

# PHOENIX

DAVE EGGERS





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SAN FRANCISCO

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Francisco.

Printed in the United States.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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## DAVE EGGERS

ON TUESDAY, AUGUST 22, 2017, a week after the catastrophe in Charlottesville, there were approximately ten thousand Trump supporters and seven thousand anti-Trump protesters sharing the same sweltering few blocks in downtown Phoenix, and at least twenty-four of these non-police participants were carrying loaded handguns and semi-automatic weapons. There were Bikers for Trump and there were roving packs of weightlifters wearing pro-Trump attire. There were men in sleeveless Confederate-flag jackets, and anti-Trump protesters had brought a giant inflated chicken made to resemble Donald Trump. There was a man with a megaphone who asserted throughout the afternoon that homosexuals were going to hell, that drunk drivers should be killed, and women who wore skirts deserved to be raped. There were anarchists,

antifascists, and hundreds of heavily armed police officers.

The country was boiling in the madness of its most irrational era, and in Arizona it was over 105 degrees and felt far hotter. The night ended with the city choking in the yellow haze of tear gas, with both young and elderly kneeling on sidewalks, gagging and wailing, as helicopters patrolled above with slashing floodlights. Partisans roamed the streets looking for conflict, looking for shelter, everyone scanning the eyes and clothing of their fellow citizens for signs of affiliations and intent. That no one died that day in Phoenix defied all logic and all odds.

Ten days earlier, white nationalists and neo-Nazis gathered in Charlottesville, Virginia for a rally they called Unite the Right. The demonstrators and counter-protesters, and a local paramilitary unit, brought shields, clubs, bats and, because Virginia is an open-carry state, dozens of loaded firearms. On August 12, Richard Wilson Preston, an Imperial Wizard of the Confederate White Knights of the KKK, was filmed yelling “Hey n-----” to Corey Long, an African American man who had brought a handmade flamethrower to the proceedings (held at a green space called Emancipation Park). Preston pointed a handgun at Long’s head and then shot a bullet into the dirt at Long’s feet. Preston was charged with what was apparently the only crime he had committed—discharging a firearm within 1,000 feet of a school. There were no charges

filed for pointing the gun at another man’s skull and threatening to kill him.

After the main demonstration had been broken up by police, two young men, Daniel Patrick Borden and Alex Michael Ramos, were charged with malicious wounding in connection with the beating of a 20-year-old black man named DeAndre Harris. They allegedly assaulted him in a parking garage as he was leaving the scene.

As demonstrators and counter-protesters were exiting the area, a car, allegedly driven by a 20-year-old white man named James Alex Fields, Jr., sped into a crowd of demonstrators who were in Charlottesville to profess their belief in peace, equality and racial harmony. The car struck at least twenty people, killing Heather Heyer, a 32-year-old protester, and injuring nineteen others. Later that night, two Virginia state police officers died when their helicopter crashed; they had been monitoring the situation below.

In all, three people died and at least twenty people were injured in Charlottesville that day. But with hundreds of weapons, including dozens of handguns and semi-automatic rifles carried amid thousands of demonstrators and counter-protesters—all in a moment of collective apoplexy and minimal police preparation—it could have been far worse.

In response to the debacle, Donald Trump said there were “very fine people” on both sides of the confrontation. Then,

four days after Charlottesville, he announced that he would hold a rally in Phoenix on August 22. This would be a campaign-style event funded by his re-election committee. He had been in office only eight months. Greg Stanton, the mayor of Phoenix, took the almost unprecedented step of asking the sitting president not to visit his city.

“America is hurting,” he wrote in an op-ed published in the *Washington Post*. “And it is hurting largely because Trump has doused racial tensions with gasoline. With his planned visit to Phoenix on Tuesday, I fear the president may be looking to light a match.”

Speculation swirled that Trump’s reasons for holding a rally were threefold: First, Jeff Flake, one of the two Republican senators from Arizona, had just published a book, *The Conscience of a Conservative: A Rejection of Destructive Politics and a Return to Principle*, that was highly critical of Trump, and Trump wanted to descend on Flake’s state and embarrass him—to call him out in front of thousands of his constituents. Second, Joe Arpaio, the former sheriff of Maricopa County and early supporter of the theory that Barack Obama was not born in the United States, was facing six months in prison for contempt. In defiance of a judge’s order, Arpaio had continued to detain people simply because he suspected them of being undocumented immigrants. Trump, it was assumed, intended to pardon the former sheriff in a public and theatrical way. Third, Trump wanted to highlight his plan to build a wall

along the U.S.–Mexico border, including the 372 miles that separate Mexico from Arizona.

“I absolutely think it’s inappropriate to be holding a political rally a few days after an innocent woman was mowed down by a neo-Nazi,” said U.S. Representative Ruben Gallego, a Democrat whose district includes downtown Phoenix. “It’s throwing tinder onto an ongoing fire.”

Doug Ducey, the Republican governor of Arizona, said he would greet Trump at the airport but would not attend the rally.

Knowing that his rally in Phoenix would likely attract white supremacists, protesters, counter-protesters and the possibility of violence, Trump did not cancel the event.

A Category 4 hurricane called Harvey was gaining strength in the Gulf of Mexico and was expected to make landfall in the United States shortly after the rally. In light of this, Trump did not cancel the event.

Catherine H. Miranda, a Democratic member of the Arizona state senate, said, “We highly recommend the president visit Charlottesville and heal that city.”

Trump did not go to Charlottesville to heal that city. He did not stay in Washington to monitor what would become one of the most devastating storms to hit the United States in decades.

He went to Phoenix to hold a rally.

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By mid-morning on August 16, the temperature in Phoenix had exceeded 100. By noon it was 106. The city was utterly still. There was virtually no one moving. On any given block downtown, there was perhaps one person walking, making their burdened way from one air-conditioned building to the next. A billboard in the city tried to lure people to Flagstaff, with its snow-covered mountains and average summer temperature of 82. Just below the sign, two people wore T-shirts declaring that CNN was “Fake News.”

The Phoenix Convention Center, an indoor venue in the center of the city’s small downtown area, was somnolent. The Convention Center was scheduled to open many hours later, at 4 p.m., with the rally beginning at 7 p.m. On the corner of Jefferson and 2nd Street, a lone man held a large handmade sign that said STOP KILLING POLICE.

By two o’clock, a few hundred Trump supporters had arrived and were in line along 2nd Street. They were not dressed in white robes or brown shirts. They were in shorts and T-shirts, sitting on beach chairs and cooling themselves with American-flag fans. They looked like they were readying for a patriotic barbecue or a Diamondbacks game.

Though the attendees were mostly white, in line there were African American men and women, there were people of Asian and South Asian descent, there were Latino families, there were plenty of elderly people and children. They did not

yell, chant or say much at all. The vast majority of them simply stood in line, trying to stay cool in the suffocating heat.

But their numbers were small. By 3 p.m., there were only about five hundred Trump supporters and the Trump staff had configured the Convention Center to hold 19,000. There existed the possibility that Trump had grossly overplayed his hand—that very few Arizonans wanted to come to a partisan rally so soon after the national tragedy of Charlottesville.

I went to Civic Space Park, where the Puente Human Rights Movement had called for a gathering and march. Puente is a Phoenix-based organization that advocates for the rights of the undocumented, and the organization had been long opposed to Sheriff Arpaio. En route to Civic Space Park, I passed the downtown campus of Arizona State University, where hundreds of college students in shorts and sandals walked to and from class and waited for buses on N. Central Avenue, white earbuds in place. There was no indication on campus that there was anything at all happening in Phoenix that day.

But a block away, at the park, about fifty people of every age and color were standing and sitting in the dappled shade. There were pallets of bottled water arranged in leaning gray pyramids. A few people were still creating the signs they intended to carry. A heavy-set African American man wore a T-shirt that said: “*Nab*” —*Rosa Parks, 1955*

On the grass and ringing the group were a number of

homeless men and women sitting under the park's low stand of trees. One shirtless man sitting on a tattered sleeping bag periodically yelled unintelligible directives from the woods.

I talked to a few of the Puente organizers, who said they planned to walk to the Convention Center at 4:30. I mentioned that I had just been there and that the crowd was thin. With the Convention Center set to open at 4 p.m., I told them, by 4:30 the few Trump supporters might all be inside already.

I went back to the Convention Center to confirm this. Trump had won Arizona by only a few percentage points, and the most recent statewide poll, by OH Predictive Insights, indicated that a majority of Arizonans, 52 percent, disapproved of Trump's performance as president. There seemed to exist the possibility that his declining popularity, and the unspeakable heat—it was by now 108—had suppressed whatever enthusiasm was left for seeing Donald Trump stand onstage for an hour, saying whatever came into his head.

This was not the case. When I reached the Convention Center again, I saw the same Trump supporters who had been there since 2 p.m., but the doors still hadn't opened. I walked past them and down 2nd Street, seeking the end of the line, which now extended the length of the block. Standing in the obliterating sunlight, there were elderly white couples and groups of middle-aged men in Trump/Pence shirts. There were men and women in matching pink polo shirts, a woman

in a wheelchair, and a man holding a sign that read, "Old Chicano Male for Trump."

I turned the corner and the line continued. It extended down Washington for a long city block. All along the backside of the Convention Center, blood-orange garbage trucks had been parked, presumably to protect those in line from the possibility of a car attack like the one perpetrated in Charlottesville. I walked the line until it appeared to end at 5th Street. But there, it jumped across the intersection and ran all the way back, on the other side of Washington. It took me half an hour to find the end of it. And even then, there was no end, because every minute more people arrived to extend it. People kept coming, driving in from all over Arizona and parking their cars and getting in line, with the newest additions more everyday-seeming than the more ardent who had been waiting since the beginning. These were casual fans, working people who decided to come to the rally with the same fervor they would attend an air show or chili cook-off. And they carried no signs or props. They couldn't. On Washington Avenue, there was an enormous LED screen that cycled through the items prohibited in the Convention Center.

- Aerosols
- Ammunition
- Animals other than service/guide animals
- Backpacks
- Bags and signs





**STOP  
RACISM**

**Chester-seeking  
OUT OF STATE**

**ER WATERS**





2nd St. 200 E



WORST PRESIDENT EVER

DOWN WITH WHITE SUPREMACY

TRUMP

CHASE TO EN CLEAR

TRUMP LOVE

2020

- Bicycles
- Balloons
- Coolers
- Drones and other unmanned aircraft systems
- Explosives
- Firearms
- Glass, thermal, or metal containers
- Laser pointers
- Mace/pepper spray
- Packages
- Selfie Sticks
- Structures
- Supports for signs and placards
- Toy guns
- Explosives
- Weapons of any kind
- Any other items determined to be potential safety hazards

These prohibitions gave a distinct advantage to the tableau of protesters who had gathered on the steps at 3rd and Washington. These protesters had signs, horns, drums, and costumes. There was a woman holding a “Go Mueller!” sign and a man wearing a “Bernie Fucking Sanders” shirt. There was a man dressed as a nun. He held a sign that read, “They said there’d be a party... Wait. Wrong party.” Other protesters posed for pictures with him. The atmosphere was festive.

Elsewhere in the city, the police had done a masterful job of ensuring that large groups of pro-Trump Americans were separated from large groups of anti-Trump Americans. The two groups were usually placed on either side of wide barricaded streets, but at 3rd and Washington, there were no barricades, no police nearby, and access between the two groups was unobstructed. Which made the interactions between the two groups — genial and almost embarrassed — all the more surreal and tragic.

The way the steps were arranged, and the way the line was formed, made for a dramatic introduction of Trump supporters to their protesters. As the Trump people made their way down Washington to 3rd Street, a high wall hid them from view of the protesters, and hid the protesters from them.

Thus, when they passed by the high wall, the rally attendees, in their red shirts and white shorts, with their Veterans of Foreign Wars hats and in their wheelchairs, were suddenly confronted by a mass of fellow Americans, standing on stadium-style steps, yelling, chanting, and carrying signs declaring the Trump supporters Nazis and fascists.

The Trump supporters looked up and down at their sudden audience, and, if they could get over their astonishment, they smiled and held up their phones to take pictures. For some reason, all day, the method of defense the Trump supporters used against the protesters was the taking of pictures with their phones. It happened thousands of times. Protesters





GO MUELLER!

NO TRUMP!!  
KKK!!  
USA!

NO PARDON  
FOR  
RACISTS!

WE ARE ALL  
IMMIGRANTS

LOSER

SIMPLE CALLING  
RACIST SECRET  
NOT HIT

yelled and Trump supporters took pictures of the protesters. The logic was hard to pin down.

And when the protesters saw just how unarmed and unassuming most of the Trump supporters were, and how free they were of signs, weapons, anything—they were left speechless.

This was a strange thing. There were a hundred or so protesters standing on the high steps, and at any given time a few dozen Trump attendees passing them on the sidewalk, but for much of the time they were in close proximity, no one said a word.

Something was happening there, in that close confrontation between the two groups. There was recognition. There was the uncomfortable knowledge that they were in most ways very similar people. The rally attendees were not frothing at the mouth and were not spouting racial epithets. They were mothers, fathers, teenagers, and families with nothing in their hands but phones and the occasional American flag.

Thus the protesters were flummoxed. It seemed cruel and strange to yell “Nazi” to a pair of grandparents in yellow polo shirts, or to a trio of Eagle Scouts, and so given the chance to say something directly to Trump supporters passing by them, mere inches away, much of the time they said nothing.

“My father fought Nazis, he didn’t march with them!” said one older white man. He repeated it to the Trump supporters a few times, and it seemed to have more impact than, for example, the sight of a man in a nun’s habit.

But otherwise the two sides were grossly mismatched in their intensity. The protesters carried with them eighteen months of outrage that began when Trump announced his candidacy and also his opinion that most Mexican immigrants were rapists and murderers. They carried with them the mass deportations, the ICE raids and the wholesale terrorizing of millions of undocumented people. They carried with them Trump’s implicit support for casual sexual assault and the objectification of all women. They carried with them Trump’s disregard for democratic principles, governmental checks and balances, and long-honored alliances with democracies around the world. They carried with them his nullification of the Paris Agreement and disdain for science, and the imminent likelihood of catastrophic weather driven by unchecked climate change. And of course they carried with them his winking support for a newly emboldened movement to ratify white supremacy as national policy.

The Trump supporters, though, seemed utterly oblivious to all this. *What are you so mad about?* their faces seemed to say. Every last one of them, as they passed the gauntlet, smiled, chuckled, took pictures and kept moving. They carried none, and knew little of, the volcanic rage and heartbreak felt by the protesters. They were only going to hear the reality-TV star make some jokes at the Convention Center. He was funny, and frank, and maybe he’d mention the building of a wall to keep the country majority-white, and maybe he’d promise to put















his political enemies in jail. It would be a night of light entertainment, and the tickets were free.

In one especially odd moment, a young male protester began chanting “USA! USA!” This is not a common chant among anti-Trump protesters, given it’s been long associated with young drunk sports fans and the occasional nationalist, so only a smattering of fellow protesters joined in. The Trump people waiting in line were initially confused, but soon they chanted “USA! USA!” too. The two groups’ ideas of exactly what those initials meant was not the same, but anyway, it was a moment of relative harmony in a darkening day.

A hulking bald man walked by holding a handmade sign that read THE ROCK FOR PRESIDENT. I asked him if he was serious about the sign. Democratic political operatives were already mentioning Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson, a former professional wrestler and now movie actor, as a possible challenger to Trump in 2020. Part of the motivation was cynical, in that only a bigger celebrity—better known and physically far more imposing, and an actual wrestler to boot—could defeat Trump, a 250-pound TV personality whose popularity was burnished when he appeared at various WWF events, even pretending one time to execute a wrestling maneuver while wearing his signature dark suit and red tie.

“He’s my friend,” the bald man said about Johnson, his voice raspy but his words quick. “I’m an anarchist, so I don’t

believe in the state at all. But if my buddy’s going to be a star, I’m all for it.”

The man’s name was Sean Allen Morley and he’d been a professional wrestler. He performed under many names, including The Big Valbowski and Glamour Boy Sean, but was best known as Val Venis. His character started as a bad guy, he said, “but people loved him so they made him a good guy.” Morley known Johnson when they were both wrestling but, Morley said, “I haven’t talked to him in a long, long time.”

Morley wrestled in Mexico, on the Lucha Libre circuit, and in Japan, and finally with the World Wrestling Federation in Europe and the United States. Having achieved his dream, he said, he now wanted to open a chain of cannabis-and-coffee shops. For him, the fact that recreational marijuana was illegal in Arizona was a particularly onerous reminder of the existence of laws, and those who make them.

“I think all politics should go away,” Morley said. “I believe all men are created equal, so how the fuck we got to a place where we have rulers and subjects is beyond me.”

Though from a distance he might be taken for a Trump supporter, he was not a fan.

“I think Trump is a cold-blooded murderer,” he said. “Straight-up. He’s dropped bombs. Just like Obama, just like Clinton and both Bushes. They dropped bombs on innocent children overseas. That’s not collateral damage. That’s murder.”

For a while, in the heat and amid the yelling of the pro-

testers and a few feet away from the man dressed as a nun, Morley and I debated the merits of the state. He was quick-witted and good-humored, and his brain was utterly self-formed and free of received wisdom. We talked for a while about the history of hemp, and the value of agencies like the EPA and FDA, and the conversation veered all over—into Henry Ford and prohibition and the three industries (cotton, oil, lumber) Morley is convinced killed the hemp industry in the early 20th century. Finally we landed on the IRS. He hates the IRS.

“Every single thing government does, how is it funded?” he asked. “How are taxes collected? By coercion and ultimately by force.”

I tried to convince him that taxes were necessary to the functioning of our lives—that we needed roads and schools and clean water, the EPA and FDA, and Social Security, Medicare, some kind of safety net for the vulnerable and aged. I stopped. Morley was smiling, not convinced.

“But fun to talk to you,” he said. He walked off with his THE ROCK FOR PRESIDENT sign.

The United States is most assuredly the only industrialized country that allows civilians to bring loaded firearms to a political protest. It’s self-evident that this makes everyone attending, including the police, far less safe. But Arizona is an open-carry state, which means that the police can’t prohibit





anyone who holds a valid gun license from arriving at a protest with a weapon and enough bullets to kill dozens of strangers in seconds.

That the most visibly and heavily armed contingent on this day were anarchists purportedly drawn from the white working class and opposed to Trump only underlines the uniquely lunatic nature of modern American life.

At around 5 p.m., on the other side of the Convention Center, I started noticing small clusters of young men and women wearing green army gear and bulletproof vests. Most of them had covered their faces with war paint. On their chests they had written, with black magic marker, JOHN BROWN GUN CLUB. It looked like they were carrying semi-automatic weapons, but until that point I hadn't heard of the John Brown Gun Club and, open-carry or not, I didn't think it possible that semi-automatic rifles could be carried in a charged atmosphere like this, so I approached one of them, a tall white man with a rust-colored beard. I asked his name. He said it was John Brown.

"Is that real?" I asked, pointing to what seemed to be an AR-15, a lightweight combat rifle with a 30-round magazine. This was the same gun often used in mass murders in the United States. The AR-15 was used in Parkland, Sutherland Springs, Orlando, San Bernardino, Newton and Aurora. It would be used a few months after this rally in Phoenix—on October 1, 2017, when Stephen Paddock would kill 58 people

with an AR-15 during a country music concert in Las Vegas.

The man calling himself John Brown carried it tensely across his chest, his index finger covering the trigger. Tucked into his waist were two additional ammunition clips, meaning he had enough bullets to kill ninety people. In close proximity like this, he could accomplish this in seconds.

"Yes sir," he said, "Arizona is an open-carry state and Phoenix is an open-carry city." He was sweating profusely, and though he tried to exude confidence, he looked nervous and spoke haltingly. "We are a community defense organization," he said. "We are anti-racist. We definitely align ourselves against the white nationalists."

I later found out that there were twenty-four members of the John Brown Gun Club on the streets Phoenix that day, all of them heavily armed. The club is affiliated with a national group called Redneck Revolt, which has chapters around the country. Redneck Revolt's website asserts that they are an "aboveground militant formation" that "stands against the nation-state and its forces which protect the bosses and the rich." The website makes for riveting reading, given a group like this—ostensibly an armed, working-class antidote to their brethren on the right—hasn't been seen since perhaps the battles between the working class and union-busting mercenaries like the Pinkertons in the 1930s.

Increasingly, Redneck Revolt's members appear at events where white nationalists are gathering—they were in Char-

lottesville—in order they present a mirror image of the disaffected whites who helped turn the election for Trump in Pennsylvania, Michigan and Ohio. “White working class participation in state and paramilitary organizations and formations like the Ku Klux Klan, the Minutemen, the U.S. Armed Forces, and the Council of Conservative Citizens has undermined the struggle for freedom among all people,” reads the Redneck Revolt manifesto. “It is with these conflicting histories in mind that we hope to incite a movement amongst white working people that works toward the total liberation of all working people, regardless of skin color, religious background, sexual orientation, gender identity, nationality, or any other division that bosses and politicians have used to fragment movements for social, political, and economic freedom.”

A few feet away from this man calling himself John Brown, two Phoenix police officers were ensuring a safe distance between a wall of protesters and a man with a megaphone standing with two signs — one asserting that supporters of Black Lives Matters are “racist thugs” and another that said ALL TRUE MUSLIMS ARE JIHADISTS. “If you drink and drive, you deserve to die,” the man with the megaphone said. “If you sluts dress like whores, you deserve to get raped. You and your wicked, wicked attire deserve so much worse.” He spoke most of the day, and was jeered at by both protesters and Trump supporters.

I asked the man calling himself John Brown how the local

police were reacting to the presence of an armed militia in downtown Phoenix. If there were twenty-four John Brown members present, and each had at least one extra clip attached to their vests, that made them capable of firing, in a few seconds, at least 1,500 rounds into the fifteen thousand or so civilians and cops assembled.

“They’ve definitely been looking at us carefully,” John Brown said.

So far that day, the Phoenix police had acted with serene professionalism. Most of the officers were dressed in their everyday uniforms, and moved fluidly throughout the crowds without any hint of overreaction. They watched the crowds from rooftops and from the five floors of an open parking garage at the corner of 2nd and Monroe. Their weapons were not drawn and their posture was relaxed.

It was easy to believe that despite the presence of the John Brown Gun Club walking freely between five to ten thousand people baking in August heat, the chemistry of that particular day in Phoenix favored calm and relative amity. There were no neo-Nazis present, at least not demonstrating or assembling in numbers. There were not, in fact, any armed right-wing attendees visible. In an unexpected reversal, it was the anti-Trump side that was louder, that was more confrontational, and among whose ranks there was a heavily armed militia. There was only one even vaguely threatening sign held by a Trump



NO NAZIS  
NO KKK  
NO WHITE  
PREMACISTS  
NO TRUMP









supporter. He sat most of the day at an outdoor café across from the Convention Center, his placard leaning against a table: DON'T START NO SHIT, WON'T BE NO SHIT, it read.

By 5 p.m. there were at least five thousand protesters lined up on Monroe across from the Convention Center. The Trump supporters who had been standing in the 108-degree heat, winding their way around downtown Phoenix, finally reached the corner of 2nd and Monroe, where there was a police security screening to ensure they had none of the items prohibited by the LED display.

Immediately after the screening, the Trump supporters were confronted by thousands of demonstrators yelling at them from the other side of Monroe. "Are you a Nazi, yes or no?" the protesters screamed. A group of young male protesters singled out each Trump attendee, critiquing their clothing and physique. "You gotta work out, dude!" they yelled at one overweight man wearing a Trump shirt that failed to cover his copious belly. "Your shirt's too small!"

In response to their taunts, the Trump supporters smiled, took pictures of the protesters—they all took pictures, every one of them; it was so strange—and very occasionally they gave their tormenters the finger. Then they disappeared into the Convention Center.

Nearby, a six-story parking garage had attracted dozens of spectators who looked down on the scene below. Among them were police who used binoculars to monitor the crowd. I

stayed near the garage for a while, watching from the street and above as the crowd move through the city. On the street, a young man selling FUCK TRUMP shirts passed peacefully by a trio of older men in Confederate flag denim jackets. A small herd of white weightlifters with red, white and blue clothing—and one with a MAGA hat—wove swiftly through the area where the anti-Trump protesters were densest. They said nothing and no one said anything to them. The light of day and heat of late afternoon seemed to melt anyone's willingness to confront their adversaries in close quarters. On the corner below the parking garage, a lone woman in her 60s, no more than 100 pounds, stood on the sidewalk with a sign that said FREE HUGS. She was doing a booming business.

The rally began at 7 p.m., and the majority of the protesters waited outside, remaining at the Monroe barricades. Inside, there was the strong possibility that Trump would pardon Joe Arpaio, in which case the protests could become belligerent. But in the meantime, the protesters waited. They cooled off with water provided by the friars standing in front of St. Mary's Basilica, and they checked their phones for news of what was happening inside the Convention Center.

Trump gave a rambling and fiery speech, wherein he: hinted that he would pardon Arpaio and seemed to be asking for the crowd's approval (it was strong but not overwhelming); called out the media for being not-real and not fair to



him; insulted Arizona's two Republican senators at the time, Jeff Flake and John McCain; encouraged his supporters to endorse the jailing of his presidential opponent, Hillary Clinton, whom he defeated via electoral college ten months prior; failed to mention the ten U.S. sailors recently killed in a collision with an oil tanker; failed to mention the two state troopers killed in Charlottesville; claimed that there were very few protesters in Phoenix, when there were at least ten thousand; and rewrote the history of his reaction to Charlottesville, omitting only and precisely the words that had provoked the opprobrium of the majority of the nation and world: "very fine people on both sides."

At about 8:25, the rally ended. Outside it was still well over 100 degrees, the air thick with incense and sweat and the smell of hot pavement. Throughout the day, fifty-six people had succumbed to heat-related illness, but there were still thousands of protesters on Monroe Street, waiting to verbally confront the Trump supporters again as they exited.

But this was not to be. "Look," a woman near me said. I was standing on the corner of Monroe and 3rd Street, leaning over the barricade facing the Convention Center. I followed her finger to see that there was a catwalk connecting the venue's south building to its north. The catwalk was enclosed in glass and was about thirty feet up; it was a transparent, sound-proof hallway crossing 3rd Street. And it was filled with people walking briskly out of the rally. The Trump sup-

porters were avoiding the protesters' confrontations completely. Instead of walking along the Monroe sidewalk in stifling heat, being verbally abused, they were twenty-five above, behind glass, striding through an air-conditioned walkway. The Trump supporters, so many of whom lived in a relative bubble, rarely intersecting with the multicultural and ever-changing nature of cities and much of the United States in general, could remain in their bubble, high above the chaotic masses assembled to oppose their hero. They could slip out through another unseen door, get in their cars and speed away on the highway, unfronted.

We could see this happening from our position on 3rd Street, and the deflation among those assembled at the barricades was profound. But the rest of the protesters, extending down Monroe toward 2nd Street, couldn't see this orderly escape, so they continued to wait.

Phoenix police officers in riot gear and shields stood in the street, watching dispassionately. All day the police had been cool-headed and professional. They had moved freely and stochastically among the protesters and Trump supporters, smirking here and there at some of the more extreme members of each side. They had, from my perspective at least, treated everyone with equal civility and even good humor.

But soon, prompted by no change in the protesters' size or mood, the number of police officers present along Monroe Street grew. About twenty emerged from the Convention Cen-

ter in riot gear, and another ten arrived on mountain bikes and positioned them as shields between themselves and the protesters. There were about seventy officers visible along Monroe, all wearing gas masks.

And the mood began to shift. As if reacting to the gas masks and seeming escalation of menace, the protesters began reminding the Phoenix Police Department of their right to demonstrate. “Peaceful protest! Peaceful protest!” they chanted. And: “Who do you *serve*? Who do you *protect*?”

An older African American woman near me began taunting one of the officers who was standing behind his mountain bike. “You. You’re a little one. A little fella,” she said. “I could fit you in my bra. I guess you need to compensate for your size with all that equipment...”

She was funny. She riffed along these lines for about five minutes, but the officer did not react. None of the officers were reacting. They had been calm all day and they were calm now. Most of all, they had been rational. Everyone had been rational. All day, no one had done anything stupid, even though everywhere there were the makings of madness and calamity.

At 8:38, I looked down Monroe toward 2nd Street and saw smoke. Its source was unclear. The twenty or so police officers on that part of the block were soon silhouetted in white fog. They looked unconcerned about the smoke, and none of the officers were moving. They wore helmets and gas masks, and

none of them made any gestures that indicated they were alarmed or agitated.

Then a single plastic water bottle was thrown from the protesters’ side of the street. It arced through the white fog and fell amid the phalanx of police. I was about fifty feet away and saw it clearly, and saw no other provocation.

But all hell broke loose.

In a most businesslike manner, an officer in riot gear stepped from behind his barricade, aimed a gun over the heads of the crowd, and shot. A thunderclap boomed overhead. People screamed and started running in every direction. He then pivoted and directed another shot toward 3rd Street. Another boom cracked open the sky, as loud as a cannon.

I turned to the young man next to me. He had curly, sand-colored hair and blue eyes. “Did you see anything?” I asked.

“Nothing,” he said, and took off.

There had been no words of warning from the police. At least four more booms cracked open the air. There was no way to know what the noises were—actual bombs? There was no information.

It was a melee. In seconds, the few thousand protesters who had been on Monroe fled, leaving just a few dozen remaining.

Now there was a clacking sound. It could have been gunfire or firecrackers. Again, there was no information coming from the police. Two loud booms followed.

White fog enveloped Monroe and helicopters thrummed above. “Oh my god! Oh my god!” a woman screamed.

A wedge-shaped formation of police officers, all in riot gear and carrying transparent shields, walked across the street, opened the barricade on the protesters’ side, and made their way into the courtyard of the Herberger Theater Center. I counted twenty-two officers shuffling, Spartan-style, toward two people. One was an African American man, tall and thin, who held his hands high in surrender. A young woman with long dark hair stood next to him, her hands over her head. It was unclear if these two people were going to be arrested. It seemed possible that the police suspected that one of them had thrown the bottle that apparently started all this.

A few feet away, a canister appeared, yellow gas billowing from it. The gas spread and veiled everything in a sickly char-treuse fog. Because there had been no warning from the police, and because the white smoke, as far as I knew, had been harmless, I assumed this gas was harmless, too. Someone in the crowd yelled “Tear gas!” but that seemed illogical and unlikely.

Tear gas is a chemical agent known to cause respiratory failure, heart attacks and miscarriage. It’s considered dangerous enough that its use in warfare was banned under the Chemical Weapons Convention of 1993. That agreement was signed by almost every nation on earth, including the United States, so there seemed no chance that the Phoenix police

would use a toxic aerosol against American citizens holding pickets, even if one of them had thrown a water bottle.

There was a young woman near me, and we both ignored the yellow gas and walked toward the man and woman holding their hands in surrender.

An older man ran past us saying, “That gas will *incapacitate* you. It is not to be trifled with. It will *incapacitate* you.”

Other voices nearby:

“Is the yellow stuff tear gas?”

“Yes!”

Two more booms sounded overhead.

Still, we walked toward the man and woman being confronted by the police phalanx. It seemed possible, amid the chaos, that the two people, holding their hands in the air, would be dealt with violently, and it seemed we were united in believing we needed to bear witness. As we neared the police advancing on the man and woman, a gust of wind took the yellow cloud, spread it and suddenly we were inside it. The air was as bright as a lemon.

The effect of tear gas on the eyes and lungs is not immediate. It took about three seconds before my eyes began burning as if they were dissolving. Involuntarily, my eyes closed and tears soaked my face—my tear ducts were trying to react and flush out the vapor, which coats the eyes and skin. I stopped, doubled over.

Confronted with a chemical agent, the body fights and

rebels in spasms. I choked, coughed, sneezed. It was like inhaling melting plastic through a straw. My nose ran and my chest constricted. I lost track of the couple and the cops heading toward them. "Are you fucking kidding me?" a young man yelled. My eyes blinked ferociously, and while stumbling down 3rd Street away from the smoke, in squinting flashes I took in the scene. Around the grounds of the Herberger Center there were life-sized sculptures of men, women and children dancing and running. In the yellow haze, these figures appeared like victims of Pompeii, frozen and flailing, while all down 3rd Street, actual people were kneeling, running, gagging. An elderly woman was being helped down the street by two men. She was disoriented and confused. A throng of people surrounded her; she could no longer walk. They sat her on the sidewalk, but the yellow smoke was now billowing from Monroe, as if carried by a malevolent wind. The men lifted the elderly woman again and they made their way toward Van Buren.

In the yellow fog I caught sight of the young woman who had been near me in front of the theater. A young man with black-rimmed glasses was flushing her eyes with bottled water. She looked up, her face soaked but relieved. She could see again.

There were a few inches of water left in the bottle and the young man flushed my eyes, too. The effect was immediate. The gas was still burning my throat and lungs, but I could

see. I ran down 3rd Street and caught up with the elderly woman. I found a bottle of water and tried to offer to clean her eyes, telling her that it helped. She didn't understand. She pushed my hands away. Another woman tried to convince her to take it; I left the bottle with them.

All around, people were trying to think, breathe, see. They huddled in doorways. A pair of young women in yellow LEGAL OBSERVER shirts ran by. "What happened back there?" I asked. They had no idea. "I saw a water bottle," one of them said.

Helicopters strafed the streets with high-powered lights, throwing jagged shadows. A voice from above told the people on the street to disperse.

This was the first message conveyed verbally by the Phoenix police. They had not told the crowd to disperse before shooting their stun grenades and tear gas. There had been no warning whatsoever.

Now a new wind blew the gas down 3rd Street, enveloping the block. Those who had stopped to flush their eyes and catch their breath now had to run again. They held shirts, handkerchiefs and towels over their mouths.

Much of 3rd Street was still open to traffic. The police hadn't had time to close it yet, so cars and buses were unwittingly driving toward Monroe, into the gas. A protester holding a bandana over his mouth strode down the middle of the street, telling the drivers to keep their windows closed and to turn off their air conditioning. "There's tear gas in the air!" he

yelled. “Close your windows!”

At the corner of 3rd and Van Buren, in front of a Hooters restaurant, a few dozen people had gathered in the yellow air. “Did you see anything?” they asked. No one could figure out what instigated the police reaction. Inside the restaurant, a few dozen people, most of them looking like protesters, watched big-screen TVs, the events in Phoenix unfolding live on the news. “I have a right to be here!” a woman yelled to no one in particular. Nearby, someone had left a sign against a palm tree that said SAVE OUR COUNTRY.

Outside the Hooters, in the middle of Van Buren, a white man waved a neo-Nazi flag bigger than himself. He was having trouble getting it to unfold and fly the way he intended; it kept bunching up and wrapping itself around him. “Out of nowhere! Out of nowhere!” a man yelled to a group of protesters recovering from the gas. “Why didn’t they say, ‘Back up?’” a woman asked him. A pedicab driver emerged from the yellow fog on his three-wheeled bike. “I can’t fucking see!” he yelled into the intersection.

For the next hour, we saw what downtown Phoenix would look like in a war or under martial law. The relative civility that had reigned all day was gone. The police had overreacted, adding the spark to what was already a combustible mix. Somewhere in the city, there were twenty-four John Brown Gun Club members, all heavily armed. There were certainly a few Bikers for Trump still lingering. There were groups of

young men looking for a fight—I passed a group of four on Van Buren, one with a Confederate jacket. In an open-carry state, there could be any kind of fanatic who might see the opportunity to make a statement with a gun or with a car. As in Charlottesville, there were plenty of protesters walking and running on sidewalks; it was a target-rich environment.

Passing anyone on the street now was fraught. We looked at each other for signs of affiliation or intent. Another pair of young men passed me in the yellow darkness. They were wearing Trump shirts turned inside out, like deserting soldiers who remove their uniforms to blend into the civilian population. Helicopters circled, illuminating groups below as they ran down the streets and sidewalks, trying to get home or get hidden. There was no trust.

For the next few hours I walked around downtown Phoenix, expecting violence. A few blocks from Hooters I saw the curly-haired young man I’d been with at the barricade. Now he was doubled over and gagging. When he stood up, his eyes were swollen and pink.

“I got fucking tear-gassed in my fucking face!” he said. “Boom, right in my face. I can’t see shit!”

He was a student at Arizona State University. He gave me his name but I’ll call him James to protect his safety. He’d watched most of the Trump rally on television and then afterward decided to come out to see what was happening on the streets. He’d just arrived at the barricades when the tear gas

overtook the city. Now he, like hundreds of others, had run from the gas and had stopped to catch his breath.

“At first, honestly, I liked Trump,” James said. He wiped his face with his shirt. “He wasn’t a politician. And I didn’t want to see another politician go into the White House. My dad was an FBI agent and then he was Secret Service, so I kinda knew the backstage of being a politician. But now that Trump’s been president for a while, obviously it hasn’t been good.”

The turning point for James was Trump’s travel ban, prohibiting entry to the U.S. for travelers from seven Muslim-majority countries. “I’m half Middle Eastern,” James said. “I thought, ‘That’s not constitutional.’ I’m half Italian, too. We’re all foreigners.” James and I stood on the dark Phoenix street corner, watching unmarked police SUVs speed by. Eventually James went back to his dorm at ASU, dabbing his eyes with his T-shirt.

James’s position demonstrates the horrific outcomes when we fail to educate our young people and ourselves about the purpose and functioning of government. If a thoughtful young man like James, whose father worked in Washington, so distrusted politicians that he initially preferred Donald Trump to anyone with experience in government, it underlines our systemic failure to teach civics at home and in our schools, to impart any real understanding of the work of governing. To

untold millions of Americans, running the country was not much different from (and certainly no more important than) running a real-estate company and selling steaks with his name on them, as Trump had done.

James was a few lateral steps from Sean Allen Morley, the former wrestler I’d encountered earlier in the day, the anarchist who would rather live in a feral, *Mad Max* kind of world without laws, codes, order—a world of individuals without trust in each other or in any systems, a world without collective responsibility, a world of free radicals, a world where a wrestler-actor was just as qualified as the reality star to run the world’s largest democracy and command the most powerful military the world has ever known.

But then again, Morley would have pleased to see, in Phoenix, the breakdown of the state he loathed. A few hours after I’d met him, his dreams, and the nightmares of the John Brown militia, had come true. The police had tacitly declared a kind of martial law. The city was under their control and, in the night’s teargas haze, all order and rights were more or less suspended. The grid was smashed.

I heard the chorus of “Love Rollercoaster” blasting from a passing car and in its wake, like a fairy godmother, a woman driving a pedicab pulled up and offered me a ride. I got on. She was wearing shorts and sneakers and a tank top. She was a wiry woman in her forties with a scruffy voice and a surfer’s drawl.

"I've never seen anything like this," she said. "Not *ever!* I didn't know you can put pepper spray in downtown Phoenix! This is not *Chicago!*" She had a wide-eyed, constantly amazed way about her. She'd been gassed and pedaled out of the yellow fog with a passenger in tow. A couple had waved her down and had washed her eyes out with water. "Phoenix isn't *Little House on the Prairie*, but still," she said. "They just *pepper sprayed thousands of people*, apparently under the guise of getting them to disperse. That's *horrible!*"

We made a wide loop around downtown, passing groups of protesters in doorways and huddled next to SUVs, assessing their next move.

"This is my first political anything," the pedicab driver said. "I wasn't gonna patronize Trump's supporters, but my friends said, 'It's money, no matter what.' I said, 'I have principles!'" she joked. Most of her customers, for whatever reason, had been protesters. She stood up on her pedals and they squeaked as she sped up. "In case you can't tell, I can't stand him," she said about Trump. "All the screaming. Out there yelling all the time, belittling people." She had never watched an inauguration before, but watched Trump's. "It was kind of interesting, actually, in an I- can't-look-but-I-can't-stop-looking kind of way."

"Now the wind's carrying it," she said, nodding ahead to an approaching cloud of yellow gas. "That stuff is *something else.*" She stopped and turned around.

Eventually she dropped me off in front of a bar where two young white women stood on the sidewalk, watching the news being broadcast on the television inside. Their names were Hallie Knowlton and Hailey Shadd. They both had straight hair, both were residents of Phoenix, and both considered themselves politically neutral.

"We came down here to capture the craziness," Shadd said. "We were at a corner and there was this lady yelling at a police officer behind her," she said. "She started blaring the song 'Fuck Trump' and started dancing in middle of the street."

"It was funny," Knowlton said. "She really did try to instigate the police officer."

"He didn't react," Shadd said.

"We are totally in the middle," Knowlton said. "We have our own opinions, but we don't need to sit there and scream at each other just to get a point across. We just had a conversation with a girl who supported Trump."

"She was being antagonized by a bunch of guys," Shadd said.

"We said, 'We respect your opinion. We don't know why people have to harass you for it.' I think the nighttime brings out the weird in people," Knowlton said.

Far away, sirens wailed. On any day, Phoenix looks and feels like a settlement on Mars, but as we stood outside, the city truly felt like a troubled colony on another planet, where a slight atmospheric change, a small crack in the bubble, had

the power to reduce all humans to mere survival.

“I think this is just giving everyone an opportunity to express themselves,” Shadd said, “and not a lot of them know how.”

At the end of the night in Phoenix, when there were more cops on the streets than pedestrians, when the yellow fog that had descended on the city had cleared, I was walking on East Jefferson Street, very sad and very tired, when I saw a Carl’s Jr. It was still open and I was hungry.

The small staff inside, all of them young people of color, was friendly and ready to close. As I waited for my food, I looked around the restaurant. There were only two tables occupied. One by a pair of young protesters, and one by an elderly white man wearing a Trump shirt and a denim vest festooned with pins supporting Trump and various conservative interests. With him, sitting and eating blithely, was a young Latina girl, no more than ten, who seemed to be his grandchild.

Two young white men burst through the door. They were about twenty years old and were wearing white Trump T-shirts, but turned inside out like others I’d seen that night. These two young men had taken the time to remove their shirts, turn them inside-out and put them back on.

“Are you guys open?” one of them asked the Carl’s Jr. staff. The young Latino man working the cash register said

they were done serving food. He was professional and polite about it, but it was odd, given he’d taken my order a few minutes earlier.

“Please, sir?” one of the inside-out men said. “Some fries even? Water?” He explained that the police barriers that had been set up around the city had blocked his car, and he and his friend couldn’t get out. “We’ll eat anything you got,” he said.

The Carl’s Jr. employee gave the inside-out man a cup of water. “Thank you. Thank you, sir!” the man said. He took a sip and looked around the room. Behind him was a large-screen TV showing the rally on CNN, with Don Lemon commenting on Trump’s speech. The young white man looked at me, pointed to the screen and rolled his eyes. “You believe this?” he asked. Then his face registered that I wasn’t a Trump supporter. “Oh, you’re not...” He smiled.

I asked him why he and his friend were wearing their Trump shirts inside-out.

“*You* know,” he said, pointing out the window into the Phoenix night and whatever disquiet was still out there. “Just to avoid the hassle.” I noted that he and his friend were both still wearing red Make America Great Again hats, which they were. He laughed. The Carl’s Jr. employee brought him and his friend a bag of fries. “Thank you, thank you, sir!” the young man said, and the Carl’s Jr. staff went about cleaning the kitchen before closing.

We ate our fries while standing in the restaurant near the



front door, and I talked to the two young men, who were unfailingly polite and eager to debate the merits of Trump, about what the country needed and deserved. I told them how incongruous I found it, that they could be so good-mannered and open to discussion, when the man they were supporting—and this they admitted readily—was rude and unkind. “But at least he’s honest,” one of the young men said.

We explored this for a few minutes. It turned out that they did not think what Trump said was always strictly true. In fact, it did not matter to them so much what he said. What mattered was that Trump’s unstudied, unrehearsed way of expressing himself was itself evidence of honesty. These young men equated unfiltered expression with truth. Thus a politician who speaks carefully, who measures his or her words—or worse, who reads from a prepared speech—is being a politician, e.g., someone who does not tell the truth. But someone who speaks off the cuff, who tweets without any consultation from staff, who has no script, is inherently more honest. These young men, and millions of other Trump supporters, did not care so much about what was or was not the factual truth. They cared more—far more—that their elected leaders speak to them candidly. Even while lying.

We talked for about ten minutes more, and finally we all shook hands, told each other to be safe out there, and we went on our respective ways.

Outside the Carl’s Jr., there was a startling scene. At the light-rail station that runs along E. Jefferson Street, there were a few hundred people sitting and standing on the elevated platform, waiting for the train. It was about 10 p.m., long after the rally had ended and after the chaos the police had created. The streets were dark and empty everywhere else in downtown Phoenix, but then there was this mass of humans, sitting under canopied lights.

The people waiting for the train were every age and color, Trump supporters and opponents, everyone still dressed in the clothes they’d been wearing all day—shorts, T-shirts, sneakers, sandals. Behind the platform, nine cops stood, watching for trouble.

On the platform, a white man in a camouflage baseball hat and a blue Trump T-shirt sat on a bench holding an upside-down Trump placard. Next to him sat an African American woman wearing a T-shirt bearing the message GOOD VIBES ONLY. The man and woman were inches from each other and their body language was so casual and at ease that they might as well have been siblings. They were like actors who had dueled onstage and now had taken off their makeup and were ready to go home and get in the tub.

They and the hundreds of others waited peacefully for the train, and the police eyeing them warily had little to do. Like just about everyone gathered in Phoenix that day and night, the people on the platform could express their opinions with-

out violence or even drama. It was evident yet again that the limitless sea that is the American people are overwhelmingly reasonable and willing to disagree from a place of goodwill and calm fellowship. They do not seek out conflict and rancor, but the occupant of the White House gives them only irrational drama and a preposterous amount of misinformation. This inflames the outliers and puts the vast reasonable middle, which is most of us, in danger. And so, in the next months and years, there will be more rallies, more protests, and at these events there will be guns, and someday all these combustible elements will meet a spark, the guns will be used, and many people will die. But for now, the hundreds of Arizonans sat and stood on the train platform, everyone seeming exhausted and wanting to go home. They looked down the rail's parallel lines, waiting in the dark for the train to come.

## EPILOGUE

In the morning, after the rally and riot and after little sleep, I talked to Jeff Flake, then in the middle of his first term as senator from Arizona. I was still in Phoenix and he was elsewhere in Arizona—his people would not reveal where—and on the phone we were talking about decency in American life and American politics.

“I worry that too many good people are turning away from politics when they see the vitriol that’s on display,” he said. His voice sounded languorous and wheezy, but he talked openly and unguardedly. “One of the most stark examples is the baseball practice in June. All of the sudden, bullets are being fired at the field. I just remember thinking, ‘Why us? Who could look at a bunch of middle-aged members of Congress playing baseball and see the enemy?’”

It speaks to the relentless and multidirectional chaos of our

nation under Trump that I had forgotten about the shooting, which had happened only a few months earlier. And I had forgotten that Flake had been there. I apologized to him. “It’s obviously not something that happens every day,” he said.

On June 13, 2017, a gunman named James T. Hodgkinson opened fire on a baseball practice Republicans were holding in preparation for a friendly game between members of Congress. Hodgkinson, a Bernie Sanders supporter, was enraged by the election of Donald Trump, and shot at least 50 rounds into the field, aiming for Republicans and seriously wounding Representative Steve Scalise of Louisiana.

“After the first volley,” Flake recalled, “I turned toward the dugout and could see the bullets hitting the gravel in front of the dugout—that was where I had to run for any kind of shelter. And the thought that came to me was, ‘Really? Us? Here? Now?’ It seems so incongruous. It’s awful. That was a sobering experience.”

Flake is from Arizona and is a gun owner. He knows hunting and how to use firearms. But his understated way of explaining what it felt like to be shot at—“not something that happens every day”—speaks to the fact that as a nation we are accustomed to a kind of everyday violence that would be unconscionable in any other advanced society.

As the gunfire continued, Flake was in the dugout, applying pressure to the leg of a congressional aide who had been shot. Meanwhile, Scalise crawled from second base into the

outfield, struggling to put more distance between himself and the shooter. When Flake was told the shooter had been immobilized, he ran to Scalise and applied pressure to his wounds. After medical personnel arrived, Flake took Scalise’s phone and called Scalise’s wife so she wouldn’t have to hear about the shooting on the news first.

“I just spoke to Steve Scalise yesterday,” Flake told me. “He’s obviously still recovering, as are others. This was six years after the Giffords shooting, and I was in the hospital again, waiting to hear if one of my colleagues was going to pull through.”

On January 8, 2011, Gabby Giffords, a Democratic congresswoman representing Arizona’s 8th district, was holding a “Congress on Your Corner” constituent meeting in a Tucson grocery store parking lot. A 22-year-old man named Jared Lee Loughner pulled a Glock 19 semi-automatic pistol and shot Giffords in the head. He killed six others, including Gabe Zimmerman, a member of Giffords’ staff and a federal District Court Judge named John Roll. Christina-Taylor Green was born on September 11, 2001, and her photograph had been featured in a book called *Faces of Hope: Babies Born 9/11*. She was shot and killed by Loughner that day, too. She was nine years old.

After the shooting, Pima County Sheriff Clarence Dupnik worried that Arizona was uniquely welcoming to the kind of radicalism Loughner embodied. “When you look at unbal-

anced people, how they respond to the vitriol that comes out of certain mouths... the anger, the hatred, the bigotry that goes on in this country is getting to be outrageous. We have become the mecca for prejudice and bigotry.”

Giffords slowly recovered from the shooting. Though still needing extensive medical assistance, and with only fifty percent of her vision intact, she was able to attend President Obama’s State of the Union address one year later. As a friend and fellow Arizonan, Jeff Flake sat next to her during the speech. At one point during the speech, Giffords wanted to stand and clap, but couldn’t manage it herself. Flake helped her up and supported her as she applauded. Afterward, he was pilloried by Republican members of Congress who thought he was somehow consorting with the enemy.

“We’ve just gone too far,” Flake said. “I remember going to play basketball with President Obama. He invited a bipartisan group of members early in his first year to play basketball on the South Lawn, on the court there. I remember getting to the White House and a call was passed through the Capitol switchboard or something, and a woman was crying hysterically. ‘Don’t play basketball with that man!’ she said.”

Flake sighed. “I think we’ve given in to the politics of anger. I think we saw a lot of that manifested during the campaign, and we see it carry through events like last night in Phoenix. That was not a hopeful message, not an optimistic,

Reaganesque kind of message.” At the rally the night before, Trump took a few swings at John McCain and then said, “And nobody wants me to talk about your other senator who is weak on borders, weak on crime. Nobody wants me to talk about him. Nobody knows who he is.” Trump had hammered Flake on immigration issues before, in large part because Trump wanted to build a wall along the Arizona-Mexico border, and Flake dismissed the idea out of hand.

Flake grew up on a working cattle ranch in Snowflake, Arizona, one of eleven children. His father hired Mexican seasonal laborers, and Flake learned the necessity of practical border policies to the functioning of the American agricultural industry. Workers needed to be able to back and forth, as did livestock, wind and water. Flake has long been an advocate of Obama’s DACA action, known as the DREAM Act, which allows the children of immigrants, those who had been brought to the United States as small children, to stay without fear of deportation. These young people, more than 800,000 of them, had grown up as Americans and were enrolled in college, or employed, or even had families of their own—and through DACA were given a path to citizenship.

In Flake’s book, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, he extolled the brand of Western conservatism espoused by Barry Goldwater and Reagan. “We have to return to the politics of comity and inclusion,” Flake writes, “and reject the politics of xenophobia and demonization. But when there are so few con-

temporary examples of politics for the common good, where do we look for such a beacon?”

On the phone, I asked Flake what his Republican colleagues thought of the book.

“Many of them question my sanity to put a book like this out during the campaign,” Flake said. “But frankly, I thought it was important. I’m under no illusion that this makes my campaign easier. I’ve had tough primaries because I’ve taken a little different view on immigration than some of my colleagues, and that always ensures that I’ll have a tough primary race. But you get through it.”

Because Flake had survived an attempted mass-murder on a baseball field two months prior, and because his colleague Gabby Giffords was permanently physically marred by a gunman, and because Flake lives in a state with at least one million guns and virtually no laws controlling their use, and because he has five kids, I asked him if he ever thinks it’s time to get out of politics, given the climate and the fact that the dangers are so self-evidently real and immediate.

“No, I love what I do,” Flake said. “It’s an honor to represent the state of Arizona, now more than ever. I think it’s important to show you can get reelected without screaming and yelling and ascribing the worst motives to your opponent. But it’s not worth it if you’re just going to mark time. You have to be accomplishing something. If you are, then it’s extremely rewarding. But you have to do something other than just

mark time.”

I asked if there was anything that would force him out of politics.

“No, I think it’s important,” he said. “I think it’s that important. You’ve got to stay in there and fight.”

On October 24, 2017, Jeff Flake announced he would not seek another term. It was reported later that Trump was so intent on ridding Arizona of Flake that before the Phoenix rally in August, he met backstage with Arizona state treasurer Jeff DeWit and former state GOP chairman Robert Graham, two potential challengers to Flake. (DeWit had flown to the rally on Air Force One.) According to three people at the backstage meeting, Trump referred to Flake as “the flake,” and vowed to unseat him. Republican pollsters deduced that without Trump’s support, Flake would not survive the primary.

“Steve Bannon added another scalp to his collection,” said Andy Surabian, an ally of Trump and Bannon. The candidate Bannon favored to replace Flake was Kelli Ward, an archconservative former state senator who has said, “I’d love to see the U.N. leave the United States, and maybe the U.S. leave the U.N.” and “taxation is theft.” Ward quickly garnered the endorsement of Fox News host Sean Hannity.

In announcing his retirement, Flake delivered a plaintive speech on the Senate floor. “I’m aware that there’s a segment of my party that believes that anything short of complete and un-

questioning loyalty to a president who belongs to my party is unacceptable and suspect,” Flake said. “The notion that one should stay silent as the norms and values that keep America strong are undermined, and as alliances and agreements that ensure the stability of the entire world are routinely threatened by the level of thought that goes into 140 characters—the notion that we should say or do nothing in the face of such mercurial behavior—is ahistorical and profoundly misguided.”

“He is one of the finest human beings I’ve met in politics,” said Chuck Schumer, the Democratic Minority Leader the day of Flake’s announcement. “He is moral, upright and strong, and he will be missed by just about everybody in the Senate.”

“I knew that he was thinking about it,” John McCain said to reporters that day, “but I’m very sorry it’s happened. He’s one of the most honorable men I’ve ever known.”

McCain died less than a year later. Before his death, he let it be known that he did not want Trump attending his funeral. As if to retaliate, Trump lowered the White House flag to half-mast for the minimum time required by law.

Retired Arizona senator Jon Kyl was appointed to fill McCain’s seat, but Flake’s empty seat was up for grabs during the 2018 midterm election. The race attracted an array of Arizona’s prominent Republicans, including Rep. Ward, state treasurer DeWit, Rep. David Schweikert and even Sheriff Joe

Arpaio, who Trump had pardoned a few days after the rally in Phoenix. Eventually Rep. Martha McSally, a former fighter pilot who served in Afghanistan, won the GOP nomination and seemed formidable in a state that had elected only one Democrat to the Senate since 1968.

McSally’s opponent was Kyrsten Sinema, a three-term Congresswoman from the Phoenix suburbs. On paper, Sinema would be considered a long shot in a state like Arizona, where registered Republicans outnumbered Democrats by 300,000. Sinema had once been a Green Party activist and was a vocal critic of the war in Iraq; indeed, she had once been photographed at an anti-war rally while wearing a pink tutu. She was unmarried and bisexual. When she had been elected to Congress in 2012, she had become the first openly bisexual member of Congress in American history.

McSally had been critical of Trump during his 2016 campaign, but decided to attach her candidacy firmly to Trump’s policies and persona. She had previously supported the DREAM Act but now campaigned against it. She painted Sinema as a radical; during their one televised debate, she accused Sinema of treason. In contrast, Sinema ran a moderate campaign that highlighted her history of bipartisan cooperation in the House and her support of affordable healthcare. Most pre-election polls favored McSally.

By the end of election night November 6, McSally was ahead but the race was too close to call. Because seventy-five

percent of Arizonans vote by mail, it took four business days to declare the winner. As the votes were being counted, Trump tweeted a charge of possible fraud: “Just out — in Arizona, SIGNATURES DON’T MATCH. Electoral corruption – Call for a new Election? We must protect our Democracy!” He did not provide proof of any wrongdoing, and his charge was not corroborated by election officials. By November 12, Martha McSally had received 1,059,124 votes. Kyrsten Sinema had received 1,097,421.

In Sinema’s acceptance speech, she paid tribute to John McCain and said, “Arizonans had a choice between two very different ways forward: one focused on fear and party politics, and one focused on Arizona and the issues that matter to everyday families. Arizona rejected what has become far too common in our country: name-calling, petty personal attacks, and doing and saying whatever it takes to get elected.”

“Congratulations on a race well run, and won,” Jeff Flake said to Sinema via tweet. “It’s been a wonderful honor representing Arizona in the Senate. You’ll be great.”

The Arizona Senate race had been overshadowed by the Ted Cruz-Beto O’Rourke contest in Texas, and the gubernatorial races in Georgia and Florida, both which held the possibility of bringing the first African American governors to those states. But what happened in Arizona was remarkable, and demonstrated the inscrutable malleability of the electorate.

A moderate Republican, Jeff Flake, had been forced out by the hardline conservatives in the White House and in Arizona—a state with two Republican senators and a Republican governor. To contend for the open Senate seat, the Democratic party nominated a bisexual former anti-war activist, and she won.

As if sensing the change in the weather, a few days after the election, Flake said he was considering challenging Donald Trump for the Republican nomination in 2020. “I’ve not ruled it out. I’ve not ruled it in,” Flake said to reporters. “I hope somebody does [run], just to remind Republicans what it means to be conservative and what it means to be decent. We’ve got to bring that back. You can whip up the base for a cycle or two, but it wears thin. Anger and resentment are not a governing philosophy.”

