

IDENTITY, POLITICS AND DISTRUST

Journalist George Packer
examines democracy, education
and the transformation of America



GEORGE PACKER
SPEAKS AT THE
UO JAN. 24.

In 2012, journalist George Packer published *The Unwinding: An Inner History of the New America*, in which he documents the stories of Americans in various U.S. regions over the last three decades and the results of changes in culture, politics and economics. Packer describes modern American identity as “tribal.”

Packer’s talk “American Identity in the Trump Era” is part of the University of Oregon’s Humanities lecture series, “We the People.” The lecture is 7:30 pm Wednesday, Jan. 24, at 182 Lillis Hall at the UO.

In 2003 Packer wrote a story for *The New Yorker* about a prosthetist from Brooklyn who wanted to help fit amputee victims of Sierra Leone’s civil war who’d had their limbs forcibly amputated by rebels, some using dull machetes. He says it took a year and half to get the piece published “because in the meantime 9/11 happened and suddenly Sierra Leone wasn’t as interesting.”

Packer became a staff writer for *The New Yorker* the same year. Since then he has reported from Iraq and, just before the 2016 election, he interviewed Hillary Clinton and wrote “Hillary Clinton and the Populist Revolt — The Democrats lost the white working class. The Republicans exploited it. Can Clinton win it back?”

Will you talk a little bit about what your lecture will be covering?

I’m going to talk about the background to my last book, *The Unwinding*, some of the longer-term trends in American life that *The Unwinding* is about and the meandering path that led us to this new place we’re in. So some of the background to the politics of the Trump era, and the ways in which the country is becoming — the word I use is “tribal” — more balkanized into groups that don’t understand each other, that don’t want to understand each other, that are in a perpetual fight and that don’t feel part of the same national fabric.

How do you think American identity has changed over the few years before the last presidential election to today?

I think that you have to go back further. Trump is a symptom; Trump is a creature of a long transformation that has a lot of causes — there is no single cause. But to grossly oversimplify, the country has gone from being a middle-class democracy in the post-war era, where there was, to be sure, tremendous inequality and injustice — much more in some ways than now — but was also economically a fairer place and didn’t have the same dramatic inequalities we have today.

It had a culture that was more of a common middle-class culture, it had a media that was broadly influential and was rather confined to just a few sources, a few newspapers, TV news, news magazines. It’s all pretty blindingly obvious, but you have to look back at that period and how it slowly broke up to understand how we could end up with a president and a significant minority of Americans who don’t seem to see the value of the institutions that were part of that middle-class democracy. Institutions ranging from government to media to the legal system to our foreign policy — all of that seems to have collapsed but it actually was a long time weakening and destabilizing.

I still am amazed when people I have conversations with — especially police officers — look at me strangely when I say that I’m a journalist.

They don’t trust us, and we don’t trust them. No one trusts anyone, except the blind trust people put in the celebrities and the leaders that they’ve chosen as their tribal head. And once that trust is given, it’s blind: nothing can shake it. So, sort of the ideal of a citizen in a democracy, which is someone who thinks for him or herself and pays attention to public life, to contrary views, to facts, and comes to semi-rational conclusions and basically engages with other people who disagree and engages with institutions. That citizen doesn’t seem to survive very well.

Do you think that blind trust will always keep Trump’s base — I know he isn’t polling very well right now, and he might not have a very high approval rating — but I feel like he can still say things like “shithole countries” and people will still support him.

Yeah, we’re way, way past the point where those hardcore supporters would have peeled off. There were so many moments for them to get off the train, and they’re still on it and will stay on it, and it’s partly just a kind of primal identification with Trump. I don’t think it has anything to do with policy. It has to do with his rhetoric and almost just the frequency he gives off that seems to join with theirs, and it’s a big “fuck you” to people who they think might disdain them.

Do you think this is — just how you described American identity as tribal right now — do you think that has anything to do with a failure of public education in any way?

Yes. I don’t want to blame too much on the schools because the schools are also symptoms, they can only do so much, but just to pick one small cause — there was this dreary thing called civics that was taught when I was in school. And no one wanted to take it, and yet it probably had an effect in teaching us not just about how a bill became a law, but about what the value of a democracy was. Civics I don’t think is really taught anymore.

I think civics is considered dangerous because it quickly can become partisan politics in the classroom, so it takes a certain kind of teacher who can keep the discussion open ended and philosophical and not land on certain hard partisan positions. But it’s essential because without that, education just prepares us to be consumers, to be careerists, and there’s a gap in the teaching of American history; there’s a gap in the teaching of critical thinking. ■