day.

When I stop and think about why I continue to feel this way, I usually end up remembering my father, the first Webb after generations in the Appalachian Mountains to finish high school and then the first to finish college following twenty-six years of intermittent night school. The Old Man would have been busting his buttons to see me walking these halls as the equal of giants whose names he had known only through history books and newspapers. I still roll my eyes and laugh to myself, imagining the daily phone calls I would have

received had my father lived to see me become a member of the U.S. Senate. Truly he would have irritated the hell out of my staff. He would never have left me alone. He would have called me every day, bursting with ideas providing advice, challenging me with crude jokes, and quoting from the key phrases of editorial writers who hated me.

James Henry Webb Sr. was not an easy man to please. He gave me no slack in the days of my boyhood and our family moved from town to town, from military base to military base, and I from school to school to school. Complaints were not in order. My siblings and I grew up with certainties that he, and especially my mother, could never have imagined: there was always food on the table; I never lacked for clean clothes; from the time I was twelve, there was always a job somewhere if I knew how to hustle. And he never let us forget that we were living in the greatest country on earth, a country that our rock-hard ancestors had pioneered, one star on a mountain and one wide river and one war at a time.

When it hurts, just grit your teeth and take it. Don't you ever back down. Never start a fight, but if somebody else does, never run away. If you run from a bully you will never stop running, but if you fight he won't run coming back at you again. Stand up. Fight back. Mark him. Give him something to remember every morning when he looks into the mirror. Then even if you lose you win. And by the way, if you ever run from a fight I will personally beat your ass.

My father was not exactly a mellow guy. He did not spare the rod. But he taught me early that there is no substitute for moral courage, whatever the cost, and that the ultimate duty of every leader is to take care of the people who rely on him when otherwise they would be forgotten or abandoned. Courage in the face of those above you and loyalty to those below you were my father's inalterable standards, the only true way to measure the worth of another human being.

I had fought my way into the Senate based exactly on those principles. I was not recruited to run for political office, which was one of the odd attractions of running in the first place. I took the gamble precisely because I could not accept the idea that a country such as America should be governed by a club of insiders who manipulate public opinion in order to serve the interests of hidden elites who hold the reins of power. I did not solve this problem in a mere six years, but I did nudge it here and there, even as my concerns about it only grew stronger.

• • •

I knew what my dad would be saying to me at this moment if he were still alive. He would be aggravated beyond words that I had declined to run for reelection. He would not be able to resist sending a verbal barrage my way on the very day that I was heading to the Senate floor for the final time in order to congratulate the person who would now be taking my seat:

What the HELL is going on in your brain, Sonny Boy? After you fought so hard to get here, what are you doing walking away from it, just when you reached the top of your game? There are no instant replays in life. You are not coming back! Didn't I teach you a damn thing?

I would have listened to him for a while, nodding now and then as a measure of respect, finally telling him to stop being such an irritable, cantankerous bastard. We had argued with sharp, combative humor for decades about everything from poetry to baseball to history, and especially about the unpredictability of my so-called career. But for me, in this imagined debate the answer would have been easy:

Dad, seriously. We're talking about an institution with a 6 percent approval rating, and I can't figure out why anybody would want to be in that 6 percent.

• • •

On this final morning the corridor in front of my Russell Building office was eerily quiet. I was arriving without a briefcase, and indeed without portfolio. I did not belong here anymore. I had already become an interloper in a place that until yesterday had been my personal fiefdom and even my second home. No staff members greeted me. Actually I did not even have a staff anymore, as of this very morning. But none of that really mattered. I had not come here to be escorted, briefed, coffeeed up, or attended to. All I wanted was to walk through my personal office spaces one last time, in the rare calm of a do-nothing morning, before the office as it was now constructed and I myself disappeared into the dry annals of Senate history.

I reached Russell 248, which had been my office's main reception room. My heavy brass nameplate was still bolted face-high onto the wall outside the door, just where it had been posted in the Russell Building for the past six years:

SENATOR
Jim Webb
Virginia

Three flags had always stood next to my door: the American flag, the flag of the Commonwealth of Virginia, and the flag of remembrance for those still missing or unaccounted for on our nation's battlefields. They were gone now, wrapped up and shipped away. Senate maintenance personnel would soon unbolt my nameplate from the wall and have it hand-delivered to my home. The high-ceilinged marble hallway was lined with large trash bins piled to the top with mounds of memories—discarded papers, binders, and odd pieces of cardboard—all the refuse and political detritus from six years of intense staff functioning. Until a few days ago the office spaces were occupied by more than two dozen energetic staff members of all ages and backgrounds, united by their desire to serve our country and to carry out the goals that I had laid before them.

I had put a lot of energy into the selection and development of my staff. I had personally interviewed every person who served on it, from receptionist to chief of staff, including those who worked in the distant regional offices in Richmond, Virginia Beach, Roanoke, Danville, and in the far southwest heartland of the Appalachian Mountains, whose struggling coal mines and disappearing tobacco fields are nearer to Detroit than they are to Washington. I personally invested myself in each of their futures, in the same spirit that I once took pride in the career evolution of what I termed “Webb-trained Marines.” More than any memorial highway or bridge or piece of legislation, these people and the principles of leadership and political philosophy that hopefully imbued in them will remain the most important legacy of my time in the Senate.

They were gone, off to other things. The desks and tables they had occupied were empty and bare, as were the now nail-bitten walls. Their computers had been scanned, stripped of all data, and removed. The “landline” phones had been taken out. Personal cell phones had been returned, the numbers rendered inoperable. And on January 2, like a surrendering army, every staff member had formally turned in all room keys to the Senate sergeant at arms.

I left the corridor, walking inside the main reception room. The walls of the room had been filled with my personal memorabilia: photographs dating to my time in Vietnam, including one in which I stood shirtless in front of an enemy bunker, hard-eyed, gaunt, and bearded, a reminder that we should always respect military sacrifice but never glamorize its toll; a dozen framed newspaper and magazine articles; the *Publishers Weekly* cover from July 10, 1978, announcing my novel *Fields of Fire* as “the most powerful war novel in my generation”; the tally card from the final roll-call vote when we passed the historic Post-9/11 GI Bill in 2002; and some classic eighty-year-old black-and-white photos taken in the coal fields of southwest Virginia.

I stuck my head into the conference room next door. The room was dark, made darker still by the high wooden cabinet on one wall and the long table that filled the center of the room. Nineteen stiff-backed chairs

lined the conference table, eight on each side, two on the far end, and another just inside the door, where I sat during our meetings. A shaft of grey light from a courtyard window illuminated the tabletop as if it were a du mirror. I could see faint smudges on the table from the hands of people who had once sat in its chairs. The walls also had been filled with dozens of plaques, photos, and memorabilia, all of which had now been taken down, bubble-wrapped, boxed up, and sent away.

I had spent uncountable hours at this table, meeting with schoolkids, religious leaders, business executives, community organizers, union members, university presidents, military commanders, advocates of prison reform, law enforcement officials, judges, political figures, ambassadors and foreign ministers, and, of course, the story-seeking members of the media. Not even counting unscheduled meetings with members of my staff which numbered in the hundreds in a typical week, during my time in the Senate I had taken 5,005 official meetings in my office, as well as 2,300 personal meetings and 675 interviews with the media. Almost all of these had taken place inside this now-shadowed room. Since we're counting, I also attended 1,078 committee hearings, appeared at 264 formal speaking engagements, and spoke at 358 political events. And on the Senate floor I had taken more than 1,800 roll-call votes.

I crossed the hallway into Room 247, for another hour or so still my personal office. Three desks inside the narrow anteroom had housed the immediate nerve center of my staff: the press secretary, my scheduler, and my executive assistant. Across from the desks a small closet held a microwave oven, a small fridge, and room for storage. Curious, I looked inside the closet and confirmed that it was still a crumbly, noodle-infested mess. The latest human occupants were gone, but the Senate roaches soldiered on.

At the back of the room I turned into a short breezeway, walking past a small closet and my private bathroom before entering my personal office. There I was suddenly overwhelmed by a wave of memories and emotion.

Now stripped bare of all my personal memorabilia, the contrast with the intimacy of the years I had spent in this room gave a hard edge to the reality of my departure. My desk was just inside the door. The age-old fireplace marked the middle of the far wall, a gigantic, gold-framed mirror above it. The shelves, credenza, chairs, and circular working table remained in place. And yet everything had become sterile and depersonalized.

This sudden emotion was a surprise, since my wife Hong and I had decided nearly two years before that six years in the Senate was enough, and that once we made the final decision to leave we would not second-guess. The tangible effects that had warmed this room were gone, but I could see them still: the hundreds of books on the shelves, the underlined and earmarked papers that had been piled upon my desk, the personal computer, the phone with its intercom connections to personal staff, the TV set against the wall by my desk, the notepads and ever-revolving stacks of memos from my staff, and the dozens of family photos that had surrounded the walls and tables around my chair, nestling me into my daily routine.

I reached my desk and ran my hand along its right-hand corner. The desk was beautiful, huge and ornate, a piece of history, as are so many objects in the Senate. My fingers traversed more than a dozen small gashes in the wood. I smiled to myself, for this was another private remembrance: in those gashes in that desktop corner was an unforgettable, defining memory.

For the past six years I had kept two objects on this corner of my desk, unspoken reminders for everyone to see and for those who were intuitive enough to contemplate. The first was a beautiful gold-embossed Bible inscribed with my name on the cover, a gift to me from my friend Barry Black, the chaplain of the Senate. The long cloth ribbon inside its pages had been permanently kept at the paragraphs of the second chapter of the book of James, verses 14–18, which defined for me the overriding reasons that I had decided to run for the Senate. Part of those verses reads, “And what good is faith without works? Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.”

The second object was a traditional black-bladed, leather-handled Marine Corps combat knife, which I had jammed into the time-hardened wood of the desk itself, just behind the Bible.

At some moment during just about every day, the Bible and the bayonet would catch my eye, both reminding me of why I was sitting at the desk in the first place. I have led a sometimes hard and complicated life but I am strong in my faith. I also know what it's like to fight in a philosophically controversial war and to have shed my blood on a faraway battlefield. I came to understand at a very young age that moral complexities are an inseparable part of hard face-to-face combat. These twin realities deepened not only my faith but my respect for the burden of military service, irrespective of the political decisions that impel it.

Some would look at the Bible and wonder about the bayonet. Some would look at the bayonet and wonder about the Bible. For me, they go together. And all I have asked, as the ancient philosopher intoned, is not to be understood too quickly.

From the window behind my desk I looked out at the expansive park that stretched across the street, up Constitution Avenue. My office window was a great vantage point from which to watch the frequent political rallies that were held in the park. I have always taken comfort in these rallies, no matter their political viewpoint for they represent the greatness of an America where at least most of the time we can vent our ideas and even our anger with bullhorns rather than bullets. The park was quiet today, on the morning when new senators would be sworn in and others would say good-bye.

I turned away from the window and sat in the thick, high-backed leather chair that for years had been my private senatorial throne. Without deciding, I swiveled the chair around toward my desk. Like a modern-day Ozymandias, I surveyed my empty empire, knowing this would be the last time I would sit at this desk and probably the last time I would ever even be in this room. I looked at the clock on the far wall. It was fifteen minutes before eleven, when the swearing-in proceedings for the newly elected senators would begin. I needed to make my way to the Senate floor.

A thought from my childhood struck me: I began wondering if after all of this preparation I had left anything behind. It was the last thought my father would always raise whenever we moved, or even if we simply vacated the latest ten-bucks-a-night motel room—both of which we often did. *You always forget something.* That was my father's mantra, and he was almost always right: a favorite baseball cap in one remote closet, a dollar bill on the floor, or maybe a bar of store-bought soap in the shower. Such a final search had become a longtime family game.

I pulled out all the drawers in my desk, finding each of them empty—nothing in there, not even a paper clip. I searched the two wide drawers underneath the end tables that flanked the window behind my desk; once filled with personal files, they too were empty. My staff had done a thorough job, shipping more than sixty large crates and smaller boxes to my home and to my writing office in Virginia. Walking across the carpeted room, I reached the wide credenza that stood along the far wall. Empty. Then I opened up the minifridge inside its left-hand cabinet door.

Bingo. Four beers and a plastic container of rice had been left inside. I laughed aloud, delighted at the discovery, for here were the truth-tellers of my Senate tenure. The rice box had been prepared months ago by my wife. It brought back memories not of gala banquets, grand speeches, or my frequent trips abroad but of the usual lunches at my desk, spent staring at a computer screen, catching up on emails and time-sensitive news. Hong had prepared the rice box because I had grown sick of the gut-roiling daily specials from the Senate cafeteria. And the beers made me remember all the frustrating, ridiculous late nights sitting bored and restless in the office, waiting for the majority and minority leaders to schedule usually meaningless votes on the Senate floor so that we might finally go home.

My first thought as I pulled the objects from the fridge was that Hong, who had escaped South Vietnam on a fishing boat following the communist takeover in 1975 and spent time in two refugee camps after her family was

saved at sea by our Navy, would insist that I bring the container home. The thought struck a suddenly fragile nerve. ~~The very normality of thinking to bring a container home reminded me that this was the last time I would actually be going home from the Senate.~~

I picked up the rice container and dismissed the thought as quickly as I had entertained it, for again I heard my father's voice: *If you're going to miss it, then maybe you should have stayed, Sonny Boy.*

No. It was definitely time to go.

I now had ten minutes to stash the container in my car and then make my way to the Senate floor. My private visit was over. I would never again return to this room. But I was leaving the Senate with what, for me, was the ultimate satisfaction. I had lived up to every promise I had made when I had asked people to elect me a little more than six years before. I had never backed down. I had never said a word that I did not mean. And I had never cut a political deal.

Good-bye was over. I walked out the door, heading for the Senate floor. I would bring the rice container home. But I left the beer for the cleanup crew.

THE GOOD OF THE SERVICE

My life has aligned chronologically and in spirit with the Baby Boom generation that followed in the wake of World War II. I was born on February 9, 1946, almost exactly nine months to the day following Germany's surrender in that war, which in America we remember as V-E Day. I have often thought about the serendipitous coincidence that might have played into the moment of my conception. Since I never worked up the gumption (or lack of propriety) that it would have taken to put the question directly to my now-departed parents, the kinds of secrets will never be answered. But the poet in me can contemplate its possibility.

May 8, 1945, was a glorious day. Much of the world was rocked with a fantastic celebration. The war was over in Europe, and soon it would be over in Asia. Most Americans seemed sure that a generation of peace would follow. What an emotional day it must have been for my dad, who at that time was an Army Air Corps bomber pilot, and my mom, who, although only nineteen, was already nursing a nine-month-old child, the first of four that would be born by the time she was twenty-four. Nine months later, in the tree-lined tranquility of the beautiful old town of St. Joseph, Missouri, lo and behold I was born.

I like to think that it must have been a pretty good party.

• • •

America's historic Baby Boom generation, spawned by the return of millions of veterans from World War II, grew up not in an era of world peace, as had been expected, but in a nation living under the constant threat of nuclear war, even though our country had undeniably grown more prosperous. The tensions brought on by what was termed the cold war also had a couple of so-called flash points that resulted in 100,000 American military deaths, in Korea from 1950 to 1953, where even now a full peace settlement has not been agreed upon, and in Vietnam from 1964 to 1972, with the final communist victory over our South Vietnamese allies coming in 1975. Debates about our nation's foreign policy would sunder the Baby Boomers during Vietnam, when a million among their age group were called upon to serve in the military and 2.7 million of them shipped out to war, while others took to the streets in frequent and sometimes violent protest.

Another, less-noted reality took place as a result of the cold war and the very hot "conflicts" that flared up during the same decades: America's new place in world affairs brought about a dramatic, historic change to the size, structure, and so-called peacetime deployments of its military forces. For those of us who grew up inside the military, these changes shaped every element of our daily lives.

The present size of our military and the enduring worldwide commitments that followed in the wake of World War II were never contemplated by our Founding Fathers. Normal to us now, they are unique to the post-World War II environment. Article 1, Section 8 of the U.S. Constitution affirms the belief of our Founding Fathers that America should not keep a standing army during peacetime. Congress would have the power to "raise and support Armies," while limiting any appropriations toward that end to no more than two years—a deliberate check against limitless military campaigns. At the same time, Congress was empowered to "provide and maintain a Navy," with the understanding that securing our sea lanes was a deterrent to war,

protection of national commerce, and thus a vital interest during war or peace.

~~Until the aftermath of World War II, the United States closely adhered to these objectives, keeping a~~ small peacetime military. In times of peril the country would follow tradition, its citizens laying aside the plow and picking up their rifles to serve until the crisis passed. Amid the unspeakable carnage of the Civil War the tradition of citizen-soldiering during wartime was expanded to include federal conscription. This planning model was built around a small peacetime military, which could be expanded by conscription in times of war and was repeated in World Wars I and II. But after a brief and largely unremembered drawdown in the aftermath of World War II, it was abandoned in the face of continuous international obligations. Conscription at some level was considered necessary to fill the ranks of our Army not only for the Korean and Vietnam wars but also during the cold war interludes in between.

In sum, during peacetime America has traditionally fielded a volunteer military, which would grow rapidly during a period of war and then shrink just as quickly once the war was ended. All that changed after World War II. Except for a two-year interval between 1945 and 1947 our military has been sized and deployed as if on a permanent wartime footing, even though war has never been formally declared during this entire period. Given the necessity to continually field a sizable military, the challenge for our political system has been to balance a moral argument against a fiscal debate. Should these requirements be met through a cheaper (and some would argue, a fairer) system of conscription, with the attendant concerns about forcing our citizens into uniform, or should we continue to spend an ever-growing portion of our defense budget on compensation and family support programs in order to maintain an all-volunteer military force? From the final days of the Vietnam War through the end of the cold war and during the continuous deployments of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, we have opted to pay the financial costs of an all-volunteer military rather than endure the uncertainties and unending moral debates over forced conscription.

What, you may ask, does this have to do with family support programs and the childhood experiences of the military brats among the Baby Boomers? The answer is: a lot.

It was easy for the military to reduce its size in 1945; our service members were largely young, most had been drafted, and particularly among the enlisted ranks few wanted to stay anyway. It was the same with the weapons of war that our nation had so capably and prodigiously produced during wartime. We took blowtorches to many combat aircraft and weapon systems, often right there on former battlefields, leaving them to be hauled away as scrap metal rather than shipping them back to the United States, where it would have been a challenge to house all of them anyway. We cut up, gave away, civilianized, or mothballed our ships. Except for necessary occupation forces in key countries, we brought our soldiers back to America as fast as the troopships could carry them, rewarding our "Greatest Generation" veterans with a generous GI Bill and sending them home to pursue civilian aspirations. And we ended conscription, seeking to reestablish the concept of a smaller, all-volunteer military that had preceded the war.

But the entire face of the international order had changed during that horrific war, as had America's role in guaranteeing worldwide stability. With the back-to-back maelstroms of two world wars fought within the space of only thirty-one years, former dominant powers such as Great Britain, France, Germany, and Japan had bled themselves white and spent their economies to the edge of oblivion. Tens of millions of people were dead—more than 40 million in Europe alone. Their home countries had been devastated. Colonial empires were being dissolved, leaving unprecedented political and economic vacuums all over the map. The European powers and Japan were receding rapidly from their former holdings throughout Asia. Europe and Japan themselves were largely in ashes. In the aftermath of such horrific slaughter, governing philosophies throughout the world were being questioned. The Soviet Union, itself devastated in every sense by the war nonetheless was seeking to expand incessantly into the creases and vacuums left over from the carnage. China, torn apart by decades of internal strife and a fourteen-year Japanese occupation, was steadily consolidating

under a communist system that would take control of the country in 1949 and was antipathetic to our own view of stability in East Asia.

In economic terms America gladly accepted its place at the top of the new international order. But we did not claim ownership in any lands that we had taken through military force during the war, nor did we seek to shed the military burdens of the postwar world. In fact, we did not want either. The uncomfortable reality was that in terms of guaranteeing international stability, no other country was capable of carrying the responsibility that had now fallen onto America's shoulders. And so despite our effort to demobilize and to bring most of our military forces home from foreign places, beginning in 1947 and accentuated with the 1948 Berlin Airlift, the formation of NATO in 1949, and the 1950 invasion of South Korea, it became clear that the United States had no other alternative but to accept these worldwide obligations.

World War II was over, but the cold war had begun. Our military would again have to grow, and in 1947 conscription was reinstated. For the first time in its history the United States would be required to field a standing army during what could arguably be called peacetime. From this rather reluctant decision came the "draftee army" that eventually would be replaced by today's all-volunteer force.

Even then, however, American defense planners did what they could to preserve the historical concept of citizen-soldiering. The most important benchmark was not the reinstatement of the draft but rather that the military would be required to become permanently larger. The Army would rely on conscription to fill its enlistment quotas, but except for rare occasions the Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps remained all-volunteer, even in the days of the draft and even during bitterly debated conflicts such as Vietnam. Ironically, the true draftee army in our history was not the one that eventually fought in Vietnam, but rather the one that had just finished fighting in World War II. Two-thirds of those who had served in our military during World War II were draftees. By contrast, two-thirds of those who served during the war in Vietnam, the so-called Draftee War—as well as 73 percent of those who died in Vietnam—were volunteers.

Along with this decision the military would be required to adjust, not just with respect to its operational objectives but most important in terms of family support programs and the actual physical structure of its facilities. With a first-ever standing army came the necessity to build a different kind of military basing system that included infrastructure capable of meeting the demands for family-assistance programs on a scale that the American military had never before faced, either with previous peacetime armies or during wartime, since draftees and enlistees alike were usually required to leave their families behind.

Thus began an enormous and historic journey.

Today's leaders in the Department of Defense rightly pride themselves on the vast array of programs designed not only to protect the well-being of military family members but also to include them as integral parts of the military community itself. Our military families receive full, comprehensive medical care, and those who stay until retirement are covered by a generous postcareer insurance program called TRICARE. Military housing on bases throughout the world is first-class. The Department of Defense school system is ranked among the top public school systems in America. Almost every military base of any size is able to provide day-care centers for children, recreational facilities for everyone, grocery stores known as base commissaries, retail stores known as base exchanges, gas stations, golf courses, jogging tracks, fast-food franchises, and advisory offices dedicated to a wide range of counseling and legal protection and advice for family members. Indeed, a few years ago, during a windshield tour of an Air Force facility on Okinawa, the base commander boasted to me that Americans stationed at Kadena could spend three years on that populous Japanese island and never have to leave the base.

Many commentators like to point out that the overriding emphasis on family support programs had its roots in the creation of the all-volunteer military after the Vietnam War. The challenge of sustaining such a sizable all-volunteer military has indeed been something of a grand experiment. But it would be wrong to assume that the

concept of an all-volunteer military was unique to post-Vietnam America, and it would be just as wrong to argue that the programs now in place are simply a manifestation of the need to pay off our military in order to recruit and retain them. Some may view such support programs as extravagant or too costly when budgets come under scrutiny, especially if one is far removed from the operational military or after a national crisis has passed. But our military members earned these benefits the hard way, as did their families. Anyone who wishes to dispute this should begin by putting himself into the shoes of those who have stepped forward to serve.

And there is another point to be made. In the days when our wars were fought largely by young, unmarried men these programs took on a different meaning than they do in a military that is largely married and continually deployed for years on end. So let's just say that when it comes to family support programs the military, like the international position of the country itself, has evolved dramatically since the end of World War II.

Watching and participating in this evolution has been one of the most satisfying parts of my professional life. I am proud of my family's service during this era, including that of my brother and the husbands of both of my sisters, as well as my son and three of my seven nephews. I have covered the military as a journalist, including the fighting in Beirut in 1983 and in Afghanistan in 2004. I worked on veterans' issues for four years as a committee counsel in Congress just after the Vietnam War, at a time when groundbreaking research was being done on such issues as post-traumatic stress, and Agent Orange. I spent five years in the Pentagon, four as an assistant secretary of defense and Secretary of the Navy during the mid-1980s, at a time when family-assistance programs were becoming a top priority. And in the Senate I had the privilege of chairing the Armed Services Subcommittee on Personnel, directly responsible for the authorization and oversight of all Department of Defense programs in that area.

These vast changes are rarely understood by most Americans and seldom discussed by commentators and policymakers, but they are central to budget issues as well as philosophical arguments about military service. Our post-World War II military became a completely new phenomenon, different in size and family makeup from any military that preceded it. As it evolved, new bases were being built at home and overseas, while others were being expanded in order to address the strategic challenges of the cold war. And many existing bases were undergoing extensive infrastructure shifts from the old models that had dominated the peacetime militaries of the past.

Even today a visit to military bases whose roots reach back to the years before World War II offers a glimpse of the simpler life that once dominated America's peacetime military. A nostalgic drive through the central area of Fort Myer, Virginia; Offutt Air Force Base, Nebraska; Fort Lewis, Washington; and Schofield Barracks, Hawaii; just to pick a few, still provides reminders of the elegant officers' quarters and the cramped but orderly barracks where hundreds of enlisted personnel lived in long rows of bunk beds, sharing common toilet areas. All built around a wide parade field where the officers and troops once met for morning musters as the bugle played and the flag was raised, then marched off to their daily regimens.

The size and demographic makeup of our military after World War II and during the cold war also provided an institutional shock to the country's budget makers and to the age-old military culture itself. It took years for our bean counters and leaders to catch up, and thus to build the housing, schools, and other support structures that would accommodate this new approach.

I spent my childhood inside this reality. Its bottom line was that for several years a whole lot of kids were going to be growing up without the frequent presence of their fathers (for then it was almost always the fathers) and that a whole lot of mothers would be left to struggle on their own while their husbands were away.

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It is difficult for many Americans to fully comprehend the impact of what it means to take the oath to defend our country and then put on a military uniform. From the moment you enter the military until the day you leave every aspect of your life is under the control of others. You can argue, hope, and try to persuade, but even your decision about your military career is subject to what the higher-ups of leadership call “the good of the service.” During the time you are serving in uniform your individual needs and desires are not only subordinated to the good of the service, but they are irrelevant if the service decides it needs you elsewhere. You can sign up for a particular occupational specialty, but there is no firm guarantee you will be chosen for it if the good of the service intervenes. Even if you are given the occupational specialty of your choice you cannot decide what your actual job will be or, in most cases, even ask to interview for a specific job. You cannot decide to quit if you don’t like your job. You cannot look for another place to work if you don’t like your boss. And here is the biggest rub: if your boss does not like you, you may be totally screwed, not only for the moment but for your longer career. Several times a year this boss will evaluate your “proficiency and conduct,” which, whether favorable or not, has the potential to affect your reputation and your potential for any future assignment.

You cannot decide where you will be stationed or for how long. You cannot tell your commanding officer that thanks very much, but you really don’t want to be deployed overseas right now, much less to a combat zone. In an operating environment you might be required to carry far more gear than you need or than your body can absorb, in the process permanently wearing down your orthopedic structure at an early age. It could become normal to operate for long months in the scorching heat or under torrents of rain, with little sleep, bad food, and only sporadic news from home. You might be billeted near hateful, menacing neighbors or downwind from health hazards such as toxic burn pits. And all the while you will be legally obligated to carry out the orders of those in charge of you, whether or not you agree with the wisdom of those orders. This includes the distinct possibility that even against your own better judgment you might be placed in a situation in which you will get injured, blown up, or shot.

Not incidentally, if you are in the operating forces of any of the military services you will probably spend a lot of time away from your family—a lot of time. My mother had four children, and due to his military assignments my father was unable to be present for three of those four births.

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My father, a World War II veteran, was discharged from the military during the demobilization of 1945 returning home to his prewar job as an electrician, but he was invited to rejoin the Air Force in 1947 due to the realities of the cold war. Immediately upon reentering the military my father all but disappeared from our daily lives; it would be more than three years before our family was able to live together full-time again. He spent a long deployment flying B-29s from a frigid strategic outpost in a remote area of Alaska, their missions designed to deter or respond to activities by the Soviet Union from just across the Bering Strait. He was sent to England for similar reasons, while we stayed behind. He did a stint at Biggs Air Force Base in Texas, where there was no available family housing. He was deployed to Germany, flying C-47 and C-54 cargo planes during the Berlin Airlift. Finally returning to our general geographic area, he was assigned to Scott Air Force Base, Illinois.

For his first year at Scott Air Force Base my dad “commuted,” more or less. In those days before interstate highways, almost every Friday night he would climb into his old Kaiser and drive 380 miles one way along narrow two-lane roads, arriving just before dawn to be with us at our home in St. Joseph, Missouri. He would then drive back again on Sunday afternoons in order to be at work on Monday morning.

For all of the family support programs in place today, it is hard to imagine that in those days just after World War II, “quality of life” for a military family was defined not by the availability of a day care center or a good school or a commissary but by whether you were able to live in the same house as your dad. And adequate

family assistance did not consist of counseling or support groups, which at the time were unheard of. For our family it was whether my grandmother and Aunt Carolyn would be able to move to St. Joseph to live with me and help my mother during those long years while my father was either deployed or assigned to bases where there was no housing.

And so, as my father deployed again and again, the Webb family support program became my granny, Aunt Carolyn, and the kindness of our neighbors.

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My dad, one of the most innovative thinkers I have ever met, was the first known Webb in many generations harkening back to the Appalachian Mountains of Southwest Virginia and Eastern Kentucky to finish high school. When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, he was living in a two-man room at the YMCA in St. Joseph, and working at Townsend and Wall, the city's largest department store. An excellent and unpolished athlete, he was a phenomenal swimmer. When I was a young child it was nothing for him to swim laps at the local pool with me and my older sister, Pat, clinging onto his back. In the days before World War II his frequent regimen was to swim across the swirling, eddy-filled Missouri River from St. Joseph to the hamlet of Elwood, Kansas, where he had lived during his teenage years, and then back again.

Like so many others in his generation, the day after the Pearl Harbor attacks my father walked down to the local recruiter's office and enlisted in the Army. Accepted into the aviation cadet program of the Army Air Corps, he became a pilot and was commissioned as a second lieutenant. Flying B-17 and B-29 bomber aircraft by war's end he had been promoted to the rank of captain. As it turned out, my dad loved the military and loved to fly. But when the war ended, he, like many other officers without a college education, was RIFFED—an acronym for a mandatory reduction in force—and sent back to the civilian world.

In the halcyon days just after the defeat of Germany and Japan, people with my father's reserve commission and lack of education were basically cut from the team, deemed expendable as the military's force structure shrank. It was one thing that thanks to their intellect and basic skills these uneducated, so-called ninety-day wonders could qualify to become pilots and officers during the rigors of wartime. It was quite another that they and their ever-expanding families could join the class-conscious officers' club milieu and fit into the historic peacetime model.

But then the cold war came. The old peacetime model was broken. The military was once again expanding. The draft was begun again. People with wartime experience, and particularly pilots who like my father had logged thousands of hours of flying time, were being sought out and brought back to active duty as the country faced new and unexpected geostrategic challenges. But these veterans were now a few years older. While the skills they had learned and honed during World War II were immediately valuable, thus saving the military the cost and time that it took to train and mature younger pilots, the families that they so frequently brought along with them carried their own challenges.

My dad and his non-college-educated peers were something of a quick-fix solution. On the other hand, his wife and kids and other families like us were something of a problem. What would the age-old hierarchy do with us—not rhetorically but physically? Where would they put us? How much would it cost to house, educate, and medically take care of us? And how long would it take to put such systems in place?

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My mother did not quite fit the Officers' Wives Club model either, at least in those early days. Vera Lorraine Hodges grew up in the steamy, poverty-stricken cotton fields and strawberry patches of rural East Arkansas, the sixth of eight children. And as so often is the case with those who have really had it hard, my mother did not like

to talk about how hard she really had it. She had grown up without indoor plumbing or electricity. She usually went barefoot. She brushed her teeth with twigs. She started working in the fields as a child, chopping cotton, picking strawberries, cutting and “ricking” wood in the middle of the night. She never had the chance to finish grade school.

Her father and three of her seven siblings died of now-curable or preventable illnesses. In the space of only a few months just after she turned ten, her father, Birch Hays Hodges; her closest younger sister, eight-year-old Eunice; and her grandfather, Francis Adolphus Doyle; all died suddenly, a trilogy of unanticipated tragedies that she never fully overcame. When she was sixteen her mother, my granny Georgia Frankie Doyle, was forced to make something of a Sophie’s choice, leaving my mom behind and alone in Arkansas as she took her youngest child, my aunt Carolyn, to California, having saved enough money for only two one-way tickets in her search of work as Rosie the Riveter in a factory that made American bombers.

My mother met my dad in Monahans, Texas. She was seventeen years old. She had been sent by her aunt Minnie from Kensett, Arkansas, to live in Monahans with her next older sister, my aunt Zara, whose nickname was Dot. Dot’s husband Calvin, also of Kensett, had escaped the cotton fields by finding work in Monahans as a fireman. My dad was stationed at nearby Pyote Air Force Base, an outpost that had sprouted up in the Texas desert like a cactus weed just after the war began. One afternoon, completely by chance, he met my mother on a crowded bus and offered her his seat. They began to talk. Immediately smitten, he got off at her bus stop and walked her home.

When they neared her house my aunt Dot saw them approaching. Rightfully leery of any potential rascal wearing a military uniform in this remote region of Texas, she blanched. It was Dot’s worst nightmare to look out a window and see my brash, talkative dad with his military cap pushed jauntily to one side, walking her seventeen-year-old sister home from the bus stop. Springing into action, Aunt Dot raced to the front door, pulled my mom inside, and quickly slammed it in my dad’s face.

Somehow my dad persisted, he and my mother finding a way to work past Dot. Eleven days after meeting my mom, he asked her to marry him.

However he managed to keep in contact with my mom, neither of them were fooling my aunt Dot. Dot was an uncannily shrewd and knowing woman. She did not exactly drip with sentimentality. You did not want to be across the table from her in a gambling casino or facing her down in a barroom brawl. The brutal, draining travails of East Arkansas and her own personal scars had hardened Dot like tempered steel. This was not necessarily a bad thing, because on the other hand if you were in a fight you could do no better than having Aunt Dot on your side. Dot never backed down and she always thought ahead. She was already saving her dollars in hopes of escaping from the parched vistas of the Texas desert in favor of the postcard-pretty orange groves and palm-lined beaches of California. She would soon do exactly that, working her way up from cocktail waitress to managing a casino in Lake Tahoe before settling in as a real estate agent and tax preparer in a town just north of San Diego.

And so as my dad became ever more obsessed with my mom, Aunt Dot wisely reached into her piggy bank and bought her little sister Vera a one-way bus ticket to Santa Monica to stay with my grandmother. Aunt Dot had a double motive in sending my mom to California in those early days of 1943. First, my granny’s letter back to Texas indicated that she had grown tired of her job as a riveter. California may have looked pretty on a postcard, but Granny was spending her days on all fours, pooled in sweat, crawling inside the nose cones of bomber aircraft, prized by her employers for her tiny size and her muscled arms. But she was thinking of moving back to Arkansas. If she was going to work in a factory, she reasoned, she could always return to the Army munitions plant in North Little Rock, where she had worked long shifts making artillery shells while saving money to head out to California.

By sending my mom to California, Aunt Dot was slowing my granny down, upping her financial ante for

return ticket home by another one-third. Second, and more obviously, Aunt Dot did not want this moonstruck military man who was almost eight years older than her younger sister to mess up Vera's nubile mind. In her seasoned view this braggart of a pilot might simply defile her little sister and then escape, unannounced and unscathed, as he moved off to his next military assignment and a brand-new girlfriend.

But my dad was equally persistent. He was impossibly in love. He wired my mother enough money for a return ticket from Santa Monica to Monahans. And there in the Texas desert, less than three months after she turned eighteen, to the utter chagrin and doomsday predictions of my aunt Dot, he convinced my mother to marry him.

My dad's strongest memory of my mother at that age was not just her violet eyes and dark-haired beauty but his amazement that her years of working in the cotton fields and chopping wood on absentee farms in the middle of the night had given her the arms and shoulders of a boxer and hands whose palms were as rough as the bark of a tree. Throughout her life my mother was a soft-spoken deal maker, inclined to teach and argue through the use of biblical parables, just as she had learned from her beloved father, whose early death had forever scarred her, and just as she would teach her children. But she was also infused with a legendary stubbornness that she inherited from my departed grandfather, that doomed, lame Kentuckian who could quote Shakespeare, argue politics, and dream of diamonds as he broke the clods and tilled the soil of his backyard truck farm.

In my father's eyes this odd combination, along with a physical beauty that was honed and, in his mind, even accentuated by the struggles she had only recently left behind, was fresh and magnetic and overwhelming. Like a real-life Daisy Mae she had stepped out of the cotton fields and strawberry patches of a much harsher world whose tragedies and daily burdens had blunted her temperament and quelled her emotions. But its most immediate impact on this teenage girl was not the lack of a demure coquettishness that otherwise might have defined her had she grown up in better circumstances; it was the visible evidence of the hardship of her journey. This was not a pom-pom-waving homecoming queen or a varsity athlete who had toned her body in a local gym. My mother never complained, but it was her struggles that had visibly shaped her shoulders, grown her biceps, and crusted her palms—while in a less visible way narrowing her view of her own long-term horizons.

Decades later, when I was in my forties, I suppressed a defensive anger as I watched my mother sit quietly in an expansive waterfront Florida living room while a well-bred woman her age described the supposed difficult impact of the Great Depression on her family. As the woman told it, the crash on Wall Street and the failed economy had made it necessary for them to ship their car by rail from New York to Florida when they headed south for the winter. Who could predict, she reasoned, whether there would be food or gasoline if the driver had to refuel and dine in the remote and hostile environs of small-town Georgia?

My mother merely smiled and nodded, as if in agreement. I myself squinted unbelievably, waiting for the punch line, unsure if the woman was serious. How could Vera Hodges, child of despair, whose favorite retort to any of her children who complained was "I felt so bad that I had no shoes, 'til I met a man who had no feet" even begin to explain the grinding reality of true poverty? I recognized the smoke that momentarily glazed my mother's eyes, and I watched her file that comment away behind the enigma of her little Mona Lisa smile. She would not respond, but I knew that she would never again trust this woman with a private thought. The Great Depression, what was that? In family conversations my mother would often quip that in East Arkansas they did not even know there had been a Depression. As the old country song put it, when you've got nothing, you've got nothing left to lose, so how could you tell if things went bad?

And here was my dad, sending her a return ticket from Santa Monica to Monahans, swearing his eternal devotion. High school, that hadn't happened. College, what was that? A job in a factory, riveting bolts into the nose cones of bombers? Granny hated every minute of it. A future in a Lake Tahoe casino, or maybe running a penny arcade on the pier at Santa Monica? Aunt Dot hadn't yet pulled that off, and anyway how did you g

about chasing those kinds of seemingly impossible dreams? How could she sort her way through the implications, and what was she supposed to trade to get there?

What my mother did know was that in a world where her father and grandfather and closest sister had suddenly died, and where her mother had been forced to leave her behind, this bragging, frustrating, but intrinsically good man really loved her.

I am not sure if there is really anything such as a truly smooth marriage. If there is, my parents did not have one. Their fifty-three years together were an unstoppable, hold-your-hands-over-your-face roller-coaster ride for them and for us. But from my early childhood to his final days on earth, every time I heard my father tell the story of how immediately he had fallen for my mother when he gave her his seat on a bus in Monahans, Texas and how he so achingly pursued her, I understood clearly that no matter the battles you may fight along the way, there is truly such a thing as the mystery and power of love.

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My parents were married in September 1943. Eleven months later, in August 1944, my sister Pat was born. In February 1946 I became their second child. My mother was then twenty. By the time she was twenty-four she had also given birth to my sister Tama Sue and my brother, Gary Lee. My dad was not present for either birth. I was the only child born while he was at home, during the two-year interval when, against his wishes, he had left the military and returned to civilian life.

St. Joseph, Missouri, was a beautiful old town whose population had peaked at 100,000 just after the turn of the century. The launching point for the famed Pony Express, at one time it had been a hub for Conestoga caravans heading westward into Colorado and beyond. It had also been a railroad center where the packinghouses along the river had shipped beef and pork that had been brought in from the nearby farmland. St. Joe was smaller and quieter in the days following World War II, filled with gentle hills, well-kept parks, and narrow, tree-lined streets. We had warm, thoughtful neighbors who were constantly helpful. One of my daily routines as a small child was to walk unannounced into the house of the Colestocks, who lived next door, and without even asking, take my nap on their living-room couch. Through much of this time my very young mother was largely alone, in a town she had never even visited until after the war, with a husband who was constantly deployed.

My mom had a rare touch with babies and young children that would continue throughout her life, including when she first became a grandmother at the age of thirty-nine. Loving and filled with song, she was infused with the teaching points that had come from her father's proverbs and parables. And yet in those early years she was really just a kid raising a bunch of kids. In many ways my mom and I grew up together. There were times, even during my childhood, when I would be scolding and didactic with her. Before I turned thirteen she had already nicknamed me "Grandpa." In retrospect, given my mother's own childhood, the postwar life in St. Joe was probably a walk in the park for her. Although my dad was gone, she knew he loved her and that he was coming back. In the meantime we lived in a nice if small house on a quiet street in a well-kept city. We had food, and the rent was paid.

But in retrospect, I'm not sure how we would have survived those years if it had not been for my grandmother. Granny probably needed us as much as we needed her, but if there is such a thing on earth, Georgia Frankie Doyle became our savior.

There is no way to explain how much I loved my grandmother and what an impact she had on my young life. Some evenings in our house at St. Joseph as a very little boy I would simply lie next to her on the hardwood floor as if I were a puppy, hugging her ankles and kissing her feet while she ironed clothes. Granny's favorite passage from the Bible in fact defined her. As Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans, "We rejoice in our

sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts."

Just short of five feet tall, with bulging arms like Popeye's from her own years in the cotton fields and then in the military factories, Granny was the embodiment of sheer toughness. If Aunt Dot was shrewd and knowing, Granny was imbued with a steady, quiet invincibility. If she was angry she could scare your socks off without even raising her voice. But if you were scared, she would nestle you up against her and calm you down, talking away the demons in her slow, slow Arkansas drawl. Granny's bright blue eyes held a magic power, at least for me, as she stared out toward a dark unknown into a place where you somehow knew she had already been and where she would not let them take you. I could always sense with certainty that she had fought those demons before, and had beaten them, and that if I only had the courage to be unafraid, I could beat them too.

In the southern oral tradition, Granny was a natural storyteller. Every night before we went to sleep she laid out our family history before us, one long-remembered tale at a time. Listening every night, constantly asking questions, I learned about the great Scots-Irish migration down the Appalachian Mountains from Pennsylvania through Southwest Virginia and into the midlands of North Carolina, Kentucky, and Tennessee. The covered wagon journeys, the marriages and births and deaths, the wartime enlistments and the historic battles fought, all came alive from the recesses of her memory, just as they had come from her mother and her mother's mother before her, with precise dates and specific places that I would later verify in writing to have been exact.

Her stories about her childhood made me feel as if I myself had lived it. Her mother had been the only person in the family other than my great-great-grandfather Samuel Jasper Marsh to survive a cholera epidemic that hit the Memphis area in 1873, just after the Civil War. As a small child Granny had journeyed along with nearly a dozen siblings in a covered wagon from Tipton County, Tennessee, down into Tippah County, Mississippi, then crossed the Mississippi River on a barge into the swamplands of East Arkansas. She had walked in the muddy ruts behind the wagon as the men dropped small trees and saplings in order to make "corduroy roads" that would hold the weight of the wagons as they pitched and yawed through the snake-infested swamplands. At the end of those wanderings she had grown up in the remote, panther-ridden farmlands of White County.

Granny's later journey from Arkansas to California had been driven by more than the family tragedy of poverty and widowhood. Indeed the decades before and during World War II saw a migratory explosion of scarred but stubborn people. The United States prides itself on being a nation of immigrants, but sometimes we forget that there are many ways to become an immigrant, and in that respect the internal migration out of the severe hardship and regional isolation of the South is perhaps the most misunderstood movement of people in American history. The novelist John Steinbeck brought the world a microcosm of this journey in his masterpiece, *The Grapes of Wrath*, following the Joads, an "Okie" family, out of Dust Bowl Oklahoma to the discrimination that faced them in some areas of postcard-pretty California. Even today, when people think about this migration—which is seldom—many tend to characterize it as simply the Dust Bowl journey, brought on by a drought that hit some areas of the mid-South particularly hard. But make no mistake, it was not just the dust that set so many people into motion during the early decades of the twentieth century, some of them went north to places like Chicago and Detroit and others out west to the Promised Land of California. There was no dust in East Arkansas; there was only Mississippi Delta mud. Nor, by the way, was it the dust that caused the people of my father's family to pour westward out of the hollows and the untamed ridges of the Appalachian Mountains.

Even today, driving west from Memphis up toward White County, Arkansas, where Granny's family settled and where my mother was born, one can see the mud and remember its long-ago seduction and what had once been its economic power. Black gold, at least for the people who owned the thousand-acre farms and at one time the slaves, a rich soil that lured settlers from across Big Muddy, the mighty Mississippi River, and in time

produced wide, unending fields filled with thick stands of cotton. On some summer mornings as you drive past or walk along the fields the Mississippi Delta's mud seems almost to boil from the heat, the humid soil and lush undergrowth cooking up into the air until a low, thin mist lies like smoke above the land as far as the eye can see. And every now and then, where the thick stands of trees rise up at the edges of the swamps and meet the wide, rich fields, the boiling earth spits out a long, fat rattlesnake or maybe an irritated water moccasin.

No, it was not just the dust that put these people into motion, black and white alike, as they pushed northward and westward from the hamlets and the mountains and the cotton fields. Nor was it simply the economics of the Great Depression, whose impact had actually been felt much more strongly in the northern factory regions than in the already struggling small farms of the South. It was the painful, life-squelching poverty that had choked off the South and punished its people for more than seven decades since the end of the Civil War.

Yes, the South had fought and lost the Civil War. And for that fight and because of that loss, the entire region had richly paid, in a way that modern America no longer understands or even dares to teach in its hypersensitive, politically correct academic classrooms. Slavery had ended, although its pervasiveness among the white population of the antebellum South is now wildly exaggerated in our classrooms and films. John Hope Franklin, perhaps our country's most eminent African American historian, wrote pointedly many years ago that only 5 percent of the whites in the South had actually owned slaves, and less than 25 percent had benefited economically from the slave system. The Union had been preserved, but in the war almost one in every three adult white males in the South had died, including two of my own ancestors. In its aftermath the region had become destitute, angry, and alienated from the rest of the United States.

This observation is not a political rant or a fantasy dreamed up in order to advance fictional theories based on the supposed grandeur of the antebellum, *Gone With the Wind* years of plantations and slavery. Nor does it seek to minimize the cruel, vindictive Jim Crow society that grew out of the Union's military occupation just after the Civil War and the Reconstruction era that followed. The retaliatory Jim Crow policies of segregation lasted for decades, into my own childhood. I saw their denigrations and humiliations with my own young eyes. But what we have forgotten over the years is that the South was, and always had been, not simply white against black but a three-tiered system. In many ways that system was consciously designed to pit poor white against poor black, while the false aristocracy of the plantation owners, and later the country-club elites, preserved their social and economic dominance.

Behind those policies was always a simple, though often delicately ignored truth, even among struggling whites who were always mindful that the elites at the very top could in a heartbeat shut down their little tenant farms and send them spiraling down even further into abject and humiliating poverty. The truth was this: when it came to poverty, the average white farm worker in the South had it little better than his black counterpart. And in the end the only true option of either was often to accept this reality or leave the region.

Nowhere has the stark hopelessness of the conditions that caused the mass migration out of the South during those years been so carefully and concisely documented as in a thorough and largely forgotten report issued by President Franklin D. Roosevelt during the very period that saw the tragic destruction of my mother's nuclear family and my widowed granny's decision to try her luck in California. I cannot summarize this report or the situation that spawned it any more accurately than I did in my 2004 book *Born Fighting*:

The years since 1865 had brought such deep and enduring fault lines that the entire South had become the North American equivalent of a Banana Republic, replete with colonialism from the outside and abuse by a thin patrician class from within. This disparity became ever clearer during Franklin Roosevelt's presidency, and as the innovative Democrat reached the midpoint of his second term he asked the National Emergency Council to report to him on the economic conditions of the South. In his letter of transmission Roosevelt stated his conviction that "the South presents right now the Nation's No. 1 economic problem—the Nation's problem, not merely the South's," and wrote bluntly of "the long and ironic history of the despoiling of this truly American section of the country's population."

On July 25, 1938, the National Emergency Council reported its findings to the President. The document issued by the Council is one of the

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