

HOST: Terrorist and/or Patriot John O'Neill

LISTENING CHALLENGE: Explore the continuum of views that exist in the Republican and Democratic parties, not the extremes.

PLACE: O'Neill, Nebraska



# TUNING INTO POLITICS

*And what if excess of love  
Bewildered them till they died?*

"Easter, 1916," by W.B. Yeats

**U**nCLE John. Patriot, Civil War hero, scoundrel, rebel, terrorist.  
Take your pick.

I know my grandmother, Elizabeth O'Neil Sullivan, learned about John O'Neill first-hand from her uncles, who lived with the Irish-American hero as boys growing up in the 1870s. John and his wife Mary Ann had several children of their own, but also took in his nephews as they tried to build a new life--a new Ireland--in Nebraska.

Yes, a new Ireland.

Born in County Monaghan, Ireland in 1834, John, his parents and siblings, like millions of other Irish, were decimated by the potato famine of 1846 to 1852, known as the Great Hunger. Two million Irish fled; one million perished. The British famously did little to help and even took Irish crops and shipped them elsewhere.

These numbers matter when it comes to deciding if John O'Neill proved himself to be a good American citizen or terrorist in the end, because they lie at the root of what motivated him to undertake the unthinkable: invade Canada in May, 1866 (at the time, still under British

rule), seize territory, and use it as leverage to win Ireland's freedom.

Yes, I know, it makes no sense to us. Only an extremist would undertake such a lost cause.

But at the time, the fact any Irishman would gather arms, men and supplies and take a stab at the British seemed downright fair and inspired given 700 years of British rule over the island and the British response to the starving Irish during the Great Hunger.

If facts mattered and could sway people's political, cultural and social leanings, my relative John O'Neill never would have invaded Canada in 1868. But it was never about facts for him—though he had an easy case to make that the British had oppressed and killed the Irish for centuries. And it's not about facts today either for most Americans split along Red/Blue lines.

It's about feelings and family narratives and belief systems rooted in experiences and perhaps that "excess of love" the Irish poet Yeats speaks of in his poem, "Easter, 1916," written in response to the Irishmen shot by firing squad for attacking the British and the hundreds more that died in the bloody protests afterwards.

We love the "idea" of what we feel and believe; dislodging it so our country can move forward towards more productive discourse remains a great obstacle, and, as it turns out, the most motivating aspect of my road trip for *The Bronzed Project*.

Which makes my journey to visit O'Neill, Nebraska, founded and named after John O'Neill, one of the founding leaders of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), the family tale that feels most relevant for our times. He embodies the beauty and horror that can spring from a person ruled by intense belief systems exacerbated when his or her group becomes marginalized.



## “The odds were terrible.”

That’s from an 1868 account of O’Neill’s first attack on British-controlled Canada, often called the Battle of Ridgeway. As the author, John Savage, makes clear, O’Neill had hoped for thousands of Irish-American compatriots, many of them Civil War veterans like himself, to join him but instead he rallied only a few hundred and faced a ground force of approximately 1400 British troops once his small band crossed the Niagara River near Buffalo, New York into Canada. Despite the grim numbers, “the Irish went after [the British troops] in earnest, driving them three miles through the town of Ridgeway.”

After covering 40 miles and engaging in two conflicts in two days, O’Neill and his men needed reinforcements, which the fledging Irish “army” known as the Fenians, had promised but which never materialized. As news traveled that another 5000 British troops were on their way, they had to retreat across the American border, but not before beating the Brits on the field in Ridgeway and planting the Irish flag.

As Christopher Klein explains in his book, *When the Irish Invaded Canada*, “*The Boston Herald* sold more copies of its edition covering the Fenian raid than it had after Lee’s surrender at Appomattox [the end of the Civil War].”

Internationally, it was recognized as the first Irish win over the British on British territory since 1745.

Sounds pretty impressive but many men on both sides died. Canadian farms and homes were burned. The Fenians captured by the Canadians were paraded through Toronto then hung for violating the neutrality laws.

John O’Neill made it back to American soil and received a hero’s welcome from 6000 Irish in Buffalo, New York. None other than Grover Cleveland, a future president, agreed to be his lawyer.

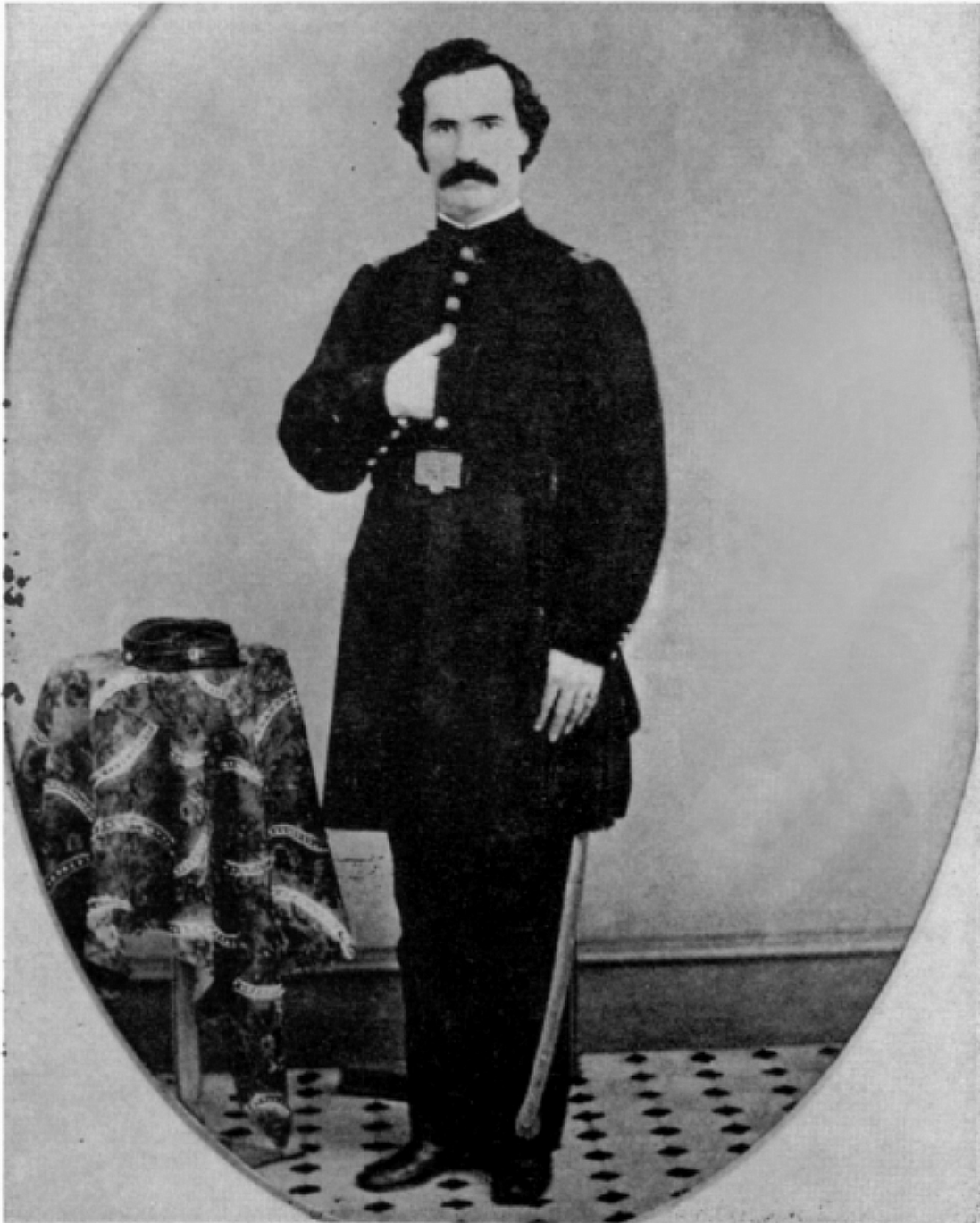
Pro bono, of course.

No self-respecting politician wanted to risk losing the Irish-American vote.

Those that made it back to the US got off, which just means O’Neill was free to try again, which he did, twice, both times more farcical and implausible than the last. While the first attempt met with great fanfare, each subsequent failure undermined his credibility and standing, which was considerable since he was the President of the Fenian Brotherhood in the US.

The British wanted him shot; the Canadians, despite their own battle with the British to secure home rule, got fed up with the toll on farms and Canadians and wanted the Fenians jailed or hung. Many Irish-Americans wished O'Neill had just died a martyr at the Battle of Ridgeway and it had all ended there.

O'Neill did serve three months in jail—of a three-year sentence—for an 1870 raid, but President Ulysses Grant pardoned him, in part because of



John O'Neill (1834-1878)

O'Neill's exemplary service on the Union side in the Civil War. Uncle John used his moment in the courtroom to make his personal case and the case for Irish independence.

“I came to this country for the purpose of making a dutiful citizen of the land of my adoption, and *except in this instance*, and perhaps another of a similar character, I have been a good citizen and that I have been willing when called upon to offer up my life for the land of my adoption.”

Here's John O'Neill trying to have it both ways—to be a rebel with a cause against Britain, yet a good citizen of the US who served with distinction in the Civil War. Later in the same speech, he makes it plain that, “had George Washington failed in his endeavors he would have been a rebel, and treated as a rebel by this tyrannical government that I would like to strike a blow against.”

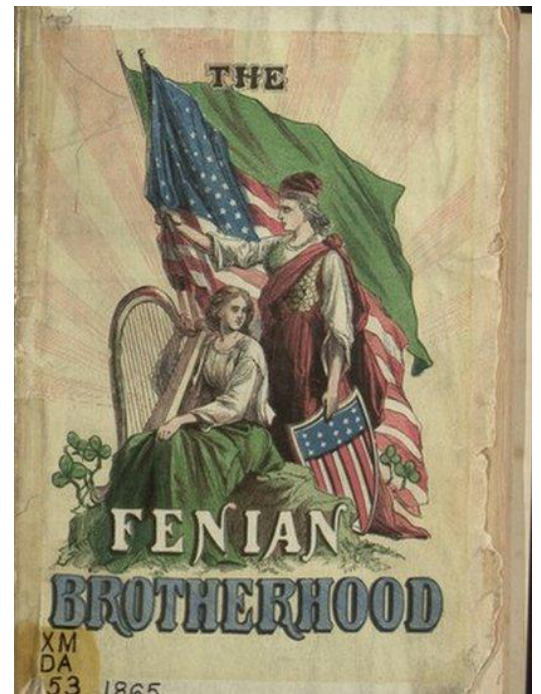
The Fenians never made headway seizing British territory, but they definitely secured American involvement in the England/Ireland conflict from the late 19th Century up to the present day. Men like O'Neill, who had left their native land, helped rally the Irish diaspora into a formidable political force. The Irish Republican Army, the offspring of Fenians, became the international face of the Irish uprising for generations.

And, yes, I am talking about the IRA that became world renowned for its violent struggles with the British, including The Troubles in Northern Ireland in the sixties and seventies that led to devastating losses, terrorist attacks on British soil, thousands of civilian deaths and a divided island nation. Today, the violence may flair again as the Great Britain and Ireland face Brexit.

*Except in this instance.*

That one phrase raises so many questions about what it means to be a responsible citizen and a patriot. How do any of us measure when it's the right instance to engage in violent protest against a government or group that we feel threatens a way of life?

“It's a tale of a nation of people who risked everything for what they know is right and what they know is true.”



“I came to this country for the purpose of making a dutiful citizen of the land of my adoption...”

That's actually President Donald Trump speaking to a crowd on the National Mall on July 4, 2019. He's providing a grammar-school primer on the history of the American Revolution complete with patriotic references to George Washington and John Paul Jones (hey what about John Barry!). The White House famously did not post the text of this particular speech for a range of reasons, including that Trump invited fighter jets and 60-ton military tanks to the party, but also because he praised the Colonial soldiers for controlling the skies and airports. Essentially, he blended a few historical narratives to sustain his overall mood of endless American triumph and superiority. 1776 and 1944 became one.

John O'Neill made up plenty of tale tales of his own as he tried to raise money for the Irish cause on the guest speaking circuit in 19th Century America. He would have fully understood Trump's bravado as he talked about the Americans who stood up to defend their independence and God given rights 243 years ago. They both grasped it's rarely about the facts and study after study backs them up.

When airplanes fly in a story about the American Revolution, or a sod house in 19th Century Nebraska can be named the Grand Hotel to help recruit Irish American settlers, fact and fiction blend to form whatever narrative suits the needs of the group in that moment.

"If you didn't know anything about the context, you could almost wind up thinking there was something vaguely whimsical going on, some gigantic and inscrutable performance-art piece that maybe had something to do with the fictionality of nationhood."

That's author Mark O'Connell in his *New York Times* feature "Fantasy Island" reflecting on the weird experience of being on a *Game of Thrones* tour in Northern Ireland, where a lot of that series was filmed, and hearing narratives about violence on the show that blend in his mind with the very real violence that occurred in the same geography as the Irish battled the British for independence. The two storylines converge until it's impossible to distinguish one from the other.

"In the end nations are works of the imagination," he concludes.

Which means each American's imagined idea of a strong democracy and Making America Great Again needs editing, since most facts anyone might present about what's best for the nation and protecting the balance of power between the three branches of government clunks to the pavement. The revisions must happen on a deeply personal level and hit people not just literally where they live, but also inside the value system that governs where they live.

Again, John O'Neill was a master of grasping this basic tenet of leadership and politics, which made him incredibly effective at recruiting

Irish from their horrid conditions in East Coast cities and factories to follow him back to the Grand Hotel in Nebraska, which they soon learned was nothing but a long house built out of dirt. But O’Neill was also selling an idea, not just land. All of the people that followed him really just wanted to return home, to an Ireland untouched by British hands, itself a Fantasy Island and narrative they had built out of nothing because it had never existed in their lifetimes.



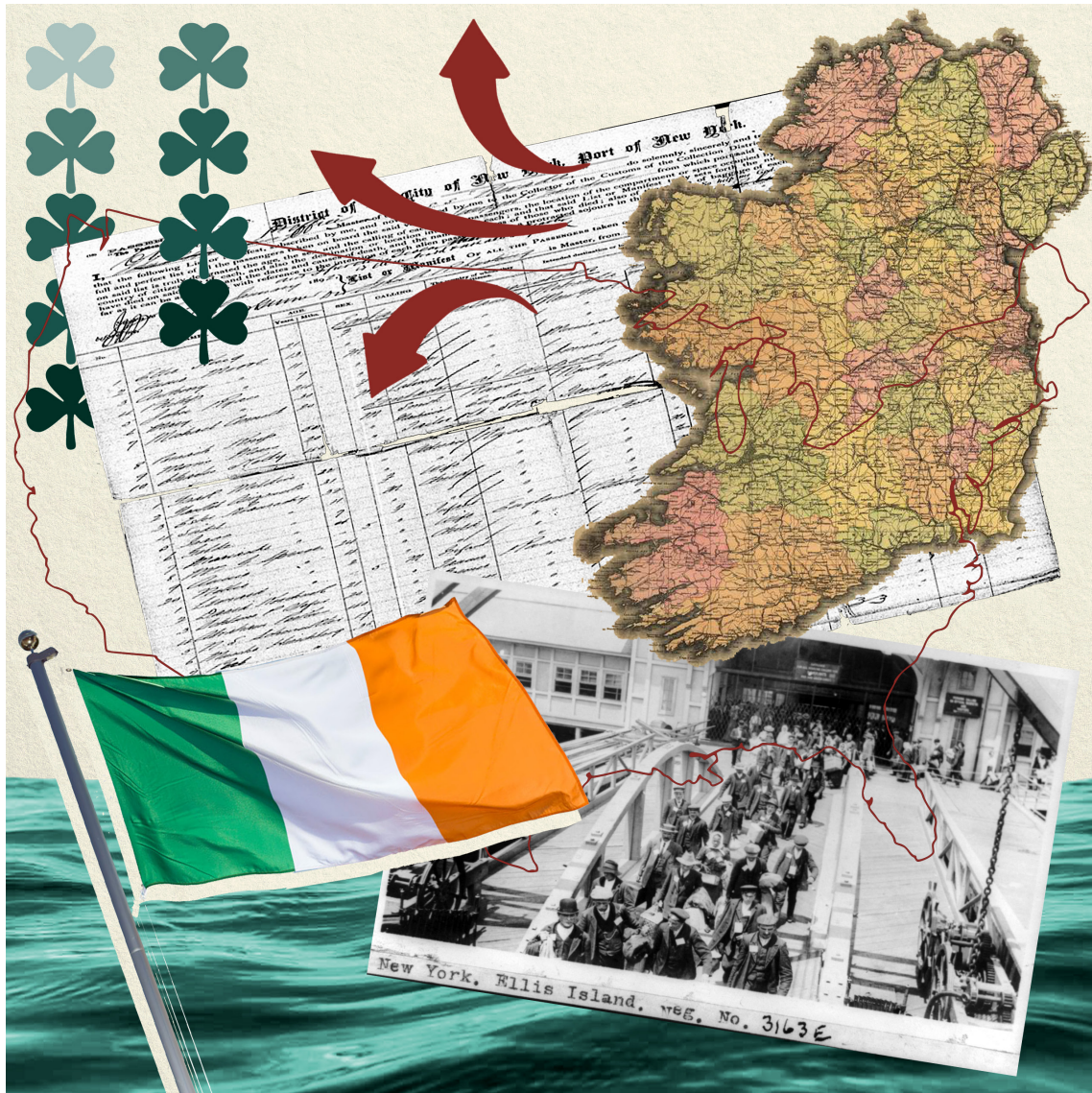
That didn’t make them any less passionate and committed to the ideal, a fact that illuminates my evolving understanding of conservatives in the US and Trump supporters. Many in the white communities surrounding the bronzed statues of my relatives in Maine, Philadelphia, and Nebraska want to return to “their America,” which, of course, is a work of the imagination.

Democrats engage in mythmaking as well which has resulted in two extreme political camps that function a lot like a diaspora--disenfranchised people scattered from their “homelands”--but in this instance in pockets around the country seeking to reunite with like-minded Americans. When Democrats win in a Republican stronghold like Orange County, California, for example, the press treats it like a battle victory. Americans are moving to live with like-minded Americans at a record rate.

The fact 1800 local print outlets have shuttered in the US since 2014 and at least 200 counties have no local newspaper whatsoever may be one, if not the, most disturbing trend in terms of people operating in silos only with like-minded people online, in social settings, at work, church and elsewhere. Without a steady stream of relatively neutral local news reporting, individuals will increasingly find it difficult to even agree on basic facts. They will find information that just confirms their world view. Suzanne Nossel, the Chief Executive of the nonprofit, nonpartisan PEN America that conducted the survey in 2019, declared the disappearance of local newspapers “a national crisis.”

Once again, for better or worse, Uncle John would have understood the importance of controlling the narrative and may have listened to my ringing alarm here with a shrug. After the third attempt to take over Canada, and the third pardon, he agreed to stop, and instead focused his energy on creating a place for like-minded Americans like himself—Irish Americans keen to escape British rule—in the Heartland of his adopted country. In his view, if the Irish had owned their own land and not been under British rule during the Great Hunger, his family never would have broken up, millions could have been saved.

The Irish needed to own land and the American West offered plenty.



Getting warm bodies to the settlement was all that mattered, facts be damned.

“We could build up a young Ireland on the virgin prairies of Nebraska and there rear [sic] a monument more lasting than granite or marble to the Irish race in America.”

That’s O’Neill in a letter to a Catholic Bishop, explaining his next great adventure and challenge. Between 1873 and 1874 Uncle John traveled through Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois and Nebraska before settling on the Elkhorn Valley in Nebraska where he’d build a new Ireland on 70 lots of land he purchased for about \$600.

Does making a country within a country for people just like yourself make you a good citizen?



Does making a country within a country for people just like yourself make you a good citizen?

Well in the spring of 1874 the first group of settlers to follow John O'Neill to Nebraska decided that it did and named the new settlement after him. Somehow, he convinced 13 men, two women and their children to head to a place that had no trees, relentless heat and bitter winters, and heavy soil unlike anything the city-living Irish Americans had ever tried to work.

Their first building was a 36-foot sod house, the previously mentioned "Grand Central Hotel." A swarm of locust ate their first crops. More than half of the original group returned East after just a few months. But, to his credit, O'Neill just hit the road again and recruited yet more settlers. After several attempts, the town took, in large part because gold was discovered in the Black Hills and the prospectors needed provisions. Later, a railroad ran through O'Neill, cementing it as a stable settlement.

O'Neill himself died at age 43 of pneumonia in 1878, hit by the same asthma and lung issues that still plague my extended family. They buried him in Omaha, an odd choice for their founder, but many of the townspeople felt they'd been drawn out West with false promises. As one local historian explains, when the first colonists arrived at O'Neill, they were "amazed at what they saw. There were no buildings, no businesses, and certainly no thickly settled countryside."

On the 10th anniversary of John O'Neill's death, the city of Omaha offered to move his remains to the town, but the locals told them to just "keep him in Omaha."

A monument more lasting than granite or marble.

I laugh to myself about this tale as I move through a cemetery outside of Omaha after traveling all day from Connecticut so I can visit his grave, his town, and meet up with Natalie Butterfield, a descendant of the original settlers.

The entire area that surrounds it feels stalled, with a few local bars here and there, a Sonic and other fast food places lining the roadway. While driving through Omaha during rush hour, I needed to cut across some lanes to make an unexpected turn.

There were no cars. At 6:00 p.m. on a Thursday.

Empty.

I'd read that rural counties in Nebraska in particular continue to lose residents, but I wasn't prepared for the eerie emptiness at all times of the day in the city.

The gravesite itself is neither statue nor grave but an obelisk put up by Irish Nationalists to honor their Fenian forebearer as a soldier and leader. They called John O'Neill the General and engraved "God Bless Ireland"

on the marble. The entire thing feels forlorn on some level, a feeling that sticks with me as I head out with my friend Susan McElhinney across the 100 or so miles to the other monument to the General, the town of O’Neill. Our rented Nissan zips past fields of corn and soybean that unwind like an open factory floor because there’s few towns, few people, and lots of machinery.

We’re two professional middle-class white women moving across a state where 85 percent of the residents voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 election, which means we can easily pass as locals, despite the fact neither of us belongs to that political tribe. Uncle John intentionally created a space for like-minded people, but as a relative visiting these lands, I know I’m a Democratic college professor from the East. I’d be an outcast here among any remaining ancestors and question how anyone can hold onto the values espoused by the Trump administration and the Republican party. When I started this project, my engagement with the “other” within my own white tribe began and ended there.

But after two years on the road trying to listen more carefully to all sides of our political discourse, I know I need to meet with people like Natalie Butterfield, a Republican, a Trump voter, whose people came to Nebraska with my people many generations ago, and listen to her rather than just spurn or judge her. The key words here are meet in person with respect.

And listen.

As we pull into the town of about 3500 residents, 91 percent white, I don’t see any Make America Great Again red hats, but spy the world’s largest painted shamrock (below) marking the main intersection. Smaller shamrocks line the sidewalks, all part of an Irish Walk of Fame.



The World's largest permanent shamrock painted on an intersection in O'Neill, Nebraska.

Source: City of O'Neill

The key words here are meet  
in person with respect.

And listen.

Natalie Butterfield waits for us at the Holt County Historical Society on the corner, now shuttered for business until they can find the funds to staff it.

She's brought in Mexican food for us and a Styrofoam cooler, the type they use a lot at her work as a nurse at the local hospital. It's for our leftovers.

I eye the beans and rice and think of the Immigration and Custom Enforcement's (ICE) raid last year on this town, which made national news because they swept into the local agribusinesses, which rely heavily on Latinos, and took away more than 100 undocumented workers. Our takeout probably came from a restaurant many of them used to frequent.

Natalie acknowledges that she knew many of the families that wound up getting split up and that her daughter once attended a party at the house of Juan Pablo Sanchez Delgado, who withheld "taxes" from the undocumented workers' paychecks that he pocketed to the tune of \$8 million. In 2019, he was sentenced to 10 years in Federal prison.

She has a soft, intelligent face with expressive eyes, and wears a plaid shirt shimmering with glitter and blue jeans. Like everything else we discuss, she can only say that it's complicated. Some of her cousins protested at the court house because the raids sent some parents back to their native countries leaving children behind. But, as Natalie points out, ICE also grabbed Delgado "who was exploiting these people. It's not just 'ICE' swoops in and is just terrible."

I swipe a soft tortilla and fill it with beans, chicken and rice as Natalie tells me about her past as a local girl having an idyllic childhood in O'Neill, as a nursing student in Lincoln and then a few years away in Ann Arbor, Michigan with her first husband. But then she came back to O'Neill with two young daughters in tow and found a job as a nurse at the local hospital, remarried, had more children, and stayed.

"My great grandparents settled here in 1878 and my family has been here ever since. My maiden name is Cook."

Later, when we return to the topic of her family history, she tells me, “General John O’Neill brought us here and by God we’re still here and thriving. When you have history as far back as I do you love history. You want to preserve it and protect it.”

Yet the historical society is shuttered and the town continues to lose population at an alarming rate. Natalie acknowledges that her own children—four daughters and a son—probably won’t stay.

This great love for place and past, and the relentless decline of the state and her town, influenced Natalie’s decision to vote for Trump in the 2016 election.

“I kind of felt, what can the other guy do? At least he’ll never be boring.”

But then she emits a sound that I could only capture on tape, not the page, a moan of sorts without any trace of irony or humor, that captured her own growing disenchantment with both parties. She’s evolved into a self-described light red Republican and doesn’t see any viable candidate for the next election.

The level of her thoughtfulness seeps into me, fills me with respect for her caring and her dilemma. Surrounded by conservatives whom she loves, including her own husband, and even a younger generation of men who put Hillary for Prison stickers on their trucks, she has evolved into

the swing voter that may very well hold the future of our democracy in her hands. She abhors extremes and longs for the social decency of the past when her own parents—her father a Catholic Democrat and her mother a Republican whose father was mayor of the town—could go to the polls together, with her in tow, and tell her what mattered was to exercise your right to vote.

“They knew they would cancel each other’s votes out but they still voted. They even went to different schools so we’d have Corn Husker vs. Wild Cat debates and the politics was the same way, the same decibel.”

Now, political fights on Facebook among her classmates from high school, class of 1979, undercut their 40th reunion and kept many away. Before she never really knew the politics of most of the people in her community, since people understood that you never talked of religion or politics in social settings, but thanks to social media she knows what just about everyone thinks on everything.

The same decibel.

Her husband, Phil, who manages his family farm and works at



the hospital as well, descends from Native Americans, French Canadian fur traders and Caucasians. When they first married in their 30s, the both of them were “very liberal, hippie types.”

She laughs.

Today, he listens to Rush Limbaugh and fully supports Trump.

“Rush Limbaugh is too bombastic for me. I cannot stand talk radio. I have to set limits. I don’t want it in the house. He can put in ear buds or go somewhere else.”

At a recent baby shower for one of her daughters, she found a Trump pin that she figured her husband must have meant to put on a lapel or hat.

“Where did you get this? I asked him. ‘Oh, you probably bought it for me,’ he said. I laughed and said, ‘I don’t think so.’ I went upstairs and lay it on a post to remind me to take it downstairs and, you know, I think he’s forgotten about it for two months now what are the chances he would ever notice it had disappeared?”

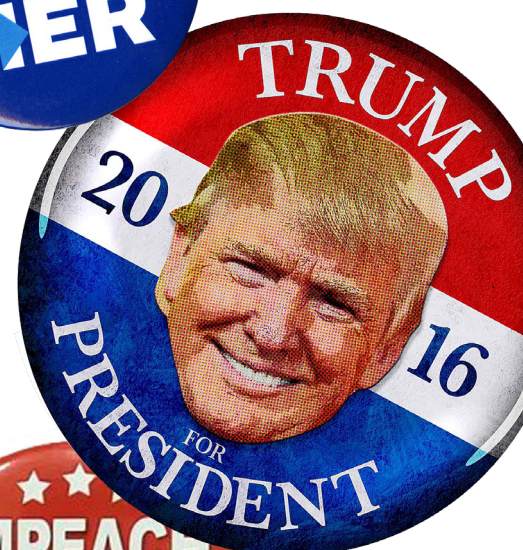
She looks at me with a smirk.

“I truly thought of pitching it, but you know, like most marriages, sure enough he would have remembered.”

How to handle Trump pins at a baby shower? The narrative building and editing has already begun before the new grandchild even arrives.

At this point in the conversation I am done with lunch and have noticed more of the historical items in the small room, including photographs, books, postcards of green horses in the St. Patrick’s Day parade, and maps. Her people came with my people, I think, as she continues to talk. Look at us, two direct descendants of the founders of this town, two white women from the high school class of 1979, one Republican, one Democrat, and we have way more in common than I could have ever imagined while seated at my desk in Connecticut.

You have to travel the miles. Meet in person. Ask real questions. Feel the emotional currents at work behind any person’s choices.



Something akin to melancholy fills me for a moment as I reflect that John O'Neill's hard work to build a place for Irish Americans produced Natalie and me and, yet, here we sit in a country barely able to hold us both and we are the same gender and color. We come from the same starting point in the past.

Back in the 1960s, her father helped start the St. Patrick's Day parade in O'Neill that has become a popular state tradition. In 1967, the centennial of Nebraska, they painted the world's largest shamrock in the center of town and the governor declared my ancestor's dream colony the Irish capital of the state.

"[My father] was motivated to make sure the Fenian's story didn't disappear. When you think about the Irish potato famine, really genocide, and the fact they were second class citizens then the fact they still existed was really spunky. There are very few towns that were founded not for religion but as a colony, in our case for Irish independence."

Once there were 16 bars, now there are 2.

She doesn't expect her children to stay here.

Her sister is part of a group raising money for a bronzed statue to General John O'Neill in town.

Her husband listens to Rush Limbaugh.

The whirling currents at play in the Midwest kick up dust around Natalie Butterfield, who engages with it all with a self-awareness and intelligence that I find striking, even heroic.

One thing she's learned: "The more extreme people who only hang with the other extreme people, well that leads to brittleness."

As I gather my tape recorder and bags to leave, we both know we still don't share the same politics but we do respect our ancestors' grit and the importance of history and facts.

"At least you're trying to do something about it," she tells me as I leave, referring to the dark turn in our country's political discourse.

A few months later we exchanged emails about the weeks leading up to the U.S. House of Representatives' impeachment proceedings against President Donald Trump on December 18, 2019.

I did watch. For several hours. I listened to cordial phrases, such as "Madame Speaker," and "I yield my time," work as fancy bookends to an endless partisan vitriol from both sides. As Peter Baker from the *New York Times* noted, the Democrats used the phrase "no one is above the law" sixty times and the Republicans used the word "sham" 29 times. Officially, what occurred was a "general debate," but no one from either party budged and

few voters did either.

I believe without reservation that the Democrats had to hold Trump accountable for his behavior and had no choice but to press for impeachment. I firmly believe in the witnesses' testimony and Rep. Adam Schiff's effort to get at the truth, but here on the page where I am trying not to take sides, but instead listen to how we explain our points-of-view to each other, I take little consolation in the fact Speaker Nancy Pelosi did indeed find the votes.

219. 227. 229.

The Democrats' vote totals ticked across the TV screen.

Article One. Article Two.

Not once did I see any evidence of either side listening to the other.

And in stunning fashion, most people I know went about their daily business and did not pause to watch much of it, and I live in an affluent, educated predominately white community. Friends went to Spin classes; co-workers went about their daily routine and did not become fixated on C-Span or any network. A few checked news clips on their phones throughout the day. No one thought to give the entire country the day off to ponder and process the heavy proceedings.

Seventy-five percent of Americans agree that President Trump should not have used tax dollars as leverage against a foreign country in an effort to secure dirt on a political opponent, but that's seems to be where the common ground ends.

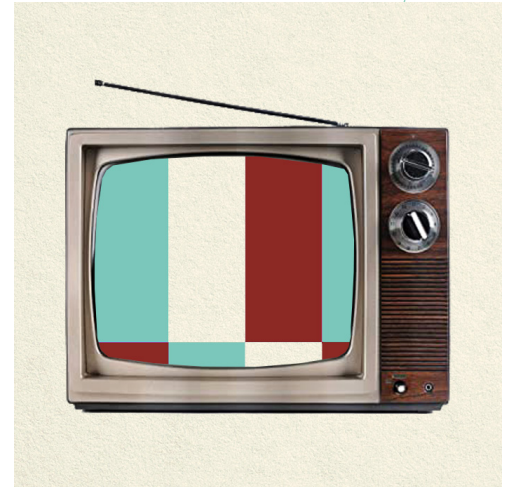
Somehow an impeachment hearing wound up as background noise in America.

"Our time for general debate has expired," a Congresswoman behind the podium announced as Speaker Pelosi readied the House for the vote on Article One.

But no debate actually transpired, a fact that we should find as disturbing as any other piece of information I've discussed.

Natalie Butterfield shared that her husband, a devoted Republican and Trump supporter, "is taking the whole impeachment thing hard. I don't solicit opinions, so he's the only one I have heard talking about it. I'm Doris Day. Que Sera, Sera mode."

In effect, as a citizenry, we all yielded our time on December 18 and continue





to yield our time out of fear and some inexplicable sense of paralysis about how to break the current dysfunction. Now that Covid-19 has swept the land, and the pandemic exacerbates our political divide, the stakes are even higher, the costs a rising death rate. Both Natalie and I know that's not the country our 19th Century ancestors hoped for us.

