

# The Divided States of America

In "The Unwinding," George Packer tells the story of a country fractured by economic inequality, where the forces that held us together are coming apart

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It's hard to say just when it began, the unravelling of the American Dream. Did it start in the '70s, with the slow dismantling of industrial jobs in the Midwest? Can it be traced to the era of Reaganomics, that time period in the '80s of reduced government spending on social programs, slashed income taxes (for the rich, anyway) and increased deregulation of the financial industry? Maybe the '90s rise of Silicon Valley played a role or the Walmart-ification of the U.S.? Or was it the new millennium fervor for flipping homes?

If you read George Packer's "The Unwinding: An Inner History of the New America" (Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, \$16), you'll get a sense that all these factors and more contributed to the unravelling. The moment when some of our country's core tenets — that anyone can make it if she works hard enough, that each future generation will fare better than the one that preceded it — began to crumble isn't easy to pinpoint. Yet crumble they did. And since then, our country has been altered, and continues to be in ways that are stark and profound.

Assembling all this into one narrative, making a fabric from threads that stretch back decades, seems an impossible task. Yet Packer, a staff writer for *The New Yorker*, does it with grace. Part of this comes from the way he explains the unwinding: Instead of focusing on statistics about the loss of factory jobs, he uses the power of human stories. He relates the experience of a black woman named Tammy Thomas who watched her Ohio hometown collapse after steel mills closed. He introduces us to Usha Patel, an Indian immigrant fighting to keep her motel in the face of the foreclosure crisis. Interspersed with tales of these and other ordinary, working-class people are stories of today's icons of power and wealth: Oprah Winfrey, hip-hop mogul Jay Z, high-end restaurateur Alice Waters and good ol' Midwestern boy Sam Walton. Their stories, interwoven, depict how our country is coming apart. For his effort, Packer won last year's National Book Award for Nonfiction.

**Rosette Royal:** *The unwinding: Where does that term come from?*

**George Packer:** It was used by one of the people in the book who was describing his vision that Big Oil was going to decline, and instead, we would have all these alternative energy sources like biodiesel, which was his thing. There would be a return to something more localized and decentralized, where everyone made their own fuel and their own food. That was his

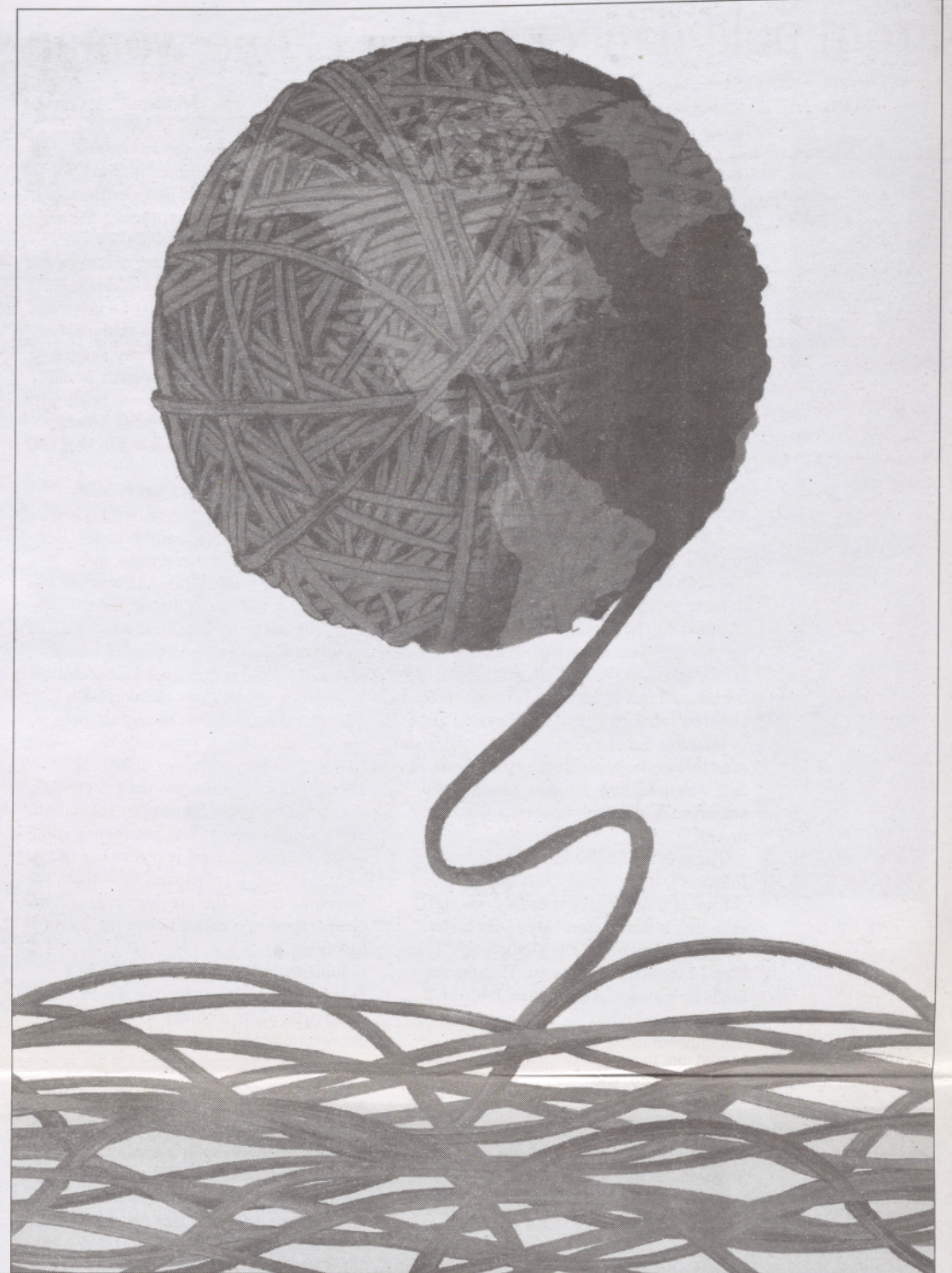


ILLUSTRATION BY JON WILLIAMS

picture of rural North Carolina. And he called it an unwinding. So that phrase, I'd never really heard anyone use it before. It stuck in my head. I thought it would be a good title because it doesn't tell you exactly what to think.

**R.R.:** *In this book, things are unwinding over several decades. But was there a moment when you realized there were connections between so many disparate events?*

**G.P.:** There was no moment. But once I began to find out who I was writing about — Dean Price in North Carolina, Tammy Thomas in Youngstown, Ohio, this guy Jeff Connaughton in Washington — something recurring started to come up: (The) institutional glue was dissolving. The things that held together important institutions — blue-collar work or newspapers or small-town life — everywhere I went, I just saw things coming undone. In many cases, they seemed to go back to the same period of time — the '70s — that at the time, might not have been so obvious. But now we can see them, like the end of the industrial era. The steel industry began to die in the '70s. A lot of the rust belt started to lose its jobs, and at the same time, the information age started taking off. So you can sort of pinpoint (that) one kind of society was changing. To say this is when it happened, we always have to find some time frame to start and end with. So I thought I would start in '78.

**R.R.:** *A while ago in The New Yorker, you wrote a piece about people in Silicon Valley becoming more involved in political causes, sort of supporting issues that were important to people outside of Silicon Valley.*

**G.P.:** There was a little movement in that direction. (Facebook co-founder) Mark Zuckerberg founded a nonprofit set up to support immigration reform, so that was the main example. But what I really found was a phenomenal level of isolation and obliviousness to how most of America was doing. I mean, a question I asked all these tech people out there was: Why has the period of growing inequality over the last 30 years coincided with the tech revolution? Why hasn't the tech revolution made life more equal rather than less so? I got different answers, but the main impression I got was that no one had thought about this because it — Silicon Valley — has become this splendid kingdom where miracles happen, and it just doesn't have a connection to the rest of the country. It also is changing life in the Bay Area phenomenally. I think probably the same thing is happening here (in Seattle): Housing prices are out of control; families that have lived there for generations can no longer afford it. San Francisco no longer has a middle or a working class. Old working-class neighborhoods are now tech neighborhoods, so people are moving south and east, and it's changed the character of the city profoundly. Some people were wringing their hands about it, but most people were unaware. The Google bus was the symbol of this, where you get in your bus, you have Wi-Fi, you don't have to look at anything, the bus takes you straight from your apartment in San Francisco to the Google campus in Mountain View and back. You can hardly blame them for wanting the convenience, but it kind of shows how cut off they are from the community they're in.

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