

How Did We Get Here?
A Presentation by Penny Gross
to LLI Class at NOVA Annandale
June 17, 2025

Introduction

Living in Northern Virginia places us right in the white-hot center of global politics! Living in that “bubble” and bombarded by the 24/7 information cycle, we sometimes might forget that this is a huge nation – geographically, socially, economically, culturally, politically. I was born and raised in the West which, I hope, has given me a somewhat broader perspective about politics and the American condition. When I first moved here after college, I figured out pretty quickly some basic differences between the East and the West. We don’t have Ivy League colleges in the West. We didn’t fight the Civil War. And everyone came from somewhere else, so the question I got from someone in Richmond “Where did your people come from?” left me puzzled as to why one would even inquire.

To understand how we got here, we must look at the various puzzle pieces that make up the United States. The beginnings of the nation in industrial New England and along the mid-Atlantic. The impact of slavery, King Cotton, and the plantations of the Old South. The hardscrabble hollows of Appalachia. The vast prairies of the Midwest. The awesome beauty of the Rocky Mountain states which once was, fittingly, the final frontier. The high deserts of the Mountain West. The rain forests and rich soils of the Pacific Northwest. The Spanish influence on California and the American Southwest. Layer on top of all that culture and geography the many diverse faith communities, indigenous tribes, immigrant groups, and the changing local economies

that provide jobs for all levels of skill, and you have a fascinating “lasagna,” stew, hot pot, or bimbimbap.

As we navigate through history and politics that have led us to 2025, I hope you will keep in mind those many pieces that make up today’s American jigsaw puzzle. Most of those pieces will fit together, some will need to be flipped around to fit, and a few, maybe, as usual, will fall on the floor!

Let’s begin...

In the summer of 2016, I attended my high school reunion in Oregon (I won’t tell you how many years it had been since graduation), and I was one of three alums invited to make a formal speech at the reunion dinner. My presentation, of course, focused on a lifetime in elective politics in the Nation’s Capitol. A classmate asked if “that guy” (referring to Donald Trump) actually could get elected. I told her I hoped not, but that we’ve seen strange things happen in free elections. The nation, and democracy, survived the first Trump Administration. Can we survive the second?

How did we get here? I think you have to go back many administrations, nearly 100 years, to figure that out. Herbert Hoover was a civil engineer and humanitarian, elected at a time when overspeculation, and corporate stocks, boomed – with little regulation or oversight by the government. Corporate leaders and cabinet officials evaded taxes, legally, as they amassed fortunes in the boom economy.

According to Samuel Eliot Morison, author of the *Oxford History of the American People*, published in 1964, noted that a Harvard economist “exposed the ‘honeyfugling, hornswoggling, and skullduggery’ of corporate practices, but not enough people listened.” Hoover’s administration was much maligned for Black Friday and the Great Depression, and his lackluster response to the economic crisis led to his overwhelming defeat by Franklin Roosevelt in 1932. We should remember that Depression-era America was poor, with a soaring unemployment rate, farms failing on depleted soils, and a struggling military. In 1932, thousands of World War I veterans and their supporters marched on Washington to demand the “bonus” promised to them by legislation in 1924, but which, by law, would not be paid out until 1945. *Imagine having to wait 27 years for something earned by your 1918 wartime service.*

FDR promised a New Deal, but it was tough love, and it took more than a decade to achieve. He established a “brain trust,” essentially an unofficial cabinet, many of whom were more important than the actual cabinet. In his first Hundred Days, FDR introduced legislative and executive initiatives – including the Emergency Banking Act, the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Federal Emergency Relief Act, the Tennessee Valley Authority Act, the Truth in Securities Act, the Glass-Steagall Banking Act, and the Farm Credit Act. Congress also agreed to abandon the gold standard – all in the first hundred days. The CCC alone provided jobs for 300,000 unemployed young men by that August, and more than 2 ½ million by the beginning of World War II. A far cry from the first hundred days of the current administration!

The New Deal was not without a lot of critics and pain. In my own family, I discovered that my grandfather, who worked as a switchman on

the railroad, was able to obtain a \$50 loan from the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen to “save” the house that he had purchased for my grandmother and mother. The following year, he applied for another \$50 loan, but was rejected because “we already gave you a loan last year.” He lost the house in town and the family moved to an old house near the Willamette River that flooded regularly.

The National Industrial Recovery Act was designed to regulate or codify numerous industries and set work hours and minimum wages, forbidding child labor. Title 1 of the NRA was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1935. The second part of the Act, the Works Progress Administration, or WPA, was allowed to stand, and spent billions on flood control, reforestation, rural electrification and utilities – things we take for granted today, or did. The WPA also set up projects for artists, musicians, writers, and performers, the harbinger of the NEA and NEH now under attack by Trump and DOGE. Later in FDR’s first term, Congress passed the Social Security Act, which changed forever the retirement opportunities of American workers.

Some of the New Deal initiatives did not pass Supreme Court muster, and FDR suggested that he should be authorized to appoint one justice for each sitting justice over the age of 70. Six of the nine sitting justices were septuagenarians and FDR wanted a change. Rebuffed in his attempt to pack the court, he got the changes he wanted over time as the old justices died or retired during the following four years, and he appointed six new justices, including Hugo Black, Felix Frankfurter and William O. Douglas. In historian Morison’s assessment, “FDR’s administration saved 20th century American capitalism by purging it of gross abuses and forcing an accommodation to the larger public interest.” In a 1938 fireside chat, FDR said that “we in America know

that our democratic institutions can be preserved and made to work.” He further observed “the only bulwark of continuing liberty is a government strong enough to protect the interests of the people, and a people strong enough and well enough informed to maintain its sovereign control over the government.” That made America “the hope of the human race.”

At the same time, communism, fascism, and demagoguery were on the rise, in this country and around the world, gradually leading to World War II as Hitler invaded Poland and its neighbors, Italy sought to consolidate power in Africa, and Japan attacked the U.S. at Pearl Harbor. FDR had been re-elected for an unprecedented third term in 1940, and again in 1944, even though we know now that he was ravaged by illness that was kept hidden, and died in office before the Allies prevailed over Germany and Japan, including the use of the atomic bomb.

Harry Truman acceded to the presidency with very little preparation, but his midwestern stubbornness proved to be formidable as he navigated the postwar economy, putting Europe back together, and dealing with the House Unamerican Activities Committee and Senator Joseph McCarthy. The shadow of communism permeated everything in domestic culture – the arts, business, education, and politics. Morison termed McCarthy as “one of the most colossal liars in the history of our country.” But Morison never met Donald Trump!

By 1952, the Republicans had been in the minority for 20 years, and party leaders were determined to change that. Ohio Senator Robert Taft was the likely candidate, but had made many enemies, especially via the Taft-Hartley Act, and the party recruited war hero General Dwight D. Eisenhower as their standard bearer. Ike didn’t have any political experience, but his military reputation and big grin captivated

the electorate, and the GOP soundly defeated Adlai Stevenson and his crew of “eggheads.” Ike created the Interstate Highway System that made travel across our big country more popular and contributed to the car culture that continues to this day. His cautionary words about the rise of the military-industrial complex fell on deaf ears for the most part, but his administration also saw *Brown vs. the Board of Education* integrate schools. Nonetheless, Ike had to send federal troops to Little Rock to maintain order as two Black students enrolled in high school.

Ike was popular enough to have run for a third term, but now there was that pesky XXII Amendment that passed with the support of Republicans who remembered FDR’s four campaigns. The nation was turning to a young, seemingly more vigorous John F. Kennedy, also a war hero brimming with charisma. The 1960 campaign also was marked with a new campaign tool – television. Voters got to see their candidates up close and personal, even if only on a black and white television screen. Kennedy’s victory over Richard Nixon was very close – only 100,000 votes separated the two nationwide. Kennedy’s term began with the disastrous Bay of Pigs debacle, and much of his 1000 days was consumed with foreign relations – the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Berlin Wall, *Alianza de Progreso*, the Peace Corps, the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, and what was becoming the Vietnam War. Kennedy aroused the enmity of racial, religious, and political bigots, but he gave them no quarter, preferring to spend his energy and political capital on civil rights, the space race, and insisting that American policy must be guided by learning and reason.

That may have set the stage for his successor, Lyndon Johnson, to enact so much Great Society legislation. However, as much as LBJ led the fight for civil rights, voting rights, and higher education in the

celebrated 89th Congress, he was mired in the growing war in Vietnam. Public protests grew, too, and led to his decision not to seek re-election in 1968.

The late 1960s saw upheaval across the nation, as fear and uncertainty, and the tragedies of war were broadcast into American living rooms every night via television network news. The time was ripe for a change of party, and Richard Nixon finally made it to the presidency. Nixon “opened” China, paid more attention to Native American policy, and surrounded himself with sycophants who eventually were investigated, tried, and convicted in the Watergate scandal. Any Nixon accomplishments were overshadowed by his enemies list, his involvement in the Watergate coverup, and eventual resignation as president, the first in the nation’s nearly 200 years of democracy. What may be forgotten is that some of Nixon’s young henchmen “Dirty Tricksters” wrote the book that became the National Conservative Political Action Committee, and other right-wing and evangelical Christian campaigns that are still with us, such as Roger Stone and Paul Manafort. Other young Nixonians – Kevin Phillips, Lee Atwater, Paul Weyrich and Terry Dolan – are gone, but their templates and ideas are not. And many of those plans were hatched right here in Northern Virginia!

Gerald Ford inherited an Oval Office rife with bad juju and struggled to reset the institutional and political damage done by his predecessor. It was a thankless task. His pardon of Nixon, done to end the long national nightmare of Watergate, had the opposite effect, as oil prices and inflation doomed his un-elected time as president.

Jimmy Carter was a transition president, unknown to Washington and unfamiliar with Washington politics. The energy crisis, Iran hostages and cancellation of US participation in the Moscow Olympics made him a one-term president whose star burned brighter in his long retirement as a humanitarian whose spiritual beliefs were widely admired around the world.

Hollywood actor and former California governor Ronald Reagan began his two-term presidency with a sweeping 1980 national victory that helped the GOP re-take the Senate for the first time since 1953. It also cemented the rise of the radical right, the Moral Majority, and the Iran-Contra scandal. Reagan's folksy personal popularity, we now know, masked an increasing dementia in his last couple of years as president, a health situation that was hidden by his family and his handlers.

His Vice President, George H. W. Bush, came to the presidency with a resume of public service that began with flying combat missions in World War II when he was barely 20. Personally popular, Bush 1 was criticized for raising taxes in violation of a campaign promise, and the Persian Gulf War, which featured Operation Desert Storm. Many of us remember the remarkable television coverage of General Norman Schwarzkopf directing strategic air strikes in that conflict. But a successful military venture was not enough to keep Bush in office. After 12 years of Republicans in the White House, young Arkansas governor Bill Clinton was inaugurated in 1993.

Clinton was the first Baby Boomer president, handsome, charismatic, and commanding on the stump. Campaigning on "It's the economy, stupid!," Clinton brought in newer, younger, and Southern

staff, and teamed with his wife, Hilary, to garner support for legislation, especially health care. This was the first time, probably since Eleanor Roosevelt, that a First Lady was seen as proactive on issues rather than simply a hostess at the Executive Mansion. But Clinton's terms also faced the deadliest mass shooting in history at Columbine High School, and the Monica Lewinski scandal, which led to the first impeachment of a president in 130 years. Lacking a supermajority vote in the Senate, Clinton was acquitted.

Remember the hanging chads? The 2000 election created a constitutional crisis for the nation, as the Bush/Gore race ultimately was decided by the Supreme Court in counting the Florida votes. Democrat Al Gore actually won the popular vote by about 500,000 votes, but lost the electoral college by just five votes. George W. Bush became the second son of a president to win the presidency, matching John Adams/John Quincy Adams in the earliest days of our Republic. Bush had been president for less than a year when 9/11 happened, and his administration was pretty much defined by his response to the worst attack on America since Pearl Harbor. "See something. Say something" has become a template for both security and suspicion in the decades since. His response to Hurricane Katrina also doomed his reputation.

By 2008, the country was ready for another change, and it came in the form of Barack Obama, the first Black candidate for president. That year also tested the nation's "taste" for diversity on both major party tickets. Obama and Hilary Clinton battled it out in the primaries, and on the Republican side, John McCain won his party's nomination over Mike Huckabee and Mitt Romney. McCain selected Alaska Governor Sarah Palin as his running mate, and we all probably remember the many faux pas she made during that campaign, and after. Obama's

significant victory brought millions of people to the Mall for his first inauguration.

Obama and his young family brought a new vigor to Washington, and a pledge by the Republicans to ensure that he would be a one-term president, aided by Donald Trump who questioned his birth certificate and whether he actually was a citizen. Obama's legislative victories included the Affordable Care Act, which has withstood court and congressional challenges to date. But Obama's election, and subsequent re-election, unleashed latent racial hatreds many had hoped had been put to rest long ago.

Hopes were high in 2016 as Democrats selected Hilary Clinton as their standard bearer, the first woman to head a major party ticket. Many Virginians were delighted when she chose Tim Kaine "America's Dad" as her running mate. The Clinton/Kaine ticket couldn't possibly lose to the Trump/Pence ticket, could it? The nation wouldn't fall for a narcissistic megalomaniac who declared bankruptcy multiple times, would it? Well, yes it would.

The election of Donald Trump in 2016 was a surprise and a disappointment for millions, and probably a surprise for the winner, who appeared to be the dog that caught the car and now didn't know what to do with it. It was another case of Democrats winning the popular vote but losing the Electoral College. Trump's first term was chaotic and clearly demonstrated that he didn't understand the role of the presidency, but he did have a few people around him who provided guard rails to rein in his most outrageous desires. If, as P.T. Barnum said, "there's a sucker born every minute," then Trump perfected that line as the Republican Party and millions of followers went full MAGA in thrall to

his cult of personality. His handling, or mishandling, of the COVID pandemic mirrored how he dealt with most issues. Norms weren't norms anymore, Trump was impeached twice, but not convicted, and democracy was taking a hit.

Watching the chaos, Joe Biden decided that he could not let these attacks stand, and once again, the Democratic primaries fielded a number of good candidates. By Super Tuesday, Biden was a lock, and the convention chose California Senator Kamala Harris as his running mate, becoming the first woman of color and South Asian heritage to be on a major party ticket. The general election saw Biden winning more than 81 million votes, the largest number of votes ever cast for a presidential candidate. Much of the campaign was conducted virtually, as COVID still was rampant, but Donald Trump still seems not accept the results of the 2020 election, claiming it was rigged or stolen, despite any factual evidence of electoral mischief. Perhaps the biggest shock to our democratic system was the horrific January 6 assault on the Capitol itself, where rioters were egged on by Trump, who also demanded that his Vice President overturn the results of a free and fair election to keep him in office.

Many voters breathed a sigh of relief with Biden's election which actually took four days to finalize, and was subject to multiple lawsuits by the Trump campaign. The Biden administration had some significant legislative successes, including the Inflation Reduction Act and the American Rescue Plan which provided additional federal money to help with recovery from the impact of COVID. But the hectic withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan and COVID-related inflation tarnished Biden's legacy. He already was the oldest man ever elected to the presidency, and those same voters and supporters watched in dismay

as he began to show his age and cognitive decline as he announced his intention to run for a second term.

We all know what happened then. A disastrous debate performance led to his announcement in July withdrawing from the race and endorsing Kamala Harris for president. What we learned, sadly, is that 100 days is simply not enough time to mount and win a nationwide campaign for president. This time, Trump did get more votes than Harris, but neither won 50 percent of the vote. It was no landslide or mandate, but you wouldn't know that when listening to Trump.

So here we are. Nearly one hundred years of presidential administrations, through wartime, peacetime, culture shocks, and population changes. The 1930 Census counted 123 million people when Herbert Hoover was president; in 2020, when Trump was president, the Census count was 331 million people. For comparison, the Commonwealth of Virginia had 2.4 million people in 1930; by 2020, that number was 8.6 million.

The good old days weren't all that good. No one really wants to go back to Hoovervilles, bread lines, and the Dust Bowl. (Well, maybe I mis-speak. Donald Trump seems to have a fascination for the early 20th century, before the income tax and while gold still was the standard). We should have learned our lessons. FDR's New Deal helped grow us out of the Great Depression, but also wrestled with isolationism (perhaps the previous iteration of "America Alone") and, as unprepared as we were for World War II, the nation came together and focused on winning that war and preserving our freedoms.

The Atomic Age brought new terrors in the form of nuclear weapons, the spectre of which could destroy the entire planet. Foreign relations and defense swallowed larger portions of the national budget, (remember Ike's caution about the rise of the military-industrial complex). The "Red Scare" increased suspicions about individual thought and activities, and Joe McCarthy's tactics still provide a template for new screeds and investigations.

Supreme Court decisions about education, civil rights, and reproductive health were lauded by millions, but also stimulated new right-wing organizations that did not support the inclusive nature of the rulings that protected everyone's rights. The Vietnam War, assassinations of JFK, Martin Luther King, Jr, and RFK, and the riots at Chicago's Democratic National Convention unsettled Democrats and Republicans alike, and changed respect for law and the military.

And then came Nixon, his enemies list, tape recordings, a corrupt Attorney General and his addled wife, and a White House staff dedicated to covering up the Watergate burglary. The day Nixon resigned seemed to lift the black cloud over the Capital, but that constitutional crisis looks tame compared to today.

I've already discussed the rise of conservative action groups in the 1980s under Ronald Reagan. Although some of the original authors are gone, they mentored others to carry on their often scurrilous campaigns to preserve rights only for some instead of for all, and those groups have not only become engrained in this country but they have spun off some worse – Oathkeepers, Proud Boys, etc. (*those good people on all sides, as Trump so shockingly put it*).

At the same time, the two major parties have grown farther apart, declining to find common ground on behalf of the American people, just a “my way or the highway” approach to legislation, and demonizing each other day in and day out. When I first started working on Capitol Hill in the mid-60s, Democrats and Republicans debated fiercely on the Floor but worked together to pass legislation, and then get together for dinner on the weekends! Oh, to recapture those days!

Impeachment used to be the third rail in American politics, rarely used and never actually successful. But in the past 30 years, presidents have been impeached, but not convicted, three times, and it is not unusual for someone in the House of Representatives to introduce an impeachment resolution on a whim, just to get headlines or “likes” on social media. The scary thing is that this new normal is the only reference point many voters have. The historical perspective is missing, and low information voters often are “no information” voters. And we all are paying the price, tariffs or no tariffs!

Trump’s second term already is terrifying, as all the previous “norms” are gone. Ethics are gone, the rule of law is gone, adherence to the Constitution is gone, retribution is the stuff of Executive Orders, and each day brings a new grift. A quick look at some op-ed headlines in the Washington Post sums it up:

- *This is just embarrassing*
- *This is what happens when the president is morally lost*
- *We ran big colleges. The war on higher ed won’t stop with Harvard*
- *As the world goes to hell, Trump lives his best life*

- *We've lived through this before (that was an April 6 op-ed; I first discussed this idea with Mary Alexander last December!)*
- *The beginning of the end of the Trump era*
- *Trump is wrapping up 100 days of historic failure*
- *Stuck in the past, oblivious to the present*
- *The White House, otherwise known as fantasyland*

CBS anchor Scott Pelley gave the commencement address at Wake Forest University this year, and told the graduates: *“Our sacred rule of law is under attack. Journalism is under attack. Freedom of speech is under attack. Insidious fear is reaching through our schools, our business, our homes and into our private thoughts. The fear to **speak** – in America! Power can rewrite history with grotesque, false narratives. They can make criminals heroes, and heroes criminals.”* He mentioned no names, but the Trump administration has been howling!

Feminist attorney Gloria Allred, in her commencement speech at the American University School of Law last month, voiced it this way:

There is a war on the rule of law. A war on women. On immigrants. On universities. On equal employment opportunity. On science. On truth. And yes, on democracy itself. What is happening in our country right now is not normal.

I would take it one step further. Mr. Trump's order calling in the National Guard, in defiance of California Governor Newsom's objection, violates every state's authority, and Trump's insistence on arresting and deporting millions of immigrants and preventing millions

more from even visiting the United States, does not make America great. Those efforts make America very small, in the eyes of the world, our allies as well as our enemies. America has long been a beacon of hope and freedom for people everywhere, but **there now is a war on civil society as we know it. Not normal, we know, but not right. It's wrong! Wrong! Wrong!**

And it's up to each one of us to point that out...everywhere we can. At meals, at school, at church, at any gathering where the discussion might touch on what is happening to our democracy and our society. We may not actually have been here before, but we also need to ensure that democracy and Constitutional protections are preserved for the next generation, and the next, and the next. That's what America should be all about.

Thank you.