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Preface

When I think back on it now, I suppose this book began—as so many of the most important things in life do, really—while rumbling in a van through the soybean fields of eastern Iowa. It was April 2003, and I was on assignment for the *New York Times Magazine*, traveling with Howard Dean, who was just then becoming a serious contender for the presidential nomination of the Democratic Party. I found Dean interesting, but what interested me more were his crowds. I had seen my share of standard political rallies, but I was completely unprepared for the depth of partisan passion and fury that swelled within the gymnasiums and community centers on our route. “I’m Howard Dean, and I represent the Democratic wing of the Democratic Party!” the candidate would thunder, hitting his signature line, and long-suffering liberals found themselves literally moved to tears.

In Washington, Dean’s campaign was written off as the latest of the party’s quadrennial children’s crusades, an antiwar juggernaut fueled by the same college kids whose parents had screamed for Gene McCarthy. But when you saw it up close, you knew it was more than that; not only were those kids at the Dean rallies, along with their

hippie parents, but so were housewives and middle-aged labor guys and a lot of people who didn't even call themselves Democrats. Having endured eight years of Clintonian centrism, an election they believed was stolen, and then, finally, their party's own capitulation on the war in Iraq, Iowa liberals had had enough—not just of George W. Bush and conservative Washington, but of what they saw as their own party's ineffectual pragmatism. Dean, the former Vermont governor with the hard, gravelly voice, had tapped into a well of resentment that Democrats back in Washington, and those of us who covered them, simply didn't understand.

Something was happening under the surface of Democratic politics, and it had nothing to do with the usual politicians or consultants. What I had glimpsed in Iowa was the emergence of the first political movement of the Internet age.

And so, in the months and years after I first traveled with Dean, I set out across the country to find the places where this nascent movement was coalescing and to trace its arc. My initial investigation led me to a cadre of elite financiers, led by George Soros, the Hungarian-born billionaire, who had begun to meet in secret, pulled together by a mysterious and closely guarded set of PowerPoint slides. This weird discovery was followed by others that led me on a meandering odyssey to every part of the continental United States (and Alaska)—from the Hollywood mansion of the television producer Norman Lear to a hotel overlooking the Vegas strip with sparkling chocolate fountains. I walked the streets of Columbus with door knockers and drove the California coast with celebrity bloggers. I sat with former president Bill Clinton, who, forced to defend his legacy against this liberal insurrection, had lost his cool in front of a clandestine gathering of millionaires in Texas. And I met lesser-known politicians like Mark Warner and Ned Lamont, whose early forays into this new movement foreshadowed challenges that now confront the party's 2008 presidential candidates.

Returning to Washington after these trips, I would encounter colleagues and party leaders who remained, as ever, fixated on the deal making in Congress, on who was up and who was down in the midterm elections, and on the early jostling for the 2008 campaign. I'd hear about how elected Democrats like Nancy Pelosi and Harry Reid, the party's leaders in the House and Senate, were supposedly determining the direction of the party. And I began to suspect that all of us who followed Democratic politics had been missing the story. The real reinvention of the party was happening not in Washington, but in New York and San Francisco and Denver and, yes, even in Alaska. More than at any time since the 1960s, the party and its leading politicians were being forced to respond and adapt to a popular movement beyond their control—a widespread uprising led by baby boom liberals, wealthy investors, and defiant bloggers whose faith in party and country had been severely shaken by twelve years of Republican rule.

These outsiders called themselves “progressives,” hearkening back to the good-government reformers of the last century. The people they most emulated, however, were the movement conservatives of the Goldwater era, who had not only overthrown the leadership of their party, but who had managed, in an incredibly short time, to wrest control of the national agenda. The leaders of this progressive movement were a disparate group of activists, many of whom were barely known in Washington. Most had money (often more than they knew what to do with), or they had power, or they had neither but understood, intuitively, the potential of new technologies to change political fortunes. Some were motivated purely by ideology, others by anger, and still others by personal torment or a desire for glory. They shared a contempt for the culture of Washington and a belief that the moribund Democratic Party and its traditional interest groups were quickly losing power to a band of political neophytes who hadn't been corrupted by all those years of

governing—and who were, therefore, better suited to the politics of the information age.

For two years, from John Kerry's devastating loss in 2004 through the Democratic triumph of 2006, I followed the trail of these new progressives, and I came to like and admire many of them. They were revolutionaries, and the revolt they had started was redefining the Democratic Party. They found creative ways to democratize Democratic politics and to engage a legion of new volunteers. They set out to drive conservatives from Washington and challenge their own party's jaded establishment. And yet they knew, on some level, that a political movement had to be about more than building lists and fighting the power, and they struggled openly to articulate the larger meaning of their cause. I was surprised to discover, as I tried to understand the progressive revolt, that most of its leaders were trying to understand it too. What they were still searching for in these early days of the movement was an argument, some compelling case for the future of American government. They aspired to win—but to what end? If the progressives ultimately triumphed, what would their victory mean?

This remains a critically important question, not just to the Democratic Party and all those who care about it, but to the country as a whole. As I write this, the rigid conservative ideology that has transformed Washington over the past twenty-five years has been soundly discredited. The elections of 2006 marked an emphatic rejection of George W. Bush, both of his failed foreign policy and of his general contempt for dissent and debate. But they also exposed a deeper fatigue with a conservative doctrine that now seems, on so many levels, to be incompatible with the realities of governing. The same ideologues who railed against the profligacy of liberal government ended up running federal deficits that would have been

unimaginable to Jimmy Carter. The same reformers who ran against machine-era corruption found themselves shamed by scandal. The same conservatives who denounced "nation building" somehow plunged the country into a bloody experiment in remaking the Arab world. Some version of Goldwater-Reagan conservatism will surely persist through this dark period, but several of its most cherished dogmas—the reflexive disdain of multilateralism, the belief in the superiority of pure markets—have likely lost the shine that made them so tantalizing to voters in the last years of the twentieth century.

At the same time, the Republican defeat in the 2006 elections signified just that—a Republican defeat. There's not much reason to think that the Democratic Party has suddenly overcome its confusion about the passing of the industrial economy and the cold war, events that left the party, over the last few decades, groping for some new philosophical framework. As Chuck Schumer, the architect of the party's successful campaign to win back the Senate, put it in a book published just after the elections, "Unless we are able to answer the question that Democrats are always asked—'What does the Democratic Party stand for?'—voters will go right back to voting for the Republican Party they have been supporting for the last 25 years. Our victory was well deserved, but the Democratic Party still needs a new paradigm." Until they find that governing paradigm, something more contemporary than merely defending programs of the New Deal and espousing the social justice rhetoric of the 1960s, it will be hard for Democrats to establish themselves as anything other than a slightly dated alternative to the mess that is modern conservatism. This would seem to be the main challenge for a rising progressive movement.

There is now, at the core of our politics, a hole waiting to be filled. Writing on Daily Kos just hours after the midterm elections, Simon Rosenberg, one of the early visionaries of the progressive movement, summed it up this way: "Like two heavyweight boxers stumbling

into the 15th round of a championship fight, the two great ideologies of the 20th century stumble, exhausted, tattered and weakened, into a very dynamic and challenging 21st century." Americans seem to sense, perhaps better than their aging leaders do, that the solutions of the last century are wholly inadequate to the unprecedented threats of global terror and a global economy. A kind of lingering unease shadows the land, and the movement that dominates the next generation of American politics will be the one not that exploits this emotion, nor that tries to soothe it away, but that articulates some new and persuasive argument for how we meet the future.

I offer this book, then, not just as the story of an oddly heroic group of activists who somehow seized control of their party, but also as a series of questions about the new progressive movement and the future of American politics. How do we, as a nation, move beyond the tired doctrines of a receding era? Who will explain the difficult truths of our new reality? What will the next version of American government look like?

Whose argument will carry the day?

The Argument