

# CHAPTER 8

nothing to say—besides the catchphrases and slanders ginned up by the McCain campaign. Her ignorance, irresponsibility, and meanness would have been freshly disqualifying in any previous election cycle. Not in 2008.

Conservatives embraced her with an ardor that bordered on the religious. Liberals treated her with a combination of fascination and horror. More than anything, it seemed as if both sides had decided she was less a political figure than a cultural one—a symbol of working-class authenticity or small-town narrow-mindedness, feminism's promise or its demise, depending on where you stood.

Neither interpretation captured the complexities of Sarah Palin's character or explained the puzzle of her ascendancy. Beneath her charm and youthful energy, I saw someone who embodied the most basest tendencies in our politics: a kind of blind

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confidence that masqueraded as competence, the desire to win at all costs despite the societal damage, and an utter lack of interest or capacity for self-reflection. More to the point, her nomination wasn't really about her. It was driven by the same passions that would later fuel the Tea Party and the Trump presidency: a politics grounded not in logic, evidence, or even the always fungible tenets of conservative ideology, but in resentment — resentment of cultural and economic change, immigrant hordes, and liberal elites who suggested that white Americans acknowledge their country's sins and make amends.

McCain's selection of Palin as his running mate was a Hail Mary pass, one that would have long-term consequences for the Republican Party and the country. It accelerated its embrace of conspiracy theories, science denial, and dog-whistle racism. These trends would reach their nadir in Trump's presidency, but they had begun long before—a deep and widening chasm fed by social media, partisan news, and the multiplier effect of grievance.

I remembered the voters I'd met throughout the campaign—struggling families in towns upended by globalization, young people looking for a toehold in a tough job market, parents terrified that one medical emergency could mean financial ruin. Their worries were real, even if the solutions offered by Palin and, later, by others like her were not. That so many Americans felt unseen or unheard—that they would choose a politics of spectacle and confrontation, of us vs. them, to have their say—was as much an indictment of each of us, of the institutions we represent, and of the ways we did business, as it was of any political figure.

The stakes of the election crystallized in those weeks after the conventions. Despite the theatrics, or perhaps because of them, it was clear that what we were fighting for was not just a set of policies, but a vision of what America could be: inclusive, forward-looking, resilient.

It was this vision that drew hundreds of thousands of volunteers to our campaign, that allowed us to raise record-setting sums from small donors, that filled stadiums with supporters in every corner of the country. It was why people of every race, religion, and economic status queued for hours to cast their vote, why I believed we were on the right side of history.

So despite the noise, the distractions, and the occasional doubts, I remained focused on the work at hand, on the people we aimed to serve, and on the future we still could make—together.