



POKERTICIANS

The game is the same, it's just up on another level.

— BOB DYLAN, “PO’ BOY”

Poker skill didn't vault Barack Obama into the presidency. No cool-eyed read of a Hillary Clinton tell made it obvious he should reraise her claims to be an agent of change. Nor did he shrewdly calculate the pot odds necessary to call John McCain on his commitment to the Bush economic policies or extending the war in Iraq. At least not literally, he didn't. But when Senator Obama was asked by the Associated Press in 2007 to list a hidden talent, he said, “I'm a pretty good poker player.” He seemed to be talking about the tabletop card game, but the evidence also suggests he was right in the much larger sense.

As a writer, law professor, and community organizer, Obama was greeted coolly by some of his fellow legislators when, in 1998, he arrived in Springfield to take a seat in the Illinois Senate. Springfield had long been the province of cynical, corrupt backroom operators, hide-bound Republicans and Democrats addicted to partisan gridlock. So how was this ink-stained, highly educated greenhorn supposed to get

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along with Chicago ward heelers and conservative downstate farmers? By playing poker with them, of course.

“When it turned out that I could sit down at [a bar] and have a beer and watch a game or go out for a round of golf or get a poker game going,” Obama recalled, “I probably confounded some of their expectations.” He was referring to the regular Wednesday night game that he and his fellow freshman senator, Terry Link, a Democrat from suburban Lake County, got going in the basement of Link’s Springfield house. Called the Committee Meeting, its initial core was four players, but it quickly grew to eight regulars, including Republicans and lobbyists, and developed a waiting list. But whatever your affiliation, Link says, “You hung up your guns at the door. Nobody talked about their jobs or politics, and certainly no ‘influence’ was bartered or even discussed. It was boys’ night out—a release from our legislative responsibilities.” The banking lobbyist David Manning recalls, “We all became buddies in the card games, but there never were any favors granted.” Another regular was a lobbyist for the Illinois Manufacturers’ Association, and the game eventually moved to the association’s office—which didn’t keep Senator Obama from voting to raise taxes and fees for manufacturers. He says the games were simply “a fun way for people to relax and share stories and give each other a hard time over friendly competition,” adding that they provided “an easy way to get to know other senators—including Republicans.”

Most Committee Meetings began at seven o’clock and ran until two in the morning, with the players sustained by pizza, chips, beer, cigars, and good fellowship. Obama wore workout clothes and a baseball cap, but his approach to the cards wasn’t casual. He wanted to win. His analytical background—president of the *Harvard Law Review*, University of Chicago law professor—helped him hold his own at stud and hold’em, though it did him less good in the sillier, luck-based variants other players chose, such as baseball and 7-33.

Link, who probably played more hands with Obama than anyone else in Springfield, observed that his lanky table-mate played “calculated” poker, avoiding long-shot draws in favor of patiently waiting for strong starting hands. “Barack wasn’t one of those foolish gamblers who just thought all of a sudden that card in the middle [of the deck] was going to show up mysteriously.” He relied on his brain, in other words, instead of his gut or the seat of his pants. “When Barack stayed in, you pretty much figured he’s got a good hand,” recalls Larry Walsh, a conservative corn farmer representing Joliet, who neglected to note

that such a rock-solid image made it easier for Obama to bluff. “He had the stone face,” Link recalled.

Yet even as one of the boys—bluffing, drinking, bumming smokes, laughing at off-color yarns—there were lines he wouldn’t cross. When a married lobbyist arrived at a Springfield office game with someone described as “an inebriated woman companion who did not acquit herself in a particularly wholesome fashion,” Obama made it clear he wasn’t pleased, though he managed to do it without offending his poker buddies. Link says they all were displeased, and that the lobbyist and his girlfriend were “quickly whisked out of the place.”

Obama also made sure he never played for stakes he couldn’t easily afford. Only on a very bad night could one drop a hundred bucks in these games, typical wins and losses being closer to twenty-five. Among the regulars, the consensus was that “Obama usually left a winner.” The bottom line politically was that poker helped Obama break the ice with people he needed to work with in the legislature.

“Barry,” as he was called before college, had learned the game from his maternal grandfather, Stanley Dunham, a World War II army veteran whose black friends played poker as well. Barry also played with classmates at Punahou High School in Honolulu. His best game, however, was basketball. He wore a Dr. J ’fro, and his teammates respectfully called him “Barry O’Bomber.” They won the state championship in 1979, and Obama later told HBO’s Bryant Gumbel that, despite the O’Bomber nickname, “My actual talent was in my first step. I could get to the rim on anybody.” His problem as an in-shape, thirty-six-year-old legislator was that very few pols who’d been around long enough to run things in Springfield could still make it up and down a hard court. His solution was the game in Link’s basement. To connect with those who didn’t play basketball or poker, he also took up golf, a game at which Link says “he wasn’t a natural.” But he counted every stroke. “When he’d shoot an 11 on a hole, I’d say, ‘Boss, what did you shoot?’ and he’d say, ‘I had an 11.’ And that’s what he’d write on his scorecard. I always respected that.” Determined to write down fewer 11s, Obama took enough lessons to be able to shoot in the low nineties, and he eventually beat Link a few times.

But the freshman legislator seems to have understood that, as a networking tool, poker is the most efficient pastime of all. Its tables often serve as less genteel clubs for students, workers, businessmen, and politicians of every rank and persuasion. Instead of walking down fairways forty yards apart from each other, throwing elbows in the paint,

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or quietly hunting pheasant or muskie, poker buddies are elbow to elbow all night, competing and drinking and talking. The experience can tell them a lot about the other fellows' ability to make sound decisions, whether electoral or parliamentary, tactical or strategic. As Abner Mikva, one of the deans of Chicago's legal and political worlds and a longtime Obama adviser, put it simply, "He understands how you network." The networking paid off when, against all expectations, Obama hammered out a compromise bill called "the first significant campaign reform law in Illinois in 25 years" and other bills mandating tax credits for the working poor, the videotaping of police interrogations, and reform of the state's antiquated campaign-finance system.

After being "spanked"—his word for losing by 31 percent to the incumbent, Bobby Rush, in a run for Illinois's first congressional district in 2000—Obama returned to Springfield and set to work even harder. He also began speaking publicly about national issues. After September 11, 2001, he said, "Even as I hope for some measure of peace and comfort to the bereaved families, I must also hope that we as a nation draw some measure of wisdom from this tragedy," and called for a better understanding of "the sources of such madness." After President Bush called for the invasion of Iraq, Obama chose an antiwar rally to say, "I stand before you as someone who is not opposed to war in all circumstances." He cited his grandfather's service and praised the sacrifices made during the Civil War and World War II, before saying, "I know that even a successful war against Iraq will require a U.S. occupation of undetermined length, at undetermined cost, with undetermined consequences. I know that an invasion of Iraq without a clear rationale and without strong international support will only fan the flames of the Middle East, and encourage the worst, rather than best, impulses of the Arab world, and strengthen the recruitment arm of Al Qaeda. I am not opposed to all wars. I'm opposed to dumb wars."

After his keynote speech at the Democratic Convention in July 2004 made him an even brighter political star, Obama easily won election to the United States Senate in November. John Kerry's loss at the top of the ticket, however, prompted David Mamet to write an unconventional postmortem for the *Los Angeles Times*. "The Republicans, like the perpetual raiser at the poker table, became increasingly bold as the Democrats signaled their absolute reluctance to seize the initiative," he said, arguing that Kerry had lost in part because of his timid response to the distortion of his service in Vietnam. "A decorated war hero muddled himself in merely 'calling' the attacks of a man with, curiously, a

vanishing record of military attendance.” Mamet went on to say, “Control of the initiative is control of the battle. In the alley, at the poker table or in politics, one must raise. . . . How, the undecided electorate rightly wondered, could one believe that Kerry would stand up for America when he could not stand up to Bush?” Mamet made his poker parallel even more specific by suggesting that a better “response to the Swift boat veterans would have been, ‘I served. He didn’t. I didn’t bring up the subject, but, if all George Bush has to show for his time in the Guard is a scrap of paper with some doodling on it, I say the man was a deserter.’ This would have been a raise. Here the initiative has been seized, and the opponent must now fume and bluster and scream unfair. In combat, in politics, in poker, there is no certainty; there is only likelihood, and the likelihood is that aggression will prevail.” Anticipating future elections, Mamet chided the Democrats for “anteing away their time at the table. They may be bold and risk defeat, or be passive and ensure it.”

The playwright’s point was uncannily in sync with advice Admiral John S. McCain Jr. once gave his children. “Life is run by poker players, not the systems analysts,” he told them, referring to poker players’ cunning and toughness, and their tendency to have a bold strategic vision, not fussy myopia. His son John III, while certainly cunning and tough, turned out to prefer craps, a loud, mindless game in which the player never has a strategic advantage and must make impulsive decisions and then rely on blind luck. His selection of Sarah Palin for the vice presidential slot and his unsteady response to the economic crisis were two of the better examples of a dice-rolling mind-set.

By contrast, the Obama campaign’s preparation of a separate website featuring a fifteen-minute documentary video about McCain’s role in the savings-and-loan scandal of 1989 was but one piece of evidence that the candidate understood Mamet’s point about raising. “We don’t throw the first punch,” he said, “but we’ll throw the last.” In other words, if the McCain campaign or its surrogates wanted to raise the specter of Bill Ayers or Jeremiah Wright, Obama was going to reraise. As he’d told his fledgling staff back in January 2007, “Let’s put our chips in the middle of the table and see how we do.”

Mamet’s and Obama’s analogies appear more traditional when we learn that as early as 1875, a *New York Times* editorial declared that “the national game is not base-ball, but poker,” noting that the newspapers of the day were already in the “daily” habit of using “the technical terms of poker to illustrate the manner in which political questions

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strike the Thoughtful Patriot.” This book will offer cases in point from nearly every decade since.

Where Mamet made clear why a politician must raise, especially with a stronger hand, Andy Bloch, a poker pro with degrees from Harvard and MIT, explained how bluffs might be read in military and diplomatic arenas. “In poker you have to put yourself in the shoes of your opponents, get inside their heads and figure out what they’re thinking, what their actions mean, what they would think *your* actions mean.” Contrasting Obama with his predecessor, Bloch said, “One thing that got us into the Iraq War was that George Bush didn’t realize that Saddam Hussein was basically bluffing, trying to look like a big man, when he really had no weapons of mass destruction.”

Back in 2002, Obama read that bluff correctly. He also understood that the most pressing threats to American security were the bin Laden strongholds in Afghanistan and Pakistan. President Bush, Vice President Cheney, Secretary of State Colin Powell, John McCain, and seventy-six other senators misread (or allowed themselves to be misled about) Saddam’s bluff. The Bush administration then proceeded to squander tall stacks of military and diplomatic chips it should have deployed against Al Qaeda.

In April 2003, the Iraqi Most Wanted poker deck, with Saddam as the ace of spades and fifty-one other Baathists beneath him in the hierarchy, was officially designated the “personality identification playing cards” by Brigadier General Vincent Brooks of the U.S. Central Command. The pattern on their backs was the desert camouflage worn by our troops. Cards with a similar purpose had been deployed by both sides during the Civil War and in every important American military campaign since. So it seemed rather telling that no deck depicting members of Al Qaeda was requisitioned by President Bush.

Although he was more likely to be seen on the campaign trail playing Uno with his daughters, or a pickup game of basketball, than poker, Obama has already extended the long tradition of presidents who have used the card game to relax with friends, extend their network of colleagues, or even deploy its tactics and psychology in their role as commander in chief. His tendency to finish poker sessions in the black puts him in the company of Chester Arthur, Dwight Eisenhower, and Richard Nixon. But by limiting his play to small, friendly games, Obama is more like Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman. He has also played the national card game, as Theodore Roosevelt and Lyndon

Johnson did, at least in part because of the entrée it gave him to political circles he would not have had otherwise.

George Washington (1732–1799) and Andrew Jackson (1767–1845) both loved to play cards and gamble, and would no doubt have taken up poker had the game been around in their heydays. As a young officer, Washington received a rebuke “for wasting so much of his time at the gaming table,” and Jackson was one of the most notorious gamblers of the early nineteenth century. But it wasn’t until Jackson’s old age that the French game of *poque* evolved in New Orleans—the city he’d saved from the British in 1815—and began moving north on Mississippi steamboats as poker. By the 1850s, however, it was the card game of choice among savvy risk takers in nearly every state and territory, and most politicians were playing it.

In November 1861, with Union armies generally stymied and the capital threatened by rebel armies under Beauregard and Johnston, Abraham Lincoln used a poker analogy to explain a difficult wartime decision to an anxious Northern public. The British mail steamer *Trent*, bearing two Confederate envoys to London, was intercepted by the Yankee captain Charles Wilkes. When Wilkes decided to take the envoys prisoner, he created an incident that threatened to bring Britain into the war on the side of the South. The British delivered a stern ultimatum: release the ambassadors and apologize, or else. “One war at a time” was Lincoln’s rationale as he “cheerfully” freed them. Yet reporters and politicians on both sides of the Atlantic wanted to know whether the president would also apologize, as the British had insisted. Said Lincoln to one of them: “Your question reminds me of an incident which occurred out west. Two roughs were playing cards for high stakes, when one of them, suspecting his adversary of foul play, straightway drew his bowie-knife from his belt and pinned the hand of the other player upon the table, exclaiming: ‘If you haven’t got the ace of spades under your palm, I’ll apologize.’” As the great Civil War historian Shelby Foote would write of the *Trent* Affair: “Poker was not the national game for nothing; the people understood that their leaders had bowed, not to the British, but to expediency.”

Theodore Roosevelt gained access to the middle echelons of New York’s Republican Party in the early 1880s by showing up at their informal gatherings in a smoky room above a saloon on East Fifty-ninth Street. To overcome the mostly Irish bosses’ impression that he was a “mornin’ glory,” a well-to-do poseur who “looked lovely in the mornin’ and withered up” quickly, he insisted on taking part in every profanity-

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laced “bull session,” in spite of his loathing for vulgarity and tobacco. “Some of them sneered at my black coat and tall hat. But I made them understand I should come dressed as I chose,” he recalled. “Then after the discussions I used to play poker and smoke with them.” His intention, writes David McCullough, was “to get inside the machine.”

And it worked. These and other masculine gambits helped the formerly frail young man shimmy up the political totem pole with astonishing speed: assistant secretary of the navy by thirty-eight, governor of New York by forty, president of the United States by forty-two. What our youngest chief executive called the Square Deal was inspired by a set of silver scales presented to him by the black citizens of Butte, Montana, in 1903. Roosevelt used the term to promote a sweeping series of policies designed to ensure that all Americans could earn a living wage and that the scales of justice would be put into balance for black and white, rich and poor citizens. “When I say I believe in a square deal,” he explained, “I do not mean to give every man the best hand. If the cards do not come to any man, or if they do come, and he has not got the power to play them, that is his affair. All I mean is that there shall not be any crookedness in the dealing.”

When the dark-horse candidate Warren Harding was asked by reporters how he’d managed to win the Republican Party’s nomination in 1920, he said, “We drew to a pair of deuces, and filled.” (That is, he made a full house.) After soundly defeating James M. Cox in the first national election in which women could vote, he continued playing poker at least once a week. Harding’s games while in office were for fun and relaxation, not profit or political advantage, and the rumor that he lost the White House china in one of them is merely a bit of embroidery. The more significant charges are that Harding took poker, alcohol, and his affairs with at least two women more seriously than his responsibilities as president, and that he fostered a spirit of corruption. One of the regulars in his game, Interior Secretary Albert B. Fall, went to prison in the Teapot Dome scandal for accepting bribes for leasing oil-rich fields in Wyoming without competitive bids. Other regulars included Speaker of the House Nicholas Longworth and his wife, Alice, a daughter of Teddy Roosevelt, along with other members of Harding’s administration, who came to be known as the Poker Cabinet. “Forget that I’m President of the United States. I’m Warren Harding, playing poker with friends,” he would say, “and I’m going to beat hell out of them.” Alice Longworth described the Prohibition-era gatherings this way: “No rumor could have exceeded the reality; the study was filled

with cronies . . . the air heavy with tobacco smoke, trays with bottles containing every imaginable brand of whiskey stood about, cards and poker chips ready at hand—a general atmosphere of waistcoat unbuttoned, feet on desk, and spittoons alongside.”

It was to promote policies designed to lift the United States out of the Depression in 1933 that Franklin D. Roosevelt, following the example of his fifth cousin, Theodore, chose a term from the game he knew millions of ordinary Americans loved: the New Deal. Throughout his three terms (and the few weeks he served of his fourth), FDR played relatively sober nickel-ante stud games in the White House to unwind after his grueling days managing the Depression and then the Second World War. Beginning only eight days after his first inauguration, he steadied and soothed anxious Americans with a series of popular evening radio broadcasts from his second-floor study, where the poker games also took place. “Good evening, friends,” he’d begin. As he delivered at least one of these Fireside Chats, he kept hold of some of his chips, fingering them the way others might use worry beads or a rosary. His friends gathered around their boxy wooden radios could hear them clicking together in his hand.

FDR’s final vice president, Harry Truman, had played poker as a doughboy in France and kept up with war buddies at small, friendly games in Missouri. In *Truman*, David McCullough teased out poker’s role in our most mainstream president’s careers as an artillery officer, haberdasher, judge, and politician. “He never learned to play golf or tennis, never belonged to a country club. Poker was his game, not bridge or mah-jongg.” Truman’s Monday-night sessions with old army buddies “had a 10-cent limit. A little beer or bourbon was consumed, Prohibition notwithstanding, and the conversation usually turned to politics. Such was the social life of Judge Harry Truman in the early 1930s, the worst of the Depression.” During his years in the White House, he played with chips embossed with the presidential seal, though only once did he allow himself to be photographed doing so.

Eisenhower and Nixon, both of whom came from working-class backgrounds, played for significant stakes during their military service. At West Point in 1915, Ike attended cadet dances “only now and then, preferring to devote my time to poker.” During the First World War he paid for his dress uniform and courted the wealthy Mamie Doud with his winnings. As supreme allied commander in 1944, he outfoxed the Germans on D-day with a series of bluffing maneuvers before taking Normandy Beach.

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As a navy lieutenant in the Pacific theater, Nixon won enough in five-card draw and stud games to finance his first congressional campaign in 1946. That same year, an up-and-coming Texas congressman named Lyndon Johnson tried to get himself invited to President Truman's poker sessions aboard the yacht *Williamsburg*—not to win money, of course, but because a seat in that game would have been a precious political asset. When those efforts failed, Johnson started his own game with more junior politicians, though he did play with Truman a couple of times at the home of Treasury Secretary Fred Vinson. And while John Kennedy didn't play much poker with cards and chips, his ability to call Khrushchev's bluff without triggering a nuclear war during the Cuban missile crisis in October 1962 may be the best example we have of how the tactic at the heart of our national card game helped alter the course of our history. Even so, Aaron Brown, the hedge fund manager who wrote *The Poker Face of Wall Street*, credits Khrushchev as "the one who made a wise fold. He had a strong hand but not an unbeatable one, and he sensed the other guy was going to call everything to the river. Good laydown."

As we'll see in Chapter 29, bluffs, counterbluffs, and strong lay-downs throughout the cold war, from Khrushchev's threats to nuke Britain during the Suez crisis to Ronald Reagan's Star Wars initiative, gradually made it more apparent how important poker's most basic maneuver was to modern military and diplomatic strategy. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the survival of Western civilization depended on bluffing effectively. One of the most inventive scientists of the nuclear age, John von Neumann, began his monumental *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior*, cowritten with the economist Oskar Morgenstern, as a mathematical expression of bluffing. "As in poker," wrote Morgenstern after serving as an adviser to Eisenhower, "both we and the Russians must realize the importance of making threats commensurate with the value of the position to be defended, and not bluff so grossly that the raise is sure to be called."

Chapter 34 tells the story of the Massachusetts congressman Tip O'Neill's tide-turning change of heart about Lyndon Johnson's Vietnam strategy. During a poker game at the Army and Navy Club, General David Shoup told the hawkish O'Neill that the conflict was a civil war between Vietnamese factions and wasn't winnable by U.S. forces, at least not the way LBJ was fighting it. The president later admitted to O'Neill that he had severely limited his military options against Hanoi

for fear of triggering a nuclear response from China or the Soviet Union. More recent nuclear bluffs by Iran (the subject of Chapter 42) and North Korea have driven home how vital to our national interest poker logic, and in particular the ability to bluff and read bluffs, continues to be.

The book will also show how naturally poker thinking extends into such arenas as law, business, education, the Internet, and artificial intelligence—all this in spite of the fact that more than a few politicians, historians, biographers, and editors have tried to minimize poker's importance. The latest edition of *The New Oxford American Dictionary*, for example, fails to include flop (as a poker term), hold'em, Omaha (as a game), and World Series of Poker. (Terms deemed fit to appear there include floptical, holdall, Pokemon, and World Heritage Site.) Similar omissions occur in the Merriam-Webster, thefreedictionary.com, encarta.msn.com, and other online dictionaries. Such cultural blind spots persist in the face of poker's expanding global popularity, as well as abundant evidence that the game has helped not only presidents and prime ministers and Supreme Court justices but countless other movers and shakers make their way in the world—that it was essential to the development of their character, education, bankroll, military and business practices, as well as to their networks of contacts and friends.

“He played poker and Boston [a form of whist] all through his Presidential career for money.” Here we have William Tecumseh Sherman writing privately in 1889 to the president of Harvard about Ulysses S. Grant, who had died four years earlier. Sherman well knew of his comrade in arms's penchant for bluffing at Vicksburg, Chattanooga, and other key battles, and of his keen feel for poker. Yet Grant's majestic two-volume *Personal Memoirs* made no mention of poker; nor would the 880 pages of Sherman's own *Memoirs*, even though he had used the Confederate general John Bell Hood's poker tendencies against him to destroy Hood's army outside Atlanta.

A similar whitewash occurs in even the best works of Civil War history. Chapters 13–15 tell how Southern generals such as Lee, William Mahone, and Nathan Bedford Forrest deployed poker tactics in battle at least as effectively as their blue-coated counterparts. Even so, Bruce Catton's three-volume *The Civil War* and James M. McPherson's *The Battle Cry of Freedom* each have a single fleeting reference to poker; James Ford Rhodes's *History of the Civil War*, Stephen Sears's *Gettysburg*, and Jeff and Michael Shaara's bestselling *Civil War Trilogy* of

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novels have zero. Generations of history buffs were therefore unable to appreciate the extent to which officers and enlisted men on both sides of the slavery divide played the game avidly, and that the supplest minds among them, including seven future presidents, learned to apply its tactics in diplomatic and military contexts alike. As Albert Upton, Nixon's lit professor at Whittier College, would observe: "A man who couldn't hold a hand in a first-class poker game isn't fit to be President of the United States."

However one feels about Nixon, it's hard to disagree with Professor Upton. One reason so many voters have disagreed in the past is what the historian Garry Wills calls the "cult of the common man," which makes people "think of their heroes as rising almost by magic, rather than by ambition, hard effort, and shrewd calculation." Ever since our earliest presidents aristocratically refused to campaign for the job, many citizens came to believe that the shrewd calculations of a frankly ambitious candidate were traits to be counted against him.

Moral crusaders in the nineteenth century also tried to censor or downplay poker's growing appeal, mainly because the game wasn't virtuous. It involved gambling, for one thing, often in combination with hard liquor, foul cigars, painted harlots, and concealed weapons. You either lost money or took other people's—not by hard, honest toil but by cunning and ruthlessness. Perhaps their most legitimate reason was that during its first several decades, poker was a cheater's paradise, the villainous details of which are explored in Chapters 7–12. President Grant's gambling at poker and in the stock market is forever linked, fairly or not, with the corruption and other failures of his two terms in office.

In the twentieth century we saw presidents Franklin Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, Johnson, and Nixon—every regular player but Harding, it seems—downplay or even deny their affection for the game. Poker's reputation as a backroom cheating fest helped make it a political minus, even though by the time Eisenhower first ran in 1952 it was usually played on the square—and even though malfeasance occurred in every game Americans loved, baseball most certainly included. The Brooklyn Dodgers, after all, had just been cheated out of the '51 National League pennant when the Giants used a telescope and buzzer wire to tip Bobby Thomson that Ralph Branca's next pitch would be a fastball. Meanwhile even friendly little White House poker games during the FDR and Truman administrations had to be kept from the public, despite the fact that poker went hand in hand with

the military weapons and tactics that had won World War II and bolstered our cold war diplomacy (subjects covered in Chapters 25–29).

Politicians and biographers have numerous motives, of course, but there's no doubt quite a few of them have seen poker as either a dirty secret or, at best, "just a game," never as a key to achievement. Whereas if a president split a rail, shot a buffalo, played football, or simply played a character who did, we got to read a chapter or hear a speech about it, with more than a few Gipper or White Hunter moments sprinkled in thereafter. Even today, "Governator" Arnold Schwarzenegger is evidently more proud of his steroid-fueled pecs and flamboyantly homicidal film roles, as Bob Dole was of his comedic talent, John Kerry of his grouse hunting, and George W. Bush of his exercise regimens, than of whatever poker skills he might possess—skills much more relevant to the job they aspired to, including shrewdness, psychological acuity, risk and resource management, and the ability to leverage uncertainty.

The habit of sweeping presidential poker under a carpet of virtue was first exposed in 1970, when Wills published *Nixon Agonistes*, which used wartime poker sessions to illuminate the character of one of our most accomplished but least popular leaders. "Nick," as he was called in the Navy, had taken home \$8,000—a genuinely whopping haul in the forties—from games in the Pacific. Once, while holding the ace of diamonds, he drew four cards to make a royal flush, about a 250,000–1 shot. "I was naturally excited," he would write in his autobiography. "But I played it with a true poker face, and won a substantial pot."

Wills zeroes in on the Quaker lieutenant's "iron butt" and the fact that he "got to know his fellows, not in foxholes but across the tables, in endless wartime poker games." Since most American fighting men played, Nixon's participation could have been seen simply as part of his lifelong campaign to be a regular guy, but Wills shows how much more to it there was. The presidential biographer Bela Kornitzer agrees: "Out there Nixon passed over the traditional Quaker objections to gambling. Why? He needed money. He learned poker and mastered it to such a degree that he won a sizable amount, and it became the sole financial foundation of his career."

"Nick, as always, did his homework," writes Wills. "He found poker's local theoreticians, men willing to play and discuss, replay and debate, out of sheer analytic zeal." He persuaded one expert, Jim Stewart, to spend a few days coaching him on five-card-draw strategy. Nixon's term for such preparations was war-gaming. He reveled in risk-averse tactics and began to make serious money playing tight, rocky

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poker. His Quaker mother may not have approved of fighting or gambling, but he had “eased his way into the military past her scruples. The war became a moral hiatus. Besides, motive is what matters, and Nick’s motive was pure, was puritan. He was not playing games; with him it was a business.” Wills continues: “Show him the rules, and he will play your game, no matter what, and beat you at it. Because with him it is not a game.” Looking ahead to his subject’s checkered political career, Wills adds, “It helps, watching Nixon’s ‘ruthless’ singlemindedness when bigger pots have been played, to remember those poker days.” Sometimes, in other words, the game is much more than just a game.

Wills also shows that while Nixon played ruthlessly, Eisenhower was even better at poker, perhaps because he was more of a natural—and played with a greater sense of virtue to boot. “Like Nixon, he made large sums of money in the long games at military bases,” writes Wills. “Unlike Nixon, he was so good he had to stop playing with enlisted men; he was leaving too many of them broke.” Even so, when he chose Nixon as his running mate in 1952, both men stopped playing or even mentioning poker, fearing voters would think it unsavory.

A more partisan Republican than Eisenhower, who was considered to be “above” political parties, Nixon was “a hot political property” after helping to convict Alger Hiss of perjury during an investigation into whether Hiss was a Soviet spy. But neither Ike nor Dick ever mentioned the game while campaigning, even though both of them had played for life-changing stakes while serving in their country’s armed forces.

Nixon, for his part, was raised in East Whittier, a working-class Quaker community twelve miles southeast of Los Angeles, where any kind of gambling, he said, was “anathema.” His family’s modest means forced him to turn down a full-tuition scholarship to Harvard in 1930 because it didn’t include living expenses and would have kept him from helping out at his family’s gas station and grocery store. Instead he attended Whittier, the small Quaker college not far from his home. A star debater as an undergraduate, he did accept a scholarship to the Duke School of Law, then returned home to practice in Whittier, where he married Pat Ryan, a schoolteacher and aspiring actress, in June 1940. After the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, he volunteered for sea combat duty, but because of his age (thirty) and advanced education, the navy assigned him to the South Pacific Combat Air Transport at Guadalcanal and later on Green Island. He spent the war preparing mani-

ests and flight plans for C-47 Skytrains, prosaic but necessary duty that helped make American forces more mobile than their Japanese adversaries. Promoted to lieutenant, he served from May 1943 until December 1944.

Even though his austere Quaker upbringing prohibited poker, he later admitted that “the pressures of wartime, and the even more oppressive monotony, made it an irresistible diversion. I found playing poker instructive as well as entertaining and profitable. I learned that the people who have the cards are usually the ones who talk the least and the softest; those who are bluffing tend to talk loudly and give themselves away.”

Nixon was “as good a poker player as, if not better than, anyone we had ever seen,” one of his navy buddies testified. “I once saw him bluff a lieutenant commander out of \$1,500 with a pair of deuces.” While serving on Green Island, Nixon was invited to a small dinner party for the celebrity pilot Charles Lindbergh, who was testing prototype planes for the air force. Having earlier agreed to host a poker game that night, Nixon RSVP’d in the negative. As he explains in *RN*, “In the intense loneliness and boredom of the South Pacific our poker games were more than idle pastimes, and the etiquette surrounding them was taken very seriously.” He continues: “With my pay, Pat’s salary, and my poker winnings, we had managed to save \$10,000 during the war.” Upon discharge, he used those impressive profits to bankroll his first congressional campaign. In November 1946, he defeated the popular incumbent Jerry Voorhis in part by accusing the forty-five-year-old FDR Democrat of being a draft-dodging Communist—though he did refrain from calling him “a jerry.” In 1950, Nixon used the Communist smear and other dirty tricks to swiftboat Helen Gahagan Douglas, a three-term congresswoman once called “ten of the twelve most beautiful women in America,” for a seat in the U.S. Senate. After Nixon called her “the Pink Lady” and claimed the attractive New Dealer was “pink right down to her underwear,” she retorted with a nickname that stuck: “Tricky Dick.”

Presidents have been useful in writing the story of poker because at least one biography and thousands of articles have been written about each of them. While the habits of ordinary Americans go unrecorded for the most part, we can reasonably infer that if as profound a communicator as Lincoln quoted the lore about poker cheats to explain a diplomatic decision in 1861, most citizens knew enough of that lore to

understand what he was telling them. If Truman, the Model Son of the Middle Border, as David McCullough calls him, played pot-limit five-card stud aboard the *Williamsburg* in the late 1940s, a fair number of average Americans must also have been playing that variant then. And if most news reports today about nuclear standoffs with Iran or North Korea include the word “bluff,” we can be sure the world’s citizens understand what this tactic involves.

But it’s not just the game’s wartime applications that this book is concerned with. As we’ll read in Chapter 6, decades before New Yorkers like Alexander Cartwright began tinkering with the English game of rounders, our other national pastime was being cooked up in the polyglot gumbo of New Orleans during its turbulent first years after the Louisiana Purchase, which President Jefferson had announced to the nation on July 4, 1803. Baseball and poker emerged as dueling national pastimes well before the Civil War and have been among the brightest, most durable threads in our social fabric ever since.

My goal is to show how the story of poker helps to explain who we are. The game has gone hand in hand with pivotal aspects of our national experience for a couple of centuries now. As our language adopts more and more poker terms, the ways we’ve done battle and business have echoed, and been echoed *by*, poker’s definitive tactics: cheating and thwarting cheaters, leveraging uncertainty, bluffing and sussing out bluffers, managing risk and reward. I rely on the memoirs of ordinary citizens, interviews with poker stars and everyday players, newspaper and magazine articles, popular and scholarly histories, as well as presidential biographies (especially those written after *Nixon Agonistes*), all of which help to reveal poker’s distinctive double helix in our evolving DNA.

Questions this book seeks to answer include: Why would *poque*, an eighteenth-century parlor game played by a few French and Persian aristocrats, take hold and flourish in kingless, democratic America? Why did *poque* evolve into our national card game, some say our national pastime, instead of piquet or cribbage or whist? How much has poker’s popularity had to do with bluffing and risk management, or with the fact that money is its language, its leverage, its means of keeping score?

American DNA is a notoriously complex recipe for creating a body politic, but two strands in particular have always stood out in high contrast: the risk-averse Puritan work ethic and the entrepreneur’s urge to

seize the main chance. Proponents of neither MO like to credit the other with anything positive. Huggers of the shore tend not to praise explorers, while gamblers remain unimpressed by those who husband savings accounts. Yet blended in much the same way that parents' genes are in their children, the two ways of operating have made us who we are as a country.

Ever since the *Mayflower* carried separatist Puritans to Plymouth in 1620, what is often called the American Experiment has lavishly rewarded and punished those who take risks. From Washington's attack on Trenton after crossing the Delaware in a Christmas night hailstorm, Alexander Hamilton's revolutionary banking and credit systems, to the nine-figure compensation packages for CEOs and hedge fund managers, our military, political, and economic systems have all been tipped in favor of people who bet big and won—as opposed to Old Europe, where nearly every advantage went to those who were lucky enough to be born aristocrats.

Geneticists have now learned there is literally such a thing as American DNA, not surprising given that nearly all of us are descended from immigrants. We therefore carry an immigrant-specific genotype, a genetic marker that expresses itself—in some environments, at least—as energetic risk taking, restless curiosity, and competitive self-promotion. Even when famine, warfare, or another calamity strikes, most people stay in their homeland. The self-selecting group that migrates, seldom more than 2 percent, is disproportionately inclined to take chances; they also have above-average intelligence and are quicker decision makers. There's something about their dopamine-receptor systems, the neural pathway associated with a taste for novelty and risk, that sets them apart from those who stay put. While the factors involved are numerous and complex, the migratory syndrome has been deftly summarized by the journalist Emily Bazelon: "It's not about where you come from, it's that you came at all."

The migratory gene was probably even more dominant among those Americans who first moved west across the Appalachians, up and down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, then out to Nevada and California during the Gold Rush. Their urge to strike it rich made poker much more appealing to them than point-based trick-taking games like whist, bridge, and cribbage.

Today, the U.S. population teems with exuberant, curious, energetic risk takers, a combination of traits called "hypomania" by Peter C.

Whybrow, a behavioral scientist at UCLA. Why aren't Canada, Central and South America, and Australia, where so many immigrants and their descendants also live, as hypomanic as the United States? Whybrow argues that human behavior is always a function of genetics and environment—of nature plus nurture. In America, “You have the genes and the completely unrestricted marketplace,” he says. “That’s what gives us our peculiar edge.”

Our national card game still combines Puritan values—self-control, diligence, the steady accumulation of savings insured by the FDIC—with what might be called the open-market cowboy’s desire to get very rich very quickly. The latter is the mind-set of the gold rush, the hedge fund, the lottery ticket of ordinary wage earners. Yet whenever the big-bet cowboy folds a weak hand, he submits to his puritan side.

Sometimes outsiders can see our traits even more clearly than we see them ourselves. The Budapest-born historian John Lukacs calls poker “the game closest to the Western conception of life . . . where men are considered moral agents, and where—at least in the short run—the important thing is not what happens but what people think happens.” Another keen foreign observer, Alexis de Tocqueville, wrote in *Democracy in America*: “Those living in the instability of a democracy have the constant image of chance before them, and, in the end, they come to like all those projects in which chance plays a part.” This was true, he deduced, “not only because of the promise of profit but because they like the emotions evoked.”

It remains unclear which chancing games Tocqueville witnessed, but the perceptive Frenchman came to appreciate our allegiance to risk, initiative, and democratic opportunity while traveling in 1831 aboard the steamboat *Louisville* along Mark Twain’s Mississippi, the original American mainstream, at the very moment poker was coming of age. Twain himself would become a highly paid steamboat pilot just before the Civil War closed the river to commercial traffic. Forced to make his way as a writer instead, he produced numerous reports and “yarns” about the game, the most famous of which appeared in *Life on the Mississippi*. Echoing both Tocqueville and Twain, a headline in the April 23, 2003, *New York Times* declared: “Whoever wants to know the heart and mind of America had better learn poker.”

Cowboys Full does not always proceed chronologically. I explore a few subjects (luck in poker, poker in literature, no-limit hold’em tourna-

ments, the emergence of women players) independently of the historical time line. But since time lines are crucial to any story, this one begins with prehistoric gambling, the invention of playing cards, and the Renaissance vying games that eventually gave rise to twenty-card *poque* in New Orleans during the Jefferson administration. By Lincoln's election, Americans of every variety were using fifty-two cards to play the new riverboat bluffing game. After the army split into blue and gray factions when Fort Sumter was fired upon in April 1861, just about every soldier became familiar with poker's cunning and expedient stratagems. The game also provided them with an upgrade from such entertainments as bare-knuckle boxing, chuck-a-luck, or betting on the outcome of a race between lice. Given an acre or two in warm sunshine, most Yankees preferred baseball, which they often played with a walnut wound with twine for the ball and just about any length of wood as a bat. But when cramped terrain, weather, or darkness kept everyone close to his tent, poker helped both Confederate and Federal troops pass the time between marches and field drills and bloodbaths. The lucky survivors then took the game home with them to every state and territory and introduced it to the next generation.

After peace was secured at Appomattox, the story moves west with the prospectors and railroad workers, with outsize characters as different as Twain, Doc Holliday, Alice Ivers, Wild Bill Hickok, and George Armstrong Custer taking the stage in their turn. After 1890, it follows a few of the cowboys and Rough Riders back east, where poker's popularity spread among soldiers in the Great War to end all wars and all our other wars that followed.

The huge cast of characters includes the cryptographer and spy Herbert Yardley; Arnold "the Brain" Rothstein, who fixed the 1919 baseball World Series and lost \$350,000 in a single weekend stud game; "Texas Dolly" Brunson, who bridges the span between the dangerous road games of the 1950s and the safely legitimate mountains of loot in the twenty-first century; the crack addict and hold'em genius Stuey Ungar, often called the best player ever; Phil Ivey, the "Tiger Woods of Poker," and his friend Barry Greenstein, the "Robin Hood of Poker," who donates all of his tournament winnings to charity; the ninety-five-pound Jennifer Harman, winner of two World Series bracelets, who took on a billionaire heads-up while awaiting her second kidney transplant; the witty and charismatic Canadian pro Daniel Negreanu; the Texas banker Andy Beal, who invited the best in the world to compete

as a tag team against him and still almost busted them in the biggest poker game ever played; and scores of other pros, amateurs, studs, bal-las, donkeys, and fish.

Chapters 35 and 37–42 cover the World Series of Poker, which af-ter being dominated by Texans for most of its first decade (1970–1979) has now crowned champions from the Bronx, the Lower East Side, Los Angeles, Madison, Grand Rapids, Boston, China, Ireland, Viet-nam, Spain, Laos, Norway, Indonesia, Sweden, and Iran. Foreign-born players like Men “the Master” Nguyen, John Juanda, Gus Hansen, Humberto Brenes, Carlos Mortensen, Joe Hachem, and Peter Eastgate have won hundreds of millions of dollars in American tournaments. In 2004, the European Poker Tour began to challenge the American cir-cuit in prestige and the size of its purses. Lucrative events are also be-ing played in southern Africa, South America, Australia, and eastern Asia. And despite the Unlawful Internet Gambling Enforcement Act (the subject of Chapter 49), scarcely a minute goes by without a tour-nament beginning on the Internet, with buy-ins ranging from zero to \$25,000. The biggest winners online go by names like durrrr, Ziig-mund, SNoOoWMAN, OMGClayAiken, Annette_15, AJKHoesier1, and Gus Hansen.

Above all, I trace poker’s development from what was accurately called the Cheating Game, a cutthroat enterprise that for much of its first century was dominated by cardsharps, to what is today a mostly honest contest of cunning, mathematic precision, and luck that is open to everyone. The quarter of a billion dollars at stake during the World Series every summer in Las Vegas is merely the tip of the iceberg. America has been a melting pot since New Orleans was defended in 1815 by Andrew Jackson’s regulars and sizable contingents of French pirates, Choctaw warriors, and freed Haitian slaves. But it wasn’t until about thirty years ago that our national card game began to welcome a few hundred million contenders on every inhabited continent, includ-ing a young Hawaiian hoopster called Barry Obama.