

CHAPTER 24: Whose Bid Is It?

"Chapter 24: *Whose Bid Is It?*" Pete Souza and I sat opposite Marvin and Reggie at the Air Force One conference room table, all of us a bit bleary-eyed as we sorted through our cards. We were on our way to Mumbai—the first leg of a nine-day trip to Asia that would include not only my first visit to India but also a stop in Jakarta, a G20 meeting in Seoul, and an Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting in Yokohama, Japan. The plane had been humming with activity earlier in the flight, with staffers working on laptops and policy advisors huddling over the schedule. After ten hours in the air, with a refueling stop at Ramstein Air Base in Germany, almost everybody on board (including Michelle, in the forward cabin; Valerie, on the couch outside the conference room; and several senior staffers stretched out at odd angles on the floor) had gone to sleep. Unable to wind down, I'd enlisted our regular foursome for a game of Spades, and I was trying to read through my briefing book and signing a stack of correspondence between plays. My divided attention—along with Reggie's second gin and tonic—may have accounted for the fact that Marvin and Pete were up six games to two on us, at ten dollars a pop.

"It's your bid, sir," Marvin said.

"What you got, Reg?" I asked.

"Maybe one," Reggie said.

"We'll go board," I said.

"We're going eight," Pete said.

Reggie shook his head in disgust. "We're switching decks after the next hand," he muttered, taking another sip of his drink. "These cards are cursed."

ONLY THREE DAYS had passed since the midterm elections, and I was grateful for the chance to get out of Washington. The results had left Democrats shell-shocked and Republicans exuberant, and I'd woken up the next morning with a mix of weariness, hurt, anger, and shame, the way a boxer must feel after coming out on the wrong end of a heavyweight bout. The dominant story line in the postelection coverage suggested that the conventional wisdom had been right all along: that I'd attempted to do too much and hadn't stayed focused on the economy; that Obamacare was a fatal error; that I'd tried to resurrect the kind of big-spending, big-government liberalism that even Bill Clinton had pronounced dead years ago. The fact that in my press conference the day after the election I refused to admit as much, that I seemed to cling to the idea that my administration had pursued the right policies—even if we clearly hadn't managed to sell them effectively—struck pundits as arrogant and delusional, the sign of a sinner who wasn't contrite.

The truth was, I didn't regret paving the way for twenty million people to get health insurance. Nor did I regret the Recovery Act—the hard evidence showed that austerity in response to a recession would have been disastrous. I didn't regret how we'd handled the financial crisis, given the choices we'd faced (although I did regret not having come up with a better plan to help stem the tide of foreclosures). And I sure as hell wasn't sorry I'd proposed a climate change bill and pushed for immigration reform. I was just mad that I hadn't yet gotten either item through Congress—mainly because, on my very first day in office, I hadn't had the foresight to tell Harry Reid and the rest of the Senate Democrats to revise the chamber rules and get rid of the filibuster once and for all.

As far as I was concerned, the election didn't prove that our agenda had been wrong. It just proved that—whether for lack of talent, cunning, charm, or good fortune—I'd failed to rally the nation, as FDR had once done, behind what I knew to be right. Which to me was just as damning.

Much to the relief of Gibbs and my press shop, I'd ended the press conference before baring my stubborn, tortured soul. I realized that justifying the past mattered less than

planning what to do next.

I was going to have to find a way to reconnect with the American people—not just to strengthen my hand in negotiations with Republicans but to get reelected. A better economy would help, but even that was hardly assured. I needed to get out of the White House bubble, to engage more frequently with voters. Meanwhile, Axe offered his own assessment of what had gone wrong, saying that in the rush to get things done, we'd neglected our promise to change Washington—by sidelining special interests, and increasing transparency and fiscal responsibility across the federal government. If we wanted to win back the voters who'd left us, he argued, we had to reclaim those themes.

But was that right? I wasn't so sure. Yes, we'd been hurt by the sausage-making around the ACA, and fairly or not, we'd been tarnished by the bank bailouts. On the other hand, I could point to scores of "good government" initiatives we'd introduced, whether it was placing limits on the hiring of former lobbyists, or giving the public access to data from federal agencies, or scouring agency budgets to eliminate waste. All these actions were worthy on their merits, and I was glad we'd taken them; it was one of the reasons we hadn't had a whiff of scandal around my administration.

Politically, though, no one seemed to care about our work to clean up the government—any more than they credited us for having bent over backward to solicit Republican ideas on every single one of our legislative initiatives. One of our biggest promises had been to end partisan bickering and focus on practical efforts to address citizen demands. Our problem, as Mitch McConnell had calculated from the start, was that so long as Republicans uniformly resisted our overtures and raised hell over even the most moderate of proposals, anything we did could be portrayed as partisan, controversial, radical—even illegitimate. In fact, many of our progressive allies believed that we hadn't been partisan enough. In their view, we'd compromised too much, and by continually chasing the false promise of bipartisanship, we'd not only empowered McConnell and squandered big Democratic majorities; we'd thrown a giant wet blanket over our base—as evidenced by the decision of so many Democrats to not

bother to vote in the midterms.

Along with having to figure out a message and policy reboot, I was now facing significant turnover in White House personnel. On the foreign policy team, Jim Jones—who, despite his many strengths, had never felt fully comfortable in a staff role after years of command—had resigned in October. Luckily, Tom Donilon was proving to be a real workhorse and had ably assumed the national security advisor role, with Denis McDonough moving up to deputy national security advisor and Ben Rhodes assuming many of Denis's old duties. On economic policy, Peter Orszag and Christy Romer had returned to the private sector, replaced by Jack Lew, a seasoned budget expert who'd managed OMB under Bill Clinton, and Austan Goolsbee, who'd been working with us on the recovery. Then there was Larry Summers, who had stopped by the Oval one day in September to tell me that with the financial crisis behind us, it was time for him to exit. He'd be leaving at year's end.

"What am I going to do without you around to explain why I'm wrong?" I asked, only half-joking. Larry smiled.

"Mr. President," he said, "you were actually less wrong than most."

I'd grown genuinely fond of those who were leaving. Not only had they served me well, but despite their various idiosyncrasies, they'd each brought a seriousness of purpose—a commitment to policy making based on reason and evidence—that was born of a desire to do right by the American people. It was, however, the impending loss of my two closest political advisors, as well as the need to find a new chief of staff, that unsettled me most.

Axe had always planned to leave after the midterms. Having lived apart from his family for two years, he badly needed a break before joining my reelection campaign. Gibbs, who'd been in the foxhole with me continuously since I'd won my Senate primary race, was just as worn down. Although he remained as well prepared and fearless a press secretary as ever, the strain of standing at a podium day after day, taking all the hits that had been coming our way, had made his relationship with the

White House press corps combative enough that the rest of the team worried that it was negatively affecting our coverage.

I was still getting used to the prospect of fighting the political battles ahead without Axe and Gibbs at my side, though I took heart in the continuity provided by our young and skillful communications director, Dan Pfeiffer, who had worked closely with them on messaging since the start of our 2007 campaign. As for Rahm, I considered it a minor miracle that he'd lasted as long as he had without either killing somebody or dropping dead from a stroke. We'd made a habit of conducting our end-of-day meetings outside when the weather allowed, strolling two or three times around the driveway that encircled the South Lawn as we tried to figure out what to do about the latest crisis or controversy. More than once we'd asked ourselves why we'd chosen such stressful lives.

"After we're finished, we should try something simpler," I said to him one day. "We could move our families to Hawaii and open a smoothie stand on the beach."

"Smoothies are too complicated," Rahm said. "We'll sell T-shirts. But just white T-shirts. In medium. That's it—no other colors or patterns or sizes. We don't want to have to make any decisions. If customers want something different, they can go someplace else."

I had recognized the signs that Rahm was close to burnout, but I'd assumed he'd wait for the new year to leave. Instead, he'd used one of our evening walks in early September to tell me that longtime Chicago mayor Richard M. Daley had just announced that he wouldn't be seeking a seventh consecutive term. Rahm wanted to run—it was a job he'd dreamed of since entering politics—and with the election happening in February, he needed to leave the White House by the first of October if he hoped to have a go at it.

He looked genuinely distraught. "I know I'm putting you in a bind," he said, "but with only five and a half months to run a race—"

I stopped him before he could finish and said he'd have my full support.

A week or so later, at a private farewell ceremony in the residence, I presented him with a framed copy of a to-do list that I'd handwritten on a legal pad and passed to him during my first week in office. Almost every item had been checked off, I told the assembled staff, a measure of how effective he'd been. Rahm teared up—a blemish on his tough-guy image for which he later cursed me.

None of this turnover was unusual for an administration, and I saw the potential benefits to shaking things up. More than once we'd been accused of being too insular and tightly controlled, in need of fresh perspectives. Rahm's skill set would be less relevant without a Democratic House to help advance legislation. With Pete Rouse serving as interim chief of staff, I was leaning toward hiring Bill Daley, who'd been commerce secretary in the Clinton administration and was the brother of Chicago's outgoing mayor, to replace Rahm. Balding and about a decade older than me, with a distinctive South Side accent that evoked his Irish working-class roots, Bill had a reputation as an effective, pragmatic dealmaker with strong relationships with both labor and the business community; and while I didn't know him the way I knew Rahm, I thought his affable, nonideological style might be well suited for what I expected to be a less frantic phase of my administration. And along with some new faces, I was thrilled that I'd be getting one back starting in January when David Plouffe, fresh from a two-year sabbatical with his family, would return as a senior advisor and provide our White House operation with the same strategic thinking, intense focus, and lack of ego that had benefited us so much during the campaign.

Still, I couldn't help feeling a little melancholy over the changes the new year would bring: I'd be surrounded by even fewer people who'd known me before I was president, and by fewer colleagues who were also friends, who'd seen me tired, confused, angry, or defeated and yet had never stopped having my back. It was a lonely thought at a lonely time. Which probably explains why I was still playing cards with Marvin, Reggie, and Pete when I had a full day of meetings and appearances scheduled to start in less than seven hours.

“Did you guys just win again?” I asked Pete after we finished the hand.

Pete nodded, prompting Reggie to gather up all the cards, rise from his chair, and toss them into the trash bin.

“Hey, Reg, that’s still a good deck!” Pete said, not bothering to disguise his pleasure at the beatdown he and Marvin had just administered. “Everybody loses sometimes.”

Reggie flashed a hard look at Pete. “Show me someone who’s okay with losing,” he said, “and I’ll show you a loser.”

I’D NEVER BEEN to India before, but the country had always held a special place in my imagination. Maybe it was its sheer size, with one-sixth of the world’s population, an estimated two thousand distinct ethnic groups, and more than seven hundred languages spoken. Maybe it was because I’d spent a part of my childhood in Indonesia listening to the epic Hindu tales of the Ramayana and the Mahābhārata, or because of my interest in Eastern religions, or because of a group of Pakistani and Indian college friends who’d taught me to cook dahl and keema and turned me on to Bollywood movies.

More than anything, though, my fascination with India had to do with Mahatma Gandhi. Along with Lincoln, King, and Mandela, Gandhi had profoundly influenced my thinking. As a young man, I’d studied his writings and found him giving voice to some of my deepest instincts. His notion of satyagraha, or devotion to truth, and the power of nonviolent resistance to stir the conscience; his insistence on our common humanity and the essential oneness of all religions; and his belief in every society’s obligation, through its political, economic, and social arrangements, to recognize the equal worth and dignity of all people—each of these ideas resonated with me.

Gandhi’s actions had stirred me even more than his words; he’d put his beliefs to the test by risking his life, going to prison, and throwing himself fully into the struggles of his people. His nonviolent campaign for Indian independence from Britain, which began in 1915 and continued for more than thirty years, hadn’t just helped overcome

an empire and liberate much of the subcontinent, it had set off a moral charge that pulsed around the globe. It became a beacon for other dispossessed, marginalized groups—including Black Americans in the Jim Crow South—intent on securing their freedom.

Michelle and I had a chance early in the trip to visit Mani Bhavan, the modest two-story building tucked into a quiet Mumbai neighborhood that had been Gandhi's home base for many years. Before the start of our tour, our guide, a gracious woman in a blue sari, showed us the guestbook Dr. King had signed in 1959, when he'd traveled to India to draw international attention to the struggle for racial justice in the United States and pay homage to the man whose teachings had inspired him.

The guide then invited us upstairs to see Gandhi's private quarters. Taking off our shoes, we entered a simple room with a floor of smooth, patterned tile, its terrace doors open to admit a slight breeze and a pale, hazy light. I stared at the spartan floor bed and pillow, the collection of spinning wheels, the old-fashioned phone and low wooden writing desk, trying to imagine Gandhi present in the room, a slight, brown-skinned man in a plain cotton dhoti, his legs folded under him, composing a letter to the British viceroy or charting the next phase of the Salt March. And in that moment, I had the strongest wish to sit beside him and talk. To ask him where he'd found the strength and imagination to do so much with so very little. To ask how he'd recovered from disappointment.

He'd had more than his share. For all his extraordinary gifts, Gandhi hadn't been able to heal the subcontinent's deep religious schisms or prevent its partitioning into a predominantly Hindu India and an overwhelmingly Muslim Pakistan, a seismic event in which untold numbers died in sectarian violence and millions of families were forced to pack up what they could carry and migrate across newly established borders. Despite his labors, he hadn't undone India's stifling caste system. Somehow, though, he'd marched, fasted, and preached well into his seventies—until that final day in 1948, when on his way to prayer, he was shot at point-blank range by a young Hindu extremist who viewed his ecumenism as a betrayal of the faith.

IN MANY RESPECTS, modern-day India counted as a success story, having survived repeated changeovers in government, bitter feuds within political parties, various armed separatist movements, and all manner of corruption scandals. The transition to a more market-based economy in the 1990s had unleashed the extraordinary entrepreneurial talents of the Indian people—leading to soaring growth rates, a thriving high-tech sector, and a steadily expanding middle class.

As a chief architect of India's economic transformation, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh seemed like a fitting emblem of this progress: a member of the tiny, often persecuted Sikh religious minority who'd risen to the highest office in the land, and a self-effacing technocrat who'd won people's trust not by appealing to their passions but by bringing about higher living standards and maintaining a well-earned reputation for not being corrupt. Singh and I had developed a warm and productive relationship. While he could be cautious in foreign policy, unwilling to get out too far ahead of an Indian bureaucracy that was historically suspicious of U.S. intentions, our time together confirmed my initial impression of him as a man of uncommon wisdom and decency; and during my visit to the capital city of New Delhi, we reached agreements to strengthen U.S. cooperation on counterterrorism, global health, nuclear security, and trade.

What I couldn't tell was whether Singh's rise to power represented the future of India's democracy or merely an aberration. Our first evening in Delhi, he and his wife, Gursharan Kaur, hosted a dinner party for me and Michelle at their residence, and before joining the other guests in a candlelit courtyard, Singh and I had a few minutes to chat alone. Without the usual flock of minders and notetakers hovering over our shoulders, the prime minister spoke more openly about the clouds he saw on the horizon. The economy worried him, he said. Although India had fared better than many other countries in the wake of the financial crisis, the global slowdown would inevitably make it harder to generate jobs for India's young and rapidly growing population.

Then there was the problem of Pakistan: Its continuing failure to work with India to investigate the 2008 terrorist attacks on hotels and other sites in Mumbai had

significantly increased tensions between the two countries, in part because Lashkar-e-Tayyiba, the terrorist organization responsible, was believed to have links to Pakistan's intelligence service. Singh had resisted calls to retaliate against Pakistan after the attacks, but his restraint had cost him politically. He feared that rising anti-Muslim sentiment had strengthened the influence of India's main opposition party, the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

"In uncertain times, Mr. President," the prime minister said, "the call of religious and ethnic solidarity can be intoxicating. And it's not so hard for politicians to exploit that, in India or anywhere else."

I nodded, recalling the conversation I'd had with Václav Havel during my visit to Prague and his warning about the rising tide of illiberalism in Europe. If globalization and a historic economic crisis were fueling these trends in relatively wealthy nations—if I was seeing it even in the United States with the Tea Party—how could India be immune?

For the truth was that despite the resilience of its democracy and its impressive recent economic performance, India still bore little resemblance to the egalitarian, peaceful, and sustainable society Gandhi had envisioned. Across the country, millions continued to live in squalor, trapped in sunbaked villages or labyrinthine slums, even as the titans of Indian industry enjoyed lifestyles that the rajas and moguls of old would have envied. Violence, both public and private, remained an all-too-pervasive part of Indian life. Expressing hostility toward Pakistan was still the quickest route to national unity, with many Indians taking great pride in the knowledge that their country had developed a nuclear weapons program to match Pakistan's, untroubled by the fact that a single miscalculation by either side could risk regional annihilation.

Most of all, India's politics still revolved around religion, clan, and caste. In that sense, Singh's elevation as prime minister, sometimes heralded as a hallmark of the country's progress in overcoming sectarian divides, was somewhat deceiving. He hadn't originally become prime minister as a result of his own popularity. In fact, he owed his

position to Sonia Gandhi—the Italian-born widow of former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi and the head of the Congress Party, who'd declined to take the job herself after leading her party coalition to victory and had instead anointed Singh.

More than one political observer believed that she'd chosen Singh precisely because as an elderly Sikh with no national political base, he posed no threat to her forty-year-old son, Rahul, whom she was grooming to take over the Congress Party.

Both Sonia and Rahul Gandhi sat at our dinner table that night. She was a striking woman in her sixties, dressed in a traditional sari, with dark, probing eyes and a quiet, regal presence. That she—a former stay-at-home mother of European descent—had emerged from her grief after her husband was killed by a Sri Lankan separatist's suicide bomb in 1991 to become a leading national politician testified to the enduring power of the family dynasty. Rajiv was the grandson of Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister and an icon in the independence movement. His mother, Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi, had spent a total of sixteen years as prime minister herself, relying on a more ruthless brand of politics than her father had practiced, until 1984 when she, too, was assassinated.

At dinner that night, Sonia Gandhi listened more than she spoke, careful to defer to Singh when policy matters came up, and often steered the conversation toward her son. It became clear to me, though, that her power was attributable to a shrewd and forceful intelligence. As for Rahul, he seemed smart and earnest, his good looks resembling his mother's. He offered up his thoughts on the future of progressive politics, occasionally pausing to probe me on the details of my 2008 campaign. But there was a nervous, unformed quality about him, as if he were a student who'd done the coursework and was eager to impress the teacher but deep down lacked either the aptitude or the passion to master the subject.

As it was getting late, I noticed Singh fighting off sleep, lifting his glass every so often to wake himself up with a sip of water. I signaled to Michelle that it was time to say our goodbyes. The prime minister and his wife walked us to our car. In the dim light, he

looked frail, older than his seventy-eight years, and as we drove off I wondered what would happen when he left office. Would the baton be successfully passed to Rahul, fulfilling the destiny laid out by his mother and preserving the Congress Party's dominance over the divisive nationalism touted by the BJP?

Somehow, I was doubtful. It wasn't Singh's fault. He had done his part, following the playbook of liberal democracies across the post-Cold War world: upholding the constitutional order; attending to the quotidian, often technical work of boosting the GDP; and expanding the social safety net. Like me, he had come to believe that this was all any of us could expect from democracy, especially in big, multiethnic, multireligious societies like India and the United States. Not revolutionary leaps or major cultural overhauls; not a fix for every social pathology or lasting answers for those in search of purpose and meaning in their lives. Just the observance of rules that allowed us to sort out or at least tolerate our differences, and government policies that raised living standards and improved education enough to temper humanity's baser impulses.

Except now I found myself asking whether those impulses—of violence, greed, corruption, nationalism, racism, and religious intolerance, the all-too-human desire to beat back our own uncertainty and mortality and sense of insignificance by subordinating others—were too strong for any democracy to permanently contain. For they seemed to lie in wait everywhere, ready to resurface whenever growth rates stalled or demographics changed or a charismatic leader chose to ride the wave of people's fears and resentments. And as much as I might have wished otherwise, there was no Mahatma Gandhi around to tell me what I might do to hold such impulses back.

HISTORICALLY, CONGRESSIONAL ambitions tend to be low during the six- or seven-week stretch between Election Day and the Christmas recess, especially with a shift in party control about to happen. The dispirited losers just want to go home; the winners want to run out the clock until the new Congress gets sworn in. On January 5, 2011, we'd be seating the most Republican House of Representatives since 1947, which meant I'd be unable to get any legislation called for a vote, much less passed, without

the assent of the incoming Speaker of the House, John Boehner. And if there was any question about his agenda, Boehner had already announced that the first bill he'd be calling to a vote was a total repeal of the ACA.

We did, however, have a window of opportunity during the coming lame-duck session. Having returned from my visit to Asia, I was intent on getting several key initiatives across the finish line before Congress adjourned for the holidays: ratification of the New START on nuclear nonproliferation that we'd negotiated with the Russians; repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," the law that barred gays, lesbians, and bisexuals from openly serving in the military; and passage of the DREAM Act, which would establish a path to citizenship for a large swath of children of undocumented immigrants.

Pete Rouse and Phil Schiliro, who between them had nearly seventy years of Capitol Hill experience, looked dubious when I ran through my lame-duck to-do list. Axe actually chortled.

"Is that it?" he asked sarcastically.

Actually, it wasn't. I'd forgotten to mention that we needed to pass a child nutrition bill that Michelle had made a central plank in her fight against childhood obesity. "It's good policy," I said, "and Michelle's team's done a great job lining up support from children's health advocates. Plus, if we don't get it passed, I won't be able to go home."

I understood some of my staff's skepticism about trying to move such an ambitious agenda. Even if we could muster the sixty votes needed for each of those controversial bills, it wasn't clear that Harry Reid could get enough cooperation from Mitch McConnell to schedule so many votes in such a short time. Still, I didn't think I was being entirely delusional. Almost every item on my list already had some legislative traction and had either cleared or seemed likely to clear the House. And while we hadn't had much luck overcoming GOP-led Senate filibusters previously, I knew that McConnell had a big-ticket item of his own that he desperately wanted to get done: passing a law to extend the so-called Bush tax cuts, which would otherwise

automatically expire at the end of the year.

This gave us leverage.

I'd long opposed my predecessor's signature domestic legislation, laws passed in 2001 and 2003 that changed the U.S. tax code in ways that disproportionately benefited high-net-worth individuals while accelerating the trend of wealth and income inequality. Warren Buffett liked to point out that the law enabled him to pay taxes at a significantly lower rate—proportionate to his income, which came almost entirely from capital gains and dividends—than his secretary did on her salary. The laws' changes to the estate tax alone had reduced the tax burden for the top 2 percent of America's richest families by more than \$130 billion. Not only that, but by taking roughly \$1.3 trillion in projected revenue out of the U.S. Treasury, the laws had helped turn a federal budget surplus under Bill Clinton into a burgeoning deficit—a deficit that many Republicans were now using to justify their calls for cuts to Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and the rest of America's social safety net.

The Bush tax cuts might have been bad policy, but they had also modestly lowered the tax bill of most Americans, which made rolling them back politically tricky. Polls consistently showed a strong majority of Americans favoring higher taxes on the rich. But even well-to-do lawyers and doctors didn't consider themselves rich, especially if they lived in high-cost areas; and after a decade in which the bottom 90 percent of earners had seen stagnant wages, very few people thought their own taxes should go up.

During the campaign, my team and I had settled on what we considered a policy sweet spot, proposing that the Bush tax cuts be repealed selectively, affecting only those families with income greater than \$250,000 a year (or individuals earning more than \$200,000). This approach had almost universal support from congressional Democrats, would affect only the richest 2 percent of Americans, and would still yield roughly \$680 billion over the next decade, funds we could use to expand childcare, healthcare, job training, and education programs for the less well-off.

I hadn't changed my mind on any of this—getting the rich to pay more in taxes was not only a matter of fairness but also the only way to fund new initiatives. But as had been true with so many of my campaign proposals, the financial crisis had forced me to rethink when we should try to do it. Early in my term, when it looked like the country might careen into a depression, my economic team had persuasively argued that any increase in taxes—even those targeting rich people and Fortune 500 companies—would be counterproductive, since it would take money out of the economy precisely at a time when we wanted individuals and businesses to get out there and spend. With the economy barely on the mend, the prospect of tax hikes still made the team nervous.

And as it was, Mitch McConnell had threatened to block anything less than a full extension of the Bush tax cuts. Which meant that our only option for getting rid of them right away—an option many progressive commentators urged us to take—involved doing nothing and simply letting everybody's tax rates automatically revert to higher, Clinton-era levels on the first of January. Democrats could then return in the new year and propose replacement legislation that would reduce tax rates for Americans making less than \$250,000 a year, essentially daring Republicans to vote no.

It was a strategy we strongly considered. But Joe Biden and our legislative team worried that given how badly we'd lost in the midterms, centrist Democrats might break ranks on the issue and then Republicans would use those defections to marshal a vote that made the tax cuts permanent. Politics aside, the problem with playing chicken with the GOP, I decided, was the immediate impact it would have on a still-fragile economy. Even if we could hold our Democrats in line and Republicans ultimately buckled under the pressure, it still could take months to get any tax legislation through a divided Congress. In the meantime, middle- and working-class Americans would have smaller paychecks, businesses would rein in their investments even further, the stock market would tank again, and the economy would almost certainly end up back in a recession.

After gaming out various scenarios, I sent Joe up to Capitol Hill to negotiate with McConnell. We would support a two-year extension of all the Bush tax cuts—but only if Republicans agreed to extend emergency unemployment benefits, the Recovery Act's lower- to middle-class tax credit (Making Work Pay), and another package of refundable tax credits benefiting the working poor for an equivalent period.

McConnell immediately balked. Having previously declared that “the single most important thing we want to achieve is for President Obama to be a one-term president,” he was apparently loath to let me claim that I'd cut taxes for the majority of Americans without Republicans having forced me to do it. I couldn't say I was surprised; one of the reasons I'd chosen Joe to act as an intermediary—in addition to his Senate experience and legislative acumen—was my awareness that in McConnell's mind, negotiations with the vice president didn't inflame the Republican base in quite the same way that any appearance of cooperating with (Black, Muslim socialist) Obama was bound to do.

After a lot of back-and-forth, and after we'd agreed to swap the Making Work Pay tax credit for a payroll tax cut, McConnell finally relented and, on December 6, 2010, I was able to announce that a comprehensive agreement had been reached.

From a policy perspective, we were pleased with the outcome. While it was painful to keep the tax cuts for the wealthy in place for another two years, we'd managed to extend tax relief for middle-class families while leveraging an additional \$212 billion worth of economic stimulus specifically targeted at those Americans most in need—the kind of package we'd have no chance of passing through a Republican-controlled House as a stand-alone bill.

As for the politics behind the deal, I explained to Valerie that the two-year time frame represented a high-stakes wager between the Republicans and me. I was betting that in November 2012, I'd be coming off a successful reelection campaign, allowing me to end the tax cuts for the wealthy from a position of strength. They were betting that they'd beat me—and that a new Republican president would help them make the Bush

tax cuts permanent.

The fact that the deal left so much riding on the next presidential election might explain why it immediately provoked outrage from left-leaning commentators. They accused me of caving to McConnell and Boehner and of being compromised by my buddies on Wall Street and advisors like Larry and Tim. They warned that the payroll tax cut would weaken the Social Security Trust Funds; that the refundable tax credits benefiting the working poor would prove ephemeral; and that in two years' time, the Bush tax cuts for the wealthy would be made permanent, just like the Republicans had always wanted.

In other words, they, too, expected me to lose.

As it so happened, the same mid-December week we announced the deal with McConnell, Bill Clinton joined me in the Oval Office dining room for a visit. Whatever tensions had existed between us during the campaign had largely dissipated by then, and I found it useful to hear the lessons he'd learned after suffering a similar midterm shellacking at the hands of Newt Gingrich in 1994. At some point, we got into the nitty-gritty of the tax agreement I'd just made, and Clinton couldn't have been more enthusiastic.

"You need to tell that to some of our friends," I said, noting the blowback we were getting from certain Democratic circles.

"If I have the chance, I will," Clinton said.

That gave me an idea. "How about you get the chance right now?" Before he could answer, I walked over to Katie's desk and asked her to have the press team rustle up any correspondents who were in the building. Fifteen minutes later, Bill Clinton and I stepped into the White House briefing room.

Explaining to the startled reporters that they might like to get some perspective on our tax deal from the person who'd overseen just about the best U.S. economy we'd experienced in recent history, I turned the podium over to Clinton. It didn't take long

for the former president to own the room, mustering all of his raspy-voiced, lip-biting Arkansas charm to make the case for our deal with McConnell.

In fact, shortly after the impromptu press conference began, I realized I had another commitment to get to, but Clinton was clearly enjoying himself so much that I didn't want to cut him off. Instead, I leaned into the microphone to say that I had to leave but that President Clinton could stick around.

Later, I asked Gibbs how the whole thing had played.

"The coverage was great," Gibbs said. "Though a few of the talking heads said that you diminished yourself by giving Clinton the platform."

I wasn't too worried about that. I knew that Clinton's poll numbers were a whole lot higher than mine at the time, partly because the conservative press that had once vilified him now found it useful to offer him up as a contrast to me, the kind of reasonable, centrist Democrat, they said, that Republicans could work with. His endorsement would help us sell the deal to the broader public and tamp down any potential rebellion among congressional Democrats.

It was an irony that I—like many modern leaders—eventually learned to live with: You never looked as smart as the ex-president did on the sidelines.

Our temporary détente with McConnell on taxes allowed us to focus on the rest of my lame-duck to-do list. Michelle's child nutrition bill had already received enough Republican support to pass in early December with relatively little fuss, despite accusations from Sarah Palin (now a Fox News commentator) that Michelle was intent on taking away the freedom of American parents to feed their children as they saw fit. Meanwhile, the House was working through the details of a food safety bill that would pass later in the month.

Ratifying New START in the Senate proved more challenging—not only because, as a treaty, it required 67 rather than 60 votes but because domestically there was no strong constituency clamoring to get it done. I had to nag Harry Reid to prioritize the

issue during the lame-duck sessions, explaining that U.S. credibility—not to mention my own standing with other world leaders—was at stake, and that a failure to ratify the treaty would undermine our efforts to enforce sanctions against Iran and get other countries to tighten up their own nuclear security.

Once I got Harry's grudging commitment to bring the treaty up for a vote ("I don't know how I'll find the floor time, Mr. President," he grumbled over the phone, "but if you tell me it's important I'll do my best, okay?"), we went to work lining up Republican votes. The Joint Chiefs' endorsement of the treaty helped; so did strong support from my old friend Dick Lugar, who remained the ranking Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and rightly viewed New START as an extension of his earlier work on nuclear nonproliferation.

Even so, closing the deal required me to commit to a multiyear, multibillion-dollar modernization of the infrastructure around the United States' nuclear stockpile, at the insistence of conservative Arizona senator Jon Kyl. Given my long-term goal of eliminating nuclear weapons, not to mention all the better ways I could think of to use billions of federal dollars, this concession felt like a devil's bargain, though our in-house experts, many of whom were dedicated to nuclear disarmament, assured me that our aging nuclear weapons systems did need upgrades in order to reduce the risk of a catastrophic miscalculation or accident.

And when New START finally cleared the Senate by a 71-26 vote, I breathed a big sigh of relief.

THE WHITE HOUSE never looked more beautiful than during the holiday season. Huge pine wreaths with red velvet bows lined the walls along the colonnade and the main corridor of the East Wing, and the oaks and magnolias in the Rose Garden were strewn with lights. The official White House Christmas tree, a majestic fir delivered by horse-drawn carriage, occupied most of the Blue Room, but trees almost as spectacular filled nearly every public space in the residence. Over the course of three days, an army of volunteers organized by the Social Office decorated the trees, halls, and Grand Foyer

with a dazzling array of ornaments, while the White House pastry chefs prepared an elaborate gingerbread replica of the residence, complete with furniture, curtains, and—during my presidency—a miniature version of Bo.

The holiday season also meant we hosted parties practically every afternoon and evening for three and a half weeks straight. These were big, festive affairs, with three to four hundred guests at a time, laughing and chomping on lamb chops and crab cakes and drinking eggnog and wine while members of the United States Marine Band, spiffy in their red coats, played all the holiday standards. For me and Michelle, the afternoon parties were easy—we just dropped by for a few minutes to wish everyone well from behind a rope line. But the evening events called for us to position ourselves in the Diplomatic Reception Room for two hours or more, posing for photos with nearly every guest.

Michelle didn't mind doing this at the parties we hosted for the families of Secret Service personnel and the residence staff, despite what standing in heels for that long did to her feet. Her holiday spirits dimmed, however, when it came to feting members of Congress and the political media. Maybe it was because they demanded more attention ("Stop making so much small talk!" she'd whisper to me during momentary breaks in the action); or because some of the same people who regularly appeared on TV calling for her husband's head on a spike somehow had the nerve to put their arms around her and smile for the camera as if they were her best high school chums.

Back in the West Wing, much of my team's energy in the weeks before Christmas went toward pushing through the two most controversial bills left on my docket: "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" (DADT) and the DREAM Act. Alongside abortion, guns, and just about anything to do with race, the issues of LGBTQ rights and immigration had occupied center stage in America's culture wars for decades, in part because they raised the most basic question in our democracy—namely, who do we consider a true member of the American family, deserving of the same rights, respect, and concern that we expect for ourselves?

I believed in defining that family broadly—it included gay people as well as straight, and it included immigrant families that had put down roots and raised kids here, even if they hadn't come through the front door. How could I believe otherwise, when some of the same arguments for their exclusion had so often been used to exclude those who looked like me?

That's not to say that I dismissed those with different views on LGBTQ and immigration rights as heartless bigots. For one thing, I had enough self-awareness—or at least a good enough memory—to know that my own attitudes toward gays, lesbians, and transgender people hadn't always been particularly enlightened. I grew up in the 1970s, a time when LGBTQ life was far less visible to those outside the community, so that Toot's sister (and one of my favorite relatives), Aunt Arlene, felt obliged to introduce her partner of twenty years as “my close friend Marge” whenever she visited us in Hawaii.

And like many teenage boys in those years, my friends and I sometimes threw around words like “fag” or “gay” at each other as casual put-downs—callow attempts to fortify our masculinity and hide our insecurities. Once I got to college and became friends with fellow students and professors who were openly gay, though, I realized the overt discrimination and hate they were subject to, as well as the loneliness and self-doubt that the dominant culture imposed on them. I felt ashamed of my past behavior—and learned to do better.

As for immigration, during my youth I'd given the issue little thought beyond the vague mythology of Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty transmitted through popular culture. The progression of my thinking came later, when my organizing work in Chicago introduced me to the predominantly Mexican communities of Pilsen and Little Village—neighborhoods where the usual categories of native-born Americans, naturalized citizens, green-card holders, and undocumented immigrants all but dissolved, since many, if not most, families included all four.

Over time, people shared with me what it was like to have to hide your background, always afraid that the life you'd worked so hard to build might be upended in an instant. They talked about the sheer exhaustion and expense of dealing with an often heartless or arbitrary immigration system, the sense of helplessness that came with having to work for employers who took advantage of your immigration status to pay you subminimum wages. The friendships I made and the stories I heard in those Chicago neighborhoods, and from LGBTQ people during college and my early career, had opened my heart to the human dimensions of issues that I'd once thought of in mainly abstract terms.

For me, the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" situation was straightforward: I considered a policy that prevented LGBTQ persons from openly serving in our military to be both offensive to American ideals and corrosive to the armed forces. DADT was the result of a flawed compromise between Bill Clinton—who'd campaigned on the idea of ending the outright ban on LGBTQ people serving in the military—and his Joint Chiefs, who'd insisted that such a change would damage morale and retention.

Since going into effect in 1994, DADT had done little to protect or dignify anyone and, in fact, had led to the discharge of more than thirteen thousand service members solely due to their sexual orientation. Those who remained had to hide who they were and who they loved, unable to safely put up family pictures in their work spaces or attend social functions on base with their partners.

As the first African American commander in chief, I felt a special responsibility to end the policy, mindful that Blacks in the military had traditionally faced institutional prejudice and been barred from leadership roles and for decades had been forced to serve in segregated units—a policy Harry Truman had finally ended with an executive order in 1948.

The question was how best to accomplish the change. From the outset, LGBTQ advocates urged me to follow Truman's example and simply issue an order to reverse the policy—particularly since I'd already used executive orders and memoranda to

address other regulations adversely affecting LGBTQ people, including the granting of hospital visitation rights and the extension of benefits to domestic partners of federal employees. But in short-circuiting the consensus-building involved in passing legislation, an executive order increased the likelihood of resistance to the new policy inside the military, and foot-dragging in its implementation. And, of course, a future president could always reverse an executive order with the mere stroke of a pen.

I'd concluded that the optimal solution was to get Congress to act. To do that, I needed the military's top leaders as active and willing partners—which, in the middle of two wars, I knew wouldn't be easy. Previous Joint Chiefs had opposed repealing DADT, reasoning that the integration of openly gay service members might adversely impact unit cohesion and discipline. (Congressional opponents of repeal, including John McCain, claimed that introducing such a disruptive new policy during wartime amounted to a betrayal of our troops.)

To their credit, though, Bob Gates and Mike Mullen didn't flinch when I told them, early in my term, that I intended to reverse DADT. Gates said that he'd already asked his staff to quietly begin internal planning on the issue, less out of any personal enthusiasm for the policy change than out of a practical concern that federal courts might ultimately find DADT unconstitutional and force a change on the military overnight. Rather than try to talk me out of my position, he and Mullen asked that I let them set up a task force to evaluate the implications of the proposed change on military operations—which would ultimately conduct a comprehensive survey of troops' attitudes toward having openly gay members in their ranks. The objective, Gates said, was to minimize disruption and division.

"If you're going to do this, Mr. President," Gates added, "we should at least be able to tell you how to do it right."

I warned Gates and Mullen that I didn't consider discrimination against LGBTQ people to be an issue subject to plebiscite. Nevertheless, I agreed to their request, partly because I trusted them to set up an honest evaluation process but mainly because I

suspected that the survey would show our troops—most of whom were decades younger than the high-ranking generals—to be more open-minded toward gays and lesbians than people expected.

Appearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee on February 2, 2010, Gates further validated my trust when he said, “I fully support the president’s decision” to reexamine DADT. But it was Mike Mullen’s testimony before the committee that same day that really made news, as he became the first sitting senior U.S. military leader in history to publicly argue that LGBTQ persons should be allowed to openly serve:

“Mr. Chairman, speaking for myself and myself only, it is my personal belief that allowing gays and lesbians to serve openly would be the right thing to do. No matter how I look at this issue, I cannot escape being troubled by the fact that we have in place a policy which forces young men and women to lie about who they are in order to defend their fellow citizens. For me personally, it comes down to integrity, theirs as individuals and ours as an institution.”

Nobody in the White House had coordinated with Mullen on the statement; I’m not even sure that Gates had known ahead of time what Mullen planned to say. But his unequivocal statement immediately shifted the public debate and created important political cover for fence-sitting senators, who could then feel justified in embracing the repeal.

Mullen’s testimony came months before the evaluation process he and Gates had requested was completed, which caused some political headaches. Proponents of repeal started coming hard at us, both privately and in the press, unable to understand why I wouldn’t simply issue an executive order when the chairman of the Joint Chiefs supported a policy change—especially because, while we took our sweet time with a survey, LGBTQ service members were still being discharged.

Valerie and her team bore the brunt of the friendly fire, particularly Brian Bond, a highly regarded gay activist who served as our principal liaison to the community. For months, Brian had to defend my decision-making, as skeptical friends, former

colleagues, and members of the press suggested that he'd been co-opted, questioning his commitment to the cause. I can only imagine the toll this took on him personally.

The criticism grew louder in September 2010 when, as Gates had predicted, a federal district court in California ruled that DADT was unconstitutional. I asked Gates to formally suspend all discharges while the case was appealed. But no matter how hard I pressed, he repeatedly refused my request, arguing that as long as DADT was in place, he was obligated to enforce it; and I knew that ordering him to do something he considered inappropriate might force me to have to find a new defense secretary.

It was perhaps the only time I came close to yelling at Gates, and not just because I considered his legal analysis faulty. He seemed to consider the frustrations we were hearing from LGBTQ advocates—not to mention the anguished stories of gay and lesbian service members who were under his charge—as one more bit of “politics” from which I should shield him and the Pentagon, rather than a central consideration in his own decision-making.

(Ultimately he did at least modify DADT's administrative procedures in such a way that nearly all actual discharges were halted while we awaited resolution on the issue.)

Mercifully, toward the end of that same month, the results from the troop study finally came in. They confirmed what I'd suspected: Two-thirds of those surveyed thought that allowing those gay, lesbian, and bisexual colleagues to serve openly would have little or no impact on—or might actually improve—the military's ability to execute its missions. In fact, most troops believed that they were either already working or had worked with LGBTQ service members and had experienced no difference in their ability to perform their duties.

Get exposed to other people's truths, I thought, and attitudes change.

With the survey in hand, Gates and Mullen officially endorsed the repeal of DADT. Meeting with me in the Oval Office, the other Joint Chiefs pledged to implement the policy without undue delay. In fact, General James Amos, the Marine commandant and

a firm opponent of repeal, drew smiles when he said, “I can promise you, Mr. President, that none of these other branches are going to do it faster or better than the U.S. Marine Corps.”

And on December 18, the Senate passed the bill 65–31, with eight Republican votes.

A few days later, former and current LGBTQ service members filled an auditorium at the Department of the Interior as I signed the bill. Many were in dress uniform, their faces expressing a medley of joy, pride, relief, and tears. As I addressed the crowd, I saw a number of the advocates who’d been some of our fiercest critics just a few weeks earlier now smiling in appreciation.

Spotting Brian Bond, I gave him a nod. But the biggest applause that day was reserved for Mike Mullen—a long, heartfelt standing ovation. As I watched the admiral standing on the stage, visibly moved despite the awkward grin on his face, I couldn’t have been happier for him. It wasn’t often, I thought, that a true act of conscience is recognized that way.

WHEN IT CAME to immigration, everyone agreed that the system was broken. The process of immigrating legally to the United States could take a decade or longer, often depending on what country you were coming from and how much money you had. Meanwhile, the economic gulf between us and our southern neighbors drove hundreds of thousands of people to illegally cross the 1,933-mile U.S.-Mexico border each year, searching for work and a better life.

Congress had spent billions to harden the border, with fencing, cameras, drones, and an expanded and increasingly militarized border patrol. But rather than stop the flow of immigrants, these steps had spurred an industry of smugglers—coyotes—who made big money transporting human cargo in barbaric and sometimes deadly fashion. And although border crossings by poor Mexican and Central American migrants received most of the attention from politicians and the press, about 40 percent of America’s unauthorized immigrants arrived through airports or other legal ports of entry and then overstayed their visas.

By 2010, an estimated eleven million undocumented persons were living in the United States, in large part thoroughly woven into the fabric of American life. Many were longtime residents, with children who either were U.S. citizens by virtue of having been born on American soil or had been brought to the United States at such an early age that they were American in every respect except for a piece of paper.

Entire sectors of the U.S. economy relied on their labor, as undocumented immigrants were often willing to do the toughest, dirtiest work for meager pay—picking the fruits and vegetables that stocked our grocery stores, mopping the floors of offices, washing dishes at restaurants, and providing care to the elderly. But although American consumers benefited from this invisible workforce, many feared that immigrants were taking jobs from citizens, burdening social services programs, and changing the nation's racial and cultural makeup, which led to demands for the government to crack down on illegal immigration.

This sentiment was strongest among Republican constituencies, egged on by an increasingly nativist right-wing press. However, the politics didn't fall neatly along partisan lines: The traditionally Democratic trade union rank and file, for example, saw the growing presence of undocumented workers on construction sites as threatening their livelihoods, while Republican-leaning business groups interested in maintaining a steady supply of cheap labor (or, in the case of Silicon Valley, foreign-born computer programmers and engineers) often took pro-immigration positions.

Back in 2007, the maverick version of John McCain, along with his sidekick Lindsey Graham, had actually joined Ted Kennedy to put together a comprehensive reform bill that offered citizenship to millions of undocumented immigrants while more tightly securing our borders. Despite strong support from President Bush, it had failed to clear the Senate. The bill did, however, receive twelve Republican votes, indicating the real possibility of a future bipartisan accord.

I'd pledged during the campaign to resurrect similar legislation once elected, and I'd appointed former Arizona governor Janet Napolitano as head of the Department of

Homeland Security—the agency that oversaw U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and U.S. Customs and Border Protection—partly because of her knowledge of border issues and her reputation for having previously managed immigration in a way that was both compassionate and tough.

My hopes for a bill had thus far been dashed. With the economy in crisis and Americans losing jobs, few in Congress had any appetite to take on a hot-button issue like immigration. Kennedy was gone. McCain, having been criticized by the right flank for his relatively moderate immigration stance, showed little interest in taking up the banner again. Worse yet, my administration was deporting undocumented workers at an accelerating rate.

This wasn't a result of any directive from me, but rather it stemmed from a 2008 congressional mandate that both expanded ICE's budget and increased collaboration between ICE and local law enforcement departments in an effort to deport more undocumented immigrants with criminal records. My team and I had made a strategic choice not to immediately try to reverse the policies we'd inherited in large part because we didn't want to provide ammunition to critics who claimed that Democrats weren't willing to enforce existing immigration laws—a perception that we thought could torpedo our chances of passing a future reform bill.

But by 2010, immigrant-rights and Latino advocacy groups were criticizing our lack of progress, much the same way LGBTQ activists had gone after us on DADT. And although I continued to urge Congress to pass immigration reform, I had no realistic path for delivering a new comprehensive law before the midterms.

Enter the DREAM Act. The idea that young, undocumented immigrants who'd been brought to the United States as children could be given some sort of relief had been floating around for years, and at least ten versions of the DREAM Act had been introduced in Congress since 2001, each time failing to garner the needed votes. Advocates often presented it as a partial but meaningful step on the road to wider reform.

The act would grant “Dreamers”—as these young people had come to be called—temporary legal residence and a pathway to citizenship, so long as they met certain criteria. According to the most recent bill, they had to have entered the United States before the age of sixteen, lived here for five continuous years, graduated from high school or obtained a GED, and attended college for two years or joined the military—and they could have no serious criminal record. Individual states could make Dreamers legally eligible for reduced tuition rates at public colleges and universities—the only realistic way many of them could afford higher education.

Dreamers had grown up going to American schools, playing American sports, watching American TV, and hanging out at American malls. In some cases, their parents had never even told them they weren’t citizens; they learned of their undocumented status only when they tried to get a driver’s license or submitted an application for college financial aid.

I’d had a chance to meet many Dreamers, both before and after I entered the White House. They were smart, poised, and resilient—as full of potential as my own daughters. If anything, I found the Dreamers to be less cynical about America than many of their native-born contemporaries—precisely because their circumstances had taught them not to take life in this country for granted.

The case for allowing such young people to stay in the United States, the only country many of them had ever known, was so morally compelling that Kennedy and McCain had incorporated the DREAM Act into their 2007 immigration bill. And without the prospect of passing a more comprehensive rewrite of U.S. immigration laws in the immediate future, Harry Reid—who, in the months leading up to the midterms, had been locked in a tight reelection contest in his home state of Nevada and needed a strong Hispanic turnout to put him over the top—had promised to call the DREAM Act for a vote during the lame-duck session.

Unfortunately, Harry made this last-minute announcement on the campaign trail without giving us, his Senate colleagues, or immigration reform groups any notice.

Though not thrilled with Harry's lack of coordination with her ("You'd think he could have picked up the phone"), Nancy Pelosi did her part, quickly pushing the legislation through the House.

But in the Senate, McCain and Graham denounced Harry's decision as a campaign stunt and said they wouldn't vote for the DREAM Act as a stand-alone bill since it was no longer linked to increased enforcement. The five Republican senators who'd voted for the 2007 McCain-Kennedy bill and were still in office were less declarative about their intentions, but all sounded wobbly.

And since we couldn't count on every Democrat to support the bill—especially after the disastrous midterms—all of us in the White House found ourselves scrambling to drum up the sixty votes needed to overcome a filibuster during the waning days before the Senate wrapped up business for the year.

Cecilia Muñoz, the White House director of intergovernmental affairs, was our point person on the effort. When I was a senator, she'd been the senior vice president of policy and legislative affairs at the National Council of La Raza, the nation's largest Latino advocacy organization, and ever since she'd advised me on immigration and other issues.

Born and raised in Michigan and the daughter of Bolivian immigrants, Cecilia was measured, modest, and—as I used to joke with her—"just plain nice," bringing to mind everyone's favorite young elementary or middle school teacher. She was also tough and tenacious (and a fanatical Michigan football fan).

Within a matter of weeks, she and her team had launched an all-out media blitz in support of the DREAM Act, pitching stories, marshaling statistics, and enlisting practically every cabinet member and agency (including the Defense Department) to host some kind of event. Most important, Cecilia helped bring together a crew of young Dreamers who were willing to disclose their undocumented status in order to share their personal stories with undecided senators and media outlets.

Several times, Cecilia and I talked about the courage of these young people, agreeing that at their age we could never have managed such pressure.

“I just want to win so bad for them,” she told me.

And yet, despite the countless hours we spent in meetings and on the phone, the likelihood of getting sixty votes for the DREAM Act began to look increasingly bleak.

One of our best prospects was Claire McCaskill, the Democratic senator from Missouri. Claire was one of my early supporters and best friends in the Senate, a gifted politician with a razor-sharp wit, a big heart, and not an ounce of hypocrisy or pretension. But she also came from a conservative, Republican-leaning state and was a juicy target for the GOP in its effort to wrest back control of the Senate.

“You know I want to help those kids, Mr. President,” Claire said when I reached her by phone, “but the polling in Missouri is just terrible on anything related to immigration. If I vote for this, there’s a good chance I lose my seat.”

I knew she wasn’t wrong. And if she lost, we might lose the Senate, along with any possibility of ever getting the DREAM Act or comprehensive immigration reform or anything else passed.

How was I to weigh that risk against the urgent fates of the young people I’d met—the uncertainty and fear they were forced to live with every single day, the possibility that with no notice any one of them might be rounded up in an ICE raid, detained in a cell, and shipped off to a land that was as foreign to them as it would be to me?

Before hanging up, Claire and I made a deal to help square the circle.

“If your vote’s the one that gets us to sixty,” I said, “then those kids are going to need you, Claire. But