



# NORM COADY PROPS

A HISTORY OF POWER  
IN 7 LESSONS



# **PROPS A HISTORY OF POWER IN 7 LESSONS**

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EXCERPTS

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Stay human.

**EXCERPT: WAMPUM**

MOST PEOPLE who have ever heard of wampum imagine that it was basically a form of money, but it's a lot more complicated than that. In fact, the arrival of Europeans led to a destabilization of the currency and its inflation. Most goods, especially in the interior, would more likely be exchanged, a barter system where everyone roughly knew the rates—a certain number of beaver pelts gets you a certain number of guns, metal pots, needles, and thread. And so, wampum belts became more symbolic than transactional, a receptacle for wealth that cemented intentions and created peace. To accept wampum was to bind yourself to a people.

This understanding of the currency brings me back to the 5th Grade when beads on safety pins were given out as tokens of friendship. Looking to avoid the hard work of social networking, I convinced my mother to set me up with a small factory, which I used to produce many friendship beads for myself.

And that's how, one morning, I showed up at the Franklin School and entered Ms. Gladwin's class wearing so many

friendship beads on my collared t-shirt that I looked like a little tin pot dictator. Mussolini would have been impressed.

But I overdid it. Classmates began to inquire about the origin of my honors, protective of the value of this new currency. No number of vague answers or allusions to friends in neighboring towns satisfied their suspicions. Slowly, discreetly, my friendship safety pins were removed and placed out of sight, ending up in the trash can. My shirt was now a mess of holes where counterfeit social capital once hung.

Clearly, I would not have lasted long in the 18th Century Ohio River Valley. Because you can't go make a bunch of wampum for yourself. It must be given to you. Its value is tied up in the fact that another person has surrendered it.

Wampum might also be compared to Bitcoin as its worth came from the labor that went into its production as opposed to the rarity of its material. Typically, a person working all day with a flint could produce maybe 20 to 25 beads, a tiny fraction of the total needed for a single belt. Add to that labor, the inland demand for the beads, the associated transportation costs, which come at a premium due to its value, and a belt with thousands of beads becomes an object of real value.

And, of course, where there is value, there is scarcity. At times, wampum paucity became so acute that the French took apart and reworked belts in their possession to regift them to the tribes. They tried using glass beads mass-produced in Europe, and when this failed, they introduced cowrie snails into the New World, so they could farm their shells. My God, what could possibly be more French than

trying to fix an issue of consumption by introducing snails into the situation?

Wampum represents a spoken shared purpose made concrete, sometimes beautifully and sometimes cynically. In fact, this is what they are called: speech belts. Louis XV ordered four million beads in anticipation of all the words of goodwill needed to sustain the French in the Americas during the Seven Years' War. All those tiny cylinders represent a whole lot of sweet talk.

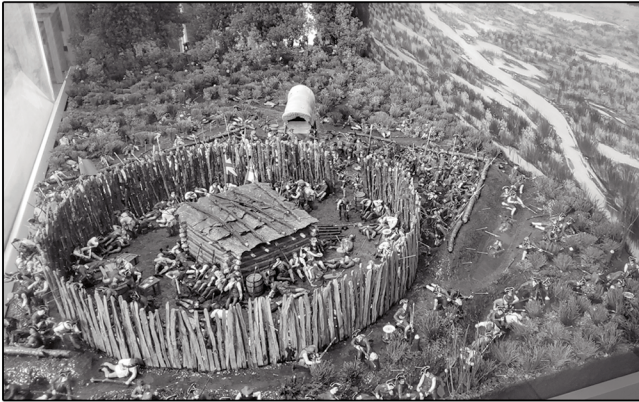
Alas, sweet talk can soon fade into sweet nothings. Or, put another way, the more wampum is tossed around, the less it's worth. Any cunning chief worth their salt might see the writing on the wall and embrace a more practical view of affairs. Do I want this pretty French speech belt, or do I want these good British guns to blow the heads off my competition? Like my classmates, these Indian chiefs begin to question the origin of the beads themselves and wonder about the stability of the entire system. The tribes, and their valuable beaver pelts, begin to further drift from the French, who are left with just so many holes in their shirts.



A comically incorrect and patently unfair French rendering of what happened with the Jumonville Party, which was bad enough that it need not be exaggerated. The white flag and clutched diplomatic papers are a nice touch, though.



Hey everybody! I found the perfect place for a fort. It's in a sunken meadow with streams nearby and it's also surrounded by forest which will provide our enemy the perfect protection why they take pot shots at us.  
Hope it doesn't rain!



Let's be honest: More effort went into this diorama of Fort Necessity than went into the original building of Fort Necessity. The pooling meadow water in the background is a nice touch. That'd be an A+ in my gradebook!



A sadly accurate depiction of Washington and his men trying to get enough light to read the French terms for surrender. They never do get a candle lit, and Washington accepts French demands, sight unseen, tacitly admitting to murdering Jumonville in the process. Whoops!



## EXCERPT: CHALK

Do you know who made Maximilien Robespierre look like a mild-mannered barrel of laughs? Lenin, that's who. *Vladimir* Lenin. He is often confused with John Lennon when brought up in casual conversation, conjuring lyrics like, "*Imagine all the people living life in peace.*" But the Lenin we're talking about is not all that into peace and is actually likely to spit on the ground if anyone even brings it up. This Lenin doesn't like to sit around crossed-legged and naked in bed, "imagining" things. He prefers Marx and would rather bring the next and final historical stage into reality. This Lenin isn't a famous singer, though; he did end up on just as many posters as the other Lennon, if not more.

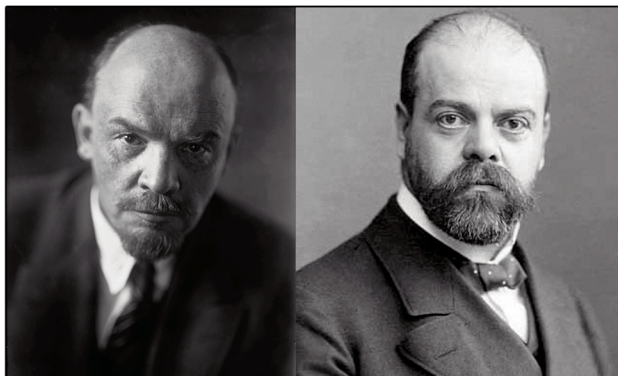
To be sure, times have changed. Whereas now the ability to recreate 30-second viral booty-shaking dances might get you invited to state dinners, back in the early 20th Century, you might get there by sitting in cafes writing tracts on the means of production and laying into your rivals as if you were slaughtering a wild hog.

Lenin is good at both, writing page-turning beach reads

like *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* while denouncing other Marxists as vermin or detestable centrists or demanding that the worker's movement be purged of, "filth which has accumulated during the score of peaceful years." So yeah, John Lennon's just not into peace, but he might be cool with the "no possessions" part.

Right now, he is on a cramped train moving through Germany with the goal of killing the Tsar and pushing Russia into a revolution that will resolve the course of human history. This is his long-term ambition, anyway. His more immediate concern is the cigarette smoke coming from the toilet stall. Smoking is not part of achieving a classless society. It's just another capitalist ploy to mollify the masses. Plus, he can't stand smoke, so he has forbidden it from the train car outside the toilet stall. Only now, he can't help but notice smokers are dominating the stall. Other people in line might legitimately be looking to do a #1 or even working on a #2, and as you know, anyone working is given priority in a Marxist world. So, he is compelled to create a new order around the use of the toilet with tickets for people defecating and tickets for people smoking. Crappers—the workers—get priority, of course.

But we might be looking too closely into the toilet on the train, and it is not, generally speaking, a good idea to look too closely into the toilet on a train. In fact, there are some people on board, especially this cranky fella Lenin, who would rather we pretend that this German train did not exist at all. Forget the train, forget who is on it, forget what country it is moving through. Pretend we see nothing.



Left: Vladimir Lenin, clearly overjoyed. Right: Israel Lazarevich Gelfand, A.K.A. Parvus – one of the strangest humans of the 20th Century, a Marxist who brought about revolution while drinking champagne for breakfast in his mansion outside of Berlin



A glorified version of Lenin's time on the "sealed" train, making him appear to be a man of the people, which he most certainly was not. He hated people. Especially rich is all the smoking, a capitalist activity Lenin immediately outlawed on the train outside of the toilet.

**EXCERPT: UMBRELLA**

WE'RE BACK in a high school in America, just a normal suburban school churning out a quality educational experience. Let's call it John F. Kennedy Memorial High, a medium-sized school. It's the first class of the day, and the students are sleepy. Actually, some are not just sleepy; they're asleep, faces planted on their desks. One is leaking a mucus trail. Even the eager beavers seem to be hibernating.

"Hitler!" I declare, knowing this is a name that usually wakes them up. I explain how this fella Neville Chamberlain was the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, and in 1938 in Munich, he quite foolishly attempted to negotiate with Hitler. That's right, *Hitler! Adolf* Hitler. The *Nazi*!

Everyone knows you can't trust *Hitler*, right?

My students slowly awaken, nodding sagely. Of course not.

I tell them that Adolf makes all these demands and promises to this guy Chamberlain and that, for some reason, old Neville believes him. But of course, Hitler breaks all his promises and invades a bunch of countries in the process. If

only Neville had stood up to him and said, “No way, Dolfie,” we wouldn’t even have had a World War 2. It would have just been World War 1 with no sequel. Sequels may be fun to watch, but let’s admit it, 75 million dead people is a drag.

So obviously, Hitler makes this guy Neville look like a world-class idiot. He could have stopped Hitler in Munich just by saying no, and instead, he caves. In fact, I tell my students that Chamberlain might be the biggest idiot of the 20th Century. His name is now synonymous with weakness, giving in, appeasing Hitler.

A special kind of contempt is reserved for this kind of equivocator, probably because his example is so useful for us. If we ever get mad at someone for not being aggressive, we can just say they’re like Chamberlain, letting Hitler off the hook. You can see how super useful this is. It turns what might be an overly aggressive piece of warmongering into a highly principled, world-saving stance. Pretty neat.

I notice my students’ attention flagging again. Perhaps I haven’t dropped Hitler’s name enough to keep them awake. But I have an idea. I walk over to the closet, poke my head in, and come out with an umbrella.

“What’s this?” I ask, holding it up for them.

They’re not in the mood. They stare sullenly.

“Seriously,” I insist. “What’s this?”

“An umbrella,” says Marco grudgingly.

“Yeah,” I say, “or what the British call a brolly.”

I hold it in my right hand and wield it like a sword, swooshing it through the air, almost knocking Marie’s backpack off her desk. This gets their attention. Then I do something way more radical: Bring my left hand down to the stem and unsnap the retaining strap. The umbrella flutters a bit,

now unrestricted, and my students are suddenly awake to the danger I present to them. They know I can't be trusted at times like these. I'm the kind of teacher who does dumb things like double-stepping on a student's boot. They're a superstitious bunch and everyone knows it's bad luck to open an umbrella inside. They don't want any part of what might come next.

"Hold on," says Marie in the front row.

Evan, in the back row, stands up, hands outstretched. "Coady, don't."

Making teenagers suffer is kind of a side hustle of mine. It makes up for the low wages and mind-numbing curriculum meetings. So, yes, I'm loving this, every second of it. I begin to ever so gently pull back and forth on the umbrella stem, an inch up, then an inch back, so the umbrella flaps like a giant bat. Now, I have their full attention. No one is sleeping now. A few of them are even up out of their seats.

*That's bad luck, Coady. We don't need bad luck, thank you very much. We don't mess with this kind of thing, Coady; we don't tempt fate.*

But they know I do. All the time.

"Do you dare me?" I say, flapping the umbrella. "Do you dare me?"

They're all very much awake now.



Chamberlain's wife drops her umbrella. Apparently, it's bad etiquette to pick up your own dropped umbrella – but not as bad etiquette as signing an agreement with Hitler.



Looks kind of sunny to be toting around a brolly while surrounded by dodgy Nazis. But Neville looks chuffed to bits to return to England and let everyone know the good news: he has signed a peace treaty that will lead to millions of deaths and destroy his own reputation forever.



Kennedy in a convertible, the umbrella of cars. The Presidency got him the Lincoln, but he bought his first convertible, a Buick, with profits from his book defending Neville Chamberlain – *Why England Slept*.



Louie Steven Witt seated on the far right of the photo, umbrella at his feet. One of the closest people to Kennedy during the assassination, he did not actually see it. Why? Because he was opening his damn umbrella. Why? Ugh, don't ask.