The Meaning Of Merit: The American Idea Of What We Have Earned, What We Deserve, And Whether We Got Lucky

Doron Taussig

University of Pennsylvania, doron.taussig@asc.upenn.edu

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The Meaning Of Merit: The American Idea Of What We Have Earned, What We Deserve, And Whether We Got Lucky

Abstract
This dissertation is about the notion of merit in America. I examine what it means in American culture for a person to have merit, how we assess its role in individual lives, and whether those constructions are changing as Americans’ belief that we live in a meritocracy wavers. The project draws on analyses of mediated life stories of prominent figures from politics, sports, and business, as well as on in-depth interviews with a diverse group of 60 Americans, asking in both cases how narratives are used to explain professional and socioeconomic outcomes. What I find is an ideology that is more nuanced and less blinkered to social dynamics than is implied by popular clichés about meritocracy. American stories do not typically convey that opportunities are distributed in equitable fashion or that rewards accurately reflect performance. Rather, they describe complex interactions between individuals, systems, and circumstances, and a balance between agency and accident in life outcomes. But they demonstrate a strong commitment to the idea that this parsing of internal and external factors should and can be done, and that the result of the parsing tells us something important about the deservingness of an individual. In making their assessments, the stories use a number of identifiable storylines and standards – some of which are logically coherent, some of which are not; some of which are consistent with meritocratic principles, some of which are not – to navigate the relationship between internal and external factors and individual deservingness. I argue that the ideology of merit is powerful precisely because it is accommodating to a variety of circumstances, perspectives, and conclusions. The ideology has been evolving in recent years, as our stories give more credence to the possibility that external and systemic factors are decisive in individual outcomes. To a certain extent, the ideology has also been eroding, as a few sources question the premise that determining the role of merit in individual outcomes is feasible and important. I propose that we ought to embrace this opportunity to rethink our assumptions about merit and our ability and need to assess its role in our lives.

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THE MEANING OF MERIT: THE AMERICAN IDEA OF WHAT WE HAVE EARNED, WHAT WE DESERVE, AND WHETHER WE GOT LUCKY

Doron Taussig

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Supervisor of Dissertation

Michael X. Delli Carpini

Walter H. Annenberg Dean, Professor of Communication

Graduate Group Chairperson

Joseph Turow, Robert Lewis Shayon Professor of Communication

Dissertation Committee

Barbie Zelizer, Raymond Williams Professor of Communication

Joseph Turow, Robert Lewis Shayon Professor of Communication
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ABSTRACT

THE MEANING OF MERIT: THE AMERICAN IDEA OF WHAT WE HAVE EARNED, WHAT WE DESERVE, AND WHETHER WE GOT LUCKY

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Michael X. Delli Carpini

This dissertation is about the notion of merit in America. I examine what it means in American culture for a person to have merit, how we assess its role in individual lives, and whether those constructions are changing as Americans’ belief that we live in a meritocracy wavers. The project draws on analyses of mediated life stories of prominent figures from politics, sports, and business, as well as on in-depth interviews with a diverse group of 60 Americans, asking in both cases how narratives are used to explain professional and socioeconomic outcomes. What I find is an ideology that is more nuanced and less blinkered to social dynamics than is implied by popular clichés about meritocracy. American stories do not typically convey that opportunities are distributed in equitable fashion or that rewards accurately reflect performance. Rather, they describe complex interactions between individuals, systems, and circumstances, and a balance between agency and accident in life outcomes. But they demonstrate a strong commitment to the idea that this parsing of internal and external factors should and can be done, and that the result of the parsing tells us something important about the deservingness of an individual. In making their assessments, the stories use a number of identifiable storylines and standards – some of which are logically coherent, some of which are not; some of which are consistent with meritocratic principles, some of which are not – to navigate the relationship between internal and external factors and individual deservingness. I argue that the ideology of merit is powerful precisely because it is accommodating to a variety of circumstances, perspectives, and conclusions. The ideology has been evolving in recent years, as our stories give more credence to the possibility that external and systemic factors are decisive in individual outcomes. To a certain extent, the ideology has also been eroding, as a few sources question the premise that determining the role of merit in individual outcomes is feasible and important. I propose that we ought to embrace this opportunity to rethink our assumptions about merit and our ability and need to assess its role in our lives.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS………………………………………………………………...ii

ABSTRACT ...........................................................................................................iii

CHAPTER 1: The question of merit ......................................................................1

CHAPTER 2: Merit and meritocracy ....................................................................22

CHAPTER 3: Methods ..........................................................................................72

CHAPTER 4: “We’ve all done great things or we wouldn’t be on this stage”: Presidential candidates debate why they reached the top .......................................................80

CHAPTER 5: “They knew how to try”: Do star athletes deserve stardom? .............135

CHAPTER 6: “Certainly luck plays a part. But ...”: Business leaders grapple with critiques of meritocracy ..........................................................................................................................168

CHAPTER 7: “The opportunity was there, but I took it”: Americans take stock of how they got to where they are, and whether they deserve it .................................................200

CHAPTER 8: “There’s no way to know if the person sitting across from you in a job interview or a negotiation is there on his or her own merits or with an assist of one kind or another”..................................................................................................................253

APPENDICES ...................................................................................................268

BIBLIOGRAPHY .................................................................................................271
Chapter 1
The question of merit

“Deserve’s got nothing to do with it.”

-Will Munny in Unforgiven and Snoop in The Wire

Nick¹ grew up in south Jersey, the middle child of parents who had, in his words, “white collar jobs but a blue collar work ethic.” They lived in a less-wealthy section of a more-wealthy suburb. Nick got his undergraduate degree at a satellite campus of New Jersey’s state university system, working 40 hours a week at a bank to pay his way. After that, he attended an elite law school, discovered a passion for tax law (!), and landed a job at a law firm with Fortune 50 clients. At 28, he walks around downtown Philadelphia in a fancy suit. He feels successful.

When I ask Nick why he’s been able to be successful, while interviewing him one afternoon outside his office building, he points to a few different factors: enthusiasm for his field, good fortune that his particular area of the law is not especially competitive, hard work, and (when I inquire about it specifically) talent, including interpersonal skills and intelligence. I give a little spiel about how one of the “big ideas” about America is that it is supposed to be a meritocracy, meaning people are supposed to end up about where they deserve to be professionally based on their efforts and abilities. I ask whether Nick has experienced his life this way. “Yes and no,” he says. He is not sure that he

¹ All participants’ names have been changed.
deserved to get into his elite law school, and thinks it may have been due to networking – Nick had a good relationship with the chancellor at his undergraduate school, who recommended him to someone at the fancy law school. Nick regards this as less meritocratic than getting in on the strength of one’s LSAT scores, and his were not especially strong. Since entering the workplace, however, his answer to the meritocracy question is yes: he is smart, he works hard, and he has merited his success.

But then he goes on. “I have become acutely aware ... let me take a step back. I sort of always thought it was a meritocracy, particularly the workplace. And it’s not.” He mentions women at his firm, “female attorneys that I work with who I think are smarter than me,” who are “just not going to be as successful.” They get worse projects, or don’t get promoted, because of the sexism of his male bosses. So for him, he says, merit has been rewarded. “But I don’t think that’s representative.”

Anita didn’t grow up in any one place, because her parents were in the military, but her father was from Philadelphia and she always considered it home. It’s where she stayed at 16 when she had her first child and ran away from her family. She lived in a shelter for nine months, then finally got a job and her own place. Over the years she bounced from a job at Party City to one at Fed Ex to one working as a waitress, having two more kids and getting married to their father along the way. When I meet her she is 37, living in a rowhouse in a working class neighborhood in the city. The day after we talk she will start a new job in the kitchen of a Hilton Hotel.

Anita is proud of her family and happy with her life, but dissatisfied with her career – she would have liked to be a court reporter. For this disappointment she blames
both her family and herself: Them for failing to provide her with a support system, and
her for “trying to be grown” and failing to take the necessary steps to get ahead. “I didn’t
do what I was supposed to do to make it better…. I could’ve went back to school, I
didn’t.” She had opportunities, she says, and didn’t take advantage. “When you’re young,
you think it’s always going to be there.” She thinks she deserves to be where she is
because of her choices, and that outside of being a good wife and mother, she doesn’t
“have much to offer.”

When I ask her whether people in America more generally end up about where
they deserve to be professionally, she doesn’t hesitate to answer: No. “Some people work
hard and still are not where they should be,” she says, and explains that, in her view,
powerful people control the world and pick and choose who will succeed for reasons
unrelated to deservingness. Kelly Rowland, she offers by way of example, is a better
singer than Beyoncé Knowles (“and everybody knows it”), but Beyoncé gets all the
awards and attention. I ask her to square this sense she has of unfair outcomes and
foregone conclusions in American society with her story of her own life, in which she,
rather than some external factor, is responsible for her professional shortcomings. “I’ve
been brainwashed, definitely,” she says.

***

It seems quaint from the vantage point of 2017, but back in 2012, Barack Obama
sparked a nationwide controversy with comments he made during a campaign stop in
Roanoke, Virginia about the nature of success in America:

Look, if you’ve been successful, you didn’t get there on your own. … I’m always
struck by people who think, well, it must be because I was just so smart. There are
a lot of smart people out there. It must be because I worked harder than everybody else. Let me tell you something – there are a whole bunch of hardworking people out there.

If you were successful, somebody along the line gave you some help. There was a great teacher somewhere in your life. Somebody helped to create this unbelievable American system that we have that allowed you to thrive. Somebody invested in roads and bridges. If you’ve got a business – you didn’t build that. Somebody else made that happen.

The public response to Obama’s observation included relentless discussion on cable news, a widespread backlash on Twitter (#youdidntbuildthat), and a TV ad cut by Mitt Romney’s presidential campaign. At the Republican National Convention, performers and presenters harped on Obama’s comments. A country singer named Lane Turner performed an original song called *I Built It*, which tells the story of a man who works pumping gas, then saves up to buy the gas station (“I built it / with my own two working hands / Yeah I built it / with no help from Uncle Sam”). Speaker after speaker took the stage to tell stories about “building it,” which began with humble roots and ended with financial success.

Liberal commentators accused Republicans of quoting Obama out of context – the “that” which business owners “didn’t build,” they said, was “roads and bridges,” not businesses, and they believed this observation was true and important (Stewart, 2012; Berrier et al., 2012). Conservatives replied that business owners paid for roads and bridges with their taxes, and that anyway, Obama’s underlying theme was clearly that Americans need their government’s help – a “philosophical rewriting of the American story” of individualism (Cline, 2012).
Obama had definitely struck a nerve. But how, exactly? The policy debate around which this all swirled was about tax rates, but that was probably not the true sensitive spot. Nor was the deeper philosophical issue of the relationship between the individual and the state likely what made some Americans feel belittled by their president. The emotional subtext of this episode was something more personal. When Obama said that business owners’ success was not due to their smarts or hard work, he seemed to be questioning whether their life outcomes really have much to do with them, and many seemed to take it as an attack on their individual merit – the sense that one has personal qualities deserving of reward.

This is an important subject in America. American culture has long been understood to embrace an ideology of merit that says in this country, individual qualities and accomplishments can and should determine outcomes (McNamee and Miller, 2014). From Benjamin Franklin to Horatio Alger to Obama himself, we are awash in stories of people rising to success from humble roots, due to their hard work and smarts. Our institutions profess to place merit at the center of decisions about everything from school admissions to hiring and promotions to fantasy football leagues. Just as significantly, Americans organize our sense of self-worth around merit. In America, dignity is built in part around a sense of meritorious achievement (Sennett and Cobb, 1972).

Any number of popular American clichés, from the one about picking oneself up by one’s bootstraps to the one about any boy growing up to become president, suggest a culture that is sold on the notion that America lives up to its meritocratic ideals – that in America, “virtue leads to success, success makes a person virtuous, success indicates
virtue, or apparent success is not real success unless one is also virtuous” (Hochschild, 1995, 23). Survey research suggests that, broadly and historically, Americans believe we live in a meritocracy (McNamee and Miller).

But on this point there has always been dissent. Americans tend not to wonder whether merit should be important – as Carson (2006) observes, in most American policy disputes, both sides try to frame their positions as defending the reward of true merit, rather than question merit’s relevance – but we regularly debate whether merit is actually rewarded. Lately, it seems, we debate this a lot. As Hayes argued in his prescient 2012 book *Twilight of the Elites*, growing inequality and a string of failures by the ruling class have sown doubt about the people in charge of America and the procedures by which they are chosen. A bigger public platform for dissenting voices via the Internet (Benkler, 2006; Hindman, 2008), and a more mainstream discourse about privilege (Maltz Bovy, 2017) have also nurtured skepticism about whether merit actually wins out in this country. Recent polls show that Americans have become less confident that we live in a meritocracy in recent years (Dugan and Newport, 2013).

The Occupy Wall Street movement was in many ways an expression of this creeping sense that merit is not correlated with success in America. On *We are the 99 Percent*, a blog of short first-person narratives about “how these harsh financial times have been affecting [people],” many of the stories emphasize honorable efforts (i.e. going to school, holding two jobs) that don’t end in success. The writers argue, essentially, that they have more merit than their circumstances reflect. Obama’s “you didn’t build that” comment appeared to represent a rhetorical crescendo for this concern, until Donald
Trump came along and won the presidency in part by telling white voters that their struggles were due to external forces such as a “rigged” economy and nefarious outsiders, arguing essentially that other people out there have less merit than their circumstances reflect. Americans’ lack of confidence that our system rewards merit transcends political boundaries, and appears to be profound.

The past few years have seen a number of thinkers take on the question of American meritocracy, identifying procedural flaws and cultural ramifications – most importantly, the perpetuation of inequality – and proposing fixes. Some, such as Guinier (2015) and Deresiewicz (2014) focus on the inequities of the higher education system. Others, such as Hayes, Reeves (2017), Littler (2017) and Andrews (2016) address social or economic systems more broadly.

Given all the cultural and political attention being paid to the ideology of merit and the extent to which we live up to its promises, it is worthwhile to step back and examine what it actually means in American culture for a person to have merit, and how we assess its role in individual lives. After all, at the heart of all the research about mobility, the attempts of various institutions to define and measure merit, and the discussion of who has what privileges, is still the individual whose merit is assessed – the hypothetical business owner, the Occupy Wall Street protester, the president. When Nick and Anita talk about how they got to where they are and whether they earned it, they are attempting to take the measure of their own merit. How do Americans decide whether “we built that” or “somebody else made that happen”? How do we decide whether we
deserve what we have? And in light of our recent doubts about meritocracy, are our understandings changing?

***

It is significant, I think, that before talking about roads and bridges and the “unbelievable American system,” Obama proposed to his hypothetical business owner, “there was a great teacher somewhere in your life.” This was an attempt to reframe the business owner’s merit through his life story. Similarly, I don’t think it is a coincidence that Republicans responded by telling stories about their humble roots, nor that the posts on We are the 99 Percent took the form of narratives that made political arguments through personal histories (Taussig, 2015). Individual merit, I would like to suggest, can be usefully understood narratively, through stories about a person’s progression through time that make points about him or her (Linde, 1993; Atkinson, 1998; McAdams, 2008). This is because narratives imply causality (Ricoeur, 1984), and the question of individual merit is in large part a question about whether I am causing myself to deserve my situation. A story is an efficient way to answer that question. Narrative also functions as a form of “rationality” (Fisher, 1984), drawing on culturally recognizable “good reasons” to make assessments, and individual merit is often an object of assessment. Finally, individual narratives are informed by and reflect key cultural themes (McAdams, 2008), and correspond with available “master narratives,” which “offer pre-existing sets of socio-cultural codes for making sense of the world” (Hill, 7). Merit is, of course, a fundamental American cultural theme. By examining how merit is reflected in individual
stories, we can gain insight into how the concept is communicatively constructed, and what it means.

There are two key categories of life story to consider in studying the construction of individual merit in American culture. The first is life stories shared publicly through media. One of the important roles of media today, communication scholars have argued, is to construct and maintain the ideology of merit by telling stories, often about celebrities, whose stories serve as model lives for the rest of us, in which success and failure accurately reflect individuals’ efforts, abilities, and virtues, and which portray a world in which individuals determine their own outcomes (Smith, 2009; Barton and Turman, 2009; Stahl, 2004; Sternheimer, 2011). The cultural implication of such coverage, many have argued, is to support inequality in America by treating it as justified. Such work offers important insights into meritocratic ideology, but tends not to focus on the narrative construction of merit at the individual level, nor on the contemporary cultural moment and the influence of the digital environment.

The second category of life story to consider are personal stories. We carry with us stories about how we got from where we started in life to where we are, through which we grapple with questions like our identity and place in society (McAdams, 2008; Atkinson, 1998). Sociologists have studied how meritocratic values inform citizens’ assessments of their lives and selves (Sennett and Cobb, 1972; Newman, 1988; Khan, 2011), and called meritocracy a “dominant discourse” through which individuals understand their achievements as the result of individual efforts, though people are often aware of contradictions in their experiences (Sealy, 2010; McMillan, 2003; Śliwa and
Johansson, 2014). This research, too, tends not to focus specifically on the meaning and function of merit in stories of individual lives, nor examine our contemporary context.

I seek to understand the construction of merit in America by putting these pieces together, conducting qualitative analyses of both mediated and personal narratives, examining the content of each and how the two relate, and considering whether the ideology has evolved in recent years. I don’t posit that the values contained in mediated stories drive the constructions people develop in personal narratives, but rather that “media discourse is part of the process by which individuals construct meaning, and public opinion is part of the process by which journalists and other cultural entrepreneurs develop and crystallize meaning in the public discourse” (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989).

What I find is an ideology that is more nuanced and less blinkered to social dynamics than is implied by popular clichés about level playing fields or the American Dream. American stories do not typically convey that opportunities are distributed in equitable fashion, that protagonists simply made it on their own, or that rewards accurately reflect performance. Rather, they describe complex interactions between individuals, systems, and circumstances, and a balance between agency and accident in life outcomes – with a particular awareness of external factors in contemporary narratives. But they demonstrate a strong commitment to the idea that this parsing of internal and external factors should and can be done, and that the result of the parsing tells us something important about the deservingness of an individual. In making their assessments, the stories use a number of identifiable storylines and standards – some of
which are logically coherent, some of which are not; some of which are consistent with meritocratic principles, some of which are not – to navigate the relationship between internal and external factors and individual deservingness. The power and resilience of the ideology of merit draws not from the assertion that we live in a meritocracy, but from our acceptance of the broader premise that we should measure our contribution, and from the fluid process we use to do so. Meaningful erosion of the ideology is signaled not by the assertion that circumstances dictate outcomes, but by the rejection of the broader premise and process. We are beginning to see small signs of erosion.

Mediated narratives

I analyze mediated life stories about elites from three sectors of American public life: politics, sports, and business. The stories come from several different media, and two time periods, one decisively before the current crisis in American meritocracy (the 1980s-1990s) and one contemporaneous to it (2008-2016). Each subset of narratives reveals important facets of the American construction of merit, and give us reason to believe that the American relationship with the ideology of merit is undergoing a shift in the contemporary moment.

Political elites

Perhaps no one in American society is expected to make as naked and explicit a case for his or her own merit as the presidential candidate. A person who seeks to hold the highest office in the land should have considerable merit, after all. One of the ways
candidates have historically sought to demonstrate such qualities is through biographical stories. Political campaigns use biographical stories to “establish a candidate’s character by relating how his background, personal life, and early career have equipped him for the presidency,” writes Morreale (1993, 19).

The country was swimming in such stories in both 1988 and 2016, as two-term presidents left office and a swarm of hopefuls introduced themselves to the public. After reviewing the broad tendencies of biographical stories told by candidates from 1952-2016, I analyze biographical portions of campaign brochures and TV advertisements from ten 1988 primary candidates, and look closely at discussions of biography in materials such as speeches and journalistic coverage of the four most successful contenders for the presidency: Michael Dukakis, Jesse Jackson, Bob Dole, and George H.W. Bush. From 2016, I analyze biographical sections of websites and web and TV advertisements of eleven primary candidates, and look closely at speeches, journalistic discourse, and social media discourse about the biographies of five contenders: Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders, Jeb Bush, Ted Cruz, and Donald Trump.

Campaigns attempt to establish candidates’ merit by telling stories that highlight their intelligence, hard work, integrity, morality, and persistence. But opponents and journalists interrogate these assertions, and the picture painted of America in the discourse at large is hardly one of a straightforward meritocracy. It is understood and accepted that rewards sometimes come in the absence of merit, due to factors such as unfair advantage (usually class), luck, dishonorable behavior, or undesirable qualities that are inappropriately rewarded. Narratives are used to negotiate the relationship between
these confounds and candidates’ agency. In 2016, in the digital context, the confounds seem to be paid more attention.

But there was a more important development in the treatment of candidates’ merit between 1988 and 2016. Campaign materials across both elections are generally accepting of the notion that a candidate’s success should be explained and attributed to merit, taking into account the context of potential confounds – with two exceptions. One is Bernie Sanders, who initially resisted making a biographical case for himself, and then told a story in which he exhibits merit many times without receiving reward for it. The other is Donald Trump, whose materials deal much less than other candidates’ with context, and instead treat Trump’s outcomes as obvious evidence of his merit. Both shun standard merit discourse by rejecting the premise that a candidate’s story should contextualize and justify his or her success. The fact that they did so from the growing fringes of their political parties suggests that the anti-establishment sentiment in the country in 2016 involved the rejection of traditional political treatment of merit and its role in American life.

*Athletic elites*

Professional athletes occupy a unique position in merit discourse. Because there is a score at the end of every sporting event, star athletes clearly “should” occupy their enviable positions, in some sense. But we grapple with the question of their merit in other ways.
I analyze journalistic profiles of ten extremely successful athletes, five who played in the 1980s (Michael Jordan, Steffi Graf, Don Mattingly, Larry Bird, and Mike Tyson) and five who play today (Lebron James, Serena Williams, Mike Trout, Stephen Curry, and Conor McGregor). I selected profiles from popular and/or representative publications at the time of each athlete’s career, such as *Sports Illustrated* and *Esquire* from the 1980s and *ESPN The Magazine Online* and *Deadspin* today. I included multiple profiles about most athletes, as well as social media discourse about the contemporary athletes.

The overarching theme of the athlete narratives is an attempt to suss out whether and why the athletes’ *deserve* their enviable positions. The stories reliably argue that there is “something else in” the star athletes beyond physical talent that makes them stars, and deploy narratives that associate that “something else” with deservingness – though the criterion for deservingness are sometimes incoherent. Athletes are typically portrayed as deserving of success, but I take issue with previous scholarly explorations that claim sports narratives tell “the vast majority of people” that “they too can succeed.” These stories very clearly describe their subjects as rare and special. Even if most Americans identify with the protagonists of the stories and think of themselves the same way, the discourse still does not suggest that enormous success is available to anyone, or even most people, in America.

There is evidence in this discourse, as well, that the cultural conversation around merit is changing. In some cases, this change takes the form of increased attentiveness to the role of privilege and other external factors in athletes’ lives. More profoundly, a few
contemporary pieces dissent from assumptions displayed throughout the rest of the sample about how to assess deservingness, and whether an individual assessment is a necessary part of appreciating an athlete.

Business elites

Even more than our favorite actors and athletes, even more than candidates for president, Americans associate the word *success* with business people – entrepreneurs and CEOs who make oodles of money. We want to know how they did it. Many have been more than happy to tell us. The business autobiography is a sub-genre unto itself, purporting to reveal the successful business person’s secrets via his or her story. Along the way, it makes a case for the business person’s merit and its role in making him or her rich.


These stories demonstrate narrative tools available to those who wish to make a case for an individual’s agency in determining outcomes rather than external factors, in particular by advancing a quasi-statistical perspective in which chance is subject to individual control through industriousness and persistence. Their overall implication is
not that America is a meritocracy, *per se*, but that individuals are more powerful than external and systemic influences. These stories also deal with the question of what constitutes an appropriate reward for meritorious behavior, and reveal a tendency, at least among business leaders, to accept the validity of markets separate and apart from considerations of meritocracy.

The contemporary crisis of meritocracy is evident here in the tendency of the contemporary business narratives to reflect more readily and, in some cases, respond more aggressively to the notion of systemic injustices than did their predecessors.

**Personal narratives**

Nick and Anita were two of 60 Americans with whom I sat down for in-depth interviews about their lives and how they understand the role of merit in their outcomes. My interviewee population, drawn from around Philadelphia as well the rust-belt city of York, Pennsylvania, was economically, racially, generationally, and politically diverse, and in addition to Nick the corporate lawyer and Anita the hotel employee includes a dairy farmer, a police officer, a probation officer, several ex-offenders, a former go-go dancer, a CEO, a handyman, a fireman, a teacher, a retired military intelligence officer, a computer technician, an unemployed 31-year old, an investor, a medical student, a Trader Joe’s team member, a drug addict, a drug dealer, a tech entrepreneur, and many more. I describe my recruitment, interview, and analysis processes in greater detail in the Methods section.
My conversations reveal a number of important dynamics regarding the understanding of individual merit in the American mind, including the major factors Americans tend to cite when explaining their life outcomes, which of those factors are understood to be linked to deservingness, which are acknowledged as meaningful advantages and disadvantages, and the narrative tools used to navigate the relationship between them. When Americans ask ourselves whether we deserve something, I find, one of our key questions is whether we did enough on our own to attribute our outcomes to agency, with definitions of enoughness being fluid, relative, and contingent on expectations associated with an individual’s origins and circumstances.

A key theme that emerges from this pattern is a separation in my participants’ minds between individual merit and American meritocracy. Nick and Anita, for instance, both believe that their outcomes accurately reflect their individual merit even while they describe a social system which does not reliably reward merit. This is not simply a matter of Americans internalizing an ethic of personal responsibility; the disconnect runs in the other direction, too. I spoke with a fireman who felt he’d been lucky to get to where he is in life, but described the American system as meritocratic, and a woman who said her unemployment status was a result of some bad breaks, but that people generally get what they deserve in America.

The trend could be understood to reveal an incoherence: Nick can’t actually merit his position if a woman he works with deserved it more. But this is only true if one prioritizes meritocratic principles: that the playing field should be fair and the best person should get the job. Americans seem much more committed, in understanding our
own lives, to merit principles: that if you display positive qualities, you should be rewarded. Americans’ understandings of our lives are influenced by meritocratic principles, but our assessments of deservingness ultimately hinge on merit.

There were of course differences amongst my interviewees in their conceptualizations of merit, including differences across demographics such as race, gender, and age – the latter of which seems to suggest a response to the contemporary crisis of confidence in American meritocracy. A few interviewees also expressed dissent from the central idea that individual merit can and should be parsed and assessed, offering different philosophies of how to think about deservingness and its role in professional and socioeconomic outcomes.

***

In the chapters that follow, I will review literature on merit and meritocracy in American life and the role of media in reflecting and maintaining key ideologies, and make a case that the ideology of merit may be in crisis. I will discuss literature on life stories and narratives and explain why I think individual merit should be understood narratively. Then, I will discuss in detail my analyses of mediated narratives, and share my interviewees’ stories and thoughts on why and how they’ve ended up where they are in life, and what merit had to do with it.

The mediated and personal narratives reflect and draw on one another’s stories and tendencies in a manner that suggests the mutual construction of cultural meaning between media and individuals. Taken together, the narratives reveal several important patterns in the communicative construction of the American notion of individual merit,
and suggest contemporary changes in that ideology. First, they reveal that while meritocracy and individualism are American ideals, the “master narrative” around merit is a story that negotiates the relationship between internal and external factors in a person’s outcomes. The assessment of an individual’s merit involves the construction of a narrative that takes into account a variety of acknowledged potential confounds to merited outcomes, deploys culturally coherent storylines to negotiate the relationship between person and situation, and relies on broad cultural standards for “deservingness” that are not always reflective of meritocratic premises.

I am emphatically not arguing that American culture or individual Americans accurately understand or assess their advantages, disadvantages, or the role of merit in their outcomes. People may acknowledge the existence of external factors in their lives without identifying them correctly or thoroughly. Nor am I rejecting the long-held received wisdom that American culture pushes a meritocratic ethos, or that individuals generally accept it; most narratives do eventually wind their way to the conclusion that individuals are responsible for their own outcomes. But it is crucial to understand how the narratives get there — and that they are not always successful — because to a large extent this process is the core of the worldview.

The ideology of merit resonates, even in the face of dramatic inequality, precisely because of the complex, subtle, and sometimes inconsistent ways it explains reality. It invites us to take stock of individual merit, then adapts to a variety of circumstances and accommodates multiple interpretations and conclusions. This allows many individual outcomes to be perceived as justified or at least palatable despite clear unmeritocratic
currents. Even when outcomes are not deemed to be justified, meritocracy can still be viewed as an attainable and desirable goal, perhaps with tweaks to the system (better public schools, need-blind admissions, affirmative action etc.).

There are signs that the American understanding of the role of merit in individual lives is shifting, however. In the more recent mediated materials and to some extent among younger interviewees, we see greater attention paid to external factors and the role of circumstance in life outcomes. This pattern is reflective of the contemporary crisis of confidence in meritocracy, including the democratization of public discourse and accompanying rise of awareness of privilege. I view it as a shift within the master narrative of merit. There is also more profound dissent from the master narrative, and thus from the crux of the American ideology of merit: that the assessment of individuals through the parsing of internal and external factors and their relationship to outcomes can and should be done. This kind of dissent represents a true counter-narrative, and may be the beginning of a struggle in American culture over the question of how professional and socioeconomic lives work, and how they should work.

Merit is a “foundational political concept” (Delli Carpini and Williams, 1994), and in my concluding chapter I explore the cultural and political implications of the dynamics outlined above, how the ideology of merit illustrates the functioning of American ideology more broadly, and what real ideological evolution could mean. I argue that in order to counter the economic, political, and psychological damage being wrought by America’s current confusion over our relationship to meritocracy, we ought to embrace this opportunity to rethink our basic assumptions about merit and our ability
and need to assess its place in life outcomes. A partial rejection of the premise that meritocracy even makes sense would present a more effective challenge to injustice than the more conventional argument that meritocracy is being poorly executed. If we could continue to pursue putting capable people in appropriate positions while conceding that “deserve’s got nothing to do with it”—or at least not that much, and we’ll likely never get to the bottom of each individual case— we could take a meaningful step toward creating the cultural and political conditions for a kinder, better society.
Most of us would like to have merit, but that doesn’t mean we know precisely what it is. Merit is a vague concept, made no easier to understand by the fact that its meaning varies depending on its grammatical use, and has shifted in time and context.

Used as a verb, the word “merit” is similar to the word “deserve” (Anderson, 2013, 451). One could say that a business owner “merits” his success, but one could also say that a problem “merits” attention or even that a criminal “merits” a jail sentence. The verb is value-neutral. This neutrality differentiates “merit” as a verb from “merit” as a noun, because one would not say that a criminal “has merit,” at least not in the context of his crime. As a noun, merit refers to positive characteristics (Anderson, 2013).

But the noun “merit” is not just a fancy word for “positive characteristics.” The term still retains a hint of the notion of deserving: To have merit is to be good in a particular way that makes you deserve something. This is why to make a hire according to merit is not to say that you’ve hired someone good; it is to say that you’ve hired someone deserving. Often, it means you have hired someone who earned the job, though not always – earning something requires specific necessary actions. Merit refers simply to positive characteristics worthy of reward or recognition. The reward or recognition may or may not follow.

There’s a problem with defining merit as “positive characteristics worthy of reward or recognition,” however. This definition tells us almost nothing about how merit
actually works or what it looks like. What is a positive characteristic? What makes an idea, a practice, or, for our purposes, a person, worthy? As a concept, “merit” looks like an empty vessel.

Indeed, merit can look quite different depending on a society’s philosophical assumptions. In Homeric times, merit (or the concept most closely linked to it) was based on results alone. A person’s intentions, or factors beyond his control, played no role in society’s assessment of him (Pojman, 1999). Maybe this was because so many endeavors were life or death at the time. Did you win the war? Did you deliver the crops? If the answer was “no,” there was not much cause for assessing the context or your intentions anyway. Applied today, this approach would mean that the aforementioned job candidate’s merit would be assessed based solely on whether she landed the job. There would be no room to consider whether the outcome was appropriate, and assess her merit separately.

Today, we do not necessarily accept outcomes as *prima facie* evidence of merit. We could ask whether a company made the right decision in hiring our applicant, or whether its criteria were fair. We could ask whether our applicant was really responsible for the success that brought her to the hiring company’s attention, or if she were just in the right place at the right time. We could ask where the applicant went to college, and how she ended up there, or where she grew up and what her life was like. If we really want to get into it, we might ask whether she just happens to be smart, because intelligence might be largely genetic, thus a product of luck and not really something for which our applicant deserves reward (Simon, 1974). She might reply that it is her *use* of
intelligence that is being rewarded, not just her intelligence. But then we could quote Rawls to her:

The assertion that a man deserves the superior character that enables him to make the effort to cultivate his abilities is especially problematic: for his character depends in large part upon fortunate family and social circumstances for which he can claim no credit. (1971)

What we would be driving at with all this is what Simon (1974) calls the “principle of agency”:

We deserve X (on grounds of merit) on the basis of Z only if Z is the result of the exercise of some quality of ours, and possession of that quality is not caused by factors beyond our control. (497)

The *deserve* component of modern-day merit depends in large part on agency – individual control. As Longoria (2006) observes, taking this view to its extreme would mean that people “could no longer be held accountable for their actions because their choices and efforts are considered to be beyond their control” (16). Nevertheless, because of contemporary uncertainty about questions like nature vs. nurture and free will (Pojman, 1999), our agency, and thus our merit, are open to interpretation.

For example: I remember hearing NBA player-turned-analyst Jalen Rose diminish the accomplishments of NBA superstar-turned-analyst Shaquille O’Neal by saying Shaq had won the genetic lottery. Shaq was 7’1, 300 pounds of muscle, a considerable head start for a basketball player. But Rose was himself the son of an NBA player, 6’8 with otherworldly hand-eye coordination. Where was the line between agency and outside factors in this case? Somewhere between 6’8 and 7’1?
All of which is to say that within contemporary philosophical boundaries, the precise meaning of merit is unclear. It is “deeply contingent on our views of a good society,” and “essentially underdefined” (Sen, 1999). This presents certain dilemmas for anyone who would wish, for example, to organize a country around the concept.

**The meaning(s) of merit in America**

Americans did not come up with the idea of organizing social relations around merit – Plato beat us to the punch. In *The Republic*, he argued, “a golden parent will sometimes have a silver son, or a silver parent a golden son.” He proposed a class of gifted “guardians,” drawn from all classes, be selected at age 10 and raised to be society’s rulers (Lemann, 2000). The monarchs who ruled most societies for most of subsequent history disrespectfully disagreed, but did sometimes look to promote people who showed useful abilities. In Europe in the 1600s and 1700s, various groups at different times advocated that a society’s leaders should be chosen according to merit (Kett, 2013). But in America, for the first time, merit was embraced as an organizing principle by *insiders*, who based their very claim to authority on their self-proclaimed merit (Kett). America gave the concept of merit a promotion.

Why was America, in its national infancy, the right place at the right time for the acceptance of merit as an organizing principle? McNamee and Miller identify a few contributing factors. Religious beliefs may have played some role: Puritan colonists believed in an individual, rather than communal, relationship with God (McNamee and Miller, 2014). Merit is not an *inherently* individual concept (it is possible to assess the merit of a group), but its application to individuals fits neatly with this outlook. The
Protestant ethic also promoted the idea of hard work as a virtue, and though early on this was understood as service to God (who had already chosen his “elect” for salvation), it paved the way for acceptance of the idea of working for advancement (McNamee and Miller).

Economic factors likely contributed as well. Europe’s feudal economy meant that a person moving out of his station could bring social upheaval – no feudal lord would turn his land over to the talented son of a tenant farmer. America, however, had no feudal past, plenty of land, and a population that was mostly self-employed (McNamee and Miller, 2014). Here, white males could rise and fall in their stations without disrupting the basics of social organization.

Finally, the political circumstances of America’s founding contributed to the embrace of merit. After suffering under the tyranny of a monarchy and rejecting it, America’s founders looked for another form of social organization in the nation they established. They rejected heredity and central control, and placed power in the hands of the people (again, white and male), whom they declared equal. But there was a tension here, beyond the obvious contradictions of slavery and patriarchy. Even if all white men were equal, some of those white men were going to rule. This introduced the question of how those rulers would be chosen and their position justified. Fortunately for the founders, they did not actually believe that all people were truly and literally equal. They considered people “equal” in the sense that they were entitled to certain universal rights in the eyes of God and the state. Beyond that, the founders believed, people were quite different. “Was there, or will there ever be, a nation, whose individuals were all equal, in
natural and acquired abilities, in virtues, talents, and riches? The answer of all mankind must be in the negative,” wrote Adams. Jefferson famously declared his belief in a “natural aristocracy of talents.” Thus to reconcile the desire for equality with the realities of rulers, America defined equality as advancement by merit (Kett, 2013). This would be the land of opportunity, and though early Americans didn’t think much about providing equal opportunity, they sent down through the generations the notion that in this country, any man could rise to the top if he earned it. In fact, as if to make the point crystal clear, the founders went ahead and dubbed themselves the “Men of Merit” (Kett, 2).

When politicians today claim to be meritorious, their claims are often disputed by detractors and opponents. George W. Bush is told he was born on third base, Barack Obama is called an affirmative action case, Donald Trump’s fortune is compared to the amount he would have if he had simply placed his inheritance in an index fund (Matthews, 2015). But the Men of Merit rarely heard their merit questioned. This was not because they were universally admired, but rather because the conception of merit in their era was different from our contemporary one. To the founders’ generation, merit was understood to be a permanent, internal characteristic that was accurately reflected by his achievements and performances (Kett). A man’s merit was not worth disputing because it was evident in real-life outcomes. In this sense, the founders’ version of merit still echoed important aspects of the Homeric version. Kett calls this version of merit “essential” merit.

Essential merit was indivisible. Kett notes that the Men of Merit would have been “astonished to hear that merit could be broken down into discrete units” (8) such as work
ethic, intelligence, etc. Which helps explain why thinkers from their time offered such vague descriptions of differences in ability. How, exactly, did men differ? The most commonly invoked terms in conversations about the subject were “virtues” and especially “talents,” and “talents” was ill-defined, both in what qualities were at issue and in the source of differences – whether they were caused by “education or nature, and, in the latter case, whether they were the products of heredity or chance” (Carson, 2007, 16).

The vision for America, in short, was that it would reward men of merit, whose merit was supposed to be obvious, and that this merit would be a product of their talents, which no one could define or account for. And here we can begin to see a problem with organizing a country around merit, at least the way the founders sought to do it: eventually, people are going to start asking questions about what the heck merit is, and whether they have it. In fact, “the new republic rapidly became a society where all citizens, or at least those who really counted, claimed to be meritorious” (Kett, 7). Vast inequality and evident unfairness in the Gilded Age fueled dissatisfaction with the poorly elucidated concept and skepticism about the role merit played in life outcomes.

Merit was supposed to justify social distinctions, but instead it was confusing matters. And so, through the 19th century and into the 20th, a new conception of merit arose – one that Kett calls “institutional” merit. Indeed, the development of many American institutions is in many ways the story of Americans trying to put merit at the center of society, at least superficially. Pressed to substantiate their decisions, institutions that determined social outcomes – like the armed forces, the civil service, the developing public schools and the higher education system – began turning to tests and other
categorical measures to justify rewarding certain individuals while rejecting others. Instead of treating merit as abstract and explanatory of performance, this approach treated it as concrete and *predictive* of performance (Kett).

The specific qualities these institutions associated with merit varied and evolved. Sometimes merit was equated with specific knowledge, as in some civil service exams, or the Harvard entrance exam, which was based on the curricula of its New England feeder schools; sometimes it was equated with concepts like character. Around the turn of the 20th century, American institutions began to focus on identifying one particular quality, which they understood to be predictive of performance and constitutive of merit: intelligence. Intelligence, at the time, was believed to be “a biologically based, unitary, quantifiable entity” (Carson, 5) – a “true” distinction between individuals rather than a “false” one. It was also an *important* distinction in an era of modernization, when Americans were increasingly performing white collar work, for which intelligence was understood to be a useful predictor of success.

A French psychologist named Alfred Binet designed the first intelligence test in 1905, to identify slow learners who needed extra help (Carson). But the idea of testing for intelligence held great appeal for American institutions looking for ways to sort applicants and select the most qualified for their ranks. In particular, a Harvard President named James Bryant Conant was enamored of the idea that testing could be used to fix what he thought ailed America. In his 1999 book *The Big Test*, Nicholas Lemann tells the story of how Conant, from his perch at Harvard, saw America being taken over by an undeserving elite, the rich children of rich parents who didn’t earn their elite position and
were unsuitable to lead. At the same time, he saw the country being populated by immigrants who didn’t believe in the individualist ethic of American achievement. And, crucially, he saw the end of the Western frontier, which he believed, following the historian Frederick Jackson Turner, had been the provider of American opportunity, allowing any ambitious man to simply strike out on his own. In short, he saw a crisis in the belief in and availability of merit-based achievement.

Intelligence testing looked to him like a way out. America already led the world in providing public education to large numbers of citizens. Testing, Conant believed, could help to sort those citizens. Initially, he thought of using intelligence tests only to identify a truly deserving elite – an aristocracy of talent, so to speak. But eventually, he turned to the idea that testing could be used to sort the entirety of American society, both by identifying the elite (whom Conant, like Plato, believed should become the governing class) and by directing each individual to his appropriate professional pursuit. With this goal in mind, in the years after World War II, Conant pushed adoption of the Scholastic Aptitude Test as a criterion for college admissions throughout the country. It caught on.

In some histories, the two decades after World War II were when the notion of merit really took off in America (Tsay et al., 2003); Jefferies (2009) writes that the American turn to merit came in the middle of the 20th century, after race science was rejected and Jim Crow was overturned, when the country needed a new justification for racial inequality. Merit was indeed used as a new explanation for racial injustice. But as we’ve seen, the notion of opportunity and earned individual achievement had long been part of the American ideal – well before the SAT, de Tocqueville wrote of Americans,
“They owe nothing to any man, they expect nothing from any man; they acquire the habit of always considering themselves as standing alone, and they are apt to imagine that their whole destiny is in their hands.” What changed, in the post-war decades, was the development of the belief that the American educational system should provide universal opportunity, and determine most outcomes. Before Conant, “opportunity in America … came in an informal, unorganized way, and certainly outside school and college” (Lemann, 2000, 50). After, merit was formalized and systematized, particularly in the growing higher education system.

As a consequence, the meaning of merit continued to evolve. Tsay et al. (2003) find evidence of a change in how merit was defined, at least in academia, by looking at letters of recommendation for university admissions, which became more universalistic in the post-war period. Before the shift, “getting into a selective school had much more to do with having a good character (which was typically judged on the basis of one’s social background”), and so letter writers tended to emphasize social, moral and personal characteristics of candidates. After the shift, citations of intellectual and technical criteria – measures of intelligence understood to be universal – became much more common.

It was during this period, in 1958, that the term “meritocracy” was popularized by a British sociologist named Michael Young (Young is often credited with coining the term, but this distinction actually belongs to Alan Fox (Littler, 2017, 32)). Today, “meritocracy” refers to “a social system as a whole in which individuals get ahead and earn rewards in direct proportion to their individual efforts and abilities” (McNamee and Miller, 2014, 2), and in mainstream discourse, has a largely positive valence. Young did
not intend it this way. He was a member of the Labour Party, and when he looked around at the growing systematization of merit, he worried that this new system would take away labor’s ability to make a case for itself, because outcomes would be justified. His book, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, depicts a dystopian future in which all social positions are determined through intelligence testing, and people are crude and cruel as a result – wealthy parents try to adopt high-IQ working class children, superiors are dismissive to their objectively inferior subordinates, etc.

Looking back on it now, one of the striking things about Young’s vision is that he does not appear concerned with the possibility that the testing regime might be inaccurate. In fact he is much more afraid that the testers would get it *right*, and that society would accept their definitions of merit. Leaving aside the question of whether we live in a dystopian hellscape, that is not what happened. Yes, Americans disregarded Young’s warning about the dangers of aspiring to a merit-based system, and intelligence testing remained important, particularly for admission to selective universities, which became an increasingly important step on the path to economic success. But there was pushback on the intelligence test-as-merit approach, including within the university system. At Harvard, for example, the new testing regime meant that admission became more competitive, and incoming students began to look different, not always in ways that pleased administrators. There were more Jews, more African-Americans, more graduates of public high schools (Stampnitzky, 2006). Fearing that the school would admit “an army of future P.h.Ds” (Stampnitzky, 472) who would be “pansies and poets and serious
la-de-da types” (475), they introduced new indices of merit, such as athletic and extracurricular achievement.

Indeed, as the stakes of merit systems rose, the meaning of merit continued to be contested. Critiques of social hierarchy in the 1960s led Americans to take seriously the idea of *equality of opportunity* in our conception of merit. Recall that this was not a major concern for the founders, who regarded advancement-by-merit as informal and haphazard. Once merit was systematized, the notion of a “fair start” became important, though different constituencies defined it differently: according to Roemer (1998), some Americans subscribe to a “nondiscrimination” approach to equality of opportunity, meaning that all applicants for a given position should be judged by their relevant qualifications, while others take a “level playing field” approach, meaning that all applicants should have equal opportunity to develop those qualifications.

Today, write McNamee and Miller, Americans seem to conceive of merit as consisting of four main components:

1) *Innate talents and abilities*, including intelligence and creativity;

2) *Having the right attitude*, including a sense of responsibility, ambition, persistence in the face of adversity, and a willingness to defer gratification;

3) *Hard work*, perhaps the great American value – Gardner (1961) writes that in Britain, when a child doesn’t know an answer in school, he is told “you are not up to this, whereas in America, he’s told “you need to study harder”;}
4) *Moral character*, the sense that truly meritorious people have integrity and don’t lie or cheat.

This strikes me as a good overarching list. But the matter isn’t settled. Longoria, for instance, offers a useful distinction between acquired abilities, which “can be gained through proper training” (18), and innate abilities, which he calls “capabilities,” and are distributed at birth. Witness also the recent excitement over the notion of “grit”: When Duckworth et al. (2007) introduced the idea that “perseverance and passion for long term goals” were a better predictor of individual success than talent, they were basically throwing a monkey wrench into our contemporary concept of merit. And people liked it! Grit, an individual characteristic which seems to be a mix of attitude and hard work, has been the subject of coverage in a wide range of mainstream media, and Duckworth’s TED talk on the matter has been viewed 7.5 million times. Perhaps attempts to measure the quality will eventually become part of institutional definitions of merit, the way intelligence testing is now. Two and a half centuries into the American experiment, merit now plays a larger role in our social organization than the very large role it played at the founding. But we’re still working to define it.

**The case for and against meritocracy**

Ask an American why we place so much emphasis on merit – why meritocracy makes sense as a way to organize society, rather than birthright, or equal distribution of rewards, or drawing names out of a hat – and you are likely to get some version of one
(or both) of two arguments, which Hayes calls the “practical” and “moral” justifications for meritocracy. The practical case is that meritocracy is efficient. The moral case is that meritocracy is fair.

The efficiency case rests on classical economic theory, which says that “society benefits the most when resources are allocated to those who make the most efficient use of them” (Anderson, 2013, 452). A pure meritocracy should encourage this, by incentivizing the most talented leader to rise to the top of her company, the hardest-working carpenter to land a job building houses, the most entertaining singers to find an audience for their music. It should enable us as a society to get stuff done as well as possible, because it puts people in the right positions and encourages them to perform.

The fairness case rests on a moral concept universal to all cultures, with evolutionary roots. Monkeys get angry when they get “unequal pay” for a task, find Brosnan and de Waal (2003), and Haidt (2013) observes that the ancient Babylonians built some (now outdated) notions of fairness into their Code of Hammurabi:

If a builder builds a house and does not construct it properly, and the building collapses and kills the owner, the builder shall be put to death. If it kills the owner’s son, the builder’s son shall be put to death.

We can understand fairness in one or more of three ways. 

*Procedural fairness* refers to the question of whether a game is rigged and the rules are being enforced as stated. In the context of meritocracy, this refers to equality of opportunity, a theoretical prerequisite for contemporary merit. 

*Distributive fairness* refers to how resources and responsibilities are allocated. Distributive fairness divides into two subcategories: *equality*, which means equal distribution, and *proportionality*, which means “all receive rewards in proportion to
their inputs” (Haidt). If you and I go hunting and kill a mammoth, we don’t want those other lazy cavemen to get all the good meat – the very suggestion offends us, and we wouldn’t want to live in a troupe that rewards them for their sloth. In America today, liberals value equality to some extent, but everyone endorses proportionality. By promising that people will get rewards in proportion to their inputs, meritocracy appeals to a basic human desire for proportional fairness.

People who wish to argue against American meritocracy also generally take one of two approaches. The first is to reject the premises that a functioning meritocracy would be efficient or fair. This is what Young was arguing when he predicted that meritocracy would ruin Britain. He saw advancement by merit leading to dramatic inequality, which he understood as unfair because people are not responsible for their intelligence. From there, he imagined, society would fall into a bloody revolution, which we can assume would be inefficient. We see this type of argument occasionally in America today. It finds partial expression in policy proposals like a universal basic income, which is concerned with fairness in the “equality” sense, but it is not terribly common.

The second approach is to make a case about execution, and contend that the promised efficiency and/or fairness of meritocracy aren’t being delivered – essentially, that America’s meritocracy isn’t functioning correctly and our outcomes do not reflect merit. Execution arguments can focus on the evolving meaning of merit, and claim that we’re defining merit wrong: take for example the argument that intelligence tests ignore important qualities like humor, creativity, or grit (Lemann, 2000). More often, though, in
my estimation, people making execution arguments stipulate that merit is constituted by some combination of individual talent, hard work, attitude, and morality, and argue that life outcomes in America are not meaningfully driven by these factors.

McNamee and Miller (2014), for example, argue that the systemic phenomena of inheritance, social and cultural capital and discrimination all stand in the way of achievement by individual merit. This is a distinctly progressive, “level playing field” framing, and a conservative might take a non-discrimination approach and argue that the key obstacles to meritocracy include affirmative action and government assistance. Both sides could theoretically acknowledge, as McNamee and Miller do, that plain old luck is a complicating factor. In any case, the issue is that various factors disrupt the “principle of agency” that Simon writes about, and make it so that forces outside the individual’s hard work, talent, morals and/or attitude determine can his or her outcomes. When they do, the argument goes, those outcomes are neither efficient nor fair. That’s when you get the CEO’s son running the company into the ground, or the talented mathematician dropping out of college because he can’t afford his rent.

Americans have argued since the founding about whether we have in place systems that enable advancement by merit. In the nation’s earlier days, disputes centered on issues like patronage or nepotism in appointments, and popularity (which was understood to stand in opposition to merit) in elections (Kett, 2012). In the second half of the twentieth century we fought about dynamics such as class, race and gender, and the challenges posed to meritocratic principles by systemic discrimination and privilege, the unearned advantages that accrue to powerful groups (McIntosh, 1989) – in particular
debating the legality, propriety and pragmatics of affirmative action, and asking whether elites have fixed the status game in their own favor. A slew of recent missives have argued that American “meritocracy” has created a new aristocracy, as meritocrats pass success on to their children (Hayes, 2012; Karabel, 2005; Guinier, 2015; Putnam, 2016). Today, in what is frequently described as a New Gilded Age, we ponder whether America delivers on its promise of meritocracy so frequently and so intensely that the question could destabilize longstanding pillars of American life. But to appreciate why, we need to understand how deeply rooted merit and meritocracy are – not just in American systems and history, but in American culture and psyche.

The Great American Ideology

The “American Dream” can refer to a wide range of specific visions – a secure job and a chance to send your kid to medical school, a white picket fence and 2.3 children, making your first million and putting it all on black. But at its core the American Dream is about success, however it is defined, and how Americans achieve it (Hochschild, 1996). Bill Clinton explains:

The American dream that we were all raised on is a simple but powerful one – if you work hard and play by the rules you should be given a chance to go as far as your God-given abilities will take you. (in Hochschild, 18)
In this short statement, Clinton makes three key points about the American Dream, which together suggest the central role of merit in American culture. First, he tells us what the American Dream says it takes to achieve success in this country. Here we see telltale signs of the contemporary conception of merit: success requires “God-given abilities” (innate talents), playing by the rules (morality) and hard work – and there’s a specification here of your talent, your morality, your hard work. As Hochschild writes, echoing Simon’s principle of agency, these are “actions and traits under one’s own control” (18). Achieving success through one’s own merit is a key component of the American Dream.

Second, Clinton tells us that everyone should have a chance at success. Recall that “equality of opportunity” rhetoric emerged as a result of the attempted systematization of meritocracy. Today, it has become one of the loudest points of agreement in American discourse. Matthews (2015) observes that equality of opportunity has received explicit recent endorsements from President Obama, Hillary Clinton, Paul Ryan and Jeb Bush; when Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg recently promised to donate the vast majority of his fortune, he suggested that a focal point of his efforts would be on promoting equality of opportunity. Another key part of the American Dream, then, is the sense that we should all have a legitimate chance to prove our merit.

Third, Clinton observes that we are all raised with this Dream. This is a crucial point. The meritocracy promoted by the American Dream needs to be understood not just

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2 Hochschild offers her own analysis of this same statement, breaking it down into the who, what, how and why of American success. My analysis overlaps with this a bit, but I’m focused here on the implications for the notion of merit.
as a mode of social organization, but as an *ideology* in the Gramscian sense. “Ideology … refers to the set of attitudes, values and perceptions through which we come to see the world” (Jefferies, 2009). An ideology does not need to be true to have an effect on people – it just needs to be persuasive. The American Dream has been understood to be at its core an ideology of merit⁴, and works to persuade people that in this country, individual qualities can, should, and do determine outcomes.

How, when and where does this persuasion take place? Surely much of the transmission is accomplished through cultural practices, like the lessons we teach our children in school and at home (my sons know that if they want dessert, they have to “earn” it by eating vegetables). Then there are our classic cultural stories of “self-made men” like Benjamin Franklin, who rose from humble origins and through hard work and talent made a legendary name for himself, as well as the works of Horatio Alger, whose protagonists did the same, and “The Little Engine that Could” (McCoy and Major, 2007), which exhort us to work hard and tell us that anything is possible.

Of course the themes from these classic materials get reproduced and reiterated in other contexts (after all, how many people in America today have actually read a Horatio Alger story?). Sometimes, this reiteration is extremely direct. Look at the musical

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³ I refer throughout this project to an “ideology of merit,” which I conceive of as pertaining to the role of merit in the lives of individuals; this is related but not identical to an ideology of meritocracy, which pertains to the functioning of social systems. But the notions have a great deal of overlap, and others use the term “ideology of meritocracy” to refer to something closer to what I call an ideology of merit.
Hamilton, about “the ten dollar founding father without a father” who “got a lot farther by workin’ a lot harder, by bein’ a lot smarter, by bein’ a self-starter.”

Of particular interest for this project is communication of ideologies of merit and meritocracy through contemporary media, which, media researchers say, happens a lot. McCall (2013), for example, argues that news media use their agenda-setting function to reinforce the idea that America should function as a meritocracy. In an analysis of coverage of inequality, she finds that the news media don’t ring alarm bells about inequality of outcomes, but do alert Americans about perceived threats to equality of opportunity, because they might compromise advancement by merit. Such patterns in coverage communicate a sense that meritocracy is essential to the American Dream, and needs to be protected.

Jefferies (2009) also examines news coverage and argues that it promotes an ideology of merit. He contends not that news coverage causes public opinion but rather that it is part of an iterative process of cultural meaning construction. One of the ways this meaning is constructed is through framing, a selection of certain aspects of a reality to “make them more salient” and “promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (Entman, 1993, 52). Jefferies shows how an “American Dream frame” is deployed in news coverage of immigration reform, both by activists who highlight the immigrants’ hard work, talent, and humility, and by opponents, who argue that diverting resources to undocumented people would harm the American Dream for qualified Americans. Both understandings suggest that in considering the circumstances of immigrants, merit is the important issue.
He says this supports the “ideology of meritocracy,” which he defines as the proposition that “everybody in the United States is able to ‘succeed’ in society, with success defined as having access to a profession and accumulating goods” (27). He also critiques this belief system as an “ideology of inequality” because it suggests the immigrants will rise or fall based on their individual qualities, when in fact they face “systemic barriers” (34).

Other researchers have looked at entertainment media, which has been understood by theorists such as Gerbner (1972) to convey to viewers a “hidden curriculum” about how the world works. One of the ways America works, according to American media, is meritocratically. The Cosby Show portrayed “upward mobility and institutional access” (Gray, 1993) as available to a black family when it was generally not, argue Jhally and Lewis (1992). Winn (2007) argues that the American Dream, with its assurances of mobility, is “alive and well” in Hollywood films such as Working Girl, which suggests that hard work, not social action, is the path to improved economic circumstance. Smith (2009) analyzes two popular biopics, Ray (2004, about Ray Charles) and Walk the Line (2005, about Johnny Cash), which depict their protagonists rising because of their merit. They faced obstacles, but the films treat individual psychological trauma, rather than race or class, as the meaningful barriers in the artists’ lives.

Charles and Cash were celebrities, and this is not a coincidence: the greatest concentration of research about cultural promotion of the American Dream focuses on celebrities and public figures, and the rise to stardom as parables of meritocracy. Celebrities, writes Sternheimer (2011), serve a purpose in society: they are “a shared set of characters for us to talk about and often give us the chance to reinforce shared values.”
(6). She is not the first to make this observation. In one of the classic investigations in media research, “The Triumph of Mass Idols,” Leo Lowenthal (1944) looked at what we would now call magazine profiles of prominent Americans in politics, business and entertainment. Lowenthal argued that between the turn of the 20th century and when he conducted his research, in the early 1940s, these “biographies” underwent a marked shift. There were many more of them in the later period, but they covered a different type of subject: Instead of major figures in the worlds of politics and business – “idols of production,” as Lowenthal characterized them – the later biographies introduced readers to figures from sports and entertainment – “idols of consumption.” It covered them differently, too. The earlier biographies, Lowenthal found, focused on “technical requirements and accomplishments” (206), presenting to readers “examples of success which can be imitated” (207). The latter biographies focused on the private lives and consumer preferences of their subjects, encouraging readers to relate to them in a different way. “It is some comfort for the little man who has become expelled from the Horatio Alger dream,” Lowenthal writes, “who despairs of penetrating the thicket of grand strategy in politics and business, to see his heroes as a lot of guys who like or dislike highballs, cigarettes, tomato juice, golf and social gatherings – just like himself” (228). In other words, though he didn’t use the term, Lowenthal argued that over time the biographies facilitated a different engagement with meritocracy and the American Dream.

Contemporary researchers have focused mostly on how coverage of celebrities and public figures project and reflect meritocratic values. Barton and Turman (2009)
examine VH1’s hit program, *Behind the Music*, a show that tells the stories of musical artists’ ascents (and sometimes falls). They quote Brummet (2006) arguing that the “American public increasingly tries to understand public problems by examining the experience of individuals” (196, cited in Barton and Turman, 9). *Behind the Music*, they argue, tells personal stories about famous people that “reinforce a central theme in American culture, namely that a merit based system is both fair and moral” (8).

Analyzing *Behind the Music* episodes about Guns and Roses and The Notorious B.I.G., Barton and Turman show how the stories create a “composite narrative” (21) of meritocracy, by attributing the artists’ successes to hard work and talent, and their failures to immoral behaviors. The artists’ life outcomes, in these tellings, are meritocratically justified.

Stahl (2004) also identifies “narratives of meritocracy” about celebrity, in his case in *American Idol*. He cites Jameson’s contention that narrative is the “preeminent cultural mechanism through which social relations are apprehended and negotiated” (215), and explains *American Idol* as a microcosm of a utopian American life. The contestants enter in pursuit of “economic security and social mobility” (216). Anyone can audition; contestants are “equally unknown.” Audiences then “meet” the contestants through biographies emphasizing, in many cases, their ordinariness, and situating them in hometowns, schools, churches and families from all over America. The competition is fair – contestants perform for impartial judges – and the people who fail badly *obviously* deserve to do so.
A key lesson that seems to emerge from our discourse about public figures, Sternheimer (2011) finds in an analysis of celebrity magazines, is that “upward mobility is possible in America” and “inequality is the result of personal failure rather than systematic social conditions” (3). As Lowenthal understood, however, this lesson is not static. What Sternheimer calls “the American Dream fantasy” takes different forms in different eras, depending on social conditions. In the 1950s, celebrities were portrayed living modest, family-centered suburban lives; in the 1980s, they lived lavish lifestyles. More recently, celebrities have disclosed a great deal about their lives, putting their very selves up for sale. Sternheimer understands the boom in reality television and related depictions of celebrities as “ordinary” to be a response to America’s rising inequality, and a defense of the American Dream: “The message seems to be that if they can do it, so can you” (219).

Of course there are a great many nuances to these various authors’ analyses and arguments, but they seem to agree that the American Dream and American meritocracy, as portrayed in American media, involve the premises that anyone can make it (with “making it” defined as upward mobility), that making it is related to individual merit, that individuals can overcome obstacles, and that systemic obstacles are minimized or “depoliticized” (Meeuf, 2014). There is some lack of clarity across authors around what exactly the promise that “anyone” can make it means: whether it promises that everyone who exhibits the right traits and behaviors will succeed, or that someone will win a game from which none are shut out, and that the tantalizing possibility of triumph sells people on the system. I would argue that both strains are present in American culture.
Another theme running through much of this literature is the “ideology of inequality” motif: Media are repeatedly criticized for their boosterism of meritocracy and thus inequality. Some scholars understand this dynamic in a “false consciousness” sense, with the media manipulating viewers into accepting an unfair system. More popular seems to be an understanding that media content both reflects and projects, and thereby reinforces, social norms. As Sternheimer says, “we collude with this fantasy … the myth of mobility makes Americans feel good about ourselves and is woven into our sense of nationalism” (7). In either case, though, the underlying notion is that meritocracy has replaced ideologies like birthright and race science in doing the work of justifying unfair outcomes. This conclusion, with its negative valence, seems almost unanimous in recent media research. Sternheimer suggests that a functionalist might praise the American Dream for promoting “common values, productivity, and, ultimately, social stability” (6), and Glass (1954) argued that “belief in opportunity in itself brings about greater social harmony” (Śliwa and Johansson, 2014). But I haven’t found any work making this case about, say, Shark Tank. Outside of the media research context, perhaps, and certainly outside of academia, there is no shortage of positive sentiment about the American Dream.

It’s worth noting that of the studies I’ve encountered examining merit in media (in addition to those discussed here, see also Dalton and Linder, 2008), few have looked at digitally native content, or even content influenced by the existence of the digital context and the participatory nature of Web 2.0. There is reason to believe that such content might carry a different valence, as I discuss below in the “Merit in Crisis” section.
What is clear in any case is that the ideology of merit is all over American media, and that the depiction of individual “model” lives, such as those of celebrities or public figures, might play some particular role in developing our cultural discourse about merit and how it works in America. For understanding that role, I’m especially partial to frameworks that conceptualize media content as carrying deeply embedded values, which “must be inferred,” but “since inference cannot take place without an inferrer … different people … may infer many different values from what they see or read” (Gans, 1979, 40). Those values, as per Gamson and Modigliani (1989), are both reflective of currents in culture and also part of the “tool kit” individuals use, along with their “life histories, social interactions, and psychological predispositions” (2), to form their thinking. Merit is one of those values.

Losers and winners

“Look, I know it’s nobody’s fault but mine that I got stuck here where I am,” says a garbage man. “If I wasn’t such a dumb shit … no, it ain’t that neither … if I’d applied myself, I know I got it in me to be different, can’t say anyone did it to me” (Sennett and Cobb, 1972, 96). A janitor ventures that if he had been “a better person, like if I made something of myself, then people couldn’t push me around” (96). A third worker thinks about his professional life and concludes, “I really didn’t have it upstairs” (118).

These men attribute their social positions, which they find undesirable, to different sources – effort and innate abilities, respectively. But they all point fingers at
themselves. This is the central finding of Sennett and Cobb’s 1972 sociological classic *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, from which these quotes are drawn, and it helps to make clear that the ideology of merit affects not just how we view society, but how we view ourselves and others as individual people. It informs our identities.

Americans generally see the world through a meritocratic lens. This means people here often feel individually responsible for our lots in life, and we understand our circumstances to be an indicator of our performance. Americans are also individualistic. This means people here wish to stand out from the mass, and thus accept the display of exceptional abilities as a proxy for dignity, per Sennett and Cobb. Taken together, these aspects of American culture lead Americans to derive a great deal of our sense of dignity from our meritocratic achievements.

Dignity has not always worked this way. In other societies, dignity has found a source in tribal association and castes. Connecting dignity to work performance “would have seemed absurd” (245) in other times and places. That horseshoe you made was just a horseshoe, not a reflection of your inner worth. But in contemporary America, because of the faith we place in meritocracy, professional circumstance is accepted as an indicator of something more.

For those in the working class, Sennett and Cobb observe, this often means feeling badly about their lives. Their life outcomes are interpreted, by others and by themselves, as signals that they lack merit, whether in the form of talent, effort, or what
have you. And so in addition to a lack of money, the ideology of merit leaves them with a lack of dignity.

We can see in Sennett and Cobb’s analysis a fairly profound attack on the American tendency to link merit so closely with dignity. By definition, most people belong to the mass. What’s the case for an ideological system that makes average people feel badly about being average? We can also see an “ideology of inequality” critique. By causing workers to doubt themselves, the ideology of merit prevents them from challenging class institutions, because they are “saddled with the agonizing question, Who am I to make the challenge?” (250). The ideology drives others to doubt them as well. As Hochschild says: “Americans who do everything they can and still fail may come to understand that effort and talent alone do not guarantee success. But they have a hard time persuading others. After all, they are losers – why listen to them?” (30).

Nor does the working class on which Sennett and Cobb focus constitute all of meritocracy’s “losers.” Newman (1988) studied the experience of the oft-ignored “downwardly mobile” in the United States. Through interviews, she collected what anthropologists call “focused life histories” from people who had made it, then lost it. In many cases, the loss was a result of forces far beyond the individual’s control, such as the collapse of an industry. But often, the people around the downwardly mobile (friends, neighbors, spouses) couldn’t accept this. They wondered about the real reason for a man losing his job, or being unable to find one – maybe he liked not working? Eventually, the man began to wonder, “What is wrong with me? Why doesn’t anyone call me? What have I done wrong?” (6-7), and suffer from “debilitating self-blame” (xii). Although there
are periods in America’s history, such as the Great Depression, in which failure is now understood to have been systemic, contemporary American culture gave Newman’s subjects few explanations for their circumstances other than their own lack of merit.

The ideology of merit can be cruel to meritocracy’s losers in its repercussions for their identities. And what of its winners? Some research has examined how the ideology of merit gives wealthier, more educated, more professionally successful Americans justification for their success and a desirable identity. Lamont (1992) finds that upper-middle class Americans see themselves and others like them as moral, hard-working and competent, and measure these things in part by socioeconomic status. (Upper-middle class French people, less convinced that they live in a meritocracy, don’t infer as much about people from socioeconomic status, and care less about hard work and competence in general.) Khan (2011), in an ethnography of the private, highfalutin’ St. Paul’s School, looks at the education of America’s contemporary elite, and finds that elite students learn to act at “ease” under all circumstances, to give off a sense of omni-competence.

“Students from St. Paul’s appear to naturally have what it takes to be successful” (16). They become convinced that they’ve earned their position through merit, and that this makes them good.

Even in the face of evidence that maybe they’re not so good, successful Americans can be persuaded by the ideology of merit that they are. In 2010, the NPR program *This American Life* interviewed patrons in a Wall Street bar about the Wall Street bailout. The conversation included this exchange:
Jane Feltes (producer): You got to keep your job because you guys got bailed out. You guys got bailed--

Bar Patron 2: No, no, no, no, no. That's not what happened with my job. I mean, survival of the fittest.

Bar Patron 1: Because I’m smarter than the average person.

Adam Davidson (reporter): And even if the government bails out your industry that failed, you still say it’s because you’re smarter.

Bar Patron 1: No. The government bailing out an industry was out of necessity for whatever the situation was. The fact that I benefited from that is because I'm smart. I took advantage of a situation. 95% of the population doesn’t have that common sense. The only reason I’ve been doing this for so long is because I must be smarter than the next guy.

For Americans who have done well, the ideology of merit allows them, indeed motivates and encourages them, to find ways to claim that they earned and/or deserve it. “A basic ritual associated with entrance into the circle of winners,” writes Hayes, “is constructing a personal story about how it was through grit, talent, and determination” (161). The people around them, similarly familiar with the ideology of merit, often perceive them as deserving as well, and so they acquire, in their own eyes and in the eyes of others, a great deal of dignity.

It’s important to note, though, that the categories of “winner” and “loser” in American meritocracy are not perfectly clear, and that the ideology of merit does not simply work in the service of the identity of people with high socioeconomic status, and against the identities of those further down the ladder. For one thing, people from all stations of life can draw hope from the sense that they might be able to change their station in life through their own actions (McCoy et al., 2013) – belief in meritocracy “opens up … the opportunity to develop a proactive and optimistic approach to their career prospects and achievement” (Śliwa and Johansson, 838). Hence the cliché that many Americans oppose income redistribution because they believe they’ll be rich one
day. Some working people also find dignity in available components of merit, such as hard work (Williams, 2017).\(^4\) Certainly there is a vein in American culture that valorizes the working class, in part by trumpeting its members’ work ethic (Lamont, 2000). Think of all the pandering to “real,” hard-working Americans on the campaign trail. Finally, some find peace in the sense that they control their own destiny. There is more to recommend the ideology of merit for the average American than Sennett and Cobb let on.

The well-off, meanwhile, can find plenty of trouble through a meritocratic lens. Success is an inherently comparative concept, after all, and so an assessment of one person’s success will depend on to whom he or she is compared. In a review of *The Hidden Injuries of Class* shortly after the book was published, Sanborn (1972) observed: “Sennett and Cobb are not much interested in the injuries that the upper-middle class inflicts on the middle class, or that the intellectual class inflicts on everybody. But the craving for merit in the eyes of others is the same in every stratum.” The phenomenon of relative deprivation means that well-off people find themselves comparing mostly up (Livingston, 2014), and so can end up with negative self-evaluations when the people in their lives are even more well-off than they are. I might be driven to think less of my own talent and efforts if my neighbor becomes the CEO of Apple.

The relationship between merit and identity is further complicated by the fact that assessments of merit can take into account origins, advantages and disadvantages, and expectations (Ortner, 2003, 5). This is due perhaps to the principle of agency –

\(^4\) Sennett and Cobb examine the dynamic of workers finding dignity in sacrifice for their children, for instance – although they portray this path to dignity as fraught with risk.
Americans may understand “starting point” as useful information for assessing what a person did on his or her own – and it’s why rags-to-riches stories are more flattering than riches-to-riches stories: they imply more merit. It’s also why advantage and opportunity can become a psychological burden. Sennett, returning to the subject of work and dignity in his 1998 book *The Corrosion of Character*, finds that the educated son of one of his original subjects had developed an “unbending willingness to be held accountable”; compared to his father, his sense of responsibility for his circumstances was more “absolute” (29). Ortner reports on a woman who “by most accounts would be seen as quite successful,” but because she had been such an excellent student, “felt embarrassed to see people from high school, because ‘she didn’t live up to her potential’” (5). Because of where they started, these people felt, they had to go very far in order to be seen as having merit.

These findings square with the work of researchers studying privilege, who have found that people often resist acknowledging the existence of their unearned advantages (see e.g. Solomona et al., 2006; Knowles and Lowery, 2011). Knowles and Lowery argue that this resistance is a function of “self-concern” (2). Writing about white people who deny white privilege, they argue, “Whites who endorse meritocracy seek to see themselves as personally possessing merit (i.e., talent and diligence), and deny the existence of racial inequities – specifically, unearned White privilege – that challenge this desired view of self” (2). This is not a uniform response – certainly there is a contemporary sub-genre of personal essay about coming to terms with one’s own white privilege, and several researchers have identified circumstances under which acceptance
of privilege is more likely (Middleton, Anderson, and Banning, 2009; McIntosh, 2012). But the acknowledgement is difficult because of the connection we draw between advantage and merit. If you got what you have through privilege, it raises the question of whether what you have should be taken away – and whether you lack merit.

None of this is to say that people accept the premises of the ideology of merit automatically, or view their lives and the lives of others through its lens unthinkingly. Sennett and Cobb found that “workingmen intellectually reject the idea that endless opportunity exists for the competent” (250). But they still held themselves accountable. “Talk about how arbitrary a class society’s reward system is will be greeted with general agreement – with the proviso that in my own case I should have made more of myself” (250). Sealy (2010) considers how senior women in the UK banking industry understand the role of meritocracy in their own careers, especially given the paucity of women in leadership positions in their industries. She found that meritocracy was “a construct full of contradictions in terms of what the participants wanted to believe and what they experienced” (185), as well as “changing adherence over time to the role of meritocracy in women’s career success” – as their careers went on and their experiences contradicted the meritocratic ideal, the women believed less and less that they were working in a meritocracy.

Śliwa and Johansson (2014) examine how foreign-born women academics in the UK understand their career trajectories, considering whether and how they invoke the “discourse of meritocracy” in their narratives, in the form of notions of achievement, individualism, and just rewards, and whether and how they contest it. Though
contestation is evident in some narratives, for example when women cited experiencing discrimination, the authors argue that meritocracy is a “dominant discourse” in their participants’ stories. “Even where individuals have experienced either career advancement or discrimination due to reasons not associated with merit, this does not tend to disrupt the hegemony of the meritocratic discourse in the narratives” (838), because the definition of merit goes unquestioned and responsibility for achievement tends to remain with the individual.\textsuperscript{5} The premises and principles of merit are such givens in a putative meritocracy that it can be hard to think outside of them.

Though I am focusing on merit in the professional and socioeconomic contexts, the American preoccupation with deserving reward because of talents and efforts is so intertwined with our notion of goodness that we think about it outside the professional context as well. Sennett and Cobb touch on this dynamic in a short passage about how Americans seek to display their abilities to “earn” romantic partners, citing a man who tries to impress a potential partner by proving he has good taste in records, good politics, etc. They argue that this approach is folly: “love cannot be earned or deserved” (64), they write, and though it is not clear to me on what authority they make this assertion, I think they are right that there is something of a meritocratic ethos in American romance (how else could we have come up with a show like The Bachelor?). Health and beauty, obviously, are other areas where Americans have come to think about earning rewards, through disciplined dieting, voluminous sit-ups, etc. (Sender, 2012).

\textsuperscript{5} They also note that lack of belief in meritocracy can be “disempowering” because it can lead to “self-exclusion from getting involved in merit-acquiring activities” (839).
Silva’s (2013) work suggests that young Americans have actually come to view psychological well-being through a lens of merit as well. She investigates how working class Americans in their twenties and thirties define “adulthood” today, when so many markers of adulthood (steady employment, one’s own home, a stable relationship, children) have become structurally unavailable or undesirable. She finds that her subjects reimagine adulthood as a personal coming-of-age story in which the individual triumphs over the pathologies of a painful past. Accepting American values of self-reliance and combining them with a contemporary language of therapy, they mark adulthood by a sort of earned emotional accomplishment. Silva uses the term “neoliberalism” in explaining the phenomenon; happiness, she writes, has been “privatized.” Another way of understanding this, I think, is to say that even as we reorganize our American conception of adulthood, merit persists as a central pillar of self-conception, and a necessary structure upon which to build a positive sense of self.

In myriad ways, Americans use the ideology of merit not just to organize our institutions but to inform our identities. We take stock of ourselves and others by considering our constraints and advantages, and assessing the role of our efforts and abilities in creating our circumstances. This use of merit for understanding a life can be contested. But Americans have long accepted that the role of individual agency in our lives is great, and understood merit, sometimes for better and sometimes for worse, as a big part of who we are.

Could any of this be changing?
Merit in crisis

Back in 1986, during a pessimistic spell in American society, the *Wall Street Journal* commissioned an investigation into whether Americans still believed in the American Dream. The researchers explained their thinking:

Changing economic realities in the 1970s and 1980s, combined with shifting social and cultural values, have caused many observers to wonder whether the underpinnings of The American Dream are eroding.

What the *Journal* found, though, was that the American Dream was fine: “Most Americans, in fact, feel the American Dream is alive and well.”

The American Dream is composed of some of the most bedrock American cultural beliefs, and they don’t break easily. Historically, research and polling data have indicated that Americans generally accept its central premises. Shepelak (1989) found that most Americans “believe that America has an open system where achievement is tied to individual abilities and educational opportunities,” though only half believed high socioeconomic position is “reflective of special abilities” (217). In 1995, many more Americans than Europeans, including the poor, believed they had “a good chance of improving our standard of living” (Hochschild, 1996, 19), and Isaacs et al. (2008) echo the finding that Americans are more likely than people in other countries to think you get ahead by trying, and not because of your family.

Of course, not everyone accepts society’s premises equally, and it is perhaps not surprising that people further down the American socioeconomic ladder and those who are older are less likely to accept the promises of the American Dream as real (Reynolds
and Xian, 2013). It’s also important to note that the general American belief that we live in something approaching a meritocracy has not meant that we necessarily subscribe to all the ideals of meritocracy. As Longoria (2006) observes, along with believing that hard work and ability should be rewarded, “Americans support the distribution of wealth by heredity, of income by seniority, and believe it is fair for educational opportunities to be distributed via the market where the wealthy can purchase superior opportunities for their children. In short, Americans are not strictly meritocratic in their distributive preferences.” But nevertheless, “the overall pattern is clear: most Americans believe that meritocracy is not only the way the system should work but the way it does work” (McNamee and Miller, 2014, 3).

At least, we did. In 2014, the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), a conservative think tank, revisited the Wall Street Journal’s question. The researchers wondered whether general pessimism in American society following the financial crash of 2008 and a weak economy had “infected” views about the American Dream, defined as the belief that hard work and ability translate into success in this country (Bowman, Marsico and Sims, 2014). “Is the American Dream alive?” they asked. This time, they found, the American Dream is showing some wear. In particular, Americans viewed the Dream as harder to achieve than it had been in the past:

People still believe the American Dream is alive, but it may be a little bruised. In the 1986 Roper/Wall Street Journal survey, 32 percent said it was very much alive, 54 percent somewhat alive, and 11 percent not really alive. A March 2011 Pew Charitable Trusts poll showed that 17 percent thought it was very much alive, while a majority, 53 percent, believed the dream was somewhat alive and 27 percent not really alive. In questions asked by other pollsters, 15 to 20 percent said it was dead.
Americans are beginning to wonder about the truth of a basic American premise, AEI concluded.

Though data on this point are not unanimous (see for example Reynolds and Xian, 2013), other recent polls have found a similar trend of a declining belief in the American Dream, and in particular a declining confidence in American meritocracy. Gallup found that between 1998 and 2013, American beliefs about equal opportunity changed dramatically: 68 percent of Americans thought our economic system was basically fair in 1998, and that number dropped to 50 percent in 2013 (Dugan and Newport, 2013). A Bloomberg poll in 2013 found that 64 percent of Americans say the U.S. does not offer everyone an equal chance to get ahead (Lynch, 2013). A recent poll by the Harvard Institute of Politics suggests these doubts are particularly strong among millennials, fully half of whom believe the American Dream is dead (Harvard Institute of Politics, 2015).

There is good reason to think that Americans’ perceptions about whether the U.S. is a meritocracy could change over time. The ideology of merit is not so all-powerful that belief in American meritocracy overwhelms all individual and contextual elements. Previous research has found that belief in meritocracy varies according to income, education, race, and inequality in local residential context (Newman, Johnson and Lown, 2014). When your observations, experiences, and information environment give you reason to doubt that America is a meritocracy, you do sometimes regard the idea with a skeptical eye.

There is also reason to think that if Americans’ perceptions about whether the U.S. is a meritocracy were going to change, these last few years are when that would
have happened. Hayes (2012) observes that American elites – ostensibly products of our meritocracy – have overseen numerous spectacular failures over the past two decades, including the financial collapse, the Iraq War, the Catholic Church abuse scandal and steroids in baseball. He argues that this has led to plummeting trust in American institutions and a rising belief that the people at the top didn’t really earn their positions. Add to these failures a dramatic rise in inequality, which has not been accompanied by any obvious increase in the merit of those at the top, and you have a potential recipe for doubting meritocracy, particularly among those aforementioned millennials, who have moved into adulthood and entered the workforce largely during a period of economic struggle.

On the other side of the ledger, it’s true, we had the election of the first black President and then the first female major party presidential nominee. But Hillary Clinton lost to a candidate who declared time and again that the American system was “rigged” against ordinary Americans. Economic and political circumstances do indicate that more Americans are wondering about the state of meritocracy in the 21st century.

Trends in cultural discourse are helping to amplify those questions, and make them more personal. As Benkler (2006) has argued, the Internet and social media have helped democratize public expression, affording opportunities for those not connected to powerful institutions to exert influence in public discourse. One consequence of this is that elites – allegedly the most meritorious amongst us – are made “more accountable, or at least more vulnerable” (Hindman, 2008). Bloggers challenge and mock prestigious columnists; CEOs are confronted by tweets from little-known comedians. Inherent in this
dissent is often a rejection of the elites’ merit (Hayes). Earlier this year, Gawker’s Hamilton Nolan wrote the following about New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman:

Tom Friedman married into a billionaire dynasty, lives in a $10 million mansion, and holds one of the most coveted jobs in journalism despite having one of the worst ears for the English language of any living native English speaker. If we were socialists, Tom Friedman would be taxed into oblivion, fired to make way for a more deserving writer, and perhaps given a job more suited to his skill set, such as “cab driver.” (Nolan, 2016)

The apparently meritorious faced dissent before the Internet, of course, but it was not as public or as destabilizing as it is now. Online, the merit apparatus is thrust into public question.

Then there’s the contemporary discourse about privilege. Peggy McIntosh published “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” in 1989, laying out forty-six components of white privilege (such as “20. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race”). It has since been read by many college students, the concept has been explored by many more scholars (McIntosh, 2012), and in the last few years, the notion of privilege as an important aspect of American life has made its way off campus. It is still likely a term more familiar in elite circles, but has become mainstream, the subject of explainer quizzes on Buzzfeed and monologues from Bill O’Reilly. The 2016 Democratic primary involved “Bernie Sanders’s and Hillary Clinton’s supporters incessantly accusing the other side of supporting their candidate because of their (that is, the supporters’) unearned advantages” (Maltz Bovy, 2017, 5).

What discussions of privilege are often about – the reason the term can be such a “provocation” (Sehgal, 2015), and so emotionally fraught – is merit. Consider an essay
that the *New York Times Magazine* put on its cover in late 2015, titled “White Debt: Reckoning with what is owed – and what can never be repaid – for racial privilege,” which includes the following passage about the author’s son:

> I knew that he would be encouraged, at every juncture in his life, to believe wholeheartedly in the power of his own hard work and deservedness, to ignore inequity, to accept that his sense of security mattered more than other people’s freedom and to agree, against all evidence, that a system that afforded him better housing, better education, better work and better pay than other people was inherently fair. (Bliss)

To be privileged, this passage says, is to have less merit required of you than you are given credit for, because you are aided by advantages not of your own making. For Eula Bliss, the author of the *Times* piece, this prospect is a source of guilt, because merit is important and she does not wish for her son to benefit from its corruption.

For others, the concept of privilege is a source of anger, because to be *called* privileged is to have less merit acknowledged in you than you would like. Consider this passage from an op-ed in *The Princeton Tory*, written by a freshman named Tal Fortgang, who was tired of being told to “check his privilege”:

> I do not accuse those who “check” me and my perspective of overt racism, although the phrase, which assumes that simply because I belong to a certain ethnic group I should be judged collectively with it, toes that line. But I do condemn them for diminishing everything I have personally accomplished, all the hard work I have done in my life, and for ascribing all the fruit I reap not to the seeds I sow but to some invisible patron saint of white maleness who places it out for me before I even arrive. Furthermore, I condemn them for casting the equal protection clause, indeed the very idea of a meritocracy, as a myth, and for declaring that we are all governed by invisible forces (some would call them “stigmas” or “societal norms”), that our nation runs on racist and sexist conspiracies. Forget “you didn’t build that;” check your privilege and realize that nothing you have accomplished is real. (Fortgang, 2014)
Fortgang’s piece went viral. It was linked all over social media, reprinted in *Time*, covered in the *New York Times*, discussed on Fox News, *Salon, Jezebel, The Atlantic, Vice, the Huffington Post, the BBC, National Review, the Washington Post ....* Its appeal, I think, was in the frankness with which it linked privilege to an assessment of individual merit. It gave people an opportunity to air their thoughts on this sensitive proposition.

I should note that privilege is not always understood as a simple debit to individual merit. Ta-Nehisi Coates (2012) has written that the concept of privilege is most illuminating when linked to a specific advantage, and less helpful in the context of understanding a whole individual. But the response to Fortgang’s piece suggests that the notion of privilege as a factor in the calculation of individual merit resonates, and carries a great deal of emotional freight.

Whether one approaches the notion of privilege by accepting its validity, like Bliss, or rejecting it, like Fortgang, and whether one sees oneself as inside or outside the ranks of the privileged, the important point is that in America today, more people are being confronted with the question. Our public discourse involves a great deal of debate not just about whether our society is a functioning meritocracy but also about how to assess the merit of individuals in light of our doubts. Which is why I’m proposing to study what individual merit looks like in American politics, American media, and in the minds of Americans, and how it compares to the individual merit of the past. If confidence in American meritocracy is in something of a crisis, as I’m suggesting it is, how is our conception of individual merit adapting?
Contemporary research offers a couple of hypotheses. Sternheimer (2011), whose work on celebrity is discussed above, argues that American culture has effectively responded to rising inequality and declining mobility by doubling down on the ideology of merit – she sees the boom in reality TV and depiction of celebrities as “ordinary” as a defense of the American Dream and a statement that anyone can make it. But this analysis seems particularly attentive to a particular kind of Kardashian/Hilton celebrity. I am curious to know if other successful figures are similarly portrayed as ordinary, and if other media, including digital media, suggest that ordinary people can easily become successful. I’m also not sure I agree that portraying celebrities as “just like us” constitutes a full-throated defense of American meritocracy. After all, the American Dream says not just that anyone can make it, but that the people who make it deserve to do so. A more direct interrogation of how merit is represented in contemporary media seems warranted.

Silva (2013) also offers potential insight into contemporary individual merit, with her observation that 20- and 30-something adults mark adulthood by therapeutic triumphs. This is a very plausible and potentially valuable insight into a possible shift in conceptualizations of merit – it could be that some of us measure merit now less through professional and economic achievement, and more through psychological self-improvement. But Silva’s study is not focused on merit, per se.

In closing a chapter in *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, Sennett and Cobb observed that the children of their subjects might see the American Dream “exhausted” in their lifetimes. The word “exhausted” is too strong to describe what we’re seeing now, but the ideology of merit seems weary, and this raises the interesting question of how our
understanding of merit in individuals works today. To investigate this, though, we first need a clear framework for thinking about individual merit.

**Merit and narrative**

In this section, I’m going to make a case that the cultural construction of individual merit can be usefully understood through narrative. “Narrative” has been defined a number of different ways, but I like Hoshmand’s (2005) fairly broad definition of narratives as “accounts of events, which involve some temporal and/or causal coherence” (in Laszlo, 2008, 1). This definition has the strength of emphasizing the notion of *coherence*, which is a key point, because lending coherence to events is what makes narratives such potent carriers of *meaning*.

White (1980) observes that a set of events (for example, a list of historical occurrences) only acquire meaning when constructed into a narrative. Narrative, he says, solves the general human problem of how to translate knowing into telling, and he quotes Barthes explaining that narrative “substitutes meaning for the straightforward copy of events recounted” (p. 6). It does this by suggesting an intelligible connection between occurrences whose relationship might be accidental or arbitrary, per Ricoeur (1984): “To make up a plot is already to make the intelligible spring from the accidental, the universal from the singular, the necessary or the probable from the accidental” (41, cited in Mishler, 1995, 103).
This utility begets ubiquity. Narrative is everywhere – culturally universal and, says White, a “natural impulse.” Because of this ubiquity, narrative is not only a way we tell about life, but a way we experience it. It inhabits our thinking: as Bruner (1987) explains, we see the world through these stories we use for understanding, and act according to the tendencies of the stories through which we see. “Narrative imitates life, life imitates narrative” (13), he writes.

Fisher (1984) proposes that narrative actually constitutes a form of “rationality” which humans use to make assessments and decisions. Humans find “good reasons” for accepting something as right or true not exclusively in the logic and evidence of “traditional rationality,” but more reliably in the recognizable stories of “narrative rationality,” he writes. Faced with a decision, we consider the stories we are being told, and assess their “narrative probability” (by which Fisher means their coherence and internal consistency) as well as their “narrative fidelity” (by which Fisher means the extent to which the story “rings true” according to their experiences and the stories we know to be true from our culture). “The production and practice of good reasons is ruled by matters of history, biography, culture, and character,” he writes (7). Critics such as Stroud (2002) and McClure (2009) have worked to revise Fisher’s argument to account for the acceptance of stories that contradict or adapt existing cultural storylines, by for example ringing true to “values an auditor holds or could hold” (Stroud, 389). But the central observation that we attempt to understand the world through the “good reasons” of narrative holds.
One of the basic things we use narrative to understand and assess is ourselves. Humans think about ourselves, many theorists have argued, through life stories. “A life story is a fairly complete narrating of one’s entire experience of life as a whole, highlighting the most important aspects,” writes Atkinson (1998, 8). McAdams (2001) calls life stories “psychosocial constructions, coauthored by the person himself or herself and the cultural context within which the person’s life is embedded and given meaning” (101). Linde (1993) defines a life story as “all the stories and associated discourse units” told by an individual that a) make a point about the speaker and b) have “extended reportability” (21). I don’t think a narrative needs to be “fairly complete” to constitute a life story, as per Atkinson, and I reject the notion, included in all three definitions, that a life story needs to be told in the first person. I’d propose that a life story can be thought of as a narrative about a person’s progression through time that makes a point about him/her and/or gives that person’s life meaning.

Though based on actual experiences, life stories are not factually accurate retellings. Rather, the information we include and foreground is selected from an uncountable number of thoughts and experiences, and then interpreted and constructed to form a narrative. We take guidance in this endeavor from culture, which McAdams and Pals (2006) conceive of as a “menu” of narrative options, including plots and themes for our stories. Piecing together these available understandings enable us to form a “coherent” account of a life (Linde, 1993) – a notion that echoes Fisher’s conceptualization of “good reasons” for accepting a story. As in the case of Fisher’s
narrative rationality, individuals can recognize and accept, repudiate and reject, adapt or introduce plots, themes, and storylines in specific accounts.

Individual narratives also correspond with larger master narratives, “the stock set of stories drawn from a particular culture that circulate frequently and widely among the members of the culture and embody the culture’s shared understandings” (Hill, 2013). Think of these as broader than coherent individual storylines – not, “being picked on in school made me tough” but rather “America is a special country that has a unique role to play in the world” (Hill). These are the assumptions we internalize. Hill argues that Gerbner’s cultivation, which aims to explain the shaping of individual perceptions of reality by media, “occurs when the positions afforded by master narratives are taken up and internalized by individuals; such internalization brings an individual’s world view in line with the dominant culture and forecloses alternative explanations for how the world works” (8). Master narratives are “the mythological structure of a society from which we derive comfort, and which it may be uncomfortable to dispute” (Kermode, cited in Hill, 22); their “unexamined taken-for-granted assumptions about how the world is and ought to be conceal patterns of domination and submission” (Mishler, 1995, p. 114). As such, master narratives constrain our “local narratives” (Sandlin and Clark, 2009), not by dictating them precisely but by establishing parameters. That said, “counter-narratives” can be told, and master narratives can evolve by adapting to cultural change. Thus the collective culture/individual identity process becomes a two-way street: as individual identities transform, so does the collective culture, and vice versa (Hammack, 2008).
Consequently, stories are about not just who we are but “how individual lives interact with the whole” (Atkinson, 4).

The stories we construct to make sense of our lives are fundamentally about our struggle to reconcile who we imagine we were, are, and might be in our heads and bodies with who we were, are, and might be in the social contexts of family, community, the workplace, ethnicity, religion, gender, social class, and culture writ large. *The self comes to terms with society through narrative identity.* (McAdams, 2008, 243)

Coming to terms with society often means making an assessment. As Taylor (1989) observes, “Our being selves is essentially linked to our sense of the good,” and the good is a socially situated moral framework. We orient ourselves to that good via life stories. “What I am has to be understood as what I have become. … We have to move forward and back to make a real assessment” (47-48).

Because stories perform these important functions, they’ve made an attractive area for research. Atkinson (1998) observes that stories can be studied for a variety of disciplinary purposes. Psychologists have used them to study identity development. Sociologists have used them to “become more aware of the range of possible roles and standards that exist within the human community” (13). Anthropologists have used them “to get at shared cultural meanings, the insider’s view of a community, and the dynamics of cultural change” (15). Folklorists study stories as “repositories of traditional lore, beliefs, customs and practices” (15).

I would like to add “understanding individual merit” to this list of ways stories can be used. More specifically, I would like to propose that assessments of individual merit are likely conceptualized and often communicated through life narratives, which
utilize culturally coherent storylines and standards (“good reasons”) to explain the relationship between individuals and outcomes and assess individual merit, and correspond with master and counter-narratives about the meaning of merit and its place in American life.

Merit is an inherently storied concept. Recall that merit is assessed over time – when we consider a person’s merit, we consider not just his or her current status, but his origins and journey. Stories, of course, capture the progression of time quite effectively. Merit is also assessed according to the principle of agency, which we can understand as a question about whether the individual at issue caused his or her circumstances through some qualities of his or her own, or if some external source deserves credit or blame. One of the key features of life stories is that they make a life coherent by suggesting themes and causes. A life story is an effective way to link a person’s agency to his outcomes – or to suggest that some other factors were more important. Merit is also, as we’ve seen, an important American ideology. Orienting a person “to the good” in America will often entail using a story that corresponds with master narratives about merit.

The closest conceptualization to this of which I am aware is in Śliwa and Johansson’s (2013) study of how minority women academics in the UK reproduce or contest the “discourse of meritocracy” in narratives about their professional lives. Their analysis involves identifying “elements of meritocratic discourse” (830) as well as conflicting discourses such as “the role of power in defining merit and the way it is measured, the place of the collective in the achievement of merit by an individual, as well as the effects produced by … gender, class, age, nationality, race and ableness” (827).
They note “attributions of reasons for particular outcomes (e.g. luck, hard work, the possession of knowledge or skills, personal characteristics)” (830).

My aim, for the remainder of this project, is to use both mediated and personal American narratives to understand the American notion of merit. I want to know how American media construct merit in the stories they tell about “model lives” – what versions of merit they put on the cultural “menu” – and how individual Americans construct merit in stories of their own lives. I also want to know if these constructions are changing as the ideology of merit has begun to wear.
Chapter 3
Methods

My analytical method in this project is qualitative analysis of mediated and personal narratives, the latter of which I collected in in-depth interviews. Multiple typologies have been offered of the available approaches to narrative analysis. Riessman (2005) distinguishes between thematic analysis, structural analysis, interactional analysis, and performative analysis. Thematic narrative analysis focuses on “‘what’ is said more than ‘how’ it is said” (2): “Investigators collect many stories and inductively create conceptual groupings from the data.” By contrast, structural narrative analysis examines “the way a story is told,” especially form (see e.g. Barthes and Duisit’s (1975) breakdown of narrative into components such as levels and functions); interactional narrative analysis looks at “the dialogic process between teller and listener” and performative narrative analysis extends this approach by viewing storytelling as a performance involving settings, gestures, etc. (see Peterson and Langellier, 2006). Mishler (1995) distinguishes between analyses that focus on temporal ordering, those that focus on textual coherence and structure, and those that emphasize “psychological, cultural, and social contexts and functions of narratives” (87), which he calls “narrative functions.”

I locate myself squarely in Riessman’s thematic category, and Mishler’s narrative functions one. A distinction I have found useful is between analytical approaches that examine narrative – that is, the dynamics of narrative are themselves the object of study – and those that examine narratives in order to understand something else. I do the latter: narratives, for me, are a container for an ideology that is the object of my study.
Consequently, I seek to identify “common thematic elements” (Riessman, 3) across my cases, and think about “the ‘work’ stories do” (Mishler, 107). My thematic analysis draws on qualitative frame analysis, paying attention to the “selection and salience” of certain perspectives and information (Entman, 1993), but I focus on framing in a narrative setting – that is, the selection and emphasis of particular sequences and outcomes and the assumptions that underlie them. I use the notions of narrative rationality, master narrative, and life stories to inform my interpretation of themes.

Having said this, I should note that the “performative” approach has important insights to lend in any context, and I do take into account the different performative purposes of the narratives I analyze. But performative analysis is not my central purpose. I acknowledge, for example, that my own identity necessarily influenced the content of my conversations with interviewees (not to mention my interpretations). In what ways, however, I will leave to others to speculate.

My central purpose is to understand the construction of the individual notion of merit in American narratives. Recall that merit is an empty-vessel concept (“positive characteristics deserving reward”). I ask how American culture and individual Americans fill it in through stories, considering stories that address a person’s life outcomes and the path he or she took to achieve them. These stories can be told in the first, second, or third person, or even negotiated through dialogue. The key point is that the story is used to address the role of a person’s agency in determining the circumstances of his life. I take into account a story’s treatment of a person’s origins, other advantages and disadvantages, positive or negative traits, agentive actions, and the storylines that weave
these factors together, as well as implicit and explicit statements about what the person has earned or deserved in life, and why. Though there is a difference between the notions of “earning” and “deserving,” as I detail in Chapter 2, the distinction is subtle, and I use the terms generally interchangeably in my interviews and analysis to refer to a just relationship between inputs and outcomes.

One point worth clarifying is that these narratives need not be accurate or honest. People have diverse, sometimes contradictory incentives when discussing individual merit. We may exaggerate our own merit to win respect, or minimize it so that we’ll seem humble; we may exaggerate someone else’s merit to seem polite or kind, or minimize it out of jealousy, spite or strategic consideration. Because my sample includes narratives told from both first- and third-person perspectives, all of these dynamics may be at play here. But a story that makes a point about an individual’s merit nonetheless reveals assumptions about how merit works and what a meritorious life looks like. What’s more, a narrative need not be philosophically coherent – I conducted interviews in which participants appeared to contradict their own stated views on the criterion for “earning” an outcome, for example. But their stories still reveal the important considerations and tensions at play in their thinking.

I will refer to my two categories of narratives, for brevity’s sake, as “mediated” and “personal” narratives.

Mediated narratives
The mediated narratives I analyze include non-fiction narratives about accomplished people in one of three sectors of American life: politics, sports, and business. These are, to my mind, three of four major categories of public elites in America (the other being entertainment elites), whose successes we respect and behaviors we view as models.

Because I’m interested in whether American merit narratives have changed in recent years, I sought to collect mediated narratives that reflect the American understanding of merit from both before and after the American Dream began to show wear and tear. Though there is no decisive turning point or clean comparison for an endeavor like this, I looked at narratives from two eras: 20-30 years ago, and 2008-2016. I focus on the latter period because it represents the contemporary moment during which I argue there may be a shift in the American understanding of merit, after the Great Recession and decisively in the Internet era; the former a clearly distinct but still relatively recent cultural moment during which awareness of relevant trends such as inequality had begun but not fully taken hold, and when the information environment was dramatically different. The purpose of the juxtaposition is to identify an evolution that might coincide with contemporary skepticism about the American system.

I try to draw from media sources representative of their respective eras, i.e. I use digital platforms when possible for contemporary media, with an eye toward the question of whether merit is constructed differently in the “democratized” digital context. I also use narratives told in different formats, including campaign ads, speeches, brochures, websites, and newspaper profiles, i.e. “the drawing of a portrait in words” (Joseph and
Keeble, 2015, 1), for the political elites; magazine profiles and social and web media
response for athletic elites; and autobiographies for business elites. This approach
necessitates wariness about making comparisons across categories, but presents an
opportunity to identify consistencies in conceptualizations across contexts.

The specific cases I selected are enumerated in the introduction, and at the start of
each chapter. The individuals I consider do not constitute a representative sample of
elites, of course, but are strategically chosen to include a set of “model lives” that helps
reveal the cultural construction of merit across a variety of contexts. The sample as a
whole is biased toward white males; this is in large part because the political elites I
examine are the presidential candidates from 1988 and 2016, most of whom were white
males. Within each individual category, I think, the elites I have chosen constitute a
defensible sample of the model lives on offer in mainstream media in their respective
industries and eras.

Personal merit narratives

The personal narratives I analyzed come from in-depth interviews I conducted
with individual Americans. I recruited participants from around the city of Philadelphia
and its surrounding suburbs and exurbs, as well as some from the rust-belt city of York,
Pennsylvania, by reaching out to potential “connectors” in different communities – such
as the membership coordinator at a community center in a working class black
neighborhood in Philadelphia, the head of a Republican County Committee, and a guy
who organizes a pickup basketball game in a predominantly white suburb – and asking them for referrals, then building a “snowball sample” by asking participants to connect me with more people they knew. In a few cases I simply asked someone I happened to meet if he or she would speak with me. The population of 60 interviews I ended up with is economically, racially, generationally, politically, and occupationally diverse, though somewhat disproportionately male and liberal, and somewhat lacking in non-black racial minorities (the sample includes two Asian interviewees, one of middle eastern descent, and three of mixed-race; twenty-two were black and thirty-two were white). Interviewees ranged in age from 21 to 88, with multiple representatives from each decade of life in between. In addition to Nick the corporate lawyer and Anita the kitchen worker, the interviewees include a dairy farmer, a police officer, a probation officer, several ex-offenders, a former go-go dancer, a CEO, a handyman, a fireman, a teacher, a retired military intelligence officer, a computer technician, an unemployed 31-year old, an investor, a med student, a Trader Joe’s team member, a drug addict, a tech entrepreneur, a reverend, an EMT trainee, an office manager, a housewife, an acupuncturist, and others. I had met only two participants before interviewing them, and only in a minority of cases did I share a mutual personal acquaintance with a subject prior to the study. (For a list of interviewees’ occupations, age, race, and gender, see Appendix B.)

Like the mediated narratives in this study, this sample of personal narratives does not constitute a representative sample of American stories. I could presumably find different understandings of merit were I to recruit in Silicon Valley, for instance, or rural Texas. But I did speak to Americans from many walks of life, including from urban,
suburban, and rural settings, and the variation of culture and life experience in my sample has enough meaningful variation for me to draw valuable inferences about how some Americans relate to the meaning of merit in our national culture.

I met people in their workplaces, homes, or at establishments in their communities, and typically spoke with them for between 45 and 75 minutes, depending on how much they talked, after which I gave them $10 of the University of Pennsylvania’s money for their time. Though I used a general protocol (see Appendix A), these were semi-structured interviews that included components of both life history interviewing (asking interviewees for the details of their paths through life) as well as questions about interviewees’ reflections on what they had earned in life, whether they had experienced their lives meritocratically, and whether they considered American society to function meritocratically. I both audiotaped the conversations and took notes.

My analysis is a hybrid of an examination of narratives and of individuals’ stated interpretations of their lives and the place of merit in them. I look at the stories they construct about how they came to be where they are and the important factors in their journeys; I also asked them directly whether they felt they had ended up about where they should have in life, based on their efforts and abilities, and whether they earned or deserved their outcomes.

One of my questions in this project is whether a contemporary crisis in the American belief in meritocracy is affecting the way we understand merit’s role in individual lives. Comparing the construction of merit across time periods was more difficult to operationalize in interviews than in mediated materials, of course – I couldn’t
interview someone from 1986 – but I look for possible indicators of change by considering differences across generations and other demographic categories.

In addition to analyzing the construction of merit in the mediated and personal narratives, and whether they’ve changed across time, I consider the relationship between the mediated and personal narratives, asking to what extent individuals appear to “collude” with the narratives told in media, and if individual narratives differ in a patterned way, where and how so. I bear in mind that the subjects of my mediated narratives represent only three industries, whereas my interviewees represent a wide range of occupations and professional contexts, and that the subjects of my mediated narratives represent a “national culture” whereas my interviewees represent a set of “local” ones; these dynamics, rather than the mediated/personal distinction, may account for certain differences between categories. I also bear in mind that my interviewees told first-person stories, whereas the mediated narratives included both first- and third-person perspectives, and that the stories’ properties may vary as a result.
Chapter 4

“We’ve all done great things or we wouldn’t be on this stage”: Presidential candidates debate why they reached the top

The one big, beautiful American ideal [Ted] Cruz manifestly and undeniably believes in, is animated by, and even embodies is that in this country a man can make himself what he chooses to be, obstacles be damned, so long as he believes he can.

Ted Cruz believes, man. Holy shit does he ever. Enough to bundle all his horror up into more-or-less plausible human form and ooze his way within sight of the most powerful elected office on Earth. He is the truest of believers. And the right stiff-armed him in favor of a big orange inheritance baby. Not a more conventional, middle-of-the-road candidate, but a great big combed-over shit-for-brains whose platform begins and ends with him pointing down at the pile of cash he landed on at birth and bellowing, “I’m a winner.” I’m laughing my ass off.

-Albert Burneko on Deadspin

The above passage, published on the nominally sports-oriented website Deadspin as part of a series of “farewells” to Republican presidential candidates upon their exits from the 2016 primary, is illuminating for two reasons. First, in claiming that Donald Trump’s platform begins and ends with him pointing at a pile of cash and bellowing, “I’m a winner,” Deadspin comes surprisingly close to describing Trump’s actual treatment of his own biography, and in so doing highlights an important way in which Trump differs from his predecessors. Second, in conceding that Ted Cruz “embodies” the self-made ideal and then mocking him anyway, the passage signals a contemporary evolution in American political culture: a fraying of an unspoken consensus around how we should think about the place of merit in candidates’ lives.

The American presidency is the “supreme symbol of the American republic” (Heale, 1982, 225), meaning that, for better or worse, presidents have historically been expected to “personify” important ideals of the country and its people (Morreale, 1993).
One of those ideals is meritocracy. Establishing that a candidate has achieved his or her high status through merit helps to reinforce the premise that the American social system is a meritocracy, and of course simultaneously makes the case that a candidate’s merits are considerable and would translate to the presidency.

Presidential campaigns have argued for their candidates’ merit by telling stories of candidates’ lives and paths to prominence. These stories have then been assessed and negotiated through media by the campaigns’ opponents, reporters, and pundits. This tradition dates back at least to Andrew Jackson, whose campaign in 1824 published a biography portraying Jackson as a simple “soldier-farmer” who had served in two wars; his opponents pushed back, observing that Jackson was a slaveholder unfamiliar with the feel of a spade, and had been just 13 at the time of the first war in which he claimed to have fought (Jamieson, 1984, 6).

In a study of presidential campaign films, which introduce candidates to the broad public at the national party conventions, Morreale (1993) observes that in the biographical portions of the films:

Candidates often come from humble beginnings, but work hard to become successful. Whenever possible, they are described as poor, although hard work, determination, and commitment to education enables them to succeed. The candidates conform to the American ideal of success embodied by the rags-to-riches, Horatio Alger myth. The individual who strives to achieve can overcome economic hardships.” (8)

Consistent as these stories have been – Morreale describes candidates’ backgrounds portrayed in the films as “remarkably similar” (7) – the narrative patterns of candidates’ stories are neither uniform nor permanent. Presidential myth evolves in accordance with the media technologies through which it is built and shared, as well as the contemporary
cultural values the candidate seeks to personify. Jamieson (1988) argues that first radio
and then television changed what it meant to be an effective political candidate; Edwards
and Smith (2003) argue that the erosion of privacy for political figures forced candidates
to portray themselves as populist common men rather than great and distant mythical
leaders. Parmelee (2009) says that presidential candidates seek to “personally mirror the
society they wish to represent” (88) in its contemporary “cultural, economic and political
context” (89).

Recent elections have involved both new media technologies through which
campaigns need to share and negotiate their messages, and, as we’ve seen, a changing
cultural, economic and political context around the notions of merit and meritocracy. In
this chapter I consider how discourse about the life stories of presidential candidates
construct the notion of merit, and ask whether there is evidence of a recent shift in that
construction. First, I give a brief overview of the stories told by major party presidential
nominees from 1952-2016 in biographical portions of presidential campaign
announcement speeches, nomination acceptance speeches, advertisements, brochures,
and websites. Then I look closely at biographical materials and journalistic discourse
about candidates from the elections of 1988 and 2016.

I focus on these particular elections for several reasons. First, they are separated
by the period of time over which I argue an evolution of the notion of merit has occurred.
Second, neither involved an incumbent, and thus featured crowded primaries with
multiple candidates’ stories to examine. Third, both occurred at a time when the just
distribution of resources was a salient political issue (welfare in 1988; inequality in
2016), and so meritocracy, often offered as a justification for that distribution, was up for debate.

I examine the conversations about how the candidates came to be in their prominent positions, the implicit meaning of merit in their stories, and whether they suggest merit is reliably rewarded. Historically, political discourse has highlighted a number of different traits and actions as meritorious, including intelligence, hard work, integrity, morality, and persistence. Though these positive qualities deserve reward and are often portrayed as contributing to success, the discourse at large does not represent America as a society where outcomes reliably reflect merit. For every candidate who claims to have merited his or her achievement, there are opponents, journalists, and citizens who reject or examine the claim. In doing so, they advance the notion that rewards sometimes come in the absence of merit, due to factors such as substantial unfair advantage (often class), luck, dishonorable action, or undesirable actions inappropriately rewarded. Consequently, candidates’ merit is contextualized and negotiated through narratives that take stock of such potential confounding factors.

The “master narrative” of merit in American political discourse, accepted by most campaigns and commentators, is a story constructed to assess an individual’s merit in relation to his outcomes and grapple with these acknowledged corruptions of meritocracy, with the underlying assumption that such an assessment is relevant and doable. In 2016, these stories appeared to give increased attention and credence to the role of non-meritocratic factors in life outcomes. Even more profoundly, in 2016, the storytelling of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders revealed cracks in the broader
consensus that such an assessment of a candidate’s merit is even worthwhile. These developments suggest that the contemporary loss of confidence in American meritocracy is affecting how American culture understands and represents individuals’ lives.

**A brief overview of presidential campaign biography**

In a forthcoming paper on presidential campaign biography (Taussig, 2018), I map the important events and experiences in candidates’ life stories, and the inferences the campaigns invite about the candidates. The presidential life, as broadly constructed in campaign lore, begins with humble roots. Since 1952, the year of the first televised presidential campaign advertisements, almost every major party presidential nominee who could credibly bring up his modest beginning has done so. One of the very first TV ads, produced by the campaign of Dwight Eisenhower, began: “Out of the heartland of America, out of this small frame house in Abilene, Kansas, came a man, Dwight D. Eisenhower.” The campaigns of Lyndon B. Johnson (he has “known the face and feel of hardship”), Hubert Humphrey, Jimmy Carter, Walter Mondale, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama all struck similar notes in ads and other media such as brochures and websites. Typically the invocation of a candidate’s humble roots is used to make one or both of two points about the candidate: That the candidate has empathy for regular, working people, and that he or she has had to work to achieve a high station.

Other early life experiences that come up frequently in candidate stories include the candidates’ parents, who teach and model core values like hard work, and candidates’ hometowns, where candidates acquire values and learn key lessons. The candidate may
go on to serve in the military, where he shows his patriotism and courage, and perhaps learns about American unity; he or she also goes to school, works hard and typically excels. Then the candidate launches a career, in which he or she develops and displays principles and competence, and starts a family, which may inspire him or her further to make the world a better place.

Merit, in this narrative template, looks broadly like a willingness to work hard, a desire to help others, and an ability to perform. The fact that class mobility, high-level achievement, and effective government service are offered as evidence of merit suggests an assumption that these qualities reliably lead to reward, and that meritocracy, broadly, works in America. But of course candidates’ stories vary widely both inside and outside of this outline, and are subject to pushback. In these variations and negotiations, a more nuanced conceptualization of merit and its role in life emerges.

Because this is the first data chapter in this dissertation, I go into considerable detail below about the construction of candidates’ lives in political discourse. I hope this level of description helps to reflect the myriad and complex ways merit can be claimed, implied, problematized and disputed in a narrative.

1988

As the Reagan presidency drew to a close, the road to the White House appeared to be wide open. Reagan’s vice president, George Herbert Walker Bush, was not as close to Reagan ideologically as were many other Republicans, so the president had no obvious political heir. The Democratic party, meanwhile, lacked a standard bearer and were
searching for a new direction after a brutal 1984 defeat. A large crowd of presidential hopefuls flooded the airwaves, filled the newspapers, and stuffed mailboxes with their own personal American Dream stories.

The issues of merit and meritocracy are always floating in the American political ether, but were foregrounded more in 1988 because of a national debate over welfare policy (Reagan had called for reform of the welfare system in 1986; it passed in October 1988), and because of the Reagan administration’s rhetorical emphasis on personal responsibility and the notion that the rich deserved their money – though Reaganites had not explicitly made a case that voters should admire, say, the wealthy son of a senator from Connecticut.

_The Republican Primary: “He started at the top. ... Why should he even be there?”_

The frontrunner in the Republican primary was Vice President Bush, and he had a potential problem, from a narrative perspective: he had been born rich. In formally announcing his candidacy to the American public in the fall of 1987, Bush had this to say about his own life story:

I am a man who, as a Navy flier in World War II, was shot down by the enemy and rescued by an American sub that just happened to come by – and so I am a man who has learned how precious life is, and how frail our hold on it.

I am a man who 40 years ago threw everything he had into the back of a Studebaker and tooled on out to west Texas – where I started a business and tried to meet a payroll and experienced the tensions and the satisfactions of having a business in America. I felt the deep joy of being able to provide for my wife and children; I felt joy when I was able to give a fellow a job and know that his children would be cared for. (United Press International, 1987)
A campaign brochure released by the campaign elaborated a bit on Bush’s journey, beginning:

Throughout his life, George Bush has shown – time and time again – that he has the ability, integrity and leadership required to meet and overcome tough challenges.

His years of experience in private business and at the highest levels of our government have earned him the reputation as a man who gets the job done right. (www.4president.org)

Bush’s parents, the brochure said, “instilled in him strong values that are the basis for his exemplary achievements.” The pamphlet recalled the candidate’s military exploits and his career in Texas, and then discussed his public service record, calling him a “skillful negotiator” and a “tireless leader.”

Bush’s opening argument for his own merit was, essentially, “awesome man excels.” His materials do not dwell long on the question of how Bush became awesome, simply crediting his parents with instilling in him strong values and citing his military experience and career in Texas as the sources of important lessons. The specific attributes connected to his success include hard work and “ability,” including skillful negotiation and a capacity to work and appeal across partisan lines. Bush’s story is very accepting of meritocratic premises, taking for granted that he got good outcomes because he did good work.

The fact that Bush points to his parents’ teachings as a positive formative influence introduces a theme that runs through candidates’ stories: good parents are treated as an acceptable advantage in life, indeed an experience about which a candidate can comfortably boast. By contrast, economic advantage and the positive formative experiences that come along with it – such as attending high quality schools that might
help one become a “skillful negotiator” – are not typically dwelt on. The Bush campaign is so eager to avoid highlighting the candidate’s socioeconomic head start in life that it makes an attempt to craft a Horatio Alger story about the candidate. If “everything” Bush had could fit in the back of a Studebaker, it couldn’t have been much. But Bush’s attempt to duck the question of his privileged upbringing wouldn’t work.

For one thing, the media knew all about it. One week after Bush announced his candidacy, *Newsweek* hit the stands with a big cover story arguing that the candidate had a problem projecting self-confidence, a tendency reporter Margaret Garrard Warner traced back to his Wasp-y youth. “At the Greenwich Country Day School in the 1930s, boasting and strutting were anathema, the boorish behavior of parvenus and cheap politicians” (Warner, 1987).

Among Bush’s opponents, Pierre “Pete” Du Pont did not present a problematic contrast in this regard, given that it was basically impossible to have grown up wealthier than Du Pont. Jack Kemp could and did claim humble roots, but his campaign’s argument focused more on his ideological closeness to Reagan. When he did make a biographical case, it was actually rather similar to Bush’s: Kemp had been an NFL quarterback, and highlighted his history of leadership and winning, linking his merit to excellent outcomes. But then there was Bob Dole.

The story Dole told about his life was not specifically constructed to contrast with Bush’s biography, but it might as well have been. Dole had grown up poor, in the heartland. He liked to say so and he liked to talk about what that meant. Dole announced his candidacy in Russell, Kansas, where he grew up. On the stump, he went on “at
practiced length about his dust-bowl youth in the outback town” (Fineman, 1987), and told audiences he was a “product of ‘public schools’ who didn’t ‘start at the top’” (Fineman, 1988). Dole’s brochure elaborated: “Bob’s Dad ran a cream and egg station. His mother sold sewing machines. In Dust Bowl days, when times were tough, the Doles were tougher” (www.4president.org).

One of Bush’s biographical strengths was his status as a war hero. But Dole’s biography managed to make even this part of Bush’s story seem sprinkled with pixie dust. As a naval aviator, Bush had been shot down; the other two men on his plane were killed in the incident, undoubtedly a traumatic experience for the future vice president. But Bush was rescued and exited military service without serious injury. Dole did not. As United Press International told readers in 1987, during a battle in Italy, Dole:

was hit in the right shoulder with a mortar shell while trying to help a fallen soldier. The injury temporarily paralyzed his arms and legs and left him on the verge of death. Before the injury, the 6-foot-3 Dole weighed 192 pounds and played football and basketball at the University of Kansas. A year later, he weighed 120 pounds and could not even feed himself. (Duda, 1987)

“Bob Dole willed himself to live,” read a Dole brochure. He was only able to pay his hospital bills because of the help of his neighbors in Russell, who took up a collection on his behalf. Even then, he lost most of the use of his right hand for the rest of his life.

Dole’s biographical materials frame his injury, recovery, and the assistance from his community as a crucial turning point for the candidate. Dole said it made him stronger, committed him to giving back, and opened his eyes to the fact that sometimes, people can’t always do things on their own. “I put great stock in self-reliance, but experience has shown me that there’s no such thing as an entirely self-made man or woman,” Dole wrote (Stafford, 1988).
In coverage of Dole’s life, journalists highlighted Dole’s humble roots, his terrible injuries, and Dole’s complicated relationship with the notion of help. Several profiles noted Dole’s “fear and resentment of dependence,” born of the fact that when Dole was immobilized, “his mother had to hold his cigarettes to his lips,” (Fineman, 1987). “Today, he refuses shortcuts. He ties his own tie, laces his own shoes,” wrote Sydney Blumenthal (1987) in the *Washington Post*.

Both Dole and the media recognized and seized on the contrast between the two strongest candidates for the Republican nomination. “I didn’t dream it up to go after Bush,” Dole said of his biography in the Blumenthal piece. “But it’s true. He started at the top and he stayed there. That says something … Why should he even be there?” On the stump, wrote the *St. Petersburg Times*, Dole “never misses an opportunity to draw a contrast between the Dole and Bush backgrounds” (Stafford, 1988).

Blumenthal asserted that Bush had a “Silver Spoon problem,” and noted that “since Lincoln, with the accidental exception of Theodore Roosevelt, the Republican Party has never nominated a candidate who could not claim a modest small-town origin, preferably in the Midwest. The contrast between Dole and Bush, in this regard, could not be sharper.”

The Bush campaign responded to these observations and attacks by trying to soften the distinction between the candidates, demanding that Dole (and Bush’s other opponents) release their tax returns. “Bush aides said privately that they were convinced the returns would show that Bob and Liddy Dole had made too much money in recent years – nearly $600,000 in 1986 – to pose in Iowa as Mr. and Mrs. Main Street,” reported
Newsweek (Fineman, 1988). This was more of an attempt to contradict Dole’s suggestion that he understood the working man than to disparage Dole’s merit. The other major biographical critiques offered of Dole were that he had spent too much time in government, and that he was just too *mean*, a trait which caused him to blow the 1976 presidential election for Republicans (he was the vice-Presidential nominee) with his vicious attacks on opponents.

In the debate over which of these two conservative men was better suited to lead the Republican Party and the country, a big part of the argument was over the construction of merit. One key point on which they differed was how merit is demonstrated in American life. Where Bush’s narrative pointed to excellence, Dole deployed storylines highlighting adversity. “I’ve been tested and I’ve failed but I’ve gotten up and tried again” (Weinraub, 1988), Dole said, and claimed that Americans wanted “someone in the White House who got there the hard way” (Clifford, 1988). Dole offered his struggles as proof that his merit is not circumstantial. Someone who has had all the breaks, Dole contended (hint, hint), has not truly been tested, and could prove less meritorious in a more adverse situation.

An illustration of how crucial adversity is in Dole’s construction: One of the narrative devices that can be used to explore the role of merit in an individual’s life is an alternative timeline – a hypothesized storyline in which important elements are changed. Alternative timelines pertaining to merit generally take one of two forms: a version of a person’s life in which his or her circumstances are different (“had he not been born a Bush, George W. would have been an insurance salesman”), or a version of the person’s
life in which someone else is placed in his or her circumstances (“few men would have shown McCain’s courage in a Vietnamese prison”). In both cases, the device is meant to isolate and reveal what is essential about the individual by separating the person from his or her circumstances – a sort of imaginary controlled experiment.

Dole’s campaign offers both types of alternative timeline in discussions of the candidate’s biography. Dole suggested that without the war, “I’m not sure what kind of career I had in store” (Stafford, 1988), and a Dole brochure claimed that “other men might not have survived” the candidate’s injuries. For Dole, his experience in World War II both revealed his essential strength and forged his other meritorious qualities. Whether through creation or revelation, struggle is at the crux of Dole’s merit, and this served to differentiate him from Bush.

Another important difference in the two campaigns’ construction of merit was their conceptualizations of agency and what it means to do something on one’s own. Bush exhibits agency, in his story, by striking out to Texas and starting a business, finding agency in a foray into the free market. His attacks on Dole’s long government career, which draw on the trope that public sector employment is safe and easy, is consistent with this construction. Dole sometimes defined agency as receiving no help – “nobody handed me anything,” he said – but in his story Dole actually received quite a bit of help from his family and neighbors when he needed it. In Dole’s construction, it is acceptable to receive help when necessary, but not acceptable to have an unreasonable advantage. This is a notion that will surface repeatedly throughout this dissertation, and which I dissect most thoroughly in Chapter 7. Bush’s advantage, to Dole, was
unreasonable, which meant he had not met the standard for being an agent of his own success, and thus not truly meritorious.

The critiques of Dole’s temperament introduced another dynamic to the discussion. If Dole’s central message about Bush’s merit was that he had achieved his station because of his advantages rather than his positive qualities, Bush and various pundits told a story in which Dole had earned his failure in the 1976 election because of his negative traits, and that those same traits would affect his performance as president. *Newsweek* explicitly wrote that though Dole’s “icy, peremptory manner . . . [hasn’t] inhibited his success as a legislator… [his] operating style has already hampered his campaign – and could create problems for a Dole presidency” (Warner, 1988).

In short, each campaign sought to establish its own candidate’s merits (Bush is excellent; Dole is tough) while problematizing its opponent’s claims (Bush had too many advantages and hadn’t been tested; Dole hadn’t struck out on his own, and sat lazily in government employ). They clashed over appropriate standards for merit and drew on different available storylines about how individuals achieve their outcomes in relation to potential confounds such as wealth and cushy government jobs. In the end, Bush of course won the primary, though this is different from saying he won the argument over the construction of merit (there is much more to an election than biography). In any case, *Newsweek* argued, Dole had earned the defeat.

The poor boy from Russell, Kans., who lost his youth and athletic grace to a stray German shell, can be a fatalist. The morning after Super Tuesday, as Dole sat in a suburban Chicago restaurant, he said simply, “Nothing’s ever easy in life – for me.” What he failed to acknowledge was that in this campaign, at least, he had made life harder for himself. (Warner, 1988)
The Democratic primary: “This is the American Dream, folks.”

If the road to the Republican nomination in 1988 was crowded, the Democratic race was a pileup. Early frontrunner Gary Hart suspended his campaign because of a sex scandal, re-entered the race, then dropped out again after disappointing results. New York Governor Mario Cuomo was aggressively recruited, but declined to run. Joe Biden withdrew because of a plagiarism scandal, brought to public light by the campaign of Michael Dukakis (who disavowed any knowledge of the affair and fired the campaign manager involved). Dukakis emerged from this mess as the frontrunner. We will begin with him.

Dukakis introduced himself to voters with a rags-to-riches story – about his parents. Dukakis’s brochure is titled “An American Success Story,” and begins: “Mike Dukakis is a modern leader with a classic American success story. He’s the son of Greek immigrants who came to this country 75 years ago, searching for better lives. His father became a family doctor, his mother a schoolteacher.” The Washington Post went into detail:

Whatever Dukakis has done – or may do – pales in his mind beside his Greek immigrant parents’ accomplishments. His father came to America at 15, speaking no English, and eight years later talked his way past a skeptical admissions official and into Harvard Medical School. His mother was 9 when she landed and did so well in the Haverhill public schools she was admitted to Bates College in Maine and became a teacher. (Broder, 1987)

Dukakis himself was raised in a comfortable middle class home; profiles and campaign materials describe him excelling in athletics (brochure: “He ran the Boston marathon in 1951, finishing 57th”) and in school. The candidate is portrayed as a brilliant and ambitious achiever: “Michael was inevitably a teacher’s pet: bright, beautifully
behaved, a natural leader with an adult’s poise and awareness” (Martz, 1988). He went to Swarthmore – working construction to help pay his way, his brochure notes – and then into the Army, “one of the few institutions Michael Dukakis never tried to conquer: he entered and left a private” (Martz)\(^6\) according to Newsweek. He entered Harvard Law, and after graduating, and got into local politics, rising to the Governor’s office.

Dukakis framed himself as the realization of a multi-generational American Dream. The New York Times described him on the stump: “‘This is the American dream, folks,’ says the candidate, his deep, forceful voice sounding as if it came from a man much bigger than Dukakis’s 5-foot-8 and 155 pounds” (Butterfield, 1988). The American Dream can indeed be understood as a generational promise, in which parents work hard to make a better life for their children. Dukakis clearly sought to embody that vision. But his choice to begin his narrative with his parents raises interesting questions about Dukakis’s construction of merit, and that of other candidates who have invoked their parents’ humble roots, including Al Gore, Mitt Romney, and Hillary Clinton. How does Dukakis’s parents’ success reflect on him?

One of the inferences the campaign invited about Dukakis from his parents’ class mobility was that he had absorbed the values and shared the experience of coming from humble roots, even if he had not actually done so. “Discipline was strict. Lots of chores. We always earned our own spending money. Life was comfortable but by no means lavish. And the rule was: No special privileges” (Broder, 1988), Dukakis said of his upbringing.

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\(^6\) One implication of the specification that Dukakis “never tried” is that there is no evidence that he lacked the ability.
Another possible inference, one that the campaign pushed less explicitly but was nevertheless part of the public discussion of the candidate’s background, was that Dukakis’s parents’ incredible success suggested that the candidate had natural talent. The *Washington Post* speculated that part of the explanation for Dukakis was “his genes”: “He is a second generation overachiever” (Broder). Liberal American culture is uncomfortable with familial genetic explanations for success, because the notion of a “blank slate” of human nature allows for the possibility that social change could correct societal ills and build a more equitable country (Pinker, 2004). In Dukakis’s story, there is a gentle suggestion that genetics are real and relevant. The talent Dukakis was understood to have inherited from his parents was not simply brilliance, but *drive*, and an ability to work hard to apply his brilliance. *Newsweek* noted that Dukakis made his high school’s cross-country team “by endless training,” and was “characteristically irked” that the team’s star “got by on talent alone” (Martz).

Dukakis’s story is complicated by a storyline about his brother Stelian, who, multiple outlets reported (Stafford, 1988; Carlson, 1988), was outshone by his younger brother, had a mental breakdown, and at one point distributed leaflets opposing the future presidential candidate’s election before being killed in an auto accident at the age of 42. Stelian of course shared genes with and had experienced a similar upbringing to his brother, and the contrast of the two serves to suggest that *something* about Dukakis’s exceptionality was uniquely the candidate’s – though pushing this line of argument would have been cruel, and neither the campaign nor the media harped on it.
At a basic level, the narrative construction of merit in the case of Michael Dukakis was that he was “a man of uncommon ability, integrity and enlightenment” (Chicago Tribune, 1988), who had gotten that way because of both his natural abilities and the way he was raised. His parents played a prominent role in his rise, but the parental contributions emphasized by Dukakis’s campaign were discipline and example, rather than socioeconomic advantage and opportunity.

There was one other wrinkle to the Dukakis narrative, however. After his quick rise through Massachusetts politics to the governor’s office, Dukakis had been defeated in the Democratic primary in his bid for reelection. He had made many enemies in his first term, according to his campaign, by focusing too much on governance and not enough on public relations. The defeat was devastating for the future presidential candidate, Dukakis and his associates told reporters.

Dukakis was stunned, unable to comprehend the loss. “Michael was grieving,” said Dr. Don Lipsett, a psychiatrist and friend for 25 years. Dukakis called it “the most painful thing that ever happened to me.” (Drogin, 1988)

Dukakis spent one gubernatorial term in the political wilderness, and there, he said, came to understand that he had turned people off. He learned to listen. “I understand a lot better than I did that you’ve got to involve people from the beginning in what you’re doing – legislators, constituency leaders – and if you involve them, you get not only greater commitment but a better product,” he told the Washington Post for a story headlined “Dukakis’s lessons of defeat, victory and growth” (Broder, 1987). For the same story, his wife commented: “Michael is so bright and quick that people used to be intimidated by his skill and intelligence .... I think he began to recognize during that period that he was
out of office that what happened oftentimes was that he stifled the give-and-take in discussion.”

After learning this key lesson, the story went, Dukakis re-took the governor’s office and enjoyed a successful tenure. And although questions about the veracity of this narrative made their way into coverage of the candidate – “some question [Dukakis’s] stubborn insistance (sic) that he learned to be humble,” wrote the *Los Angeles Times* – the story still carries implications for the notion of merit. A factual failure from Dukakis’s past, a potential debit to his merit, was transformed into a narrative asset through the use of a storyline about overcoming adversity. It was acceptable for that adversity to come from within Dukakis so long as Dukakis triumphed over it. The remaining question is whether certain flaws, even once remedied, are more acceptable in redemption narratives than others. As Dukakis’s campaign was at pains to note, in his transformation, “His goals and values did not change, but his tactics did” (Drogin, 1988). Joan Didion, writing about Dukakis, observed that “his tragic flaw, we have read repeatedly, is neither his evident sulkiness at losing that election nor what many since have seen as a rather dissociated self-satisfaction … but the more attractive ‘hubris’” (Didion, 1988).

Dukakis’s opponents in the Democratic primary included Tennessee Senator Al Gore, who stressed in his life story intelligence and integrity, and attempted to point to humble roots that were not really there (“Rather than advertise his prep-school and Harvard education, and a comfortable upbringing in Washington, Sen. Albert Gore stresses summers working tobacco on his father’s farm in Tennessee” (Fineman, 1987a)); Richard Gephardt, who stressed his working class background, and the work ethic and
loyalty to working people he had acquired from it; and Paul Simon, who portrayed himself as a courageous fighter and straight talker who had been unafraid to take on powerful interests.

The candidate who emerged as Dukakis’s main opposition was Jesse Jackson, a minister who had risen to prominence in the civil rights movement. Jackson came from humble roots, and he said so in speeches.

I was not supposed to make it. You see, I was born of a teen-age mother, who was born of a teen-age mother. I understand. I know abandonment, and people being mean to you, and saying you’re nothing and nobody and can never be anything. I understand.

Jackson’s strong rhetorical emphasis in discussing his humble roots was about empathy rather than accomplishment (“I understand”), but of course his story still carried implications of individual merit, evidenced by Jackson’s rise. In terms of meritorious qualities, Jackson primarily stressed how much he cared for working people, the poor, and the downtrodden. His merit, as he portrayed it, was centrally a merit of morality.

The public discourse about Jackson’s journey did not accept so simple an explanation. For one thing, the press pushed back on Jackson’s claims about the circumstances of his birth: “neither the Haynie Street area, where [Jackson] was born, nor the other Greenville neighborhoods he lived in later were what would be called slums, his relatives and childhood friends say today. They remember a comfortable home, better than most, a freezer on the porch and plenty of food around for his visiting friends” (Purnick and Oreskes, 1987).

This is not to say that Jackson’s accomplishment was dismissed. Having a freezer was an insufficient explanation for rising to national political prominence. Instead,
journalists used storylines in which Jackson succeeded because he was wildly talented, selfishly ambitious, and untrustworthy.

Over and over in telling Jackson’s story, more than they did for other candidates, journalists pointed to the candidate’s prodigious innate talent. Profiles spoke of his “gifts” as a communicator (Weisberg, 1987) and his tendency to “arrive moments before air time and ‘wing it’” (Hackett and Springen, 1989); they said he was “a charmer from the start” (Sheehy, 1988) who could “ad lib his way through a sermon” (Purnick and Oreskes); and he had an “enormous innate sense of the media” (Purnick and Oreskes).

These judgments were not made by reporters alone, of course – this was the story they were told by political observers, as well as Jackson’s friends and relatives.

“Jesse was an unusual kind of fella, even when he was just learning to talk,” his father told the *New York Times*. “He would say he’s going to be a preacher. He would say, ‘I’m going to lead people through the rivers of water.’” (Purnick and Oreskes)

The description of Jackson’s gifts was different in tone than descriptions of other candidates’, even the “brilliant” Dukakis. His talent was described as more explosive, reminiscent of portrayals of artists and athletes.

But even this was an insufficient explanation for Jackson’s status. “Everybody knew that only the strivers could overcome segregation and racism,” wrote Gail Sheehy, and so in addition to Jackson’s talent, profiles focused on his ambition. This passage from a profile in *Mother Jones* is illustrative:

No one ever accused the man his friends call “J.J.” of aiming too low. An intractable part of his character, say admirers and detractors alike, is to make the most audacious move; never having run for public office before, in 1984 he made a break for the top position in the land. But a second, equally intractable element of Jackson’s makeup is to labor so single-mindedly, like the aggressive football
player he was in high school, that he sometimes succeeds at incredible goals. (Foster, 1987)

As with Dukakis, a sibling is used as a narrative device to highlight Jackson’s unique qualities. Jackson’s half-brother Noah “had more natural ability,” wrote the New York Times, “but Jesse was motivated” (Purnick and Oreskes). What motivated him, Jackson’s family members explained to both the Times and Vanity Fair, was being born out of wedlock. “I think being born out of wedlock bothered him disproportionately to the way it did anyone else we grew up with. The thing that drives him is a subliminal longing for respect and recognition that he is somebody,” his brother said (Purnick and Oreskes).

Profiles of Jackson highlight his hard work – but a very particular kind of hard work that is centered on the acquisition of attention. Consequently, “Detractors say that [Jackson’s] soaring words are rarely matched by deeds – that he gets the headlines, but does not do the groundwork and organizing that would convert his inspirational vision into solid accomplishment” (Purnick and Oreskes).

This ties to the third key element in narrative explanations of Jackson, the framing of the candidate as untrustworthy. “For years, the rap against Jackson has been his image as a cynical opportunist, willing to do almost anything to get ahead,” wrote Newsweek (Martz et al, 1988). A key anecdote used repeatedly to convey this point was that Jackson had falsely claimed to cradle a dying Martin Luther King in his arms (Martz et al; Alter, 1988; Weisberg, 1987; Shapiro, 1988). He was called “demagogic,” and portrayed as possibly dishonest and unserious in both his oratory and his work. “Though he often says money means little to him, he has achieved a net worth in the neighborhood of $1
million. He calls himself a devoted family man, yet he is hardly ever home,” wrote *Newsweek* (Hackett, 1988).

The noteworthy thing about this element of Jackson narratives is that Jackson’s negative qualities were framed as possible *contributors* to his success. This complicates the relationship between merit, agency, and outcomes: Jackson is said to have succeeded because of his own characteristics, but those characteristics are not all laudable.

Beyond these three elements, race was a theme in coverage of the most successful black presidential candidate in American history to that point. Segregation and discrimination were cited as part of the barrier Jackson had overcome from his youth, though in his political career, the implications of his race were treated as more nuanced. In the Democratic primary, some coverage implied, being black registered as an advantage. *Time* magazine wrote of Dukakis’s “deep reluctance to directly confront Jackson, a black man” (Shapiro, 1988) and George Will declared that “Jackson has had it two ways for too long. He complains that the media treat him as a ‘black candidate.’ Yet he insists that his achievements not be weighed on the same scale that measures the achievements of white candidates” (Will, 1988). There was also an assumption in much coverage, however, that race would work against Jackson should he reach the general election.

From the perspective of merit, then, the Jackson who emerges from biographical coverage in 1988 is a complex figure. Jackson offers himself as proof that “you can make it,” but he seems to mean this in a spiritual sense rather than a meritocratic sense: he does not imply that anyone can reach the higher rungs of American society as he had. Those
covering Jackson likewise saw him as undeniably talented and driven. There is no suggestion, as there was with George Bush, that Jackson was replaceable, an occupant of his position merely because of luck or structural circumstance. But his occupation of that position is questioned in any case, because Jackson may have achieved it through undesirable actions or traits. The story constructed about Jackson in political discourse is, in a way, an indictment of the American political system, a suggestion that it may reward the wrong things.

Like the Republican candidates of 1988, both of the leading contenders for the Democratic nomination saw their merit negotiated through narrative explanations of how they came to occupy their positions, with the candidates and campaigns building stories that placed “positive qualities deserving reward” front and center, and critics asking whether other factors should be considered. The Dukakis and Jackson campaigns themselves did not dissect one another’s biographies to the degree the Bush and Dole campaigns did, but there was a strange class dynamic between the two candidates. Dukakis sought to portray both as structurally disadvantaged, because of their backgrounds, saying he and Jackson were “very proud of each other, actually…and very proud that a couple of guys named Dukakis and Jackson have come this far” (Didion, 1988). Jackson meanwhile described Dukakis coming from a world of privilege in comparison to his own background: “Mike Dukakis’s parents were a doctor and a teacher; my parents a maid, a beautician, and a janitor. There’s a great gap between Brookline, Massachusetts and Haney Street in the Fieldcrest Village housing projects in Greenville, South Carolina,” he said in his Democratic National Convention speech. The
context of the remark was about the coming together of Americans of different backgrounds. But Dukakis had attempted to equate the immigrant experience and the black experience, and draw merit from the equation. Jackson saw things differently.

The general election: “Yes, my parents were prosperous, and their children were lucky. But...”

The Bush campaign’s attacks on Michael Dukakis in the general election of 1988 are the stuff of political legend, and for good reason. Dukakis really did look silly poking out of a tank with a helmet flopping over his face; the Willie Horton ad really violate several ethical boundaries. Bush also attacked Dukakis’s biographical claims of merit directly. Dukakis said that the culmination of his hard work, talent, and redemptive realization was a successful gubernatorial tenure in Massachusetts – it was the earned outcome of his positive efforts and abilities. The Bush campaign argued that a) Dukakis’s tenure was not all that successful, and b) to the extent that it was, it wasn’t because of Dukakis.

Dukakis tried to capsulize his argument about his successes as governor with the term “Massachusetts miracle.” Bush pushed back by referring to the “Massachusetts mirage” (Eichel, 1988), claiming that the Massachusetts economy was in fact weak. This was an effort to problematize Dukakis’ narrative of succeeding due to merit by rejecting the premise that he had succeeded at all. At the same time, Bush’s economic adviser Michael Boskin argued that the Massachusetts turnaround was due to the decisions of
Dukakis’s predecessor and improvements in the national economy under the Reagan administration (Boskin, 1988): “[Dukakis] returned to office in 1983 at a time the national economic recovery – his opposition to the Reagan-Bush Administration recovery program is well-documented – benefited every governor elected in 1982.” This was an effort to offer an alternative explanation for Dukakis’ success: The Bush campaign called Dukakis lucky.

Dukakis’s campaign, meanwhile, sought to draw a biographical contrast between himself and Bush by emphasizing his regular guy-ness, pointing repeatedly to a 25 year-old snowblower that the candidate kept in his garage. The emphasis on Dukakis’s simplicity and frugality was explicitly about connection with the average voter, rather than meritorious achievement. Dan Payne, a Dukakis media consultant, told the New York Times that “Bush hasn’t had the experiences of ordinary citizens” (Toner, 1988). But it carried implications about merit, as the Bush campaign knew, and against which it sought to push back, by pointing at money Dukakis had inherited from his physician father.

[The candidates’] wealth figures in the campaign, because of what Mr. Bush’s aides say is a misperception that the Vice President, who was reared in affluence in New England and later was in the oil business in Texas, is far wealthier than Mr. Dukakis. Mr. Dukakis plays on this perception…. the message gets under the skin of the Bush campaign. “Bush worked like a dog for his money,” said Lee Atwater, the Vice President’s campaign manager. “The reason Dukakis doesn’t care much about money is he didn’t work for it. He inherited it.” (Berke, 1988)

In the end, Bush earned the presidency – or perhaps lucked or cheated his way into it – but not before finding an elegant storyline for dealing with his biographical merit problem in his Republican National Convention speech:
Yes, my parents were prosperous, and their children were lucky. But there were lessons we had to learn about life. John Kennedy discovered poverty when he campaigned in West Virginia; there were children who had no milk. And young Teddy Roosevelt met the new America when he roamed the immigrant streets of New York. And I learned a few things about life in a place called Texas.

And when I was working on this part of the speech, Barbara came in and asked what I was doing, and I looked up and I said, “I’m working hard.” And she said, “Oh, dear, don’t worry. Relax, sit back, take off your shoes and put up your silver foot.”

Now, we moved to west Texas 40 years ago, 40 years ago this year. The war was over, and we wanted to get out and make it on our own. Those were exciting days. We lived in a little shotgun house, one room for the three of us. Worked in the oil business and then started my own.

And in time, we had six children. Moved from the shotgun to a duplex apartment to a house and lived the dream – high-school football on Friday night, Little League, neighborhood barbecue.

Yes, my parents were prosperous, and their children were lucky. But …. In this passage, Bush concedes that he enjoyed an advantage, but mocks the idea that this advantage blinded him to the realities of the world or determined his outcomes. He still struck out on his own, he still worked hard, and he was still the real reason for his own success.

2016

In the years leading up to the 2016 presidential election, both national parties were challenged by insurgent movements from within their bases that questioned the legitimacy, efficacy, and ideology of establishment leaders. What’s more, both party establishments pushed in their respective primaries political legacy candidates. These dynamics made merit and its relationship to status a particularly salient issue in the campaign. The media environment in which this conversation took place was profoundly
different than it had been in 1988, however: The relatively structured and predictable political coverage of large newspapers and magazines and a few networks had given way to the swirling chaos of myriad websites, channels, podcasts, message boards, and social media. Still, as in prior elections, most candidates sought to introduce themselves to voters by relaying their paths to prominence, and these stories became the subject of analysis and debate.

_The Republican Primary:_ “I can’t be doing so badly, because I’m president, and you’re not.”

Perhaps the best, most succinct summary of the candidacy of early Republican frontrunner Jeb Bush came from the satirical news outlet _The Onion_, which in an infographic described Bush’s “Greatest Liability” this way: “O, what fickle hand of fate! ’Tis the very same privileged background that elevated him to such prominence in the first place!” (_The Onion_, 2015).

“Privileged” is of course an understatement. Taking a Princeton Review SAT prep course is a “privilege.” Jeb Bush was a political prince. When it came to establishing his merit and embodying meritocracy, the candidate had a steep hill to climb.

Consequently, the story that Bush and his campaign told about his life took a defensive tone. In his announcement speech and in his lengthy website bio, Bush emphasized striking out on his own, away from his parents, to find his own path – ironically, the same narrative his father had used to establish _his_ merit 28 years earlier.

“Long before the world knew my parents’ names, I knew I was blessed to be their son. And they didn’t mind at all that I found my own path. It led from Texas to Miami by way
of Mexico” (Miller, 2015). Bush described meeting his future wife while on an exchange program, struggling with the price of diapers in Caracas, and starting his own business. About his political career, he spun a Dukakis-esque redemption narrative about an ignominious electoral defeat in 1994, a year when his brother became Governor of Texas and few Republicans lost national races. After losing the gubernatorial election, he learned: “If you really want to solve a problem, take the time to understand it first, and get ready to roll up your sleeves” (“Meet Jeb,” 2016). Bush emphasized thoughtfulness, with an eye toward helping others, as his key meritorious qualities. He went on eventually to become governor, and the implication of his story was that harsh reality had forced him to engage with the world, and only then was he truly rewarded.

The Bush campaign also dealt explicitly with the issue of the candidate’s dynastic name in its campaign website bio, which was written in the candidate’s voice. “I know I’m unique in that I have a brother and a father who have both served this nation as president,” it read. “As I prepare for this job audition, I have thought about their successes and their failures – and learned from them” (“Meet Jeb”). The important point about Bush’s family, this story suggested, was not that it helped him achieve prominence, but that it helped him achieve insight. Recall that meritocracy can be justified on the grounds of either fairness or efficiency: a meritocratic outcome can be right because it is fair, or because it means a job will get done well. Bush’s campaign urged voters to prioritize efficiency. Bush’s advantage, it said, had better prepared him to serve as president, and that was what mattered.
No one really bought it. The Bush campaign failed badly in its efforts to defuse the legacy issue, with Bush’s opponent Donald Trump dubbing him “a spoiled child” and “an embarrassment to the Bush family” (Key, 2015), and journalists framing Bush through the prism of his presidential surname. From Yahoo News: “Try as he might to emphasize that he is his own man and not his father or his older brother, who both served as president, Bush could not shake the echoes of the past as he launched his own run for the White House” (Ward, 2016). From Time: “Jeb Bush has a record of his own as a two-term former Governor and longtime policy geek, so it’s natural he wants [to be] judged on his own merits and ideas. … But the moment was a clear reminder that, yes, this is a Republican family with ties to almost every major powerbroker in the party” (Elliott, 2016). From the New Yorker: “[Bush’s] announcement inevitably renewed questions about the desirability of political dynasties” (MacGillis, 2016).

The “renewed questions” were partly about Bush’s ideological distance from his unpopular brother. They were also about Bush’s merit. A New York magazine profile included a quote from a businessman who said, “I am offended … by people who feel that they’re entitled to something just because of their last name” (Senior, 2015). The conservative Weekly Standard published a forgiving profile that noted, “By all accounts Bush made his money because he was smart, tireless, creative, unflappable, personable, and a Bush” (Ferguson, 2015).

A good deal of this coverage also reflected the Onion’s observation that Bush’s privilege had become a mixed blessing. “Belonging to a political dynasty is supposed to
be a shortcut to power. For Jeb Bush, however, it has become a millstone around the neck” (Smith, 2015), wrote the Guardian.

Numerous people who sounded off in the comment sections of such pieces seemed to accept the premise that Bush was being hampered by his name, and some, unconstrained by the journalistic pretense of withholding judgment, indicated that this was a justifiable outcome for Jeb. “So long as Jeb continued his inability or unwillingness to face the truth of his family's two failed presidencies, he will disqualify himself,” wrote someone under the moniker pAUL52 on New York Magazine’s website (Senior, 2015). Occasionally, commenters argued that the entire Bush line should be discredited because of Jeb Bush’s grandfather Prescott Bush’s alleged business dealings with Nazis.Merit, for a Bush, was a family affair. “Thanks to the Internet, Jeb can NEVER escape his family’s history,” wrote Kenneth S. on Yahoo News (Ward). These indictments were more profound than the critiques offered in the articles themselves. But neither accepted Bush’s narrative reasoning for claiming merit in spite of the advantages he had enjoyed in life.

In September 2015, in response to a question about how his campaign would win over black voters, Bush said the following:

“Our message is one of hope and aspiration. … It isn’t one of division and get in line and we’ll take care of you with free stuff. Our message is one that is uplifting – that says you can achieve earned success.” (Dann, 2015)

The comment was met by a range of responses. The conservative pundit Bill O’Reilly defended Bush by arguing that yes, the Democratic Party promised voters “free stuff” (Media Matters, 2015). A few mainstream commentators argued that the rich actually enjoyed government benefits (Ehrehnfreund, 2015), and others highlighted Bush’s racism
and ahistoricism (Blow, 2015). But in liberal outlets such as MSNBC (Benen, 2015), in many more progressive digital publications such as *Salon* (Walsh, 2015) and *Gawker* (Nolan, 2015), and in comment sections and on social media, people responded to Bush’s gaffe by pointing to his biography and arguing that almost no one had enjoyed more “free stuff” than he.

“He Bush, ultra-wealthy from the moment he was born, standing atop a mountain of stuff he never earned, yells down at the rest of us not to take free stuff,” wrote one commenter on *Raw Story* (Gettys, 2015). Twan Robinson, a union official with the United Steelworkers, tweeted “Jeb Bush has received free stuff his whole life by way of his daddy, yet somehow his own form of affirmative action escapes him” (Robinson, 2015). The musician John Legend tweeted: “It’s always the guys born on 3rd base talking about black people lining up for free stuff” (Legend, 2015). The activist DeRay McKesson, on Larry Wilmore’s *Nightly Show*, argued that Bush “comes from a legacy—he hasn’t earned the stuff he has” (Gettys).

Bush was condemned because he failed to recognize his own advantage, and more broadly because that advantage was understood to be so vast that it had rendered Bush’s individual contributions moot. This version of Bush’s story appears to have been given particular voice in more democratized digital media sources.

The candidates who opposed and in most cases outperformed Bush in the Republican primary spun a variety of different kinds of narratives about their journeys. In speeches and in her website bio, Carly Fiorina summed up her bio with the simple tagline
“Secretary to CEO” called herself a “self-made woman,” emphasized her rise from the bottom rungs of the corporate ladder, and claimed her story was “uniquely American” (“Meet Carly”). She pointed to her work ethic, capacity to make difficult decisions, and willingness to take on entrenched interests as the meritorious qualities that enabled her climb, and identified her gender as a disadvantage she had overcome. This story became the subject of an intriguing dispute: The *Washington Post’s* Factchecker column gave Fiorina “Three Pinnochios” for it, arguing that she had actually enjoyed a very privileged upbringing as the daughter of a Duke Law School Dean. The candidate had attended Stanford and was no Horatio Alger character: “She worked briefly as a secretary in between law school and business school, but she always intended to attend graduate school for her career. … Fiorina uses a familiar, ‘mailroom to boardroom’ trope of upward mobility that the public is familiar with, yet her story is nothing like that,” wrote Michelle Ye Hee Lee (2015). Many commenters objected strongly to the objection. John Sexton of *Breitbart* articulated the opposing view:

> Somehow, Fiorina’s intention to one day attend grad school invalidates her actual start in business. … She certainly went to a great undergraduate school, but her degree was in history and philosophy. It was only after college that Fiorina discovered her aptitude and interest in business. Her rise from there was certainly helped by her attendance at an Ivy League school, but it did not determine her future success. (Sexton, 2015)

Partly the *Post* and *Breitbart* disagreed over whether a fact-checking column should endeavor to adjudicate conjured narratives, or just stick to hard facts. But there was a disagreement here, too, about standards for assigning merit and the use of a storyline that implied great agency. The *Post* concluded that Fiorina had enjoyed “opportunities and options that were unique to Fiorina, not necessarily uniquely American” (Lee and...
Kessler, 2015) – that she was claiming a meritocratic rise, but had not risen on her merits. Sexton did not agree that Fiorina’s advantages disqualified her from making meritocratic claims. He thought she did not deserve the Jeb Bush treatment.

Ben Carson told a redemption story, displaying his merit by overcoming both external and internal disadvantages – poverty and a bad temper – thanks to his loving mother and his own hard work. The difference between the narratives told by Rand Paul and John Kasich, the former the son of a wealthy congressman and the latter the son of a mailman, is a vivid illustration of American politicians’ discomfort with professionally successful parents. Paul leaves his father out of his story, emphasizing his own good deeds as a doctor, while Kasich harps on his dad’s occupation.

Ted Cruz emphasized the role of his immigrant parents in his life, pointing to their experience of adversity as Cuban refugees as the source of his love of liberty and opportunity. But Cruz’s construction of his own merit (he’s a tenacious, principled fighter, and so gets good things done) is not as noteworthy as the response to Cruz from detractors: Biographical examinations of Cruz, particularly on the web, highlighted the fact that he was an asshole.

“He was a smart and talented guy, but completely taken with himself and his own ideas. … He would come to meetings where he wasn’t invited – and wasn’t wanted.” In fact, [a Bush administration] alum recalls, “the quickest way for a meeting to end would be for Ted to come in. People would want out of that meeting. People wouldn’t go to a meeting if they knew he would be there. It was his inability to be part of the team. That’s exactly what he was: a big asshole.” (Corn and Murphy, 2016)
An article in *Wonkette* was titled, “Ted Cruz’s College Years: Portrait of a Young A**hole” (Gray, 2015), and a *New Republic* article “Everybody Hates Ted” (Shephard and Chang, 2016).

Commentators tried to parse what this particular biographical theme meant for Cruz’s merit. Some saw jerkiness as a disadvantage Cruz had overcome: “literally everyone hates him; and yet, he became a U.S. Senator and won whole entire states in a major-party primary campaign for the presidency” (Burneko, 2015). CNN published an opinion piece hooked to Cruz titled “Why ‘jerks’ get ahead” (Drexler, 2016), arguing that actually, jerkiness was an asset. “Disagreeable people,” it said, “are quite excellent at getting their ideas heard.” The *Huffington Post* suggested that being an asshole was a mistake Cruz had made, which might have prevented him from winning the Republican nomination: “Ted Cruz Maybe Should Have Been Less of a Jerk to Everyone” (Linkins, 2016). This was an alternative timeline, an attempt to isolate and identify what Cruz was truly capable of if some variable were altered. But when a commenter on *Deadspin* similarly suggested that Cruz might have done better if he had been nicer, another commenter rejected the hypothetical, replying, “I don’t think he has the capacity.” I explore the dynamics of innate traits in assessments of merit in much more depth in Chapter 5; for now suffice to say that these two commenters disagreed about whether Cruz chose to be an asshole or was doomed to it. Neither commenter’s scenario was flattering to the candidate, but the two constructed his merit differently by taking different positions on Cruz’s responsibility for this behavior.
The characterization of Cruz as an asshole in many ways echoed the critique of Dole’s meanness, but the former seemed to get much more airtime and explicit expression. Standards of civility have ebbed and waned in American politics, and I don’t intend to suggest that the Internet has ushered in an era of unprecedented rancor. But in 2016, with specific regard to discussions of biographical merit, discourse about candidates seemed less deferential about candidates’ status, accomplishments, and their deservingness of them, particularly in the “Wild West” of the digital context where, for example, Ted Cruz’s freshman year college roommate could take to Twitter: “As a freshman, I would get into senior parties because I was Ted’s roommate. OUT OF PITY. He was that widely loathed. It’s his superpower” (Millstein, 2016).

Still, in discourse about Cruz and the other candidates discussed thus far, the central assumption of biographical materials from 1988 held: that the measure of a candidate’s merit would be found in the weighing and negotiation of his or her characteristics, actions, and circumstances. The candidate who laid waste to all these aspirants took a different approach. Donald Trump, it is generally understood, loves to talk about himself. He speaks relentlessly about how great he is and how much he has accomplished – his website bio declares that Trump is “the very definition of the American success story” (DonaldJTrump.com). But Trump does not seem to want to *story* his success. The bio mostly just lists Trump’s victories. His intervention in a Veteran’s Day celebration led to a huge parade and an honor at the Pentagon. Trump’s real estate portfolio is “prestigious” and “award-winning,” and one of his hotels was named the #1 Hotel by *Travel and Leisure* magazine. Trump is “Emmy-nominated” and
The Apprentice was the “number one show on Television, making ratings history and receiving rave reviews and world wide attention.” Trump’s catchphrase, “You’re fired,” is “listed as the third greatest television catchphrase of all time.” Trump has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. At the end, it says that Donald Trump is from Queens.

Absent are Trump’s formative influences, any adversity he’s suffered or lessons he’s learned, any disadvantages he’s overcome or advantages he’s enjoyed, any interaction between individual contribution and circumstance. Absent are alternative timelines that suggest other directions Trump’s life could have taken had circumstances broken differently.

Nor is this merely a characteristic of Trump’s website bio. Lack of attention to the context or process of his success is a theme in Trump’s biographical rhetoric. Trump’s book, Trump: The Art of the Deal, tells a story of Trump learning the real estate business from his father and then striking out on his own, out of Queens and into Manhattan (1987). This is a Bush-esque narrative. Trump also discusses his father when explaining his toughness in his 2015 campaign book, Crippled America: How to Make America Great Again. But the author of Art of the Deal, Tony Schwartz, told The New Yorker that during interviews, “Trump seemed to remember almost nothing of his youth, and made it clear that he was bored” (Mayer, 2016). Indeed, Trump did not push his biographical arguments on the stump, preferring simply to point at outcomes as proof of his merit: money, buildings, ratings, polls. “I’ve made billions of dollars,” he said, citing this as evidence (Shamsian, 2015). He did not literally point at a pile of cash he was born on and
bellow that he was a winner, as the quote at the top of this chapter suggests. But he came close.

When asked to account for his success, the explanation Trump often offers does not delve into his story. He says his superiority is genetic. “You have to have the winning gene,” he has said. “I have great genes and all that stuff”; “I always said winning is somewhat, maybe, innate” (Huffington Post). Even hard work, that revered American value, is not an especially important part of Trump’s narrative – much less important than talent (D’Antonio, 2015a).

For Trump, success is simple, almost pre-ordained. His story is “Donald Trump succeeds.” Outcomes speak for themselves, and there’s no need to recap the game when you can just point at the scoreboard. The quote that mostly neatly captures his worldview came after the election, when President Trump ended an interview with Time magazine by saying, “I can’t be doing so badly, because I’m president, and you’re not” (Scherer, 2017).

Critics and opponents in the primary tried a number of different narrative explanations to knock down Trump’s claims of obvious merit. Some pointed to his privileged upbringing, and contended Trump hadn’t made it on his own (“Had he not come from New Money, where, oh where might he have landed, without his phonied-up bragging rights? I’m guessing used car sales” wrote a commenter on an excerpt from a biography of Trump published on Politico (D’Antonio, 2015b)). Some claimed Trump had not actually been successful, pointing to his bankruptcies as evidence of failure, or arguing as a piece in Vox did that “Trump would’ve been a billionaire even if he’d never
had a career in real estate, and had instead thrown his father’s inheritance into [an] index fund that tracked the market” (Matthews, 2016).

Finally, a story was told about Trump, reminiscent of one told about Jesse Jackson, in which he has some qualities that contributed to his success, but they aren’t actually admirable qualities. David Plotz, on the Slate Political Gabfest podcast, gave voice to the tenor of these critiques in an exchange during which he insisted Trump was not intelligent, but might have some “lizard brain” aptitude. Trump is good at getting attention for himself, such stories concede, or good at pulling cons and selling things to idiots. But though Trump is granted agency in his outcomes, he is not granted merit, because his relevant qualities aren’t positive. Such stories also portray American meritocracy as flawed, at least in this instance, because it rewards the wrong things.

In the face of such dissent Trump pushed his extremely simple proposition: I am winning, therefore I must be good. He defined merit as intelligence, broadly construed, and a generalized predisposition toward winning. And he took for granted that his outcomes were proof he had plenty of merit.

The Democratic primary: “Don’t we want somebody who has at least achieved something on their own...?”

The 2016 Democratic primary initially looked as close as a presidential primary comes to being a fait accompli without an incumbent being involved. Hillary Clinton had the money, the endorsements, and the name recognition. Having been first lady for eight years, a senator, a frontrunning presidential candidate in 2008, and secretary of state,
Clinton probably did not need to introduce herself to the electorate. But she followed political convention and did so anyway, in a website bio (Clinton website bio), in advertisements, in stump speeches, and in a biographical video called “The Story of Her.” Clinton’s version of the American Dream narrative echoed Dukakis’s: she invoked the bootstrap stories of her parents. Her father “worked hard and wasted nothing.” Her mother, Clinton said in her first TV ad of the 2016 cycle “was abandoned by her parents at the age of eight,” but received the help and kindness of others, including a caring teacher, and ultimately provided a loving home to her own family (“Dorothy,” 2015). Her mother’s story, Clinton said, made the candidate want to work as a champion for those in need.

Clinton’s own youth is depicted as stable, wholesome, and average – advantageous, but reasonably so. She grew up in a middle class home, attended public schools, was a girl scout, and developed a “lifelong passion for social justice” when her youth minister took her to see Martin Luther King, Jr. speak. She displayed early promise by being selected as the first ever student speaker at Wellesley’s commencement, and by becoming one of only 27 women in her graduating class from Yale Law School. With this last observation, Clinton touches on the biographical theme of gender as a disadvantage, a theme that would be emphasized by some of her supporters and rejected by detractors.

“After law school,” Clinton’s bio reads, “Hillary could have taken a high-paying job in Washington or New York. But instead, she went to work for the Children’s Defense Fund.” The candidate’s morality is highlighted with an alternative timeline.
Clinton is shown spending her professional life fighting for good causes. Her career is marked by many successes, but also a couple of major defeats, after which Clinton gets up, dusts herself off, tries again, and succeeds, for example by following the failure of National Health Care Reform with the creation of the Children’s Health Insurance Program, and following her 2008 presidential defeat with a successful tenure as secretary of state.

Merit, in Clinton’s construction, meant using wholesome advantages and innate talent for good, working hard on behalf of others, and, crucially, persistence. Clinton is portrayed as a worker, less talented but more dogged than her husband and former rival Barack Obama. Unlike Jeb Bush and Michael Dukakis, Clinton does not bounce back from failure through a major transformation of her approach, but by putting her nose back to the same grindstone. For her, figuring out the correct orientation toward an issue is not a challenge. Getting things done is a challenge. She uses storylines in which positive qualities and effort are rewarded, but only over time, after persistence is applied.

Though Clinton, like Bush, was part of a presidential family, Clinton’s campaign did not go through the contortions of the Bush campaign to explain away the advantages that may have accrued from that status.7 Her marriage to Bill Clinton and his election as president are mentioned in Clinton’s biographical materials, but no attempt is made to defuse any potential implication that Clinton had not earned her position.

Which is not to say that others didn’t raise the issue – among the arguments made by Clinton’s opponents and critics was that she had ridden her husband’s coattails to

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7 The campaign did struggle with the record of the Bill Clinton administration, but this is a separate issue.
prominence “She has done nothing right, save possibly marrying Bill.” wrote one commenter on a Breitbart story about Clinton’s record (Swoyer, 2015). The biographical argument that gained traction against Clinton in the primary, however, was not that she had inherited her position. It was how she had used that position, and to some extent the fact that she had held a position of power at all.

Clinton’s main challenger in the Democratic primary was Bernie Sanders, a populist from Vermont. Sanders did not want to tell his story. From the New Yorker:

When I asked Sanders a question about his early years, he sighed with the air of a man who knows he can no longer put off that visit to the periodontist. “I understand,” he said. “I really do. For people to elect a President, you’ve got to know that person – you’ve got to trust them.” He insisted that he was happy to talk about his life. But he couldn’t resist sermonizing first: “When I talk about a political revolution, what I’m talking about is how we create millions of decent-paying jobs, how we reduce youth unemployment, how we join the rest of the world, major countries, in having paid family and sick leave. I know those issues are not quite as important as my personal life.” And then, unnecessarily: “I’m being facetious.” (Talbot, 2015)

Initially, Sanders’ website contained only the most rudimentary biographical information. Eventually it was updated to include an “interactive timeline” (Sanders timeline). The story Sanders told, there and when asked in interviews, begins with humble roots, in an immigrant family with little money or education. His father, he said, “didn’t speak English, yet managed to send me and my brother to college.” From there, Sanders reveals his good core values, as a Congress of Racial Equality officer and SNCC organizer (he too highlights hearing Martin Luther King Jr. speak). When he launches his political career, he experiences little initial success, and indeed his timeline luxuriates in his low shares of the vote – 2 percent, 1 percent, 4 percent, 6 percent. But he keeps at it, and “in a stunning upset” wins the mayoral race in Burlington, Vermont. He proves competent in
elected office, establishing the Burlington Community Land Trust, and advances to national office. Then the timeline shifts, and focuses less on Sanders’ competence (though he still gets things done occasionally) and more on his judgment.

Over and over in the timeline, Sanders is right (by his standards), others are wrong, no one listens to him, and bad things follow. He opposes the first Gulf War, stating “I have a real fear that the region is not going to be more peaceful or more stable.” He opposes NAFTA. He opposes the Defense of Marriage Act. He votes against deregulation of the financial industry that he says led to the crash of 2008. He votes against the Patriot Act and the second war in Iraq. All of these measures pass. Sanders passes an amendment to prevent the government from obtaining library records on Americans, but the amendment is removed in “backroom negotiations.” He gives an eight-hour, “filibuster-like” speech opposing an extension of Bush-era tax cuts. Where Clinton treats being on the right side of an issue as a fairly straightforward prerequisite for meritorious behavior, Sanders treats it as the crucial variable.

Politicians have of course highlighted opposition to decisions that proved unpopular (or disastrous) before – Barack Obama in 2008 made much of his 2003 opposition to the war in Iraq. Like Obama, Sanders was working to juxtapose his record with Hillary Clinton’s, and so wanted to note instances in which they had disagreed and history appeared to prove him right, at least in the opinion of the Democratic electorate. But it is striking how much Sanders’ narrative is crafted around repeated failures, and this narrative choice constructs a different relationship between merit and outcomes than have most other campaigns. Though Sanders does connect his own positive outcomes to
individual qualities such as persistence, his story gives little implicit credence to the notion that accomplishments reflect effort and abilities. How could they, if Sanders repeatedly made the correct decisions and nothing good happened?

This dynamic illuminates one of the reasons that Sanders proved such a confounding foil for Clinton during the primary. In Clinton’s story, Clinton sometimes failed, so her construction of merit allowed for the possibility that meritorious effort might lead to bad outcomes. But her failures were mitigated by subsequent success, and generally her professional advancement is treated as evidence of meritorious performance. To some extent, Sanders’ rejection of this premise was a classic outsider candidate’s dismissal of an insider’s credentials. But the rejection in Sanders’ case was more profound: Sanders offered himself as living proof that Clinton’s accomplishments were empty – he undermined the “good reasons” for her merit. The disconnect between the two candidates and their supporters on this matter helps explain why Clinton’s campaign was so enraged by Sanders’ claim that Clinton was “not qualified” to be president (Trudo and Gass, 2016): it undermined one of the campaign’s central assumptions about the candidate, that she was obviously qualified by virtue of her relevant experience. For Sanders, achievement was not proof of merit, and perhaps even suspect, given the state of American governance.

Journalists and commentators, for their part, did seek to process Sanders through a meritocratic lens. Profiles in mainstream and liberal outlets tried to explain why he had risen to the station of senator, insisting that there must be some reason: one friend told the New Yorker that unlike other lefties, Sanders “wants to win” (Talbot); Politico found that
Sanders “loved to campaign” and did so “tirelessly” (Kruse, 2015); *New York Magazine* argued that Sanders is “as savvy and hard-nosed a politician as you’ll find,” and asserted that “He couldn’t have come through those early face-offs with the 100 would-be Bernies back in Burlington without a high percentage of cold-bloodedness” (Jacobson, 2014), though *Bloomberg* declared that he lacked other political gifts: “As a gauge of his natural charisma, he came in last of three candidates when running for president of James Madison High School in Brooklyn” (Stein, 2016).

Some in the conservative press, meanwhile, evaluated Sanders’ early professional life, during which he had bounced from one low-paying job to another, and at one point collected unemployment:

Sanders was essentially a failure for all of his early adult life. You don’t expect people working primarily on charitable or activist work to be joining the ranks of billionaires, but Sanders didn’t even keep his own markers covered. … he never really earned a steady paycheck until he was in his forties and even then it was from the government when he was finally elected mayor. Before that he ran up debts, failed to pay his own utility bills and was known for being perpetually broke…. To be clear, I’m not saying that having joined the billionaire boys’ club is a requirement to occupy the Oval Office, but don’t we want somebody who has at least achieved something on their own…? (*Investors Business Daily*, 2016)

In comments sections and social media, Americans debated whether Sanders’ time making little income was evidence of his authenticity and commitment, or an indictment of his character. Some commenters seemed particularly bothered that Sanders lived marginally despite having gone to an elite school (the University of Chicago), and argued that this meant he had been poor by choice. The word “bum” was used a lot.

Sanders’ conservative critics were comfortable treating his electoral successes as irrelevant to an assessment of his merit. For them, the real world of the private sector, not political and electoral outcomes, took one’s true meritocratic measure. Of course Sanders
did not face this particular criticism from Clinton in the Democratic primary. But Clinton’s trouble with the implication that success might be disconnected from merit would become an issue in the general election.

*General election: “Look, I’ll be honest, she has no natural talent to be president”*

Donald Trump treated his own accomplishments in life as *prima facie* evidence of merit, but did not display the same generosity of spirit in his analysis of Hillary Clinton. Trump and conservatives in general told a story in which Clinton occupied a prominent position in American life because of her membership in something akin to a criminal syndicate.

This framing of Clinton’s narrative was evident in Trump’s labeling of Clinton as “crooked” and the system from which she benefitted as “rigged.” It could also be seen in discourse about Clinton in conservative media, on social media, and in comment sections of articles about Clinton. At every step of her journey, Clinton’s critics alleged, she lied and cheated in order to advance. “Remember cattle futures? Travelgate? Whitewater? Rose Law Firm billing records? Vince Foster? Monicagate? The ‘reset’ with Russia? Benghazi? Private email server? And I’m sure I’m forgetting a few. Everything Hillary touches either becomes corrupt or more corrupt” (Swoyer, 2015) wrote a commenter named CaptainSensible50 on *Breitbart* in a representative if unusually thorough remark.

Clinton had risen by breaking rules, conservatives said, and once in power she and her compatriots had fixed the entire system so that they could continue to succeed without merit. As some Trump critics said of Trump, they believed Clinton had negative
characteristics that were correlated to success. But they did not believe she would succeed in a properly functioning system. She had to break rules or pervert the basic functioning of capitalism and democracy.

Conservative critics also flipped Clinton’s narrative of overcoming the disadvantage of her gender on its head, and framed it as an unfair advantage she had exploited. On the *O’Reilly Factor*, Karl Rove claimed Clinton often succeeded when she “made herself a victim” (Media Matters, 2016). Trump accused Clinton of playing “the women’s card,” saying “she has got nothing else going on” (Media Matters, 2016).

Indeed, Trump’s verdict on Clinton was that she had “no natural talent” (Vitali, 2016), a profound condemnation given Trump’s belief that talent should and did, under normal circumstances, determine all. When Trump attacked Clinton’s long political record, claiming she had been in politics for 30 years and gotten nothing done, Clinton responded in part by recasting her years in government as evidence of her devotion to positive causes, and framing her victories as evidence of merit. “Sixty-seven percent of the people voted to re-elect me when I ran for my second term” (Transcript of the Second Debate, 2016) she said when Trump said she had gotten nothing done in upstate New York. Of course, 67 percent isn’t so impressive to those who claim the electoral system is rigged.

Regarding his own biography, Trump offered more token nods to conventional narrative standards in the general election, saying in his Republican National Convention speech that he learned from his father “to respect the dignity of work and the dignity of working people.” A biographical video played at the convention offered a cursory
treatment of Trump’s journey to success, mentioning that Trump “learned the building business at his father’s side” (Trump Convention Biography) in the middle of a list of Trump accomplishments. These are recognizable storylines for navigating the relationship between internal and external factors in life outcomes. But even these narrative explanations of Trump’s success were brief, and simple. “After college, Donald faced a decision. Join his father in Queens, or dream big, and make it in the greatest city in the world. The decision was easy” (Trump Convention Biography).

The Clinton campaign called Trump a fraud, alleging he had cheated people out of money. They argued that making a lot of money was not evidence of merit in the political context, because it showed no ability to accomplish things for the benefit of others. On the debate stage, Clinton also tried to call Trump out on his privileged background and head start in business. “Donald was very fortunate in his life, and that’s all to his benefit. He started his business with $14 million, borrowed from his father, and he really believes that the more you help wealthy people, the better off we’ll be and that everything will work out from there” (Transcript of the First Debate) she said, critiquing Trump’s policies and his empathy for working people, but anchoring them with a dig at Trump’s biographical merit. Trump’s response: “My father gave me a very small loan in 1975, and I built it into a company that’s worth many, many billions of dollars, with some of the greatest assets in the world, and I say that only because that’s the kind of thinking that our country needs” (Transcript of the First Debate).

Trump engages briefly with the question of whether his father’s help constituted an unreasonable advantage. Then he moves on, dismissing the attack and pointing at his
pile of cash. His company is worth “many, many billions of dollars.” What more did anyone need to know?

“We’ve all done great things or we wouldn’t be on this stage”

During a Republican primary debate in September of 2015, former Governor of Arkansas Mike Huckabee made the following observation:

I’ve been listening to everybody on the stage and there is a lot of back and forth about ‘I’m the only one who has done this, the only one who has done that, I’ve done great things.’

We’ve all done great things or we wouldn’t be on this stage. (Transcript of the Second Republican Debate)

This has not proven to be a consensus view in presidential politics. Rather, American political discourse constructs and assesses candidates’ merit using narratives that seek to explain a candidate’s rise, taking into account factors that could lead to unmeritocratic outcomes.

The “positive qualities deserving of reward” that candidates and campaigns seek to claim in these narratives – the “merit” they treat as relevant to the presidency – include talents and abilities such as leadership and problem-solving; a propensity for hard work; integrity and a commitment to principles; morality and empathy; persistence; and good judgment and decision-making. In most cases, campaigns suggest that meritorious attributes and actions did in fact lead to their candidates’ success, though occasionally an attribute such as integrity may be treated as a practical handicap.

But before a meritocratic story can be told, a few questions can be asked. The first relates to advantages and disadvantages experienced by the candidate. The area of
advantage or disadvantage addressed most frequently in this sample – and, I think it’s safe to say, in American political discourse – is the socioeconomic class of one’s birth. Candidates from humble roots point to those roots as evidence of individual achievement, and those who were raised with substantial resources avoid saying so, or argue that this experience does not compromise their merit, while their opponents often claim that it does. It is not always clear if the objection is to the candidate acquiring desirable opportunities due to privilege, or simply being lifted to an undeserved high station. In either case, disputes over socioeconomic advantage often turn on whether the advantage was an *unreasonable* one. Hillary Clinton, for example, was comfortable explaining that she came from a stable middle-class home, and was not attacked as privileged for having done so.

Other kinds of experiences function as advantages or disadvantages in these narratives as well. But most don’t *need* to be dealt with quite in the way that class does, because none are understood to be connected to professional outcomes as clearly as class.⁸ No tall candidate is compelled to explain why his height is not responsible for his success, for example, despite the fact that tall candidates have enjoyed considerable historic advantages; no white candidate tries to explain away this privilege. Some kinds of advantages, such as the aforementioned experience of having loving parents, don’t register as a potential debit to merit at all.

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⁸ Race and gender appear to become issues for non-white and female candidates, respectively, sometimes as perceived advantages that redound to merit (i.e. Clinton being accused of playing the “woman card” and Barack Obama being treated as an affirmative action case), but the data on these dynamics in this sample are limited.
It is worth recalling the common argument that American culture’s treatment of class is propagandistic of meritocracy – that our culture’s stories suggest anyone can make it, regardless of the class he or she starts in. Our clichés do indeed indicate this. But while some candidates’ stories suggest that it is possible to follow a Horatio Alger path, it is also important to recognize that they treat such trajectories as an impressive accomplishment, an overcoming of odds, while coming from wealth is understood to be a considerable advantage. American political culture does reflect the imperfection of meritocracy in this regard, if not the statistical reality that dramatic mobility is highly unlikely.

In addition to accounting for advantages and disadvantages, campaigns, opponents, and journalists assess whether a candidate behaved honorably to reach his or her station (as in the case of Hillary Clinton), whether the qualities that enabled the candidate to succeed were actually positives (as in the case of Jesse Jackson and Donald Trump), whether the candidate’s actions are actually related to his or her success (as in the case of Michael Dukakis), and whether the candidate actually succeeded (as in the case of Bernie Sanders).

Merit is articulated and assessed through the narrative negotiation of meritorious attributes and these potential confounds (as well as other external factors), with the “good reasons” of narrative rationality deployed and developed along the way. These are the culturally recognizable storylines that explain and justify outcomes, such as the privileged son striking out on his own, the flawed leader having undesirable characteristics extinguished by a redemptive journey, the talent-less hack getting lucky,
the gifted orator pursuing his own glory. Other “good reasons” are standards for assessing merit, such as the aforementioned reasonable/unreasonable advantage.

Meritocracy, of course, is implicated in this process. It is actually rather astounding how often mainstream American political actors reject meritocratic premises by arguing that an opponent doesn’t deserve his or her station. In 2016, in the democratized digital context and the accompanying cultural crisis in acceptance of meritocracy, I would argue that these objections to candidates’ merit grew more profound and more complete than in the recent past, as commentators became more open about publicly rejecting the idea that candidates whom they opposed had earned their high stations.

But we should not understand this trend of aggressive dissent about individual candidates’ biographical merit as the rise of a new counter-narrative to a master narrative of self-made men or functioning meritocracy. Recall that master narratives are structures of understanding that may be uncomfortable to dispute. The self-made person is an American ideal, but it is not now, nor has it been for a long time, uncomfortable for American political discussants to suggest that a candidate’s successes are due to some factor other than his or her individual merit. Better to understand the American master narrative of merit as the notion that an assessment of a candidate’s merit in relation to his outcomes is relevant and feasible, if appropriately contextualized in a coherent narrative. Almost all the campaigns examined in this chapter accepted this premise – with two exceptions.
The first exception is Bernie Sanders. Sanders’ resistance to telling his own story, and his willingness when he finally did so to focus on many instances when he displayed merit and no good came of it, marks a dissent from the consensus of meritocratic ideology more profound than alleging that one’s opponent has cheated his way to the top, or lucked into it. He exhibits a sort of radical acceptance of the doubts about meritocracy evident elsewhere in 2016 discourse. In Sanders’ story, merit is systematically disconnected from outcomes. There is little point to the narrative endeavor.

The second exception is Donald Trump. Trump does not see his own merit as disconnected from outcomes – he sees the two as intimately linked. But he feels no need to contextualize, to explain. He ignores these requirements of the master narrative.

In the past few years, the American left has become deeply aware of privilege and inequality, and the right distrustful of undeserving elites. Now along come an outsider candidate who tells a story in which merit is not reflected, and an outsider president in which it is profoundly, obviously, simply reflected.

A potential explanation for this timing is that Sanders represents a left-wing disenchantment with meritocratic ideology, and Trump a backlash against those critiques: He gives voice to voters tired of hearing that they didn’t earn what they have. In Sanders’ case this is perhaps true. But complicating this picture is the fact that while Trump portrays his own success as deserved, he tells his supporters the game is “rigged” against them. Trump has been able to control his own fate because of superior genes, he says, but the rest of us need a better system. Nor is Trump’s deviation explained by the fact that he hails from the world of business. The narratives told about American entrepreneurs,
which we examine in Chapter 6, do not typically share the key dissenting properties of Trump’s story.

What Trump is promoting is a sentiment that has previously been very rare in American public culture: skepticism not only about whether we live in a meritocracy, but whether it is really important to work toward that ideal. Rather than grapple with the roles of luck and merit in his life, thereby acknowledging the importance of values like equal opportunity and self-determination, Trump says what really matters is picking the guy who is so naturally great, he can make your life great for you.

Consider again the quote from the start of this chapter about Ted Cruz:

Ted Cruz believes, man. Holy shit does he ever. Enough to bundle all his horror up into more-or-less plausible human form and ooze his way within sight of the most powerful elected office on Earth. He is the truest of believers. And the right stiff-armed him in favor of a big orange inheritance baby. Not a more conventional, middle-of-the-road candidate, but a great big combed-over shit-for-brains whose platform begins and ends with him pointing down at the pile of cash he landed on at birth and bellowing, “I’m a winner.” I’m laughing my ass off.

The quote is from Deadspin, a digital, new media outlet which, like Trump and Bernie Sanders, comes from the edges of American political discourse, but has pushed toward mainstream prominence. Deadspin doesn’t like Ted Cruz. But when Cruz embraces the mythology of the self-made man as a means of lionizing himself, Deadspin’s Albert Burneko doesn’t engage and argue about Cruz’s specific advantages or actions – he doesn’t debate Cruz’s narrative. Instead, he just kind of laughs off the premise. It is not necessary here to knock down Cruz’s meritocratic achievement in order to knock down Cruz. Like Trump and Sanders, Burneko sees grappling over merit as beside the point.

This is the counter-narrative of merit in American political culture that is slowly gaining
steam: that trying to figure out how someone’s merit fits into his accomplishments is kind of silly.
Chapter 5

“They knew how to try”: Do star athletes deserve stardom?

Babe Ruth was an icon of American meritocracy. When the first great baseball slugger forever changed America’s pastime in the early part of the 20th century by effectively inventing the home run, journalists and marketers celebrated not just his feats on the field, but his rise from humble origins to financial success by dint of his own efforts and abilities – just a man and his bat, conquering the world. The 1920 movie Heading Home, a fictionalized account of Ruth’s life, depicts Ruth rejected by his hometown team and forced to make it on his own. “The greatest thing about this country is the wonderful fact that it doesn’t matter which side of the tracks you were born on, or whether you’re homeless or homely or friendless,” Ruth declared. “The chance is still there. I know” (quoted in Rader, 2008, 130).

Ruth is also an icon of critiques of meritocratic ideology. “Ruth’s rise from the streets of Baltimore to the ballparks of New York was an Horatio Alger story, a blueprint for American success,” writes Trimble (1996, 45), arguing that “Ruth came to symbolize the dream of new twentieth-century America. He was the self-made man of courage, individualism, and humility that came to represent the best our society had to offer” (54). Rader makes the same point: “Ruth was living proof that the lone individual could still rise from mean, vulgar beginnings to fame and fortune, to a position of public recognition equalled by few men in American history” (2008, 130).

Athletes in general have been identified by cultural critics as common and effective vehicles for the promotion of American meritocracy. Sports, sports media and
sports culture serve as a “socializer of dominant values” (Lipsky, 1981, in Jhally, 1989) and even some analysts who have emphasized an awareness that audiences do not receive messages passively (those looking at sports through the cultural studies-inflected lens of dialectics and negotiation) have hypothesized that the sporting arena may not have been, at least in the 1980s, “a major area of cultural contestation” (Critcher, 1986). Key among the dominant values sport culture promotes is the notion that success is earned. “As a meritocracy based on skill,” Birrell writes, sport “quietly reaffirms our national commonsense: individuals who work hard and possess the right stuff will always prevail” (1989, 213). Serazio echoes this thought: “No other form of pop escapism so consistently embeds a narrative that explains achievement in terms of meritocracy. Winners succeed, sports tell us, because they work hard” (2017).

The lesson that winners “must have risen to the top through fair means and thus deserve their position,” Birrell contends, is “insidious.” Crosson (2014), in an analysis of how the American Dream was affirmed in mediated promotions of Ruth and Michael Jordan, argues that the frequent focus he finds on hard work in sport narratives “has sociological implications. By foregrounding the importance of hard work, such representations as these featuring Jordan assure those who lack such talents – the vast majority of people – that they too can succeed. Sport has the unique ability to on the one hand elevate a small number of exceptionally talented individuals while suggesting that the success they enjoy is available to all through hard work and perseverance.” He cites Giulianotti: “The cultural illusion is fostered that, one day, the ‘ordinary but special’
individual consumer may realize his or her unique qualities, and join the ever-changing pantheon of celebrities" (1999, 118-19).

But this important phenomenon warrants further interrogation. For one thing, it is worth asking how precisely athletes’ lives are culturally constructed to convey the impression that they have achieved their stations through merit. For another, it is plausible that these constructions are changing in the contemporary context. The case that sports are not a site of major cultural contestation, however true it may have been in the 1980s, has not always been true (think of John Carlos and Tommie Smith raising their fists in a black power salute at the 1968 Olympics, or Muhammad Ali going to prison for his refusal to participate in the Vietnam War), and is ridiculous on its face now, in the era of quarterback Colin Kaepernick taking a knee during the national anthem and Lebron James wearing an “I Can’t Breathe” t-shirt during warmups. In the contemporary moment in particular, sportswriting has become an almost universally liberal profession, given to questioning the big business of sports and integrating ideas about race, class, gender, and labor into coverage (Curtis, 2017).

I will not further disturb the ghost of the Bambino in this chapter. Instead, I will examine mediated discourse about a diverse set of star athletes from the Reagan-Bush era, a heyday of meritocratic ideology, and today. From the 1980s and 1990s, I examine coverage of the biographies of Michael Jordan, Don Mattingly, Steffi Graf, Jackie Joyner-Kersee, Larry Bird, and Mike Tyson. From the Obama-Trump era, I look at coverage of Lebron James, Mike Trout, Serena Williams, Katie Ledecky, Stephen Curry, and Conor McGregor. These athletes come from a diverse set of backgrounds and
represent several major sports, but share in common undeniable superstardom. For each athlete, I examined at least one and usually several journalistic profiles, as well as in some cases promotional materials focused on the athlete’s biography.

Our stories about athletes are woven to highlight the qualities that help them succeed besides their physical “gifts,” then link those qualities to deservingsness and merit, using narrative tools such as storylines exploring how an athlete struggled to acquire or express his or her ability, and whether the key qualities are truly the athlete’s own. Ultimately, we want to know if athletes are worthy of their gifts – though our criterion for this assessment have inconsistencies and contradictions that make it a muddled concept.

As with the discourse on politicians’ lives, there are signs in these stories that some doubt about our construction of merit is creeping into contemporary culture. Before delving into any of this, however, we need to consider how stories about sports stars differ from those about other idols of meritocracy, because they propose to answer a different implicit question.

Replacing Serena: The unique properties of athlete narratives

It would not be regarded as absurd to suggest that someone, somewhere would have been equally as good as or better than Hillary Clinton at being Secretary of State between 2009 and 2013. I don’t intend this observation as a commentary on Clinton. A great deal of American political discourse revolves around the participants’ theoretical replaceability, the notion that someone else could and should occupy their positions.
Because the work of political leaders is so amorphous, the relevant skill sets so diverse, and the relationship between inputs and outcomes so unclear, such suggestions are at least potentially credible. The same goes for business leaders, entertainers, and most of the rest of us. There is at least somebody, and perhaps a lot of somebodies, who could hypothetically step in and occupy our roles as well as we do. Many people in enviable positions need to wrestle with this question if they wish to make a case for their own meritocratic accomplishments: Should someone else be in your place?

Sports stars are different. Serena Williams is obviously not replaceable with literally any other human on the planet, and we know this for a fact because the entire apparatus of professional tennis is geared toward proving or disproving it. If Williams were replaceable as the most successful tennis player ever, someone would replace her; they try regularly. A clear sense of status and hierarchy is a bit harder to attain for athletes who play team sports, and basketball fans indeed debate whether James Harden would score as many points per game as Russell Westbrook if the context of his team allowed or encouraged him to do so. But this confusion exists only on the margins; Harden is very clearly not replaceable as an NBA star. If he were, someone else would have his job.

One implication of this dynamic is that we generally accept that athletes do in fact have exceptional individual qualities that are the causes of their outcomes. But the absence of a replaceability question does not mean that there is no merit question to be grappled with when it comes to sports stars. Recall Simon’s (1974) principle of agency:
We deserve X (on grounds of merit) on the basis of Z only if Z is the result of the exercise of some quality of ours, and possession of that quality is not caused by factors beyond our control. (497)

This is the Shaquille O’Neal problem. O’Neal, in his playing days, was 7’1 and 325 pounds of muscle, with extraordinary coordination for a human of that size. The cause of Shaq’s success was clearly, in some sense, Shaq. But it was not clear to many observers that Shaq had done anything to earn it.

The performative context of athlete profiles and dialogue about them is different from the context of the presidential biographies examined the previous chapter, and not only when the format or medium differs – though it is important to note that this chapter relies much more on the stories told by journalists than those woven by the subjects themselves or their paid boosters. Even more crucially, our cultural preoccupations when we try to understand athletes are different. We don’t ask whether they are in the right position, but why, and whether they deserve to be there. The materials examined in this chapter typically answer this last question in the affirmative. The more complex issue is how they create the impression that star athletes deserve their stardom.

“The most convenient explanation would be purely physical”: Assessing an athlete’s most obvious assets

The quote above is from a 1988 profile of the track and field star Jackie Joyner-Kersee (Morgenstern). The author goes on:

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9 Though the dynamics of access and “exclusives” in celebrity journalism sometimes blur this line.
It’s tempting to wonder if a body like Joyner-Kersee’s is equipped with mutated muscles, natural Teflon in the joints or extra-high-octane endorphins that give the whole organism a special kick.

Seeing her up close for the first time doesn’t dispel such thoughts entirely. She’s just driven from her home in Long Beach, Calif., to work out with her physical therapist in Santa Monica, and standing there in a bright blue U.C.L.A. track suit, she is one impressive woman. Height: 5 feet 10 inches, weight 147 pounds. Body fat a minuscule 6 percent, muscles (sprinter-jumper type, with a predominance of fast-twitch fibers) vivid and smooth beneath beautiful dark brown skin.

Michael Jordan is similarly treated as a physical marvel bordering on the miraculous:

Breathes there a human anywhere who can float longer than the 23-year-old, 6’6”, 200-pound Jordan? Someday an updraft will catch him in midglide, or Tinker Bell herself will sprinkle him with fairy dust, and he will waft on over the basket and up into the wires and lights of an NBA arena like a raptor soaring into the clouds. (Telander, 1986)

More common than this kind of florid language are matter-of-fact descriptions of the particular physical capacities deemed relevant to an athlete’s performance. Mike Trout is perhaps the best baseball player alive today; his “home runs come from his natural strength; the batting average comes from his remarkable speed” (Miller, 2012). Don Mattingly, who was regarded as the best baseball player in the world for a few years in the 1980s, “has an exceptionally quick first step for both defense and baserunning. He couldn’t have only 10 more strikeouts (76) than homers (66) the last two years without great hand-eye coordination and bat speed” (Gammons, 1986). Mike Tyson, as a child, was “big for his age, with enormous natural power” (Nack, 1986).

In the case of an occasional athlete, discourse focuses more on physical limitations than assets. To read coverage of basketball great Larry Bird, you would think he was overweight and club-footed. “Bird looks like a soft, fleshy adolescent. He is slow as NBA players go, and in the words of an NBA scout – not the only one who thought
Bird would be a mediocre pro – he suffers from ‘white man’s disease.’ That is, he can’t jump” (Papanek, 1981). The theme of whiteness as a physical disadvantage comes up more than once in coverage of Bird: “Lightning-quick black athletes—such as Alvin Robertson, Clyde Drexler, Maurice Cheeks, Isiah Thomas—are the league leaders in steals...except for Bird” (McCallum, 1986). Indeed the framing of black athletes as extraordinarily athletic in comparison to white ones is a longstanding trope in sports discourse.

Contemporary NBA star Stephen Curry does not face the particular “challenge” of whiteness, but an ESPN profile of him notes his slight build without delving into any physical advantages, such as world-class hand-eye coordination, he might enjoy (Fleming, 2015).

These assessments of physicality, unsurprisingly, are something of a commonplace in journalists’ attempts to take stock of athletes’ success. There is some variation in what the assessments say, depending on the athlete and probably the writer. But regardless of the assessment, physicality plays a very consistent and reliable role in narratives of athletes’ success: It is a premise or prelude to the real story. Reading these profiles, I came to recognize a very particular sentence or paragraph construction that said, effectively, “yes, there are physical considerations, but…” A few examples:

- On swimmer Katie Ledecky: “Strength, stroke efficiency and aerobic capacity all help make champions, but none of those is what separates Ledecky from her rivals” (Hersh, 2016).
- On Trout: “Physically, Trout’s success is simple: The home runs come from his natural strength; the batting average comes from his remarkable speed; and the overall performance comes from his ability to stay short with his swing and lay off pitches outside the strike zone. But Trout is also…” (Miller, 2012)
On Bird: “Larry Bird was blessed with his height, but…” (Papanek, 1981).

On Mattingly: “Part of that is talent, of course, but another part can be attributed to…” (Elderkin, 1984).

And my favorite, on mixed martial artist Conor McGregor: “‘The hardest hitters usually have long arms, which McGregor does, and they usually have big fists, which McGregor does, but there’s something else in him…” (Jones, 2015).

Over and over, these stories tell us, there’s something else in star athletes that makes them stars. This bears on the athletes’ merit, because though many physical capabilities can be developed and enhanced, physicality is implicitly treated here as unearned – one Bird profile, which focuses on the forward’s relative lack of physical advantage, is called “Gifts that God didn’t give.” Recall that “merit” means positive qualities deserving of reward. Physical talent is a positive quality that contributes to reward, but does not make one deserving. These stories allow for the possibility that athletes’ nevertheless deserve their success by emphasizing that there’s “something else” behind it. So what’s the “something else”?

“There’s something else in him”: Athletes’ meritorious qualities

The “something else” should be hard work, at least according to critiques of meritocratic ideology. Hard work is the ingredient that any of us can access, in theory, and so makes success available to the masses. It is also the most clearly agentive explanation for success: It’s a behavioral choice, the athlete’s own doing. Pointing to hard work is the cleanest way to suggest that American meritocracy is fair and the successful deserve their positions.
Hard work does indeed come up often as a “something else” in athletes. The gushing coverage Bird received for being an unathletic, hard-working athlete, in contrast to black peers who were understood by white media members to coast on talent, is famous in circles of NBA fans.\(^\text{10}\) Indeed the sentence excerpted above, in its completion, reads, “Larry Bird was blessed with his height, but lots of work made him the NBA’s most complete player since Oscar Robertson.” This is not an exclusively 1980s-era sentiment. In naming Serena Williams 2015 Sportsperson of the Year, *Sports Illustrated* declared that her tennis victories were not sufficient reason for giving her the honor. “The trying is what’s impressive. The trying is why we are here” (Price, 2015).

More so than in coverage of politicians’ lives, profiles of star athletes actually describe, and thus define, hard work. It usually amounts to time and repetition. From a profile of Ledecky:

Hour after hour, a swimmer sees little but the black lane line on the bottom of a pool, hears little other than innermost thoughts and the muffled sound of a coach demanding more effort.

The 4:05 a.m. wake-ups; the 20-minute predawn drives to the pool with one of her parents …. Day after day, year after year. (Hersh, 2016)

How do the athletes do it? Many profiles highlight what you might call a “hard work-enabling” trait. In Mattingly’s case, it’s “devotion” or “tenacity.” For Ledecky it is “the absolute, burning desire to get better.” For Trout it’s drive, obsessiveness with getting advice and an uncommon willingness to take it. For Curry it’s a love of the game that

\(^{10}\) The attribution of black athletes’ success to physical talent and white athletes’ success to more “meritorious” qualities such as hard work or smarts is a longstanding trope that comes up occasionally in the materials examined here, but warrants its own more focused investigation.
makes him eager to put in the time to be great. A profile of Williams cites “an obsessive attention to detail” (Gay, 2016).

There are deviations from this formula, however. It is true, as Crosson and McDonald observe, that hard work is treated as an important ingredient in Michael Jordan’s rise. The 1989 promotional biopic *Come fly with me* begins with Jordan talking about hard work and determination; commercials highlighted Jordan’s failures and perseverance; a 1991 profile points to his work ethic. But elsewhere in discussions of Jordan, including not much later in *Come fly with me*, Jordan is described as being pretty lazy. Jordan’s father, asked to explain his son’s height (no one else in the family is particularly tall), says to the camera:

> Occasionally you’ll meet people that you look at and you just know that they were born to do one thing. And God looked at Michael and knew that this kid would starve if he had to work, so I better make an athlete out of him.

> It’s also important to note that hard work is not the only “something else” in these stories that sets star athletes apart. Savvy comes up numerous times.

> “How do you differentiate the great athletes from the good ones?” asks [former teammate Dave] Cowens…. “It’s a savvy, or something. Larry’s got it. Something mental that other players with more physical talent don’t have.”

(Papanek, 1981)

For tennis star Steffi Graf, psychological makeup and ability to perform in the clutch separate her from her competition (Stone, 1987). Both Trout and Ledecky are described as being unafraid of failure. Williams’ coach says, “There are very few champions on this planet, and they share things in common …. One of those things is the ability to forget the past…. They never look behind, always ahead” (Gay, 2016). It can be more than one
“thing” per athlete. The “something else” in Conor McGregor is “some mysterious and extraordinary combination of desire and angle and speed,” but also, in most coverage of him, charisma: “He has that thing that you can’t teach people, whatever it is that makes people gravitate toward you” (Jones, 2015); “What sets McGregor apart – and what has made him a rich man with the promise of even greater riches on the way – is the force of his personality” (Botter, 2015). Joyner-Kersee has a unique acuity: she is “able to create the association between words and kinesthetic awareness right off the bat” (Morgenstern, 1988).

All of which is to say that the “something else” that makes athletes special is not always straightforward hard work – the trying is not the only reason we are here. And this raises the question of how an athlete’s “something else” relates to deservingness. Some narratives depict an athlete’s hard work not as a simple behavioral choice, but a rare and elite capacity. Other traits that serve the role of the key “something else,” such as Graf’s clutchness or Bird’s savvy, are depicted as natural gifts that don’t particularly involve choice and require no more effort to develop than many types of physical advantage. How can they be connected to merit?

“You have to know struggle to be the champ”: Adversity enhances the athlete’s merit

The “something else” that makes athletes special, hard work or otherwise, is often developed or revealed through journeys or origin tales. The archetypal example of athlete backstory is the parable of Michael Jordan being cut from his high school team. In
Jordan’s freshman year, the story goes, the coach at Laney High School put the future star on junior varsity. Jordan was despondent. But, according to *Come fly with me*, “Michael worked harder than ever, growing four inches and improving dramatically over the next two years.” In addition to the apparent suggestion that Jordan willed himself to grow taller, the biopic claims the determination that enabled Jordan’s success grew out of this incident.

Though Jordan’s story is an archetype, it is also in a sense a deviation from the standard American success narrative. As McDonald (1996) observes, Jordan came from a middle-class background, and so “the classic tale of overcoming early economic hardship, the proverbial rags-to-riches tale, could not be invoked here…. Jordan’s humble beginnings begin with an impoverished basketball talent” (42).

For many other athletes, humble class roots can be and are invoked, and play an important narrative role. The difficult poverty and violence of Mike Tyson’s early years drive him to fighting: his first fist-fight is with a boy who kills one of his pet pigeons. Once Tyson starts fighting, his talent is revealed (although not honed and channeled; that would come later). Larry Bird’s humble roots are linked to his capacity for hard work. “[Bird] believes everyone should work,” his mother is quoted as saying. “That’s how he got to be such a good player. My kids were made fun of for the way they dressed. Neighbor boys had basketballs or bikes. My kids had to share a basketball” (Papanek, 1981). Conor McGregor, from a working-class family in Ireland, was on a path to become a plumber, and so “makes fighting seem like a trade” (Jones, 2015). He learned
how to fight because “You grow up where I’m from, you must learn how to defend yourself as a young man” (Ain, 2016).

Discourse about Lebron James frequently addresses the superstar’s difficult early childhood, bouncing from one home to another. “I’m Lebron James from Akron, Ohio, from the inner city,” James said in a famous postgame interview after his Miami Heat won the 2013 NBA championship. “I’m not even supposed to be here.” The quote was spun into a Nike ad campaign, with the tagline “Come out of Nowhere.”

Struggle is the key element in these storylines. Humble roots can serve this purpose, but as in Jordan’s case, do not do so exclusively. Serena Williams, it is often observed, grew up in Compton. It is sometimes observed that her father was financially comfortable, and actually moved the family to the area “because he thought it would ‘make [his daughters] tough, give them a fighter’s mentality’” (Howley, 2015). Much of Williams’ struggle is non-economic. Early on, under her father’s tutelage, the struggle is psychological; as she moves through her career and faces obstacles of race and gender, it becomes structural; finally she battles injuries, and it becomes physical.

A profile of Stephen Curry makes a case that his skills were developed on a rickety court at his grandparents’ house in the woods of Virginia:

Dribbling through the rocks and tire tracks at Jack’s hoop honed Curry’s ballhandling skills, while the unpredictable backboard and the unforgiving rim tested his touch and inspired the perfect, impossibly high parabolic arc of his shot…. it’s hard to get rattled by Grizzlies fans once you’ve hit 100 free throws in a row with actual underfed bears lurking just beyond the tree line. (Fleming, 2015)
Curry is the son of NBA star Dell Curry; his home court growing up was a well-paved driveway (which the story mentions, with considerably less emphasis), where he undoubtedly spent more time and hoisted more shots than he did at his grandfather’s bear-infested property. He also had access to plenty of gyms. But the story shoehorns onto him a narrative of hardship.

Consider also McGregor’s disadvantageous experience, unrelated to class, of having a punchable face:

“‘I seem to have a face – I seem to attract attention somehow,’ [McGregor] says. ‘For some reason, people want to try to come at me. They want to hit me. I just wanted people to leave me alone, basically. I didn’t get into this to be somebody. I got into it to feel comfortable in uncomfortable situations.’” (Jones, 2015)

Mike Trout’s amusing disadvantage, identified in a profile in *GQ*, is hailing from New Jersey, where “the slushy cold has historically put a ceiling on prospects” (Riley, 2013). This caused Trout to be overlooked, which in turn motivated him to prove all those who overlooked him wrong. Other athletes suffer injuries, and return stronger or improved.

Adversity can beget the special something that enables the athlete to separate himself or herself and achieve at high levels, whether it’s desire, hard work, toughness, or creativity. There is still the question of how this begetting works. Does adversity reveal the athlete’s special capacity? Does it create it? Does greatness spring from the particular admixture of this person enduring this particular crucible? Usually, it is fair to say, adversity plays some catalytic role. Bird would not have his work ethic without his humble roots, according to the stories told about him. Tyson may never have learned to
fight without the school of hard knocks. The heavyweight is quoted saying: “You have to
know struggle to be the champ” (Callahan, 1988).

By connecting athletes’ key positive traits to negative experiences, the profiles
construct the traits as something other than straightforward good fortune. These athletes
aren’t just lucky to be special – no one would describe Mike Tyson’s origins as lucky.
The deservingness is created by what the athletes endure to become special.

An adversity storyline is not mandatory for the creation of a meritorious quality.
ESPN cites no disadvantage or adversity in explaining the greatness of Ledecky. The
writer who profiled Joyner-Kersee for the New York Times in 1988 went looking for a
causal narrative to craft from the Olympian’s humble childhood in East St. Louis, but
apparently couldn’t find it, and ends up quoting Joyner-Kersee saying that she didn’t feel
poor growing up. Rather, a storyline in which adversity begets a meritorious quality is
one of the culturally recognizable “good reasons” for an individual to be viewed as
having merit, and deserving reward.

“He helped me out a lot more than I ever helped him”: Weighing assistance and
agency

One of the abilities that make Serena Williams special, according to multiple
profiles, is her confidence, her “swagger.” “I had assumed Serena’s swagger to be a result
of her talent,” wrote Kerry Howley in a 2015 profile in New York Magazine. But then
Howley read the autobiography of Richard Williams, Serena’s father.
Richard was grooming his girls for a takeover, bestowing upon them a carapace strong enough to withstand the doubt, discomfort, and contempt of an entire culture. Winning depended on self-belief so impenetrable that a genteel lynch mob could not slice through. This was all part of the vision.

If Williams’s exceptionality was her father’s doing, however, does she deserve it?

Another frequently used category of storyline in discourse about athletes addresses the relative contributions of athletes and other people in the development of the athlete’s key traits – the narrative accounting of assistance and agency. The stories address the roles of people such as parents or coaches in athletes’ lives, and attempt to identify what the athlete brought to the table.

One of the most dramatic interventions by an outsider in an athlete’s life, in this sample, comes in the story of Mike Tyson. After years spent as a criminal, Tyson is sent to a reform school for juvenile delinquents, and connects with the legendary trainer Cus D’Amato. D’Amato takes Tyson under his wing, becomes his legal guardian, and molds him, teaching him about things like will and character. “He made Mike from scratch” the man who introduced Tyson to D’Amato is quoted saying of the trainer in one story (Callahan, 1988). Another story recites the various topics on which Tyson can quote D’Amato, and says their relationship was “more father-son than teacher-student” (Nack, 1986). Tyson says that had he never gone down this path, “I’d have been in the same place I was. In jail. Or dead. One of those” (Nack).

Some of the language employed about Tyson in these recollections makes this an explicitly racist or racial story; *Time* calls him “a primitive without stockings” (Callahan, 1986) and later says that “As a fictional character, Tyson would be an offense to
everyone, a stereotype wrung out past infinity to obscenity. He is the black Brooklyn street thug from reform school, adopted by the white benevolent old character from the country” (Callahan, 1988).

All of the materials describe Tyson as a physical marvel made tough by his upbringing, who only ultimately becomes a champion because of his association with D’Amato. Tyson is granted very little agency in a key portion of his narrative; other than putting in a bit of work to persuade a former pro boxer to introduce him to the trainer, his initiative is not implicated in his rise. This makes him a complicated case, merit-wise. Tyson is lucky to be mentored by D’Amato, but again, Tyson is not lucky; he has suffered such adversity that the help he receives is not treated as an unreasonable advantage. One does not get the sense, reading coverage of Tyson, that his adoption by D’Amato is understood as a problematic privilege. And so Tyson is neither credited for agency nor treated as undeserving, at least not for this reason.

In most other stars’ stories, the athlete receives help along the way, but is ultimately credited with substantial agency. Don Mattingly is fortunate to have a father who encouraged him to play sports, and a high school coach who taught him his work ethic. But his profilers make clear: “one thing was plainly his own: his tenacity” (Gammons, 1989) and “His intensity … comes from within” (Chass, 1988). Mike Trout had a former pro ballplayer for a father, but his dad says that “All we did was set him on a path and let his natural ability take over” (Kepner, 2012). Trout finds a mentor as a young ballplayer in the minor leagues, but the mentor tells ESPN: The Magazine that “He helped me out a lot more than I ever helped him” (Miller, 2012).
Steffi Graf was groomed to play tennis from a very young age by her professional tennis-playing father, but *New York Magazine* does not concede that this means her father created her. “Steffi Graf’s the kind of unique player who comes along once in a decade … She could have been born on the moon, and she still would be Steffi Graf” (Stone, 1988). (Note the implication that there is no alternative timeline for Steffi Graf.)

“Outsiders often assume [Peter Graf] is the force behind her career, a classic ‘tennis parent.’ But those who know the pair well say that in fact he acts as a brake on Steffi’s perfectionism.” Stephen Curry is similarly groomed by his NBA star father, but proves worthy of the attention. “Only people who truly loved the game and understood the commitment it required would stick past dark on his country court” (Fleming, 2015).

Joyner-Kersee’s key helper is her husband and coach, Bob Kersee. *The New York Times* defends Joyner-Kersee from what it says were unfair attributions of her success to him: “When sportswriters write about the relationship between Jackie and Bob, they usually fall back on the theme of Pygmalion, with him sculpturing her into his vision of perfection,” but “‘If you’re talking about Jackie,’” says the erudite Brooks Johnson, director of track and field at Stanford and a former Olympic coach, ‘you’re basically talking about the wonderful duality of Jackie and Bobby. They are the entity, two artists who have abstract concepts that they can translate into physical reality’” (Morgenstern, 1988). Even this allows Joyner a bit less agency than several other athletes are afforded, but the *Times* offers a defense:

Had Jackie been born in East Germany, instead of East St. Louis, she might have been discovered and developed by the state. Here in the United States, where Olympic athletes must fend for themselves, she flourishes under Bob Kersee, who is her government, her research center and her rock.
Here an alternative timeline reveals that, in the context of Olympic competition, an enabling husband-coach is not an unreasonable advantage.

In the cases of a few athletes, outsiders played a lesser role. Lebron James did not begin to flourish as an athlete until he was taken in by the family of his Pee Wee football coach, but the stability merely enables Lebron to reveal his gifts – the coach does not “make him from scratch” or anything close to it (Saslow, 2013). Katie Ledecky is introduced to competitive swimming by her mother, but takes like a duck to the water and chooses to take the pursuit seriously on her own.

Time and again, athlete profiles identify outside assistance in an athlete’s development and weave storylines that take stock of an athlete’s agency in relation to it, usually concluding that the athlete’s contribution was substantial or sufficient. This is not quite the same thing, to my mind, as saying that the discourse celebrates athletes as “self-made.” As with discourse around politicians’ lives, a close look at the stories of sports stars reveals that the meritorious individual is not completely self-made, but rather has done enough by himself or herself to deserve credit. “Doing enough” means you have not had an unreasonable advantage. Doing it “by yourself” means displaying agency through the conscious exercise of your own efforts and abilities.

Note though that neither the notion of an “unreasonable advantage” nor the notion of one’s “own” abilities are clearly defined. No athlete is understood to have had external aid that is so helpful that it removes agency from the athlete; even when Steffi Graf is raised playing tennis by her tennis pro father, we are told that external circumstances did
not determine her outcomes. And several narratives link an athlete’s agency to innate capabilities – but innateness is precisely the quality that makes physical advantages unearned in some stories. It is ultimately unclear whether being born with a natural gift redounds to merit or not.

The issue reaches its most confusing point in a *Self* magazine profile of Serena Williams, in which the star is quoted saying, “My mental game has always been from my dad” (Kahn, 2016). The writer, Howie Kahn, says in the next line that “Her physicality, however, is all her own.” Never mind that Williams’ parents could be said to have something to do with her physical form. This line feels like a rejoinder – a defense of Williams’ merit against the accusation, made by Williams herself, that her father deserves some credit for her success. Here we’ve come full circle, to the point from which it seemed we were trying to get away, where an athlete’s merit is linked to unearned physical gifts.

*“Shameful display of selfishness and betrayal by one of our very own”: Debits to merit*

Even in positive profiles and promotional materials, the salient critiques of an athlete from public discourse surface, some of which address the athlete’s merit, and help illuminate the construction of merit by identifying the things that can compromise it. These are culturally recognizable storylines that serve as “good reasons” to deny an athlete’s merit.
One critique we have already seen the profiles seek to address is the possibility that the athlete has coasted on unearned physical advantage. Explicit manifestations of this critique include a Twitter user with the handle “diegtristan8” tweeting about Serena Williams that the “main reason for her success is that she is built like a man” (Burke, 2015), or a Twitter user named “Tape” responding to Lebron James’ comment that he was “not even supposed to be here,” by quipping “quoth the once-in-lifetime freak athletic specimen” (Tape, 2013).¹¹ (James’s “Come out of Nowhere” Nike ad acknowledges this argument and offers a direct rebuttal: “Yeah, you were told you were gonna be one of the greats. They told so many others the same thing” (Come out of Nowhere, 2016). Potential and success are not the same thing, James contends.)

The accusation that an athlete used or uses performance enhancing drugs is another common attack on the successful athlete’s merit. An ESPN profile of Katie Ledecky grappled with questions about the record-breaking swimmer doping:

German TV network ZDF brought up the issue again at last year's worlds, where Ledecky dominated the competition while swimming 6,200 meters in 10 races, including a 200 semifinal barely a half-hour after she set a world record in the 1,500.

“Is that humanly possible?” the network’s reporter asked German head coach Henning Lambertz.

“It obviously is, but it is definitely astonishing how she absorbs all this,” Lambertz replied.

“Does that raise question marks?” the reporter continued.

“Not with me,” Lambertz answered. (Hersh, 2016)

¹¹ As many noted on social media, James literally has the phrase “Chosen 1” tattooed across his back. If he is not “supposed” to be here, who is?
Ledecky, for her part, says “It was almost like a laughable matter because I just wouldn’t do it.”

The fundamental argument about doping is that “athletes who use drugs are gaining an unfair advantage by accessing something not available to those who follow the rules. Those who use drugs prosper at the expense of those who play fair” (van Mill, 2015). Many advantages and disadvantages can bear on a person’s merit, but this particular one is regarded as a substantial debit because it is a conscious choice easily avoided. It is also understood for this reason to reflect a moral shortcoming rather than simply a complication of deservingness, the way a lucky break might.

Other possible moral and personal shortcomings come up as well – Serena Williams shouting angrily at line judges, for example. The profile of Williams on the occasion of her winning Sportsperson of the Year cited her abandonment of that vice as part of the personal growth that warranted the award. Though the moral issue in question is not necessarily related to her performance, it still bears on her personal merit.

A major category of critique that surfaces repeatedly in these materials as a debit to merit is selfish-ness. Michael Jordan was clearly one of the best basketball players in the world in the 1980s, but before his teams began winning championships (the Chicago Bulls won their first title in 1991), analysts questioned whether this might be because Jordan wasn’t good enough at sharing. “He’s the greatest one-on-one player ever,” announcer Al McGuire is quoted saying. “The question is, does he elevate the play of those around him? It’s an open issue” (Telander, 1986).
Jordan’s questionable ability or willingness to share his gifts is understood to affect his outcomes – the fact that the great Jordan doesn’t share his talents with his teammates results in a sort of cosmic justice when the team doesn’t win championships. In Steffi Graf’s case, on-court performance is not affected by the selfishness with which she is charged when she expresses reluctance about serving as an ambassador for women’s tennis. When Lebron James left the Cleveland Cavaliers, the team that plays near his hometown of Akron, to join the Miami Heat, he too is accused of a more abstract, off-court selfishness, for thinking that his abilities were his and not his community’s. “I’m taking my talents to South Beach,” James said. In response, Cavaliers owner Dan Gilbert authored a much-quoted note calling James’ decision a “shameful display of selfishness and betrayal by one of our very own.” Whose talents were headed to South Beach?

The discourse around James includes a sense that “Being excellent at absolutely everything like this, it carries responsibility” (Laskas, 2014). “God has given me this opportunity,” James himself says. “I can take advantage of it or I can shit it away.” There’s a cliché for this: Much will be required of the person to whom much is given. The reason it is possible for James to be “selfish” about his basketball abilities is because they are not his alone; he did not earn them. The best he can do is prove worthy of them by applying and sharing them correctly.

“Give me their talent and I’ll do some really big things”: Big patterns in stories of athletes’ merit
American stories of the lives of our star athletes proceed from an assumption that
the star athlete has been “gifted” – given without earning – a level of physical ability
which contributes to his or her exceptional performance, but that this physical ability is
not the crux of the athlete’s merit. Physical exceptionality is presumed to be innate,
 involuntary, and as such unearned.

The athlete would neither be able to succeed, nor deserve full credit for
succeeding, without “something else.” That something else can be hard work, savvy, or a
variety of other traits. The narratives link such qualities to deservingness with storylines
that connect them to adversity, and identify the athletes’ agency in their development.
The narratives also assess the athlete’s willingness to share his or her gifts with fans,
teammates, and the community at large.

These patterns seem consistent with clichés that say, in effect, “Your talent is
God’s gift to you. What you do with it is your gift back to God.” The master narrative of
an athlete’s merit is a story that assesses whether the athlete proves worthy of his or her
gifts by exercising agency in applying them and sharing them.

But the standards by which this assessment is made are not always clear or
coherent. Recall that several stories depict hard work and other non-physical traits as
natural abilities – gifts. In a 1986 profile, Don Mattingly is quoted approvingly saying:

“There are tons of players who could be a lot better. I’d like to have some of the
talent of those guys. Give me their talent and I’ll do some really big things.”
(Gammons, 1986)
But Mattingly’s intensity is described elsewhere as “from within” and his tenacity as “his own.” What if these other, more talented players had been born with those? Maybe the idea is that there is more choice involved in showing tenacity than in swinging a bat quickly, and indeed choice will reveal itself more clearly as a distinguishing factor in constructions of merit in the next two chapters. But in the discourse about star athletes, the American philosophy on this point is a bit muddled.

The particular construction of merit in these stories also bears a peculiar relationship to conventional understandings of meritocracy. Recall Birrell’s (1989) description of our “national commonsense,” that “individuals who work hard and possess the right stuff will always prevail,” and Crosson’s (2014) position that sports narratives tell “the vast majority of people” that “they too can succeed.” I do not think we see that here. We see athletes emphatically described as special, in ways that are not replicable for most people even with great time and effort.

It is possible that, per Giulianotti (1999), American culture encourages all individuals to understand ourselves as special, and so Americans can interpret these stories as signals that we, too, can reach a high level of performance. After all, narrative often works through “identification” with protagonists (deGraaf, Hoeken, and Sanders, 2012). But this is different from saying these stories suggest that anyone can make it. The stories support the proposition that great success is deserved in America, but not that the opportunity to succeed is widely available.
“Players play to win championships, and fans and writers evaluate them based on whether they succeed. It’s unfair”: Contemporary dissent from the ideology of merit

In the political realm we saw dissent from cultural consensus about merit and meritocracy strengthening in recent years and moving into the mainstream – circumstantial evidence that American ideas about merit are changing. It’s happening in sports, too. The typical athlete profile from the 1980s does not differ meaningfully from the typical athlete profile published today in any way that signals a departure from the earlier cultural understanding of merit. But there are a few outlier instances in the discourse, all from the contemporary group, that betray a shifting of the terrain.

Michael Jordan being cut from his high school team, finding motivation in the failure, and making himself great is the classic athlete merit parable. The story was celebrated for decades in mainstream media, and when Jordan was inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame in 2009, he referenced the tale in his speech, even taking a not-really-good-natured shot at the coach who had cut him. “I wanted to make sure you understood: You made a mistake, dude” (Wojnarowski, 2012).

In 2012, Sports Illustrated revisited the myth in a piece called “Did this man really cut MICHAEL JORDAN?” The writer, Thomas Lake, travels to Jordan’s hometown, and learns the story of a man named Clifton “Pop” Herring. Herring was the coach who “cut” Jordan, but he was not some buffoon who couldn’t recognize world-historical talent when it walked into a gym and took flight. He was an extremely successful young basketball coach even before Jordan arrived, who dedicated his life to helping young people in his community.
If life is a cycle of giving and receiving, of storing up goodwill in the hearts of those around you, of doing kindness for the sake of kindness but also for yourself, for your reserve fund, in case one day you need to make a withdrawal, when you're old or sick or poor or maybe all three, then for the first 31 years of his life Pop Herring built about as much wealth as a man could. (Lake, 2012)

Herring did not in fact send Jordan packing when he cut him. He placed him on junior varsity. This decision, Lake argues, was the correct one, and not just because of the motivation it gave Jordan.

The decision to leave Jordan on jayvee as a sophomore was not an oversight. Herring and his assistants knew Jordan would ride the bench on varsity, so they put him on jayvee, and it worked out perfectly. When he got to varsity, he was ready to lead the team.

Over the years, Herring dedicated countless hours to Jordan’s development, and guided him well. He then had his best season as a coach after Jordan graduated. Soon, however, the mental illness that ran in Herring’s family overtook him, and he was no longer able to coach. He was also unable to defend himself from the image of him that would emerge in popular culture, as an obstacle in Jordan’s self-made story. He became homeless, and Lake finds him living in marginal conditions.

The story Lake published in *Sports Illustrated* redistributes the agency in Jordan’s story by arguing that Jordan had not overcome Herring; he was aided by him. It also observes that Herring, not Jordan, is the character in this story who overcame adversity, using an alternative timeline to illustrate Jordan’s good fortune in life, and even wields Jordan’s height as a subtle dig:

Jordan was not the hard-living urban black kid whose life is transformed by athletic achievement. He grew up in the suburbs, his father a supervisor for General Electric, his mother a bank teller, and without sports today he would probably be a thriving middle-class American like his two older, shorter brothers.
Pop, on the other hand, was born into one of the roughest parts of Wilmington to a 17-year-old mother with an eighth-grade education and a father who would soon leave.

In short, Lake flips the conventional narrative tools of athlete merit construction against Jordan, and redistributes a good portion of the merit in the story from Jordan to Herring. “The Great Cutting Myth suggests that Pop was unworthy of being Jordan’s coach, or that he failed to appreciate the divine gift he’d been given. But the numbers show otherwise. Pop was a winner before Jordan arrived and a winner after Jordan left.” The implication is not that Jordan is replaceable, of course, but that he is not as worthy of his gifts as had always been suggested.

American writers tore down myths long before 2012, and of course it is possible to imagine a story like this appearing in 1988. But just as there were more extreme takedowns in political discourse in the digital and democratized context of 2016, it is difficult to imagine this story appearing in a mainstream publication like Sports Illustrated back in the 1980s. Part of the contemporary crisis of merit is the awareness we have of privilege, the ready skepticism we bring to claims of accomplishment, and the ferocity with which we interrogate them – not only when we have a motivation to do so, as in the political context, but just because they’re there. This revision of Jordan’s story puts the public mainstreaming of these tendencies on display.

But the story is also reminiscent of many 2016 attacks on political opponents in that it still displays a broad acceptance of what I contend is the foundation of the ideology of merit: that we can and should try to determine what a person accomplished on his or
her own, and the more he or she has accomplished, the better it reflects on his or her merit. In other instances in 2016 athlete discourse, we see dissent even from this.

A 2015 essay in the *New York Times Magazine* called “The Meaning of Serena Williams” examines the racial dynamics of the discourse around Williams (Rankine, 2015). There are portions of the essay that fit comfortably into the conventional discourse of merit: the author Claudia Rankine highlights the obstacles Williams has overcome as a testament to her, and also critiques the fact that other, lesser tennis players have proven more marketable, a fact Rankine attributes to race. Here, Rankine stays within the bounds of standard merit discourse by attacking meritocracy for being insufficiently meritocratic. But at the end of the essay, the writer asks Williams about her earnings, and Williams says: ‘‘Maybe it was not meant to be me. Maybe it’s meant to be the next person to be amazing, and I’m just opening the door. Zina Garrison, Althea Gibson, Arthur Ashe and Venus opened so many doors for me. I’m just opening the next door for the next person.’’

Rankine writes:

I was moved by Serena’s positioning herself in relation to other African-Americans. A crucial component of white privilege is the idea that your accomplishments can be, have been, achieved on your own. The private clubs that housed the tennis courts remained closed to minorities well into the second half of the 20th century. Serena reminded me that in addition to being a phenomenon, she has come out of a long line of African-Americans who battled for the right to be excellent in a such a space that attached its value to its whiteness and worked overtime to keep it segregated.

Assessment of merit should go beyond the individual, Rankine argues – a true dissent from meritocratic ideology.
Next consider a piece on the heir to Jordan’s throne, Lebron James. The writer, Benjamin Markovits, was interested, as so many profile writers are, in James’s understanding of how he came to be great. But Markovits had played professional basketball in Bavaria, and his discussion of the matter winds up a bit different than what we’ve seen before. Markovits writes that, in his sit-down interview with James, “There was only one question he answered brusquely and we both knew why” (2014). The question was, “Where do you get your athletic talent from?” James’s answer: “The man above.” Markovits had wanted James to tell him about his father, he writes. Markovits then relates the following:

Magic Johnson liked to tell a story to explain his success. That he used to shovel snow from his driveway every winter morning, to work on his jump shot. That the difference between him and the rest of us was hard work. It always annoyed me to have him pass off his natural advantages as some kind of dedication. I spent every day after school, come rain or Texas shine, in my backyard shooting hoops.

Markovits appears ready to question one of the most basic premises of sports profiles here – that “there’s something else in” James that makes him special, beyond physical advantage. He wants to ask if maybe there’s not. He also tackles another cliché, the alternative timeline as a tool to reveal that special “something else” in the athlete, by observing that Lebron can’t or won’t produce one:

“Magic Johnson, Isaiah Thomas, and Michael Jordan were all asked what they’d do if they weren’t basketball players. They all gave very different answers. Magic said he’d work at a gas station. Isiah said he’d probably be a lawyer. Do you have an answer to that question?” Magic was making a comment about class. Thomas wanted to point out his intellectual savvy and combativeness. But LeBron refused to imagine any life but the one he was living.

Here, too, Markovits prods at the ideology of merit, not making an argument against it, but suggesting questions about our methodology for sussing these things out.
What really startled me, though, was Markovits’ takeaway about superstars and hard work:

the truth is, [Magic Johnson] probably did work harder. LeBron has probably worked harder at his job than anyone I have ever met. Even in Germany in the second division the better players played harder, tried harder than I could – they knew how to try.

It is this vague suggestion that even effort might be an unearned, innate quality that really doesn’t deserve reward, combined with the feeling of a general “who knows?” shrug, that really separates this profile from most of the materials we’ve seen. It echoes Trump, the only politician I examined whose biography seems less than concerned with explaining the candidate’s merit in context. The most powerful dissent from the ideology of merit is not the suggestion that success is unearned, but a losing of interest in the question.

Markovits’ piece was commissioned by a London-based men’s magazine called Port, spiked by Nike, which had funded part of the reporting, for being too negative, and eventually picked up by Deadspin. It was rejected by a conventional magazine, but then picked up by a web publication that actually has a bigger cultural footprint. I would argue that it is representative of occasional dissent from mainstream media conventions in digital media, and the growing power of that dissent.

Finally, consider a piece in the liberal online magazine Slate by the writer Josh Levin, published in 2016, after James had returned to his hometown Cleveland Cavaliers and won a championship with them. James had completed the “hero’s journey,” as the sports writer Chris Ryan said, and Levin wrote that he was happy for James because the superstar deserved it. But, he argued, it was important to realize that the Cavaliers won a
close game 7 against the Golden State Warriors to take the title in part because of some lucky breaks.

This is the reality of professional sports, and it’s because of that reality that I’ve rooted for LeBron James for the past 10 years. Players play to win championships, and fans and writers evaluate them based on whether they succeed. It’s unfair, but it’s what makes the games we watch so thrilling. Since winner-takes-some is never going to be a thing, those of us who want one of the best players we’ve ever seen to get the respect he deserves have no choice but to hope he gets the bounces he needs to make his résumé unimpeachable. (Levin, 2016)

Levin notes that when James returned to Cleveland, he published a letter explaining the move, in which he wrote, “In Northeast Ohio, nothing is given. Everything is earned. You work for what you have.” This is classic meritocratic rhetoric, and Levin doesn’t criticize it. But he does cite it and reply: “LeBron did more than enough to earn this championship, by playing as well as a basketball player can and by making his teammates better. Doing enough to win a title doesn’t always mean you win one.” LeBron deserved to win, but that is not why he won. Once again here, we see dissent from the mainstream view about merit and its role in athletes’ lives. Conventionally, our stories about athletes seek to isolate the role of merit in athletes’ success: They convey that it is important and feasible to figure out whether an athlete deserves his or her outcomes. This was the dominant thread in stories told in the 1980s and 1990s, and it remains so today. But occasionally now, we see pushback on this assumption. The entire project of connecting merit and outcomes is being thrown into question.
Chapter 6

“Certainly luck plays a part. But …”: Business leaders grapple with critiques of meritocracy

In 2012, the activists Brian Miller and Mike Lapham published a book titled *The Self-Made Myth: And the Truth About How Government Helps Individuals and Businesses Succeed*. It included a collection of first-person stories from entrepreneurs and business leaders that contained the following titles, among others:

- “Transportation and food safety regulations help my business”
- “Public support for education helped me get where I am”
- “My success was paid for by others”

This was an attempt, the authors said, to “reclaim the narrative of wealth creation,” which they believe has long been driven by the “self-made myth,” the notion “that individual and business success is the result of personal characteristics of exceptional individuals, such as hard work, creativity, and sacrifice, with little or no outside assistance” (2). Generations of storytelling about self-made successes have persuaded the American public that rich people have done it on their own, Miller and Lapham argue. The effect of this widespread belief is the acceptance of excessively unequal wealth distribution and a failure to sufficiently fund the social support systems that actually enable success.

Miller and Lapham’s effort appears to be part of a larger (but perhaps still minor) trend in businesspeople’s explanations of their circumstances. In April 2017, the investor Jason Ford published an op-ed declaring “we can blow up the myth that I’m a self-made success. Sure, I had something to do with it, but I also had some serious help” (Ford, 2017). This summer, news broke that Facebook co-founder Chris Hughes is shopping a
book titled *We Should All Be So Lucky*, in which he argues for a universal basic income and assures readers that he does not deserve to be as rich as he is.

My aim in this chapter is to look closely at some of the mainstream narratives these new stories are pushing back against, to ask how precisely traditional business stories explain success and what they have to say about the generous rewards successful businesspeople reap. I examine the autobiographies of six business leaders, three from the Reagan-Bush era and three from more recent years: *Iacocca* (1984), by the automobile executive Lee Iacocca; *Sam Walton: Made in America* (1992), by the founder of Wal-Mart; *Mary Kay: Miracles Happen* (1981/1994), by the cosmetics titan; *Things a Little Bird Told Me* (2014), by Biz Stone, co-founder of Twitter; *The Trump Card*, by Ivanka Trump; and *Lean In* (2013), by Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg. *Lean In*, Sandberg’s book about women and their professional pursuits, is not a memoir, but draws on Sandberg’s life experiences, and seemed to me an important artifact of business discourse in the Obama era.

These narratives differ in form from the stories of politicians and athletes I considered in the previous two chapters. Unlike most of the other stories, these are told in the first person. Rather than examine conversation about a person, I am looking here almost exclusively at the subject’s (or his/her ghostwriter’s) own construction. These stories are also told with a different performative purpose. Presidential candidates’ stories are told as part of an effort to assert that or assess whether the subject would make a good president; the athletes’ stories I considered were told in magazines and newspapers as part of an effort to entertain audiences. The business leaders’ narratives are typically
presented as containing useful information for the reader, in the form of advice on how to become successful. The subjects here are often explicitly treated as examples to be emulated.

Another important difference to note between this chapter and the preceding two is that many of the contemporary materials I examined about politicians and athletes originated or appeared in digital media. This chapter’s materials do not, although both Facebook’s Sandberg and Twitter’s Stone might be said to represent, or at least be influenced by, a culture of the digital era.

There is an inherent awkwardness to analyzing the stories of a category of people that includes both Mary Kay Ash and Biz Stone; these businesspeople are very different individuals who project very different identities. Kay portrays herself as a prayerful woman who lives by the golden rule. Walton presents as a simple and plainspoken country boy (“Friend, we just got after it and stayed after it” (XII)). Iacocca fancies himself a tough and savvy leader of men. Stone is the Silicon Valley innovator, enamored of creativity and change, and convinced that his work can and will change the world. Sandberg a modern, technocratic executive. Ivanka Trump, when she wrote her book at the age of 27, did not appear to know what exactly she wanted to be, besides something other than a nepotism case.

And yet these authors have more in common than swollen bank accounts. In their books, they circle many of the same questions and employ many of the same basic narratives about how and why they achieved their stations, and whether the positions are merited. I’ll begin by looking at the case each makes about what it takes to succeed, and
examine the patterns and conflicts that emerge across their stories, including the arguments they advance about the keys to success and the roles they acknowledge for external factors in their lives. Then I’ll consider what each has to say about the rewards he or she has reaped and whether those rewards are deserved, summarize their overall perspectives on merit in American life, and finally ask whether more recent narratives appear to signal growing dissent from the ideology of merit.

As in previous chapters, there is considerable grappling in the business leaders’ accounts with the role of external and systemic factors in the authors’ lives, though storylines are often deployed that assert the primacy of agency in life outcomes, essentially by showing that through industriousness and persistence, the individual can even out the odds of chance, and exert control over his or her life. The overall tenor of these explanations reflect the anodyne clichés of what Ann Friedman calls “the modern American gospel of success” (2013): you can do it, hang in there, no pain no gain, etc. In fact, each chapter of Ivanka Trump’s book is preceded by a quote, and several of these bits of wisdom manage to capture some major thread running through not just Trump’s explanation of her success, but the other entrepreneurs’, too.

There appear to be fewer clichés governing the authors’ views of compensation and wealth accumulation, about which the authors have far less to say. What they do say tends to involve assurances that money is not very important to them, and the implication that individuals have a right to take what they can get in legal and honest negotiations and transactions. This indicates a belief in the validity of markets separate from considerations about meritocracy.
On balance, these business leaders do not defend the American system as meritocratic so much as push for a master narrative in which the individual has the capacity to triumph over external and systemic factors. The contemporary narratives signal greater awareness of questions about and challenges to the ideology of merit, but stop short of attempting a new construction of merit or its role in life outcomes.

**What it takes**

*Talents and abilities*

Thirty years apart, Lee Iacocca and Biz Stone both assured their readers that they had not become successful because they were especially smart or talented. “I’ve known a lot of guys who were smarter than I am” (57), writes Iacocca. “I’m not a genius,” (xv) promises Stone. We saw in the previous chapter a hesitation in American culture to link success to exceptional talent, and it surfaces again in the stories of business leaders. “When I was successful, it wasn’t because I was more talented than the next salesperson,” writes Kay (12). Walton says he didn’t come up with most of the ideas that made Wal-Mart a powerhouse. “Most everything I’ve done I’ve copied from someone else” (47).

“And yet,” writes Iacocca, readying himself to articulate the central implicit question of most millionaire memoirs, “I’ve lost them in the smoke. Why?” Each business leader offers his or her own explanation. Echoing athlete narratives, several of them suggest that there exists a special something about the writer, some particular way or ways in which he or she excels, that enabled his or her success. For Iacocca, it is
something he calls “horse sense,” which appears to include components of decisiveness, risk-taking, seeing the big picture, and people skills. “You don’t succeed very long, kicking people around. You’ve got to know how to talk to them, plain and simple.” For Stone, it is optimism and creativity, combined with a willingness to take chances. Walton portrays himself as a natural businessman with a passion to compete. “Maybe I was born to be a merchant, maybe it was fate. I don’t know about that kind of stuff. But I know this for sure: I loved retail from the very beginning, and I still love it today” (22).

These key traits are sometimes illustrated with anecdotes – parables, really – about the subject’s early life implying that his or her special something is innate, or at least deeply embedded. Stone wanted to play lacrosse in high school, but his school didn’t have a team, so he started one. Kay competed good-naturedly but determinedly with her wealthier friend. Sandberg bossed around her brother and sister: “Apparently, when I was in elementary school, I taught my younger siblings, David and Michelle, to follow me around, listen to my monologues, and scream the word ‘Right!’ when I concluded.” Ivanka Trump played with toy trucks and cars, rather than Barbies, because she didn’t live according to other people’s expectations. Walton never lost a football game in part because “it never occurred to me that I might lose” (18).

It can be confusing to try to sort through why the business leaders cast such a skeptical eye toward the importance of smarts – treating them the way sports discourse treated physical talent – when some of their key attributes appear to amount to special, deeply embedded mental capabilities. Why is someone who is better at math than Lee
Iacocca “smarter” than the auto exec, if Iacocca has better horse sense? Why doesn’t Stone’s predisposition toward creative solutions amount to a kind of genius?

In at least a few of the cases, the answer appears to be that the application of the business person’s ability involves making choices that are available to more than a tiny subset of people. Stone argues explicitly that creativity is “a matter of attitude” (23). Not everyone can write an algorithm, but lots of people can petition school administrators to start a lacrosse team, even if Stone happens to have a natural predisposition to do so. In these instances, the tone and orientation of these stories is different from the sports narratives – less “marvel at this exceptional individual” and more “you can do it, too!”

In any case, even special abilities are insufficient in these narratives to explain the business leaders’ successes. Kay, for example, acknowledges that she has been helped tremendously by her enthusiasm – she actually calls it a talent, noting that the root of the term means “God within” – but says that to really get over the top, she had to learn to fake her enthusiasm even when she didn’t feel it. The quote offered by Ivanka Trump that captures this sentiment is from Calvin Coolidge: “nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent…. Unrewarded genius is almost a proverb” (81).

The business leaders’ explanations for their own success mention abilities, but point more to the ways they have dealt with the circumstances they’ve encountered.

**Origins**

They all start out lucky, in at least some sense. Like politicians, the businesspeople typically cite loving parents instilling in them key values, such as Kay’s
mother telling her repeatedly “honey, you can do it” or Iacocca’s father teaching him about hard work. In other respects, the business leaders’ early fortunes are more diverse. Several grew up without much money, which of course provides evidence of a “self-made” trajectory. Just as importantly, their humble roots help them develop useful attributes. Walton develops frugality growing up during the depression; Kay learns independence caring for herself at a young age, once her mother went to work to support Kay and her invalid father. Iacocca tells a similar narrative about his rheumatic fever. Contracting the illness was bad luck, but by Iacocca’s own account, turns to good luck when it keeps him out of World War II – allowing him to go to college at a time when classrooms were nearly empty and motivating him to work hard while he was there. “Being burdened with a medical deferment during the war seemed like a disgrace, and I began to think of myself as a second-class citizen. Most of my friends and relatives had gone over to fight the Germans. I felt like I was the only young man in America who wasn’t in combat. So I did the only thing I could: I buried my head in my books” (19).

Early life disadvantage is often turned into advantage in these narratives. The storylines that facilitate this transformation are not always explicitly agentive ones – circumstances act on the storytellers, rather than the other way around – but the subjects hold on to control of their lives in spite of the difficulties.

As with politicians, those who had an easier time in early life have something of a harder time crafting a desirable narrative. It is worth dedicating a page to Ivanka Trump’s handling of her head start, because she goes on about it for many pages. The title of her first chapter is “Get over it,” and it begins:
In business, as in life, nothing is ever handed to you.

That might sound like a line coming from someone with a background like mine – and a load!\(^\text{12}\) – but if you know me and my family, you’ll understand that I come by these words honestly. Yes, I’ve had the great good fortune to be born into a life of wealth and privilege, with a name to match. Yes, I’ve had every opportunity, every advantage. And yes, I’ve chosen to build my career on a foundation built by my father and grandfather, so I can certainly see why an outsider might dismiss my success in our family business as yet another example of nepotism.

But my parents set the bar high for me and my brothers. They gave us a lot, it’s true, but they expected a lot in return. And you can be sure we didn’t rise to our positions in the company by any kind of birthright or foregone conclusion. (1-2) Trump is not nearly done with the issue. In addition to arguing that her parents instilled in her a sense that one should earn one’s rewards, she posits that her name has worked against her, causing others to doubt her. She subsequently argues that the Trump surname leads people to overestimate her, by assuming she knows everything about real estate and finance, which “can be a big disadvantage” (5). She uses the metaphor of a “stagger,” the practice in a track meet of runners lining up at different positions, to explain her life: all will run the same distance by the end, but there’s an appearance of a head start. She concludes:

Get over it. Go ahead and bring it up if you feel you must. Acknowledge the elephant in the room. But then move on. Move on, because I’m way past it. Move on, because even though those who believe that my success is a result of nepotism might be right, they might also be wrong. Try as I may – and try as my critics may – there’s just no way to measure the advantage I’ve gained from having the Trump name, just as there’s no way to know if the person sitting across from you in a job interview or a negotiation is there on his or her own merits or with an assist of one kind or another. (6)

\(^{12}\) It does.
Having declared her intention to move on, Trump stays put, revisiting the topic again and again: “so I’ve had a bit of an edge getting in the door, but that doesn’t mean I haven’t developed an edge of my own now that I’m all the way in the room” (7); “Have I had an advantage? Absolutely” (8); “Forget the silver spoon and the storybook upbringing” (9); “I’m fully aware of the favorable hand I’ve drawn in life” (10); “even though the material aspects of my childhood appear to stand out, the most important and enduring gifts I received from my parents were their values: self-sufficiency, hard-work, respect” (23). I could go on. She is not over it.

The perspective Trump is trying to advance here is her father’s: Who cares how I got here? I’m here now, and I’m great. Her approach is a bit more sophisticated than the president’s. She takes time to make a case for the perspective, contending that this is actually a logical way to look at a life, because it is impossible to accurately contextualize an individual’s achievements. But having made this case, she keeps returning to the issue, trying to contextualize her achievements – she can’t seem to stop imagining the perspectives of others who doubt her – and makes a variety of related arguments: that her advantages have been disadvantages; that she wasn’t so much gifted success as *built for* success, which means she had to take action to achieve it; that her important advantage was the acquisition of good values, which is a reasonable advantage that everyone should have. She throws all the mud she can find at this particular wall.

Trump’s claims of agency seem ridiculous, partly because we know so much now about the ridiculousness of the Trumps, and partly because Ivanka Trump’s advantages were so extreme. But her arguments are not culturally illiterate. The rhetorical strategy
she employs here is a common one, which we will see again and again in businesspeople’s stories: finding and highlighting the agency in the individual’s interaction with circumstance.

_Good fortune_

I was a bit unfair to Biz Stone above, when I noted that he specifically assures us that he is “not a genius.” Stone is not suggesting it would be natural for readers to assume that the co-founder of Twitter is a genius. Rather, he is referring to his own opening anecdote, which “says a lot about how I’ve made my way in the world” (ix). Unemployed and in debt, and inspired by Wile E. Coyote, Stone launches a blog called “Biz Stone, Genius,” and prints business cards that say the same. When he says he is “not a genius,” he is offering rebuttal to his own joke.

But it is a productive joke for him. Stone’s presumptuous blog helps him connect with his co-founder Evan Williams. He lands his first Silicon Valley job, at Google, by projecting unwarranted confidence in an interview. Later, he causes Twitter’s value to spike by naming an audacious price to a potential buyer, Facebook’s Mark Zuckerberg. Over and over, in his story, Stone creates his own opportunities.

Stone is the most aggressive proponent of the “make your own luck” philosophy, but others embrace it as well. In their explanations of what it takes, the business leaders advise readers that they need to put themselves in position to experience good luck, by being aggressive, taking risks, following their passions, etc. Thus does experiencing good fortune become a question of agency.
My dictionary defines opportunity as a set of circumstances that makes it possible to do something. The world has conditioned us to wait for opportunity, have the good sense to spot it, and hope to strike at the appropriate time. But if opportunity is just a set of circumstances, why are we waiting around for the stars to align? Rather than waiting and pouncing with a high degree of failure, you might as well go ahead and create the set of circumstances on your own…. People say success is a combination of work and luck, and in that equation, luck is the piece that is out of your hands. But as you create opportunities for yourself, your odds at the lottery go way up. (Stone, 11)

Once good fortune presents itself – whether manufactured or not – it falls to the individual to seize the moment. Sam Walton presents an illustrative case. Walton concedes the premise that advantages can be compromising to merit: his father-in-law was a prominent businessman, and wanted the future founder of Wal-mart to go to work for him. But Walton and his wife Helen “felt we should be independent.” “I don’t want him to be L.S. Robson’s son-in-law. I want him to be Sam Walton,” Helen is quoted saying (26). They decided to strike out on their own. Nevertheless, when Walton bought his first store, it was with $5,000 of he and Helen’s money, and $20,000 from her father. Walton then experimented with a lot of ideas and made the store profitable, and after two and a half years, paid his father-in-law back. “I felt mighty good about that,” Walton writes. He had taken appropriate advantage of his advantage, maintained his agency, and thus could still claim to be his own man.

It should be said that Mary Kay Ash provides something of a dissenting view on this point: she characterizes her various experiences of good fortune as God’s will, although even in this construction there is agency. “I truly believe the growth of Mary Kay Cosmetics has come about because the first thing we did was to take God as our
partner,” Kay writes. “If we had not done that, I don’t believe we would be where we are today. I believe He has blessed us because our motivation is right” (60). 13

Other good fortune experienced and cited by the writers of these stories include finding good mentors and having good timing with respect to the market. Sandberg states outright multiple times that she has been lucky to get where she is. The pattern in these stories is not to deny the existence or the import of good fortune, including outside help, but rather to acknowledge it and contend that the individual has a deciding say in finding it and/or putting it to use. Sadly, Ivanka Trump offers no summary clichés on this particular point, but of course they are all over American culture: “the best luck of all is the luck you make for yourself,” “luck is where opportunity meets preparation,” etc.

Adversity

Of course, not all luck is good, and not all circumstances are advantageous. Here we come to what is probably the most common theme in business leaders’ stories: the meeting of disadvantage and/or adversity with perseverance. Time and again, these stories highlight the subjects’ experiences with adversity, sometimes of their own making but usually out of their control. Their response is to keep trying, not necessarily by doing the same exact thing, but by continuing to pursue what they want. Walton’s first store gets taken from him; he opens another one. Stone is refused a job at a startup he helped to found, so he talks his way into a job at Google. Sandberg gives herself four months to land a job, and it takes a year. Kay feels like a failure after a divorce, but she puts her

13 “It is strange how things always seem to work out for the best” (69), she writes later.
nose to the grindstone and moves her family into a bigger house. “We fail forward to success” (99), she says. “If we ever decide to compare knees, you’re going to find that I have more scars than anyone in the room. That’s because I have fallen down and gotten up so many times in my life” (12).

Iacocca gets demoted during an economic downturn. “Setbacks are a natural part of life, and you’ve got to be careful how you respond to them,” he writes. Later, he produces a good promotional campaign, but it doesn’t take for reasons outside of his control. Indeed, for much of the early part of Iacocca’s career, his level of success seems dictated by external factors, and his main contribution is to persevere. When he finally gets noticed, he says, he becomes an overnight sensation – but, he emphasizes, after he had toiled for a decade. Walton strikes a similar chord: “like most other overnight successes, [Wal-Mart’s] was about twenty years in the making” (45).

There is an implicit understanding in these stories that merit and reward do not run parallel to one another; there is good luck and bad luck, advantage and disadvantage, arbitrariness and unfairness. But if the individual’s responsibility is to persevere, then responsibility for the outcome shifts to him or her. As in the belief about creating one’s own opportunities, there’s a kind of quasi-statistical logic at play here: You persevere to give yourself more chances at good luck, or at least avoiding bad luck. If you fail once or twice, it is not necessarily your fault. But it is your fault if you stop trying. Perseverance reduces the importance of luck in these stories by turning it into a reflection of merit.14

14 A similar quasi-statistical logic is at play in Iacocca’s assertion that his second big success, the creation of the Mustang, served as proof that he was no “flash in the pan” (86). You don’t get lucky twice.
This is why, for Iacocca, the truly meritorious are not brilliant people, but “men of character and mettle” (178).

Sometimes a disadvantage will prove advantageous if it is approached the right way. “I am convinced that one of the real secrets to Wal-Mart’s phenomenal success has been [swimming upstream]. The things that we were forced to learn and do, because we started out underfinanced and undercapitalized in these remote, small communities, contributed mightily to the way we’ve grown as a company” (63), writes Walton. Or, as Ted Turner puts it in one of Ivanka Trump’s quotes: “I’m convinced that one of the reasons that I’ve been successful is that I’ve almost always competed against people who were bigger and stronger but who had less commitment and desire than I did” (203).

Trump also offers this quote on the matter, from Winston Churchill: “Never, never, never give up” (239).

Sandberg provides an interesting spin on this theme. Where most of the narratives address bad luck, misfortune, and adversity with narratives of persistence, she addresses systemic injustice and discrimination with a narrative of self-advocacy. “Women are … more reluctant to apply for promotions even when deserved, often believing that good job performance will naturally lead to rewards,” she writes. “Hard work and results should be recognized by others, but when they aren’t, advocating for oneself becomes necessary” (63). Sandberg is well aware of the choice she is making to focus attention on what she calls “internal barriers” rather than “institutional barriers,” and she doesn’t excuse systemic injustice in her book, nor blame individual women for being stymied by
patriarchal systems. But her narrative is of a piece with the others in its confidence in the capacity of individual agency to address external circumstance.

**Hard work**

When business leaders argue that their success is in large part a product of perseverance, they would seem to be implicating *hard work* in their formulas as well. How does one keep trying, if not by working? This is true to an extent. But there is actually some disagreement amongst these storytellers about what hard work means and how important it is.

For Walton, hard work is absolutely fundamental, and has a lot to do with time. “Helen bore more than her share of raising the kids, and I worked long hours, at least six days a week. Saturday was our big store day, and I worked all day Saturday and Saturday night too” (89). Recall him saying that everything he’d done, he copied from someone else. He was able to do this because of his sheer effort, he says. “I probably visited more headquarters offices of more discounters than anybody else – ever” (104). Kay’s experience has more to do with scrounging for hours wherever she could find them, and using them efficiently – she didn’t have the opportunity to leave her kids with a spouse – but she still uses a very time-centric conceptualization. She describes time management as a talent neutralizer. “Ordinary people can utilize good time-management techniques and get great results. On the other hand, people who seem to have everything going for them can fail if they do not manage time” (87). Both Walton and Kay describe “paying
the price” for success, conveying a sense that hard work is a sacrifice and involves some form of unpleasantness. They do things others don’t want to do.

Trump, too, throws in with the work-longer-hours crowd:

That’s one of the great things about most work environments: they’re not exactly the most level playing fields, and the easiest way to tilt things to your advantage is to put in the time. You might not be able to match your colleagues in every category, but you can surpass them when it comes to hard work. (145)

“I take great pride,” she writes, “in the fact that my brothers and I are typically the first ones in to the office every morning and the last ones to leave every night” (144). She acknowledges that “all this hard work comes with a price,” but it’s OK. “There’s just no way you can be at your desk first thing on Friday morning, physically yes but mentally no, if you’ve been out all night drinking and partying” (145).

Iacocca emphasizes more of a “work smarter, not harder” angle, at least insofar as hard work can be measured in days or hours. “The ability to concentrate and use your time well is everything if you want to succeed in business,” he writes. “Except for periods of real crisis,” he says, “I’ve never worked on Friday night, Saturday, or Sunday” – a very un-Walton-esque sentiment. Nevertheless, at the end of his book, he concludes that “only hard work succeeds … there are no free lunches” (340). This after multiple withering attacks on Henry Ford II, who “never had to work for anything in his life” and inherited the presidency of the Ford Motor Company. Iacocca’s own experience couldn’t overwhelm the power of the hard work cliché in his worldview.

Stone informs his readers that “Plain hard work is good and important, but it is ideas that drive us” (xv). He says that hard work follows passion. “I could bear any
struggle if my work was bringing me joy” (52). Others agree about the importance of passion, but Stone is the most explicit about making hard work contingent on it.

Sandberg struggles with how hard to work. “There are just not enough hours in the day,” she writes, both to spend time with family and succeed in her job. She regards hard work as a necessity, but does not valorize it in a Walton-esque manner. After her first six months at Facebook:

I started forcing myself to leave the office at five thirty. Every competitive, type-A fiber of my being was screaming at me to stay, but unless I had a critical meeting, I walked out that door. And once I did it, I learned that I could. I am not claiming, nor have I ever claimed, that I work a forty-hour week. Facebook is available around the world, 24/7, and for the most part, so am I. (133)

Amongst these businesspeople, there is a philosophical divide about whether working more hours than the next guy should be seen as a key differentiating factor, or if effort ought to be applied strategically in order to influence outcomes.

Morality

The politicians and athletes examined in previous chapters were only credited with truly deserving their reward if they were said to have achieved them morally, playing by the rules and treating others well along the way. They were also sometimes credited with having merit because they helped others. Moral behavior, in these constructions, is either a necessary prerequisite for merit, or a meritorious quality unto itself. In the business leaders’ accounts of what it takes to succeed, morality takes on an additional role: It is an orientation that actually helps the individual get ahead.

Kay argues that her company succeeded in large part because of its adherence to “the golden rule.” She wished to use her company to empower the women who sold her
cosmetics products, and by helping customers to “look good and feel great,” she says. “Looking good makes you feel better. I believe that at Mary Kay Cosmetics, we are in the business of helping women (and men) turn these good feelings into more positive self-images” (130). As a result, she was rewarded. “I believe [God] has blessed us because our motivation is right. He knows I want women to become the beautiful creatures He created, and to use the wonderful God-given talents that lie within each of us” (60).

Stone views his work at Twitter as having a similarly synergistic quality. “The Twitter I helped build had an idealistic long-term vision. We were in the business of uniting humanity. In fact, I hired a corporate social responsibility person several years before I hired a sales person. … I like to think that I built a brand that is synonymous with freedom of speech and the importance of democratization of information” (203-204). He told employees, he writes, that the company’s mission was to put “value before profit” (191) – but he thinks that doing good reliably led to doing well. “When we help others, we also help ourselves” (180). Walton, striking a similar note, contemplates why Wal-mart had outcompeted other discounters, that “started with more capital and visibility than we did, in larger cities with much greater opportunities” (103):

It all boils down to not taking care of their customers, not minding their stores, not having folks in their stores with good attitudes, and that was because they never really even tried to take care of their own people. If you want the people in the stores to take care of the customers, you have to make sure you’re taking care of the people in the stores. That’s the single most important ingredient of Wal-Mart’s success. (103)

Being good isn’t simply a prerequisite for merit or an end unto itself in these stories. It can help make you rich.
**Chance and choice**

Taken together, the argument these stories make about what it takes to succeed—and the business leaders’ collective answer to the implicit question of why they’ve lost so many competitors in the smoke—amounts mostly to the interaction between chance and choice. The protagonists start in different places, have good luck and bad luck, are variously helped and hindered by people and structures, and invariably meet these external factors with meritorious action. They make better luck when they need to, take advantage of their advantages, and persist through adversity, all the while working hard and choosing to do good. These storylines asserting the primacy of agency in their journeys are the culturally recognizable “good reasons” they should be credited with their success.

We turn now to the question of whether they deserve their *rewards*.

**What they get**

A reporter for *Washingtonian* got his hands on the proposal for Chris Hughes’ book about how he shouldn’t be so rich. The introduction “places readers in a room with Hughes and wealth advisers almost six months after Facebook went public. The ‘lock-up’ period after which Hughes can sell some of his stock is about to expire” (Beajon, 2017). Hughes writes:

It’s hard not to feel like a bit of a fraud sitting here stressing about how many shares to sell and how many to keep … I worked hard, but three years of work does not justify the hundreds of millions of dollars I’m about to receive. I know this, and the Wall Street suits across the table know this.
Thus far, I have dealt mostly with how businesspeople grapple with the question of whether they are responsible (or responsible enough) for their successes, and whether their outcomes actually reflect merit. The question of whether they receive appropriate rewards for their efforts is related, but somewhat distinct. It is one thing to argue that Ivanka Trump is successful because of nepotism, or that Sam Walton excels because of his exploitation of workers. It’s another to argue that even if Chris Hughes did good work that was fundamental to the creation of Facebook, he reaped an absurdly disproportionate amount of money as a result – or even more fundamentally, that no one merits that kind of reward, regardless of his or her efforts and abilities.

Both types of argument are salient in America today. Disputes about executive compensation, for example, sometimes revolve around CEOs who get paid millions for running their companies into the ground. But critics also sometimes address how much more CEOs make than they once did relative to their employees, without getting into the specifics of CEO performance. In an ideal meritocracy, after all, merit would not only be rewarded, but rewards would reflect merit in some proportionate and defensible way.

As we’ve seen, the business leaders highlighted in this chapter acknowledge and grapple with unfairness and arbitrariness in their paths to success. Do these one-percenters see the same dynamics in their compensation and/or accumulation of wealth, and if so, what do they have to say about it? Do they defend the integrity of the market? Concede its whims? Is money meritocratic to them?
This issue is addressed much less reliably than the subject of how to become successful. *How did I do it and what role did luck play?* is a central question in these stories; *Is my compensation obscene?* is not.

Still, the authors address money matters here and there, in different ways. Walton responds to the hubbub surrounding *Forbes* naming him the richest man in America in 1985. He argues that the title is only accurate if you count his family’s Wal-Mart stock holdings, which the Waltons hold onto in order to keep a controlling interest in the company. “I have never seen that [money] myself,” he writes. “Money has never meant that much to me, not even in the sense of keeping score” (9-10). It seems important to Walton to convey that he doesn’t have “a big showy lifestyle” like some of those other “overpaid CEOs, who’re really just looting from the top” (12). “I’ve owned about eighteen airplanes over the years, and I never bought one of them new” (10) he explains, by way of evidence.

Kay makes some very similar assertions. “Money, for its own sake, has never been tremendously important to me. I’ve heard people say that for them, money is a way of keeping score” (132). But she only ever cared about how much money she made when she didn’t have much, she claims, and when early in her career she saw men getting paid more than her for the same work. As a titan of industry, “I have often said that I enjoy what I do so much that I would work for nothing!” (132).

Neither of these perspectives really addresses the question of whether the wealth Walton and Kay accumulated is proportional to their merit or generally justifiable, focusing instead on the subject’s motivation to make money and preferences in using it.
Stone is much the same: He discusses money in the context of making a case for philanthropy. For him, becoming rich brought relief from the stresses of insecurity; beyond that, he lives “modestly on purpose. I like simple, small, cheap things. Timex watches, Levis, and my VW Golf” (181). Rather than spend money, he likes to give it away. This is admirable, but doesn’t answer the question of what Stone thinks about the fact that he has a billion dollars (give or take) in the first place.

Ivanka Trump actually does address the question of whether she receives an appropriate amount of money. In a passage about asking for a raise, she advises readers on how to negotiate, and states that when she has bargained over compensation, she has been rewarded appropriately. “Sometimes I get what I want; other times I don’t. But my father has almost always been right in his assessment. He might not have always given me the raise I wanted, but he usually gave me the raise I deserved” (168). The business world, in the shape of her father, has been fair to her.

Lee Iacocca is a more convoluted case. He echoes Walton and Kay in noting that he’s “not a big spender” (146), though he does use money to keep score: “I appreciate the achievement a high salary represents.” (146). He also addresses, in several ways, the question of whether his pay was merited. After he was terminated from Ford, Iacocca writes that he was “pleased” when an editorial in *Automotive News* “mentioned my $1 million annual income and said that ‘by all standards, he earned every penny’” (132). He earned this money, this line suggests, because of his financial value to the company. Recalling his subsequent battle with the company over his pension, he says, “they were
bastards to the bitter end. To get what I deserved, I hired Edward Bennett Williams, the best lawyer I knew” (134). Iacocca deserved this money because a contract said so.

Later on, Iacocca displays a more flexible understanding of the relationship between compensation and deservingness. After being fired from Ford, Iacocca took on the presidency of Chrysler, a competing automotive company in the process of cratering. While cutting costs, he reduced his own salary to $1.00, a strategic move that would enable him to ask for “equality of sacrifice” from other employees. The next year, after the union made significant concessions, Iacocca took his full salary, over union leaders’ objections. “I didn’t see the top guys at Ford or GM taking any salary cuts after the union had agreed to concessions” (233), he explains.

Beyond the hypocrisy on display here – Iacocca calls for “equality of sacrifice” until the other guy commits to sacrifice, and then Iacocca stops sacrificing – there’s an implicit understanding of compensation, which goes something like this: Take what you can reasonably get. Indeed, in describing the pay cuts at Chrysler, Iacocca says “We cut salaries in all but the lowest levels – we left the secretaries alone. They deserved every cent they made” (232). At higher levels of pay, he seems to suggest, compensation has less to do with deservingness than with leverage.

Sandberg, once again, is writing a different kind of book, and so she discusses her pay not in the context of relaying her path to success but in the context of addressing the gender pay gap and the reasons for it, one of which, she says, is that “people expect men to negotiate on their own behalf, point out their contributions, and be recognized and
rewarded for them” (45). In this light she tells the story of her own negotiation to join Facebook.

When I was negotiating with Facebook’s founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg for my compensation, he made me an offer I thought was fair….I was ready to accept the job. No, I was dying to accept the job. My husband, Dave, kept telling me to negotiate, but I was afraid of doing anything that might botch the deal….right before I was about to say yes, my exasperated brother-in-law, Marc Bodnick, blurted out, “Damn it, Sheryl! Why are you going to make less than any man would make to do the same job!” (46)

Thus motivated, Sandberg returned to Zuckerberg, played hardball, and got a better deal.

It is difficult to see this as a story defending the market as meritocratic. After all, Sandberg begins with the premise that the market is unfair. She does suggest, however, that the individual can bring the market closer to fairness – and that she herself brought her compensation closer to fairness – through appropriate individual action.

When Sandberg officially crossed the line into billionaire status in 2014, the journalist David Kirkpatrick asked, “Did she do a billion dollars worth of work? I don’t know.” Some argued that the question was sexist; would this question be asked about a male billionaire? The New Yorker’s Vauhini Vara argued that the question was also “weird”: “to quantify a billion dollars’ worth of work seems as quixotic as counting how much wood a woodchuck could chuck” (Vara, 2014).

I think this is probably correct, but I still think it’s worth asking what billionaires have to say about the fact that they have a billion dollars. The answer, at least in the books by the six wealthy people in this sample, is that for the most part they don’t get into it. Trump thinks she is paid what she is worth; Iacocca and Sandberg think they have the right to advocate for their own best interests; Kay and Sandberg indicate that the market is unfair in at least one way. Other than that, the notion that more of the proceeds
from business endeavors should go to employees, customers, taxes, or anywhere else, or even that the relationship between money and deservingness warrants interrogation, is not deeply dealt with.

A million clichés speak to the relationship between individual action and success. But the logic of the market need not be explained. It appears to be understood as having a validity separate and apart from the question of whether it is meritocratic. Markets may not be meritocratic, but they don’t have to be.

**How America, and life, work**

The bad guy in Lee Iacocca’s story is Henry Ford II, the second-generation owner of the Ford Motor Company who fired Iacocca from its presidency. Iacocca has many negative things to say about Ford – according to Iacocca, Ford was racist and partied too much – but his fundamental flaw was that he was a spoiled brat. People like Ford, Iacocca says, “go through life tripping through the tulips, wondering what they would have become without Daddy. Poor people complain that no one gave them a break, but the rich guy never knows if he’s accomplished anything on his own” (99). This experience caused Ford to be mean and insecure, Iacocca concludes.

Ivanka Trump echoes this argument, describing rich friends of hers who were not raised with those enviable Trump values, and Sam Walton worries about his grandchildren, who will be rich their whole lives. *Earning* success is a very important principle for these businesspeople, and they believe that individuals cannot be happy or whole without doing so. They care about merit.
Still, as we’ve seen, the businesspeople concede important roles for luck and external factors in their lives, and don’t grapple very carefully with whether they earned all of their money. Some of them also describe, explicitly, an American system that is far from fair or meritocratic. In addition to Sandberg orienting her book around structural unfairness, Kay, Trump, and Iacocca recognize discrimination against women (Iacocca says his secretary would have been a vice-president “if it weren’t for the chauvinism built into the system”), and Iacocca also cites discrimination against Italians and Jews. With the exception of Walton, these writers do not particularly defend or valorize the American system as a level playing field.

They support the ideology of merit in a different way, however, which is perhaps best illustrated by Iacocca’s recollections about Chrysler’s looming bankruptcy, when Chrysler went to the government for bail-out loans. Iacocca acknowledges that if he had been at Ford at the time, he would have opposed loans to save Chrysler as a violation of free market principles. But he wasn’t at Ford, he was at Chrysler, and this allowed him to recognize that because government regulation had contributed to Chrysler’s problems, the company’s failure wasn’t a free market outcome. Iacocca concluded that government intervention was appropriate, and he defends his decision to lobby for it as both correct and savvy. He argues, essentially, that he did what he had to do in the system he encountered, however fair or unfair the system was. And he takes credit when it works.

Merit, in this story, does not exist within a meritocratic system, on a level playing field, or even in a situation where individuals are protected from discrimination. It exists outside or above the system; a meritorious triumph is less like a victory in a refereed
Sporting event and more like surviving on one’s own in the wilderness. And everyone has
a chance to do that.

Somewhat strangely, several of the businesspeople proceed from this
conceptualization to the stated conclusion that truly, profoundly meritorious people
cannot fail. Iacocca argues that people who appear to have done everything right – “the
go-getters who followed a plan, went to school, got a good job, worked hard” – but still
don’t succeed must be screwing up somewhere else.

When you speak to these guys, they’ll often tell you that they’ve had some bad
breaks or perhaps a boss who didn’t like them. Invariably, they present
themselves as victims. But you have to wonder why they had only bad breaks and
why they never seemed to look for good ones. Certainly luck plays a part. But a
major reason capable people fail to advance is that they don’t work well with their
colleagues.” (57)

Kay concedes that “Sadly, most people live and die with their music still
unplayed. They never dare to try. … Women, especially, have so much potential they
never tap” (9). But if the individual approaches obstacles the correct way, success is
guaranteed. “Remember that whatever you vividly imagine, ardently desire, sincerely
believe, and enthusiastically act upon must inevitably come to pass” (120).

Trump sums up this perspective with a quote from Oprah Winfrey: “If you do
work that you love, and the work fulfills you, the rest will come.” (Stone dissents here:
“success isn’t guaranteed, but failure is certain if you aren’t truly emotionally invested in
your work” (51)).

This is the master narrative to which these business leaders adhere: The system
may not be fair, these stories tell us. But life is fair enough for actions to determine
outcomes, and for individuals to be assessed in this context.
Myth-busting?

Reading *Lean In* in 2017 was a strange experience, because the book felt weirdly out of date, for two reasons. The first is that Sandberg’s book drew a great deal of attention, which means that the arguments it makes and evidence it offers have become part of elite discourse, and can feel familiar to someone who (like me), follows news and politics. This is no indictment – it’s evidence that Sandberg accomplished at least some small part of what she set out to do.

The other reason the book feels out of date is because of its implicit optimism about America. Sandberg offers caveats about class and opportunity, acknowledging that there are inequities that prevent some people from pursuing the sort of success she addresses and framing her argument as relevant for people with “choices.” But even this, in 2017, felt too hopeful, too focused on how to attain a bright future when society’s attention has turned to avoiding dark fates.

In previous chapters, I have looked for evidence of an evolution over time in how individual stories conceive of merit and its role in life, and argued that there are signs of differences in contemporary stories and those told in digital contexts; that a crisis of confidence in American meritocracy is affecting the American understanding of how lives work. This is a more difficult question to ask in this chapter, because of the size of the sample – six books spread over 35 years cannot reflect discursive themes the way a large collection of profiles, advertisements, speeches, and columns can. But I still want to contend that a few themes emerge in these books that speak to the same cultural
developments. Namely, the more recent stories display more awareness and lend more importance to systemic factors than their predecessors. They stop short, however, of expressing true dissent from the core of merit ideology.

All of the books grapple with the potential role of unmeritocratic factors in life outcomes, and several of the books deal with systemic unmeritocratic factors. But Iacocca and Kay treat discrimination, nepotism, and the like as background noise – abiding realities that warrant acknowledgment and occasionally necessitate individual adjustment. In the contemporary narratives, these external factors are foregrounded, and dealt with in prominent ways. The existence of systemic discrimination is of course the central premise of *Lean In*, and dealing with it the book’s animating purpose. Biz Stone largely ignores systemic factors in his own rise, but thinks about external ones such as luck, and also dedicates a chapter to developing “a new definition for capitalism.”

Inequality, political instability, and climate change threaten global prosperity, he says, citing Bill Clinton, and industry “is either going to destroy the world or save it” (190).

Companies must … develop products that deliver deeper meaning. It’s important that we recognize value before profit. Challenging the very nature of ambition in business is not a well-worth path. Nevertheless, I wanted us to go out of our way to help others (190).

This speaks less directly than Sandberg does to a crisis in meritocracy, but it accepts as a premise profound flaws in existing social systems and proposes dramatic change to address it, more radical than Iacocca’s call for a return to “basic values.”

Ivanka Trump, for her part, returns again and again, almost obsessively, to the subject of her own advantage in an attempt to defray it precisely because the subject is so salient, not just in her case but, I would argue, in her moment. In this way, I think, the
contemporary narratives reflect and respond to an evolution in the ideology of merit, and a growing awareness of the social currents that cause books like *The Self-Made Myth* to exist.

That said, not even the newer narratives go so far as to conceive of individuals as being inside of systems *without the possibility of operating outside of them*. They also don’t grapple with the possibility of a person doing everything right and still failing to surmount systemic boundaries (Sandberg comes the closest to doing this, by acknowledging in an early caveat that she knows “it seems like I am letting our institutions off the hook” (11), but insisting that she does not wish to do so). Nor, crucially, do they imagine the possibility that existing structures might be so bad that they either dole out rewards arbitrarily, or systematically reward *negative* behaviors or attributes. Essentially, they do not contend with the possibility that success might not be correlated with merit at all, or that the effort to assess individuals by their demonstrated merit might be foolhardy.

This is where stories that explicitly aim to counteract traditional success narratives can (and often do) distinguish themselves. The stories in Miller and Lapham’s book contain lines like this one, from entrepreneur Jerry Fiddler: “There are millions of people who have the qualities that make you successful in business but who weren’t lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time or to get the right help. So having the capabilities is necessary but nowhere near sufficient” (59). Or this one, from Warren Buffett: “If you stick me down in the middle of Bangladesh or Peru or someplace, you’ll find out how much this talent is going to produce in the wrong kind of soil…. I work in a
market system that happens to reward what I do very well – disproportionately well” (74). Conversely, “if you are a terrific nurse, this world will not pay a lot for it” (75).

Even these dissenting stories tend to stop short of imagining that success is unrelated or inversely related to merit (they are, after all, told from the point of view of successful people). But they flip the emphasis of individual factors and external ones, allowing more for the possibility that external factors win out. In so doing, they better capture the kinds of dissent voiced in the 2016 campaign by Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders, as well as by the most radical assessments of athletes described in Chapter Five. They also reflect an individual-level pessimism, the absence of which makes Lean In feel out of place in 2017. This skepticism about merit’s place is at the heart of true counter-narratives to the traditional master narrative of the ideology of merit, and what we see in this chapter is mainstream narratives stretching and adjusting to this cultural development, trying to adapt it without conceding its premises.
Nick and Anita, whom I mentioned at the start of Chapter One, have lived very different lives from one another, in terms of both the paths they had traveled and the destinations they had reached by the time I spoke to them. One came from a supportive middle class family and ended up in a lucrative job he enjoyed; the other came from a more precarious background, and had spent her adult life bouncing from one marginal job to another. But from their journeys they had drawn a similar conclusion: They had wound up, professionally, about where they deserved to be based on their performance – they had earned their outcomes, and their lives reflected their merit.

In this conviction Nick and Anita do not appear to be exceptional. In my 60 interviews, I heard Americans tell a wide variety of stories about their lives and careers, and conclude that they had basically earned their life outcomes, for better or worse:

- A 50-year-old man with an engineering Ph.D., who had made a good deal of money in real estate and then moved on to angel investing, said he felt he had ended up in a “pretty accurate” socioeconomic position, given his performance.

- A 31-year-old woman who works as a probation officer and wants to make a living as a writer said, about both her successes and failures, “I feel like it’s all on me.”

- A 56-year-old man who had been a road crew worker and moved on to work in a retail store said “I think I’m where I deserve to be.”

- A 25-year-old pharmacist who had gotten a degree in audio production but abandoned his hope of a career in music said “I earned the spot I’m in.”

- A 42-year-old recovering addict with insecure housing said “I feel as though I earned where I am. And it’s crippling.”
This sounds like America: Individualism, personal responsibility, meritocracy. But interestingly (and as others such as Sennett and Cobb (1972) and Silva (2013) have found before), many of the same people who believed they had reached generally justifiable positions in life didn’t think America is a meritocracy at all. Both Nick and Anita, for example, believed the American system to be profoundly unfair.

Nor was everyone equally convinced of the appropriateness of their outcomes. About ten of my 60 interviewees indicated that they thought they deserved better in life – like one 59-year-old black woman who had seen throughout her career in social work white men doing the same job as she, for more money. Approximately the same number said they hadn’t done enough to earn their positions, and were just lucky, like one 26-year-old black woman who was in medical school, and felt she had gotten there primarily because of her parents’ money and affirmative action. Some of these folks who thought they didn’t deserve their stations said that America is a meritocracy.

The reason some people think they are getting fair outcomes from an unfair system or unfair outcomes from a fair one – and really, the reason questions of individual merit are so complicated, controversial, and preoccupying – is that the American ideology of merit, applied to individual lives, is neither as straightforward nor as blinkered to nuances of social dynamics as it is sometimes made out to be. When Americans tell our stories, we do not for the most part convey that we are “self-made,” or that such a thing is even possible. Nor do we typically understand opportunity to be

15 I use weasel words like “about” and “approximately” here because people’s thoughts on these matters are, obviously, complex. I am attempting to convey the overall tenor of their reflections, but there are a few borderline or convoluted cases that are impossible to categorize with precision.
distributed in an equitable fashion, or rewards to accurately and proportionately reflect performance. Rather, as we saw in discourses about the lives of politicians, athletes, and businesspeople, Americans understand life outcomes to be the product of complex interactions between individuals and circumstances. Our explanations for success and standards for deservingness are fluid and relative, and so our construction of merit and our conclusions about its role in the lives of ourselves and others are diverse, thoughtful, and sometimes contradictory.

In this chapter, I draw on my conversations with 60 Americans about how they got to where they are in life and whether they got there due to merit. First, I outline the major factors Americans cite when explaining their life outcomes, from hard work to luck to faith and frugality. Then I explain which of these factors are linked to earning and deservingness, as well as which are understood to be advantages and disadvantages and the common storylines used to deal with them. I examine how assessments of merit are made, and how they relate – or don’t – to an individual’s position in the American economic and social systems. I argue that Americans’ assessments of our own lives are influenced by meritocratic premises, but are ultimately more concerned with the principles of merit than of meritocracy. The master narrative of American merit is a story that attempts to separate merit from potential meritocratic confounds. Finally, I consider what it would mean to express dissent from this narrative, and ask what signs exist that a contemporary crisis in the ideology of merit is affecting the way Americans view their lives.
Explaining Outcomes

Ask an American how she got to where she is in life, and chances are she will tell you a story that includes several of the following factors: Parents/family, social class, education, hard work, drive, grit or perseverance, decision-making, identity (such as race, gender, or sexual orientation), large political and economic forces, help and hindrance from others, frugality, faith, morality, luck, and (if pressed) talent. Below, I review the role that each tends to play in our narratives. Some are fairly straightforward, and so I treat them briefly; others require more elaboration.

Parents/family

We believe our parents and guardians make us who we are, for better or worse, and usually for better. Parents lay foundations in our stories: they teach or model core values and behaviors that we believe contribute to success, help us develop useful skills, and provide support. I spoke to a 37-year-old woman who was working as a Vice-President of a consulting firm and felt successful in her career. I asked her to what she attributed her success. “My parents both worked, hard,” she said, right off the bat. “I watched them work hard. I watched them worry about money. I watched them place a huge emphasis on education.” One 46-year-old man from a neighborhood that was hit hard during the crack epidemic said the main reason he hadn’t spent his adult life incarcerated was that his grandfather had taught him to do electrical work, which allowed him to make money in the 1980s when “mostly all my friends were selling crack and street hustling.”
Fewer interviewees pointed to damage their parents had done to them, but when they did it was along the same indices: the parents were bad formative influences or failed to provide appropriate support. A 59-year-old man whom I’ll call Thomas had been in and out of prison for most of his life, and linked his directionlessness and need for affirmation to his mother’s lack of attention in his youth. “She tried to have fun…. She apologized to us later in her life. I mean I understood, she was young and she was let loose, and I mean I had a lot of bouts with troubles and stuff during my youth…. I looked for something to grab onto. I still do think I have that type of habit, of looking for something to grab onto, as far as family.”

The other family dynamic that surfaces repeatedly in interviewees’ stories is the importance of birth order and sibling context in the development of personality traits, such as in the case of a woman who said she had developed her sense of responsibility caring for younger siblings.

Class

In a story about how you got to where you are, your social class of origin is generally understood in American culture to be a relevant and necessary piece of information. Class is of course intertwined with parents, but specific references to the financial resources of one’s past tend to be offered as an indicator of opportunities available. In telling success stories, several interviewees pointed out that their parents could afford to send them to college, and more than one noted the safety net that their middle-class families provided. On the flip-side, one 76-year-old woman who had spent
31 years working for the federal government and the city of Philadelphia recalled that she had wanted to go to college, but her mom wanted her to work. She felt successful, but thought her career might have gone differently if she had been born into different class circumstances.

Class can also be treated as a formative influence, helping a person to develop traits like a strong work ethic (if, for example, he or she was required to work from a young age). It is important to note that while many interviewees shared a sense that class was a relevant consideration in their outcomes and that it relates to opportunity, there was less clarity about what represented an advantageous or disadvantageous class situation. Much more on this below.

Education

In addition to a general understanding that attending college opens doors, a few interviewees attributed successful outcomes to traits and skills they actually developed and learned in school. Others attributed disappointing outcomes to their educations, either in the sense that those educations weren’t sufficient, or that the participant had gone to a school he or she should not have. The 25-year-old pharmacist said that the music production program he had entered proved to be a bad fit for him, because it required a more aggressive personality. He was “trying to fit a square into a circle peg,” he said.

Hard work
It will not come as a surprise that many interviewees thought hard work was an important ingredient in their life outcomes, given the veneration of hard work in American culture. Many people who felt successful believed hard work had enabled or assisted their success, by allowing them to advance or helping them develop a valuable ability. Some who felt unsuccessful decided they had not worked hard enough, though a few others observed that they had failed to succeed in spite of their hard work.

Typically, people associated hard work with the expenditure of time (“getting up at 5:30 or 6:00 every day, not wasting time,” explained one financial manager) or the application of effort (“Whether you work 40 hours or 48 hours, it doesn’t matter,” said an assistant manager at a retail store; he found value in “going the extra mile” for a customer).

Drive

Drive takes hard work, but it is not the same thing as hard work. Drive is the application of work directed toward a specific goal; not just showing up to work and trying but doing so in a strategic way. People often point to drive as a differentiating factor – why one person did better than another, or moved from one circumstance to another. A 28-year-old man working as a computer technician explained that he had gone further in life than his younger brother because “He doesn’t have the drive that I do.” Some cited drive as a reason for why they didn’t do something. “There’s lots of things I could have done, if I’d shown more initiative and energy,” explained a retired military intelligence analyst about why he didn’t go further in his career. A related concept to
drive that didn’t come up in a great many of my interviews, but might have if I had spoken to more entrepreneurs, is risk, the strategic acceptance of potential bad outcomes in an attempt to achieve a good one.

_Grit_

Duckworth et al. (2007) define grit as “perseverance and passion for long term goals,” and say that it “entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress” (1087-1088). Adversity, and the response to it, actually came up less frequently in my interviews than it did in the mediated narratives I analyzed (in which it came up _constantly_). But several people told stories in which success followed from their willingness or ability to persist in the face of hardship or failure. “I’m a fighter,” said an African-American police officer, describing the response that helped him overcome discrimination he had faced in pursuit of promotions. A 35-year-old teacher said she had “a lot of setbacks … There are some people who aren’t able to deal with that, and those setbacks could totally change the trajectory of their lives.”

Though some interviewees admitted to not working especially hard or not having much drive, few pointed to insufficient resilience, persistence, or grit as an important factor in their positions. Even amongst the numerous people I interviewed who were disappointed in their outcomes and placed the blame at their own feet, none said, “I’m a quitter.”
Decision-making about life paths

“I sort of wish I had made different choices,” said Erin, a wealthy 50-something housewife facing the prospect of an empty nest and without a career to return to. Erin did not feel that she had failed to work hard in her earlier working years, nor lacked drive. But she wished that when she had been building her career, she had chosen one in which she could have acquired training, and developed an expertise she could now apply.

Decisions about life paths could be understood as being mostly outside a person’s control – “I couldn’t have known”; “I stumbled into that” – or as reflecting their individual qualities, such as “stupidity,” as one woman said of her decision to marry her ex-husband.

Identity

Several interviewees cited race, gender, and other aspects of social identity as factors that influenced their outcomes. One 34-year-old woman said matter-of-factly that because she is black, female, and Muslim she has had to work harder than others. Others cited personal experience with the gender pay gap and racial discrimination. Three interviewees mentioned difficult experiences with sexual orientation, less explicitly in terms of discrimination in the professional context (when compared to race and gender) but rather as an issue with which they struggled in their personal lives. One woman mentioned her physical appearance as a relevant factor in her life outcomes:

“I’m a person that gets picked, I stand out in a crowd. And so often that’s a good thing… I get chosen for the thing, or I get the job, or I got an A even though, or whatever it is. So I do have those experiences. I’m like a smiley girl with like big red hair. So I get attention without trying too hard.”
Large political and economic forces

“You’re just along for the ride,” said a 28-year-old assistant manager in a retail store who had gone to college to be a draftsman, landed a job in the home-building industry, and then lost it in the housing crash of 2008. It was “societal-level stuff” that had put him in his position. A 25-year-old college graduate who worked stocking shelves at a grocery store similarly pointed to the broader economy as a deciding factor in his situation. A man from York said that his entire city was “part of the rust belt that has been left behind” and that this had held him back somewhat; he blamed government intervention in the economy. Others referred more generally to relative strengths or weaknesses of industries they had entered at different times, and the effect those had on their progress.

Help and hindrance from other people

People cited help from many different sources in their stories. Beyond parents, people were helped by teachers and mentors, spouses and significant others, bosses; the help took the form of money, opportunity, guidance, childcare, and networking. A 69-year-old man who owns a heating, ventilation and air conditioning company explained that he may not have been able to get his company off the ground had it not been for a former supervisor connecting him to initial clients. “He was a key to us being successful,” he said. “You can be good, you can be lucky, but you have to have help.” Hindrance came in the form of bad bosses (as in the case of a teacher who lost a job
because she didn’t get along with her boss) and mooching family members (as in the case of the probation officer, whose brother borrowed money from her and refused to pay it back). Seven interviewees felt hindered by divorces or breakups, for which they pointed primarily to the behaviors of their exes. These cases also involve decision-making, as several of these participants said they were mistaken to couple with those partners in the first place.

**Frugality and expenditure**

Three older interviewees who described themselves as successful – one the aforementioned retired government worker, one the owner of the HVAC business, and one retired technical school teacher – believed that living simply was a key to their success. “We never buy anything that we couldn’t afford. The only thing we’ve ever had a mortgage on was when we bought this land for $26,000,” said the owner of the HVAC company, sitting at his dining room table. “The house was built piece-by-piece, two, three years, working on the house. Always cash. Or check I guess. But you gotta live within your means, and you gotta prepare for the future.” One 28-year-old said he was struggling financially in part because he and his wife had taken on a mortgage “on the higher end” of what they could afford.

**Faith**

In a small number of cases, faith appeared in stories as an individual action, and the storyteller explained that he has achieved his position because of his expressions of
faith. A Reverend told me that he became a community leader because he asks God for direction, and was pointed to where he is today. “It’s all for the asking,” he said.

In other cases, faith is positioned as a determinant outside of the individual’s control. “Everything is written,” said the aforementioned Muslim woman. A probation officer told me she “could’ve been on the other side of my desk…. I don’t like to say it’s all luck. I like to say I’m God’s child and he protects me.”

*Morality*

Interviewees cited behaving compassionately and honestly as a relevant factor in their outcomes – but not always as something that helped them. The HVAC company owner said that he succeeded because he showed his customers they could trust him: “As long as you don’t cheat people, you got ’em.” But a 44-year-old Trader Joe’s employee felt that his efforts to be kind and compassionate had backfired: “all it has done is open me up to be take advantage of.” One middle-aged woman who worked as an office manager and was disappointed in her professional progress felt that her honesty had hindered her at times.

*Luck*

Luck of course overlaps with several of the other categories on this list. Anything outside of an individual’s control can be characterized as luck, and so at various points interviewees said they were lucky to have good parents, lucky to come from a particular class, lucky to be born in the United States, lucky to meet a mentor. Some interviewees
characterized good decisions as simple luck, feeling that they had effectively called “tails” on coin flips that went their way.

Other instances of luck affecting a person’s outcomes in his or her story include episodes involving health (or the absence of such episodes) and fortunate timing, such as in the case of a retired sailor who had worked in the Navy as a graphic illustrator, a job he enjoyed and which he said he landed in part because he happened to know the right people when picking his path in the military. “I was in the right place at the right time,” he said. There were some philosophical differences amongst my interviewees about the questions of whether luck really exists and how much control one has over one’s opportunities, which I discuss more below.

Talent (kind of)

Whether because of humility or an earnest assessment of their lives, there were very few interviewees who pointed to natural abilities as a determining factor in their outcomes, nor even very many who explicitly brought it up as an ingredient without being asked. When I asked people about talent specifically, interviewees typically acknowledged that natural abilities played some role in outcomes, understanding it as a predisposition that needed to be made manifest through work or drive. People described themselves as “mechanically inclined,” “adept with numbers,” naturally getting along with people, having a knack for entertaining children, and being generally intelligent. A dancer said he had an innate understanding of how his body works. Several understood talent in religious terms, as a gift from God that individuals are given to use. But whether
religious or not, interviewees explained talent as necessary but not sufficient for success, at least in their own cases.

The office manager disappointed with her professional progress saw talent as something that had allowed her to get by – “I am smart and that has made things easier throughout life” – but believed she had nevertheless failed to achieve success because of her laziness and decision-making.

Interviewees who responded to my questions about talent by rating their talents tended to place themselves somewhere in the middle of the intelligence bell curve, and pointed to some other characteristic as more relevant to their outcomes. “I don’t think I’m particularly smart,” said a medical student. “Maybe you could say I’m determined.” The angel investor who had earned an engineering Ph.D. said he was “smarter than average” but that “the most important thing is perseverance.” Plenty of people in his Ph.D. cohort who were smarter than he didn’t complete the degree, he said. I interviewed no individuals who described themselves as exceptionally talented, and none who described themselves as substantially lacking in natural ability.

**Performance and the market**

An individual’s performance in a professional, educational, or financial pursuit can be viewed as an outcome of some of these other factors, but can also be understood as a contributing factor in broader professional/socioeconomic outcomes. One man said he rose to the position of manager at a catering company because the plates he cleaned were “squeaky clean.” Another lost a job in a grocery store because he regularly arrived
late or no-showed. In some cases, performance was connected to outcomes through market mechanisms such as leverage. A computer technician was able to negotiate a raise and win the independent contractor status he desired in part because he was so good at his job, enabling his boss to take vacations and garnering competing offers. Though an individual’s assessment of his or her own performance could influence the market, it was not reliably understood to do so, often because of some of the other factors discussed here, such as discrimination, hindrance from bad bosses, bad luck, or larger economic forces.

I should reiterate that interviewees’ stories almost always involved some combination of factors in interaction as an explanation of how they had come to be who and where they were in life. The closest an interviewee came to a single-factor explanation was the Reverend who said he asked God for guidance and was pointed on his way; other than that, individuals who pointed to hard work also discussed luck, class, and socioeconomic forces, and vice versa. To understand how people decide whether they earned or deserved outcomes – which is to say, to understand their conceptualization of merit and their thoughts on its place in their lives – we need to consider which of these factors contribute to deservingness, under what circumstances, and how the other factors relate to them.

“Your contribution to life is relative”: Earning and deserving

Hassan is the CEO of his own company. He feels blessed, and also that he is “the definition of meritocracy.” Of Lebanese descent but born and raised in Egypt, he
describes his class background precisely: his family was upper middle class by Egyptian standards, middle class by American standards, and his parents sent him to a private school for the “upper-upper middle class.” He grew up in two worlds, he says: his school was elite, his neighborhood was not, and to this day he feels he benefits from the ability he developed to connect with people across class lines. As far as nature and talent go, he says when asked, he may have some natural social skills, and “there is enough evidence” that his family is “above average in terms of smarts … and social skills, and basic talent,” but he is not confident about this. He was pretty good at math in school.

Hassan’s father wanted him to take over the family business, but he had a passion for engineering, so he went to school for that, and came to the U.S. for graduate school. He graduated at the top of his class, and the dean of his school helped him get him a job in the States, which enabled him to get a green card. From there he worked his way up the industry, getting an MBA along the way, and was eventually hired as a senior vice president of a major institution. After several years there he decided to start his own company. “It was a totally unfounded aspiration that I will succeed, but I somehow had the ignorance and the courage to do it.” His company struggled through the recession of 2008 but came out the other end, and is now prospering, doing work that he finds rewarding and believes is of social value. He feels he does a good job running the business, though he does not subscribe to the idea that CEOs should be up at dawn and burning the midnight oil – he works hard, but not relentlessly.

I asked Hassan what it means to him to earn something. “Your contribution to life is relative. You have certain assets. Those assets sometimes you are born with, and
sometimes you actually enhance through life,” he said. “Your name, your looks, your
height, your smarts, all of that you had nothing to do.... The question really in my opinion
is, your contribution then to society has to be driven by the relative assets that you started
with.” You earn something by “taking the assets that you have and leveraging them.”

This answer captures an important dynamic in the American construction of
merit. I asked interviewees several different questions that orbited around the general
idea of whether they had earned their successes and/or failures, whether they deserved
their positions in society, and whether they had experienced their own lives in America
meritocratically, ending up about where they should be. Their answers reliably indicated
that they associated the notions of earning or deserving with the actions one takes
regarding the factors under one’s own control.

This of course recalls Simon’s “principle of agency”:

We deserve X (on grounds of merit) on the basis of Z only if Z is the result of the
exercise of some quality of ours, and possession of that quality is not caused by
factors beyond our control. (497)

The next question is which factors Americans regard as being under our own control and
deserving of reward – i.e. what it means for someone to actually “leverage,” as opposed
to simply demonstrate, his or her assets.

I will not surprise you by noting that my interviewees did not generally say they
had earned anything due to their classes of origin, or because of large economic forces.
But among the several factors in life outcomes that are more potentially related to the
individual – talent, decision-making, frugality, faith, hard work, drive, grit, and
performance – interesting distinctions emerged.
Note that Hassan includes “smarts” on his list of “assets” for which the individual is not responsible. This was common: In addition to being described as a secondary factor in determining outcomes, talent was viewed as largely unrelated to deservingness. One 25-year-old aspiring actor who thought he had natural ability as a thespian said he had not yet earned anything in that arena, because he had not put in enough work. As in the discourse about star athletes and businesspeople, talent was described by interviewees as a “gift.” *Developing* one’s talents could be meritorious, but natural ability was understood to be outside of the individual’s control, and thus not a way for the individual to earn something.

Decision-making about paths in life, such as which career to pursue, which company to join, or which advice to follow was understood to be more subject to the individual’s control than talent, but nevertheless seemed to occupy an in-between space regarding deservingness. As I noted above, some decision-making was considered agentive, such as in the case of the woman who castigated herself for her “stupidity” in marrying her ex-husband. It is perhaps strange that her agency is linked to a measure of intelligence, which is typically thought to be a form of talent. Nevertheless, in these cases, decision-making was understood to be related to deservingness.

Other decisions, though, were not understood as being agentive, and were thus less reflective of the decision-maker’s merit. The 28-year-old who had been a draftsman but ended up working in retail after the crash of the home-building industry had clearly made a decision to go into that industry, but did not feel responsible for the outcome, because the industry’s fortunes were way out of his control and unrelated to his
deservingness. The key distinction between the two types of decisions – those reflective of merit, and those that are not – seems to be whether the decision-maker had or should have had access to sufficient information to make a good decision.

Frugality was mentioned by only a few interviewees, all of whom understood it to be related to deservingness, in the sense that one could earn a positive socioeconomic outcome by preserving resources, or earn a more negative outcome by wasting them. I should note, though, that it is very easy to imagine caveats to this pattern: No interviewee described going broke because of a sick child’s medical bills, for example, but at least some people would not consider that a deserved outcome. It is safe to assume that some forms of expenditure are considered to be reasonably under an individual’s control and others not, with the distinction in the eye of the beholder. Faith was mentioned in an agentive context by even fewer interviewees, but I thought it noteworthy that a Reverend who credited all his outcomes to God nevertheless included some agency in his explanation of his life by saying that he *took action* by asking God for guidance.

The single factor that interviewees most consistently and explicitly related to the notions of earning and deservingness was hard work. Time and again, when I asked people who felt successful whether they had earned their success, they pointed to the fact that they had worked hard as a reason that they had. People who felt they deserved better in life tended to highlight the fact that they had worked hard as evidence of this deservingness. Whether or not it actually produced positive outcomes, hard work justified them.
Hard work was so revered as a meritorious individual behavior that it was sometimes conflated with pro-social behavior more broadly. I mentioned earlier a 46-year-old man whose grandfather had taught him to do electrical work. I’ll call him Ronald. Ronald said he believed that hard work both reliably lead to and justified success – “good things come to those who work,” he said, and contended he had earned the good things he had in life by working hard. I asked him for an example of an unsuccessful person, and he gave me the example of a drug dealer. A few minutes later, I asked him what separated the people he knew who had done well from the ones who had not. This exchange ensued:

Ronald: “Hard work, hard work. They work. ‘Cuz laziness don’t get you nothing. But drug dealers not lazy, there’s hard work in that, too. You gotta worry about the police, then you gotta worry about competition. Then you gotta worry about your product you selling. So that’s work, too.

Doron: “So then the difference isn’t hard work? Because the drug dealers are working hard too?”

Ronald: “They’re working hard.”

I probably should have pushed him further, but sadly, on the recording, an awkward pause follows. For Ronald, hard work was what separated the successful from the unsuccessful, because hard work is good – meritorious, even. But when Ronald thought closely about the experience of the people he had characterized as unsuccessful, he decided that they worked hard, too.

Or consider the 28-year-old former draftsman, working as an assistant manager in a retail store. I’ll call him Eric. Eric had lost faith in the American economic system, saw unfair outcomes all over the place, but said, emphatically and repeatedly, that he believed in hard work regardless. Eric came from a Christian background, and may have been drawing on its teachings in developing his philosophy that working hard was the right
thing to do regardless of whether there was any expectation of reward for it. It was a principle unto its own.

This moral dimension to the conceptualization of hard work helps explain why people who were thought not to have worked hard in life – whether oneself or others – were often thought to have done something wrong, and were castigated for laziness. Hard work is sometimes different in this sense from the notion of drive. Both lack of hard work and lack of drive were regularly cited as an explanation for the failure to achieve or deserve something. But the valence of the explanations could be different. I mentioned above a retired military intelligence analyst who said he could have done more in his career, but lacked the drive to do so. He went on to explain: “I felt satisfied.” Another middle-aged man, who owned and managed a retail store, was extremely fond of music, but said he “never had the drive to make it in the music industry.” That work, he said, required a great deal of self-promotion, and he didn’t have it in him. He thought this outcome was fair, but did not chastise himself for his lack of drive, nor the associated decision not to assume the risk of attempting a musical career, the way a person who considered himself lazy might.

Drive, in other words, could be a credit to someone’s merit, but lack of drive did not have to be an indictment. This seemed to be less the case for poorer people. Anita, for example, chastised herself for her failure to show sufficient ambition, and a 34-year-old social worker from a poor neighborhood in north Philadelphia said that the difference between herself and her incarcerated brother was “just drive,” and faulted him for his
failures. When you are poor, you can be indicted not only for failing to work hard, but for failing to take initiative in changing your circumstances.

Grit also plays a more nuanced role in our understanding of deservingness than does hard work. Grit is not directly associated with earning the way hard work is – many people answered questions about whether they had earned their outcomes by saying, “well, I worked hard”; fewer said, “well, I’m gritty.” Instead, people cited grit as something that had helped them get to where they are, or as a personal characteristic of which they were proud. Grit enhances deservingness but is less definitionally associated with earning than is hard work, perhaps because it is easier to imagine someone earning an outcome without grit (you could show up to work every day, enjoy your job, and earn your paycheck without adversity) than without work.

Morality is understood to be an individual factor that contributes to deservingness. But in the professional and socioeconomic contexts, it seems to be viewed more as a prerequisite for deservingness than as a trait or behavior connected directly to reward. Moral behaviors are not expected to lead to any specific positive outcome, nor are they usually understood to justify them unless coupled with other actions.

Finally, meeting performance standards for a given situation was generally regarded as related to deservingness, and in some cases market outcomes that were influenced by performance were understood to be deserved. Interviewees who made sales, for instance, viewed them as agentive accomplishments warranting reward. But other interviewees indicated that market outcomes did not determine deservingness, generally because the market did not reflect performance or actual social contribution, as
in the case of a dairy farmer who felt the milk market exploited farmers. In any case, however, performance was often assumed to be a product of other factors, including deserving behaviors such as hard work and grit, and to the extent that performance created deservingness, I would argue, it was as a reflection of these.

*Choice, struggle, and time*

We earn and deserve professional and socioeconomic outcomes primarily through hard work, to a less consistent extent through grit and drive, and sometimes through decision-making, frugality, and faith. Morality is a necessary backdrop for this dynamic and performance is an intermediary reflection of inputs. The themes that connect these factors, I would argue, are *choice, struggle, and time.* We exercise our agency by making choices, and pay for positive outcomes with our most fundamental resources: our time and our comfort.

Recall that people understood hard work to refer to the expenditure of time or the application of effort. They thought that the choice to sacrifice one’s time and absorb the unpleasantness of struggle (not just work, but “hard” work) justified positive outcomes. Drive involves making this choice in a more targeted way, and can be enhanced by the assumption of risk because its acceptance of potential struggle; grit involves making the choice over and over again in the face of adversity.

Talent, on its own, is not conventionally associated with deservingness because it is not thought to involve the exercise of choice, the use of time, or struggle – though I would argue that this particular construction looks less coherent when one thinks in terms
of the application of talent, which is a choice, and considers that traits such as grit or drive may have a genetic component, and be just as much of a “gift” as height, speed, or smarts. As in the discourse of business tycoons and especially the discourse about star athletes, there is a confusion in American culture about the relationship between talent, agency, and deservingness. This confusion is reflected in our everyday cultural practices: Americans praise people for their talents (“she’s so smart) and deride others for lacking them (President Trump on Stephen Colbert: “a no-talent guy”’) though we contend these qualities are out of their control. We also take pride in our own talents, though many of us are careful not to boast about them. Going on and on about how hard one works, on the other hand, is less of a taboo. We treat talent, and its implications about individuals, inconsistently. But then again, the “good reasons” of narrative rationality need not satisfy traditional logical standards.

In any case, the individual factors that we use to construct deservingness are not the whole story. Americans exercise choice, use time, and struggle in the context of myriad external factors that may help to explain our outcomes. How do they fit in?

“Born on second base”: Dealing with advantage

Paul does not have a great story to tell, merit-wise, and he knows it. His father owns a successful business in a niche market, and he was raised in comfort – actually, his father “spoiled the shit out of his kids.” Paul went to college to study hotel management, then moved out to California and began working in the hotel industry. But he didn’t like it, and before long came back home and joined the family business. Now 32, he is in
charge of operations and is a partner in the company. He doesn’t know if it’s the ideal job for his personality type. A lot of the guys he works with are blue-collar, and he is not; a lot of the guys he works with are mechanical, and he lacks that inclination.

“But on the other hand I don’t know what I would be doing if I wasn’t doing this,” he says. “To live the lifestyle that I’m accustomed to, I couldn’t afford it, being a front desk manager [in a hotel].”

I asked Paul how much he would attribute his position in life to his circumstances, and how much to his own contributions. At first, he said it was “100% circumstances.” “I was clearly dealt a hand … if I wasn’t born into this, I would never be here.” But a moment later, he revised his answer. “The opportunity was there, but I took it.” He decided the ratio was more like 80:20. And he was comfortable with that.

“I think at this point I have earned the equity in the company that I now have.”

You don’t have to read Jezebel or attend a Peggy McIntosh seminar to see the privilege in Paul’s story. The backpack he is wearing is visible to all – including Paul himself. What is less obvious is how, standing at the top of a tilted playing field and seeing it for what it is, Paul concludes that he earned a touchdown.

The first thing that is important to note about the place of advantages in my interviewees’ stories is that the interviewees were generally not shy about discussing them. Participants may not have identified all of their advantages (more on this later), but they recognized that advantage could and often did play a role in their outcomes. Time and again, often without my prompting, interviewees included in explanations of their
lives advantageous class circumstances, advantageous parental circumstances, and lucky breaks.

The range of socioeconomic and family circumstances that interviewees described as advantageous was striking. Paul of course felt that his family background put him at an advantage in his professional life, as did several interviewees who had gone to private or good suburban public schools, and whose parents had paid for their educations. Others felt they were at an advantage because they had an opportunity to go to college, and still others said they were lucky to come from two-parent homes. “A lot of people don’t have that,” said one twenty-one-year-old who had recently graduated from community college.

One woman who was half-black and half-Mexican began our interview by offering a kind of thesis statement about her good fortune:

First off I would just like to say that, like a lot of people in this country, they’re born here out of luck or circumstances. Some come to this country through their parents or grandparents, and that’s how I got here, because if I had not been born here, I would have been poor – poor-er – abject poverty. Also, maybe one of those people that would have to be trying to cross the border and come over into the United States.

Another interviewee, the 42-year-old recovering addict, began his story by telling me he came from a “well-to-do family,” then later elaborated that his mother was a registered nurse and his father a truck driver. I don’t mean to imply that such a family can’t be financially comfortable, but it jumped out at me, perhaps because I was reading a lot of presidential candidates’ brochures and bios at the time, and politicians in this country have spun humble roots narratives out of much, much more.
All of which is to say: Advantage is relative, and subjective. Because of this, individuals have an opportunity to make their own assessment of whether the advantages they have enjoyed are reasonable. In previous chapters, I noted that the relevant issue in assessments of merit was not whether an individual experienced an advantage, but whether the advantage was reasonable or unreasonable. The same dynamic surfaced in my interviews. Interviewees identified certain advantages readily, but only a few of them interpreted these advantages as being substantial enough to pose a threat to their individual merit by compromising their agency.

The governing principles in determining whether an advantage is reasonable or unreasonable appear to be 1) whether the advantage is perceived to be relatively common and/or 2) whether the advantage is perceived to be something that everyone should have. So the woman who cited being born in America as an advantage counted herself as lucky, in a global sense, but was perfectly comfortable that she had earned her professional success and socioeconomic comfort in spite of this. Similarly, no respondents who pointed to their able or loving parents as an advantage viewed that experience as potentially compromising to their meritorious achievement, and several seemed to feel pride about being related to fine people. Numerous people who cited socioeconomic comfort, quality educations, and/or financial help with education from their parents were comfortable with having received those legs up. These experiences are understood to be components of a reasonable life on offer in America.

The primary advantages that stood out as being consistently understood as unreasonable were socioeconomic advantage one acknowledges to be extreme, or
actually inheriting a career from one’s parents. One 27-year-old woman studying to be a therapist was the daughter of a doctor, and said matter-of-factly when I asked about her advantages in life, “my dad has a lot of money.” The scale of this advantage was sufficient to compromise her agency, she thought. “My money has outweighed … you know, I might not be where I am if I didn’t have that kind of security to fall back on. I might have done things differently, I might have thought about college differently.”

An 81-year-old man recalled that he had the option, as a young man, to take a job with one of his father’s “connections,” but said to himself, “you want to make your life on your own terms, not your dad’s.” Earlier in the interview, he had said that his father’s money had enabled him to go to a good college – he described this as “luck,” and said other kids in his neighborhood had not enjoyed such an opportunity – but did not view that as preventing him from making his life on his own terms. It was a reasonable advantage that didn’t compromise his agency; working for his father’s friend would have been different.

One phrase stood out to me from my interviews as representative of the feelings of the interviewees who saw themselves as part of a broad American middle and upper-middle class. A man who had grown up in a suburban area in a comfortable family said he had been “born on second base.” Being born on third base, of course, is a problem in American life, especially if you think you hit a triple. It’s difficult to make an assessment of your individual contribution if you’re born on third. But being born on first or second base is reasonable, and this is how many people perceive their lives, as having had it good, but not TOO good to have exercised meaningful agency.
Of course, fortunate origins and foundations are not the only kinds of advantages we experience in life. There are also strokes of luck – winning the lottery, but also meeting that perfect mentor, stumbling into that great opportunity, being in the right place at the right time. For several respondents, though, these kinds of experiences weren’t luck at all, at least not in the sense that the experiences existed outside of the individual’s control. They believed that, as the old saying goes, they had “made their own luck,” by pursuing and responding to opportunity. “Is it lucky that I ended up having a lot of friends in common with my now fiancee and we ended up going to the same birthday party?” asked one 28-year-old man. “Yeah it’s lucky, but also I really tried to meet a lot of friends in town, and go out and be social.” He said he didn’t believe in luck so much as chance, which affects everyone. This conceptualization echoes a frequent storyline from business discourse: Your job is to improve your chances, and be prepared to take advantage of opportunity when it comes to you. As in the narratives of business people, luck becomes agentive.

In the cases of both advantageous origins and strokes of good luck, I came to understand through my interviews that the most important aspect of the American understanding of advantage was this: You can earn your advantages retroactively.

Time and again, asked about advantages and whether they had earned their positive outcomes, interviewees said that they felt they had earned their positions because they had displayed meritorious qualities, such as hard work or compassion, in the wake of those advantages. The aforementioned 28-year-old, who was at work on a dual law/business degree, had grown up in a wealthy suburb and attended great schools. He
recognized this as a substantial advantage. But he said he felt he had earned his successes:

because I feel like I’ve worked for them. Except for growing up in a nice household with parents who love me, and that support, I don’t feel like anything else has been handed to me… yes I’ve certainly had a big leg up because of that privilege, granted that I’ve had the leg up, it’s not as if I’ve just coasted on that one leg up, you know, every other step was me working my ass off to achieve what I want to achieve.

The advantages would have been a problem, he said, had he failed to take advantage of them.

Had I got that leg up and then kinda coasted along … just doing ok in school and enjoying growing up [in my neighborhood] and not really pushing myself or caring about things, then that would be in a way kind of unfair, unjust, what was given to me. But because I think I’ve pushed beyond that for things that are really difficult.

When I asked the 27-year-old in school to become a therapist, the one who believed her father’s money had determined much about her life, whether she deserved her position, she said, “I would like to think that I do. I would like to think that despite the advantages that I had, I still work hard, I still am a compassionate person. I still hope to help others.”16 In these behaviors she located her agency. Her origins were out of her control. “I can’t change those things. I guess I could renounce, say, mom, dad, don’t ever help me, don’t give me money, don’t help me with anything. I don’t know I think, asking for help, and having people that are able to help you, that’s important.” (She seems here

16 It was noteworthy to me that several of the people with whom I spoke who said that their socioeconomic origins – their parents’ money – had given them an enormous advantage and determined their outcomes emphasized morality as an important trait, and an important part of what gave them value as a person. They struggled to claim that they had earned their social positions, but they could find dignity elsewhere. This is an important reminder that people can conclude they have merit even if they aren’t sure they earned their position due to merit.
to be drifting toward an argument that her advantage is reasonable, because people should have it.)

Or consider the position of a 57-year-old man who owned and managed a retail store. His father had given him the money to purchase the store, without which he might not have been able to do it. But he felt that because he had put in a lot of work to make the store successful, and paid his father back, he had earned it.

This phenomenon, the paying back of advantage through hard work, is why Paul felt he was able to earn his position. “One thing my dad was good at was, he started me at the very bottom … I worked my way up” enough where I don’t feel like it was just handed to me. Like, blatantly handed to me. I earned it, but, obviously I had the opportunity to earn it because of who I am. But I still had the earning.”

The flip side of this is that the few people I spoke with who said they had experienced advantages and been unsuccessful, such as the 42-year-old recovering addict who described his family as “well-to-do,” expressed not only disappointment but guilt over having failed to control and capitalize on fortuitous circumstances. If one can earn one’s advantages retroactively, these people felt in debt.

Advantage exists in American stories, and it can pose a threat to the individual’s ability to say he or she earned his or her position, if a story is woven in which the advantage overpowers the individual’s agency. But to pose this threat, the advantage should be unreasonable, and neither the notion of an advantage nor of a reasonable advantage are well-defined. What’s more, the individual can narrate agency into a story in spite of an advantage by making his or her own luck, or by earning the advantage
retroactively through hard work. These narrative “good reasons” for assigning merit to an
dividual enable many people who believe they have been advantaged to feel that they
nonetheless earned their social positions, because many of them also believe (correctly!) that they have exhibited meritorious qualities and behaviors.

“Lots of people do that”: Dealing with disadvantage

If advantages pose a narrative challenge for the construction of merit by making it
more complicated for the advantaged to claim credit for their successes, disadvantages
present a different set of problems: Can disadvantages be blamed for failures or
shortcomings, and under what circumstances? And what do you say about your
disadvantages if you succeeded in spite of them?

The circumstances and experiences that my interviewees characterized as
disadvantages, either implicitly or explicitly, included growing up poor in a bad
neighborhood, suffering abuse and sexual assault, being orphaned at a young age,
experiencing discrimination because of one’s race or gender, disabilities, other health
challenges for oneself or one’s family, family discord, and coming from a comfortable
middle class but not elite background. I do not mean to make fun of this last item; the
man who cited it regarded it as a mild disadvantage, but he had entered a social circle
with people who came from a more privileged class background than he, and had come to
view their more advanced degrees and interesting careers as a result of an upbringing that
he hadn’t shared. Disadvantage, like advantage, is relative.
Earlier in this chapter I mentioned Thomas, who had been in and out of prison for much of his life, and attributed this in part to how his mother treated him during his youth. His difficulties did not stop there. “I came up rugged,” Thomas said. His neighborhood was dominated by gangs, which he joined, and he got into trouble. He spent his youth in and out of juvenile detention, but, “I never intended to get arrested when I turned 18.” Shortly after his 18th birthday however, Thomas said, a cop approached him one day and said “take your f-ing hand out your pockets,” then struck him. “And me being from the streets, the first thing I do is throw my hands up, because you ain’t gonna hit me no more, now…. And he said, ‘are you throwing your hands up at me?’” Then the cop’s partner hit Thomas, knocking him to the ground. “That kinda turned me out …. They gave me assault on a police officer, they sent me down. While I was in there, I just start thinking, I’m always gonna get locked up no matter what.” He began behaving accordingly. “There wasn’t really nothing I could do about this situation, but what happened is, I allowed like a demonic spirit to lead me.”

Thomas spent much of his adult life incarcerated, to a point where, in looking back and telling his story, he spoke of prison as just another place he sometimes goes. In at least one other instance, he says, he was locked up for a “racist ticket” he did not deserve, in others for violations he admits he committed, and often for violating the terms of his probation.

Thomas recognized the powerful extent and systemic nature of the disadvantages he had experienced. “What you expect?” he said of his outcomes, and observed that he has a brother who has been in jail for 41 years. Of the criminal justice system and his
years in and out of prison he said “it’s just the way the establishment is set up.” But what
was striking to me about Thomas, and other individuals with whom I spoke who had
spent time incarcerated, is that they remained preoccupied with the nuances of their
agency within these broad parameters. They drew careful lines between their just and
unjust arrests, and ultimately held themselves accountable for their outcomes. “I made a
lot of bad choices in my life,” Thomas said, and “I allowed myself to fall apart. I can’t
blame nobody but myself a lot of the time.” After the police abuse “turned him out,”
Thomas was the one who “allowed” the demonic spirit to lead him. He even blamed
himself for his failure to pay the racist ticket.

Along somewhat similar lines, the 42-year-old recovering addict from a “well-to-
do family” felt he had thrown everything away. That was his characterization of his story,
anyhow. After a longer conversation with him, it became clear to me that he had another
story to tell, had he chosen to do so. Growing up, he said, “I was always labeled as
effeminate, I was labeled as gay. I didn’t know how to throw a ball like a boy. I didn’t
know how to kick a ball like a boy. And therefore I experienced a lot of ridicule growing
up in school. That impacted my self-esteem greatly.” As an adult, he identified as a gay
man, but struggled to reconcile this identity with his Christian background. He described
these experiences as disadvantages, and meaningful ones. But he did not consider them
sufficient to remove the blame for his failures from his own shoulders. “I think life has
been fair. But I think I haven’t been fair to myself.” He should have “decided not to allow
peer pressure to influence me.”
Others dealt with disadvantages by downplaying them. Susan, the middle-aged office manager who didn’t think much of what she had accomplished in her career, had grown up in wealth and comfort, then moved to Utah, where she married a man who subsequently left her to raise their child on her own. She moved to Philadelphia, took a “completely random” job at an accounting firm because it provided health insurance for her son, and never got a career related to her interests off the ground.

I thought Susan’s being left by her husband to raise a child by herself sounded like a disadvantage to which she might attribute a large portion of the blame for her disappointment. I said so. But Susan did not see things that way. For one thing, she blamed herself for coupling with her first husband in the first place – that was an agentive decision in her story, with repercussions for her merit. Beyond that, she said, “lots of people do that, raise a kid and have a job and do it all.”

Susan’s resistance to my attempt to recast her narrative reflects three patterns: First, the primacy of class in our assessments of professional and socioeconomic merit. Class as an advantage or disadvantage tends to outweigh other factors in our narratives of professional achievement. Second, disadvantages, like advantages, are governed by a reasonable/unreasonable dynamic: when she says “lots of people do that,” Susan makes a case that to the extent that her experience was a disadvantageous one, it was not especially noteworthy. Third, Susan illustrates the ease with which people can dismiss the importance of external and structural disadvantages in disappointing outcomes. Indeed, in Susan and a few others like her, I noticed a sort of inverse fundamental attribution error.
The fundamental attribution error refers to the tendency of individuals to attribute others’ behaviors to internal factors, and one’s own to circumstance. By the time I interviewed her, Susan had married again. Her husband, she said, had wanted to go into the movie business, but after his father’s death lost a literal coin flip with his brother, and as a result took over his father’s insurance business, and stayed home to take care of their widowed mother. Susan viewed her husband as having suffered bad luck – as a victim of circumstance – even while she blamed herself for her own outcomes.

It wasn’t everyone. One 25-year-old with a communications degree said larger socioeconomic trends, rather than his own actions, were responsible for his inability to get a career off the ground in the communications industry. He worked hard and did a good job at gigs that didn’t work out, he said, before contraction in the industry closed those doors on him. A middle-aged woman who had spent her career as a dairy farmer thought an unfair market and unscrupulous middlemen had caused her and her husband to make less money in this endeavor than they deserved. In these cases, the disadvantages were unreasonable and substantial, and the individuals didn’t see many realistic adjustments they might have made to overcome them (the farmer said it was possible that being smarter might have helped, but working harder would not have). They saw their agency overwhelmed.

Overall, interviewees disappointed in their professional outcomes identified disadvantages they had suffered, but the bar for them to treat those disadvantages as key determinants in their outcomes appeared to be fairly high: they needed to feel that their
disadvantages were unreasonable (i.e. uncommon or something people should expect not to suffer), and that their agency in the situation couldn’t explain their shortcomings.

People who felt successful overall – or were more ambivalent about their outcomes, or thought that the verdict wasn’t in yet on their success – cited disadvantages too. A few viewed those disadvantages straightforwardly as obstacles that had held them back *some*. They said they would have gone further or made more money had it not been for their limited opportunities or discrimination they faced, or the logistical trouble of a health issue, etc. “Our institutions are designed to keep black people, women, and other minorities down,” said June, a 61-year-old black woman. June had made a career in the radio industry and then teaching continuing education courses to state employees. She felt successful and satisfied. But it was clear to her that with her intelligence and drive – she characterized herself as “pretty smart” and “pretty driven” – she would have gone further on a level playing field. She meant this in both an immediate sense (the men who did the same job as her were paid more, she said) and more globally. Her father had been a very smart man, but remained in a working class job because of his race. Had he been able to advance, she might have finished college more quickly, launched her career sooner, and gone further.

The other pattern in this group was to treat an experience that might conventionally be considered a disadvantage as a sort of stealth advantage, because it made the interviewee stronger. A 66-year-old retired door and window salesman had grown up biracial in a black neighborhood, and said he learned to fight as a result, making him tough. The HVAC company owner grew up poor, and consequently
developed the work ethic that he sees as being so key to his success. “I had to do it,” he said. A 26-year-old medical school student was “pushed forward” by her father’s death (her mother’s subsequent health issues were “more of a disadvantage” because of how they set her back – that experience fell more under the category of a straightforward disadvantage that slows the storyteller down).

This particular storyline – treating a disadvantage as an advantage, with the underlying belief that “what doesn’t kill me makes me stronger” – is a clear example of a discursive theme that supports a classic understanding of hegemonic individualism and personal responsibility. Disadvantage is narrated away as a determinant factor in an individual’s life through the expectation that he or she should emerge from the negative experience stronger and better. Life isn’t fair, it says, but if the unfairness throws you off, that’s on you.

Like advantage, disadvantage exists in American stories. It surfaces as an obstacle that downsized the success of a successful person; a galvanizing factor that made the successful person more successful; a problem that doesn’t explain disappointments; and occasionally, a problem that does explain disappointments. It is up the individual to construct a storyline about the relationship between the disadvantage and his or her agency, taking into account the reasonableness of the disadvantage and the capacity of agency to overcome it. My interviewees generally seemed to err on the side of taking the onus on themselves.

Making assessments of merit
Merit is not a yes-or-no proposition. It comes in degrees, and when we assess ourselves and others we wish to know not just whether we have merit and whether we have earned our current positions, but how well we have done and how awesome we are.

For some people, including America’s current president, the assessment of merit is simple: you count money, ratings, followers, or votes. Because these outcomes are straightforward reflections of individual achievement, more money, ratings etc. means more merit, unless a contest was “rigged” against you in some specific way. For most others, I found the process to be more complicated.

One important dynamic in this process is what I’m calling the “origins-to-outcomes ratio.” In addition to grappling with the relationship of advantages and disadvantages to individual agency, Americans take stock of an individual’s merit by assessing his or her achievements in the context of where that person comes from and what resources have been at his or her disposal. When I asked interviewees whether they had been successful (and other, related questions) several responded right away with an origins-to-outcomes answer:

- A 34-year-old social worker said: “Have I beat some of the odds? Yes. I came from North Philly, where it was guns, drugs around me every day. I’m no longer in that environment.”

- A 52-year-old fireman said: “Coming from pretty miniscule upbringing and surroundings, my mom really struggled raising five kids, and didn’t get any support from my biological father, I just feel really, I feel like I have more than most people that I grew up with. I did a little better than most people I grew up with.”

- A 31-year-old CEO, asked if she had experienced her life as a meritocracy, said: “I was born into a situation where I had a lot of benefits that a lot of people don’t have, and if I hadn’t had those, statistically speaking I wouldn’t be where I am. I have no way of knowing exactly what my life would be like, but one of my best friends… she is at least professionally, in many ways at the same level or even
beyond me, but she was a refugee. So the delta for her is much greater. So I don’t think there’s a black-and-white answer to that, because I can see where she had to start, and where she is, and where I had to start, and where I am, and we’re basically at the same point.”

It is worth noting that a great many origins-to-outcomes formulations revolve around socioeconomic starting point, although one can certainly imagine a similar assessment being made around talent (especially for an athlete) or something like health. The strongest example of such a framing in my sample was from a 27-year-old drug dealer, who said she had overcome a great deal in terms of mental health struggles. “For every hardship, I’m still here. A lot of people in my situation, they don’t make it this far,” she said.

Interviewees who made origins-to-outcomes assessments viewed merit through a contextual prism. They built expectations of accomplishment based on starting point and other external factors. Crucially, this means that when advantages and disadvantages are “dealt with” narratively, even in a way that enables the subject to conclude he or she earned his or her outcomes, the advantages and disadvantages are not narrated into irrelevance. They still matter, in the sense that they help to establish the expectations around which success and failure are measured.

Expectations for a given individual are based to a great extent on comparisons to people with similar starting points – people around whom the subject grew up, or siblings.\(^{17}\) Comparing the individual to childhood peers in many cases effectively

\(^{17}\) I should note that in many interviews, I introduced this comparative dynamic in my questions. But a fair number of interviewees brought it up on their own, and most of those who did not seemed to accept the premise that this was a useful way of understanding what they had done with their lives and careers.
“controls” for socioeconomic class (including race, because of the segregation of many American neighborhoods and schools), which we understand to be an important component of starting point. Comparing the individual to siblings isolates the individual even more precisely by controlling for family, which was sometimes cited as an important external variable separating the interviewee from those childhood peers. Indeed, when interviewees introduced alternative timelines in their narratives, the timelines tended to revolve around being born into a different family or a different class, an attempt to separate their own contributions from the outside factors deemed most consequential. The outcomes of childhood peers and siblings, then, create a baseline of outcome expectation (Facebook came up in several interviews as a tool for facilitating these comparisons), though some people also compared themselves to peer groups acquired later in life, such as college classmates and friends. The notion that Americans believe people should achieve class advancement or at least maintenance across generations seems to be broadly correct, including among people under 40 who should not, statistically speaking, expect such advancement.

Beyond that, however, there is a challenge in making comparisons, which is that the measure of outcomes is extremely complex and subjective. Interviewees factored into their assessments of success their level of economic comfort, the gratification they got from their work, the prestige they enjoyed in their field, the contribution they were able to make to society, and in some cases (if it was a relevant concern in their peer group of origin) their freedom from incarceration. Younger interviewees sometimes assessed their outcomes by the potential their current position provided them to achieve these things.
Some of these variables, including especially economic comfort, were oriented through comparison. Interviewees spoke of peers who made more or less money, owned or did not own homes, were or were not able to pay to send their children to college, or spent significant time in prison. But each made his or her own calculation about the appropriate weights of these various factors.

One 41-year-old woman, whom I’ll call Deb, had gone to law school, worked as a lawyer, hated it, been laid off, and then gone back to school to study community development. When I interviewed her she was working as a program officer for a non-profit, and evaluated her standing in part by saying, “When I talk to other attorneys I’m like, wow, I’m really lucky to not be you. You’re miserable and boring.” (Deb used the word “lucky,” but she felt she had made her own way out: “I worked really hard for it … someone didn’t just hand me this job, like I earned it”). Some of those attorneys were making, she said, 20 and 30 times as much as she did. But they envied her, and she was confident her outcome was better.

The impulse to use some form of comparison to measure merit could survive considerable doubts about how well American outcomes actually reflect merit. I discuss interviewees’ assessments of American meritocracy more in the next section, but here I just want to note one phenomenon. Deb the former attorney understood the existence and discourse of inequality. “There’s this thing called privilege and people with privilege get farther in life,” she said. But she did not see this reality as an invalidation of potential comparisons between individuals. People with privilege, she said, “start out with more.
To use that simple analogy of a race, you started out ten steps ahead. You’re gonna finish earlier. And if we finish at the same time that means I’m just faster than you.”

A 39-year-old dancer who said he thought that outcomes in life are “mostly random” said he was trying to stop comparing himself to other artists. “Artists ... go to other artists’ websites, people that they admire, are their heroes, they admire something about them, but probably in a similar age range, but have more success. And they go on their website and they watch their videos and they read the reviews and they go ‘oh I wish I had that, too.’ For hours.” He had decided, he said, to “stop looking at other people’s markers of success, to compare, because their starting points were different. All of our starting points were different.” His attempt to reject outcome comparisons involves an acceptance of the track meet metaphor, and of the premise that figuring out what the individual did and where he or she stands in relation to others is a meaningful pursuit, if you can take the measure of other factors.

Deb put a fine point on this when I asked if she had experienced her life as a meritocracy. “On like an absolute scale, or like in some sort of context?” she asked. “Because that makes all the difference.”

**Merit vs. meritocracy**

Charles was in the eighth grade when his family got indoor plumbing. He doesn’t remember his father; he was raised by his sharecropper grandparents, and after they died, by his mother. They ate ketchup and mustard sandwiches. When he was drafted at 19, he had never ridden on a plane, train, or bus.
But Charles lifted himself up, he says. After the service, he took a “nasty, nasty job” cleaning oil burners. Eventually he moved on to a job with a mechanical contractor, doing “whatever they wanted done” and going to school for heating and air conditioning at night. “Endeavor to improve myself is what I did.” He felt like a stranger to his daughter. The owner of the contracting company told him he would inherit the business, but it became clear he would not, so he struck out on his own, opening an HVAC company. He took calls whenever they came in, did “anything that wealthy people want,” and continued to put in long hours. Now 69, he is still at work, and feels like a success. “My whole life, all I needed was a job. Never on unemployment,” he says. “Nobody ever gave us anything.” He is very conservative and relishes arguing with his liberal friends.

Charles does not believe that America is a meritocracy.

“There’s not a whole lot of opportunity for a lot of people,” he said. “You can’t give everything away and expect people to exceed at anything…. That’s a lot of what happens. But on the other side of that coin, there needs to be a job for people.”

After asking interviewees about their own lives and how they came to be who and where they were, whether they thought they had earned their positions and whether they had experienced their lives meritocratically, I asked their impressions of American society: When they looked around, did they see the country functioning more or less as a meritocracy? Did people end up about where they deserved to be, based on their efforts and abilities?

I mention Charles because when I picture someone whom one might expect to perceive America as a meritocracy, I picture a 69-year-old white guy who grew up poor
in the heartland, cleaned oil burners, eventually built his own successful company, and enjoys needling liberals. But Charles did not see America that way, and he was not alone. Out of my 60 interviewees, only about nine said they perceived America to be, more or less, a meritocracy. This might have been due partly to the political skew of my sample, given that just 16 of my interviewees were conservatives or Republicans. But only five of those 16 saw America as a meritocracy. The vast majority of people said that in general, no, Americans do not end up in a deserved professional or socioeconomic position.

Amongst those who did believe in American meritocracy, there was occasionally a wrinkle in their belief worth noticing. The 70-year-old former military intelligence analyst, a Republican who lives in York, answered my question about American meritocracy by saying, “If you want to get to college you can, if you have the brains to do it. You can get a job.” I took this to mean not so much that America is a perfect meritocracy, but that it is close enough. Paul, the 32-year-old who had become a partner in his father’s business, echoed this sentiment: “They say it’s the land of the free and everyone has the same opportunities as anyone else. I don’t know how necessarily true that is. If you go to the middle of America, poor town, like do they have the same opportunities as a kid growing up in Radnor going to the best public schools?” But, he said, “I still think it can be done, it might be harder for some. I guess environment plays a big role.” Equal opportunity might be impossible, but, “I think for the majority it is pretty fair.”

Jim, a 52-year-old fireman, said that “90 percent of people land up where they [should be],” though he didn’t consider himself to be one of them. He had inherited a
propensity for indulgence from his biological father, he said, and in his life had driven after drinking “more times than I should have” – a mistake that could have cost him his career. “I’ve been lucky,” he said.

For most, though, America’s unmeritocratic nature was evident – whether they had experienced their own lives meritocratically or not. Recall that Hassan, the CEO I wrote about earlier, called himself “the definition of meritocracy.” Because of this, I was surprised when I asked him about American meritocracy and he started talking about how much he loved Bernie Sanders. “The issue of inequality is a deep-seated wrong,” he said. Eric, the 28-year-old draftsman who believed deeply in hard work, supported Donald Trump because he thought “the whole [American] system just needs to be thrown out.”

A few interviewees indicated that they thought America had become less meritocratic in recent years, and others were quite clear in their conviction that the country is not close and never had been. “We suck,” said a 35-year-old teacher.

In a meritocracy, people should end up where they deserve to be, based on their efforts and abilities, rather than external factors. The best applicants should be admitted and the best candidate should get the job. Consider in this light the following patterns in my interviewees’ stories, explanations of their lives, and assessments of their own merit:

- The tendency not to associate talent with merit, and to object to those who coast on talent. From a meritocratic standpoint, coasting on talent should not be a problem: if you can be the best person for a job without trying very hard, you should still get the job.

- The understanding that one can earn advantages retroactively with hard work. From a meritocratic standpoint, this doesn’t make sense. External advantages disrupt meritocracy regardless of subsequent admirable behavior.
• The tendency to assess merit within the parameters of an origins-to-outcomes ratio. From a meritocratic standpoint, all levels of achievement should be roughly equally available to people from all backgrounds.

• The claim that America is meritocratic because “you can get a job.” From a meritocratic standpoint, you should not be able just to get a job. You should be able to go “as far as your God-given abilities will take you.”

I’m not going to suggest that Americans don’t actually believe in or value meritocracy. The fact that we feel the need to grapple narratively with advantages and disadvantages is evidence that we are influenced by meritocratic premises. But when we make our final individual assessments, we are more concerned with merit than with meritocracy. We want to know whether we have displayed positive qualities deserving of reward, such as hard work, determination, good decision-making, drive, and morality, and if we have, we generally conclude that we are deserving of desirable outcomes. If we have not displayed a sufficient amount of those qualities, we are not.

From a merit standpoint, it can make sense to pay back advantages with hard work, because you are exhibiting a positive quality, and you often have little control over your advantages, anyway. It can make sense to dismiss talent if you regard it as undeserved. It can make sense to assess merit within parameters set by one’s origins if doing so provides a more accurate assessment of individual contribution. And it can make sense to applaud a system in which “you can get a job.” You show some merit, you’ll be OK, and never mind the noise about the context.

As we’ve seen in previous chapters, then, the master narrative of American merit is a story that seeks to parse individual contribution from external factors in a person’s
life, in order to take stock of his or her value. It says that merit needs to be assessed in context, but ultimately can and should be.

**Difference and dissent**

I have focused in this chapter thus far on the themes and commonalities among my interviewees that constitute the master narrative of American merit. But this does not mean that there were no important differences between my participants’ stories. Perhaps most notably, non-white people discussed race and its role in their lives much more than did white people, viewing it as a disadvantage with which they had dealt, and sometimes describing this reality as profound and obvious. White people tended not to mention race explicitly. I did not ask direct questions about the subject, but had I done so I suspect at least some of my white interviewees would have folded race into their “born on second base” conceptualization, in which they believed themselves to enjoy a state of privilege that more people should enjoy, and expressed regret that others had been excluded from the meritocratic track meet in which they had shown sufficient agency to justify their accomplishments. One interviewee described America as post-racial and a level playing field with respect to race, and others undoubtedly would have had I raised the issue. Still others would likely have described whiteness as a disadvantage, if recent events in the country are any indication. People typically acknowledge the role of advantages as a category in their narratives, but this does not mean that we reliably apprehend and assess them accurately.
More women discussed gender and its role in their lives than did men, regarding it as a disadvantage with which they had dealt. I should note that there is a literature on the “impostor phenomenon,” often believed to occur more commonly among women than men, in which an individual regards herself as a fraud who does not merit her status or accomplishments (Clance and Imes, 1978). Among my interviewees women were slightly more likely than men to feel that they had done better than they deserved, but the feeling of fraudulence was not a major theme in my conversations.

One particular demographic dynamic about which I was especially interested going into this project was age, because I thought differences across age might signal a contemporary evolution in the American conceptualization of merit, just as differences between mediated materials from the 1980s and today do. Obviously comparing younger adults to older adults is not a perfect analog for comparing mediated material from two different eras – today’s older adults don’t live in the 1980s. But I wondered if younger adults who had come of age during the contemporary crisis of confidence in American meritocracy would think about their lives differently than members of the generations that came before.

Some of the more privileged younger people (age 35 and under) with whom I spoke seemed to struggle more than others with how to deal with their advantages – they regarded their privilege as something that could credibly be considered profoundly compromising to their merit. The 27-year-old in school to become a therapist said that she “feels a lot of shame” about her family wealth, and was never quite sure how to think about whether she deserved to be in her position. A 26-year-old in medical school, whose
father had been a doctor, also said that her privilege “bothers” her, and viewed it as largely responsible for her position.\textsuperscript{18} Such concerns were usually (though not always) more understated among older interviewees who had come from privilege. This could be because people become more comfortable that they’ve caused their own success as they get older and take more agentive actions, but I also think it’s possible that this reflects a growing awareness among millennials of privilege discourse and inequality, and that this awareness is affecting how they perceive their own lives.

I also got a sense from a few younger interviewees that they viewed their prospects and outcomes through the prism of a broken promise – not just that the American system is unfair, but that it had deteriorated and failed to deliver on something. One 25-year-old said:

[I did] what everyone says, how the American Dream works ... this is what you beat into us as kids, the whole country, everybody, this is what the American Dream is… you come to America, you work hard, and for lack of a better statement, you make it. And it’s like I came in, I work hard, did what I was supposed to, I listened, I got my grades, I got the degree, I got the scholarships, got the experience, I got what you said needs to be gotten and I haven’t gotten a damn thing.

He felt this was more true for his generation than it had been for his parents’.

These patterns are consistent with a theme I noticed in contemporary mediated materials of a greater allowance for the role of external factors in life outcomes and skepticism of American meritocracy. But they don’t represent dissent from that broader master narrative of measuring individual merit in the context of advantages and disadvantages. These perspectives question whether meritocracy is working, not whether

\textsuperscript{18} She was still proud of what she had done with her life, she said, because of how she had rebounded from a trauma.
we think about merit the right way. Within my sample, however, there were a few people who offered a more aggressively dissenting viewpoint.

One example was Pam, a 34-year-old acupuncturist with her own practice in Philadelphia. To me, Pam seemed like someone who had achieved a substantial amount in her life. She had gone into a field notorious for the number of people who leave it. She had gotten her own business off the ground, made it profitable, and was preparing to hire another acupuncturist. She provided her service at an affordable price to a diverse population, in line with her political and moral values. These are all difficult things to do, and it’s not easy to see how someone could luck into or inherit them.

Yet Pam saw the key decisive factor in her career, the variable that differentiated her from all those other acupuncturists who aren’t working in the field five years out of school, as privilege. Pam’s parents had paid for her undergraduate education, which enabled her to graduate from acupuncture school with less debt than her peers. This meant she had credit, which meant she could get loans to open her business. During her first couple of years in business, when acupuncturists don’t make much money, she was able to live rent and bill-free at her grandparents’ house. “It’s all about basically money,” she said.

She conceded that there were a few other relevant factors in her outcomes other than privilege. “I was a part of it. I was trying really hard. I wasn’t a fuck up.” But overall, the key difference between her and the many aspiring acupuncturists out there? Not her. As a result, she concluded, she probably doesn’t deserve to be where she is.
In one sense, Pam differentiates herself from most of my other interviewees by appearing to prioritize meritocracy over merit. Being good, working hard, and making good decisions just aren’t enough for her to conclude she’s earned her position. She appears to think not only that she didn’t earn her advantages retroactively, but that one can’t. Even more exceptional than this, however, were Pam’s statements dissenting from the very premise that someone might earn her accomplishments. Speaking of a friend who had recently reached a major professional milestone, she said that she was proud of him, and of course he worked really hard. But, she said, “I feel like we go overboard with the ‘I earned’ and ‘I deserved.’” She thought that the whole notion of deservingness was overblown.

Josh dissented differently. A 25-year-old who had dropped out of community college, worked a string of dead-end jobs, and then landed in an apprenticeship for computer repair, he held a job in a Philadelphia public school as a computer support specialist. Josh staked out a very rare position: he didn’t particularly value hard work. He readily conceded that he hadn’t tried very hard at the various jobs he’d held through his early 20s. His bosses were fair to him for the most part, he said, but he doesn’t feel bad about his effort. “I don’t believe in suffering to succeed,” he said. He seemed confident, and comfortable, that his talent would carry him through life.

This perspective also, in its way, prioritizes meritocracy rather than merit. Josh approached work as a marketplace in which he would only apply his labor if it would get him something he wanted, and figured if he were good enough for a job, he would get and keep it, regardless of whether he worked particularly hard. This doesn’t sound
outlandish as a description of how Americans approach many tasks, and even careers.

But as a stated philosophy, amongst my interviewees, it made Josh an outlier to dismiss hard work and ignore conventional standards of deservingness in this way.

Finally, a 40-year-old Republican from York who enjoyed a comfortable life explained that he came from a prominent local family, and that his last name had helped him professionally. I asked him if he was OK with this. “Of course. I think it’s fabulous,” he said. When I asked him about meritocracy, he replied:

I guess I don’t think our objective should be to look at it as, should we be a meritocracy? … Some things are fair, some things aren’t fair. I look at it as, and people say this a lot better than I do, all men are created equal, that’s true, but the reality too is, different people are going to have different circumstances. We can’t all be born to billionaires. I think one of the things that I have observed is, the people who are really successful, it started probably a couple generations before them. We all want to catch a shooting star these days. And even in my case, I’ve been the beneficiary of that.

I asked if it was important to him to have accomplished things on his own. “Like I said, I don’t quite look at it that way. I look at it as, what are my goals and objectives, and what do I do to get there?”

Here again we see pushback on some of the basic premises of my questions, in the form of a counter-narrative that says you can’t really separate individual contributions from external variables, and we are fools to try. There is growing skepticism about the availability of the American Dream in the contemporary United States. But the most profound dissent from the American ideology of merit is not “the Dream is dead” or even “the Dream is a lie,” but rather “the Dream is dumb.”
Chapter 8

“There’s no way to know if the person sitting across from you in a job interview or a negotiation is there on his or her own merits or with an assist of one kind or another”

Donald Trump is the president of the United States, though he does not deserve to be. He has surrounded himself with a cadre of similarly undeserving figures, including “C+ Santa Monica fascist” Stephen Miller (so dubbed by the podcaster Jon Lovett), fake foreign policy expert Sebastian Gorka, and nepotism cases Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner. That these individuals did not earn their positions is brutally obvious to many Americans, and creates an uncomfortable situation wherein the White House, one of the most powerful symbols of America and the American way, represents not meritocracy but something closer to a mediocracy, or even kakistocracy. On September 2, 2017, Speaker of the House Paul Ryan tweeted the following:

In our country, the condition of your birth does not determine the outcome of your life. This is what makes America so great. (Ryan, 2017)

The statement, which years ago might have passed as a platitude, was widely derided. “False,” read one reply. “In America, the zip code of a person’s birth can predict educational attainment and life expectancy with a high degree of accuracy” (Friedman, 2017).

The contemporary crisis of confidence in American meritocracy has led in recent years to an attempt to rethink some of meritocracy’s premises. Reeves (2017) argues that we ought to transform society to make it a “meritocracy for grown-ups, but not for children.” Hayes says his “proposed solution for correcting the excesses of our extreme version of meritocracy is quite simple: make America more equal” (218). Guinier (2015) wishes to “reexamine exactly how we define ‘merit’” (xi) in higher education, arguing
that we ought to move beyond testing. Littler (2017) contends that “the idea of meritocracy has become a key means through which plutocracy – or government by a wealthy elite – perpetuates, reproduces and extends itself” and says we ought to “bury meritocracy for ever” (2017b).

What I have attempted to add to this discussion is a careful examination of what merit means at the individual level, and what role it is understood to play in our individual lives, in both American media and in the minds of individual Americans. As we reconsider meritocracy as a system of social organization and ideology, we should ask how we decide who has merit, not just institutionally but culturally and colloquially, and in what ways we think merit does and should matter in our professional and socioeconomic outcomes. I have approached these questions by looking at the stories we tell to explain both our elites and ourselves, reading the narratives with an eye toward identifying the “good reasons” on offer for why someone ended up where he or she did, and whether he or she deserved it, as well as toward the underlying master narrative of individual merit in American life. I also asked whether any aspects of these narratives appear to be changing with the crisis of confidence in American meritocracy. Understanding these dynamics will help, I believe, in any attempt to transform meritocracy, by providing a more precise sense of where American culture actually stands on the matter, and what kind of transformation might already be in progress.

I began with politicians. In my investigation into the discourse about the lives of presidential candidates, I hope I showed first and foremost that American political discourse does not so much tell us that presidential candidates have arrived in prominent
positions due to merit as it debates whether they have. After all, for every candidate who
tells a Horatio Alger story or weaves a narrative in which he or she is primarily
responsible for his or her own success, there are opponents who deny it and journalists
and pundits who interrogate the claim. There are a number of acknowledged confounds to
meritocratic achievement in American life, including unfair advantage, luck,
dishonorable behavior, or undesirable actions inappropriately rewarded. The achievement
of success due to one’s own merit is not the consistent description of reality so much as
the ideal, and our political discourse is committed to the notion that we can and should
figure out how candidates stack up to that ideal.

The stories American culture tells about star athletes are different from the ones it
tells about politicians, because we generally accept the premise that star athletes should
be in their positions, in the sense that we concede that others could not do their jobs better
than they do. We nevertheless wonder whether athletes deserve their positions, and so the
discourse about the lives of sports stars presents an opportunity to consider what
deservingness means, by noting the stories and standards used to make these assessments.
Deservingness, as constructed in the athlete profiles I examined, involves the survival of
adversity and exercise of agency to develop, use and share one’s gifts. Where gifts end
and agency begins is not always clear, however, making deservingness something of a
muddy concept. Athletes’ deservingness tends to be tied to their success – that is to say,
they succeed in these stories because they deserve to do so – but they are also portrayed
as exceptional in ways not accessible to most people.
In the autobiographies of business leaders we find narrative explanations of the success of people who don’t jump exceptionally high or run exceptionally fast, and the relationship these stories construct between individuals and external or systemic factors, as well as their treatment of financial reward. A key takeaway here is that individuals are understood to succeed or fail not because of fairness or unfairness but separate from it. Individuals are portrayed as capable of overcoming systemic influences; they can also exert control over external variables such as luck or chance through industriousness and persistence. Financial reward seems to be thought of as distinct from meritocracy in this discourse, because the proportionality of reward to merit is not a preoccupation.

These mediated narratives serve different purposes for different audiences in different contexts. But taken together, they reveal some broad cultural trends in how we relate to the matter of merit in the “model lives” of successful people. Rather than aggressively defending American meritocracy or ignoring the role of external factors in individual lives, our stories grapple with the interaction of individual and context, seeking to measure a person’s merit by using patterned, culturally recognizable storylines and standards that explain and navigate the relationship between the two.

Many of the 60 individual Americans whom I interviewed constructed their own stories and related to their own outcomes in a similar way. My interviewees saw their outcomes as the result of interactions between their agency and the circumstances they encountered. To explain these interactions and take stock of whether they had earned their outcomes, they used patterned storylines, such as earning one’s advantages retroactively or turning a disadvantage into an advantage, and standards, such as
assessing achievement in an origins-to-outcomes ratio and asking whether an advantage is reasonable or unreasonable. In Chapter Two, I recalled NBA analyst Jalen Rose’s critique of retired star Shaquille O’Neal for having won the genetic lottery, and asked whether there was an important distinction between O’Neal (7’1) and Rose (6’8) in this regard. The answer is yes, in Rose’s construction. Shaq’s advantage is construed as an unreasonable one, and thus a neutralization of his agency.

My interviewees viewed deservingness as a function of choice, struggle, and time (with some of the same lack of clarity evident in sports discourse about where choice begins and innate capacity ends). Although their stories were influenced by the premises of meritocracy, most ultimately measured deservingness according to their assessment of whether they had displayed meaningful merit.

The way to think about the relationship between an ideology as constructed in the media and as embraced and understood by individuals is as a “collusion,” Sternheimer (2011) writes. Or, to reiterate Gamson and Modigliani’s (1989) explanation: “Media discourse is part of the process by which individuals construct meaning, and public opinion is part of the process by which journalists and other cultural entrepreneurs develop and crystallize meaning in the public discourse.” I saw individual interviewees use models they knew through media to explain their thoughts about merit, for example articulating a conviction about talent by referring to Lebron James, and arguing that James had worked hard to activate his gifts. I also saw them using the same broad tools to assess the merit of famous individuals that they used for themselves. “As far as him being a tycoon, and you know where he comes from, I think he inherited that stature in life
from his family, from his father,” one 42-year-old man said of Donald Trump. “Does that
mean he didn’t deserve it? Not necessarily.” Trump’s merit needs to be understood in
context, but the context isn’t everything, and if his contribution can be isolated, his
deservingness can be assessed.

There were differences between the mediated and personal narratives. Origins-to-
outcomes ratios played a larger role in the personal narratives, in which people were
more likely to couch success in the context of starting point. But I think this distinction
has more to do with the exceptionality of the subjects in the mediated stories than it did
with the fact that the stories were mediated. The similarities between the two categories
of story were much more striking. Whether individuals were drawing on the storylines
and standards they encountered in media or media makers were bringing their individual
storylines and standards to their work is I think beside the point here; this collusion is a
two-way street.

More broadly, Bercovitch (1993) writes that American ideology is hegemonic,
presenting itself as “the expression of self-evident truth” (356), but simultaneously “a
rhetorical battleground, a symbol that has been made to stand for diverse and sometimes
mutually contradictory outlooks” (356). This project serves as a useful case study of what
this means in practice. Littler (2017) argues that thinking of ideology as involving
“instabilities” and “struggles over meaning” is “useful for understanding meritocracy”; I
have found the same for merit. The master narrative of what merit is and how it works,
which carries the ideology of merit and helps us apply it to individual lives, is itself a
negotiation between individual/agentive factors and circumstantial/structural ones. People
are not dumb; we understand that circumstances matter in our lives. But a truly effective ideology accounts for potentially contradictory observations and gives us a way to explain them—it encompasses the tension. In this case, culture provides narrative tools we can use to assert the agency of the individual, but the conclusion that a person merited his or her outcomes is neither a simple task nor a fait accompli. The consistent feature is that parsing these factors to understand merit is a meaningful pursuit.

The fluidity and flexibility of the master narrative of merit makes it seem applicable and believable across a wide range of scenarios. Both a guy whose father “spoiled the shit out his kids” and a guy who “came up rugged” can view their lives through the lens of merit and plausibly conclude that they earned their outcomes. But they might also conclude that they did not without abandoning the basic premises of merit. The complexity of the master narrative helps it to avoid and survive questioning and attack.

One might wonder how all the talk in the U.S. about rigged systems, entrenched elites, and predictive zip codes, as well as the experience of people living in a country with relatively little opportunity for mobility or occupational stability, have affected the way we think about merit in individual lives. In the American stories I analyzed, I identified signs of two different kinds of change in our narrative approach to merit. The first is a shift within the master narrative—an instability in the ideology. This shift is evident in the aggressive and complete public dismissal of political opponents’ merit in the presidential election of 2016; in the skepticism applied to Michael Jordan’s merit in the pages of Sports Illustrated in 2012; in the defensiveness of Ivanka Trump and the
prominent attention paid by contemporary business tycoons like Biz Stone and Sheryl Sandberg to flaws in meritocracy; in the confusion of my younger, more advantaged interviewees over how to deal with their advantages and the sense expressed by others that they were trapped in their circumstances. These are signs of greater weight being given to external factors in the explanation of life outcomes, a stronger hand for that party in the negotiation.

This shift is reflective of the deteriorating confidence in American meritocracy, the growing prominence of the discourse of privilege, and the democratizing capacity of online discourse. It is a response to dissenting cultural currents. But though the trend of focusing on external factors often results in dissent about the merit of existing elites, it ultimately accepts the fundamental premises of meritocracy: outcomes should be meritocratic and it makes sense to take stock of individuals in this context. When we attribute an outcome to an advantage, for example, we are not attacking meritocracy; we are defending it by calling for its superior execution. As Bercovitch observes, ideology’s “instinctive defense” against dissent is to “redefine protest in defense of the system, as a complaint about shortcomings from its ideals” (366). This is the fluidity of the master narrative at work: The dissent is built into the story. Even in the face of critique, meritocracy remains an attainable and desirable ideal. By implication, inequality remains acceptable if it is done right.

This is why so much of the political discourse over meritocracy in America seems to me to miss the point. Progressives like Barack Obama observe that people had good teachers; Mitt Romney’s supporters at the 2012 Republican National Convention respond
with the transparently absurd claim that they built their own success. But building success by oneself, without advantage or communal assistance, is not our actual cultural standard for deservingness, and most people don’t think this is how life works. Progressives are problematizing the master narrative but not really attacking it; conservatives aren’t defending it.

The other change I noticed in some more recent stories is the emergence of an actual counter-narrative. This shift is evident in the campaign biographies of Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump; in a few sports journalists wondering whether individual deservingness can ever really be sussed out or reflected in outcomes; in interviewees who rejected the premise that parsing external factors from individual agency to assess individual merit makes any sense in the first place. *This* is a rejection of the central tenets of merit, a more thorough dissent from the ideology and – very tentatively – I think we see more of it now than we used to.

These findings are subject to a number of limitations. Any project that uses interviews to collect data runs some risk that the interviewer will introduce a framework which participants accept, and that this framework will be reflected in the findings. It is possible that some interviewees who told me stories negotiating internal and external factors to determine deservingness were reflecting premises I introduced about advantages and disadvantages, or even the premise that figuring out whether one had ended up where one deserves makes sense. People were generally prepared to answer these questions, however – most appeared to have thought about these issues before – and a few did choose to reject the premises. It was possible to do so.
A potential issue with my conceptualization of merit as a narrative concept is that there are contexts in American culture in which merit is treated first and foremost as a predictor of performance or success. A “magnet” school for kindergartners that uses an admissions test might be called “merit” based, for instance, and some might say that children admitted to such a school are selected according to merit, and deserve their admission\textsuperscript{19} because the qualities they display suggest they might succeed in the future. This version of merit is not the focal point of a life narrative that seeks to explain rather than predict outcomes. As a predictive concept, merit might involve innate ability more than I have found here, and perhaps draw more on the specific performance standards of authorities or institutions. I do not think such possibilities invalidate the findings of this project, however, so much as suggest another variant of merit that takes precedence in another context.

Finally, the samples from which these findings are drawn represent a limitation. Neither the mediated materials used in Chapters 4-6 nor the population of people interviewed for Chapter 7 can be said to constitute a representative sample. The mediated narratives are a limited number of cases of “model lives,” from a limited number of industries, and cover an extremely limited number of eras. The personal narratives were all collected in 2017, and so cannot represent change over time in the same way the mediated materials do; the population of interviewees underrepresents several demographic groups and fails to capture potential geographic variations. The sample is also lacking in a certain kind of personality diversity: It does not include assholes. Every

\textsuperscript{19} Though they would probably not say that the kids “earned” it.
person I interviewed was the kind of person who was willing to take an hour out of his or her time to help a stranger. They were friendly and considerate. I have no empirical evidence for the following speculation, but my life experience tells me that assholes would have an easier time than others do dismissing advantages or help from others, or ignoring their own agency in disappointing outcomes – though it is quite possible they use the same broad narrative processes as the rest of us to do so.

My samples were nevertheless wide and diverse enough, and my findings about the master narrative of merit robust enough across both mediated and personal narratives, that I am very confident in my claim that Americans understand merit through a negotiation of internal and external factors in life outcomes, deploying patterned storylines and standards to determine whether an individual has done enough to deserve his or her outcomes. Where I would like to see future research focus its attention is on the signs I find of contemporary change in this narrative. Both the evidence of greater deference and credulity being given to external factors in life outcomes, and the evidence of a true counter-narrative about merit emerging in American culture, is based on a very limited number of cases, and in some cases on subtle differences between stories. As we continue to question meritocracy as a system, I think we would do well to remain alert to the possibility that these questions are changing our understanding of how lives work, find creative ways to identify those changes, and ask how our evolving cultural conception of individual merit might help with systemic reform.

***
One interesting dynamic in the various recent attempts to rethink meritocracy, observes Andrews (2016), is that they don’t actually rethink meritocracy.

The problems they describe are fundamental, but none of their remedies are more than tweaks to make the system more efficient or less prejudicial to the poor…. our authors fail as critics of meritocracy because they cannot get their heads outside of it. They are incapable of imagining what it would be like not to believe in it. They assume the validity of the very thing they should be questioning.

This is at least in part because, as I have argued, the master narrative of merit in individual lives encourages us always to return to the premise that we can and should interrogate the relationship between merit and outcomes – that this is an important part of how life works. Andrews’ proposed alternative is that we acknowledge and embrace the fact that our meritocracy has hardened into an aristocracy, and that the new aristocrats develop some humility about their position.

I admit that I can’t really get my head all the way outside of meritocracy, either. I can’t see my way past a system in which the people who want to be brain surgeons compete for a chance to be brain surgeons, and the most qualified people get to do it. The efficiency argument for a meritocratic process is a compelling one.

What I can imagine, though, is accepting that the person who ends up being a brain surgeon didn’t necessarily earn it, doesn’t necessarily deserve it, and that neither her occupation of that position nor her journey to get there tell me a whole lot about her merit. Life is too complicated and too arbitrary to make an accurate assessment of the various factors that led to this outcome. I will never figure it out.
The danger with this outlook, I realize, is that it can excuse advantage and invite Andrews’ aristocracy by failing to demand of the people at the socioeconomic top that they compete fairly. It can let Ivanka Trump get away with saying this:

even though those who believe that my success is a result of nepotism might be right, they might also be wrong. Try as I may – and try as my critics may – there’s just no way to measure the advantage I’ve gained from having the Trump name, just as there’s no way to know if the person sitting across from you in a job interview or a negotiation is there on his or her own merits or with an assist of one kind or another.

We can, of course, identify certain pervasive advantages and disadvantages. What’s more, some necessary correctives to them, such as affirmative action, rely on acceptance of the idea that we can figure out why some people reach the top and others don’t, and correct for structural unfairness.

But my proposal is that we build a different kind of “top,” with less prestige and reward. If we embrace the idea that “deserve’s got nothing to do with it” – or at least not a whole lot, and that even if it does we’ll never get to the bottom of it – we open the path toward a system that distributes opportunities and rewards more equally, because why should the people at the top get or keep them? We have no reason to think that they deserve it. Institutions might become more willing and able to correct for structural social inequities if the results of their processes had fewer profound implications for the dignity or material conditions of the individual. Another way to think about this: if we lower the cultural stakes of social mobility, we might get more of it. Meanwhile, people who don’t land in the most desirable professional positions would no longer absorb the psychological punishment of blaming themselves for their outcomes, and suffer less relative material deprivation for their status.
None of this is to say that we should decline to hold individuals accountable for individual actions; society could still debate and establish appropriate levels of clearly measurable individual outputs. Nor should we deny the possibility of agency affecting life outcomes; people could still take pride in a job well done. But we could soften our commitment to the idea that, at the scale of a life or a career, we can reliably link a person’s individual contributions to his or her professional or socioeconomic outcomes—or build a system in which we’ll be able to do so. Doing so would pose a challenge to injustice in a way that simply pointing at existing unmeritocratic outcomes cannot, because it would reduce people’s ability and incentive to tell stories that suggest they deserve their lot in life.

We are part of the way there. We already understand reality as a complex interaction between individual and circumstance, and have begun to collectively observe that circumstance is a very powerful force in this interaction—an observation has the benefit of being true. Now we need to bring our ideals in line with our apprehension of reality. We already prioritize merit over meritocracy; now we need to make sure the American Dream says that “everyone who has merit will be fine” rather than “someone with merit will get rich.”

What we have not done, for the most part, is learn to tell stories that orient individuals “to the good” in their professional and socioeconomic lives without placing the identification and accounting of individual agency at the center of that orientation. We still insist that we can and should figure out our role. But there are signs in the form
of an actual emerging counter-narrative of merit that we are moving beyond this. We can embrace this version of dissent that is not easily encompassed by merit ideology.

Ivanka Trump is onto something. There is often no way to know if the person sitting across from you is there on his or her merits. But Trump draws the wrong conclusion from this observation. She concludes we should assume that people do deserve their positions, and get on with things. Instead, we should assume that they don’t, and try to locate deservingness and dignity somewhere else.
Appendix A: Personal merit narrative interview protocol

The purpose of this project is to explore how people think they got to where they are, and how important these issues are to them. I’m going to ask you some questions about your own life. If you are uncomfortable with a question, please tell me and we can skip the question or stop the interview.

1. Please tell me about yourself -- where you come from, where you are now, and how you got here.

2. Do you feel like a success?

3. Why did your successes and/or failures happen?

4. In what ways have you been advantaged in life? In what ways have you been disadvantaged?

5. Do you think that most people born into your circumstances would end up with a similar life to yours?

6. Do you think your life could have gone differently? What is another path you can imagine for yourself? What would have had to change for you to end up there?

7. One of the important ideas about America is that it is supposed to be a meritocracy, meaning people are supposed to end up about where they deserve to be, based on their efforts and abilities. Has your life worked that way?

8. Do you think America more broadly is working as a meritocracy? When you look at the world around you, do you see people ending up about where they deserve to be?

9. What separates the people who have done well from the people who have not?

10. What are/were your thoughts on the 2016 election?

11. Do you think Donald Trump deserves to be in his position?

12. Do you think Hillary Clinton deserves to be in her position?
## Appendix B: Interviewee demographics

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<td>31</td>
<td>Black</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collects disability</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>Black</td>
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<tr>
<td>Career Link employee</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Law/MBA student</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investor w/ engineering Ph.D.</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>M</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assistant manager, former draftsman</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>White</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dairy farmer</td>
<td>60s</td>
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<tr>
<td>Heating and AC (owns company)</td>
<td>69</td>
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<tr>
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<td>26</td>
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<td>F</td>
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<tr>
<td>Probation officer</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Black</td>
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<tr>
<td>Office manager</td>
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<td>F</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trader Joe's</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>White</td>
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<tr>
<td>Retail (former road crew worker)</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>M</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acupuncturist</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>White</td>
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<tr>
<td>Project manager for a general contractor</td>
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<td>White</td>
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<tr>
<td>Therapy student</td>
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<td>White</td>
<td>F</td>
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<tr>
<td>CEO urban development</td>
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<td>Lebanese American</td>
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<tr>
<td>Executive director at a nonprofit</td>
<td>38</td>
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<tr>
<td>Partner in family business</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>M</td>
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<tr>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Gender</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dancer</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Japanese American</td>
<td>M</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nonprofit manager / former lawyer</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Korean American</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fireman</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>White</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tech startup CEO</td>
<td>31</td>
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<td>F</td>
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<tr>
<td>CFO</td>
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<td>White</td>
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<tr>
<td>Financial advisor</td>
<td>40</td>
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<td>Housewife</td>
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<tr>
<td>Retired military intelligence</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>White</td>
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<tr>
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<td>White</td>
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<tr>
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<td>M</td>
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<tr>
<td>Political operative and line cook</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>M</td>
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<td>Retired executive director at a nonprofit</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>M</td>
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<tr>
<td>Retired grocery store manager</td>
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<td>White</td>
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<tr>
<td>Retired social worker</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>Black</td>
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