Once Virginia’s new senator realized he couldn’t single-handedly get us out of Iraq, he got really angry. Meet Washington’s most unlikely revolutionary

A S NIGHT SETTLES BETWEEN THE MOUNTAIN RIDGES that rise on either side of Lebanon, Virginia, a rough little strip of a town in the state’s southwestern corner, Sen. James Webb’s people assemble in the Russell County Courthouse. They’re coal miners and miners’ wives, a third of them in the camouflage strike gear of the United Mine Workers, many of them wearing ball caps declaring them veterans of Korea, Vietnam or Iraq. A leather-skinned veteran named Eldridge tells me in a raspy whisper that he voted for Webb because Webb, a novelist and historian, had gotten these

THE POPULIST: Jim Webb, the first-term senator from Virginia, is trying to remake the American electoral landscape from the ground up.
JAMES WEBB

people, mountain people, right in his most recent book, a best-selling history of the Scots-Irish in America called Born Fighting. "We've got our own ghosts and goblins," Eldridge says, and he thinks Webb sees them. "He has the Second Sight."

Eldridge is the third person this evening to cite the supernatural—a kind of cultural memory, maybe—as a reason for supporting Webb, a fact that doesn't surprise Virginia's new Democratic senator. "My grandmother taught me my ghosts," he tells me, his voice a low, considered rumble.

The miners file into the courtroom, and Webb takes his place at the front, his hands in the pockets of his jeans. His natural expression is one of restrained anger, his ruddy face tucked into a bull neck as if to emphasize the glower of his foggy blue eyes. He's handsome like Jimmy Cagney, but with a jaw that would dent an anvil.

For years he kept a punching bag close to his desk, and at sixty-one he still looks like he could, and gladly would, hold his own in a bar brawl. Earlier that day, he'd donned a headlamp for a quarter-mile descent into Laurel Mountain Deep Mine, and at the courthouse his neck is still gray with coal dust from his trip underground.

A local politico, balloonning out of a Kelly green blazer, asks the Russell County Democratic Committee to stand. Up rise the miners in their labor fatigues. "We're all claiming cousins with you now," says green blazer, and Webb blushes and smiles; three of his actual cousins, including a small-town big named Jimmy Webb, are in the crowd.

Webb's family—his "blood," he says—has lived in the hollows of Big Moccasin Gap, as the area is called, for more than 200 years, but Webb grew up on military bases all over the country. When he entered the U.S. Naval Academy in 1964, he listed thirty-three home addresses on his application. His father was an Air Force officer and a veteran of World War II; Webb was a Marine officer in Vietnam; and his son, Jimmy, is a Marine just returned from Iraq, where he fought in Ramadi. Last year Webb campaigned wearing a pair of Jimmy's combat boots to remind himself why he was running: to end the war. He refuses to talk to the public about his son. When asked about the boots, he'd say that was the wrong question: "It's not why I'm wearing the boots, it's why I'm wearing the necklace."

When he ran for public office, Webb didn't campaign on his military record, he simply offered himself as a fighter. In Fields of Fire, Webb's first novel and one of the best depictions of combat in Vietnam, the protagonist, Lt. Robert E. Lee Hedges, sums up his approach to confrontation: "I fight," the character declares, "because we have always fought. It doesn't matter who." In Vietnam, Webb became the most highly decorated Marine from his Naval Academy class: two Purple Hearts, two Bronze Stars, the Silver Star and the Navy Cross, second only to the Medal of Honor. He's enamored of what he calls the "warrior aristocracy" tradition of the Scots-Irish, and he made captain at age twenty-three, though he thinks of himself as an enlisted man—one soldier among many.

Webb loves war. He's been studying military history as long as he can read. He loves war so much he can't stand to see Bush bungle the one in Iraq so badly.

WEBB COUNTRY: Webb descended into the Laurel Mountain Deep Mine in Virginia to meet his constituents. His family has lived and fought in the Virginia hills for more than 200 years.

THE CAMPAIGNER: Webb, with his wife, Hong Le, holds his son Jimmy's combat boots aloft after his Senate victory; during the race Webb wore the boots to honor his son's service in Iraq.

Webb loves war. He loves war so much he can't stand to see Bush bungle the one in Iraq so badly.

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In Lebanon, Webb starts his speech perfunctorily, talking about bipartisanship and finding common ground on the war, but then he seems to hear himself going Beltway. His voice jumps up a note; in creeps scorn for his own compromises. "This isn't about bipartisanship," he says. "It's not about going around the room. It's about 9,000 votes in Virginia." F*ck, yes, not the miners and their wives. It's about the people who put Webb over the top by less than one half of one percent.

Webb shouldn't have won—he started with no money and no support, not even from the Democrats, who backed a telecommunications lobbyist named Harris Miller. He beat Miller in the primary 50-49 to face Republican Senator George Allen, then considered one of the front-runners for the 2008 presidential nomination. But he beat Allen, too, and the men and women in this room were the reason: Conventional wisdom held that Webb, as an anti-war Democrat, would take Northern Virginia and get slaughtered in the rest of the state. Webb did win the North, but he also won more of the Southern vote than anyone expected. They didn't elect Webb to compromise; they sent him to fight. Not for the Democratic Party, for them. Webb campaigned on two main themes, foreign policy and "economic fairness," a term he's still defining. To him it means an increased minimum wage, which the new Democratic Senate promptly passed; a commitment to health insurance for all, if and when the Democrats get the votes; the conviction that "free trade" is not "fair trade," even if he hasn't decided what constitutes the latter; and most of all, a simmering fury that CEOs make on average 400 times more than the typical worker.

"After 9/11," Webb tells the miners, "the old labels don't apply. The country is just a..."
different place. And now we can remake the party system in these United States if we can get Reagan Democrats — or whatever you want to call ’em — if we can bring them back, we will remake politics. You don’t measure the health of a society from the top down, but from the bottom up.”

Before B orn Fighting, Webb’s books were animated by a critique of cultural snobbery, not capitalism. Then the war in Iraq revealed a new enemy to Webb: the system itself, the distortion of democracy that makes the poor fight wars from which only the wealthy benefit. “Class law,” he calls it, is “a disguise that allowed certain privileges to flow to a few dominant groups at the expense of the many.” The system, he concluded, needs to be turned upside down. “That’s economic fairness,” he tells the miners. “We have lost the formula. But this is the place, here in Virginia, this is the place where we are going to remake it.”

It’s time for questions. Several are about Iraq. One man has three sons in the Marines and worries about the health care they’ll receive when — not if, in his mind — they are wounded. A mother with a son overseas wants to know if we’re going to fight Iran. Another man’s son’s tour has been extended, which seems to him akin to the bullying the miners get from the coal companies.

“That’s right,” is the sum of Webb’s answers. He wants more money for vets, and he’s introduced a bill to stop Bush — or Hillary — from rushing into Iran without congressional approval, and he’s fighting for a cap on deployments; beyond that, answers are lacking. Webb the novelist sees the problem: This story doesn’t have a happy ending. But Webb the politician toes the Democratic line, declaring Iraq “solvable,” as if it were a crossword, while Webb the warrior’s plan for Iraq is diplomacy. He’s been quietly meeting with Condoleezza Rice, he’ll tell me later, urging talks with the Iranians. Meanwhile, the bodies are piling up, there and here: “We got people dying in the mines,” says one woman. Dozens every year in preventable accidents and 1,500 every year of black lung, more than the annual U.S. death toll in Iraq. “That’s right,” says Webb again, and that seems to please the miners and their wives. They know they’re right, but it’s been a long time since a U.S. senator said so.

“We’ve got people in desperate need right here,” announces one woman. “I’m talking about water.” Towns like Lebanon used to get federal grants for basic services, but under Bush they’re offered only loans. Their pipes are rusting, their kids are getting sick from dirty water. Another woman speaks up about oxygen concentrators, a crucial piece of medical equipment in coal country. The Bush administration slashed federal aid for the machines, says the woman, and people will die gasping for breath in their own beds. What will Webb do for them?

“I can look into that,” he says, then checks himself. These are his people, and now “looking into that” will not be enough. This is the paradox Webb faces: He’s been elected as an old-school populist in a two-party system that has little room for or interest in his crusade. And here are Webb’s troops: Men in need of oxygen concentrators, women who can’t pay their bills, miners in union-issued camouflage leaning hard on canes or on big, sturdy wives who pretend for their broken husbands’ sakes that it’s they who cling.

The last big strike by the United Mine Workers is nearly two decades past, which was when they took up the faded fatigue pants that some of them are wearing tonight. One of the strike’s leaders is in the courtroom, a man named Jackie Stump. I ask if he thinks Webb will help the union push back against the bosses. He shrugs. He doesn’t expect another big labor fight in his lifetime. The union won that strike — preserving health benefits for disabled miners — but lost the war, not on the picket line but in the courtrooms, where what Webb now calls “class law” crippled the union with fines in retribution for its revolt.

THE MARINE CAPTAIN: Webb, left, served in Vietnam and has the medals on his uniform and the shrapnel in his body — to prove it. To this day Webb’s men remain fiercely loyal to him.

Iraq revealed a new enemy to Webb: a distortion of democracy that makes the poor fight wars.

The mine into which Webb descended is one of the last three union coal operations in Virginia. The sons and daughters of Lebanon leave Russell County, some for Iraq, and at least one didn’t come back: a former valedictorian and all-region defensive end from Lebanon High named Donald Ryan McGlothlin, who was killed November 16th, 2005, in Al-Anbar province. McGlothlin’s father had already decided to support Webb’s campaign when he learned that, like him, the candidate was wearing his son’s combat boots in tribute. Ryan didn’t believe in the war in Iraq, feeling the real war was to be fought in Afghanistan, but he felt a powerful duty to his mission. “I would never vote for George Bush,” he told his father, “but I’d take a bullet for him.”

Bush recruited the fallen Marine’s memory for a speech “tootch up support for the war,” his father says. The family gave Bush’s speechwriters their consent. “The person was not who you owed your loyalty to,” McGlothlin says, recounting his son’s view: “It was the leader in the abstract.”

There is the war over there, and a different kind of war over here. What will happen in coal country, Jackie Stump predicts, is that the union will get weaker and weaker until someday some kids who’ve never heard of organized labor will look around at their working conditions and say to each other, ‘We’d better get together and do something about this.’ And when they do, the bosses will try to knock them down. “If they’re hungry enough,” says Stump, “they’ll hit back.”

That’s why he likes Webb, he says. Webb understands the fight must continue, even if you’re not sure what you’re fighting for. Democracy in Iraq, or clean water in Virginia?

Old men in jungle fatigues, or young soldiers in desert camouflage? Body armor? Or oxygen machines?

I

N FEBRUARY OF 2006, WEBB CALLED the Democratic political strategist Dave Saunders, and together they plotted to end the career of Senator George Allen, a handsome duchess in the mold of George W. who stood to be re-elected by thirty-three points. The Democrats planned to run Harris Miller, an anti-labor lobbyist dedicated to courting outsourcing IT jobs overseas. Saunders, his drawl as deep and wide as his connections in the tough little Dixie towns where most Democrats fear to tread, persuaded Webb that he was the man to take out first Miller — who outspent Webb three to one — then Allen. Saunders, known as “Mudcat” throughout the state, has for years been working on rebuilding Democratic strength in the South through an alliance of African-Americans and the Southern white men he calls “Bubbas.” “We were in the same place in terms of ‘How do you help people down here?’” says Webb. “How do you get the good out of this culture? At the end of this conversation, I said, I’ll do this. Let’s test the theory.”

Webb is so white he wrote a book about it; Saunders quickly realized Born Fighting: How the Scots-Irish Shaped America could become the rare campaign book voters might actually read, one that doesn’t pull punches. In its opening pages, Webb lists the slurs by which his people are known: “Rednecks. Trailer-park trash. Racists. Cannon fodder.” The Scots-Irish-Protestant Scots who fought the British in Scotland, then in Ireland, then in America — have indeed died disproportionately in America’s wars. But the Bubbas, Webb argues, were an actual earlier cannon fodder as a warrior caste. He considers poor white Southerners victims of the “monstrous moustret” they themselves built for African-Americans. “The Southern redneck” he writes, has become the “veritable poster child of liberal hatred and disgust . . . the emblem of everything that had kept the black man down. No matter that the country-club whites had always held the key to the Big House . . . at the expense of disadvantaged blacks and whites alike.”

Why did liberals ignore class? In part because Bubbas so often played the role assigned to them, but also because the poor whites, “Jacksonian populists,” as Webb likes to call them, “are the greatest obstacles to what might be called the collective taming of America, symbolized by the editors of political correctness.”

It’s not that Webb is racist, he’d just like to afford poor whites the status of victim too. In fact, he descends from a line of Southern whites at odds with the region’s racist traditions, and he’s especially proud of his fight in 1972 to get a representation of a black soldier added to the statue at the Vietnam Memorial in Washington. “I put a black man
JAMES WEBB

JAMES WEBB

on the Mall," he said in 1991, "and they"—
bigators and the art snobs who preferred
Maya Lin’s abstract wall—"can kiss my ass."

Webb believes that a re-energized
army of Bubbas will remake American
politics, restoring gun lovers, hunters and
NASCAR fans to the place they once held
at the heart of American populism. "Fight.
Sing. Drink. Pray," he titled one chapter in
Born Fighting, describing a culture that at
its best created country music and at its
worst invented the lynch mob.

But Webb is as aware of the dangers of
populism as he is of its potential. "On the
one hand," he says, "populism created
American politics. On the other it created a
formula that’s been continuously abused
from that time forward. The notions that
went into Jacksonian democracy are so
commonly turned into rhetoric rather
than substance. You know, the log cabin,
'We’re for the little people.'" Webb rolls
his eyes. "The emotional buttons."

When Webb decided to run, no one but
Mudcat Saunders and his friend the writer
Tom Wolfe (who insists Webb will be pres-
ident one day) thought he could wage more
than a symbolic fight. Sometimes it seemed
he wouldn’t even manage that. When
Mudcat arranged for a band to play for the
campaign, Webb overheard him telling the
musicians to learn the Marine Corps
hymn. "Jim never screamed at me," Mudcat
remembers. "He just takes me outside and
he starts at me and he says, ‘One thing I
want to make very clear to you. In no way,
shape or form is the Marine Corps hymn
to be used in my campaign. I will never use
that song for political gain.’" Yessir, said
Mudcat: "I thought, ‘Well, fuck, we just
gave up our own best ace card.’"

They didn’t need it; George Allen charted
his own demise. Re-election to the Senate
seemed like such a sure thing that he began
smirking during his speeches, as if aiming
Bush’s worst qualities would make him the
same pundit’s heir. He called an Indian-Ameri-
can Webb volunteer "macaca," and then he
took offense at the news that his mother
had been born Jewish, defiantly proclaiming
his determination to eat a ham sandwich to
prove his Christian bona fides.

Webb isn’t a natural campaigner; he
didn’t have to be. When he defeated Allen
in one of the slimmest, and certainly the
most unexpected, Democratic victory of
2006, pundits didn’t declare him a giant-
killer. Instead, they ruled it victory by de-
fault—curmudgeon beats boob.

A few weeks into his term, though, those
same pundits were beginning to see in Webb
what Mudcat and Wolfe recognize: the
political, yes, but also the soldier and the
storyteller to whom voters thrill. In January,
the Democratic Party tapped him to re-
summon the Bush State of the Union address.

Halfway through his speech, he pulled out
an old black-and-white photograph and held
it before the camera as if politics were show-
and-tell. "This is my father," he said, pointing
at a barely discernible figure in the center,
avantage of being true. "I was proud to follow
in his footsteps," he continued, grabbing
hold of every macho American man within
ears射 of a television, "serving as a Marine
in Vietnam. My brother did as well, serving
as a Marine helicopter pilot. My son has
joined the tradition, now serving as an in-
fantry Marine in Iraq." Webb’s fighting
family had trusted America’s elected lead-
ers, he said. "We owed them our loyalty," he
said, "but they owed us sound judgment."

Webb was almost shaking with his sense
of betrayal. Here was the synthesis of his
three identities—warrior, poet and politi-
cian—bound up in one angry man voted up
to the big house by Bubbas with guns,
pissed off about losing their jobs to China
and their children to Iraq. Last the lesson
be lost, he closed with a warning, recalling
a time a hundred years ago when "the dis-
possessed workers at the bottom were
threatening revolt." Once again, he seemed
to be saying, such a time is at hand.

AFTER WEBB’S STATE OF THE
Union response, blogs be-
gan buzzing about him as a
presidential candidate, or,
more realistically, as tough-
guy balance for Hillary or Obama. Most im-
portant is Webb’s opposition to the war,
but nobody’s asking about his solutions.
The truth is that he doesn’t have any.
"Diplomacy," he says. "He wants Iran and
Syria to make an 'investment' in Iraq,
though he can’t quite say what that might be. He voted against Democratic efforts to defund the war because he believes they weaken the U.S. negotiating position. But speaking at Virginia Commonwealth University the day his son came home from Iraq this May, he punched his arms overhead and called on the students to help him bring all the troops home. How? That’s the question.

Likewise Webb’s “economic fairness” campaign. A newcomer to the Senate, he’s an old hand in veterans’ affairs and consequently a legislative perfectionist. He wants bills to be flawless, which leads him to vote against legislation that would seem to be a natural fit for his agenda, such as Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders’ failed bill to repeal tax cuts for the very wealthy. Webb’s office won’t say exactly why the Sanders bill didn’t measure up, and so far he hasn’t offered anything comparable.

His biggest initiative is the new G.I. Bill. It’s absolutely unoriginal, nothing but an extension of the same educational benefits that World War II veterans received to post-9/11 veterans, but it’s also absolutely radical, potentially the biggest — and costliest — piece of social legislation in decades, providing college educations for millions of vets. The original G.I. Bill was crucial to the creation of the middle class; Webb’s bill, applied to today’s mostly working-class military, could have an even bigger impact. Which is why Sanders is on Webb’s side. “Now is the time to strike,” Sanders says. “Are we going to have a government for hundreds of billionaires or millions of veterans?”

Whether it has a hope of passing is another matter. Not right now, at least — it may seem a no-brainer, but a combination of Republican resistance to the massive spending it would require and the Democrats’ desire to court the middle class will likely keep the bill in limbo unless Webb can build a new power base in American politics: Bubbas, labor, minorities and the military united to take on what he calls the “hybrid royalty” of Republican and Democratic elites alike.

Tom Wolfe, who for decades has championed Webb as a major American writer, now sees Webb as a revolutionary — a conservative who could succeed where the left failed. “Jim Webb is the American de Gaulle,” he says, referring to the French resistance hero of World War II who took power in 1958. “I said to Jim, ‘Look, you’re just like de Gaulle, waiting for them to call you back into the capital to straighten up their mess.’ It’s the same issue: De Gaulle was summoned by hapless members of the assembly to do something about Algeria — then in the midst of a vicious war between French colonists and native Algerians. ‘Only de Gaulle could take France out of Algeria. You could not question his courage, you could not question his patriotism.’ Jim Webb has the moral authority to do whatever he thinks should be done.”

Webb grew up hard-scrabble, but his officer father schooled his children in poetry as well as war. He was a high school brawler, but he also aced standardized tests, surprising his friends with a Naval ROTC scholarship to USC.

The next year, he won an appointment to the Naval Academy’s class of ’68. He went determined to be an infantry Marine. “I do not want to be a cannonball,” he’d written in a poem, “but I will learn to like the meat/I will learn to live for the kill, and the advance...” The Academy was not kind to Webb. “IHTFP,” he’d say to other Academy graduates, a reminder of a slogan that gave them perverse determination to endure its humiliations: “I hate this fucking place.”

But years later, he realized he’d loved it. In 1981, as the first writer-in-residence at the Academy, he published a valentine to Annapolis, the novel A Sense of Honor, in which
Where do you draw the line? Webb asks. “Look where they end up if you don’t stop them.”

A fter Webb leaves the miners, I meet him in a bar in Salem, Virginia. Mudcat is with him, and McGarvey. I’m not a Southerner, and I’m not a veteran, and I can tell he doesn’t think we have much to discuss. He’s more interested in his beer. I take out a stack of his books. “I don’t want to talk about legislation,” I say. “I want to talk about the past.”

“You know what Faulkner said,” Webb starts, “he said the past isn’t dead…”

“Right,” I say, “it isn’t even past.”

It’s like I said a password. Webb takes a slug of beer and begins rumbling, his voice low but stretching high every few sentences, a sign of his anger. Not at me at the present, which requires history’s lessons. When you’re in a period of unknowns, which we’ve been in since 9/11, you need to fall back on a historical model. Look how this administration has overstepped its bounds; there are models for that.” A sip of beer.

“Germany. That was a nation with great respect for the law. Then it entered a period of chaos, and loyalty got transformed by people who knew how to abuse it.”

“If you look at the evolution of the Soviet Union, you had a principle that was a valid principle, the notion that we should throw out the monarch and have an egalitarian society. And yet you get rulers who come in and know how to use Karl Marx and the instruments of government against the people. “No, we’re not there today, but how do you get there? And where do you draw the line? I look at something like wiretapping. And I fear that the executive branch can say that no one, not only the legislative branch, but even the judicial branch, has the right to examine who it is they’re listening to. If you look back in history, you find that if you don’t stop them, where they can end up.

“It’s really important that we start breaking apart what’s been done. One of the strongest necessities when you’re in a situation like this is raising consciousness. It’s an old Marxist concept.” Mudcat and McGarvey laugh. “If people begin to understand, then they start to react. When I was a kid, my mother was from East Arkansas, and we’d come in through Memphis and drive out on to the fields—that’s rice country now, but then it was cotton—and I’d be lookin’ out the window at mile after mile of people sittin’ in front of these little bitty shacks, white and black, and they’d be just sittin’ there, and I’d go, ‘Why don’t you stand up and do something?’

“It’s what I ask.”

“Hmm.” He drinks some beer. “What Andrew Jackson did,” he says, “is he didn’t take crap. He didn’t try to make history. Andrew Jackson dug his heels in, said, ‘You can measure the health of a society by the working people, and you guys aren’t gonna roll me.’

“When South Carolina was going to secede when Jackson was president, he said, ‘All right, guys, you’re gonna see my troops pretty quick, and you’re gonna do it. He had the force of personality and the strength of his convictions.”

Is this Webb’s solution to Iraq, to class war? A show of force and force of personality? Not exactly.

“If you’re going to read my work,” Webb says, “you should try The Emperor’s General.” Published in 1999, it’s the novel he’s proudest of, the story of Gen. Douglas MacArthur — another Scots-Irish warrior with force of personality — during the years following World War II when he ruled Japan. It’s as sublime an exploration of political cynicism as the best of British novelist Graham Greene, one of Webb’s favorite authors. “I spent ten years thinking about what I wanted to say in that book,” Webb says. “It’s about diplomacy. War— by other means. He knocks his empty pint glass against the wooden table, and Mudcat laughs, and says, “Well, fuck.”

So Webb — student of violence and power, believer in “ghosts” and “tradition” — is waiting for history. What does he want? An end to the war. When does he want it? The moment when he can commit an act of perfect politics, so pure and smooth and necessarily total that it’s as beautiful as fighting. He took the first step by running for office and becoming a senator; now Jim Webb is in country.