



**Your on the Street Reporter**



**Uyless Black**

**Epilogue IX to *The Nearly Perfect Storm*  
Gerrymandering and Congressional Stalemates**

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## **Preface**

My intent in writing *The Nearly Perfect Storm: An American Financial and Social Failure*, and these epilogues is to spark your ire. I am not one to compose inflammatory compositions. I began my studies of the 2008 financial crisis with a neutral view of the subject, perhaps even skewed toward the financial world (specifically, the investment banking industry), reflecting my former employment at the Federal Reserve.

No longer. The more I learned about the institutions and individuals who were involved in the meltdown, the more disgusted I became. I wish this turn of events had not come about. I wish I had found the Great Recession occurred because of a downturn in a conventional business cycle. It did not.

Do not expect this series to be light-hearted, although I will attempt some gallows humor to lighten the load.

***The Nearly Perfect Storm: An American Financial and Social Failure***  
**Epilogue IX: Gerrymandering and Congressional Stalemates**

**March 1, 2014**

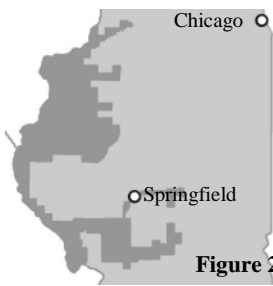
These epilogues are written on occasion as follow ups to *The Nearly Perfect Storm: An American Financial and Social Failure*, available at Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and local book stores. Epilogue IX discusses the effects of gerrymandering on the United States House of Representatives.

**Quotes from *The Nearly Perfect Storm* about the issue.**

Page 292:  
 The politicians, ideologically bedridden by gerrymandering and zealotry, will not compromise. And compromise with regard to America’s debt is what the vast majority of America’s citizens wish. Compromise moves us forward toward solving what is in reality a simple problem. Gridlock does not.

Page 309:  
 The continued use of gerrymandering is leading to the redrawing of voting districts based on political/religious/cultural ideologies. This practice is leading to ideologically based campaigns in which many issues have nothing to do with America’s security and well being.

Pages 339 and 340:  
 For sake of illustration, let’s suppose you and I live in the 17<sup>th</sup> congressional district of northern Illinois. Some of America’s political wards are as irregularly shaped as a Rorschach ink plot, with the 17<sup>th</sup> district shown in figure 24-1. The dark-colored part of the figure represents this district.



One alderman appoints the ward superintendent who directs the trucks and obliges many special pickup requests that meander through byzantine routes: “Revamping the city’s collection system...would strip officials...of key powers...[Yet] garbage trucks often travel down alleys that switch from one ward to the next and back, each with different trash schedules.”<sup>1</sup>

**Figure 24-1. A gerrymandered ward.**

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Belkin, “Chicago Mayor Trashes Politics of Waste Removal,” *The Wall Street Journal*, October 12, 2011, A1.

I am an opponent of the practice of many states (forty-four of fifty) allowing party politicians to determine the boundaries of electoral districts. Some people disagree with my stand, and studies are available that state politically based gerrymandering has no effect on electoral competition. I disagree. It allows what should be demographically based decisions to be subjugated to political preferences. Because redrawing electoral boundaries is based on the ten-year census results, the practice gives a party in power a ten year-long advantage.

Politically based gerrymandering has led to the current situation of radial, ideologically based politics. After all, if a district is redrawn based on the member's political persuasions, the district becomes more aligned with a specific political philosophy. This leads to safe districts for a candidate, which reinforces the ideological biases of both voter and candidate. One feeds on the other.

### **The Present Time**

As noted above, my views are contested by people who are richly compensated to study subjects such as gerrymandering. Having recently read former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates' book, *Duty*, I have recruited him into my corner (for non-compensated opinions):<sup>2</sup>

...we (the United States) have rarely been so polarized and so unable to execute even the basic functions of government, much less tackle the most difficult and divisive problems facing the country. I believe it is due to ...the weakening of the moderate center of both parties in Congress.

...the paralytic polarization [in Congress]...is due, first, to a highly partisan congressional redistricting process, through which more and more seats---all but perhaps 50 or 60---are safe for either the Republican or Democratic party. As a result...[congressional] candidates must cater to the most hardcore ideological elements of their base

Now the party that wins typically seeks to impose its agenda on the other side by brute force.

A couple years ago, I read Bob Woodward's *The Price of Politics*. One part of the book has stayed with me. It is about Obama's aide Rahm Emanuel. Here's a quote that summarizes my thoughts about this man, and the mentality he reflects about "working across the aisle:"

Obama got his stimulus bill, but, as Cantor predicted, without a single Republican vote. Woodward quotes Cantor as telling Rahm, "You really could've gotten some of our support. You just refused to listen to what we were saying." The bill was pretty much free of Republican input. Rahm, writes Woodward, responded to such Republican complaints with, "We have the votes. Fuck 'em." Cantor boasts that Obama (and Rahm) did the Republicans a favor: "...he had unified and

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<sup>2</sup> Robert M Gatea, *Duty* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 582-583.

energized the losers.” (The Republicans took the House in 2010, and Cantor became Majority Leader.)<sup>3</sup>

Mr. Emanuel, you won the battle, but you lost the war. Congratulations. Your attitude helped to further alienate an already hostile opposition.

This example illustrates the deterioration of the art of negotiation and compromise. It is supremely arrogant, supremely egoistic, and---in the long run---supremely stupid.

As you know by now, I hold that gerrymandering is one culprit that can be blamed for placing America into a feeble political condition. Consider the long, agonizing process to raise the debt limit (the ability of the government to pay for its ongoing operations). The Tea Party and other congressional members claimed it would be irresponsible to increase this limit.

What? The increase of the debt limit merely allows the government to fund the obligations that have already been enacted by Congress! Yep. Congress has already approved the spending of the money. But the ideologues cannot explain this truth to their voters. So they come across as responsible politicians, protecting their constituents from the politicians’ own actions.

Congress can vote and approve the name of a national highway. It cannot agree on much of anything that is substantive, at least not routinely. It must come down to tip-toeing across the precipice of responsibility, both nationally and internationally.

Faced with stark realities, the gerrymandered serfs come off their elected pedestals, if only momentarily, to say their change of vote does not represent a change of heart. Back in their safe districts, they once again regale against the very sleaze they themselves foster.

At times, my disgust with what is happening to the national political process moves me toward supporting term limits. Increasingly, I find it hard to swallow that these politicians, elected to move the country forward, are focused on getting re-elected before anything else; that they routinely pass rules/bills to favor their already privileged positions, such as health and exorbitant retirement plans; that they stay in Congress for so long, they lose ties to the realities of making a living; that some of them take on a rock star mentality: aloof to the common fan (voter), while at the same time, sniveling to their gerrymandered constituents.

Later, this series will extract more excerpts from *The Nearly Perfect Storm*, and associate them with quotes from *This Town*. This book is about Washington, DC and national politics. It should be required reading for students in our high schools (at least). I hope you will read it. If you’ve no time to do so, I’ll provide a synopsis in a later report.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.chicagomag.com/Chicago-Magazine/Felsenthal-Files/September-2012/Bob-Woodwards-The-Price-of-Politics-Rahms-Behavior-Then-and-Now/>