RENEWAL

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PREFACE: LET AMERICA BE THE DREAM THE DREAMERS DREAMED

For the past five years, Americans have lived in a state of continual crisis. Our adrenaline is depleted; our adjectives for outrage and incredulity are dull and stale from overuse. Partisan politics has dramatized a bleak landscape of division, without nuance, reckoning, or reflection.

Beneath the surface of parties and politicians lie deeper and unalterable forces of demography and technology, roiling not only the United States but the world. Many countries are confronting systemic racism, mass unemployment, and growing economic inequality, exacerbated by the gravest global pandemic in more than a century and an accelerating threat to the livability of the planet.

Many countries are also facing deep challenges to national identity. For Americans, 2026—only five years from now—will be the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. In 1976, Americans in power—the Bicentennial Commission and other worthies—had no ambivalence in describing the year as the 200th anniversary of the founding of the nation. In 2026 that confident certainty will be hard to find. Many Americans will likely think of their ancestors who were not included in that founding. Indigenous Americans may look back to the ancient tracks of their ancestors many millennia ago; Americans who are descended from enslaved Africans may think back to the disembarking of a ship in Jamestown in 1619; Latinx Americans, Asian Americans, and Americans of many other ethnicities may look for their own stories in the grand national narrative.

2026 will be a year of celebration and commemoration, but also of questioning, listening, arguing, and reflecting. Who is US? Can "we"—all of us—embrace a far broader set of traditions and cultures as American, even as we still make room for those rites and rituals deeply embedded in European-American history? Will it be possible, once we come to understand that no one group can be accurately described without a hyphen, to give them all up and just be American?

This book seeks to answer those questions. It is part personal essay, part reflection, and part manifesto. Although it speaks to the tumult in the nation and the world, it begins with events much closer to home: my own experience of crisis and change. As I describe throughout the book, an external upheaval in my life led to an internal reckoning and, ultimately, to a journey of renewal.

I am well aware that mine is a privileged tale. Many people whom I know or read about have had far worse crises in their lives: injury, illness, oppression, violence, exile, and aching, unimaginable loss. Still, I hope that you will find in my story traces and echoes of your own, and thus that you will imagine what renewal could mean for you.

My larger goal is to encourage us all to reflect more on what individual experience can teach us about the path to collective renewal. We often forget that personal transformation can illuminate and inspire social change. The analogy is apt, for to transform themselves, organizations, communities, and entire societies need to do many of the same things that individuals must do. They must face both the past and present with radical, even brutal honesty. Yet they must also preserve what is worth preserving. They must take risks and build resilience. Their leaders, at every level, must develop new ways of leading and sharing power. And they must be able to look forward to a genuinely new future, a dream that everyone can share.

I hope that my experience and knowledge—as a scholar, leader, entrepreneur, public commentator, feminist, and foreign policy expert who spent thirty years focused more on the world than on my own country—can guide you in thinking about renewal on multiple levels and in moving from one to the other. As the author of a book called *The Idea That Is America* and as CEO of an organization called New America, I have been thinking hard about American renewal for many years. More recently, the staff at New America, as in so many institutions, have steadily demanded that all of us live the principles we profess to the world in our relations with one another, requiring a process of organizational renewal as well.

Before proceeding, given that the book moves across many levels and addresses questions of personal and national identity, let me add a word about my use of the pronoun "we." In 2012, when I was fifty-four and had just left a two-year job in the State Department that I had always wanted, I wrote an article in *The Atlantic* titled "Why Women Still Can't Have It All" that went viral.[1] I suddenly found myself on the speaking circuit, talking to audiences mostly of women across the country about how far U.S. society still needed to travel to achieve gender equality.

In many question-and-answer sessions, I quickly realized that the feminist narrative that I had grown up with—the Betty Friedan–inspired story of suburban women home with their kids who had to fight to join the working world on a par with men—was a story limited to white women, and relatively affluent white women at that.[2] Black women have almost always worked, often as the primary breadwinners of their families. Immigrant women from many different countries and cultures have had no choice but to work alongside their husbands to give their children (and themselves) a better life.

I learned, far later than I should have, to be much more conscious and careful about using "we" to talk about all women, or, indeed, about all members of any group. That universalizing "we" is more often a mark of power and privilege than of solidarity. "We" have that privilege precisely because someone is choosing to invite us to speak or to publish our writing. Therefore, as a leader, writer, and speaker, I now try to explain what "we" I am talking about as quickly as possible and to speak for others as little as possible.

In moving from the personal to the political, the book assumes an unorthodox form. I piece together memories, reflections, and research in a structure that owes more to fiction than nonfiction, to novelists who tell their stories from many different perspectives at once. Think of it as a serial narrative, inviting you to add pieces of your own.

When I imagine you, my reader, I imagine first another woman, perhaps an affluent, white, straight woman like me, but I hope also many women who are very different

from me. I think particularly of the thousands of women I have spoken to and the millions I have written for over many years, women of my own generation but also the extraordinary generation of young women who are coming into their own in so many ways—inspired by women leaders from the boardroom to the operating theater, director's chair, classroom, campaign trail, and now the vice presidency.

I am writing equally for men, however—men like my father, brothers, friends, colleagues, sons, nephews, students, and mentees, as well as men everywhere who embrace change. Many of you may feel that the masculine ideal you grew up with needs revision and renewal. Parts of this book seek to complicate and challenge the traditional stories of pioneers, cowboys, and explorers who shaped the United States, but not to erase them.

Politically, I lean left. But for those of you who lean right, I remember you in so many auditoriums as I crisscrossed the country seven years ago, arguing for the value of care and the importance of our families. We often found a patch of common ground there. I hope we can find another in shared loved of country.

Demographically, I trend old and white. But for younger readers, white and of color alike, you have the greatest stake in a world renewed. Moreover, all of you will face moments of humiliation and despair at some point in your lives, when you will need to learn how to run toward the criticism and seek renewal.

Nationally, I am American, with old Virginia and North Carolina roots on one side and first-generation Belgian family on the other. At the national level, this book focuses primarily on American renewal, but for those of you outside the United States, I hope that you find insights that you can apply to your lives, your organizations, and your nations.

For Americans, we do not need to agree, and almost certainly will not on many points. What matters is that we can face and accept a common past—told and held by *all* Americans, even as we bear its weight very differently—and imagine a common future as a plurality nation.

RENEWAL

INTRODUCTION

When Leadership Means Having to Say You're Sorry

It was the worst day of my professional life.

I rode the train from Princeton to Washington that morning, lead in my stomach, reviewing and editing my remarks one last time. Waiting for the elevator in my building, I squared my shoulders and arranged my face to be able to greet our receptionist and other staff members on the way to my office. At 2:00, I made my way down the stairs and into our main event space to speak to a packed crowd of well over one hundred employees, with dozens more listening in by phone.

I took a deep breath and began with an apology. New America, the organization I led, was in the midst of a full-blown crisis caused by an employee's accusation that we had decided to fire him and his colleagues due to pressure from a funder. The accusation was neither accurate nor fair, either with regard to New America or to the funder, but it was calculated, successfully, to create a media storm and to put New America and my leadership in the worst possible light. "The result," I told the staff, "has been a set of events that has damaged New America's reputation for intellectual integrity and independence in the public eye, a reputation that is our lifeblood. I stand here now not to defend but to apologize to all of you that this episode has imperiled the extraordinary work we do and to figure out what I and we can do to repair the damage going forward. I'm sorry."

For the next ninety minutes, I answered tough questions from the floor and from current and former New America fellows on the phone, including celebrated writers and investigative reporters. One young employee asked, given several bad communications decisions I had made, how could the staff trust my future decisions? Another wondered why I had waited so long to take action against the employee in question. All I could do was to acknowledge that although I had not done what I was accused of, I had mishandled the entire situation, and to reaffirm that I was ready to listen and learn and do the best I could to grow and improve.

Toward the end, a seasoned Washington hand stood up to say: "This doesn't happen in DC; leaders don't apologize and answer hard questions." Perhaps half the room broke into applause, but the rest sat on their hands. A few members of my leadership team also stood up to speak and share responsibility; others remained silent.

The days wore on. When I look back, the time is a blur: my senior team, our hard-pressed communications staff, our board members, all of our staff who had to explain and defend in response to questions from their families and friends—we all just kept putting one foot ahead of the other. We responded to the crisis as best we could while also doing our daily work.

The essence of the attack was the claim that I and New America were intellectually corrupt, bowing to funders' demands at the expense of our objectivity. The media gleefully repeated the charge without examining how much of our work was and is deeply critical of concentrations of power in our country and our willingness, since our founding, to speak truth to power, regardless of who funds us.

In the trial by press, thirty-eight out of thirty-eight media accounts found against us, accepting that we had actually given in to explicit or implicit funder pressure. Many of those critics were people I knew, people whom I thought would not assume the worst of me, at least not without talking to me first. My Twitter feed soon disabused me of that idea. The things being hurled at me—and through me at New America—were so ugly and so impossible to respond to in 140 or even 280 characters that I quickly realized sanity lay in staying off social media altogether.

I forced myself to go to various events in DC, with my head held as high as I could manage. I wrote as many of New America's friends and supporters as I could, to explain what had actually happened. In turn, I treasured daily messages from friends, and often just acquaintances, who took the time to tell me about a similar experience they had gone through and to offer support and encouragement. Others were silent. Did they not know? If so, I was glad, and certainly did not want to spread the word. Or were they waiting to see which way the wind would blow, a favorite Washington pastime? Worse, did they actually think I was guilty?

Between September and November 2017, I knew that my job was on the line, and rightly so. I was responsible for an organization of some 150 people—thinkers, writers, researchers, community activists, and technologists who worked alongside finance, operations, human resources, development, and communications teams. In the worst-case scenario, if the foundations that provided most of our funding were to stop that funding, livelihoods, careers, and families could be on the line. The work we do, important work of policy research, advocacy, and experimentation on subjects such as education, care, political reform, work-life balance, open and secure technology, and foreign policy, could be imperiled. The New America board had to decide whether the best response for the institution as a whole was to fire me and start fresh. Some board members had been in on the initial decision to let the employee go, but regardless, we were in a mess and I was the leader who had gotten us into it and failed to respond in ways that might have mitigated the damage.

Amid what felt like an earthquake to those of us at New America, the world continued. Hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees were pouring over the Myanmar border into Bangladesh. Tensions between North Korea and the United States continued to mount. Facebook announced that it had found five hundred fake Russian "troll" accounts that it was shutting down. A gunman killed fifty-eight people and wounded many more in a mass shooting in Las Vegas. We all reminded one another that what felt so momentous in our world was a very small blip in the larger universe.

Personally, I was in a very dark place. October is always a period of the year when the shortening of the days presses on me like a physical weight, when I must summon all my energy to ward off what other family members and I refer to, jokingly but not so jokingly, as "the rising tide of despair." The technical term is "seasonal affective disorder," or SAD; the reality is a creeping sadness that tracks the waning of the light. I usually fight it with exercise, extra sleep, and time with friends, but now I was trying to keep my chin up for others at New America while staring down a black hole that seemed all too real. My husband, Andy, my siblings, my parents, and even my sons were there for me as they always are, but to little avail.

I knew, objectively, that my troubles were small in the larger scheme of things, that I had far more to be grateful for than to worry about. Still, I was a fifty-eight-year-old woman who had left the security of a tenured professorship to run a nonprofit organization, who had left a foreign policy career to focus more than half of my time on domestic issues, who was the lead breadwinner in my family, who had always prided myself on my integrity and independence—and who was now adrift. In the early morning hours when the gremlins of catastrophic thinking take over, I could see it all come tumbling down. I would be disgraced and out of a job on grounds that would make it very difficult for me to get another one. In my world, the world of ideas, research, and public service of various kinds, sacrificing intellectual independence to funder pressure is a betrayal of our deepest values.

Disgrace and self-doubt go hand in hand. I began to ask myself whether I really was a leader, or at least whether I was a good one. I often give talks on leadership, and always make the point, particularly to audiences of young women, that I did not think of myself as a leader until my late thirties, and then only after my husband prompted me to put myself up for the presidency of the leading professional organization in my field. Still, for the past twenty-odd years, being a leader has become an important part of my identity—as an executive, author, teacher, mentor, and parent. Now, however, friends and even some family members were gently suggesting that perhaps my true strength lay more in thought leadership than organizational leadership.

Lying there in the dark, I also had to confront the possibility that this crisis was part of a pattern. As I will relate, I had had a number of knocks over the previous six or seven years, expectations dashed and revelations of the ways others thought and talked about me that were far from the way I saw myself. That gap is true of almost everyone, of course—people talk behind our backs. It is just that in the age of leaked emails and social media, we are more likely to be confronted with it.

The criticisms or judgments of others may be motivated by jealousy, or spite, or the simple human desire to be part of an in-group by making others part of the out-group. They may be the product of deep bias—racial, gender, class, and other sources of difference—in which case the task is to push back hard and not allow them to undermine often fragile self-esteem. Still, finding out what others truly think of us, based on their words and actions, can be a mirror that some of us, at least, need the courage to look into. *Why* is what we see—so shaped by what we want to see and what we allow ourselves to see—so different from what others apparently see? I was preparing to find out.

As the weeks and months marched on, New America began to right the ship, with other members of the leadership team stepping up and staff members rallying around a new mission statement and an even higher set of standards for transparency and integrity for future funding. That mission statement commits us to "renewing the promise of America by continuing the quest to realize our nation's highest ideals."

Why renewal and not reinvention or restoration? Renewal means to "make new, fresh, or strong again,"[7] a concept that looks backward and forward at the same time. *Re*new; R*enew*. The "re" is a constant returning, to our past but also to our ideals; the "new" is creating something that has not existed before.[8]

Reinvention starts fresh, while renewal begins with something already there. Some parts of what is there must be rejected, but other parts can be celebrated. Renewal will require Americans to figure out what we can be proud of as well as what we must condemn and repent.

Restoration, on the other hand, is something very different: an effort to turn back the clock. To achieve the energy and power of renewal requires profound change. In *The Fire Next Time,* James Baldwin writes of the need both "to celebrate what is constant" and "to be able and willing to change." "I speak of change not on the surface but in the depths," he continues, "change in the sense of renewal."[9]

Our Constitution has survived by changing with the times, through formal and informal amendments and ongoing judicial interpretation. Yet the distinction between restoration, reinvention, and renewal lies at the crux of many judicial battles. Some judges and legal scholars, who call themselves "originalists," want to pin us down to a specific interpretation of a word or clause held hundreds of years ago by propertied white men in a deeply racist, sexist, and classist age. Others, often labeled as "judicial activists" on both the left and the right, would reinvent the rules that govern us according to contemporary political need. Renewal is in between, constrained by the text in the absence of the national political will to amend it but offering a new understanding of that text by applying the soaring words and universal vision set forth in the Preamble, the Declaration of Independence, and other founding documents to a very different America.

Renewal is also different from renovation, a distinction that has taken me a long time to appreciate. When I would talk about "renewing America" at staff meetings at New America, many of my colleagues heard something that sounded like "making America great again," a phrase and concept that ignores the many ways in which our past was most definitely *not* great for many Americans. I would explain that my concept of renewal was very different, that it was like ripping out the parts of a house or building that were outdated, ugly, or dangerous but keeping the parts that had beauty and strength: the foundation, the frame, old walls and moldings, the original wood floors. Many towns and cities across America are doing just that: abandoning twentieth-century malls and rediscovering their nineteenth-century downtowns, renovating them physically and finding new uses for old spaces. Banks become restaurants; movie theaters become meeting halls or makerspaces; shops become galleries.[10]

We needed to renew the country the same way, I would say. Keep the frame and the foundation (we call the drafters of the Constitution "framers," after all), accept good parts of our history, but find, face, and rip out the outdated, ugly, and dangerous parts.