



THE JOHN ADAMS INSTITUTE

AMERICAN CULTURE IN THE NETHERLANDS

Good evening ladies and gentlemen,

I don't know if you noticed, but while you were busy taking your seats we played a song. If you noticed I hope I don't have to explain to you that it was sung by two American Icons: Willie Nelson and Bob Dylan. Icons with their roots firm in American tradition, Willie Nelson in the country-tradition of farmers and cowhands, Dylan in the folk-tradition and the tradition of political organizing therefore. And although he rejected to be a political person from the moment he was made one in the sixties, his feeling for what's going on in American society never left him.

Let's listen for a moment to what they have to say in the Willie Nelson song:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=twlTg7f-Y9Y>

*There's a home place under fire tonight in the heartland
And the bankers are taking my home and my land from me
There's a big achin' hole in my chest now where my heart was
And a hole in the sky where God used to be
There's a home place under fire tonight in the heartland
There's a well where the water's so bitter nobody can drink
Ain't no way to get high and my mouth is so dry that I can't speak
Don't they know that I'm dyin' why's nobody cryin' for me
My American dream fell apart at the seams
You tell me what it means you tell me what it means*

If you wanted to summarize the book we are discussing tonight, I have the Dutch copy here, *The Unwinding*, an inner history of the New America, I think there would be no better way than with the words in this song. Because as much as Willie Nelson and Bob Dylan are themselves the products of an Old America, an America formed from the depression on the basis of Roosevelt's reaction to the economical damage that an unleashed market had brought to the country, the America of the New Deal, of institutions and labor unions, of practical politicians who knew how to cooperate across the aisle, of a financial sector reigned in by laws like the Glass-Steagall Act, an industrial America of proud blue-collar workers in steel and textile mills, to the same extent do they see this America crumbling and falling to pieces. To make way for something new that is still very unclear in its contours and that makes them wonder whatever that still means, this American Dream that has stimulated so many people in that same time frame from Roosevelt until.... yes, until when?

When did the old America start to unwind, that for sure is one of the questions I'd like to ask our distinguished guest of tonight: George Packer, staff-writer for *The New Yorker*-magazine and

writer of *The Unwinding*. Because it is exactly that process, the vanishing of the America that had this dream that hard work could take you anywhere in a tough but fair landscape that George Packer is describing in his book. Through the eyes of the people living in that landscape: on the hilltops, but more so in the valleys and in between. A breathtaking book, both by its content, its structure and its style. It is, if I may say so, something like David Halberstam meets Raymond Carver, in its analyzing of a society through the people forming it and in giving a voice to the struggling ordinary Americans in a superb literary style.

Two month ago Tracy Metz, director of the John Adams Institute mailed a number of aficionados with the question which guests for lectures at the John Adams were on their wish-list. There wasn't a shadow of a doubt about the person topping the result of that little inquiry: everybody wanted to hear and speak to George Packer. So it is with great joy that we welcome him here tonight.

Like I said: Mr. Packer is a staff-writer for *The New Yorker* since 2003. If you haven't read this book you might know him from 'The Assassin's Gate, America in Iraq', another book that will take your breath away, about the war in Iraq and it's aftermath of betrayal of the Iraqi-people: the devastating result of which we see every day in the Middle East. Because as much as domestic American affairs are the topic of our conversation tonight, Mr. Packer has dealt with American foreign policy over the years. His work also appeared in publications as *The New York Times*, *Mother Jones*, *The Nation*, *The Boston review* and *Harpers* and has won him many prizes. Not in the least the National Book Award for *The Unwinding*.

Ladies and gentleman please welcome George Packer.