

Middle Class Dreams

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Chapter 2: Macomb Country in The American Mind

Macomb Country – it seems a quite ordinary place to have attracted so much attention. Our politics used to gravitate to places like Cadillac Square in Detroit, where perhaps a hundred thousand blue-collar families would gather at the end of summer to cheer on would-be leaders. Harry Truman opened his underdog 1948 campaign there to the first signs of real political life. John Kennedy came in 1960, sitting atop a suitcase in an open convertible. With Walter Reuther at his side, he told this labor crowd to elect an administration “which has faith in a growing America.”

Then there was the garment center in New York City, where union leaders and politicians would march arm in arm down Seventh Avenue, confident that working America, spilling out of the shops onto the sidewalks, waving, would send them off to lead. In 1960, a quarter of a million packed in between 35th and 40th street to hear John Kennedy summon the national to a “new frontier.” Broadway and Hollywood were there in force – Melvyn Douglas, Janet Leigh, Henry Fonda, Shelly Winters, Myrna Loy, and Tallulah Bankhead; Billy Eckstine’s big band kicked off the festivities with “The Star-Spangled Banner.” In 1968, an exuberant Hubert Humphrey looked out on the sea of working people packed into those five blocks, and he clung to the local politicians and union chefs, trying to take some of that history and laborers’ sweat to the polls.

Or more simply, there was the 219 North Delaware, Independence, Missouri: the home of Harry and Bess Truman. That is where anxious candidates like John Kennedy and presidents like Richard Nixon and Lyndon Johnson came to pay their respects and show they could stand in the shoes of a common man who had led the nation.

Republican aspirants have found their way to these centers of American life – to the Main Streets across the country. Nixon drew almost a half million people to Michigan Avenue in Chicago in 1968, but there was greater comfort in the towns of perhaps two thousand, like Deshler, Ohio. Nixon emerged on the platform of his railway car to the sight of the grain elevator and an aging crowd that somehow managed to share his anger about the rising crime rate in the United States.

In an earlier day, the people – 750,000 of them – traveled to Canton, Ohio, to see Republican William McKinley campaign from his porch on North Main Street. The crowds and reporters trampled the flower beds and the picket fence, but McKinley came out dutifully to acknowledge the cheers and attack free silver as a bad deal for laboring people. The pilgrims came to delegations, sometimes one or two thousand each, their discount fares underwritten by a generous and supportive railway industry.¹

Nostalgia and aging politicians frequently drag out leaders back to these precious places. But the rituals of fall have moved imperceptibly away from the small towns and big cities to ordinary suburbs – across the Detroit city line at Eight Mile Road, to Macomb Country: This is the site of the real drama in our political life. This is the site of an historic upheaval that has wrecked the old and promises a new volatile kind of politics.

This is why the *Los Angeles Times* called this suburban country “ground zero” for the 1992 presidential campaign. Bill Clinton came here three times during that year, starting with a Democratic-primary town meeting on March 12 at Macomb Country Community College in the sturdy working-class suburb of Warren, then returning on September 24 and ending with a huge

Columbus Day picnic that filled a football field in Sterling Heights. He once asked his campaign advisers whether Macomb had more electoral votes than Florida. George Bush understood the challenge and came twice to this key battleground, telling a Republican-primary audience in Fraser that there was a “boom” in export jobs. Later he dispatched Barbara Bush to an Italian cultural center and Dan Quayle to a tank plant, both in Warren. Bush stood in the gymnasium at Macomb Country Community College and taunted his opponents, whom he called bozos; that day Bill Clinton was standing ten miles away, in downtown Detroit, addressing a racially mixed audience but speaking to Macomb: “While Mr. Bush will go to Macomb Country today and tell those people that I’m not their kind of person...I’ve got a lot more in common with the people in Macomb Country than George Bush ever had or ever will.”

In 1988, Michael Dukakis had stumbled into Warren to don a helmet and take an ill-fated tank ride at the General Dynamics factory. His statewide supporters rallied without him on election eve at Clintondale High School. Ronald Reagan came twice in 1984 and in 1988 came back to Macomb Country Community College to introduce George Bush to the new center of American politics. This one simple community college has hosted seven presidential candidates since 1984.²

The politicians came because of the numbers. In 1960, Macomb Country was the most Democratic suburb in America, giving John Kennedy 63 percent of the vote. Lyndon Johnson took the Democratic tally up to 74 percent four years later. Then it all collapsed. John Kennedy was a distant memory by 1984, when Ronald Reagan won an extraordinary 67 percent of the vote. Macomb was now the national home of Reagan Democrats and the working material for a new American political alignment. In 1992 the Republican presidential vote plummeted 24 points from Reagan’s high-water mark. The Macomb Country battleground, site of an historic upheaval, was now strewn with this political wreckage: 43 percent for George Bush, 38 percent for Bill Clinton, and 20 percent for the independent Ross Perot.³ On this battlefield lay the ruins of the New Deal and Ronald Reagan’s American and all the uncertainties of a new era.

The poignancy in this upheaval captures the broader struggle in our new political life. These extraordinary electoral swings are the convulsions of the hardworking people, union people, who gave their hearts and hopes to the Democratic party and its leaders, who believed in American and its dream, who bet everything on its reality. That is how they took the chance and bought homes in Warren and Roseville. But in the 1960s and the 1970s, the leaders who were supposed to fight for them seemed to care more about the blacks in Detroit and the protesters on campus; they seemed to care more about equal rights and abortion than about mortgage payments and crime. The resentment and disillusionment crystallized in a sense of betrayal, and the people of Macomb Country rebelled. They became Reagan Democrats, some said, though they were more like refugees from a war who soon grow disillusioned with the resettlement camps. The Republicans had promised them a new deal and a better future, this time under the tutelage of entrepreneurs and job creators. But the rich made out big while the middle-class languished – indeed, struggled – to hold on to their jobs and homes in a changing world. They grew disillusioned with the new Republican bargain, which itself turned out to be a betrayal.

Macomb is an exaggeration, a caricature of America, because it so wholeheartedly identified itself with the currents that swept the nation in the years following the Second World War.⁴ Its residents were just working Americans who made their way to the suburbs. In 1985, almost 40 percent lived in union households, most of them members of the United Automobile Workers, one of the most aggressive unions in the country. Seared into the consciousness of Macomb families are the 1937 UAW sit-down strikes at Flint and at Kelsey-Hayes wheel plant

in Detroit. More immediate and more important were the post-war strikes and contracts that linked the fate of the auto worker to the fate of the industry. By 1955, the union had won a three-year agreement with something like a guaranteed annual wage with supplementary unemployment benefits. The working men of Michigan had battled for a system that put them on salary, giving them security and money to buy into the American dream.⁵

They found that dream in the houses and yards of Macomb County, to which the white workers began to move in the 1950s. Macomb's population, just over 100,000 in 1949, nearly quadrupled by 1960 and increased by another 200,000 by 1970; in 1980, the census tally stood at 694,000. Home construction boomed: sixty thousand houses were built in the 1950's and continued at that pace for a quarter of a century. The factories moved to Macomb as well: GM's Buick assembly division, Chrysler's stamping plants, and Ford's transmission and chassis division.

These were America's workers, who had managed to carve out an idealized version of the American dream, for which they were grateful. The median household income in Macomb in 1985 was \$24,000 - \$7,000 above the national median – even though a majority of the income still came from manufacturing. Just a third of the people had gone beyond high school, yet four out of five families owned their homes, and nearly two thirds owned two or more cars. Almost everybody – 97 percent – was white. With Lake. St. Clair and its marinas forming the eastern boundary of Macomb, workers here rounded out the dream: Macomb County has more boats per capita than any other place in the United States, and its congressman heads the boat caucus.⁶

Little wonder, then, that Macomb's mostly Catholic workers proved loyal to the national Democratic party in the 1950s and '60s, even as other suburban Catholics were tempted by Eisenhower. This was one place where the New Deal's promise was real. These voters gave Kennedy his biggest suburban win and made their support for Lyndon Johnson nearly unanimous. Gratitude to the party and the union ran deep. In 1968, every state representative, every state senator, every congressman was a Democrat. In fact, Richard Nixon's law-and-order candidacy generated little excitement in this middle-American suburb: Nixon received no more votes than Barry Goldwater had for years earlier. But one in five voted for the independent George Wallace – a signal that all was not so peaceful in Mudville.

In Macomb County, there was not a lot of sympathy for the rioters who burned down more than a hundred buildings in Detroit during five days in July 1967. The looting and fires overwhelmed the capacities of the local police as the National Guard and then 4,700 U.S. paratroopers were called in to quell the violence. Forty-three people died in this, the country's bloodiest race riot.⁷

Over the next four years, the people here were consumed with the racial character of their world – the most segregated metropolitan area in America. Barely any blacks – just 5 percent – were able to break into Detroit's suburban ring, affectionately called the doughnut. Then, on September 27, 1971, U.S. District Judge Stephen J. Roth ordered the busing of school – children across the entire metropolitan area in order to integrate the schools of Detroit and its suburbs. All the school districts were directed to develop busing plans, though none was ever implemented, and in 1974 the Supreme Court overturned Roth's ruling.

Even so, the decision caused a firestorm in white suburbia, particularly in Macomb.⁸ There was rallies and marches everywhere. Every community sprouted anti-busing organizations, whose anger infused the culture and political life of the times – from local parishes and union halls to the floor of Congress. After the Roth ruling, the five liberal Democratic members of Congress from the Detroit area signed a joint letter announcing their

determination to force a vote on a constitutional amendment to ban busing. Congressman John Dingell, representing Dearborn and River Rouge, sponsored an amendment to bar the use of gasoline to take students beyond their nearest school – producing a heated clash with Congresswoman Bella Abzug of New York. Her accusation that the Detroit –area Democrats were “demagogic or racist” violated protocol and was stricken from the *Congressional Record*.

The largely white Region One of the UAW, encompassing Macomb Country, became a conservative Democratic bastion. Its long-time leader, George Merrelli, broke with the liberal leadership of the UAW to oppose busing. The town of Warren was becoming a “conservative cauldron,” as one official put it, and had to be split in the 1971 reapportionment in order to keep it from electing a conservative congressman of its own.

In 1972, George Wallace won the Michigan Democratic primary – his first bit state win outside the South. Wallace’s victory was built in part on his winning a remarkable 66 percent of the vote in Macomb. The AFL-CIO and Teamsters had endorsed Humbert Humphrey, and the UAW backed both Humphrey and George McGovern, but that clearly did not matter much in Macomb. Wallace described busing as “the most asinine, cruel thing I’ve ever heard of” and called on “the people of this country to recognize that an all-powerful government could take over their unions, businesses, their children, as they are now doing in Michigan on busing.” Which his rallies overflowing with blue-collar workers, he railed against the “fat cats” and against the crime that threatened their communities. Exit polls in metropolitan Detroit found 70 percent identifying “crime in the streets” as the number-one problem- the catchall for everything that angered Macomb’s white middle –class voters.⁹

In November, the full ramifications of the primary vote came into focus. Macomb voters seemed to give up on the national Democratic party, which failed to understand them. They scored George McGovern in the general election, giving him just 36 percent of the vote and repudiating his close association with the anti-war upheavals and social welfare adventurism. In 1976, they had trouble warming up to the moderate southerner, Jimmy Carter, who lost narrowly to a Republican from Michigan, and they slipped further back in 1980 as Ronald Reagan won a very respectable 53 percent majority.

But for all those defections, Macomb Country voters did not easily sever their special relationship with the Democrats. At the base of the ticket, in the races for the state Board of Education, where people know nothing of the candidates and just vote their gut loyalties, Macomb was casting 60 percent of its votes for unknown Democrats – right through 1978. In 1982, they voted a straight Democratic ticket – 53 and 56 percent for governor and attorney general, respectively, but more than 60 percent for the U.S. Senate. They sent a team of pro-UAW Democrats to the state legislature in Lansing while expressing complete comfort with their Democratic congressman, David Bonior.¹⁰

Most of these voters understood the insecurities that bedevil those who still work with their hands or depend on manufacture, and they were not going to walk away easily from what they had forged here. To say no to Democrats was to walk away from a political culture that had given them decent homes and yards and dreams. This was no easy walk. All the upheavals and fires in Detroit and all the new Republican talk of law and order were just not enough to overturn this order.

But the slide, then collapse, of auto jobs and the erosion of union contracts called into question the bigger contract that New Deal Democrats had signed with middle-class America. That home, boat, and safe neighborhood were line items in a special relationship. Every lost job jeopardized the contract. Across the nation, hourly wages of production workers began to drop

after 1979, and over the next decade a million and a half manufacturing jobs were lost. Things were especially bad in Michigan. The auto industry, along with the sprawling network of allied shops and services that snake through working America, was desperately retrenching. This was no simple recession. By 1983, unemployment had jumped to 17.6 percent in suburban Macomb. Over 70 percent of the laid-off auto workers lost a third or more of their savings. Median family income started dropping. Population growth ended. The three-decade boom in housing construction just came to a halt in 1980, and so did the Democrats' reach to working, aspirant America.¹¹

The 1984 election was a disaster for the national Democrats. Walter Mondale was not some fringe lefty consumed by obscure issues. He was the candidate of organized labor and of every organized interest that found its home in the Democratic party. He was the candidate of the UAW, whose leaders believed Mondale had supported them and now believed they should support him.¹² Mondale had conventional views on defense and was schooled in anti-Communist liberalism of Hubert Humphrey. But his rhetoric about the social contract had a hollow ring for a middle American that had made its deal with the Democrats. When Mondale preached "fairness," they heard "taxes."

In 1984, the voters of Macomb County turned their backs on the Democratic liberalism that had been so intertwined with the dream that had built and guarded. And this time, the national landslide was a local debacle as well. The crown jewel of suburban Democracy gave just 32 percent of its vote to Walter Mondale and handed over nearly half of the seats in its state legislature to the Republicans. The Democratic candidate for the U.S. Senate, Carl Levin, hung on with 49 percent of the vote, but party support no longer ran deep: the gut-level Democratic vote for state Board of Education plummeted to 44 percent. The heart of middle America had some scorned almost everything Democratic.

Listening to Macomb

The local Democratic leaders were stunned. Clearly something special and enduring had been shattered. The headlines were tough enough: in *The Detroit News*, REAGAN LANDSLIDE CAPTURES 49 STATES ELECTORAL MARGIN HIGHEST IN HISTORY. The surprise was not that Mondale had lost but that three members of the legislature were gone too. These were good people, working people who had stood with union Democracy, but now they had lost to a stockbroker, a realtor, and restaurateur. One of the Republican victors told his victory party that "it appears there is a realignment here, and perhaps the rest of the country."¹³ National union leaders had tried to be reassuring, passing around post-election polls that showed Mondale doing just fine with union members - if you think 55 percent is just fine. Statewide the Democrats were hanging on to a slim seven-seat majority in the state house even as some of them huddled with the Republicans to discuss the prospect of electing a Republican speaker. On the other side of the capitol, things were worse: the Democrats had lost control of the state by one seat.

Two out of three people in Macomb were now Regan voters. The heart and promise of an enduring New Deal coalition, forged in a growing suburbia, had been simply cut out. Nobody relished facing the future with a Democratic party built atop minority votes in Detroit and academic liberals in Ann Arbor.

The party leaders then did something odd: they called in an academic and a political pollster - me. They wanted somebody new to come to Michigan, to take a hard look at Macomb, to pose the toughest possible questions and be honest about the future. Use whatever techniques

you need, they said, but get to the bottom of Ronald Reagan's thrust into the heart of working America.

At the end of March, I began a conversation with Macomb County's Democratic defectors – people who had identified historically with the Democratic party but turned to Ronald Reagan in 1984. The conversations took place in small, comfortable settings like a hotel room or the back of a restaurant, where like-minded people would feel free to open up and speak their minds: all men or women, all union folks or all non-union, all working women or all housewives, all white – and all Democratic defectors. The conversation began in March in Warren and ended in April in Waterford Township, just outside Macomb, where a similar history had wrecked the Democratic ascendancy. The Reagan Democrats, as we shall see now, spoke their mind.¹⁴

The first extended conversation was about vulnerability and betrayal, virtue and honor. The Reagan Democrats has staked their way of life on a bargain with a party that was supposed to stand up for common people. That was the party's purpose and is historic role. Somewhere nestled back in their heads was the party of Jefferson and Jackson, Bryan, Roosevelt, Truman, and Kennedy, the party that identified with their lives and would understand what was happening to them. That party would understand simple things – a mortgage and taxes, family and neighborhood, a good job and a strong America. But Mondale, Carter, and McGovern – whom had they fought for?

These were disillusioned, angry voters, but they were not Republicans. They spoke of a broken contract, not a new vision. Their way of life was genuinely in jeopardy, threatened by profound economic changes beyond their control, yet their leaders, who were supposed to look out for them, were preoccupied with other groups and other issues.

These voters wondered why they weren't the central drama of the Democratic party. They should be honored, not studded, by a party that was now uncomfortable with, maybe even contemptuous of, their values, their fears, and their simple suburban ways. Their homes in Warren and Sterling Heights symbolized their virtue, not their privilege. They believed they were in trouble, yet the party implied their trouble was less important than the needs of black people, people who, in their minds, lacked virtue. Something was very wrong.

Ronald Reagan enjoyed great popularity here in the aftermath of the 1984 landslide. These defecting Democrats saw in him an essential honesty, a willingness to stand tough for his beliefs and to stand with "small" America against things "big," particularly government. Their affection for Reagan made it possible for them to flee the Democratic house in flames. But out conversations were not about Republicanism. They were about the Democratic betrayal of middle-class America.

Economic Change and Personal Vulnerability

Macomb County voters knew they were in trouble. With the economic contracting and being reconstructed, so were their dreams. Underlying all the political talk was a lot of simple fear. Givebacks and layoffs, foreign imports and robotics, and the sight of industries moving South – these things now dominated their economic world.

Plants were threatening to split for Tennessee or Mexico and leave people with nothing. That threat represented a daily reminder of the people's importance and their inability to achieve higher standards of living. One man observed, "If we wanted to keep pushing for more and more money, they will close the doors, and they will take the whole shop down South and open up and

hire people for half the wage.” With foreign interests taking over companies, workers felt that those making the decisions were even more remote and more inaccessible.

These workers felt threatened as well by computers and robotics, technologies that may have been creating new jobs but not ones accessible to them. A group of union members agreed that “the average man” who “pushed buttons on the press” was giving way to the “guy that walks in the and sits at the computer, types in the data.”

They were threatened by foreign imports and foreign people. The foreign cars were cheaper, built with lower-priced labor (a “buck a day,” one woman noted), and thus took away jobs and drove down wages. In their eyes, they were caught in a downward spiral: people get laid off and in turn cannot afford to buy American cars. A union man declared, “We are losing money, and they’re importing all these people from Vietnam, Mexico from everywhere. Here’s a bunch of people that can’t even speak English, are half-illiterate, came out of an adobe hut, and they are going to compete with us for our jobs?”

People expressed their feelings of vulnerability most poignantly when they were discussing the prospects for their children. The image of children leaving school generated enormous emotion and emerged as important even for those who did not have teenage children. People saw the system as blocked on all fronts: by computers and new technology, by the unions, and by the cutbacks in government support, particularly for college loans. “If something isn’t done quickly, this is going to come to a real traumatic head, and my kid is going to be over there scraping the bottom of the barrel,” one man declared. “There won’t be an education; there won’t be a skill because the system closed down fast.” With the middle class being denied college loans, the system was perceptibly shifting away from their kids. As one of the older men declared, “What happens is you’re creating an elite, those families that can afford to put their children through college. They’re going to run the country.”

While their vulnerability was growing on all sides, the Democratic party was turning on them. One man lamented being out there on his own:

It seemed like all of the sudden the Democratic party was turning its back on the Joe Average on the street. He was digging deeper in his pocket, and the interest rates were going up, and inflation was skyrocketing and we weren’t going any place. We were going backwards. We were having less money to spend, the standard of living was decreasing instead of increasing. And I think the average guy just shook his head and says, “Wait a minute. This isn’t the way it used to be.”

The Middle-Class Poor

These traditional Democratic voters felt squeezed and neglected, pressed on one side by richer people who carried few burdens and paid no taxes and on the other side by poorer black people who were the recipients of free programs and also paid no taxes. These voters were and are the middle class that is quite literally “cramped” and “supporting both ends,” the hardest working the most virtuous, yet the least honored.

In its own description, this middle, residual group constituted the middle-class poor. It was the product of a collapsing class structure that placed all of society’s burdens on this narrow stratum. One should not underestimate the strength of this identification and the sense of burden. A man from Waterford observed:

It's a hard pill to swallow, but I see a growling despair. At one time, say fifteen or twenty years ago, before Vietnam, we had upper middle class, middle class, lower class- fairly well defined class system in this country. And the last fifteen years – you have seen it grow to upper, upper class, and we are seeing more of the middle class become the lower middle class, and then you have the people that have been pushed off the edge. You have, then, a small minority of wealthy people or businesspeople who are controlling the nation and the enormous mass of people who are just struggling to get by.

They did not factor poorer people into that struggle. The “upper class – they got all the tax breaks,” so they were privileged; but so too were “the people that are on welfare.” The welfare recipient, a housewife observed, “buys a house and a car; he is just getting all of his money sent in to him; he doesn't have to worry about working for it.”

In their view, the middle class carried society and government on its back and was indispensable to the survival of the nation. Though politically impotent, the middle class had historically played a heroic, selfless role. If the middle class refused its obligations, the social order would come to a grinding halt.

If all middle-class Americans say, “That's it, we're boycotting. I'm quitting work so you can't tax me,” give it a year. The government would fold because nobody else is paying taxes. The poor can't pay taxes. [The rich] can't pay taxes for the simple reason that they are getting it all back in too many tax shelters. So, all the middle class- if we refused to work, the government would fold. This country wouldn't be.

And yet no one, including the national political parties, seemed to acknowledge the tremendous burden the middle class carries. The Republicans thought mainly about “big business,” and the Democrats concentrated mainly on the minority groups. When asked whose interest the Democratic party best represented, one isolated person responded, “the working man,” but everybody else talked unreservedly about the neglected middle class. Indeed, the shared sentiment on this issue among a group of housewives took on all the fervor of prayer meeting:

They [the Democrats] do try and give everybody this giveaway money, like you said. They are not interested in us because we are the ones that are going to pay for it.

I really feel it's the middle-class person. We really don't have much representation because Republicans are for big business, and the Democrats are for the giveaways, and we are the ones that pay all the taxes.

Right.

And the middle class is going to be eliminated.

Yeah.

And who will represent us?

No one.

And who paid those taxes but us middle- class people?

We do.

We do.

These workers saw themselves as members of a new minority class that was ignored by the government but forced to support social programs that did not benefit them. A male union member put it this way: “Why are we being discriminated against right now?...Well, I’m going to start calling us a minority.”

White Victims, Black Privilege

These white defectors from the Democratic party expressed a profound distaste for black Americans, a sentiment that pervaded almost everything they thought about government and politics. Blacks constituted the explanation for their vulnerability and for almost everything that had gone wrong in their lives; not being black was what constituted being middle class; not living with blacks was what made a neighborhood a decent place to live.

For these white suburban residents, the terms *black* and *Detroit* were interchangeable. The city was a place to be avoided – where the kids could not go, where the car got stolen, and where vacant lots and dissolution have replaced their old neighborhoods. The black politicians, like Coleman Young, were doing just fine, they believed, getting rich off special favors, special treatment, and special deals. But Detroit was just a big pit into which the state and federal governments poured tax money, never to be heard from again: “It’s all just being funneled into the Detroit area, and it’s not overflowing into the suburbs.”

These suburban voters felt nothing in common with Detroit and its people and rejected out of hand the social-justice claims of black Americans. They denied that blacks suffer special disadvantages that would require special treatment by employers or the government. They had no historical memory of racism and no tolerance for present efforts to offset it. They felt no sense of personal or collective responsibility that would support government anti-discrimination and civil rights policies.

In each of these discussions, we read a statement about the nation’s special obligations to black citizens because of historic discrimination in the United States. The statement was attributed to Robert Kennedy – the last Democratic leader to bring together ethnic white Catholics and black American’s with one ethical vision. But the Democratic defectors of 1985 would have none of it:

That’s bullshit.

No wonder they killed him.

I can’t get along with that.

I myself think we are all Americans, and we are all under the same amendments and the Constitution of the United States. I don't think anybody should have any performance because he is black or green or purple...

I'm fed up with it, man.

I can't see where they feel like they are still repressed.

I really feel like they have had so much just handed to them...Most of them are abusing it. It's where now – it's almost like a turnaround. They're getting, getting, getting, and the whites are becoming the minority.

I think it's getting old. I want to hear – I want to see a TV commercial that says, "Send money to white people can go to college." It's an old issue.

Almost all these individuals perceived the special status of blacks as a serious obstacle to their personal advancement. Indeed, discrimination against whites had become a swell assimilated and ready explanation for their status, vulnerability and failures. When applying or taking a test for a job or a school, blacks had a structured advantage. If blacks failed, standards would be lowered to "get the minorities inside." The tests in any case were rigged, one union member observed.

Well, let's say, for example, two people are going for a skilled job, and there is a test like an apprenticeship test. Minorities, for example, will be given certain considerations, you know, like they might get three points for being a black or Hispanic or Mexican, whereas the white guy doesn't get anything. He starts three points in a hole, and then it goes to education. The white guy takes the test, and he might not do very well in algebra. But they'll give the black guy the answer; so he's going to get that skilled job.

The black cop would always be promoted before the white cop. Indeed, white middle-class children, when they attempted to break into the labor market, would find a black preference operating there too, blocking the way: "My son – he passed the test and went through all the qualifications, but they at that time had to hire the minorities. He lost out."

The government, the participants believed, was party to all this, even in areas where "objective" criteria should have applied. One of the older men related to a receptive group how the government denied him permanent disability because he was not black or Hispanic. Another reported that after his wife died, the Social Security Administration refused to provide benefits for his minor children even though a black women, applying for identical benefits at the same time, was approved.

Federal government offices, in particular, were seen as a black domain, where whites could not expect reasonable treatment. If you applied for a job at the post office, "you may as well take the application and tear it up" because "there were twenty blacks behind you, but they will get the job." The federal offices, they believed, were staffed by blacks – or "all minorities, blacks, Mexicans,... one white" – who act to the advantage of black applicants and customers.

Many sensed that the federal government itself had come down directly and personally to block those workers' opportunities. This was not an abstract or an analytic position; it was a deeply felt personal slight that shaped the individuals' whole perception of the government. One

of the union men failed to get a business loan because he reported, “I was an average American white guy,” and his views resonated through the group:

I have put in for openings, and they have come right out and told me in person that the government has come down and said that I “can’t have the job because they have to give it to the minorities.”

And you see this. You are penalized for what you have worked for.

I am getting to the point where, hey, I got an attitude... I got an attitude toward business, government, and anybody in control, anybody in authority, because they shit all over me.

I know what you are talking about. I tried to apply for a business loan yesterday; they said, “No go. Forget it; you just ain’t the right color, pal.”

The Federal government that had once helped create their world was not wholly biased against them. For the men, particularly those over thirty, the feeling took on a special intensity. When asked who got a “raw deal” in this country, they responded successively and ever more directly: “It’s the white people” – “white, American, middle-class male.”

The word *fairness* (the touchstone of Mondale’s 1984 campaign) had become a pejorative term for special pleading – as one Macomb housewife put it, “some blacks kicking up a storm.” It never occurred to these voters that the democrats could be referring to the middle class, those carrying the greatest burden in society.

Government: A Slap in the Face

These defectors showed nothing but contempt for the “free spending” government that Democrats had fashioned. Government to them was more a burden than an ally in their time of trouble. The government’s sending its money to the undeserving was just a slap in the face.

For the middle class, taxes were real money. Taxes were visible and experienced. Pay increases evaporated into Social Security, state and federal withholding taxes. A group of Macomb housewives reported that because of “all the taxes,” one “can’t save for a down payment,” and “you have to go out and give up your weeks’ vacation at work to cover the taxes.”

Yet no one Macomb participant in these discussions could identify any appreciable benefits from government spending or, more pointedly, any benefit from the government’s handling of their tax dollars. They asked repeatedly: What happened to all our taxes? Their blank and frustrated faces revealed their bewilderment. They could make no link in their minds between their taxes and some visible and valued public spending. The money certainly did not go to the people who needed it: not to the hungry and not to the students. “Nobody ever gets to fixing the roads,” an older man lamented.

They strongly suspected that the money was squandered, first and foremost in Detroit, which, as we recall, was a pit. “Why aren’t our leaders thinking about all of this?” one man asked. “Detroit is not the state of Michigan. Michigan is a lot bigger than just Detroit.” The politicians, in addition, used the money to enrich themselves: the housewives suspected they used it “for their little junkets to go away on,” or they put it “in their own pockets.”

The Democratic party was reduced and narrowed by its association with free-spending government: “too many free programs too much spend, spend, spend.” That concern seemed less one of fiscal responsibility and more one of identity of interests. Whom did the party represent? With whom did it identify itself? There was a widespread sentiment, expressed consistently in the groups, that the Democratic party supported giveaway programs – that is, programs aimed primarily at minorities. This was no longer a party of great relevance to the lives of middle class American’s. As one man expressed:

I am kind of a born and raised blue-collar worker. My father is a Democrat and goes all the way back, you know. He might roll over in his grave. I can’t take any more taxes; I can’t take any more foreign trade like this. Where is the American car on the road? It has to end somewhere.

Another man observed, “The Democratic candidates seemed to be better and more for the working man at that time – fifteen or twenty years back.”

Ronald Reagan: The Bridge to Macomb

Ronald Reagan touched these voters because he could represent the nation as a whole and because he stood with “small people.” This vote was not about party or ideology or specific policies. In the minds of Macomb voters, Reagan transcended those aspects of election decision making. He elicited affection and pride, insinuating himself into the lives of middle – class voters. Whereas Richard Nixon had only inflamed those voters, Ronald Reagan touched them.

The starting point was a special honesty rooted in a determined consistency. That is what put Reagan in a position to represent all American and with pride, particularly against the backdrop of the Iran hostage crisis and wavering Jimmy Carter. Reagan’s firm conviction communicated strength and unity. Many of these Democratic defectors differed with Reagan on specific policy questions, but the power of this imagery overrode the reservations:

He got tired of being shit on left and right. It is obvious that Ronald Reagan finally got people to get behind him. He got ahold of that House and the committees. They are finally telling them, “This is the way we are going to run it.”

I don’t think he is a man that will back down.

He has guts.

Reagan is straight as an arrow – John Wayne.

Whatever he says he will try and stick by.

Right or wrong.

He has high morals.

Very high morals.

This consistency and pursuit of larger goals created a special relationship with the people and, at the same time, brought pride to the nation. Reagan, by pursuing his goals, by not worrying about the critics and the minor hurts, created a parentlike authority that was transcendent. Several men spoke about Reagan personally:

The thing of it is as a parent myself ...I make a decision, and then I have to stick by that decision. Sometimes it may not be an easy decision for me to make...It is the same way with Reagan. He may have to make the decision, but in his heart he has to feel that he is making the right one.

That is the most important part of being a parent: they are looking at an overall picture, just like we as parents do for our children. They are looking at an overall picture for the nation. We're looking at special interests, whether it be abortion, the arts, lower taxes. We want our needs served. We don't really care a lot about somebody else's needs as long as ours get served first. Be he has to look at everyone's needs, and some of those needs are going to conflict – just as in a parent. It is not an easy job.

That imposition of this consistent, strong authority “builds us back as a nation,” the man believed. “Where somebody like Jimmy Carter – you never know he stood, and it was always at the bottom of the well.”

These voters just looked right through Walter Mondale into the eyes of Jimmy Carter, described variously as “wishy – washy,” a “mouse,” “lost,” a “mother hen,” “a wimp” who “fiddled around and fiddled around.” He headed a party that was seen as vacillating, disorderly, and weak.

Reagan's strength and universal qualities did not turn to arrogance or stubbornness because he associated himself with average people. Ronald Reagan sided with the small against the big. He was seen to be waging a sincere and determined struggle against big and inexorable forces, particularly against “big government.” Reagan may not have slowed things, but, said one voter, “I'll tell you what: I definitely believe that he is trying with all of his heart to do the best he can for this country.”

Reagan's attack on big government was not situated in some philosophical objection to regulation or penchant for the market. Macomb voters were in a populist frame of mind. They identified with things small and suspected “big” and “powerful” institutions of any kind – labor and business, government, and both political parties.

Despite a strong labor tradition, unions were distrusted – “big, strong organizations” that should be helping “small people” but were not. Corporations were also roundly condemned as powerful and self-interested; they elicited little admiration as job creators. In the generalized assault on bigness, many respondents seemed to elide unions, business, and government, condensing a whole range of powerful forces:

The idea was good. They got real big and powerful and out of hand. That's my opinion.

They kind of lost interest in the people working for them, and...It basically boils down to the upper level...It's a business. Now that's what it is.

It's another big brother.

Yeah, I feel they expanded their limits a little too far.

They're a corporation in themselves is what they've almost become.

It's a government. It's a company to them. They just want to see how much money they can make.

At the other end of the struggle was small business, sharing an identity with middle-class America: "people working their butts off to try and make a go of things" yet squeezed by the big companies, "being taken advantage of," "overtaxed," and "struggling." The identity of interests was explicit for one of the younger men: "Small businessmen are picking up – just like middle-income men – a heck of a brunt when it comes to the tax structure in this state."

Reagan's association with their small world bought the Republican candidate an enormous amount of slack from voters who were self-consciously populist. They freely disagreed with Reagan on the subminimum wage, "taking away student loans," import quotas, "the arms race," Social Security ("those people being cut are really suffering"), and the air-traffic controllers' strike. Yet the doubts evaporated before the dominant images of Ronald Reagan: determined and honest, a proud nation for small people. Reagan was able to bridge his own world to the ordinary world of Macomb County.

Conservatism and Republicanism, however, had trouble making it across the bridge with Reagan. These voters liked Reagan yet comfortably called for regulation and state intervention in area after area – college loans for the children of the middle class, strong enforcement of occupational – safety laws for factory workers, tough measures to bar Japanese cars from the American market and foreigners from American jobs, strong action to spur the economy in case of a downturn, government takeover of the utilities.

For a minority of the Reagan Democrats, the Republicans now seemed more expansive, more open to blue-collar voters:

The Republican party has changed its whole format over the last five or ten years. It seems that they catered to the business – and to the upper – echelon people on a financial basis. And it seems that they expanded their views now, and they are starting to look at every one... And I think that they are doing more for the average guy, whereas before they seemed like they used to funnel all their efforts into the upper echelon.

A few of the men acknowledged the Republican recovery, though unaccompanied by any genuine peace of mind. Republican "good times" start at the top:

Things seem to be going smoothly right now.

They traditionally generate more business internally, in the country itself. It is not always good... because a lot of it tends to follow itself upwards.

The women too acknowledged the economic recovery, but in the same conditional terms, as put by this younger housewife: “I guess they’ve brought the economy around for their own advantage. They made it look the way they wanted it to look but they have done it.”

This grudging acknowledgment of economic “facts” was dominated by conventional images of a Republican party out of touch with working America. “I think the Republican party is basically for big business,” one of the younger housewives observed. “Whether it’s federal, state, local – they support big business more.” The men referred to a party that was “elitist,” “The Republicans tend to take care of big business first, as a priority,” one of the older men pointed out, “because that’s who is supporting them.” While the Democrats “traditionally” have supported the farmers and the “little guy” in “hard times,” the Republicans have been “for big business.” And one of the older male participants followed up, “They always have and always will be.”

That left Macomb County voters drifting into an anti-party limbo, disillusioned with Democrats but little interested in Republicanism. This dis-affiliation left most of them detached and alienated, like this man: “Personally, I have very little on either of those, Republican or Democrat. I would say I am neither. I have very low expectations for government people anymore. That’s the way I feel.”

A DEAD END?

Ronald Reagan was not on the ballot in 1988, but on the Saturday before the election he made a final appeal at Macomb County Community College. He attacked Michael Dukakis for opposing prayer in the schools, appointing “left-wing judges,” supporting gun control, and offering a “weak-kneed defense policy.” The president was not subtle, labeling Dukakis, “liberal, liberal, liberal.” He warned that “all the progress we have made is on the line” and reminded voters that George Bush had fought “to lift regulations off the shoulders of America’s economy.”

And Reagan was explicit in his historic task of making Macomb’s rebellion into new order: “I want to ask those who some people Reagan Democrats to join me and come home with me today. Come home to me and to George Bush,”¹⁵

Macomb tilted slightly back toward the Democrats, but not significantly, given his history: 61 percent voted for George Bush and just 39 percent for Michael Dukakis. In the most Democratic and blue-collar areas of the country, like Warren and Roseville, the Democrats barely edged up to 45 percent.

The 1988 campaign left Macomb Country flat, Michael Dukakis passed through with barely a trace. His misadventures at the tank factory in Warren produced some comic relief, but even that was richer in detail than his image among Macomb’s Reagan Democrats. In 1989, in another round of focus groups for years after the first conversations, Macomb voters described Dukakis as “canned,” “cold,” “wishy-washy,” “vague,” “nothing,” a “nonentity type of thing where he was just up there.”¹⁶ They concluded, to devastating consequences at the ballot box, that he simply lacked the experience, depth, and respect to manage this country and our relations with other countries. Michael Dukakis eschewed any populist reach to middle-class America, except for some grudging “on your side” rhetoric at the end of his failed campaign.

There was now a Reagan Democratic state of mind in Macomb Country. First, voters remained deeply cynical about the government and Democrats who had devoured their taxes over so many years and had forgotten the middle class. They worried that Democrats would let things get out of control, producing layers of bureaucracy and high taxes. Second, they saw this

political world as still profoundly shaped by race. The Reagan Democrats in 1989 believed that the Democrats gave precedence to “special interests” (by which they meant racial minorities and Detroit) over the general interests of the middle class. This perception was seared into the consciousness of these voters and constituted a standing qualification to anything the Democrats wanted to do with government:

I just have a feeling that the Democratic party is controlled by select, powerful minorities. I don't think maybe they reflect a broad spectrum, but they don't hit the middle. They are missing it.

They have really aligned themselves with the blacks, and it is really coming back to haunt them.

[The Democrats] are the ones that push the recognition of the minorities. And they figure if each minority got a chunk of the pie, that they would be entitled to one hundred twenty-five percent of the pie, which doesn't count anybody else.

This perception of Democratic politics and government led to some crystallized conclusions. First, the Democrats were considered “free spenders” and “spenthrifts” and prone to “giveaway government” and “bottomless social programs” for minorities that do not work, “take advantage” of the middle class, and “want something for nothing.” The contract with the Republicans was becoming more and more vivid: the latter were “antispending” and in favor of “lower taxes,” “cutting programs,” “reducing welfare,” being “conservative towards spending,” believing in “responsibility and control.”

Second, Democrats, driven by special interest demands, were seen as leaderless and “unfocused.” “Every little special interest group that comes up...tears them apart,” they said, expressing a belief that led many of the swing voters to conclude that the Democrats had “bad leadership,” “poor leadership,” and even “no leadership.” The democrats could not keep things “from getting out of control.”

Finally, Democrats appeared to lack any clear set of principles that would build confidence in them as stewards of the economy. Although these voters placed importance on the Democrats' seeming to worry more about the common, working man than the Republicans did, the party's lack of association with prosperity was devastating. An older Reagan Democrat drew this conclusion: “You go back thirty years ago, when the Republican party was for the businessman and the Democratic party was for the small working man, and I think they are equal now.” The Republicans were now associated with finance and money, with growth, prosperity, and employment increases, with “economic responsibility” and “economic stability.”

Dukakis's candidacy dashed, it seemed, any notion of Democratic renewal in Macomb Country. In its “body language” and themes, the Dukakis campaign communicated monumental indifference to the turmoil there. The world had been turned upside-down in the suburban Michigan, yet Democrats dared not acknowledge the rebellion and its challenges: that of crafting a vision that encompasses the values, aspirations, and vulnerabilities of middle-class America.

THE CRASH

And yet in 1992, Macomb's doubly disillusioned voters turned their backs on the conservative-Reagan compact, just as they had turned their backs on the liberal-Great Society compact some eight years earlier. The new Republican electoral majority just collapsed. In a very real sense, Macomb's insecure middle class was on its own, struggling to hold on to its way of life, its political world shattered beyond recognition. Neither the Democratic nor the Republican vision had any currency in Macomb Country.

Most studding was the sudden collapse of the Republican majority. Bush plummeted 18 points from 1988 and 24 points from 1984, when Reagan had appeared to seal the deal. In Warren, at the heart of the suburban auto manufacture, Reagan had taken the Republicans all the way up to 64 percent of the vote, only for Bush to take them down a paltry 39 percent; Bill Clinton carried this conservative bastion. But the republican collapse swept across all of Macomb, even to the more upscale areas, which depend less on manufacturing. In Sterling Heights, where the median income reached almost \$50,000, the Bush slide was 25 points: from 71 percent in 1984 to 46 percent in 1992.

Bill Clinton held on to the Dukakis vote in a three-way contest, which is no mean feat. By holding firm at 38 percent – that is, down just 1.1 percent from 1988 – he produced a dramatic shift of the two-party vote: he closed 33 – and 22- point defeats in 1984 and 1998, respectively, to just 5 points – a virtual dead heat in 1992. He won all the working- class suburbs of any size: Roseville by 10 points, East Detroit by 7 points, Warren by 4, and Mount Clemens by 12. The swing to Clinton was about 4 points greater in the upscale areas as Ross Perot ate further into the Bush vote.

Clinton would have run even better across Macomb had Perot not reentered the race. The exit polls conducted in Michigan for the television networks showed Perot voters choosing Clinton over Bush, 43 to 36 percent, in a straight two-way contest.¹⁷ In Macomb that would have pushed Clinton up to 49 percent of the vote – a near majority and a new game after a decade of Democratic humiliation.

Ross Perot gained 20 percent of the vote in Macomb, nearly paralleling his national performance. But in Macomb, that 20 percent is part of a larger story: betrayal and disillusionment expressed as utter disaffection.

The 1994 election in Macomb made clear just how contested middle America remains. Republican candidates for governor and the U.S. Senate ran very well, taking 70 and 56 percent of the vote, respectively. Yet Democratic Congressman David Bonior won his portion of Macomb with 62 percent and Democratic Congressman Sandy Levin won his with 50 percent. More stunning was the comeback of Kenneth DeBeaussaert, who had lost his state House seat in the Reagan landslide of 1984 but this time defeated a Reagan Democratic incumbent state senator who had switched over to become a Republican.

There is no new Democratic or Republican majority in middle America. The New Deal dream that had brought working American to the suburbs remains as shattered as supply-side economics. This is a completely new game with new rules, though the players can hardly dispel the images and themes, the old rules, that dominated their consciousness over the past four decades, maybe longer. The story of Macomb is not just about two parties and two prospective candidates contesting the Presidency. It is about two broken contracts and the search for something new that people can depend on.