

INTRODUCTION

FIFTEEN YEARS.

That's how long I have been writing weekly columns for the *Philadelphia Daily News* and the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. By my count, between 2001 and 2016, I authored 1,047 columns ranging in subject matter from the hunt for Osama bin Laden to exploring what the color of your Christmas lights (white versus colored) says about you.

I joined the *Daily News* two months after 9/11, at the invitation of then-editor Zack Stalberg. I was practicing law full time while also hosting a daily radio program in what was the early part of my broadcast career. While there was already a lot on my plate—two careers, four kids, and an equal number of dogs—I viewed the invitation as an additional opportunity to weigh in weekly, with 600–800 words, from a great platform and to do something enjoyable. That Zack is a terrific guy was also part of the draw—he's smart, funny, and centered. I remember my excitement when the *Daily News* announced my association with a series of display ads, which I clipped and still have: “Would You Like That Smerconishized?”; “Gaze on in Utter Smerconishment”; “We’re Starting to Look a Little Smerconish”; and “Smerconish . . . The Sound of Opinions Hitting Paper.”

I hope that readers of this compilation will find it interesting to note the changes evident in my thinking over fifteen years of American history. There's no doubt that my worldview has shifted in the time period that I've been chronicling local, state, and national events. And while many people's opinions change over time, in my case, these columns provide a weekly timeline

capable of being charted. Readers can (and I am sure will) decide whether those changes in my thinking have been for better or worse.

I've enjoyed looking back. In my first piece as a columnist for the *Daily News*, published on November 13, 2001, I made the case for Rudy Giuliani heading the Department of Homeland Security. And for the next decade, I published a column every Thursday. Then, in 2007, I also began writing for the Sunday edition of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. For the next few years, I was in the unique position of writing for both newspapers. When that workload finally proved too much, in 2011, I became exclusive to the Sunday *Inquirer*. All told, I wrote a total of 449 columns for the *Daily News* and, through the end of 2016, wrote 598 columns for the *Inquirer*. Some stand the test of time and I am eager to republish them here. A few I wish I'd never written.

A couple of notes on how the book was put together: As I read through the archives, I divided the columns into the four broad subject categories of politics, profiles, life, and miscellaneous, in order to ensure that the 100 or so columns selected would equitably cover a variety of topics. The next question was how to organize the columns, and the way that made the most sense was to run them chronologically with a couple of key markers of change. So, sandwiched between the introductory and concluding sections, the main body of the text consists of 2002–2007, which covers my time with just the *Daily News*; 2007–2011, which covers my time writing for the *Daily News* and *Inquirer* simultaneously; and 2011–2016, which covers my time writing for just the Sunday *Inquirer*.

Interestingly, the periods that mark my evolution as a Philadelphia columnist reflect periods of change in American culture, with 2002–2007 comprising the post-9/11 George W. Bush years, 2007–2011 covering Barack Obama's ascension, and 2011–2016 spanning the latter half of the Obama era and the rise of Donald Trump.

For the most part, every column appears here exactly as it appeared in the newspaper, including the original headlines (which, by the way, were all written by editors, not by me). The handful of minor changes made throughout in spelling and punctuation were done to promote clarity and consistency but never to change meaning (though I was tempted!).

I've written an Afterword for each column to provide updates on facts and feelings. Although I am happy to report that I stand by most columns I wrote, there are a few mea culpas sprinkled throughout.

I took the title of this collection from a line in the classic rock song "Stuck in the Middle with You" by Stealers Wheel, which is, fittingly, the theme song to my SiriusXM radio program. A surprise hit upon its release in 1972, the song enjoyed renewed interest after providing the soundtrack for a particu-

larly grisly scene in Quentin Tarantino's 1992 debut film, *Reservoir Dogs*. Should you make it through all these columns, I think you will find a catalogue of views that, on balance, defies labeling toward the left or the right. Words like "liberal" and "conservative" lack the nuance necessary to sum up an outlook like mine that includes approving of airline passenger profiling and legalizing prostitution and mistakenly supporting the Iraq invasion (after appropriately questioning it initially). And while my thought process continues to evolve, the last column included in this collection, actually written in 2017, acknowledges the bubble in which I found myself at the outset of the Trump presidency, and, as I note in that column, it's a bubble I've been seeking to burst.

There is, of course, plenty of politics discussed in these pages, but there are also many columns that serve up slices of life outside that arena. I've enjoyed writing about such disparate subjects as our family dogs, my favorite lunch counter, our kids' yard sales, the tortuous SAT exams, and a special college professor who became a good friend. My favorite columns are those that capture unique scenes from the interesting life I am fortunate to be leading. I met Ronald Reagan as an 18-year-old newly registered voter; worked in the G.H.W. Bush administration when I was 29; had dinner with Fidel Castro; took a foreign leader (Pervez Musharraf) to my local American polling place to watch me vote; hosted the members of YES, the (now) Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductees, at a backyard barbeque; conducted Barack Obama's first radio interview live from the White House; confronted the living members of Led Zeppelin with a demand that they reunite; heckled Roger Waters from the front row of Madison Square Garden; worked for Pennsylvania's longest-serving U.S. senator, Arlen Specter; brought the "living legend" Bruno Sammartino to my law office; spent the same night with Pete Rose and Ted Nugent; had my portrait painted in front of a live audience, by Nelson Shanks (the portrait artist of choice of Princess Diana and Baroness Margaret Thatcher); shared an uncomfortable train ride with David Duke; drank champagne from the Stanley Cup; and conducted Bill Cosby's only pretrial interview.

My most surprising find during this compilation process was a column I have no memory of having written. It was published as a Guest Opinion in the *Daily News* in 1985, when I was 23 years old and a first-year law student at the University of Pennsylvania, 16 years before I joined the newspaper as a columnist. I thought it appropriate to offer the column as the first in this collection; it's a good baseline to show where I started and where I am now.

—MICHAEL SMERCONISH

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