

INTRODUCTION

Here is the real political story, the one most politicians won't even acknowledge: the reality of the anonymous, disquieting daily struggle of ordinary people, including the most marginalized and vulnerable Americans but also young workers and elders and parents, families and communities, searching for dignity and fairness against long odds in a cruel market world.

Everywhere you turn, you'll find people who believe they have been written out of the story. Everywhere you turn there's a sense of insecurity grounded in a gnawing fear that freedom in America has come to mean the freedom of the rich to get richer even as millions of Americans are dumped from the Dream.

—BILL MOYERS, *Nation*, January 22, 2007

The term *grassroots* was probably coined early in the twentieth century by Senator Albert J. Beveridge of Indiana. Enthusiastic about the new Progressive Party and a champion of Theodore Roosevelt who was its presidential candidate in 1912, Beveridge proudly declared, "This party has come from the grass roots. It has grown from the soil of people's hard necessities." That election year, all 15 of Michigan's electoral votes went to Theodore Roosevelt—the only time the Republican Party lost the state since 1856 when it first fielded a presidential candidate. Roosevelt, this maverick Republican running on the third-party ticket, roused Michigan hearts and votes in part out of "hard necessities," but he also articulated a vision and version of America that they shared. Roosevelt had rallied his faithful with a platform of reforms and a crusade he promised to lead. Together they would "stand at Armageddon and battle for the Lord."¹

Throughout the twentieth century Michigan would be home to nearly every political movement in America that emerged from the grassroots. Citizens organized on behalf of concerns on the "left," on the "right," and in the "middle of the road." These were people not so easily described or explained, whatever the cause or era. This book is about the people who supported movements that others, then and later, would denounce as disgraceful. It is about the members of the Ku Klux Klan during the 1920s, the followers of Father Charles Coughlin in the 1930s, anti-Communists and the John Birch Society in the post-World War II era, the members of the Michigan Militia who first appeared in the 1990s. And it is about circum-

stances in Michigan that prompted men and women to act on behalf of America as they saw it.

As soon as Michigan Militia members made their way into public view the scramble for explanations was on: "Who *are* these people?" Nightly newscasters looked appropriately shocked while the screen shifted to camouflage-clad men toting guns and gas masks across a Michigan pasture. Then, the inevitable follow-up: "What's going on in Michigan *now*?" Was it a breeding ground for hate? Journalists searched their back-files. Academics provided scholarly perspective. A pattern was not hard to come by, usually starting with Henry Ford who publicized his anti-Semitism alongside his Model T. The Ku Klux Klan nearly elected a mayor of Detroit and burned crosses on the steps of the city hall. Father Coughlin was often labeled the father of "hate radio," and his notoriety as an anti-Semite rivals that of Henry Ford. The small town of Howell became synonymous with a revived, white-supremacist Klan because Robert Miles, a founder and leader, lived in the vicinity. The Michigan Militia seemed, indeed, on a path well trod by "extremists." Michigan, the state that produced automobiles and cherries, appeared to be a longtime producer of right-wing groups, a term conjuring up bigotry in mean and ugly forms.

To cast the state as a cauldron of hate ignores the other side of the coin. Michigan was a focal point for Progressive reforms in the early part of the century and a pioneer in civil rights legislation by the 1950s; it was home to radical labor activists from the Industrial Workers of the World to the Communist faction in the United Auto Workers. Michigan idealists planned a "peace ship" voyage to end World War I, Michigan students went off to join the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s, and Students for a Democratic Society was launched at Port Huron in the 1960s. Ordinary citizens joined Martin Luther King to march through Michigan streets, civil rights advocates headed South as freedom riders, and Michigan's peace activists faced tear gas and riot sticks in their protests over the Vietnam War. Time and again, the "extremist" movements of whatever cause or concern proved to be on the edge of an emerging broad-based public opinion. Michigan was an exaggerated reflection of the hopes, fears, passions, and disappointments common across the nation.

Movements termed *right-wing* are too easily relegated into a heap piled high with people all presumed to harbor hate in their souls or illness in their heads. *Right* and *left* were terms traditional to European parliaments; the conservatives sat on the right and the liberals on the left. These labels

became increasingly common to describe the American political scene during the 1950s. *Right-wing* was usually a disparaging characterization—such people were authoritarians and rigid, righteous and paranoid. The *left wing* was at the other end of the spectrum, but scholars and journalists often used kinder words to describe them—romantics and dreamers, idealists and fuzzy thinkers. Extremists all. These labels have made sound bites, newspaper articles, and campaign speeches simpler. Characterizing groups like the Klan or the Militia as right-wing extremists makes it oddly comforting to account for the people who gather there. But when it comes to these mostly nameless American citizens, the labels also make it too easy to draw boxes around them, dismiss their complexity, and thereby relegate them to political insignificance. If they are no more or no less than “right wing extremists,” they take on meaning as a “dark aberration” in their time and in a state conveniently labeled a “cauldron” or “petri dish” of hate. On the contrary, these are no curiosities of the past, no strangers in the present. They were the butcher, the baker, the tool and die maker, the doctor, the lawyer, and the chief of police. They are the neighbor next door, the clergyman, the farmer at the Saturday market, your great-aunt or her friend or you.

The men and women who people this book generally shared a few characteristics. They were white and they were Christians, whether churchgoing or not. Michigan had been home to their families, often two or more generations back—but there was a solid representation of second- or third-generation immigrants, even in the anti-immigrant Klan. They were ordinary people, known mostly to family, friends, coworkers, and neighbors, but they were not down-and-outers. Except for the Coughlin followers, they were Republicans, although especially at the local level they backed the person rather than the party. Unlike their popular image, these particular people in Michigan were attracted to grassroots political activism, not to the wanton violence that marked the much smaller groups like the Black Legion and the neo-Nazis. A few had private gain and personal power in mind when they encouraged others to join in the cause; a few were vicious. Most just hoped to keep their lives on track and their dreams intact. Bent on protecting the nation from those endangering it, these citizens aimed to protect themselves and their kind.

Similar concerns surfaced, one movement after another, fed by men and women who believed in common that it was their duty to rescue their country and reclaim their place in it. Children, so often at the heart of their parents' concerns, went along to meetings as a matter of course and

helped with the cause however they could be enlisted. The Klan had junior auxiliaries; Father Coughlin began his radio career with the Children's Hour, and his audience sat around the radio as families. The Birch Society sponsored anti-Communist speakers in schools; Militia parents held firearms and field exercises for their youngsters. Patriotic citizens, they were people who feared that their country was straying from its historic moorings as they understood them to be. Maxims memorized in elementary classrooms generation after generation provided an oft-repeated mantra: The founding fathers had created "a more perfect Union" than the world had ever known. But now, in this, their generation—whether it was the twenties, the thirties, the fifties, or the nineties—misguided voters had elected local, state, and national politicians who, left to their own devices, had put Americans in peril. It was an item of faith in each movement that "government of the people, by the people, and for the people" would not perish from the earth on *their* watch.

One decade after another, some of the same fears and panaceas inevitably surfaced among the friends, family, neighbors, and new acquaintances who mobilized. They were all shaped by historical memory, yet the people in each movement belonged within their own place in time with answers suited to their own problems. In each era, these activists took on concerns that were afloat in a larger public. They often represented a grab bag of prejudices and hostility more extreme than most other Americans voiced out loud—against people of other religions or of no religion, Communists, people of another class whether at the bottom of society or at the top, distrust of immigrants, dislike of blacks. Such outspoken prejudice could make these men and women targets for scorn among their contemporaries, but at the same time, they served to provide cover for other people who could distance themselves from "the likes of the Klan" or the "Coughlin Catholics" or the "Red-hunters" or the "kooks in camouflage." It is a measure of how well they dovetailed with public sentiment that so many issues pressed by "extremists" made their way into law—from immigration quotas to gun-owner rights. They claimed to gather, rally, march, or drill on behalf of their nation that was in peril, but their desperation was most often driven by situations close by. The Michigan Klansmen and Klanswomen, Coughlin's faithful audience, the Birchers, and the Militia members all aimed for more influence over American political doings, starting with what concerned them most—their own backyards.

Twentieth-century Michigan was America not only at its best but at its worst. If much was offered and could be attained by dint of individual ef-

fort, much could also be lost. Alongside a national culture nourished by hope lurks a well-honed habit of fear. In a state and nation so fine, threats seem to loom on every side. From the Ku Klux Klan to the Michigan Militia, grassroots protesters held fast to the lessons of their grade school classrooms, strengthened along the way by the words of trusted leaders from the pulpit to the presidency. The American Dream danced in their heads. But too often dangers were dangled in front of their eyes. Steeped in messages to “take responsibility”—in one’s family, church, neighborhood, workplace, military unit, or local polling place—people stepped forward. Sometimes it was Protestants who joined forces despite denominational differences; sometimes Catholics and Lutherans and Quakers made common cause. People banded together across lines of class, ethnicity, and even race to ward off Communists in their midst; Polish Catholics and third-generation Presbyterians rallied to keep their neighborhoods white. Here were men and women who headed off despite ridicule or condemnation with unsanctioned plans and unorthodox tactics, variously brandishing weapons of intimidation, discrimination, fearmongering, and terror. Sometimes they waved banners of hope and promises of better days. They viewed themselves not as radical departures from American values but as last-ditch efforts to preserve their birthright.

These people in Michigan are not strangers. They are at the heart of a national story. Time and again, too many Americans of every color, creed, and generation fear they have been written out, written off. If democracy is a government of the people, by the people, and for the people, it takes more than high-minded phrases to make it so. Too many Americans have needed better reasons and more resources to believe that “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” Too many Americans have feared each other.