

FOREWORD

by Edwin Meese III

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Americans are a people of strong opinions who have always debated vigorously the issues of the day. The Founders forcefully debated the provisions of the Constitution at the Philadelphia convention and later in the press through *The Federalist Papers*. Partisans North and South passionately debated the institution of slavery. In the twentieth century, we intensely debated America's entry into World War I, the New Deal, isolationism versus interventionism prior to Pearl Harbor, civil rights, the Great Society, the policy of containment, and the conduct of the cold war.

Uninhibited debate, you might say, is as American as apple pie. Yet no matter how strongly those on each side felt, they endeavored to respect the other's point of view. They did their best to avoid the odious practice of substituting personal attacks for substantive examination of the issue at hand.

As a result—and this is a critical point—these great debates usually produced a public consensus on even the most controversial issues. This was in keeping with the advice of George Washington, who, in his farewell address, urged his fellow countrymen to avoid the dangers of partisan hatred, fueled by political parties telling lies about each other. Whatever their passing disagreements, Washington said, Americans must remain “firmly bound together by fraternal affection.”

Another founder worthy of emulation is George Mason, author of the Virginia Declaration of Rights. That document provided the blueprint for the Constitution's Bill of Rights, perhaps the most significant protection of liberty in the history of the world. Mason was a powerful advocate of his ideas, but he was not contemptuous of those who opposed him. He never insulted those who differed with him. Instead he advanced his arguments with reason and persuasion, often winning over those who had initially taken a contrary view.

But what do we hear today in the public square? Bitter charges and countercharges. Shrill language and rancorous dialogue. We are subjected to a cacophony of partisan invective that drowns out the voices of reason and prevents consensus. Inevitably, this rising chorus of incivility has had a corrosive effect on our politics. We have seen a forty-year decline in voter participation in national elections. In the last two presidential elections, fewer than half of eligible voters bothered to vote. It is imperative that we stop shouting and begin listening to one another, for as Edmund Burke wrote, “Rage and frenzy will pull down more in half an hour than prudence, deliberation, and foresight can build up in a hundred years.”

My colleague Ed Feulner, one of the authors of this book, has put it aptly: “Our free, self-governing society requires an open exchange of ideas, which in turn requires a civility rooted in mutual respect for each other's opinions and viewpoints. . . . Restoring civility to public discourse is not an option. It is a necessity.”

That was certainly Ronald Reagan's way. He refused to engage in ad hominem argumentation. He was confident that if the people were given all the facts, without distortion, they would make the right decision. And so they did throughout the 1980s. Under his leadership, Americans regained confidence in themselves; they ignited the longest period of peacetime economic growth in our history; and they supported a foreign policy of peace through strength that ended the cold war at the bargaining table and not on the battlefield.

It is in the spirit of reasoned and principled discourse that Ed Feulner and Doug Wilson offer *Getting America Right*. Civil in its tone and respectful in its criticism, the book represents an eye-opening (at times shocking) look at how far our government has moved away from the core values and principles that have guided us throughout most of our history. Fortunately, Feulner and Wilson are here to offer the prescription. Much of what they propose is based upon the research and analysis of The Heritage Foundation, an institution superbly qualified to provide such assistance.

The Heritage Foundation occupies a unique position in Washington, D.C., and indeed in the country. At a time when public faith is fading in institutions of all kinds—government, schools, corporations, labor unions, and the media—Heritage is among a handful of public organizations that enjoys increasing public trust. This can be seen in the two hundred thousand members who financially support the Foundation, giving it the largest, most diversified donor base of any public policy organization in America. Townhall.com is also a powerful force for influencing public opinion. The website averaged nearly two million unique visitors per month in the 2004 election. News, opinion, and action are made available to interested readers.

Heritage became a major player in the world of public policy in 1980 with the publication of its monumental study *Mandate for Leadership: Policy Management in a Conservative Administration*. Its one thousand pages offered more than two thousand specific recommendations to move the federal government in a conservative direction. President Reagan liked *Mandate for Leadership* so much that, at his direction, copies were given to every member of his new cabinet at their first meeting. Some 60 percent of *Mandate's* recommendations were implemented or adopted by his administration.

Although not as big as *Mandate*, *Getting America Right* can, I believe, have as significant an impact on American governance, as it seeks to answer the question addressed by every generation— "How much government do we need?"

The authors begin by pointing out that despite the sharp differences and heated disputes, most Americans share certain fundamental principles—free enterprise, limited government, individual freedom, and a strong national defense. They build their lives around traditional American values—fairness, the primacy of the family, the right to be left alone, the idea that the least among us can rise to the top, the conviction that no one is above the law.

The authors propose sound solutions based upon these principles. For example, the national debt now stands at a staggering \$8 trillion. *Getting America Right* lists a number of outmoded, inefficient programs that could be

eliminated tomorrow without damage to anyone but the special interests that profit from them.

The welfare system initiated by the Great Society forty years ago rested on a tragically flawed premise—that government can guarantee a good living for everyone. The result has been the virtual elimination of individual initiative among welfare recipients and the creation of a permanent underclass addicted to government largesse. *Getting America Right* suggests a different premise for the welfare system—equality of opportunity. And while those who fail should be helped to get back on their feet, their failure is their responsibility and no one else's.

To help promote sound economic policy, Feulner and Wilson argue that we must reform government regulation, rationalize the tax burden, end trade barriers, and open up world markets with one of their most exciting ideas—a Global Free Trade Alliance. In the field of national security, the authors insist that the national government's first duty is to keep Americans safe from harm. To meet the clear and present danger of global terrorism, they say, we must take those essential, measured steps at home and abroad that will ensure our security and therefore our liberty.

Getting America Right deals with the fundamental concerns of every society—war and peace, order and liberty, prosperity and poverty. The challenges this book addresses, difficult as they seem to be, are not intractable. Just as the majority of The Heritage Foundation's recommendations went into effect two decades ago, so too can the real-world prescriptions Feulner and Wilson present here change the way our government works. The authors are experienced analysts who know the critical difference between the perfect and the good.

Getting America Right is a quintessentially American book—pragmatic and principled—written for those who are concerned about the future of this great country. Its proposals are offered with the conviction that committed citizens can make the difference in the voting booth, at work, at home, in the community, and, ultimately, in the nation.