

## America on the Brink

‘You pro-Trumpers are playing with fire,’ muttered Paul Levinson as he pushed through the doors of the Republican House of Representatives cloakroom. ‘We never should have backed that orange-haired fool.’

Don Baldwin looked at him warily, then, after several moments of silence, gave a weary sigh. ‘Are you sure you want to have this conversation?’

‘Why shouldn’t I?’ Paul blustered.

‘Because you’re on the losing side of the argument, that’s why. My friend, you’re one of the last of a dying breed. I can count the moderates left in the House Republican Caucus on two hands.’

‘Quality over quantity,’ said Paul.

‘Now, c’mon Paul, we’ve been friends a long time,’ Don said in the deep southern drawl that betrayed his Alabama roots. ‘So let’s not get tetchy and say things we’ll later regret.’

‘I don’t get you, Don,’ said Paul with a frown. ‘Your daddy was an abusive son of a bitch who beat you and your mother. Donald Trump is that same kind of bully. How can you admire him so much?’

‘Goddamn it,’ Don exploded, causing heads across the room to turn their way.

Noticing this unwanted attention, Don lowered his voice to an indignant whisper. ‘Don’t you dare compare the president to my father! You don’t know the first thing about bullying and abuse!’

‘Sorry, Don.’ Paul raised his palms in a soothing gesture. ‘You’re right. I had the good fortune to grow up in a loving home with a supportive family. I can’t imagine how difficult it must have been.’

‘Damned right,’ muttered Don. ‘I was lucky to find solace in God. Without the church, I probably would have ended up in prison instead of Congress.’

‘We’re getting into some personal stuff,’ said Paul in a tone he hoped was conciliatory. ‘Why don’t we go back to my office where we can talk privately? I’ll have my EA order in dinner and we can chat without worrying about prying eyes and ears.’

‘Sounds good,’ grinned Don. ‘After all, we don’t want to feed the Hill gossip machine, do we?’

The two congressmen made their way to the basement where a mini-subway ran the 300 yards from the Capitol to the Rayburn House Office Building on the far side of Independence Avenue.

‘Want to hoof it or take the subway?’ asked Paul.

‘With my bad leg?’ replied Don with a self-deprecating smile, ‘it’s the subway for me.’

As they settled into the small open-roofed subway Paul glanced at the man seated opposite. On more than one occasion, he’d heard his colleagues jokingly refer to Don and him as ‘the odd couple’, both because of their differing ideologies and their physical appearance.

He was a lanky former basketball point guard for Columbia while Don was an ex-fraternity brother at the University of Alabama, with more than a few excess pounds around his middle-aged midriff.

Recognised by the US Capitol Police as sitting members of congress, they breezed their way through the security checkpoint at the basement entrance to Rayburn and took the elevator to the top floor.

‘You do realise, don’t you,’ grinned Don as they walked down a windowless corridor, ‘that the back-corner location of your office is a reflection of your standing with leadership?’

Paul shrugged. 'I'm here to follow the dictates of my conscience, not to kowtow to the powers that be.' He pulled open a door where the Connecticut state flag was hanging and a brass plate reading 'Representative Levinson' was screwed to the wall.

'What'll you have?' Paul asked as they settled on to the rich leather chesterfield in his inner office.

'A burger, fries and a Coke from the cafeteria will be fine.'

'Done. Gary, could you come in here for a sec?' Paul said in a voice loud enough to carry through to the outer office.

The head of a young man wearing thick black spectacles materialised around the door jamb. 'Yes, Congressman?'

'Would you be so kind as to get us each a burger, fries and Coke from the Rayburn cafe?'

'Happy to, boss,' smiled the young staffer.

'Take money from petty cash,' Paul instructed. 'And get something for yourself as well.'

After a nod, the young man's head disappeared and several seconds later they heard the outer door of the office slam shut.

'So,' said Don, 'you wanted to talk. Give it your best shot.'

Paul nodded. 'I've told you about my family background.'

'You have,' said Don. 'Your grandparents were among the lucky few German Jews allowed into the country ... in 1934, wasn't it?'

'In 1935,' Paul corrected.

'Don't forget it was FDR who kept the Jews out of America before the war,' Don noted.

'A big part of the reason my parents were staunch Republicans,' Paul replied. 'And a big part of the reason why I don't like Trump.'

'C'mon, Paul,' Don protested. 'The Donald was great on Jewish issues! He moved the embassy to Jerusalem and his immigration ban on

immigrants from Arab countries helped safeguard us all from terrorism, especially the Jewish community.'

'I care about Israel, of course,' replied Paul, 'but—'

'Then you should be more concerned about AOC and her squad of loopy leftists on the other side of the aisle.'

'I'm not a Democrat,' said Paul, 'so that's Nancy Pelosi's problem. I'm more concerned about the loop heads in our party. The ones who think that Joe Biden stole the election and expressed support for the outrage on January 6th.'

Don shook his head. 'I'm not going to justify what some of those protesters did at the Capitol. That guy with the Viking horn hat and face paint was an idiot. But we also know there was all sorts of funny business going on during the 2020 election. There've been criminal convictions for absentee ballot fraud and altering the vote count in Pennsylvania, Georgia and other states.'

'Don,' sighed Paul, 'are you saying the 2020 election was stolen?'

'Don't know,' shrugged Don.

Paul sighed. 'Have you heard of Barbara F. Walter?'

'The TV journalist?'

'No,' said Paul with a shake of his head, 'I mean the civil-war-ologist.'

Don frowned 'The what?'

'It's someone who studies the factors that lead to civil war,' replied Paul. 'She's a professor at San Diego State University, and she's just written a book called, *How Civil Wars Start – And How to Stop Them*. It's scary stuff.'

'Another lefty academic pontificating from the ivory tower,' snorted Don.

‘I don’t think so,’ said Paul. ‘She’s been studying civil wars for twenty-five years. She knows what she’s talking about.’

‘And what are you talking about? What the hell are you saying?’

‘That we’re on the brink of civil war,’ Paul said, his face serious.

Don emitted a hoarse guffaw. ‘You’ve gotta be kidding.’

Paul shook his head. ‘No joke. Professor Walter says that when countries transition from democracy to authoritarianism, or vice versa, they become “anocracies” that make them unstable. And, according to Walter, that’s where America is today. Anocracy is a precursor to civil war. Along with factionalisation.’

‘You mean polarisation.’

‘Nope, factionalisation, which is different—’

‘Dinner,’ Gary announced, reappearing with a tray of food in either hand. ‘Burgers, fries and Cokes, as ordered.’

‘Thanks, Gar.’ Paul smiled as his staffer placed a tray in front of each man.

‘Bon appétit, gentlemen,’ said Gary, before disappearing into the outer office.

‘So, Professor Walter defines factionalisation,’ said Paul as he unwrapped his burger, ‘as people dividing themselves by ethnic, religious or geographic groupings.’

‘That’s the Democrat view of the world,’ muttered Don through a mouthful of burger. ‘All that intersectional theory and critical race crap.’

‘There’s a lot of that on our side of politics as well,’ replied Paul. ‘This is when political parties become predatory. They cut down rivals and enact policies for their partisan benefit. They’re more interested in staying in office than legislating for the common good. It’s a winner-takes-all approach.’

Don shook his head and took a deep swig of his Coke. ‘Sorry, friend, but that’s just not true. Madison wrote about the benefits of factionalism in *Federalist 51*. He argued that different interest groups seeking their own benefit counterbalance each other and guarantee freedom. And anyway, at the end of the day different people will have very different definitions of what constitutes the common good. We deal with that every day in Congress.’

‘Professor Walter is talking about something else entirely.’ Paul frowned. ‘Take Yugoslavia, for example. For thirty-five years, Marshal Tito suppressed ethnic rivalries by the force of his Marxist police state. But when he died in 1980, his authority died with him. Yugoslavia came apart at the seams and a very bloody civil war followed. Over 100,000 people died.’

Don put down his half-eaten burger. ‘But America is ...’

‘Different?’ Paul interjected. ‘I’m not so sure. Anocracy in Yugoslavia allowed for the rise to power of ethnic thugs and war criminals like Slobodan Milosevic and Radovan Karadzic.’

‘Sorry Paul,’ said Don, ‘but I just don’t see how a nasty war in some godforsaken corner of eastern Europe is relevant to us here in America.’

‘Hear me out,’ Paul pleaded. ‘In her book, Walter described how local ethnic politics were exploited by violent entrepreneurs who formed armed militias to take control and kill their enemies.’

‘Sounds like goddamned Antifa in Portland, Oregon, to me,’ snorted Don.

Paul nodded. ‘Yes, those black bloc Antifa types are fascists, just like some of the QAnon conspiracy theorists at the Capitol on January 6th. Professor Walter found that a common factor in the civil wars she studied is a rural–urban divide. She says resentful sons of the soil see

themselves at cultural war with town-dwellers. In Bosnia, this was embodied in the bloody four-year siege of Sarajevo, with the Serbs from the hills mortaring and sniping the occupants of the city.'

'Again, in some godforsaken corner of Europe,' said Don. 'We've had our civil war already. It ended in April 1865 with Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox Court House.'

Paul shook his head. 'Professor Walter says that Yugoslavia shows us how civil war never seems likely until it happens. Suddenly, one day, neighbours turn into executioners. And what I'm trying to say is that we're now on the brink of a second American civil war.'

Don coughed as he swallowed his last piece of burger before looking up at Paul with disbelief etched across his face. 'You should listen to yourself for a sec. You're starting to sound like one of those conspiracy theorists yourself. Your constituents would boot you out of office if you said any of this stuff in public.'

Paul's sighed as he ran his hand through his thick shock of black hair. 'I wouldn't be so quick to dismiss this. I realise no one wants to believe that it could happen here. But like Yugoslavia, the decay is so incremental that most people fail to notice it, even as they live it.'

Don shook his head as a smile crept across his face. 'You're beginning to worry me, Paul. I'm the one usually accused of being a conspiracy theorist. Are you trying to steal my gig?'

'This is no joking matter!' Paul barked in frustration. 'The warning signs are already here!'

'Sorry,' said Don, shaking his head, 'but I'm just not buying it.'

Paul slammed his palms on his desk. 'If you ticked off Walter's checklist of conditions that make civil war possible, you'd find that we have entered some dangerous territory.'

'And what conditions are those?' Don demanded.

‘The death of civility in our national discourse,’ Paul replied in an edgy voice. ‘These days political differences are no longer concerned with policy differences, taxes and the like. The extremists in both parties are almost entirely obsessed with identity politics.’

‘That’s certainly true of the damned Democrats and their 1619 Project friends,’ Don snorted.

Paul sighed. ‘It’s true of our party too. Look at Marjorie Taylor Green.’

‘Marjorie’s a good friend of mine,’ Don protested.

‘She also has a fondness for antisemitic conspiracy theories about how the Jews want to undermine European civilisation.’

‘Horsefeathers!’ Don blustered with a dismissive wave.

‘Okay, then, what about January 6th? You had a mob of thugs who stormed the Capitol trying to prevent the certification of the Electoral College vote.’

Don shook his head. ‘I already said that I disagreed with what happened that day.’

‘Haven’t you heard that the CIA has classified some of these QAnon crazies as anti-government insurgents?’

‘That’s just too much,’ sputtered Don.

‘And what about the Kyle Rittenhouse case?’ Paul challenged, his voice rising by an octave in indignation. ‘People were shooting each other in the streets. It was anarchy!’

‘That was all caused by those damned Antifa and Black Lives Matter rioters,’ Don huffed. ‘Rittenhouse was acquitted because he was found to be acting in self-defence!’

Paul shook his head. ‘Don, that’s not the point. Walter argues in her book that the four-year Trump presidency, BLM protests, the January 6th riot at the Capitol and the Rittenhouse case meet her

conditions for the outbreak of civil war. She thinks all the ingredients are there for an explosion that'll consume us all!

Don sat in grim silence, with arms crossed in front of his chest.

'Look, I know you disagree,' pleaded Paul, 'but think about it for a moment. America is a tinderbox waiting for a spark to turn it into an out-of-control fire. And I see Trump as the spark.'

'You would think so,' growled Don, 'after all you voted to impeach the man.'

Paul shrugged. 'The concentration of wealth in this country is grotesque. In 2020, the top twenty-five hedge-fund managers earned \$32 billion. That's just obscene.'

Don's lip curled in contempt. 'You know, you're sounding more and more like a Democrat with every word you say.'

'You can think whatever you want,' snapped Paul, 'but you can't deny that Trump's presidential campaign was supported by anti-regulation, anti-tax libertarians whose massive donations bought them political influence and corroded our democracy.'

'I don't deny it,' spat Don, 'I embrace it! I'd take a chainsaw to taxes and the regulatory state if I could!'

'So the growing disparity between rich and poor doesn't bother you?' Paul's voice became husky and he cleared his throat. 'You don't care about economic despair and how it fosters racism, higher homicide and incarceration rates, and a greater sense of insecurity across America?'

Don just shrugged.

'Did you know that we have more prisoners than farmers?' Paul asked.

Don didn't reply.

‘Is it any wonder the American middle class feels trapped and estranged from our political system?’

Don shifted in his seat. ‘Listen, Paul, we’ve known each other for a long time. I like you as a person and respect your point of view. But when I accepted your invitation for dinner, I didn’t expect to get an earbashing of lefty talking points.’

Paul glanced at his watch. ‘I understand. And we’re due back on the floor for a vote in 20 minutes. So I’d be grateful if you’d just hear me out for a little while longer.’

‘Fine,’ Don grumbled.

‘You have to agree that there’s been a real sense of loss among middle-class voters.’

‘Can’t argue with that,’ Don said.

‘Okay, so when we look at our rural-urban divide; at the lack of trust in Congress, the factionalisation of politics, the rise of populist grievance mongers ...’

‘By that you mean Trump?’ challenged Don, his tone defensive.

‘Among others,’ replied Paul. ‘Ilhan Omar on the Democratic side is no better. It’s just that she wasn’t president. But the overriding point I’m trying to make is that our country is crumbling from within. Our democracy is in danger.’

Paul paused for breath as Don rose to his feet.

‘Vote’s coming up. We should get back to the floor.’

Paul nodded and pulled on his suit jacket.

‘Don’t worry about the mess,’ said Gary as the two congressmen walked through the outer office. ‘I’ll clean it up.’

‘Thank you, young man,’ said Don as he smiled with all the charm of a politician accustomed to many years on the campaign trail.

‘This hatred,’ Paul continued as they walked along the corridor towards the elevator, ‘Walter says it’s the psychological fuel for civil war. She’s afraid that while we claim to still be a democracy, right now America is more of an anocracy.’

Don walked on stolidly.

Paul smiled. ‘But it’s not game over. At least not yet. Walter says that while forces of division have a playbook, then we can have one as well.’

Don turned his head with a quizzical expression. ‘What do you mean by that?’

‘Walter advocates better civics lessons in schools, prosecuting armed militias as terrorists ...’

‘Antifa as well,’ Don interjected.

Paul sighed. ‘Yes, left-wing militias are as bad as right-wing militias. Reform of what is a terribly inefficient and patchwork voting system ...’

‘A nice thought,’ said Don, ‘but anything short of a constitutional amendment is a waste of time. Article 1, Section 4 of the Constitution is clear that election laws are within the sole purview of state legislatures.’

‘Fair point,’ Paul acknowledged, ‘but there’s a lot we can do to cut Big Tech down to size.’

Don nodded. ‘No argument there. I’m no fan of Zuckerberg.’

They arrived at the bank of elevators and Paul pushed ‘B’ for basement.

‘My point is, that even though we see the world very differently, we both care about this country,’ said Paul. ‘And if we can work together ...’

The elevator bell rang as the door slid open. It was packed.

‘I see what you’re saying,’ said Don as they squeezed in. ‘But let’s talk about it more tomorrow.’

Paul smiled grimly as the elevator began its jerky descent to the Capitol subway station.

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