The Forgotten

How the People of One Pennsylvania County
Elected Donald Trump and Changed America

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Also by Ben Bradlee Jr.

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Like many others, I was captivated by the improbable political rise of Donald J. Trump and then, even more improbably, by his election as president of the United States.

Here was the best political story in generations: a crude, louche real estate magnate and reality TV star burst on the political scene and dared to say outrageous things that would have meant the end for any other candidate. But Trump, incredibly, seemed to gain strength with each scandalous affront: during his 2015 announcement speech, he accused Mexico of sending “rapists” to America; he shamelessly led the charge in questioning President Barack Obama’s U.S. citizenship; just weeks before the election, he weathered the release of the Access Hollywood tape in which he boasted in a 2005 secret recording of using his celebrity as license to randomly kiss and grope women; and during the campaign, he fended off charges from eighteen named women that he sexually assaulted or harassed them over the years.

There were other scandales, but none of them seemed to
hurt him or matter much. As Trump himself famously said during the campaign, “I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody, and I wouldn’t lose any voters, okay? It’s, like, incredible!”

Trump steamrolled over his sixteen Republican primary opponents, assigning many of them cruel and demeaning nicknames as he warmed up to face “Crooked Hillary” Clinton in the general election. He was not afraid to touch, even linger on, political third rails like misogyny, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and race—or to press his signature issue linked to race: rolling back illegal immigration. His shrewd slogan, “Make America Great Again,” was a nostalgic paean to a simpler, whiter time in America, when the pace of social change produced little angst. It was a time when what can be seen today as tribalism based on politically incorrect notions of who is and is not an American could thrive unabated.

The Trump story was so rich on so many levels that for a writer, the main problem was where to begin a book—what approach to take.

The overriding questions seemed to be who, exactly, voted for Trump, and why? I began to look more closely at the three Rust Belt swing states where the election had been decided: Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin. Surprisingly, Trump won those three states by a total of 77,689 votes out of the more than thirteen million cast. If Hillary Clinton had won them, she would have become president.

The three states are overwhelmingly white and had been historically Democratic. Neither Pennsylvania nor Michigan had voted for a Republican for president since 1988—and Wisconsin not since 1984.

But it was Pennsylvania that was the most important of the three because it had the most electoral votes—twenty—and because Clinton, who had family ties to the state, had put it firmly in her column and considered it perhaps her most critical fire wall.

A closer examination of the Pennsylvania vote revealed that Trump won largely on the strength of his showing in the northeast part of the state, and it was one county—Luzerne—that led the way. Trump routed Clinton there by 26,237 votes—a margin of nearly twenty points. His victory represented an abrupt shift in political sentiment, given that President Obama won the traditionally Democratic county by eight percentage points in 2008 and by five points in 2012.

Since Luzerne—home to economically depressed Wilkes-Barre, near Scranton—provided Trump with nearly 60 percent of his winning margin in the state, it is not a stretch to say that this single county won Trump Pennsylvania—and perhaps the presidency, to the extent that the state’s demographics and voting patterns were similar to Michigan’s and Wisconsin’s.

My curiosity piqued, I decided to visit Luzerne and talk to a range of Trump voters about the choices they made. I wanted to see if the county might be a prism through which to explore the underlying reasons for one of the most shocking election results in political history.

I made my first visit on December 6, 2016, less than a month after the election, and over the next fourteen months I would make four more trips lasting up to a week at a time. Initially, I did what reporters do: read as much as I could about the place to absorb its historical background, learned
who the leading public officials and community leaders were so I could use them as guideposts, and then plunged in.

During that first visit, people were friendly and welcoming—willing to talk to an outsider, to offer insights about Luzerne County, and to provide the names of Trump voters that I should talk to. I talked to the editor of the *Times Leader*, one of Wilkes-Barre’s two daily newspapers, and to his lead political reporter; four of Luzerne’s representatives in the state legislature; a Wilkes-Barre city councilman and local historian; and a leading radio talk show host known for having her finger on the county’s political pulse.

These people and others helped lead me to a range of Trump voters across Luzerne who seemed to represent a solid cross section of the president’s constituency. After interviewing nearly a hundred people over the time that I was in the county, I decided to tell the stories of a dozen in depth—people who I thought collectively revealed much about Trump’s appeal, or who represented key portions of his following. To be sure, there was no scientific basis for choosing those I decided to feature. Mostly it was my subjective judgment about the degree to which they served as Trump voter exemplars, as well as the strength of their stories and how they told them.

Each one of these people is different, but their lives share common themes. They have a contempt for Washington and the powers that be, who they feel have mostly abandoned them and left them marginalized by flat or falling wages, rapid demographic change, and a dominant liberal culture that mocks their faith and patriotism. They feel like everyone’s punching bag, and that their way of life is dying. They sense a loss of dignity and stature. They feel as though others are cutting in line, and that government is taking too much money from the employed and giving it to the able-bodied idle. They feel that government regulations have become strangling to small and large businesses, and that the country is in danger of being inundated by immigrants—legal and illegal.

A recent surge in the Hispanic population of Luzerne County made Trump’s raw immigration pitch relevant and attractive to many voters. For them, the new arrivals sparked not just a yearning for a whiter yesteryear, but an inclination—implicitly encouraged by Trump—to make clear that they preferred to be among their own race and social group. They felt that the place they had lived their whole lives was changing in ways they didn’t like or fully understand.

These fears had long been harbored yet usually went unmentioned. But Trump connected strongly to his aggrieved constituency, especially when he called them “the forgotten people.” That struck a chord, and then the floodgates seemed to open to him. Trump was able to activate, own, and even weaponize the resentments that Luzerne residents had over issues that were long-standing and hard to solve, if not intractable.

The phrase “the forgotten” implied that there were winners and losers. While other parts of the country have thrived in recent years under globalization and the dizzying pace of technological change, Trump voters in Luzerne and many similar places throughout the land felt dealt out of the prosperity pie, left behind, and generally unacknowledged and unappreciated. They felt relegated to the sidelines, as if their stories didn’t matter.
And by whom did they feel forgotten? By the government and the two major political parties. Less discussed was the extent to which those three institutions might have been relatively easy scapegoats, and how much the forgotten’s own personal decisions may have contributed to their frustrations in life.

So who, actually, are the people of Luzerne County who played such a pivotal role in Trump’s winning Pennsylvania and thus the presidency? There is value in listening to their stories, in considering the ground truths of their daily lives, in understanding what drives them and why they voted the way they did.

They are The Congressman. In 2006, Lou Barletta, as the mayor of Hazleton, Luzerne County’s second largest city, started a fierce debate about illegal immigration that played itself out nationally and served as a precursor to Trump’s candidacy based on the same issue ten years later. Now a congressman representing Luzerne who this year is running for the U.S. Senate against Democratic incumbent Bob Casey, Barletta was cochair of Trump’s Pennsylvania campaign and played a key role in Trump’s winning the state.

They are Trump Men like Vito DeLuca, a self-described Reagan Democrat and lawyer in Luzerne County; Marty Becone, a registered Independent who owns a bar and restaurant in Hazleton; Ed Harry, a former labor organizer and lifelong Democrat who defied his Clinton-endorsing union leadership when he announced that he was supporting Trump; and Brian Langan, newly retired after working as a detective with the Pennsylvania State Police for more than twenty-five years.

They are Trump Women like Lynette Villano, a widow and clerk for a wastewater treatment plant who was enamored with Donald Trump from day one; Donna Kowalczyk, who owns a Wilkes-Barre hair salon and fights to save the street where she lives from further blight and decay; Kim Woodrosky—born into a family of Democrats, her father a teamster and her mother a line worker in a textile mill—who became a successful real estate investor; and Tiffany Cloud, a politically active housewife and former advertising executive who’s married to an ex-Army Special Operations officer who did three tours of combat duty.

They are The Veteran. Vets like Tiffany’s husband, Erik Olson—who did two tours in Iraq and one in Afghanistan—voted for Trump over Clinton by a margin of two to one nationally. Erik never considered Hillary Clinton an option and warmed to Trump gradually. He was turned off by some of his rhetorical excesses but liked his strong leadership and his vision for the country. The gauzy memories evoked by Trump’s “Make America Great Again” slogan appealed to Olson too.

They are The White Nationalist. Steve Smith, a strapping truck driver from Pittston, heads the Wilkes-Barre/Scranton chapter of Keystone United, a Pennsylvania “white rights” group. An avowed white supremacist, Smith received national attention in 2012 when he was elected as a write-in to the Luzerne County Republican Committee, and then got re-elected by sixty-nine votes in 2016, thereby vaulting from the white extremist underground into the local political mainstream. In an era of identity politics, the phrase “white identity” has become more acceptable during the presidency of Donald Trump. Smith finds Pennsylvania—which now has
the fifth highest number of hate groups in the country, along with a KKK presence in Wilkes-Barre— hospitable to his goal of getting whites to assert themselves more aggressively as America’s minority population increases. And he is thrilled by the election of Trump, who he says has been a godsend for the white nationalist message.

They are *The Christian.* Though Luzerne is predominantly Catholic, there is a significant and growing evangelical community. Nationwide, evangelicals went 80 percent for Trump in the election and made up nearly half of his total vote. One of Trump’s most ardent Christian followers is Jessica Harker, a registered nurse who works for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs in Wilkes-Barre. She calls herself “on fire” for the Lord, and freely mixes in scripture as she speaks while not shying away from saltier, earthly language. She believes that God chose Trump to be president.

All these people are white, as Trump’s voters overwhelmingly were. And they are older than forty-five— again, as were most of Trump’s voters.

And finally, there are *The Democrats*— minorities and white liberals left behind to navigate an uneasy coexistence with still-euphoric Trump supporters, who well recognize the key role they played in delivering Pennsylvania to the president, and who sometimes still can’t resist spiking the football about it.

With much of the country still stunned that a candidate as unusual as Trump got elected president, *The Forgotten* uses Luzerne County as a way to more closely examine the white working and middle class that served as the backbone of Trump’s support throughout the United States. These detailed portraits of a group of disillusioned voters, writ large, tell much of the story of the 2016 election, and offer important lessons— both for the upcoming midterm elections, which will largely be a referendum on the Trump presidency to date, and for the future of the country.

*Ben Bradlee Jr., July 2, 2018*
Since midsummer of 2016, it looked as though Pennsylvania might be the tipping point in the presidential election, because it personified the economic pain changing the politics of the older industrial states.

Trump's unconventional candidacy was premised in large part on his ability to persuade blue-collar and white working-class Democrats to cross over to the Republican Party. He made opposition to immigration, globalization, and what he believed were poorly negotiated trade deals a central argument in his campaign. People concerned about the economic deterioration of Pennsylvania, and particularly places like Luzerne County, were ripe for Trump. A swing, bellwether county, Luzerne has almost perfectly matched the rest of Pennsylvania's vote in every presidential election since 2000.

Luzerne seemed especially open to Trump's nationalist, economic message: he had won a whopping 77 percent of the county's vote (and 57 percent statewide) in Pennsylvania's
April Republican primary, swamping his remaining opponents, Texas senator Ted Cruz and Ohio governor John Kasich.

The day before the primary, Trump attracted an overflow crowd of some twelve thousand people to Mohegan Sun Arena, outside Wilkes-Barre. The rally was a revelation of sorts for many local residents—some of whom had been embarrassed to express their public support for the turbulent and contentious candidate. Now folks attending the rally could see Trump’s hidden vote start to come out of the closet, and they could witness firsthand how many of their friends and neighbors really felt about him: they seemed smitten.

On October 10, one month before the election, Trump returned to the same arena for another jam-packed rally, this one even more raucous and filled with energy. The crowd was more economically diverse than the one in April: it was still primarily blue-collar, but with plenty of middle-class and some upper-middle-class residents represented as well. One VIP took note: Vice President Joe Biden, who had been raised twenty miles north, in Scranton, had drawn a fraction of Trump’s crowds while campaigning in the area for Clinton. When Biden saw video clips of the Wilkes-Barre rally showing how the crowd was responding to Trump, he later told the Los Angeles Times that he said to himself, “Son of a gun. We may lose this election.”

And they did.

Luzerne County has about 320,000 people and spans 907 square miles—big enough to squeeze in the entire state of Rhode Island. Interstates 80 and 81 intersect in the county, and Philadelphia and New York City are each about a two-hour drive away. Though a mix of urban and rural, Luzerne is covered by parts of the Appalachian mountain range and is on the whole more rural in character. While there are pockets of well-heeled suburbia, Luzerne is less Northeast Corridor than Appalachia.

Like many other counties in the industrial North and Midwest, Luzerne has been in economic distress for decades due to the demise of the coal industry that was once its anchor, and also due to the loss of thousands of manufacturing jobs that replaced coal. As a result, the social fabric has been frayed by a high unemployment rate and low-wage jobs, crime, and a surging opioid epidemic. In addition, new and added tensions have been created by a spike in immigration, mostly by Hispanics. Eighty-three percent of the population remains white, 11 percent is Hispanic, and 5 percent is black.

The county has been a Democratic stronghold since the 1960s, with its working-class, union-affiliated population. It hadn’t voted for a Republican president since 1988, but there had been signs that the days of Democratic domination were coming to an end. Luzerne now lines up more closely with the demographic profile of Western Pennsylvania: older, whiter voters who have seen good-paying jobs disappear and not return.

Trump’s winning majority in Luzerne exceeded President Obama’s thirty-thousand-vote swing from 2012, when he won the county by five thousand votes. Obama also won Luzerne in 2008. But many Democrats who supported
Obama twice decided to make the leap to a much different kind of candidate in Trump.

“Obama had hope and change, Trump had knock-down-the-door and change,” says John Yudichak, a Democrat who represents Luzerne County in the Pennsylvania state senate. Yudichak says he went to Trump’s April rally in Wilkes-Barre and asked a union prison guard why he was with Trump.

“The man replied, ‘Donald Trump makes me feel good about myself and who I am. Hillary makes me apologize if I want to hunt and don’t have a college education.’” Yudichak adds that 85 percent of his district consists of “uneducated white voters,” meaning those who have not gone to college. “I would hear TV pundits use that phrase all the time. That was attacking the dignity of people that go to work every day,” Yudichak says. “People felt left behind and felt the deck was stacked against them. When Trump used the word ‘rigged,’ that resonated.”

The campaign of Donald Trump exposed a gulf of culture and class that fell largely on rural-versus-urban fault lines. The election results can mostly be seen as the revenge of the rural voter. The rural poor, the working class, and the middle class felt largely ignored and condescended to by the Democratic Party, and Trump galvanized those voters’ long-simmering frustrations. Electing Trump was a rebuke of globalization and the unseen ruling classes and elites who had changed his voters’ lives without their consent.

The final 2016 presidential election results, county by county, look like a landslide for Trump.

The people who live in the vast middle of the United States have felt largely neglected. The election was less about the cities than it was about the individual counties across the nation: self-governing units with their own police, firemen, school systems, and municipal services. Many counties have urban centers, but most, like Luzerne, are rural in character, and some can serve as a microcosm of America.

While much of the red-blue divide can be linked to fostering cultural differences and antagonisms, there was an economic split as well. A postelection Brookings Institution analysis found that the 493 counties that Hillary Clinton won were in heavily metropolitan areas that generate 64 percent of America’s economic activity, as measured by total output in 2015. By contrast, the 2,584 counties that Trump won, in rural and exurban parts of the country, produce just 36 percent of the country’s output. So another way to look at the election is as a reflection of the chasm that exists be-
tween what Brookings called high-output and low-output America.

After the election, much the same way that Jane Goodall studies chimpanzees in the wild, social scientists and out-of-touch Democrats launched anthropologic-like surveys on the white working class. Clinton had largely ignored this key group during the campaign, instead trying to replicate the Obama coalition of minorities, millennials, suburban women, and the white, college-educated professional class. Some of the motivating factors behind Trump’s appeal could be found in an anonymous, postelection email circulating among his voters in Luzerne County and elsewhere; its candid sentiments amounted to a Trump voters’ creed.

I haven’t said too much about this election since the start... but this is how I feel... I’m noticing that a lot of you aren’t graci-ously accepting the fact that your candidate lost. In fact, you seem to be posting even more hateful things about those of us who voted for Trump. Some of you are apparently “triggered” because you are posting how “sick” you feel about the results. How did this happen, you ask?

You created “us” when you attacked our freedom of speech. You created “us” when you attacked our right to bear arms. You created “us” when you attacked our Christian beliefs. You created “us” when you constantly referred to us as racists. You created “us” when you constantly called us xenophobic. You created “us” when you told us to get on board or get out of the way. You created “us” when you attacked our flag. You created “us” when you took God out of our schools. You created “us” when you confused women’s rights with feminism. You created “us” when you began to emasculate men. You created “us” when you decided to make our children soft. You created “us” when you decided to vote for progressive ideals. You created “us” when you attacked our way of life. You created “us” when you decided to let our government get out of control. You created “us,” the silent majority. You created “us” when you began murdering innocent law enforcement officers. You created “us” when you lied and said we could keep our insurance plans and our doctors. You created “us” when you allowed our jobs to continue to leave our country. You created “us” when you took a knee, or stayed seated or didn’t remove your hat during our national anthem. You created “us” when you forced us to buy health care and then financially penalized us for not participating.

And we became fed up and we pushed back and spoke up. And we did it with ballots, not bullets. With ballots, not riots. With ballots, not looting.

With ballots, not blocking traffic. With ballots, not fires, except the one you started inside of “us.”

YOU created “US.” It really is just that simple.

Perhaps the most telling revelations to emerge from exit poll interviews of people who cast ballots in the 2016 election were the defection of millions of white working-class voters—almost one in four—who had voted for Obama in 2012 but jumped to Trump in 2016, and Trump’s dominance of the white vote generally, especially among whites who did not go to college. Trump won white voters, who made up 69 percent of the electorate, by twenty-one points, fifty-eight to thirty-seven, one point higher than Mitt Romney’s fifty-nine to thirty-nine margin in 2012. White men voted 63 percent for
Trump and 31 percent for Clinton, while Trump also carried white women, fifty-three to forty-three. Among white women without college degrees, Trump beat Clinton by twenty-eight points. In total, women supported Clinton over Trump fifty-four to forty-two, the same twelve-point margin by which Trump defeated Clinton among men. Given the disparaging comments Trump had made about women, as well as the sexual assault or harassment allegations made against him by eighteen women during the campaign,1 many had predicted there would be a surge of new women voters going to the polls to vote against him. But nothing of the sort materialized: women made up 52 percent of the overall vote in 2016, down a point from 53 percent in 2012.

There was a wide gap in presidential preferences between those with a college degree and those without. College grads backed Clinton, fifty-two to forty-three, while non-college-educated voters supported Trump, fifty-two to forty-four. But among whites without a college degree, Trump’s margin was the largest recorded in exit polls since 1980. Trump overwhelmed Clinton among voters in this category by thirty-nine points, sixty-seven to twenty-eight. Trump also won whites with a college degree, but by only four points, forty-nine to forty-five.

It was a change election. Among the 39 percent of voters who said that supporting a candidate who could “bring needed change” was their top priority, 83 percent chose Trump and 14 percent opted for Clinton. The change impulse was so compelling it apparently overrode concerns about Trump personally. Only 38 percent of voters had a favorable view of him, 35 percent said he had the tempera-

ment to serve effectively as president, 38 percent said he was qualified, while just a third called him “honest and trustworthy.”2

Digging deeper into the Trump vote, the Democracy Fund, a bipartisan foundation established by eBay founder Pierre Omidyar, conducted a postelection survey of eight thousand voters in partnership with the market research firm YouGov. The results suggested that there were five types of Trump voters. The two most statistically significant constituencies were what the study called American Preservationists, representing 20 percent of the total, and Anti-Eites, at 19 percent.

American Preservationists were “the core Trump constituency that propelled him to victory in the early Republican primaries...[and which] believe the economic and political systems are rigged, have nativist immigration views, and a nativist and ethnocultural conception of American identity”—in other words, a white conception of American citizenship. The Preservationists have a strong sense of their racial and Christian identity, oppose not just illegal but also legal immigration, and vehemently supported Trump’s plan for a temporary Muslim travel ban. They are angry about race relations and believe there is as much discrimination against whites as against minorities, and they believe that “real Americans need to have been born in America or have lived here most of their lives and be Christian.”

The Anti-Eites, for their part, believe “that moneyed and political elites take advantage of the system against ordinary people” and support raising taxes on the rich. They too believe that the system is rigged, but they take more mod-
erate positions on race, immigration, and American identity than the Preservationists do, and they are more willing to compromise.

The three other types of Trump voters were two traditional Republican groups, labeled Staunch Conservatives (31 percent) and Free Marketeers (25 percent), and a final group merely called the Disengaged. The Staunch Conservatives are steadfast fiscal conservatives who “embrace moral traditionalism.” They are the most loyal Republican voters, and the most likely to own guns and be NRA members. The Free Marketeers are described as being “free traders with moderate to liberal positions on immigration and race,” and their vote was primarily motivated by being against Clinton rather than for Trump. Finally, the Disengaged are defined as not knowing much about politics and feeling detached from institutions.5

LuZerne County had been drifting from its Democratic union roots for years, and found itself open to Trump’s America First agenda, his call for a stronger border with Mexico, and his tough pro-gun and anti-abortion positions.

In 2016, 5,643 Luzerne Democrats switched to the Republican Party so they could vote in the GOP primary—the vast majority of them for Trump. This party shift was the largest in either direction by any Pennsylvania county other than Philadelphia and Allegheny. Trump tailored his simple, populist message to the region’s working-class voters, who felt left out and overlooked—“the forgotten people,” as Trump called them.

When Barack Obama was campaigning for president during the recession of 2008, he made what was thought at the time to have been an impolitic remark about people living in the T section of Pennsylvania, the more conservative area between Pittsburgh and Philadelphia that the political consultant James Carville once famously likened to Alabama.

In April 2008, then-senator Obama—speaking to a wealthy crowd at a San Francisco fund-raiser two weeks before the Pennsylvania primary, in which he was in a close race with Hillary Clinton—said the following: “You go into some of these small towns in Pennsylvania and, like a lot of small towns in the Midwest, the jobs have been gone now for twenty-five years and nothing’s replaced them. And they told through the Clinton administration, and the Bush administration, and each successive administration has said that somehow these communities are going to regenerate, and they have not. So it’s not surprising then that they get bitter, and they cling to guns or religion or antipathy toward people who aren’t like them, or anti-immigrant sentiment, or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations.”

Clinton jumped on the remark and called Obama an “elitist.” The fuss may have helped her in the short term since she won the Pennsylvania primary, but she went on to lose the Democratic nomination to the young senator from Illinois.

Yet in hindsight, it’s apparent that what Obama said was essentially true, and seven years later, as president, he circled back to the remarks in the context of Trump’s appeal to the white working class in places like Luzerne County. In a December 2015 interview with National Public Radio, Obama reaffirmed his 2008 comments, citing “demographic change with all the economic stresses that people have been
going through because of the financial crisis, because of technology, because of globalization, the fact that wages and incomes have been flatlining for some time, and that particularly blue-collar men have had a lot of trouble in this new economy. You combine those things, and it means that there is going to be potential anger, frustration, fear. Some of it justified, but just misdirected. I think somebody like Mr. Trump is taking advantage of that. That’s what he’s exploiting during the course of his campaign.”

Another way of thinking about Trump voters was to say that they were, in the words of the Wall Street Journal’s Peggy Noonan, “the unprotected.”

“There are the protected and the unprotected,” she wrote in a 2016 column, eight months before the election. “The protected make public policy. The unprotected live in it. The unprotected are starting to push back, powerfully. The protected are the accomplished, the secure, the successful—those who have power or access to it. They are protected from much of the roughness of the world. More to the point, they are protected from the world they have created… The unprotected came to think they owed the establishment—another word for the protected—nothing, no particular loyalty, no old allegiance. Mr. Trump came from that.”

Tony Brooks, the lone Republican on the Wilkes-Barre city council and a Luzerne County historian, thinks another way to look at the 2016 campaign is as a struggle between “the givers and the takers.”

“And the givers are fed up with the takers,” Brooks says. “Every single block in Wilkes-Barre will have a row of houses that are immaculate—generally retired, white working class, and union. Cut grass and a tomato garden in the back. But sadly, within the last twenty years, we’ve seen a lot of what I call economic refugees from New York and New Jersey who have moved in under Section 8 housing. So, one house sits pristine and immaculate next to another on Section 8. The people in the nice house feel like their investment is going down the tubes. And they connected this feeling to Donald Trump. They’ll say, ‘I’m not a racist: it’s because he’s a bad neighbor, with trash on his front porch.’ This is happening in other Rust Belt cities across America. People were frustrated by so many takers in their neighborhood. And not giving back. Living on the dole. They saw themselves as giving, paying their taxes while their neighbors were not. And they attached that to the entitlement mind-set of the Democratic Party.”

There were earlier cultural and political touchstones that paved the way for Trump.

One was Morton Downey Jr.’s television talk show of the late eighties, which served as a petri dish for the tumultuous Trump rallies that sustained his campaign, and from which he has continued to draw oxygen as president.

“Downey, who died in 2001, presided over the original Trump rally,” wrote Charles McElwee, a Luzerne County historian, in a 2017 article for the American Conservative that examined the links between Downey and Trump. “His show launched during the final stretch of Reagan’s presidency, a period of cataclysmic change in the media realm that was only realized in hindsight… Downey’s show developed a loyal cult following. His confrontational persona, distinguished by an intolerance for excessive political correctness, especially res-
onated with a large segment of the increasingly postindustrial mid-Atlantic...

"They cultivated a base of aggrieved Republicans and Democrats who once cheered at Downey’s crude insults and now laugh at Trump’s stinging tweets... The modern working-class Americans who appreciate Downey or Trump fail to click with either political party. They’re just navigating the frantic pace of a global economy that often appears to present little hope for their future. In 1987, their outlet for populist release was Downey’s show. Now it’s Trump’s presidency. 5

A political forerunner of Trump was Pat Buchanan, the archconservative former adviser to Presidents Nixon, Ford, and Reagan who became a TV commentator and syndicated columnist, and unsuccessfully sought the Republican presidential nominations in 1992 and 1996 while running as a populist.

It was Buchanan who warned some twenty-five years before Trump that the United States was losing its global stature; who questioned how much the United States should pay for the defense of its allies; who promoted an America First agenda, excoriated both the Republican and Democratic parties for leaving working-class Americans behind, and railed against the effects of globalization and multiculturalism. Buchanan also drew on the racial resentments and anti-elitist scorn of George Wallace, as did Trump, who first made himself politically prominent and viable for the Republican nomination by fanning nativist flames over the issue of Obama’s birth certificate: Could Obama prove he had really been born in Hawaii, or was even an American?

The loss of some five million manufacturing jobs since 2000, coupled with stagnant incomes, caused a bubbling anger that—along with the rise of talk radio and cable networks and the powerful emergence of social media—turned Trump’s campaign into Buchanan’s on steroids.6

Trump’s “Make America Great Again” campaign slogan was a skillful and evocative use of nostalgia that invited his base to conjure up a placid and white Ozzie and Harriet—like vista of American life in the 1950s, before the immigrant hordes arrived. Trump co-opted the slogan from Ronald Reagan, who first used “Let’s make America great again” in his 1980 campaign, when the country’s economy was lagging. Bill Clinton also used the line in his 1992 campaign, though in speeches, not as a slogan.

As for Trump’s phrase “the forgotten people”—the people he said he was fighting for—it echoed Franklin Roosevelt’s 1932 speech about “the forgotten man at the bottom of the economic pyramid” and also contained a dash of Huey Long from the same era.
Ed Harry, seventy-two, is a veteran of the war in Vietnam, where he served in an Air Force unit that was attached to the National Security Agency.

The son of a coal miner, Ed grew up in Luzerne County, worked as a labor organizer, immersed himself in Democratic politics, and rose to become president of the Wilkes-Barre Labor Council.

But when his union endorsed Hillary Clinton before the Pennsylvania primary in 2016, Ed resigned—and announced that he was voting for Donald Trump.

"I was a Democrat for fifty-two years of my life," he says.

"My whole voting life. I was even an elected delegate for Bill Clinton in 1992. Then NAFTA and GATT happened and I became disillusioned. There was a new globalization in America and I was looking for an alternative. The Democrats have been slipping away from the people for a long time. The six top richest people in the country now are Democrats, so they have become the mean and nasty people. We lost our party. It got taken away from us."

Not that he saw the Republican Party as the party of the people either. He simply came to conclude that both parties were corrupt.

But Hillary Clinton was especially anathema to Ed. "She should be in jail over Benghazi and the Clinton Foundation. She did not go out and meet people like me. She just wanted big money from Wall Street. She took people for granted, and we got fed up with all that. We think there are two sets of standards: one for the politicians and one for the rest of us."

Trump was an outsider but initially hard for Ed to take seriously. "At first I sort of laughed at Trump. I didn't think he was credible, but the more I listened to him and watched him in action, [the more I saw that] he was an advocate for things I believed in, like getting rid of TPP [the Trans-Pacific Partnership]. No more trade agreements. And something had to be done with immigration."

Trump's financing of his own campaign also appealed to Ed because it meant he was independent. "That would have played good for me no matter who it was. I think most of the people in Washington are blackmailed because they've been compromised by money and political contributions."

And he liked the way Trump talked, especially without
observing the traditional niceties. “Trump talks like you and I talk. He calls it the way it is. The political correctness today is so over the top. I don’t like people telling me what to think, or how I should think... Come on, give me a break! I’m not a two-year-old who can’t think for himself. Don’t call me out and tell me I’m stupid because I don’t think the way the ultraliberals do.

“And why are the Russians the bad guys? You’ve got the Chinese and the North Koreans practicing slave labor. Russian spying is no big thing. It’s been going on for years.”

Ed and his younger sister grew up in Plymouth, a borough in the center of Luzerne County just west of Wilkes-Barre, and he still lives in the house his family has occupied since 1949.

His mom worked in the local dress factories, where she was active in her union and led the occasional strike. Ed thinks that’s what sparked his interest in the labor movement.

His dad, the coal miner, was five eight and weighed about 270 pounds. He was illiterate, which Ed didn’t know at the time. It seemed as though his father had always worked in the mines. He drank beer. He volunteered for his fire company, which was a social club for a lot of the local men.

One day, when Ed was a senior in high school, his dad came home from work, took a water glass, filled it up with whiskey, and drank it. Then he poured himself another glass, filling it about halfway this time. Then he started crying. The roof had caved in on his mine shaft that day. He and his friends made it out, but he swore he’d never go back in the mines again, and now he was worried about how he’d support his family.

“That was very traumatic for him—and for me, needless to say,” says Ed, a stocky man with a mustache and white hair that is usually covered with a ski cap in winter and a Penn State ball cap in summer. He favors sweatshirts, and often has a toothpick dangling from his mouth.

The coal industry was dying at the time his dad quit the mines, so Ed asked an older friend who was a leading local Democrat to help his father get a job working as a laborer for the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, or PennDOT, as it is known locally. It was a patronage job. Ed’s whole family was Republican, but he was the first to register as a Democrat because all his friends were Democrats. There was little job security at PennDOT. None of the jobs were unionized, and if you weren’t civil service, you usually got fired when the governorship changed.

Ed’s dad lived until he was eighty, and his mom, an asthmatic, until she was seventy-five. Ed thinks the most his family ever made was $5,000 a year.

“We were all so poor, I didn’t know what the hell the middle class was. I didn’t know how bad my parents had it until I graduated high school. But no one had their doors locked. Me and my friends used to eat at each other’s houses. I grew up in an area where there were about eighteen or nineteen guys my own age. We played sports all day. If we weren’t in school, we were out in the summer playing ball. In the winter, we played basketball in the snow.”

Ed graduated from Plymouth High School in 1964 and, after working for a year, entered Mansfield State College, up on the New York line. He stayed for a semester and then quit. He didn’t know what he wanted to do, and his parents couldn’t afford the tuition anyway.
Then he got drafted. He joined the Air Force in April 1966. Why the Air Force? He figured the Marines and the Army drew the heaviest duty, and he had liked the Air Force recruiters when they came to Plymouth High.

Ed became a radio intercept analyst, tasked with monitoring, collecting, and interpreting military voice and electronic signals from countries of interest—and also from American pilots, to make sure they were on the straight and narrow. He was assigned to the Air Force Security Service, which was essentially an offshoot of the NSA. He left for Southeast Asia in January 1968 and was based in Thailand, but he made frequent forays into Da Nang and into Tan Son Nhut Air Base in Vietnam. Thai headquarters was the Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base, known as NKP, which was used by the United States in its fight against North Vietnam and the Pathet Lao communist guerrillas in Laos from 1961 to 1975. The CIA’s Air America was also based at NKP.

"We'd tap into conversations of people who worked there to monitor if what they were talking about was legit," Ed says. "In Vietnam, we'd go to Tan Son Nhut or Da Nang and monitor every communication that took place between the pilots and the towers. We wanted to make sure pilots did not give their coordinates, so the enemy wouldn't know where they were. We also monitored American conversations, including the Air America pilots.

"I was one of the guys sent into Laos to work with the CIA, but soon rotated back. We broke the war effort in Laos. We froze it. Americans weren't supposed to be there and we blew the whistle on illegal U.S. ops there. But they never shut it down. They just did things to make sure they would not get caught again."

After returning home on Halloween of 1969, Ed got a job working for the state of Pennsylvania as a custodian for a mental hospital in Luzerne County. The hospital got unionized and he became a steward, handling grievances.

After five years, he moved to Florida to organize for the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME)—the largest public employees' trade union in the country—from Fort Lauderdale north to Jacksonville, Gainesville, and Tallahassee.

"I loved my job," Ed remembers. "It was different. I got to teach on weekends—about stewards' training, and organizing. I enjoyed meeting people. The University of Florida was my primary responsibility, which was huge. Florida did not want anyone unionized, like any other state government. It was eye-opening for me—entirely different than the military. The state was still mostly segregated back then. You went up to the panhandle, they'd call you 'Yankee,' and not in a nice way. I was exposed to many more black people than back in Pennsylvania. There were no blacks in my high school. It was an entirely different atmosphere for me in the service and in the unions."

Homesick, he returned to Luzerne County in the late seventies and went to work as a business agent handling contract negotiations for AFSCME. He also became a key labor operative in Pennsylvania political campaigns, running phone banks and canvassing operations. He worked congressional, gubernatorial, and presidential campaigns, including those for Bill Clinton, Michael Dukakis, John Kerry, and Barack Obama.
Once, in 1988, the Dukakis campaign arranged to plant him at a town hall event to lob a friendly question to the Massachusetts governor, Ed says, chuckling at the memory.

In 2012, he became president of the Wilkes-Barre Labor Council.

But despite his deep involvement in Democratic politics, Ed gradually found himself growing more and more disenchanted with the party. While he’d worked for Obama’s election twice through the labor movement, Ed had not voted for him. He’d opted for Republican Ron Paul in 2008 and Gary Johnson, the Libertarian, in 2012.

In 2016, Ed’s first choice was Jim Webb, the conservative former senator from Virginia who announced he would seek the Democratic nomination to run for president, but Webb dropped out early.

Ed thought Hillary Clinton and the Democrats were preoccupied with cultural issues he deemed trivial, like separate bathrooms for transsexuals. “To me there are more important issues than getting an extra door for transsexuals in public buildings. I worked with the gay and lesbian communities. But now, the trans stuff, it’s every day in the paper. There’s enough problems out there. Should this really be national news when there are no jobs and businesses are leaving? To me this issue is not important…I don’t know where the Democrats are going. They’re so far left. The party I grew up with certainly doesn’t exist.”

When the Wilkes-Barre Labor Council announced in April 2016, just before the Pennsylvania primary, that it was endorsing Hillary Clinton, Ed resigned as president and announced that he was voting for Donald Trump.

Though plenty of union rank and file in Pennsylvania were voting for Trump too, union leadership viewed Ed’s move as a treasonous act. He had virtually ousted himself by showing up at the raucous rally Trump held in April outside Wilkes-Barre that was attended by some twelve thousand people.

Reporters knew him and spotted him, and he agreed to do an interview with the popular local radio talk show host Sue Henry.

“People asked why I was there. I said, ‘I’m here because I’m going to support Trump.’ The next morning, I received a phone call from the union, asking if it was true I’d come out for Trump. I said it was, and to save them the embarrassment, I told them I’d resign.”

But the union made him walk the plank. He was told he had to formally resign in front of his membership at the next meeting. “I think by that time almost everybody knew. We did the pledge, then I got up and said, ‘As of today I’m officially resigning as president of the labor council, and the reason is, I’ve publicly endorsed Donald Trump for president. I did it on the radio. Live. I’m satisfied with my decision. Thank you and so long.’

“I’m one of the idiots who had enough guts to come out and support Trump.”

Ed thinks Bill Clinton and Obama were complicit—ironically, along with the unions—in the decline of manufacturing in America and the loss of jobs to foreign countries.

“With Bill Clinton, it started with NAFTA and GATT. We lost probably twenty factories in Luzerne County because of NAFTA and GATT. I wondered why we were supporting these people, when all the jobs were leaving. Then Obama
wanted to do the TPP. It all collapsed on me. I was fed up with both parties, so I looked at someone who wasn’t a politician, and that was Trump. Trump started talking about trade. I know a lot of people who lost jobs after all the manufacturers left. There was a mass migration out of here. The jobs left because of the trade agreements. The jobs left! No one gave a shit. Politicians did not care.

“It was frustrating being in an office in a labor council and watching the jobs be wiped out, and no one cared, including the unions. It was all a swamp. And I made a living from being part of that system.”

Ed concluded that the United States was too willing to accept an inevitable globalization of the economy.

“It meant my country was going to be dying. I had problems with how the European Union was created. Because no one had a vote. I’ll be damned if the U.S. was going to be part of a UN globalized network, with the World Bank. I have problems with that. I actually believe that people direct the presidents what to do and say. What people? I don’t know—industrial and banking heads. None of the EU citizens have any say. All the trade agreements we made—who was controlling our presidents that made the deals? Because they sure as hell weren’t for the betterment of our country.

“The Republicans wanted cheap labor so they brought in the immigrants, which screwed the unions and other people. The Democrats brought all these people in to vote for them and keep their power, because a lot of the immigrants went to blue states to register to vote.

“At least I sleep better at night now. And Trump has been trying to change the trade agreements and bring jobs back. I have less respect for both political parties than I did a year ago. I knew Trump would take the heat he’s taken.”

Another factor that turned Ed toward Trump was the candidate’s pledge to disengage from military quagmires abroad and put “America first.”

“Especially as a veteran, I was fed up with all the wars going on,” Ed says. “Whether it was Republicans or Democrats, in my mind they didn’t care, as long as they got their political contributions. To be honest, I think all of us are fed up with all the wars that keep happening. We’re tired. Since I’ve been born, we’ve been in a state of war almost all the time. When does it stop? We’re pissing away all our money, building bombs that kill people, and we don’t take care of veterans at home that need the help.

“I voted for Trump because he was a nonpolitician. Not because he was a liberal or conservative. Vietnam, Afghanistan, we’re still involved in Iraq. If you want to fight something, bring it to an end one way or the other. The sad part is that whoever becomes president listens to the generals, and the generals, by nature, fight wars. And the biggest lobbyists are the defense contractors who spend a lot of money to keep wars going. We were warned by Eisenhower about the military-industrial complex. Nixon finally ended Vietnam because he was on his second term. War perpetuates itself. Is that how the rest of the vets feel? I don’t know, but that’s how I feel. All the money pissed away on wars could be used here to take care of the needs of people.”

After he left the military, Ed swore he’d never own a gun, but he had a change of heart recently.

“I have problems with people taking shots at other people
all the time—whether it's at cops, the Vegas concert, that church in Texas. I never wanted to buy another gun after Vietnam. But the way things are going with the crazies in this country, I bought one last summer. Anything can happen, and I just want to have a weapon. Everybody around here has them.”

Besides Trump's stance on trade and his America First agenda, several other issues that he pushed resonated with Ed. One was his flaying of the media. “People don't believe what they hear in the news anymore. For a whole bunch of reasons. I have to look at alternative sites like Drudge. I look at Breitbart. I don't get enough from what the major networks tell me. To me it's a propaganda machine. I read my two local papers cover to back, and occasionally Time or Newsweek. I'll listen to Hannity and Tucker on Fox, but I won't watch CNN or MSNBC. I listen to Alex Jones and Michael Savage.”

Jones and Savage are syndicated radio talk show hosts noted for promoting conspiracy theories, which Ed readily entertains.

“I don't believe every theory that comes out until I do my own investigation,” he explains. “Do I believe the official report on the JFK assassination? Absolutely not. And I read the Warren Commission, and fifteen or twenty books about the assassination.

“Do I believe 9/11 the way the government said? No, because I've watched documentaries about how the buildings were so tightly constructed. You'll never convince me that two planes caused the buildings to collapse.”

Ed also questions the official versions of the Oklahoma City bombing and the Boston Marathon bombings, and embraces the unfounded theory that liberal billionaire George Soros paid Black Lives Matter $30 million to protest in Ferguson, Missouri, and Baltimore.

Voter fraud was another Trump issue that Ed approved of discussing. “Yes, there is a lot of voter fraud. I heard Obama say, 'All you immigrants come in and vote.' Governor Terry McAuliffe in Virginia let the prisoners vote. So yes, I believe Trump when he says there were 3.5 million illegal votes. I think that's somewhat conservative, actually. When I came home from Florida, there was an investigation of voter fraud in Luzerne County. Six or seven politicians were indicted for voter fraud. They'd fill out absentee ballots, hold them in abeyance, then release them as needed. So, is there voter fraud? Yeah. I assume it still goes on.”

Ed is enjoying his retirement these days. He spends some of his time as chairman of the Luzerne County Arena Authority, which oversees the county's main indoor sports venue, Mohegan Sun Arena, outside Wilkes-Barre, where Trump packed the house at two rallies during the 2016 campaign.

In the summer, he likes going to county fairs, from Harrisburg east. He has lots of grass to cut at home. He's a big sports fan, especially any sport involving Penn State. He takes his four cats out for walks, and also helps tend to three cats at his girlfriend Rosalie's house.

Never married, Ed and Rosalie Zuba, seventy-one, have been together for forty-six years. He was twenty-four when they met. “When I worked my schedule, I was never home,” he says. “It never came up that we should get married.
Rosalie gets $585 of Social Security a month now and she couldn't live without me. We opted not to have kids. We each took care of our parents until they died. She's the boss, like all women are. And I listen. I say, 'Yes, dear' and 'No, dear.' So we have very few arguments."

Like Ed, Rosalie voted for Trump, and it was the first time she ever voted in a presidential election. "She decided that on her own," Ed says. "I was shocked. She said she didn't like any of the others, or did not trust anyone else."