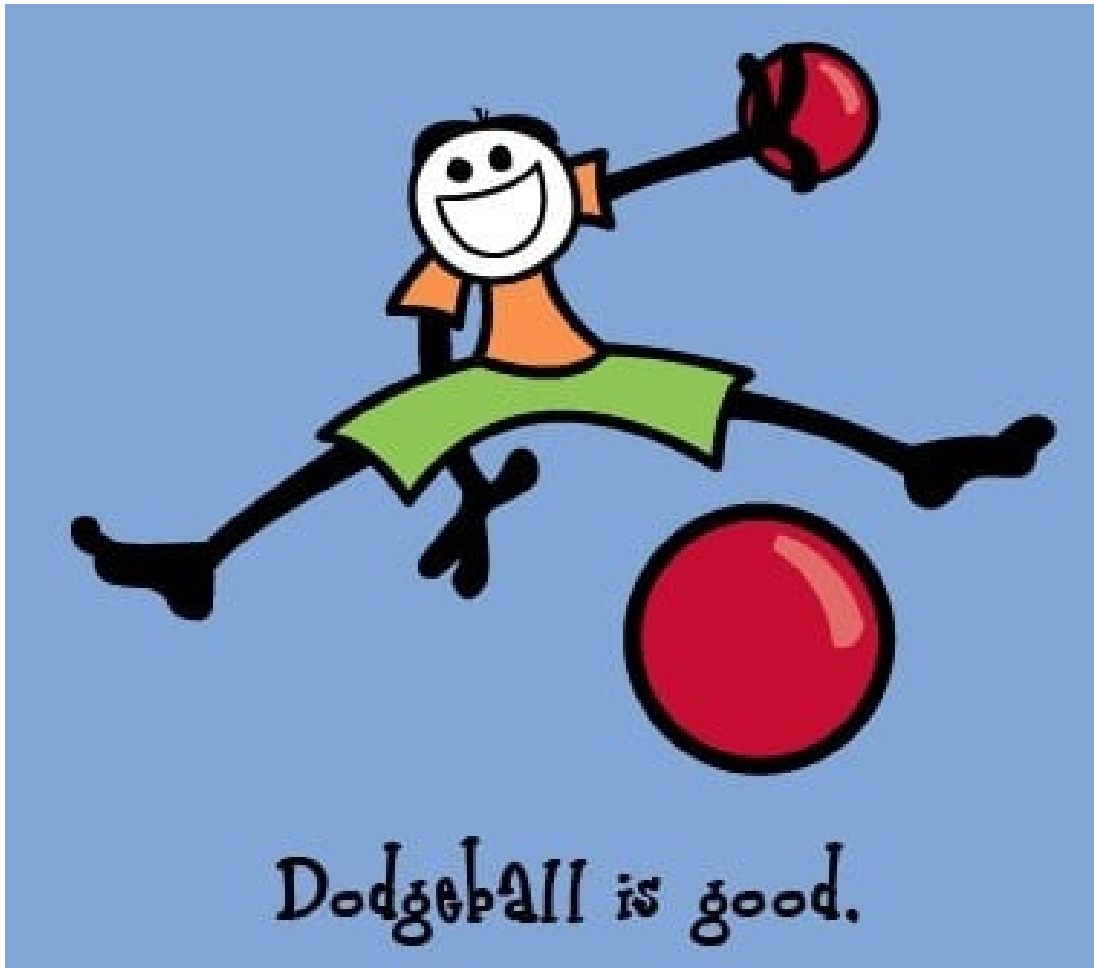


The Dodgeball Foundation

by [Charlie Wheelan](#) (January 2025)



The Dean of Harvard's Kennedy School offers a fulsome introduction of me, most of it accurate, and I walk out from the eaves of the stage to shake her hand. The two of us step to the chairs for our "fireside chat" with no fire. This is the biggest crowd I've drawn so far and the most distinguished group of academics, particularly political scientists. I know that some of these people have been vocally skeptical of my book.

I unbutton my blazer and sit down in a dark wooden chair with a Harvard crest. The Dean's matching chair is angled toward

mine. A small table with bottles of water and a copy of my book is wedged between us. As the polite applause die down, the Dean asks, "Did you know that you were a pawn in one of the most curious and significant chapters in American political history?"

"Of course not," I reply. "How could I?"

"Tell us about when your editor called with the assignment," she asks. I can tell from the question that she has read the book, which will make our conversation easier.

"I was in an airport somewhere, JFK I think."

"She asked if you knew Laurence Comstock," the Dean suggests, prompting a reaction from the Harvard crowd: a few claps, a loud whistle, some hissing.

"I didn't know Laurence Comstock personally," I answer, "but obviously anybody who had spent time in New York recognized the name."

"The billionaire hedge fund manager," the Dean says, finishing my thought. There is more clapping and hissing, which lasts long enough that the Dean asks her next question over the noise. "He'd announced that he was starting a foundation—putting \$500 million against it—and she wanted you to write about it."

"That's all we knew," I say. "He refused to say how he was going to spend the money."

"You weren't excited to write the piece," the Dean points out. "Even though Laurence Comstock was offering you an exclusive."

I shrug theatrically. "I figured Laurence Comstock was pledging \$500 million for public art in the Hamptons," I say. There is a predictable burst of laughter. One benefit of my packed schedule is that I can try out lines and stick with the ones that land, and this one always does. I continue, "My

editor insisted that I have lunch with him. She was going on about how clever he was. That was the word she kept using: *clever.*"

"Your editor was at Oxford with him," the Dean points out.

"They were Rhodes Scholars together. She told me repeatedly that Laurence Comstock was one of the smartest people she'd ever met."

"You underestimated him," the Dean says, stating the obvious but moving the conversation along. There is a burst of applause, but also an outburst in the back of the auditorium, a male voice yelling something angry but inaudible.

"Obviously," I agree, "but I got a book out of it." I pick up my book and show off the crisp white jacket with a drawing of a rubber playground ball landing on an electoral map of America: *Dodgeball, Politics, and the Future of America: The Inside Story of the Laurence Comstock Foundation*. "We all underestimated him," I continue. "I've met a lot of rich people, and I've met a lot of smart people, and I'm not persuaded the two have anything to do with each other." More applause. This riff plays well everywhere, but particularly well in Cambridge.

"You knew Comstock was no fool," the Dean continues. "He saw the real estate collapse coming in 2007. That's where he made his fortune. And he was one of the few who predicted that Trump was going to win, both times."

"I agreed to have lunch with the guy," I say. There is loud and sustained applause. I take another small sip of water, mostly for effect. The crowd grows quiet. "We met at noon on a Friday at the Legacy Club," I add. There is a collective groan.

"*The Legacy Club*," the Dean repeats with disdain. "Deliberate, don't you think?"

"I'd never heard of it."

"You'd never heard of the Legacy Club?"

"Who knew there were still clubs in Manhattan that exclude women?"

"He invites you, a journalist, to a club that excludes women. And you didn't wear a tie," she says, teeing up an anecdote from the book.

"I did not. They have a strict dress code: coat and tie at all times. The *maître d* had to loan me a tie, which was humiliating."

"Also deliberate?" she asks.

"Everything Laurence Comstock did was deliberate."

"You have your first meeting with him at the Legacy Club," the Dean explains. "Can you read us that passage from the book?"

I turn to a page marked with a purple Post-It and begin reading: "The Legacy Club is tucked into a residential block on the Upper East Side, an elegant brownstone with two African American doormen in smart green uniforms, including matching green captain caps with gold braiding on the brim. They looked like senior military officers in a semi-broken African country.

"Comstock was already seated in the dining room, a formal place with dark wood paneling and white tablecloths. Only three or four other tables were occupied—all men, of course. A waiter in a white shirt and a black bow tie hustled over to pull out my chair for me.

"Comstock stood politely and extended his hand. He was wearing a conservative blue suit and a light blue tie. He struck me as accomplished but not flashy. Nothing about his appearance or demeanor screamed out billionaire—not that I've dined with a

lot of them. He tried to make friendly small talk, but I was impatient with the faux suspense and still annoyed by my rental tie, so I asked straightaway, 'Let's do the big reveal: Who or what is getting \$500 million?'

"'Dodgeball,' Laurence Comstock said.

I pause as the audience reacts. There are shouts and cheers and laughter. "Oh, we're just getting started," I tell them, prompting the Dean to do a curious little clap.

"Can you read a couple more paragraphs?" she asks.

I continue: "Laurence Comstock looked me firmly in the eye. 'I'm going to bring dodgeball back to schools all across the country,' he said. I assumed he was joking, so I waited for him to tell me what he was really going to do with \$500 million. But he held my gaze without so much as a smirk.

"'Dodgeball,' I repeated eventually. He sat there silently until I felt compelled to ask, 'You're serious?'

"'It's time to de-pussify America,' he said."

There are hoots of disapproval. I'm aware for the first time of a group that looks to be protesters sitting near the stage. Their body language projects anger; they have placards resting in their laps.

"Let me stop you," the Dean says. "Are you comfortable with that word: de-pussify?" The protesters near the stage emit a collective hissing.

"Of course not," I say. "But it's central to the story."

"Why don't you read a little more," she says.

I find my place and continue: "I took my notebook out of my bag. 'Just to be clear,' I said to Comstock, 'we're on the record here, right?' This was a courtesy. Any conversation

with a journalist is on the record unless there is some agreement to take it off the record.

"Comstock nodded toward my pad, signaling that what he was about to say was for attribution. He spoke slowly, watching as I wrote: 'I am pledging \$500 million to launch a new foundation that will bring dodgeball back to America's schools. This is an effort to de-pussify our country.' I finished writing and looked up at him, hoping he might be joking but knowing that he was not.

"'De-pussify,' I repeated. 'Is that a word?'

"'It is now,' Comstock assured me."

I close my book and put it back on the table. "Let's talk about that word," the Dean says. "What did your editor have to say about it?"

"I insisted that we run Comstock's quote in full," I answer. "My editor agreed. If you remember, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and all the broadcasters censored it."

"For a while," the Dean says.

"Correct. And then at some point it became hard to report the story without using the word. Rachel Maddow insisted on saying 'de-pussify' on her show rather than, as she put it, 'sugarcoating the misogyny.' Pretty soon even Terry Gross was saying it." There is laughter as this image lands.

"Back to the lunch," the Dean probes. "What were you thinking when Laurence Comstock told you that he was going to spend \$500 million to bring dodgeball back to America's playgrounds?"

"I asked him, 'So, you think a lack of dodgeball is our greatest social challenge right now? Not poverty, or opioid addiction, or malaria, or Alzheimer's?'"

“And he answered?”

“He said, ‘I believe this is how I can have the most impact on America.’”

“That’s a prescient line, isn’t it?” the Dean asks. There is desultory clapping. I look at the protesters, most of whom are leaning forward in their seats, holding their placards with both hands. If they are going to spring up, it will be soon.

“Laurence Comstock was very good at bringing back dodgeball,” the Dean asserts.

I nod in agreement. “He offered \$100,000 to any public or private school in America that allows students to play dodgeball—no strings attached. It wasn’t logistically difficult. All you need are a couple of rubber balls. Kids love it, and schools were eager to have \$100,000 in unrestricted funds.”

“When did you know what he was really up to?” the Dean asks.

Before I can answer, the protesters stand up. There are seven or eight of them, men and women. The house lights are blinding, but I can still read most of their signs: Dodgeball Is Violence; Pussy = Strength; a few others in that vein. A short woman in glasses with bizarrely large frames yells, “Why have you glossed over the thousands of physical injuries because schools must allow this stupid game to get the funding they need!” The auditorium is designed to carry sound away from the stage; her voice sounds thin and muffled. There are shouts for her to sit down. Several security officials move briskly down the outer aisles. “Do we really want to live in a society where students have to throw balls at each other for their schools to get adequate funding?” she continues. A male security officer arrives at the end of the protesters’ row. They shuffle slowly toward him, signaling their willingness to go. As they walk out, one of the men turns and points at me. “What about the emotional damage?” he screams.

"Shut up or leave!" someone yells at him from elsewhere in the audience.

The Dean speaks over the din: "I want to remind everyone of our policy regarding civil discourse. Any member of the audience is free to share an opinion, but that is reserved for the Q and A period. No one has the right to interfere with the speech of other community members." There is desultory clapping.

"When did you know what Comstock was really up to?" the Dean asks me again.

"I wish I could tell you that I had suspicions early on," I say, "but I didn't. I wrote my piece about the Comstock Foundation. He really did bring dodgeball back—thousands of schools, millions of kids. The whole 'de-pussify' movement became a cultural flashpoint. Comstock was suddenly a hero among conservatives. Sean Hannity had him on every week for 'De-Pussify Friday'."

"Liberals *hated* him," the Dean offers.

"Many still do," I say, pointing to the door where the protesters had been escorted out. "The *New York Times* did an 8,000-word story on dodgeball injuries—which made conservatives love Comstock all the more. After the *Times* piece ran, FOX made De-Pussify Friday into a new show."

"And then?" the Dean asks.

I sip some water. "Comstock began talking about the federal debt. He was doing one of his regular television appearances. The host asked him an easy question, something about a 'strong America,' and Comstock said, 'Great countries don't over-borrow. It's unconscionable to be running trillion-dollar deficits when the economy is strong. If we really want to de-pussify this country, we should pay our bills.' The quote is in my book. I had an inkling then."

"What came next?"

"At the beginning of August, Comstock told Hannity that strong democracies don't cozy up to dictators."

"Lots of people had been saying the same thing," the Dean points out. "Why was it different when Comstock said it?"

"He was in their tribe."

"And then he began talking about 'chivalry'."

"Yeah, it's an antiquated term, but basically he was saying that strong people, especially conservatives, should treat women with respect."

The Dean's assistant is giving us the "wrap it up" sign from the front row. We still haven't spoken about the last third of my book: the conclusion of Laurence Comstock's political chess game.

"I know we're running short on time here," the Dean says, "but tell us briefly about the MSNBC interview."

"The Rachel Maddow moment," I offer.

"Yes."

"This was around Labor Day. Comstock had been criticizing the President for several months, and the administration was starting to push back. Comstock went on Rachel Maddow's show—no accident, obviously—and she asked about picking teams for dodgeball."

"Picking teams," the Dean repeats. "All the kids line up. Two captains take turns picking. Some kids will be picked last, obviously. Maddow asks about the emotional toll of that."

"Yes," I acknowledge, "And Comstock told her—"

"—The famous reply," the Dean interrupts.

"Comstock said, and I'm going to quote him here, 'Welcome to life. The problem with progressives is that most of them were picked last in elementary school and they still haven't gotten over it.' "

There is laughter and jeering, the loudest of the evening. The Dean looks out to the crowd and says, "The most memorable part is Rachel Maddow's reaction when he asked her if she was picked last."

I take her prompt. "It turns out, not shockingly, that she was."

"How do you feel about that exchange?"

"It was just another act in his play."

"We need to take some questions," the Dean says. Six or eight hands go up immediately. The Dean calls on a bearded man whom I recognize as a prominent political scientist. "I don't believe it," he says when the microphone is delivered to him.

"You don't believe what?" I ask, even though I know perfectly well what he doesn't believe.

"I think you're giving Laurence Comstock way too much credit," he continues. "He was a misogynist asshole who ended up saying a few intelligent things that his misogynist asshole followers happened to listen to."

"Please, a question," the Dean implores.

"Okay," the professor acknowledges. "This whole plan ... how do you know it was a plan at all? Where's the evidence?"

"Thank you," the Dean says. The professor sits down but continues to glower at me.

"Comstock died while I was working on the book," I begin. "He never agreed to a second interview—but he also never refuted

any of the stories that were written about his grand plan.”

“Why would he?” the professor says loudly from his seat. “You made him look like a genius.”

“Please, let him answer,” the Dean admonishes.

“Comstock didn’t keep a journal,” I continue. “His family has never made any public comments about the arc of events, though they’ve continued to fund the Dodgeball Foundation. So, how can I be sure? Look, this guy was remarkably clever and disciplined. There is an eight-month period during which he ramped up the Dodgeball Foundation. He became the spokesman for the de-pussify movement, seizing every opportunity to speak via conservative media about what it means to be strong, responsible, chivalrous, honest, and so on. He became the most respected voice among Americans who self-identify as ‘conservative,’ or as a ‘values voter.’ That we can quantify. And over that period, respect for the President and his acolytes fell by more than half. In the aggregate, it was a political free fall. That’s how I describe it in the book.”

The professor parries, without the microphone but still loud enough to be heard, “That’s correlation, not causation, and the rest of the country thought he was a complete jackass—the very worst of humanity.”

“That was the point,” I say.

“Let me exercise my prerogative as moderator,” the Dean says. “Do you believe that he transformed American politics?”

“Of course he did,” I answer confidently. “There is a whole chapter in the book on that. When Laurence Comstock began talking about dodgeball and de-pussifying the country, the President had an 85 percent approval rating in his own party. During that summer, Comstock began using his platform to argue that the President was weakening the country. That was always his language—strong versus weak. For two weeks, he hammered on

the growing debt. Then for two weeks he argued that a strong leader should stand firm against authoritarian regimes. And then for two weeks he hammered on business ethics—”

“That was when he invoked scripture for the first time to draw attention to the President’s business interests.”

I answer, “Matthew 6:24: ‘You cannot serve both God and money.’ That week there was a twelve-point drop in the President’s support among Evangelicals. You can look at the polling data: Every time Comstock criticized the President on a new front, his poll numbers dropped significantly.” I motion out at the Harvard audience. “He didn’t give a shit what any of you thought.” There is frustration in my voice.

The Dean points to a young woman sitting near the back of the auditorium. “In the purple sweater,” the Dean says, inviting her question.

The woman stands up and speaks excessively loudly into the microphone, “I think you’re an apologist for an awful human being who made money on the backs of Americans who lost their homes during the financial crisis and then turned around and spent hundreds of millions of dollars encouraging children to attack each other on the playground—”

“Is there a question?” the Dean interrupts.

The woman, who appears to be an undergraduate, continues, “Isn’t it true that there have been thousands, *thousands*, of dodgeball-related injuries across the country, not to mention the psychological damage inflicted on a whole generation who have learned to interact with each other only through violence—”

“Is it really worse than social media?” I quip, drawing laughter.

“What about picking teams?” the undergraduate continues, not

easily deterred. "Wasn't that part of the Dodgeball Foundation mission—humiliating students who are picked last just because they're not good at playing violent playground games?"

"Thank you for that question," the Dean says. "The playground injuries: Is that a serious concern?"

"No," I say emphatically.

"Thousands of injuries!" the woman yells from her seat. "That's just a fact. That's data!"

"Sure," I agree, "there have been a lot of minor injuries, most of which have not required medical attention. No one has died—"

"What about the concussions!" a student next to her yells.

"Please, let him answer the question," the Dean admonishes.

"The *New York Times* reported that there have been about five hundred concussions," I say. "Let's put that in perspective. Every year in the U.S. there are somewhere between two and four million sports-related concussions among kids under eighteen. There are over a hundred thousand from soccer alone."

"I think we have time for one more question," the Dean says. She points to a gray-haired man who has been patiently holding his hand in the air.

"Did you talk to Comstock at all after the election?" the man asks. "Before he died."

"I had one conversation with him," I say. "I ran into him on the street in Midtown near Sloan Kettering. We now know that he was being treated there for liver cancer."

"Will you read us that section of the book?" the Dean asks. "Let's finish with that."

I flip to the final chapter and begin reading: "Comstock was standing near the curb, waiting for his driver. He was dressed in a blazer with no tie. He had refused all of my interview requests after the election, so I knew this might be my only chance to speak with him. I did not realize that he was on his way out of the hospital, or that he would be dead within a month. 'Mr. Comstock,' I said. 'May I speak to you for just a few seconds?' He looked older. Maybe it was his illness, or the bright daylight. He had a single bodyguard who stepped warily in my path. 'I'm the guy who wrote the first Dodgeball Foundation story,' I explain.

"'I remember you,' Comstock said. His tone was courteous. There was no effort to brush me off.

"'I've been trying to reach you,' I said.

"'You have,' he acknowledged with a hint of a smile. I had called his office at least twenty times.

"'I'm writing a book about the Dodgeball Foundation—the bigger picture, obviously, your real intent.'

"He smiled and nodded politely. 'Good luck with that.'

"'Can I ask you a few questions?'

"'I've said everything I have to say,' he answered and turned toward a waiting SUV, not abruptly or in anger. Still, it was clear that he was not going to answer my questions."

The Dean interjects, "I found this to be the most affecting part of your book. Tell us what happened next."

I can recite this part from memory, so I close the book and

set it on the table. “Comstock walked a few paces, but then came back. He looked me in the eye and held my gaze. I could tell that he was weighing his words. ‘This is a sad story,’ he said eventually. ‘Make that clear in your book. It’s a sad story. We have to do better.’ That was the last thing he said to me.”

“We have to do better,” the Dean repeats. The audience breaks into loud and sustained applause.

I always finish my talks with that vignette, as Laurence Comstock might have predicted.

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Charlie Wheelan teaches public policy at Dartmouth College. He’s published numerous short stories and his first novel, *The Rationing*, was published by WW Norton in 2019.

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