When I was about six years old, my pop-pop—my father’s father—was in the hospital following a heart attack. I heard my dad commenting to somebody about an unexpected benefit from this unfortunate situation: pop-pop shared a room with a mobster, and the friendship they developed during their convalescence meant that my family was now connected. We had a guy we could ask for a favor, who could deliver. In a clubby, who-you-know town, we now knew people, and to them we were suddenly “one of us.” Beyond that revelation, facts are hazy, but the lesson I took was a sense that in Philadelphia you need connections.

Waiting in line and paying full price is for chumps. Knowing someone on the inside results in special treatment. Slip a guy a few bucks to sneak down to the good seats at a ball game, have a connection to park in the special lot, get a discount on a set of tires—this is what I understood to be the Philly way. None of these experiences from my youth represents anything nefarious, but they all gave me the sense that, in my hometown at least, there are always shortcuts and workarounds for the connected.

There is nothing more “Philly” than trying to get something for nothing. Everybody wants a discount. Everybody wants to cut corners. Everybody wants to butt in line. Everybody wants to avoid jury duty. Everybody wants to fix a parking ticket. Everyone wants one more soft pretzel thrown in the bag.
At the same time, Philadelphians are cynical. We do not trust in the integrity of systems or the law of averages. No matter how hard we root, root, root for the home team, they don’t win enough. Our long experience with substandard schools and pothole-filled roads makes it hard to believe that any proposed policy initiatives or bureaucratic innovations will actually bring promised improvements. So, we long for a sure thing and believe that having a connection is the key to getting results, especially from government.

Philadelphians want a hookup and a handout, and we assume that everyone else is hustling for one as well. Far from begrudging anyone who sneaks down to the sideline from the cheap seats they purchased or being angry at someone who gets a car at a discount, most Philadelphians would offer that anyone who doesn’t at least make an effort to find a deal is a sucker. When someone is caught running afoul of the law, the reaction is less disapproval of the conduct and more an acknowledgment that you can’t blame a guy for trying.

This book is about corruption in Philadelphia—and about ending corruption in Philadelphia—written by someone who cares deeply about the city and has engaged in the business of politics and government here. In my career, I have not always been so militant about the need to fight the perception and reality of Philadelphia corruption. In a town where calling someone a “boy scout” is not meant as a compliment, I know that over many years I have confused too many corrupt acts as politics as usual. Even as a reform-oriented government official and political insider, I made the mistake of thinking that by playing the game and turning a blind eye to certain abuses, I could be in a place to do good things for the city and make important reforms from the inside. I have met many good people similarly trying to do good within the system. Some of them still do not see the corruption around them for what it is; some like a little too much to be in on the joke and part of the gang.

Plato says in The Republic that the penalty for avoiding politics is being ruled by worse men. I entered public service in Philadelphia to pursue that Platonic ideal but discovered that the punishment for trying to improve government is becoming a silent witness to corruption. When I was an active participant in the world of politics and government, I saw plenty of patronage and lots of public money wasted to achieve political ends.
I saw decisions made to enrich the connected at the expense of the citizenry. I saw examples of quid pro quo that may not have met a legal definition of a crime, but certainly were instances where everyone understood what was going on. I knew so many who committed unethical and illegal acts but avoided stigma or prison time because of sheer luck (or prosecutorial selectivity) and too many otherwise good people who ran afoul of the law and lost their careers or their freedom. I sometimes wonder or fear that under the wrong circumstances, I could have been one of them. Mostly, I saw a system of uninspired insiders connected in incestuous relationships that functioned as a perpetual motion machine of you-scratch-my-back-I’ll-back-your-hack interactions with nobody wanting to stop the game before they got theirs.

One engagement crystalized the ubiquity of this system for me. I served on the board of a nonprofit organization whose mission was to operate a playground and playhouse dedicated to providing unstructured free play for Philadelphia children. The facility includes a century-old mansion and a giant wooden slide that have delighted generations of children. All that delight left the property in need of a major renovation, and our board of directors was challenged to find the resources for it.

We sought help from city and state governments. Government insiders encouraged our nonprofit organization to hire a lobbyist to help us make our case to secure funding from the state legislature—specifically, a former state senator who had spent six months in federal prison after pleading guilty to falsifying tax documents to hide income he received as a consultant for a private tax-collection firm while serving in office. At board meetings I bristled at the idea of paying a lobbyist out of our tiny organization’s perpetually stressed budget, but I also admitted that it would probably be money well spent. In dealing with state legislative leaders, one can get much farther with a kind word and the right lobbyist than with a kind word alone.

Far from facing scorn for disgracing his office, this recent federal inmate found former colleagues who were willing to help him build a new career. To them, he was “one of us.” Instead of using tens of thousands of dollars to purchase new play equipment or expand services, our little nonprofit gave him the money because we understood that it was the smart way to persuade public officials to invest in our organization.

In the end, the system “worked.” The lobbyist was paid a monthly retainer to represent our organization. Once state legislative leaders saw that
we were represented by the right guy, we got the money to improve our facility for the children of Philadelphia. A little legislative shakedown to help an old felon friend was child’s play.

I am convinced that going along to get along and hoping for marginal improvements is not a viable or ethical path to the major changes that Philadelphia needs. I was compelled to write this book because we will not make Philadelphia the city that it should be—the city that Philadelphians deserve—unless we do things in a fundamentally different manner. We have to make the city work for all folks, not just for the connected.

Readers should know that I have worked cordially with, and even feel a genuine affection for, many of the individuals who are referred to in this book. Some I consider to be real friends, and I have shared laughs and fond memories with a lot of the people I have locked horns with in political or policy fights. Even the ones who have broken laws or otherwise done wrong by our city have colleagues, friends, and families who care about them. If history and local politics had played out differently, the people I share a strained or antagonistic relationship with might have been colleagues or collaborators. My frustration with their actions should not be confused with scorn or contempt for them as people. This book, therefore, focuses more on the systems and habits that foster corruption and less on the personalities of public officials. Throughout the years of writing—and the decades of experience that preceded the decision to write the book—I conducted many formal interviews and informal conversations with current and former elected officials, civic leaders, academics, and Philadelphians of all backgrounds. Quotations and insights based on that original research appear throughout the book. However, some would speak only off the record, and many conversations could not be treated as interviews for attribution.

The book’s framework includes the actions, investigation, trial, and conviction of a couple of well-connected operators, but in general I am not interested in calling out individuals. I name names where doing so provides important insights or connects dots; I avoid doing so where pointing fingers would add little to a reader’s understanding. I took great pains in my writing to document and footnote the material. I hope readers will consider the content in these pages and avoid skimming the index for individuals—and I reassure the curious that everyone referenced or quoted in the book is fully credited in the notes.
This book is the story of a city’s confrontation with a history that threatens its future. It includes three distinct elements: (1) A detailed account of the corruption investigation of one of the city’s most powerful political figures stretches across the chapters, illustrates the themes of the book, and allows us to explore networks of corruption. In choosing this story of crime and punishment, my purpose is not to damn any particular individual’s misdeeds but to provide insight into how our collective actions or inattention give consent to the corruption. (2) Each chapter also discusses a specific aspect of Philadelphia corruption, its roots and effects, and the reasons for its persistence. (3) The third part of the narrative consists of freestanding vignettes about corrupt actors and reformers (from William Penn’s day until the recent past) that are revealing in themselves and help put current issues into perspective.

In Chapter 1, *corruption* is defined—not in legalese, but in philosophical, political, and social terms, with illustrations drawn from recent events and actors. Chapter 2 examines the costs of corruption, both financial and nonpecuniary, and considers the opportunity cost that corruption imposes. Chapter 3 explores the nature and development of Philadelphia’s unique culture of corruption, emphasizing how machine politics and self-dealing are entwined with city history. Chapter 4 uses insights drawn from the work of Daniel Elazar and the work of Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba to expound on the civic culture that allows corruption to thrive; it also places Philadelphia’s corruption in perspective using data and comparative analysis from Thomas Gradel and Dick Simpson’s examinations of corruption in Illinois. Chapter 5 explores the particular Philadelphia acceptance of corruption that frustrates efforts to relegate it to history. Chapter 6 looks at responses to corruption scandals in other cities and considers the changing relationship between corruption and legality over time, as well as the limited efficacy of legal strategies, especially given recent court rulings. Chapter 7 uses past reform efforts and insights about Philadelphia’s civic character drawn from E. Digby Baltzell, Nathaniel Burt, and others to explain the challenges faced by would-be reformers. Finally, Chapter 8 explores practical, achievable policies and actions that can produce positive change in Philadelphia and elsewhere. This book is a critique, but above all it is a call to action.

Interspersed with these chapters are brief narratives of historical and recent crimes, investigations, bosses, civic improvements, indictments, and
trials, illustrating the sometimes-outlandish nature of Philadelphia corruption, the baffling and troubling consent of the governed, and a longtime pattern of reform and backsliding. Each “History Lesson” and each era—from William Penn to Octavius Catto, from Marge Tartaglione to Joey Coyle—offers insights into the present-day Philadelphia situation and mindset. These core samples from more than 300 years of Philadelphia history illustrate how corruption has persisted and adapted; how scandals, reform efforts, and relapses have played out; how violence too often accompanies corruption in the City of Brotherly Love; how third political parties, non-politicians, and elites have emerged to bring change but proved to have little staying power; and how insiders and outsiders have participated in corruption and consenting over time. Above all, these historical episodes show the effects that both chronic malfeasance and insufficient attempts to thwart it have had on people’s lives and the fabric of the city.

I have lived in Philadelphia all my life. I have been employed in city government and in city politics. As a citizen, I hoped that making a change for the better in my neighborhood or through work with civic groups would compensate for the failings of the city’s political and governmental systems. To try to make more progress, I worked for reform organizations and even entered the fray as a candidate for office. I have served on a number of nonprofit boards and been involved with policy advocacy. I have been behind closed doors when decisions have been made and have had a front-row seat for events that have made major news. I attempted to make slow and steady progress from within the system, sometimes consenting with my own silence to the corruption and rationalizing that if I could just navigate those waters well enough, I would have the chance to make the change I championed. But Philadelphia corruption endured, and the city continued to suffer for it.

Philadelphia’s culture of corruption disparages and cheapens our city. Ending the consenting to corruption is a prerequisite for so many other positive changes. Unless we alter this course, Philadelphia will continue to be a city that truly serves only those individuals who thrive in the corrupt culture to which we consent.

A little more than a century ago, an essay entitled “Who Is a Philadelphian?” appeared in Harper’s Magazine. It offered a damning indictment:
“The one thing unforgivable in Philadelphia is to be new, to be different from what has been.”

We can be new, and we must be different.

Today’s Philadelphia has a new energy. A diversifying and modestly growing population has given the old city some much-needed vitality. Whether this energy makes marginal improvements or fundamentally transforms the city depends, in so many ways, on diminishing the cost and encumbrance of corruption.

Some choose to see the waste and fraud and abuse from Philadelphia corruption as minimal or typical of big cities or unavoidable. But, does anyone truly believe that Philadelphia cannot exist without corruption? In “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,” Ursula Le Guin describes a tragic utopia. Everything that is wonderful about the fictional city of Omelas depends on the misery of one unfortunate and abandoned youth:

> They all know it is there, all the people of Omelas. Some of them have come to see it, others are content merely to know it is there. They all know that it has to be there. Some of them understand why, and some do not, but they all understand that their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weathers of their skies, depend wholly on this child’s abominable misery.

Le Guin ends her story by showing us the people who walk away, unable to live with that knowledge. Surely nobody believes that Philadelphia could not exist without the corruption and surely nobody believes that the corruption establishes the best possible city. If Philadelphia were a city where families and firms thrived and enjoyed unlimited potential, it might be possible to excuse corruption as a trivial matter or even entertain the argument that some corruption might contribute to the city’s success. Instead, corruption exacts a significant cost and imposes a stark toll. Walking away will not change that.

To create the city that Philadelphia truly should be—a place of prosperity and opportunity for all citizens and all neighborhoods—Philadelphians must reject corruption. If we can do that, there are no city limits. To make that happen, we need to understand our fraught and corrupt his-
tory, confront our collective responsibility for allowing it to happen, and stop consenting when leaders put their own interests before those of the public.

I want to make it clear that I love the City of Philadelphia despite all its flaws. I love the physical city: the buildings, the parks, and the strollable neighborhoods. I love the metaphysical city: the palpable history, the ideals of William Penn’s Holy Experiment, and the poignancy of more than three centuries of struggle to make a city where all can thrive. Most of all, I love Philadelphians’ collective lack of self-importance and the sense that we are all in this together. I love that when Philadelphians ask, “What school did you go to?” we are asking about high school, because it matters where you grew up. I love the fact that Philadelphians know all too well what is wrong with our city, but the same enumeration of complaints from an outsider becomes fighting words. I love that Philadelphians embrace the gritty tradition of throwing an old pair of sneakers over a telephone wire along with the glamour of some of the world’s most significant art collections. I love that Philadelphians cheer for our teams as if our enthusiasm alone could make up for their dearth of talent, and I love that Philadelphians boo our teams when they don’t care as much about winning as we do. In the rare times when we all get to celebrate a championship, I love the civic euphoria and hometown pride expressed by everyone who knows we all waited for this for far too long. Most of all, in spite of so much evidence telling us that the forces of the world are aligned against us, I love the fact that Philadelphians never give up. Philadelphia is a dirty city that still shines and a poor city that still has hope—a city of endless potential, no matter how many times we have failed to realize it.

Lincoln Steffens famously declared that Philadelphia is “corrupt and contented.” His insights into misgovernment appear frequently in the chapters that follow. In the introduction to his famous book on municipal malfeasance, Steffens declared the purpose of his attacks on corruption in Philadelphia and other cities: “to sound for the civic pride of an apparently shameless citizenship.” In the same spirit, this book is not a condemnation. It is a convocation. It is about us and how we react, and fail to react, to the corruption we see. There can be no doubt that we can make Philadelphia the city that Philadelphians deserve.