

## CHAPTER 1

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# We *Can* Push Back

*Freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction. We didn't pass it to our children in the bloodstream. It must be fought for, protected, and handed on for them to do the same, or one day we will spend our sunset years telling our children and our children's children what it was once like in the United States where men were free.*

—RONALD REAGAN

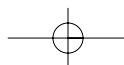


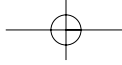
**W**HERE DID THINGS go wrong?

For proud conservatives this should have been the best of times. After all, conservatives are finally steering the ship of state after decades of liberal dominance.

But look what's happening in this putatively conservative era. Look at the extent to which our government now intrudes into its citizens' lives, reaching for ever more power at the expense of individual liberty. Look at the greed and corruption that have produced outrageous pork-barrel politics and government budgets spiraling out of control. Look at the fiscally reckless accumulation of unimaginable public debt that now threatens the nation and the world. Look at how many Americans now look to government for the “quick fix” or for personal advantage.

And all this is occurring at a time when our nation faces a tsunami of dangers—terrorists eager to massacre innocent civilians; uncompetitive economic practices that drive businesses and





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jobs overseas; ill-defined immigration policies that jeopardize the uniquely American notion of *E pluribus unum* (out of many, one); runaway government growth that threatens to bankrupt the country.

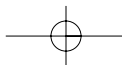
Gloomy as we may sound in diagnosing America's current ills, we are actually optimistic about the potential for effective cures. Some key changes have already begun, giving us hope for the future. What we urgently need is an action plan for building on these changes to make America as great as she can and should be.

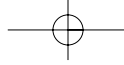
*Getting America Right*, we believe, is that action plan.

Any plan for fixing the problems that plague our government must involve individual Americans. Too many Americans feel helpless in the face of the government leviathan, watching as budget numbers soar, the number of Washington bureaucracies expands, and government feels more and more removed from our lives. But as this book will reveal in real-world terms, government is not some abstract entity with little connection to our lives; it dramatically affects all of us. Simply put, social power is a zero-sum game: When government takes it, individuals lose it.

The growing complexity of government lets bureaucrats and elected officials hide their acts behind an opaque screen, allowing them to escape accountability. *Getting America Right* shows how we can and must pull away that screen—how each and every one of us can demand responsibility and a return to core principles.

And what are those core values and principles? They are nothing less than what has made America great. And despite our hotly contested elections and increasingly rancorous partisan disputes, Americans still share fundamental principles. We still support free enterprise, limited government, individual freedom, a strong national defense, and the rule of law. Most Americans still





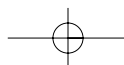
## **We *Can* Push Back**

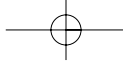
believe in the Ten Commandments as guides for our individual lives. We still stand for such traditional American values as fairness, volunteerism, the primacy of family, the freedom to worship as we see fit, self-government, and the defining faith that the least among us can rise to the top—but that no one is above the law.

These ideas define our worldview. They are grounded in our founding document, the Declaration of Independence, which insists on equality under the rule of law, natural rights, liberty, and government only with the consent of the governed. Thomas Jefferson credited the wisdom of the Declaration to a higher power than himself: He called it “an expression of the American mind.” In short, the United States exemplified the then radical idea that governments exist to serve their people, not the other way around—that nations become great only when they free their people to become great individuals.

But too often, politics trumps principle in our nation’s capital, particularly since powerful interest groups, wealthy lobbyists, and angry extremists have come to dominate the political scene. So why do we have reason for optimism? Because those groups do not represent mainstream America. Much as it may bore the jaded celebrities of New York, Hollywood, or Washington, myriad polls show that mainstream Americans overwhelmingly hold dear the time-tested anchors of God, citizenship, and patriotism. Consider these recent poll results:

- 85 percent of Americans say religion is very or fairly important in their lives.
- 71 percent believe the Constitution promises freedom of religion, not freedom from religion.
- 88 percent agree that “schools should make a special effort to teach new immigrants about American values.”



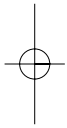
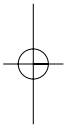


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- 80 percent of Hispanic parents say it's more important for children to learn the rights and responsibilities of citizenship than to focus on their own ethnic group's customs and heritage.
- 81 percent of all Americans believe immigrants should learn English.
- 69 percent proudly display the American flag on holidays and any other time they wish.

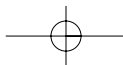
Now it is time to defend and honor—not just pay lip service to—the principles that have always been the strength of our great nation.

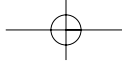
## WHAT WE BELIEVE



In Winston Churchill's words, "The farther back you can look, the farther forward you are likely to see." Conservatism is not a religion, not an ideology or a political platform. Conservatism is a set of beliefs that prizes moderation, reflection, tradition, and reason; it cherishes the old and valued even as it produces new solutions. It seeks ongoing improvement of a society, but always in the context of an existing cultural system.

Conservatism is thus a broad social movement of diverse but reinforcing beliefs, gathering travelers on the same journey—pilgrims who may argue over the topography of the promised land, but still move in the same direction. To be a conservative is to apply old ideas to new circumstances. As liberal thinking took center stage politically in the 1960s and 1970s, conservatives relied on the time-tested principles and ideas that could be fashioned into constructive change. And these days, it is the conservatives who seek new approaches while, at the same time, preserving en-



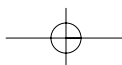


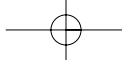
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during principles. In a speech to the graduating class of 2005 at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, President George W. Bush told the new midshipmen to be “champions of change” and to “pursue possibilities others tell you do not exist.”

We would add only one caveat: Change must be evolutionary, not radical or revolutionary. If customs and traditions need to be altered, the new form can’t be imposed from on high. People must be persuaded that change is necessary. Humans are too complex for a healthy society to emerge from the theorizing and the social engineering of elites—academics, editorialists, government officials—proclaiming “enlightened” policy. Government of the people, by the people, and for the people, to use Abraham Lincoln’s eloquent phrase, requires the active involvement of an informed citizenry.

Yet for the past seventy-five years, the federal government has sought increasing power over the American people, at the expense of many of our traditional values, and it has often done so in a revolutionary fashion. As conservatives, we continue to believe in the empowerment of individuals, and we remain skeptical of government programs that promise utopia. The American people know their own needs and values and can judge what is in their interest far better than any distant bureaucrat or elite authority. Fundamentally, a civil society derives its strength not from big impersonal government, but from virtuous individuals and “little platoons” joining forces to achieve a dynamic social impact. When government steps in to provide a service that private sources could perform, it crowds out private entities that outperform government if left alone to respond to local needs on their own. Small example: The staff and volunteers at the local soup kitchen go on alert when a regular client fails to show up; they can find out what’s wrong and mobilize local help to deal with it. By contrast, the federal food stamp program is simply a





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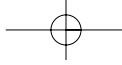
remote paper-churning bureaucracy, oblivious to the real people it supposedly serves.

First among society's little platoons, of course, is a stable, loving family. A host of formal and informal institutions follow, ranging from neighborhood schools to churches and synagogues to volunteer fire departments to the Boy Scouts to the Rotary Club. What they have in common is faith in America's shared moral order that respects human dignity, inculcates decency, overcomes fear, and inspires people to help one another in times of trouble. We have learned truths through the ages, among them that all individuals seek freedom, that human life has intrinsic value, and that it is unjust to show arbitrary preference for some people over others.

We also know that freedom is not a license to do anything one pleases. Freedom requires limits and responsibilities—to separate the two trivializes the entire concept of freedom, as sociologist Charles Murray has argued. Freedom endures in a civil society only when individuals accept that with liberty comes responsibility. In return for enjoying liberty and prosperity, we commit ourselves to virtuous behavior, notably in defending the worth of other lives, not just our own. And while we join in helping society's weakest members, we expect them to help themselves to the best of their abilities. People on welfare, for example, must try to use the helping hand being extended to get back on their feet and contribute to society. For one thing, what's good for their self-respect is good for society. A healthy society is built by citizens free to create their own destiny—and to use freedom responsibly. When people and markets are free, they tend to remedy mistakes and choose paths to success.

America's well-being grows from our prime asset: our national character—our passion for individual freedom, buttressed by an abiding respect for justice and individual dignity under the rule of law. Any diminution of that asset is dangerous.





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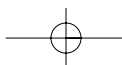
Accordingly, conservatives deplore the rise of the nanny state over the past seventy-five years—the intervention of government in our lives at the expense of character-building families, churches, and the many other community organizations with which we are all involved.

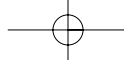
We will never waver in our firm commitment to the principles that Americans have always believed in. Our country must allow markets to flourish, empower individuals to achieve their potential under the rule of law, and support the values that have made the United States the exceptional idea that it is. These principles have stood the test of time, nourished by much blood and treasure, and even the best-intentioned attempt to change them will prove futile. But we are convinced that they can be applied in new ways to solve problems that our nation has never previously encountered.

America is an extraordinary nation—“a city on a hill” in an allusion to the biblical phrase (Matthew 5:14). As the great British prime minister Margaret Thatcher wrote, “America is more than a nation or a state or a superpower; it is an idea—and one which has transformed and continues to transform us all.”

America is the greatest single political invention in human history, and we believe that its future health will come from restoring the intent of the framers’ brilliant blend of adequate federal power under real restraint. But that can be done only by mustering public support to beat back federal policies that foment betrayals of principle, profligate federal spending, creeping bureaucracy, and individual dependence on government handouts.

We believe these problems flow from the wrong kind of political compromise, the kind aimed to make cozy deals that benefit the few at the expense of the many. We have nothing against political compromise as such. In fact, compromise is indispensable to building productive coalitions and consensus for





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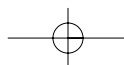
the common good. Any republic is a mixed bag of disparate interests that can't function without compromise.

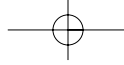
It is imperative, however, to fight the bad kind of compromise, the insidious sort that thrives when lawmakers grow cynical or corrupt. The result is familiar—crooked budgeting, gerrymandering, pork-barreling, truth-spinning. The nation risks getting mired in a new Gilded Age, the high-water mark of Washington corruption that inspired Mark Twain to write, “There is no distinctly native American criminal class except Congress.”

But we are not pessimists. Some of our conservative colleagues have concluded that politics have failed, and that our existing institutions are so corrupt and decadent that there is no choice but to scrap the old society and build a whole new set of schools, media, medical services, and the like among the ruins. We believe that such fatalism is profoundly mistaken. True, there are deep social pathologies to be healed in the United States, and the expansion of government power in recent decades has stifled individual choice and thus eroded the competition and innovation that have long been the foundation of American life. But rather than despair, we can and must return to the core values and beliefs that built this great nation in the first place.

We have no illusion that this will be easy to achieve. It means awakening the vast group of citizens who have tuned out of the current poisonous dialogue, and calling them back to act for their country on the beliefs they have held all along. And if we can do it, we will have summoned the soul of America.

As a practical technique for holding our government accountable, *Getting America Right* has a chapter on each of six questions that every citizen and every policymaker should be asking and answering about every government action or policy that comes up for discussion. An unsatisfactory answer to any of the six should trigger deep skepticism about what our political leaders are doing. The six questions:



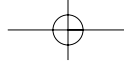


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- *Is it the government's business?* In our highly complex world, Washington cannot stay wholly out of our lives. What we want is the least possible involvement, with federal action kept within the limits of constitutional authority. The federal government should do only those things that cannot be handled better by a state, a community, or an individual. For instance, even we conservatives can make a case that it was necessary for President Dwight D. Eisenhower to launch the federal interstate highway program in the 1950s. The nation's roads were inadequate for interstate commerce, and we could have suffered a military disaster if war with the Soviet Union—then a distinct possibility—had required rapid, massive movement of troops and supplies. The states had neither the expertise nor the resources to create a national highway network. But these days, as Chapter 2 shows, the problem is congestion approaching gridlock—and the federal program is all but dysfunctional.

- *Does this measure promote self-reliance?* Programs should help individuals stand on their own. But far too many government efforts—exemplified by the welfare system and public-housing programs dating back to Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty—punish individual initiative and condemn their hapless recipients to permanent dependency. The underlying problem is a well-meaning but misguided insistence that outcomes must be equal—that government should ensure that everyone ends up in the same condition. The real objective, as Chapter 3 points out, should be equality of opportunity: Everyone should have the same chance to succeed. Those who fail should be helped back onto their feet, but their failure is their own responsibility if they have had a fair start. Again, quoting Ronald Reagan, “Government can and must provide opportunity, not smother it; foster productivity, not stifle it.”

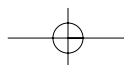


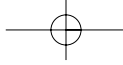


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• *Is it responsible?* Programs must be able to stand on their own and withstand the scrutiny of citizens and legislators. Above all, they should not destroy what they pretend to safeguard. It is human nature to be irresponsible sometimes, which is why we have governments to pass and administer laws that protect us from one another. But governments can be feckless too and ours, sadly, is no exception. Our federal government has become so bloated from pork and wasteful spending that it has trouble getting off the couch to act in times of genuine need. Lawmakers are unable to see the difference between high-priority spending—such as rebuilding the bridge over Louisiana’s Lake Pontchartrain destroyed by Hurricane Katrina—and vanity projects like the infamous “bridge to nowhere” in Alaska. Our government grows bigger by the minute, we have made vast unfunded promises in public education and Medicare benefits, and the national debt has mushroomed by more than 42 percent. But, as we write in Chapter 4, it is not too late to prevent disaster, and we suggest several measures to reintroduce responsibility in Washington.

• *Does it make us more prosperous?* Prosperity is an intrinsic ingredient of the American Dream, one that our republic achieved to the world’s envy. But in recent decades, our government has switched from promoting sound economic policy to dishing out advantages to special interests—and in the process, our economy has become weighted down with handicaps. Outmoded and unneeded federal programs, layers of regulation, and favors for the powerful soak up resources and erode our competitive position just as the globalized business world demands ever-greater efficiency and creativity. In short, we are losing the economic freedom that is the very wellspring of national prosperity. To regain it,

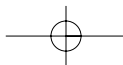
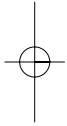
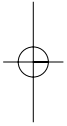


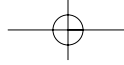


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Chapter 5 proposes that we reform government regulation, lighten and rationalize the tax burden, end all trade barriers, and open up world markets with a Global Free Trade Alliance.

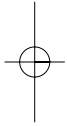
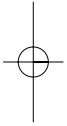
- *Does it make us safer?* Governmental policy should protect our country and make for a better future. Keeping America safe from harm is any president's—indeed, any government's—first duty. And there is no shortage of threats to guard against. We face an insidious and implacable band of fanatical terrorists who do not hesitate to sacrifice their own lives—and those of their hapless relatives, friends, and neighbors—to weaken our national resolve. We face rogue states that support terror and try to sneak into the nuclear weapons club to blackmail us and aggrandize their own power and influence. And we see a potential world rival, China, whose exploding economic strength is being used to build up its armed forces with the world's second-largest military budget. These are largely uncharted waters, and we have made more than our share of mistakes and miscalculations in trying to navigate them. But we are still winning on balance, and, as Chapter 6 makes clear, it is not too late to correct our course. What's needed is a new seriousness in Washington about the perils we face and the end of business as usual in providing security, buttressed by the kind of strength, courage, and resolution that Ronald Reagan brought to bear in his final defeat of the Soviet Union.
- *Does it unify us?* Government should bind us together with our shared national values, not exaggerate our differences and undermine our national identity, principles, and purpose. Our country grew by gathering a great human stew of Puritans, gamblers, and second sons; of fugitives, dreamers,



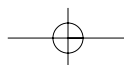


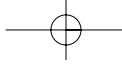
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and the dispossessed. They miraculously forged themselves into “Americans” with a common identity and set of values. Our unofficial yet vital symbol, the melting pot, turned base metals into one of the strongest alloys on earth. But today that alloy needs reinforcing, mainly because we have lately taken to celebrating “diversity” and encouraging differences. No one advocates prejudice and intolerance, yet no one should tolerate favoritism or inequity. When we permit people to become citizens and still think of themselves first as Chinese, Mexicans, Iranians, or Nigerians—“hyphenated Americans,” as Theodore Roosevelt put it nearly a century ago—we risk losing the glue that holds us together as a nation. When we hold some Americans back, we reduce our potential as a nation. Governmental policies and programs, we assert in Chapter 7, must encourage patriotism, American values, a common language, a unified national identity, and a level playing field, without fear or favor.



If we the people start demanding answers to these six questions, government will have no choice but to take the right course—one that is consistent with our cherished national principles, yet innovative in the way they are practiced. To be sure, we are not so naïve as to assume that each of our six standards can be achieved without reference to the others. Like everything in life, these benchmarks are interdependent. Trade-offs are inevitable. For example, the nation would clearly be safer if we closed every port in the country, but it would also leave us less prosperous. Conflicting priorities like these will necessitate compromise, and often excruciating compromise. But that’s what policymakers do for a living, and we have no intention of allowing them to throw in the towel just because their jobs have become more difficult than ever.





### **We *Can* Push Back**

That said, we believe our six-question approach outlining the right role for the federal government is one of the most clarifying, and certainly energizing, reform ideas ever proposed. With your support, it could well become the bypass operation that restores Washington's failing political heart to normal functioning. It is our hope that this book will show the way.

