America is the richest and most powerful country in the world. It may be the richest and most powerful country in the history of the world.

But it cannot agree on a plan to reduce its dependence on foreign oil. Nor can it balance its federal budget.

It can’t provide health insurance for the nearly one in six Americans without it, either.

It can’t agree on a plan to improve security at its borders and provide a humane way to deal with the estimated twelve million illegal immigrants working in its fields and factories and restaurants.

It can’t align the promises it has made to seniors through Social Security and Medicare with the tax burdens that future generations realistically can bear.

It can’t agree on the steps to rebuild economic security for middle-class Americans in the age of global economic competition. It can’t formulate a strategy for reducing the emissions of the gases that contribute to global warming and potentially disruptive changes in the climate.
It cannot agree on an approach to fight the threat of Islamic terrorism, at home and abroad, in a way that unites the country with shared purpose.

None of these problems are new. All have been discussed for years in the media. All are the subject of constant debate in Washington. In most cases the options for dealing with them are limited and familiar.

Why, then, has America failed to make more progress against these challenges?

The answer, above all, is that the day-to-day functioning of American politics now inhibits the constructive compromises between the parties required to confront these problems. The political system has evolved to a point where the vast majority of elected officials in each party feel comfortable only advancing ideas acceptable to their core supporters—their “base,” in the jargon of modern campaigns. But progress against these problems, and almost all other challenges facing America, requires comprehensive solutions that marry ideas favored by one party and opposed by the other. It’s implausible, for instance, to imagine that we can address the long-term challenge of Social Security and Medicare without both reducing benefits and increasing taxes. Or that we can regain control of our borders without significantly toughening enforcement and creating a legal framework for the millions of illegal immigrants already in the United States. Or that we can reduce our dependence on foreign oil without reducing consumption and increasing domestic production. Yet in each of those cases, and all the others listed above, most elected officials in one of the two major parties will not accept half of that solution. The result is to prevent us from using all of the tools available to attack our problems. One side proposes to control the deficit solely through spending cuts; the other side almost entirely through tax increases. One party proposes to produce more energy, the other to conserve more energy. In fact, to make meaningful progress against any of these problems, the answer is almost always that we will need to do both. Yet because each party seeks to impose its will on the other—and recoils from actions that might challenge its core supporters—it cannot propose comprehensive solutions. We are left with either-or alternatives—increase production or reduce consumption, cut benefits or raise taxes—when the challenges demand that we apply solutions built on the principle of both-end.

This book examines how we have reached this dangerous impasse. It rests on an unambiguous conclusion: The central obstacle to more effective action against our most pressing problems is an unrelenting polarization of American politics that has divided Washington and the country into hostile, even irreconcilable camps. Competition and even contention between rival parties has been part of American political life since its founding. That partisan rivalry most often has been a source of energy, innovation, and inspiration. But today the parties are losing the capacity to recognize their shared interest in placing boundaries on their competition—and in transcending it when the national interest demands. On some occasions—notably efforts to balance the federal budget and reform the welfare system under Bill Clinton, and an initiative to rethink federal education policy in George W. Bush’s first year—they have collaborated on reasonable compromises. But for most of the past two decades the two sides have collided with such persistent and unwavering disagreement on everything from taxes to Social Security to social and foreign policy that it sometimes seems they are organizing not only against each other, but against the idea of compromise itself.

Against this backdrop of perpetual conflict, America is living through a transformation of its political life. For most of our history American political parties have functioned as loose coalitions that lightly tether diverse ideological views. Because the parties were so diverse, they have usually operated as a force that synthesized the diverse interests in American society. As the great political historian Richard Hofstadter once wrote, “In our politics, each major party has become a compound, a hodgepodge of various and conflicting interests; and the imperatives of party struggle, the quest for victory and for offices, have forced the parties to undertake the business of conciliation and compromise among such interests.”

That definition is obsolete. From Congress and the White House through the grassroots, the parties today are becoming less diverse, more ideologically homogeneous, and less inclined to pursue reasonable agreements. American government, as we’ll see in the chapters ahead, usually has worked best when it is open to a broad array of views and perspectives, and seeks to harmonize a diverse range of interests. Today the dynamics of the political competition are narrowing the perspectives of each party in a
manner that pushes them toward operating as the champion of one group of Americans against another—with dangerous results for all Americans. Reconfigured by the large forces we will explore in this book, our politics today encourages confrontation over compromise. The political system now rewards ideology over pragmatism. It is designed to sharpen disagreements rather than construct consensus. It is built on exposing and inflaming the differences that separate Americans rather than the shared priorities and values that unite them. It produces too much animosity and too few solutions.

Political leaders on both sides now feel a relentless pressure for party discipline and intellectual conformity more common in parliamentary systems than through most of American history. Any politician who attempts to build alliances across party lines is more likely to provoke suspicion and criticism than praise. “People want you to choose sides so badly in modern politics, there is no ability to cross [party lines],” said Senator Lindsey Graham, a conservative but iconoclastic Republican from South Carolina. “You are one team versus the other and never shall the twain meet. If it’s a Democratic idea, I have to be against it because it came from a Democrat. And vice versa.”

Richard A. Gephardt of Missouri, the former Democratic leader in the House of Representatives, used almost the exact same terms to describe the changes he experienced during the twenty-eight years he served in the House before retiring after 2004. “There is no dialogue [between the parties],” he said. “You are either in the blue team or the red team, and you never wander off. It’s like the British Parliament. And I never thought about it that much when I came, but it was very different then. It wasn’t a parliamentary system, and people wandered off their side and voted in committee or on the floor with the other side. There was this understanding that we were there to solve problems.”

The wars between the two parties that take place every day in Washington may seem to most Americans a form of distant posturing, like border clashes between two countries they could not find on the map. But this polarization of political life imposes a tangible cost on every American family—a failure to confront all of the problems listed above with sensible solutions that could improve life for average Americans. Less tangibly but as importantly, extreme partisanship has produced a toxic environment that empowers the most adversarial and shrill voices in each party and disenfranchises the millions of Americans more attracted to pragmatic compromise than to ideological crusades. The reflexive, even ritualized, combat of modern politics leaves fewer and fewer attractive choices for all Americans who don’t want to be conscripted into a battle between feuding ideologues or forced to link arms with Michael Moore or Ann Coulter.

Ken Mehlman, the campaign manager for Bush in 2004 and chairman of the Republican National Committee during part of his second term, does not exaggerate when he says America is now living through an era of “hyperpartisanship.”

The defining characteristics of this age of hyperpartisanship are greater unity within the parties and more intense conflicts between them. On almost every major issue, the distance between the two parties has widened, even as dissent within the parties has diminished. Interest groups in each party are escalating their efforts to enforce ideological discipline on elected officials. Each party has demonstrated greater willingness to employ confrontational tactics that earlier generations considered excessive.

This new political order, as we’ll see, has some of its roots in the strategies liberals pursued in the first decades after World War II to promote more disciplined and ideologically unified parties. But over roughly the past fifteen years, the Republican Party has contributed more than the Democrats to the rising cycle of polarization in American politics. That’s partly because the GOP has controlled a larger share of political power during that time; Democrats have not had as much opportunity to implement a philosophy of government. But it’s mostly because conservatives, eager to reverse decades of liberal policies, have embraced both ends and means that accept high levels of division as the price for ambitious change. Since the GOP takeover of Congress in 1994, and especially since Bush’s election in 2000, the Republican Party has grown into a centrally directed, ideologically coherent institution that demands loyalty, isolates and punishes dissent, and mobilizes every conceivable resource allied with it against the other side.
Bush and his advisers greatly accelerated this process by rejecting the assumption that controlling the center of the electorate is the key to success in American politics. Instead, he has tolerated, and at times even seemed to welcome, division as the price of mobilizing his core supporters behind an aggressive agenda that splits the country and the Congress. Under Bush, the GOP has set the pace in adopting confrontational legislative tactics, tethering Congress to the White House, discouraging internal disagreement, constructing an electoral strategy that relies more on exciting its base than courting swing voters, and advancing an agenda, often on razor-thin party-line votes, that aims to meet the preferences of its supporters with as little concession as possible to those outside of its coalition.

The ferocity of this challenge rattled the foundations of the Democratic Party. During the Bush years Democratic leaders faced rising demands from their own base to abandon Bill Clinton’s centrist model of governing and reconfigure the party into a mirror image of the highly partisan warrior party that the president and his political “architect,” Karl Rove, had designed for the GOP. In fact, Democrats are unlikely ever to match (or even pursue) the level of centralized control and ideological conformity achieved by Republicans because they rely, as we’ll see, on a much more diverse electoral coalition. But Democrats are moving fitfully in the same direction, as more party activists push their party to emulate the Republican model. The Democrats have not been the principal engine of polarization, but they have not been immune to its effects either.

On some fronts, the change in the political environment can be measured quantitatively. On major votes, nearly all Republicans and Democrats on Capitol Hill now line up against each other with regimented precision, like nineteenth-century armies that marched shoulder to shoulder onto the battlefield. For the past half century Congressional Quarterly, a nonpartisan political magazine in Washington, has tracked the extent to which House and Senate members vote with a majority of their party on contested votes. Both Republicans and Democrats are standing with their own party against the other on about 90 percent of the votes, a level of lockstep uniformity unimaginable only a generation or two ago. Rather than seeking to bridge their differences, the vast majority of legislators in each party now reflexively vote against any initiative that originates with the other. The table above tracks the level of party unity in congressional votes under every president since Dwight Eisenhower’s second term. In both chambers, and in both parties, the trend toward a parliamentary level of loyalty is unmistakable.*

The same trend toward division is evident in the way Americans look at the president. Polls over the past half century show it has become increasingly difficult for presidents to win approval from voters across party lines. Dwight Eisenhower, Lyndon Johnson, even Richard Nixon all attracted significant support from voters who identified with the opposite party. But since then the gap has steadily increased between the way Americans in the president’s party assess his job performance and the reviews he receives from Americans in the other party. Under Bush, this difference has widened to unprecedented, almost unimaginable, heights: Bush has excited his own party and infuriated the other as much as any

* Using a different set of measures, the political scientist Nolan McCarty, Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal have calculated that House and Senate members are voting with their parties today at the highest levels since the 1950s.
### Presidential Approval by Party

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>President</th>
<th>Democratic Party (%)</th>
<th>Republican Party (%)</th>
<th>Gap (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>Eisenhower</td>
<td>54.1</td>
<td>92.8</td>
<td>38.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>Johnson</td>
<td>84.1</td>
<td>61.6</td>
<td>22.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>Nixon</td>
<td>39.0</td>
<td>83.4</td>
<td>44.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>Ford</td>
<td>36.3</td>
<td>69.2</td>
<td>32.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Carter</td>
<td>53.5</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>31.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>Reagan</td>
<td>28.8</td>
<td>88.4</td>
<td>59.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>G. H. W. Bush</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>70.5</td>
<td>54.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Clinton</td>
<td>82.8</td>
<td>22.1</td>
<td>60.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>G. W. Bush</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>90.5</td>
<td>75.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Calculations from Gallup surveys; data by party provided in 2006 by Professor Gary Jacobson, University of California (San Diego).

There are two dangers in examining today's conflicts between the parties and their allied coalitions. One is to ignore the similarities to the past. The second is to ignore the differences.

Many commentators who downplay the significance of today's partisan wars correctly note that there was never a golden age in American political life when statesmen entirely transcended party to advance the national interest. Politics has always been a rough game; as early as 1797, Thomas Jefferson complained that the factional disputes in the new republic were so heated, "Men who have been intimate all their lives, cross the streets to avoid meeting, and turn their heads another way, lest they should be obliged to touch their hats."

But the level of conflict between the political parties today, the intensity of their disagreements, and the difficulty they face in reaching reasonable compromises is not typical either. American politics is evolving toward greater partisanship and ideological rigidity than it experienced through most of the twentieth century, though in many respects it is moving along a track that is taking it back to the future.

This book will argue for a new way of understanding the cycles of conflict and cooperation between the parties. It will show that relations between the two parties have moved through four distinct phases over the history of modern American politics, a period that traces back roughly over the past 110 years.

The first phase, which stretched from 1866 through 1938, saw the parties pursue highly partisan strategies for governing in a period of sharp party conflict. This era, which will be explored in Chapter 2, was the period in modern American political life most like our own, and in many ways the political system today is re-creating the advantages and disadvantages of that time.

The second (the subject of Chapter 3) saw an erosion of partisan discipline that forced presidents from Franklin D. Roosevelt through John F. Kennedy into the longest sustained period of bipartisan negotiation in American history. This is the period that most closely approaches an ideal of cooperation across party lines. Although the political system in those
years was flawed in many respects, its best aspects contain important lessons for us today.

The third period, ranging from the mid-1960s through the mid-1990s, was a period of transition, in which the forces that had sustained that bipartisan system waned and the pressures for more partisan confrontation intensified. (These will be explored in Chapters 4, 5, and 6.)

The final phase, the culmination of those pressures, is our own period of hyperpartisanship, an era that may be said to have fully arrived when the Republican-controlled House of Representatives voted on a virtually party-line vote to impeach Bill Clinton in December 1998. (Chapters 6 through 10, from different angles, will all explore this period.)

The resurgence of partisanship over the past several decades confounded the expectations of political scientists in the middle to late twentieth century. Most analysts predicted that the parties might be eclipsed by television (which provides politicians a more direct relationship with voters), the ability of candidates to raise large sums of money on their own, or the rise of independent voters.

Instead we have moved into an era when partisanship at every level, from the voters to elected officials, is the most powerful force in political life. "The two political parties are really strong in a way they haven't been in years," Mehlman correctly notes. "Not strong that as the chairman of the Republican Party I'm a big dog; that's not what it is. Strong in the sense that... joining a political party means something. Political parties are no longer divided along lines that are arbitrary: religion, race, what your economic status is. They are now divided along [the lines of] what your ideology is, which is much more durable. We live in an era of very strong parties."

These strong parties, as noted above, are reminiscent in many ways of the dynamic parties that anchored the age of intense partisanship around the beginning of the twentieth century. But the competition between the parties today is unique in one critical respect: In the early years of the twentieth century, the country was deeply divided but not closely divided. It was deeply divided, because a large gulf separated the priorities of most Republicans and most Democrats throughout that era. But it was not closely divided, because Republicans and Democrats each assembled dominant coalitions that constituted a clear majority of the country during the

years when they held power. Conversely, in the period of greater bipartisan negotiation, between the late 1930s and the mid-1960s, the country was closely but not deeply divided. It was closely divided because the tendency of dozens of conservative Democrats, and a smaller number of moderate Republicans, to routinely cross party lines left neither side with a reliable majority in Congress throughout this era. But it was not deeply divided, because the very instability of the system encouraged presidents from each party to pursue mostly centrist agendas.

Today America is deeply and closely divided. The ideological differences between the parties are as great as at any time in the past century. But the country is split almost exactly in half between the two sides. Deeply and closely divided is an unprecedented and explosive combination. Voters for the losing side always feel unrepresented when the other party wins unified control over government. But for most of our history those voters could look to heretics in the majority coalition (liberal Republicans or conservative Democrats) who championed an approximation of their views. And in most cases—under William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt, or Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson—the disaffected faced the reality that the other side, at that moment, represented a preponderant majority of the country. Neither was true while Republicans controlled the White House and Congress through most of Bush's presidency. Nearly 49 percent of the country voted against Bush in 2004, but few Republican leaders, inside his administration or in Congress, held views close to almost any of those voters. The size of the losing electoral coalition was much greater than in most previous periods of unified government, but their influence inside the governing coalition was smaller. For most of his presidency this dynamic allowed Bush to govern in a manner that satisfied his base while excluding perhaps a greater share of the electorate than at any previous point in American history. The operation of that system, and its consequences for Bush, the two parties, and the country, will be explored more in Chapters 7 and 8.

The polarization of American politics is an enormously complex, interactive phenomenon. Its roots trace into factors far beyond the workings
of the political system itself, into changes in social life, cultural attitudes, and America’s place in the world. The tendency toward polarization has been fueled, on the one hand, by the rise of feminism and the gay rights movement, and on the other by the increasing popularity of fundamentalist and evangelical churches. It draws strength from the questions about America’s international role opened by the end of the cold war. And it has been influenced by changes in residential patterns that appear to have increased the tendency of Americans to settle among neighbors who share their political views.

This book, though, will focus on the changes within the political system that have carried America into the age of hyperpartisanship: the changing nature of the party coalitions; the role of organized constituency groups in shaping the political debate; the shifts in the way the media interacts with political life; the changes in the rules and practices of Congress; and the strategies pursued by presidents and other political leaders. All of these changes are diminishing our capacity to resolve conflicts. Indeed, as we’ll see in the chapters ahead, almost every major force in American political life now operates as an integrated machine to push the parties apart and to sharpen the disagreements in American life.

The consequences of hyperpartisanship are not all negative. The new alignment offers voters clear, stark choices. As recently as 1980 less than half of Americans told pollsters they saw important differences between the Republican and Democratic parties. Today, three fourths of Americans say they see important differences. With the choices so vividly clarified, more Americans are participating in the political system. Over 122 million people voted in 2004, nearly 17 million more than just four years earlier. The number of people who volunteered and contributed money to campaigns has soared too. One study found that the number of small donors to the presidential campaign increased at least threefold, and perhaps even fourfold, from 2000 to 2004. Many of those small donors made their contributions through the Internet, which has demonstrated an extraordinary ability to connect ordinary citizens to politics. The liberal group MoveOn.org is the best example: It has over 3 million members who not only direct torrents of cash toward favored candidates and stacks of e-mails to Capitol Hill, but get up from their computers to participate

in everything from candlelight vigils on the Iraq War to bake sales. The political blogs are often intemperate, but they have created vibrant communities that discuss and debate political issues with remarkable verve and intensity. They daily disprove the easy assumption that Americans are fundamentally apathetic about the choices their leaders make in their name.

The rise in political conflict is a measure of vitality in another respect, too. As we will see in Chapters 3 and 4, American politics is more polarized in part because it is more diverse and open. Far more interests than half a century ago have a voice in shaping the national agenda. That has required the political system to deal with difficult issues, from civil rights for minorities to protection of the environment, it largely submerged during the era of the greatest bipartisan cooperation around World War II. Many of these issues inherently provoke strong emotions and conflict. That is unavoidable and in some ways admirable. Political peace bought at the price of ignoring problems is usually temporary and almost always counterproductive: It produces mounting frustration and growing alienation, the way the bipartisan refusal to confront the South over segregation did through the early 1960s. The conflict that comes from including a greater variety of voices in decisions is to be welcomed, not feared.

It’s also a mistake to blame the ideologues in both parties for this system, or at least to blame them too much. There have always been true believers in American politics. Sometimes they function as a negative force, as they did, say, in the Joe McCarthy era. Today they inhibit progress when they lean too heavily on the parties to reject compromise. But ardent believers also play a valuable role in the political system by challenging the status quo. What Hofstadter wrote about utopian parties applies to the true believers of left and right today—they can be useful by bringing “neglected grievances to the surface.” John Kennedy considered the civil rights activists a nuisance; when the freedom riders mounted their brave campaign to integrate interstate travel on hazardous trips through the South, Kennedy once told his top civil rights aide to have them “call it off.” But they persisted, at great personal risk, and forced him to move more quickly than he wanted to obtain desegregation of interstate buses. Few interest groups can claim such a moral high ground today. But they also
serve by pressuring the parties to confront problems they might otherwise ignore. The agitation of environmentalists has made it more difficult for politicians to ignore global warming; conservative groups pressure Washington to acknowledge the long-term difficulty of funding the current promises under Medicare and Social Security. Without ideologues, the system can mistake drift for consensus.

Likewise, it is a mistake to blame the rise in political combat primarily on political consultants. Political consultants are a force for conflict in campaigns because as a group they love negative advertisements. But they are not a consistent force against compromise in government. Some of them preach the gospel of “feeding the base” to win elections; that has been the central focus, for instance, of Bush’s political team. Others, in both parties, still worry about alienating moderates and independents in the many states that don’t lean decisively to either party. Most, in the end, can argue it round or argue it flat: They run polarizing campaigns for politicians who prefer to polarize and centrist campaigns for candidates who want to conciliate. If anything, most political consultants prefer to keep every possible vote in play; that inclines many of them against the most ideological approaches.

Yet it is impossible to deny that in a period of polarization, politicians, consultants, and activists can find it in their short-term interest to accelerate the spiral of division. Surrendering to polarization often appears an easier, and safer, political course than confronting it. Bush made polarization work for him in both the 2002 and 2004 elections by generating an enormous turnout of the Republican base. Congressional Democrats maximized their influence during Bush’s second term by uniting solidly against his agenda, especially his plan to restructure Social Security. Reaching out across party lines takes a very long arm when the two sides begin almost every debate so far apart. In particular, the ambition and edge of Bush’s agenda—his determination, as he often expressed it to aides, not to play “small ball”—pointed him in directions on many issues so far from the preferences of most Democrats that it sometimes seemed it might be easier to find common ground between the interests of the cow and the slaughterhouse.

In this environment, politicians who appeal for compromise often appear like traitors or enemies of the other side. Yet it is a dangerously self-fulfilling prophecy for politicians to view themselves as soldiers in an army whose only legitimate goal is to destroy the other. The more elected officials accept that logic the more they harden the divisions that inspire the argument in the first place. Ultimately, breaking the cycle of polarization will require elected officials—almost certainly beginning with a future president—to take a leap of faith that a constituency for reasonable compromise still exists in America.

Nothing is certain in politics, but there’s considerable evidence that such a gamble would pay off. As we’ll explore in Chapter 6, one critical reason American politics has grown so polarized is the consistency of ideological belief in each party—the solidifying dominance of conservative views among voters and officeholders in the Republican Party, and to a lesser extent, the ascent of liberals in the Democratic coalition. But the intensity of belief among average voters isn’t the principal problem. The weight of evidence suggests American politics isn’t so polarized because large numbers of Americans have suddenly grown deeply, ardently ideological in their view of the world. The number of deeply committed ideologues in America, though difficult to measure precisely, probably isn’t much larger today than at earlier points in our history, which is to say minuscule. In the biennial political surveys conducted by the University of Michigan, the percentage of adults who call themselves very liberal over the past three decades has soared from 1 percent to . . . 2 percent. The share that calls itself very conservative has exploded from just 1 percent to 3 percent. In that survey, after the 2004 election, half the voters in both red and blue states placed themselves in the three most centrist categories.

None of this suggests an electorate suddenly dominated by crusaders. If anything, it suggests an electorate that might be more receptive than commonly believed to a problem-solving, pragmatic politics that tempered the hostilities between the parties. Given the political choices they are now presented, Americans align in sharply defined, and increasingly antagonistic, camps. But that doesn’t mean many Americans might not accept, or even prefer, less adversarial choices. In the spring of 2006, a group of veteran political operatives from both parties launched an Internet-based effort to draft a centrist third-party candidate for 2008. (We’ll look at that possibility more closely in Chapter 10.) As part of their planning, they
fund a poll that measured American attitudes toward the political system. The survey found enormous disenchanted over the unstinting conflict between the parties. Three fourths of those polled agreed, "The bickering between Republicans and Democrats in Washington is getting in the way of solving the nation’s problems." An even greater number—82 percent—agreed that "America has become so polarized between Democrats and Republicans that Washington can’t seem to make progress solving the nation’s problems."

Such findings support the verdict of Stanley B. Greenberg, a veteran Democratic pollster who advised the presidential campaigns of Bill Clinton, Al Gore, and John Kerry, when he concludes: "The country doesn’t like this politics. It doesn’t like to be sorted; it doesn’t like to be forced into an agenda that follows these lines. There are still lots of voters who don’t fit into these pigeonholes." Matthew Dowd, the senior strategist and chief pollster for Bush's presidential campaigns in both 2000 and 2004, expresses the same conclusion in even more emphatic terms. "I think there is a big opportunity for movement," he said. "I think an election could come along that is not a close election if somebody or some party speaks to the mixed... group while still maintaining part of their party.... Because I think people in this country want something that brings them together, not something that separates them. I think people want that sense of community, they want that sense of connection."

It would be naive to underestimate the difficulties of building an electoral coalition centered on constructive compromise. Here the key is to watch what people do, not what they say. Americans may say they dislike partisan bickering, but more of them are aligning more reliably with one party or the other. When centrist solutions to problems such as immigration, the budget, or welfare are offered in polls they almost always attract broad support. But when they are presented in the real world, against a backdrop of praise from the leaders of one party and condemnation from leaders of the other, support often fractures along the familiar party lines. Building consensus in this environment is a formidable challenge.

But the best evidence is that it’s not an insurmountable one. Constructing broad agreements is more difficult today than in the first decades after WWI. It becomes more interests must be accommodated. But, as we’ll see, even amid the rising partisan tensions of the past four decades, the two parties have come together for important agreements on the environment (under Richard Nixon), tax reform and the stabilization of Social Security (under Ronald Reagan), the federal budget (under George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton), and welfare reform (under Clinton again).

American politics isn’t breaking down because the country’s disagreements are inherently more difficult to bridge today than they were while those men sat in the White House. It is breaking down because too few political leaders resist the rising pressures inside the parties for ideological and partisan conformity that make it more difficult to bridge our disagreements. Ideological voices are louder than perhaps ever before in all aspects of American politics, from Congress to the media, but that isn’t because deeply ideological voters now dominate the American electorate. At its core, the problem isn’t too many ideologues but too few conciliators willing to challenge the ideologues, and partisan warriors on each side demanding a polarized politics. The first step toward lowering the temperature in American politics is a political leadership that would rather douse fires than start them.

Today, though, the impulse to harmonize divergent interests has almost vanished from the capital. Rather than promoting consensus, Washington manufactures disagreement. In both parties, many politicians see it in their interests to widen, not narrow, the underlying divisions in society. Americans today are sincerely divided over the role of government in the economy, foreign policy (especially the Iraq War), and perhaps most intractably, cultural and social issues. But no one would say Americans are divided as violently and passionately as they were over civil rights and the Vietnam War in the 1960s, or the rise of the corporate economy in the 1890s, much less slavery in the 1850s. In each of those periods, the differences between Americans were so profound that they were expressed not just with words, but with fists, and clubs, and ultimately guns. (Think Kent State, the Homestead Steel strike, and John Brown, not to mention the Civil War.) Clearly the country has been more polarized than it is today. What’s unusual now is that the political system is more polarized than the country. Rather than reducing the level of conflict, Washington increases it. That tendency, not the breadth of the underlying divisions
itself, is the defining characteristic of our era and the principal cause of our impasse on so many problems.

The road to this point has been paved by the long list of factors that we will explore in the chapters that follow. It has been manifest in hundreds, even thousands, of discrete decisions, yet the overall direction has been unwavering. The center in American politics is eroding. Confrontation is rising. The parties are separating. And the conflict between them is widening.

With so many centrifugal forces at work, this era of hyperpartisanship won’t unwind easily or quickly. No one any time soon will confuse American politics with the era of good feeling that virtually eradicated partisan competition early in the nineteenth century. The forces encouraging polarization are now deeply entrenched, and they are unlikely to be entirely neutralized: Many of the most antagonistic features of American politics over the past fifteen years are likely to endure indefinitely. But that doesn’t mean the country has to be as sharply and relentlessly divided as it is today. The parties have cooperated before to reach commonsense solutions that advance the national interest and could do so again. An exploration of how the parties have cooperated, or failed to, over the past century, shows the opportunities that are still available—and the risks of failing to seize them.

Chapter 2

The Age of Partisan Armies

The presidential election of 1896 was the first that contemporary Americans would recognize as a distant ancestor of the modern campaign for the White House. In its style, the contest between Republican William McKinley and Democrat William Jennings Bryan gestured toward a fading past but mostly welcomed an approaching future. McKinley, the stately and serene Ohio governor, respected the nineteenth-century tradition that disdained personal campaigning for the White House; he famously remained at home on his front porch in Canton, receiving carefully selected delegations of supporters. But around him, Republicans organized an extensive, expensive public relations campaign that functioned as an overture for the multimedia onslaughts of the twentieth century. Under the direction of Cleveland industrialist Marcus (Mark) Hanna, the shrewd strategist behind McKinley’s rise, Republicans dispatched an army of promotional speakers, distributed over 120 million pieces of literature, and even hired two cameramen to produce a rudimentary campaign film of McKinley chatting (where else?) on his porch. Bryan, the thundering Nebraska populist who opposed McKinley as the Democratic nominee, shattered tradition even more emphatically: He mounted