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Strange Days: PW Talks with George Packer

By Will Swarts | Mar 22, 2013

In *The Unwinding: An Inner History of the New America*,

New Yorker staff writer George Packer utilizes individual stories of haves and have-nots to examine the last four decades of America in decline.

There are a multitude of stories in the book, mostly about how people's lives are becoming less stable, but you don't really dive into what you're comparing the "unwound" present to. Is this a history lesson?

There was a deliberate decision to tell the story through narratives. I needed to use the tools of a novelist, not a policy analyst. I wanted to step aside and let people's voices work in a symphonic way. The voices in the book are famous and obscure, but the story is really one of individuals improvising a way forward amid an institutional breakdown.

What is it about North Carolina businessman Dean Price's inventive but often unsuccessful business efforts that drew you to him?

He was the first piece of the book to fall into place. He went from being the son of tobacco farmers to a self-made entrepreneur, to someone who, as a result of Hurricane Katrina, rejected all of that. He realized that his whole community had been living wrong, that they were living with high-priced gasoline, with bad food and low-wage jobs, and he began to see it as the problem. His response—trying to make biofuels locally—inspired me.

Robert Rubin gets singled out for criticism, but your description of the incremental process that led to crucial financial deregulatory measures enacted when he was Secretary of the Treasury makes it impossible to blame one person.

He was a brilliant, talented, and very competent Secretary of the Treasury, but it's hard to say that all that establishment credibility made things better. The whole period when he's been a public figure is a period I think of as a shredding of the social contract. He's not responsible for that, but the way he thought Wall Street and Washington could be aligned blew up in our faces in 2008.

What can counter the effects of "organized money"?

The forces of organized money are so powerful that legislation and [social] organization are hardly a match for them. Once the norms of institutions like government, business, banking, and media begin to slip away, you've taken away an important check on the raving selfishness in us all. You hear about miraculous new upgrades to the iPhone and then how the Detroit Fire Department doesn't have enough money to buy toilet paper. What a strange thing to live in a time when the extremes are so great, but there's nothing holding it together at the center. Part of what [the book] is about is what happens when there's so much freedom that people get lost and have to make their own way.

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