“This Time I’m Going to Fool Somebody”:
Willie Stark and the Politics of Humiliation

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“Folks,” roars Willie Stark on the eve of his impeachment trial, “there’s going to be a leetle mite of trouble back in town. Between me and that Legislature-ful of hyena-headed, feist-faced, belly-dragging sons of slack-gutted she-wolves. If you know what I mean. Well, I been looking at them and their kind so long, I just figured I’d take me a little trip and see what human folks looked like in the face before I clean forgot. Well, you all look human. More or less. And sensible. In spite of what they’re saying back in that Legislature and getting paid five dollars a day of your tax money for saying it. They’re saying you didn’t have bat sense or goose gumption when you cast your sacred ballot to elect me Governor of this state.” From his colloquial diction and insults to his collegial banter with his own supporters, from his invocation of corruptly used tax money to his reference to the sacredness of the ballot, Stark identifies himself as one of the people. Before neurosurgeon Ben Carson or business moguls Carly Fiorina and Donald Trump, farm-boy-turned-lawyer Willie Stark was the ultimate political outsider.

Narrated from the perspective of Stark’s most trusted political advisor, Jack Burden, Robert Penn Warren’s 1946 novel All the King’s Men follows Stark’s meteoric political rise, his idealism turned into strategic pragmatism, and his eventual death at the hands of Adam Stanton, an accomplished doctor and childhood friend of Burden’s, who discovers Stark’s affair with his sister, and onetime lover of Burden’s, Anne Stanton. While the model for Stark is widely acknowledged to have been Huey Long, a hard-charging, divisive Louisiana politician who was assassinated in 1935, the novel anticipates the future nearly as much as it looks to the past, particularly in its portrayal of the cultivation of populism, the infusion of entertainment into politics, and the messiness of personality-driven political action.

Stark sets out to be a qualified, nuanced, and thoroughly idealistic politician. His speeches ask for reflection, his policies are well-considered, and he even approaches individual voters with pencil and paper to explain his ideas. As a young county treasurer, Stark demonstrates his commitment to his constituents
when he refuses to fund an underhanded deal for building a new schoolhouse. His early idealism, however, costs Stark reelection, as his superiors install a treasurer willing to fund the schoolhouse kickback project.

Rather than setting him back, this episode provides Stark with an awareness of existing corruption and a stroke of political good fortune. The tragic collapse of the shoddily constructed schoolhouse, and the death of three students, validates Stark and wins him support against the establishment: “He became symbolically the spokesman for the tongue-tied population of honest men.” And once he earns the title of spokesman for the populace, he painstakingly maintains it. Stark proudly proclaims that he “is not a gentleman,” describes himself as “just a human, country boy,” and regularly gets his picture taken in front of a chicken coop with his wife and their son. “The hens didn’t do any harm, either,” Burden explains. “They gave a nice homey atmosphere. They inspired confidence.” Especially after Stark’s fall from idealism, maintaining his status as a political outsider becomes a primary strategy. On the very day he announces “I’m not a politician today,” Stark forcibly arranges a photo shoot with his father’s unwilling dog on the porch of the family farmhouse: “[G]et the hairy bastard up here and make him look like he was glad to see me.” It’s insincere and produced, but—even to the extent of pretending to be beloved by a salt-of-the-earth dog—it’s an essential part of his political persona.

In depicting this rollicking anti-establishment spirit, Warren captured something that has since overflowed. Rachel Maddow, in a February 2016 interview, recognizes the explosion of this strategy in the Republican Party:

The conservative movement since the Reagan-era has been telling conservatives that government is the problem, which makes experience running government a mark on your record. Having constructive ideas about what government could do makes you a suspicious character. Honestly, the very idea that you would thirst to hold high government office in Washington, D.C. almost inherently disqualifies you as a Republican. So everybody is unqualified, and therefore you pick the person who most entertains you.

Having tried and failed to win support through competence and righteousness, Stark adds, to his burgeoning populism, Burden’s advice to entertain. “Maybe you try to tell ’em too much,” Burden suggests. “It breaks down their brain cells. [ . . . ] Just tell ’em you’re going to soak the fat boys, and forget the rest of the tax stuff. [ . . . ] Hell, make ’em cry, make ’em laugh, make ’em think you’re their weak erring pal, or make ’em think you’re God-Almighty. Or make ’em mad. Even mad at you. Just stir ’em up, it doesn’t matter how or why, and they’ll love you and come back for more.” Burden’s call to befriend audiences as “their weak erring pal” solidifies Stark’s outsider status, his suggestion to make people angry precipitates Stark’s biting rants, and his warning against policy-
driven speeches alters Stark’s trajectory. “I’m not going to read you any speech,” Stark promises at the outset of his next public appearance. “I’m going to tell you a story.” This move to turn himself into a character foreshadows the carefully controlled and expensively crafted stories that make many of our contemporary political figures seem nearly as fictionalized as Stark himself.

Entertainment’s role in politics has perhaps reached an apex with the GOP nomination of Donald Trump, but entertainment reigns also in the Democratic Party and in politics in general. In June, for example, the left-leaning New Republic couched its concerns over Tim Kaine’s viability as a vice presidential candidate in terms of his entertainment value: “Tim Kaine Is Too Boring to Be Clinton’s Running Mate.” Part of this shift in focus comes from the creation of 24-hour cable news networks, the widespread availability of bite-sized information disseminated on social media, and the emphasis on making scads of money through these platforms—what George Saunders has called “The Braindead Megaphone.” But, as Warren reveals, the insistence that politics must be entertaining is not just a twenty-first-century phenomenon. Describing Stark’s early career, Burden recalls, “[F]olks don’t listen to you when your voice is low and patient.” This is an indictment of the voter at least as much as it is an indictment of the politician; many of us should spend more time than we do—when reflecting on everything from the relationship between neoliberal capitalism and global terrorism to the deteriorating worldwide water situation to the prevalence of football-related head injuries—listening to voices which are low and patient.

Importantly, Stark isn’t the only one turning himself into a character, and All the King’s Men isn’t just a novel about politics. Narrator Jack Burden creates his own persona—and is able to do so in a low and patient voice—by telling his story. It’s a story of nostalgia, his childhood friends, his first love, and his feelings of pain at being rejected and unfulfilled. It’s a story about the wistful desire to have lived a better life, particularly in terms of his failed relationship with Anne Stanton, a failure made more painful by her affair with Stark. After outlining a number of ways he could have acted differently one fateful night with Anne—should he have knelt down and seized her hand?—Burden concludes, “[I]f any of those things had happened things might have been different then and forever afterward. But none of those things had happened.”

This is the kind of book that leaves you asking if you’ll ever be in love again like that one summer listening to Josh Ritter’s “Girl in the War” over and over together in her apartment, or wondering how your best friend would react if he knew about that time you let his girlfriend eat peanut butter off of your fingers, about how your shoulders were touching when she did. It’s a sexy, reverie-inducing book full of philosophical meanderings, individual scars, and perfumed regret (it also happens to be about tax policy and graft). And it’s this fusion of the personal and political that makes All the King’s Men both compelling and
terrifying: Compelling because it evokes our own nostalgia and melancholy; terrifying because we recognize that it’s people—passionate, flawed, desiring, unmoored, fragile human lives—who make up our political systems. And people might be motivated by reasons other than idealism.

During a March 2016 GOP debate in Detroit, Trump revealed something of his motivation for running for president when he mocked a reporter’s question that cited a BuzzFeed News article. “First of all,” Trump scoffed, “BuzzFeed? They were the ones that said under no circumstances will I run for president—and were they wrong.” BuzzFeed reporter McKay Coppins—whose 2014 article “36 Hours On The Fake Campaign Trail With Donald Trump” provided the impetus for Trump’s outburst—wrote a follow-up article in July 2016 suggesting that Trump’s presidential run has been driven by his fears of inferiority and his desire to prove people wrong. Coppins writes, “What had most struck me during my two days with Trump was his sad struggle to extract even an ounce of respect from a political establishment that plainly viewed him as a sideshow. But what I didn’t realize at the time was that he’d felt this way for virtually his entire life—face pressed up against the window, longing for an invitation, burning with resentment, plotting his revenge.”

The same kind of revenge mentality gives Willie Stark his big political break.

Originally prominent because of his reputation as the rural county treasurer who refused to compromise the safety of school children, Stark is later tricked by an operative of democratic gubernatorial candidate, Joe Harrison, into joining a two-way race for the democratic nomination. Harrison secretly wants Stark to “split the hick vote” of his opponent, MacMurfee, thereby ensuring Harrison’s own nomination. When Stark discovers the plot, he feels naïve and ridiculous. In this instance, and in his earlier dealings with the corrupt politicians overseeing the construction of the faulty schoolhouse, he realizes he’s been made into a dupe; and the rough treatment grinds him down: “They tried to run it over me,” he says. “They just figured I’d do anything they told me, and they tried to run it over me like I was dirt.” Stark’s wife Lucy tries to placate him by appealing to his sense of morality: “Now, honey, you didn’t want to be mixed up with them anyway. Not after you found out they were dishonest and crooked.” She has to raise the issue repeatedly, however—“they would have been crooks even if they didn’t try to run it over you. [. . . ] They’d be crooks, wouldn’t they?”—before Stark finally admits, “Yeah, yeah, they’d be crooks, all right.” Warren’s implication, made more certain given Stark’s morally suspect behavior later in the novel, is that Stark doesn’t care so much that his opponents are crooks as he does that they tried to run it over on him. This slight and his desire for revenge, a desire to prove to himself and to others that he’s not dirt, that he belongs, that he’s capable of the same successes as everyone else, propel Stark’s rise to governor. “This time I’m going to fool somebody,” Stark
announces. “When I come back to run for Governor again, I’m coming on my own and I’m coming for blood.”

Riding the waves of his own resentment, Stark runs in the next election on a provocatively anti-establishment platform and becomes governor. In the process, he learns that in order to get things done he needs to compromise his purity—one of Burden’s main responsibilities, for example, is to uncover incriminating stories for use as blackmail against Stark’s political opponents—but he remains largely committed to the interests of the people who elected him. In a single speech just over half-way through the novel, we see both the promise and repugnance of Willie Stark. Stark begins by touting his state hospital. “It will belong to you,” he exclaims. “Any man or woman or child who is sick or in pain can go in those doors and know that all will be done that man can do. To heal sickness. To ease pain. Free. Not as charity. But as a right. It is your right. Do you hear? It is your right?” He then expands the idea of inalienable rights into other areas where people—especially working-class people—are struggling: “[I]t is your right that every child shall have a complete education. That no person aged and infirm shall want or beg for bread. [. . . ] That no poor man’s house or land shall be taxed. That the rich man and the great companies that draw wealth from this state shall pay this state a fair share. That you shall not be deprived of hope!” This is what we might call the Good Willie: the Willie who supports workers and health care, infrastructure and education. The Willie who reminds readers of his idealistic beginnings.

But he concludes the speech not with an appeal to the inherent value of humanity or the efficacy of cooperation, but with threats of violence against anyone who stands in his way: “[I]f any man tries to stop me [. . . ] I’ll break him. [. . . ] I’ll smite him. Hip and thigh, shinbone and neckbone, kidney punch, rabbit punch, uppercut, and solar plexus. And I don’t care what I hit him with. Or how! [. . . ] I’ll hit him. I’ll hit him with that meat ax!” And this is the Bad Willie: the Willie who too closely prefigures Donald Trump. The Willie who, like Trump, feels scorned by the political elite and wants revenge. The Willie who values his own rise enough to sacrifice some of his humanity. And we recognize this Willie in the Trump who, after the Democratic National Convention, threatened, “I wanted to hit a couple of those speakers so hard. [. . . ] I was gonna hit this guy so hard, his head would spin. He wouldn’t know what the hell happened. [. . . ] I was going to hit a number of those speakers so hard, their heads would spin, they’d never recover.”

Still, in the end, it’s easy to dismiss Trump because, in addition to his bullying tactics, he also champions ideas that are jingoistic, misogynistic, and xenophobic. It’s less easy to dismiss Stark. The reason All the King’s Men remains relevant isn’t primarily because we always have politicians who act like Willie Stark—although the 2016 election certainly attests to Warren’s perceptiveness.

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It’s that Willie Stark might be right: that if you want goodness you really do have “to make it out of badness. [. . . ] Because there isn’t anything else to make it out of.” No politician in the novel escapes corruption, and Stark probably does more good than any of the others. “If the government of this state for quite a long time back had been doing anything for the folks in it,” Burden asks a group of skeptical friends, “would Stark have been able to get out there with his bare hands and bust the boys? And would he be having to make up so many short cuts to get something done to make up for the time lost all these years in not getting something done?” And yet, while we can understand why Jack Burden and the often two-timed Lucy Stark feel as though they “must believe that Willie Stark was a great man,” we’re not particularly likely to agree. More modestly, what readers can say is that Willie Stark—like the U.S. political system in which he participates—is complex and flawed, clearly in need of reform, but recognizably and desperately human, capable of doing good, even if too often only with dirtied hands.

In his final conversation, in the hospital before he dies, the fading governor implores Burden, “It might have been all different, Jack. [. . . ] You got to believe that.” This is the theme of both of their lives: If one thing had been different everything would have been better. If Burden had married Anne at 21, he would have been successful and fulfilled. If Stark hadn’t been humiliated as county treasurer, he would have become the steady, competent politician he set out to be. Warren, however, invites us to resist these conclusions. Burden was as aimless in youth as he is in middle age. Stark, Burden tells us, belongs to the class of people who “are what they are from the time they first kick in the womb until the end.” By insinuating that Jack Burden may not have been any happier married to Anne Stanton, that Willie Stark may not have been a shining star of political idealism, Warren leaves readers wrestling with the larger question: Is the U.S. political system even capable of freeing itself from the kind of corruption that hijacks Stark’s career? Seventy years after the publication of *All the King’s Men*, we’re still wondering whether it can all be different.