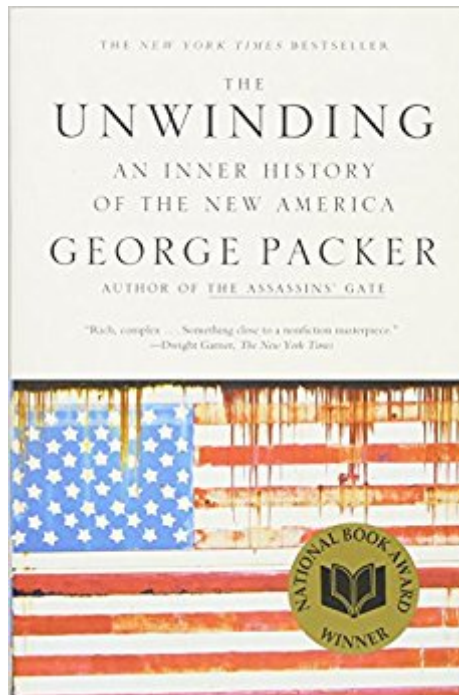




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# **The Unwinding: An Inner History Of The New America**



## Synopsis

The 2013 National Book Award Winner A New York Times Bestseller American democracy is beset by a sense of crisis. Seismic shifts during a single generation have created a country of winners and losers, allowing unprecedented freedom while rending the social contract, driving the political system to the verge of breakdown, and setting citizens adrift to find new paths forward. In *The Unwinding*, George Packer tells the story of the past three decades by journeying through the lives of several Americans, including a son of tobacco farmers who becomes an evangelist for a new economy in the rural South, a factory worker in the Rust Belt trying to survive the collapse of her city, a Washington insider oscillating between political idealism and the lure of organized money, and a Silicon Valley billionaire who arrives at a radical vision of the future. Packer interweaves these stories with sketches of public figures, from Newt Gingrich to Jay-Z, and collages made from newspaper headlines, advertising slogans, and song lyrics. Packer's novelistic and kaleidoscopic history of the new America is his most ambitious work to date.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

**\*Starred Review\*** How have we come to feel that neither the government nor the private sector works as it should and that the shrinking middle class has few prospects of recovering its former glory? Through profiles of several Americans, from a factory worker to an Internet billionaire, Packer, staff writer for the *New Yorker*, offers a broad and compelling perspective on a nation in crisis. Packer focuses on the lives of a North Carolina evangelist, son of a tobacco farmer,

pondering the new economy of the rural South; a Youngstown, Ohio, factory worker struggling to survive the decline of the manufacturing sector; a Washington lobbyist confronting the distance between his ideals and the realities of the nation's capital; and a Silicon Valley entrepreneur pondering the role of e-commerce in a radically changing economy. Interspersed throughout are profiles of leading economic, political, and cultural figures, including Newt Gingrich, Colin Powell, Raymond Carver, Sam Walton, and Jay-Z. Also sprinkled throughout are alarming headlines, news bites, song lyrics, and slogans that capture the unsettling feeling that the nation and its people are adrift. Packer offers an illuminating, in-depth, sometimes frightening view of the complexities of decline and the enduring hope for recovery. --Vanessa Bush --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Though *The Unwinding* is manifestly an homage to the U.S.A. trilogy of John Dos Passos, Packer attempts something far more ambitious and original. The book, an epic retelling of American history from 1978 to 2012, is a kind of fantasia--a set of variations on themes without the support of an overarching narrative. This is a brilliant and innovative book that transcends journalism to become literature. --Michael Lind --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

First off, this is not a polemical book with Packer trying to thrust his viewpoint down your throat. Packer's own voice is largely absent from this book. Instead, he lets his characters speak for themselves. Regardless of your politics, you have to agree with Packer that since the 1960's, Americans have "watched structures that had been in place before your birth collapse like pillars of salt across the vast visible landscape." Government no longer consists of genuine politicians seeking to help the people, banks are no longer the staid institutions we once knew, and American manufacturing and the stable union jobs that accompanied it are mostly gone. As Packer notes, the loss of these institutions has obviously hurt some and helped others to prosper. Packer tells this story by presenting a series of compelling profiles of several individuals: among them a union worker in Youngstown, Ohio, a entrepreneur/bio-fuels evangelist in North Carolina, a D.C. insider, and a Silicon Valley innovator. These profiles follow the progression of their protagonist from the late 70's to the present day. Each story is independent, but all share a common thread: as the institutions that provided security to Americans following the New Deal and into the 70's started to fall apart, each person is forced to deal with their new found freedom. Some thrive, while others struggle to survive. Interspersed in these longer narratives are shorter profiles of key players in the unwinding, from Newt Gingrich and Andrew Breitbart to Oprah Winfrey and Jay-Z. As he skips

ahead in years, each new section is foreshadowed by a collage of words - snippets of movie and music quotes and headlines from newspapers - that Packer uses to expertly capture the mood of each year. The genius of this book is that Packer doesn't tell you what to think. Instead, he presents indisputable facts by way of the stories of real people to show both sides of this "unwinding." At the end, you can draw your own conclusions. Packer is simply using his amazing powers of shaping narratives to capture this unique time of upheaval in America. It's easy to lose track of the drastic changes that have taken place over the last few decades unless you read a book like this, which captures the transformation of American institutions to American individualism. If you are liberal and mourn the loss of these institutions, Packer will force you to consider the opening of opportunities that came with these losses. If you're conservative and applaud the rise of the rugged individual, he will also make you recognize the price some people have paid due to the loss of security. I would recommend this book to anyone that sees the change that has happened in the U.S. Although it is never stated, I think Packer is asking his readers a seemingly simple question: what does it mean to be an American, and what do we want this country to be? Is the price of freedom the loss of the common bonds that kept us all together, or is the overriding right to be free paramount to all else? I can guarantee that anyone who finishes this book will have a lot to think about and will have enjoyed reading these profiles.

George Packer, we learn from the book's jacket blurb, is a staff writer at The New Yorker magazine which means he has access to that publication's marvelous fact checking apparatus that is so good, many fact checkers at The New Yorker have gone on to write their own non fiction books. Packer has borrowed liberally from the John Dos Passos U.S.A. Trilogy, especially its "Camera Eye" sequences to produce a book with an artistic sense of the possible, and the creative interpretations that go along with them. Through a series of glimmering short essays, Packer has put together a story of how wealth has concentrated itself in the United States in the second half of the twentieth century, and the first decade of the 21st. One lesson most of us learned about the Great Depression was that the wealthy, by themselves, could not sustain the U.S. economy in 1932. One commentator wrote that every person making over \$100,000 would have had to buy 32 cars in order to stave off the economic consequences of the 1929 stock market crash. On the contrary, the lesson drawn by Packer about the 2008 Great Recession is that today, the wealthy are so wealthy they can indeed sustain the U.S. economy almost by themselves. This staggering conclusion is brought home to readers in Packer's brief but luminous essay on Sam Walton where he writes that six of Walton's descendants had as much money as 30% of the least well off Americans. The story

of how America's other top income earners fared until the onset of The Great Recession is told in the essay on Robert Rubin: the top 1% of wage earners saw their incomes triple. People in the middle enjoyed a 20% income increase, people at the bottom had flat income which means on an inflation adjusted basis, they lost money. For his part, Robert Rubin argued against regulation of derivatives. Then, after derivatives killed America in 2008, Robert Rubin argued against any responsibility. When a Congressional investigator told Rubin he couldn't have it both ways, Robert Rubin hurriedly left the room. Stop the cameras, stop the book. The fact that Robert Rubin was allowed to leave the room comes off as a major thesis of this book. The gap between what Americans have and what they cheer for is another layer of Packer's analysis, although the book's commentary is somehow less successful when ordinary Americans like Tammy Thomas and Dean Price are Packer's subjects and I was less willing to follow their stories than I was when household name personalities like Joe Biden and Newt Gingrich were under Packer's microscope and his work on them seemed spellbinding. This is a deeply unsettling book, and in the end, Unwinding seems an inappropriate description for it - The Great Adjustment seems more specifically geared to what actually took place in the country - those with more struggle to adjust to unfathomable wealth, those with less struggling with their new reality.

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