

DAVID CALLAHAN

the  
MORAL  
center

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How We Can Reclaim Our Country from  
Die-Hard Extremists, Rogue Corporations,  
Hollywood Hacks, and Pretend Patriots

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[www.HarcourtBooks.com](http://www.HarcourtBooks.com)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Callahan, David, 1965-

The moral center: how we can reclaim our country from die-hard extremists, rogue corporations, Hollywood hacks, and pretend patriots/David Callahan.—1st ed.

p. cm.

1. Social values—United States. 2. Self-interest—United States. 3. Social problems—United States. 4. United States—Moral conditions. 5. Liberalism—United States. 6. Conservatism—United States. 7. Right and left (Political science). I. Title.

HN90.M6C35 2006

303.3720973—dc22 2006008292

ISBN-13: 978-0-15-101151-3 ISBN-10: 0-15-101151-6

Text set in Adobe Jensen

Designed by Cathy Riggs

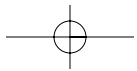
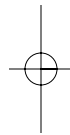
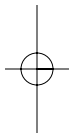
Printed in the United States of America

First edition

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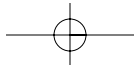
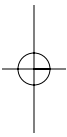
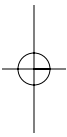
*For my parents, Daniel and Sidney Callahan,  
who shaped my values*

*And for my wife, Wendy Paris,  
who helps me live them*



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## preface

**B**ack in the late 1990s I helped start a think tank, Demos, which hoped to tell a new story about how to make America a better place. We set up shop during the dotcom madness, and sometimes—especially when I read the business page every morning—I wondered whether the age of ideas and politics had passed. It often seemed that the real action lay elsewhere and that if I really wanted to affect how people lived I should join a technology company or a venture capital firm, or get hip to various synergies in the media world.

I didn't do any of these things. And, as Demos took form, one of our themes was that Americans shouldn't leave their destiny in the hands of private market actors who were growing more powerful. Instead, we thought

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that people should come together to protect the human values we shared.

The go-go 1990s are long gone and we now live in a time when nobody can doubt the importance of politics or ideology. At the same time, market forces have only gotten stronger. Every day I see more evidence that we can't take for granted such basic values as time for family, a fair reward for hard work, our obligations to protect each other from misfortune, and our ability to shape the beliefs of our own children.

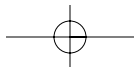
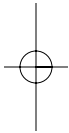
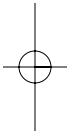
This is a short book on a very big topic. I do not try to cover everything and there are many issues left unaddressed. In particular, I don't delve deeply into religion and its role in our society—not because faith isn't central to any understanding of values in the United States, a point I make often in the pages ahead, but rather because there are so many others who have written extensively in this area. Likewise, if you're looking for detailed policy solutions, you've come to the wrong place. While I do offer many prescriptions to address the problems discussed in each chapter, I do not include in-depth explanations of how these policies would work. My goal with this book is to advance a different way of thinking about values, along with promising ideas for changing America, not to provide a comprehensive blueprint for action.

I am grateful to various people who helped me develop my thinking and make this book possible. Over these last

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years Demos has provided me with a home and colleagues, with whom I have enjoyed extended conversation about many of arguments in this book. I'm grateful to Charlie Halpern and Stephen Heintz who were instrumental in creating Demos, as well as to Miles Rapoport, who has so effectively led and built the organization since 2001. I'm also grateful to Tamara Draut for helping me think through my ideas about work and opportunity, and for reading this book in draft form. Many others provided feedback on all or some of the book, including Craig Charney, Jessie Klein, David Smith, and John Schwarz. In researching the book, I conducted many interviews around the country, often with people who see the world very differently than I do. Yet everyone I talked to was helpful, kind, and forthcoming. My thanks to all of them. My editor at Harcourt, Andrea Schulz, has brought pure genius to the challenge of shaping the project, just as she did with my last book. My agent, Andrew Stuart, has been an invaluable friend and a staunch ally, intellectually and professionally.

Finally, I want to thank my wife, Wendy Paris, who has helped me not only to become a better writer and thinker, but also a better person.



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CHAPTER ONE

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## What's Really Wrong

**Y**OU DON'T NEED TO BE A BUSH VOTER OR AN EVANGELICAL Christian to be worried about the moral climate of America. You don't need to be upset by abortion or gay marriage or sex ed teachers putting condoms on bananas. You don't have to be up in arms about the influence of Charles Darwin in our schools or the absence of the Ten Commandments from our courthouses.

You may have none of these concerns—and yet still feel that something is deeply wrong with the values of America. Maybe you worry that most strangers can't be trusted. Or that young Americans have lost any sense of purpose beyond getting rich and famous. Or that Hollywood and Madison Avenue influence children more than Mom and Dad. Or that millions lack health care in the world's richest country. Or that having a strong marriage

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and family is ever less compatible with making a living. Maybe you gaped at the television images of people stranded in New Orleans and wondered, “How did we ever become so cold-hearted?” Maybe your specific concerns keep changing, but you can’t shake the feeling that American life is getting meaner and more degraded, and that everyone is out for themselves.

For me, it’s all this and also something else: a sense of constantly being tugged away from my real values. I never cared much about money and never saw myself as a covetous kind of person until I moved to New York City, where I had to walk past the townhouses of the rich every day and started reading magazines like *New York* and the real-estate section of the *New York Times*. With inequality now at levels that rival the Gilded Age, envy may be the most powerful emotional current in America today, and it’s hard not to get caught in its grip. We live in a time when so many of us look anxiously upward at what we might have or who we could be, as opposed to looking downward and being thankful for all that has come our way. I consider myself a compassionate person who cares about the misfortunes of others, but I’ve learned to tune out the beggars on the subway, even the women who tug their children along and tell horrific stories of lost housing or benefits that I know reflect reality. I’m committed to marriage and family—this is the foundation of true meaning

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and happiness, I understand—but much of the time I put career first, scrambling after an endless series of external rewards. I want to know my neighbors better and get involved in my community, but I'm busy and preoccupied. Maybe next year. It's easy to feel that things are not only getting worse, they are also making you a worse person. I don't have children yet, but I can imagine how parents might lack confidence about passing along their values in this environment.

You're not alone if you share these feelings. While the complaints of the Christian right echo through our politics every day, the truth is that Americans of all political stripes worry about values, in one way or another. This has been obvious for some time. The 1990s were a decade of peace and prosperity—and of Columbine, Monica Lewinsky, and Ferrari-driving twenty-eight-year-old millionaires. Moral angst burned hot beneath the façade of good times, so much so that in 2000 a major poll found that only 12 percent of Americans were satisfied with the moral values of this country, the lowest level for any major issue. More recently, a 2005 poll—echoing other polls—found that a strong majority of Americans believe that people aren't as honest or moral as they used to be, and an even higher percentage see young people as having a weaker sense of right and wrong than they did fifty years ago. Most Americans also feel that we are too tolerant of bad behavior.<sup>1</sup>

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It's not that values matter more than other issues. They don't. Scholars like Jeffrey Stonecash and Larry Bartels have documented the enduring—in fact, growing—role of class in politics. Poorer whites in particular are still more focused on economic issues than on social ones, contrary to what Thomas Frank argued in *What's the Matter with Kansas?* But there is also no question that moral concerns have become bigger issues in recent decades and that public anxieties go well beyond the agenda of religious conservatives.<sup>2</sup>

Yes, voters who named “moral values” as their top issue went overwhelmingly for Bush in 2004, and yes, abortion and same-sex marriage have reshaped the political landscape in certain parts of the country. But other issues matter, too. In a Zogby poll conducted after the 2004 election, 33 percent of voters said the nation's biggest moral problem was “greed and materialism” and 31 percent cited “poverty and economic justice.” Another post-election survey—of Catholics voters—found that these Americans were more likely to emphasize issues of integrity or the “social compact” when they thought of moral values than to focus on abortion or gay marriage. Earlier polls found that a majority of Americans defined poor health care, as well as inequality between whites and minorities, as moral issues.<sup>3</sup>

These anxieties help explain why values stay on the national agenda despite a steady stream of good news. Violent crime is now down to where it was in the late 1960s.

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Abortions declined sharply in the 1990s, reaching the lowest level since 1975. Teen pregnancy rates also plunged dramatically. Births to unwed mothers have stopped rising. Divorce rates have fallen since their high in the late 1970s, particularly among college-educated couples.

Usually when things get better, public debate moves on to other matters. Not this time. And that suggests that the new moral politics is fueled by more than the longstanding concerns of the Christian right. Something bigger is happening.

If you talk across ideological divides—to Americans left, right, and center—a unifying theme of much moral anxiety is a feeling that selfishness is careening out of control. You see this feeling in conservative concerns about divorce—and in liberal anger about corporate crime. You see it in the anti-abortion activism on the right—and in the living wage movement on the left. Conservatives worry that kids today grow up wanting to be porn stars; liberals fear that they want to be investment bankers. A lot of Americans fear that the pursuit of self-interest is pushing aside other values in every aspect of life: family, sex, culture, business, education.

But if people of all stripes worry about selfishness, it is conservatives who have defined what kind of selfishness is wrong, who is to blame for it, and how we can find a better moral compass. The right blames selfishness on liberalism, blasting the hedonism and focus on personal rights

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that emerged in the 1960s. Their solution to our moral state is simple: America needs to return to religion and traditional values.

You needn't agree with the right on the specifics to find reassurance in such appeals. Whatever you may think about Christian conservatives, at least they offer a plan to get America on a different moral path. At least they clearly say that something has gone very wrong with our moral life. So does the Republican Party that these activists have reshaped in recent decades. And it is no wonder that this party does so well with married voters and parents. Just the fact that conservatives believe it's possible to change the culture may be enough to turn a great many people into GOP "values voters."

The catch is that the moralists on the right don't have a real solution to rising selfishness. Not only have they defined the problem far too narrowly—obsessing about sex especially—they refuse to confront the force that increasingly fans an extreme ethos of self-interest, namely our free-market economy.

THE IDEA THAT market forces are a decisive shaper of values is neither radical nor new. The sociologist Daniel Bell made this argument in his 1976 book *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*. Others had made the point before him, and others have made it since. Strangely, though, even as history has accelerated in recent decades, with globaliza-

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tion and technological change moving at a dizzying pace, this elementary insight into moral life stands largely forgotten. We talk about how “the world is flat” or how this invention or that is altering our daily existence, but we’re not so good at connecting these conversations to the values debate.

Capitalism forms the backbone of the American idea that everyone can chart their own destiny and the market fosters so much that is positive. A free market, existing independent of church or state, has long been recognized as a linchpin to personal liberty. Certainly no one has figured out a better way to produce wealth, and it is capitalism that has made America the richest, most dynamic country on earth. Market prosperity has underwritten fantastic leaps forward in our education levels, standard of living, and longevity—all positive moral outcomes. Capitalism can foster other moral results, too: by pushing people to be self-disciplined, by elevating those who work the hardest, by replacing cronyism with competition, and by rewarding people based on their creativity and talent.

But there are obvious moral risks to this system, because it revolves around the pursuit of self-interest. To make the system work and keep the riches flowing, we fan a set of very productive—yet very dangerous—human impulses. We ride the tiger of selfishness. Untamed, it will eat everything we care about. The logic of self-interest can not only go too far in the business realm, as we well know;

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its excesses can lap over into other parts of society, such as family, sex, and popular culture. This danger exists in any nation, but it is particularly acute here, where individualism has always been very strong.

Conservatives are in deep denial about this connection. For forty years they have pushed freer markets in concert with a call for stronger moral checks rooted in religion. And for forty years, evidence has piled up that traditionalist values are no match for unfettered capitalism—which among other things has forced parents to work longer hours and given us a multibillion-dollar pornography industry. Of course, you didn't have to live through recent history to know that markets and traditional values don't get along so well. That has been clear ever since mothers and children were sent to toil in nineteenth-century mills and early mass media weakened the influence of religious leaders.

Do conservatives ever seem to learn this basic lesson? Strangely not, and the religious "family values" crowd remains in a tight alliance with pro-business libertarians.

LIBERALS ARE NAÏVE about capitalism in their own way. The left has long promoted an expansive form of individualism—especially since the 1960s. Liberals have said that you should be able to control your own life when it comes to sex, marriage, worship, and other matters. These freedoms were never meant to stand alone; the left champi-

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oned more personal autonomy and more social responsibility in the same breath. You could do your own thing, sure, but you also were supposed to make the world a better place. The problem is that it's easy to forget about the second half of the equation in a consumer society, especially when—amid a backlash to the 1960s—we were told that earnest idealism was for fools. Ironically, the new individualism of the counterculture helped set the stage for the me-first materialism of the 1980s and '90s.

In a strange way, religious traditionalists and liberal idealists are now in the same boat. Both are increasingly powerless to shape the culture. None of the restraints on moral behavior imagined by left or right have succeeded in an age of turbo-charged global capitalism. Today, it is private actors—developers, corporations, entertainment conglomerates, advertising firms, technology companies—who often determine how people live, and more important, *what they value*. In general, these actors increase their bottom line by fanning our impulses toward personal gratification and individual autonomy. They work at odds with such quaint notions as self-restraint and duty to others. As they have become more dominant, they have come to wield more influence in many cases than the various institutions that once promoted selfless values, such as family, community, religion, and government. And it is not just that market actors have more power. It is that the ethos of the market—the notion that self-interest is the best organizing basis

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of society—has reordered our moral universe. As a result, it has become easier to rationalize a wide range of selfish behaviors.

This is a big shift, and yet it mostly goes ignored. Even as the idealism of the left and traditionalism of the right are pushed aside by the same bulldozer, both sides still act as if the real moral powerbrokers are federal judges or Congressional firebrands or megachurch ministers. Conservatives write an endless stream of diatribes that trace all of America's moral problems back to Gloria Steinem or the Warren Court, while liberals increasingly define the Christian right as the enemy. This debate misses a dominant fact of our time: Whether you're a moralist on the left or the right, it's hard to practice your values in a society that has become mostly about self-interest.

THESE DAYS IT'S EASY to get caught up in "culture war" talk. And make no mistake: The polarization between traditionalists and modernists is real. But there is another rift in America that we need to think about. It is between the Cares and the Care-Nots.

Cares worry about the spread of self-interested behavior and the misfortunes of others, and they want to do something about it. Cares exist on both the left and the right, and they have more in common than they realize. Cares on the left populate myriad antipoverty groups in the social justice sector—as do Cares on the right, who

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combat poverty at home and abroad through a vast network of faith-based charities. Conservative Cares document the toxicity of popular media—as do liberal Cares. At election time, Cares on the left urge Americans to get involved and heed higher ideals when casting their vote—as do Cares on the right. Liberal Cares write unending studies and books about the pressures on family life—as do conservative Cares, although they point to a different cast of culprits. Cares on the left talk about “downshifting” and dropping out of the consumer culture to live their values—and you hear the same talk from evangelical Cares on the right.

The Care-Nots, in contrast, are insular and self-absorbed. Many have embraced the logic of self-interest as a way of life.

Research by the firm Environics and its founder, Michael Adams, suggests that the divide between the Cares and the Care-Nots has actually been growing more quickly than any other divide in America. Every four years since 1992, Environics has administered a household survey in which more than 2,500 individuals spend three hours answering six hundred questions about their beliefs. According to Adams, the resulting data show that both conservative traditionalists and liberal idealists have been shrinking as a portion of the U.S. population. Which values are growing? Adams argues there has been a growth in the ranks of Americans who reject nearly all authority and

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are focused on status, materialism, and risk-taking. They tend to be alienated, and turn to consumerism or violent media or high-risk sports to help fill the void. They are “re-signed to living in a competitive jungle where ostentatious consumption and personal thrills rule.” They don’t vote. The Environics data show that this group has grown rapidly, nearly doubling during the 1990s from 16 percent of the U.S. population to 31 percent. Young people in particular are said to be moving in this direction.<sup>4</sup>

Adams’s conclusions line up with what I found through my research for *The Cheating Culture*, which catalogs a rise in unethical, self-interested behavior across many spheres of American life. Other authors, including Jedediah Purdy in *For Common Things*, David Myers in *American Paradox*, Eric Uslander in *The Moral Foundations of Trust*, and Jean Twenge in *Generation Me*, have drawn similar conclusions. Some of Robert Putnam’s research on community and social capital points in the same direction.

If it’s true that more Americans don’t care about others and are just out for themselves, this helps explain what is otherwise a great puzzle—pervasive moral anxiety at a time when so many social indicators have been moving in a positive direction.

RIGHT NOW, neither major political party grasps what is happening. Neither tries to speak to Cares on all sides of the partisan divide or offers a full account of why the Care-

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Nots seem to be growing more numerous. Republicans offer a hopelessly narrow take on what has gone wrong while Democrats struggle to find a moral voice.

Democrats tend to make one of two blunders when dealing with values. The first is to accept the existing terms of the debate, stiffly quoting the Bible and scrambling to the center on issues like abortion and gay marriage. This may be a smart survival strategy in certain states or Congressional districts, but it doesn't get at the root of the problem or provide progressives with an authentic way to talk about values.

The second mistake is to plaster the values tag on the existing Democratic agenda, particularly in the economic area. Not long ago, for instance, I received a fundraising letter from Nancy Pelosi, the leader of the embattled Democrats in the House of Representatives. Declaring that Democrats were the defenders of "true American values," the letter called for more money for health care. More for child care. More for schools. More for unemployment insurance. Pelosi also pledged to protect pensions. Amen, I thought. There are certainly a lot of unmet material needs these days and, if you ask me, we must meet those needs to create a more moral society—an America where we look out for each other.

But what if you are also worried about other needs? What if you think of America as materially rich, but spiritually poor? What if you think that, yes, parents need

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more economic supports—and also protection from the bottom feeders who run our popular culture? What if you're all for affordable housing but don't think it will do anything to make neighbors more trustworthy? What if you agree that seniors should get the prescription drugs they need—and you worry about the overmedication of an entire generation of kids? What if—ever since the days of JFK—you've been waiting for a Democrat to ask you to do something for your country besides pay higher taxes? If this were the case, Pelosi's letter might leave you cold. Ditto for John Kerry's acceptance speech at the Democratic convention. Kerry used the word "values" eighteen times but never once did he hint at any defect in America's culture or suggest that anything other than more money was needed to strengthen family life or end poverty.

Even after their defeat in the 2004 election, the reflex of Democrats is toward the politics of bread and butter. That number once made them lucky, so they keep betting on it. If Americans can just see the clear economic facts, the logic seems to go, Republicans will be toast. Good luck, is all I can say. As 2005 came to a close, an ABC/*Washington Post* poll found that nearly half of Americans thought the economy was in bad shape—but three-quarters were optimistic about their own family's financial situation. Earlier in the year, another poll found that 78 percent of respondents agreed that "Everyone has it in their own power to succeed."<sup>5</sup> Americans were optimistic even though most

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families haven't seen real income gains in four years, and even though the costs of housing, health care, and college tuition have been rising annually by double digits. Americans were optimistic even as many drowned in credit card debt, and even as two very dark clouds filled the horizon—the economic awakening of India and China, and the retirement of the boomers at a time when the federal government is already broke.

Why are Americans so optimistic? Because they are Americans. It's in their DNA. And because, for all their insecurities and debts, most have a phenomenally high standard of living. A while back I bought a decent sixteen-piece tableware set at Target for \$9.99. "This is why the working class doesn't revolt," I told my wife, only partly in jest. Democratic messages about economic hardship have uncertain traction in a generally affluent society—except during those moments when the economy is really, really bad, like in 1992. At other times, Democrats are in the unenviable position of trying to convince voters that they are in worse shape than they think they are.

Economic appeals aren't useless by any means. Middle-class insecurity is growing and will keep growing as global competition intensifies, as technology replaces jobs, and as corporate policies siphon yet more wealth upward. People want help with health care, pensions, wages, college tuition, housing, and so on. But they want less tangible things, too. It's hard for Democrats to get a chance to address material

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anxieties if they don't address the nonmaterial ones. And, of course, even the economic concerns have a moral dimension. It's not enough to appeal to people's economic *interests*; you need to connect with their economic *values*. Democrats once were adept at challenging the self-interested excesses of the free market in ways that jived with American values around work and self-reliance. They haven't been so skilled at this lately.

THE GOOD NEWS for Democrats is that GOP dominance of the values debate can't last. Republican calls for moral renewal are appealing to moderate Americans in the abstract only. We like the idea of a moral bottom line, but we don't want that bottom line determined by Jerry Falwell. The actual details of the religious right's agenda, such as banning abortion and promoting abstinence-only sex education, do not enjoy majority support. To the extent that the evangelical base has enough clout to begin turning its agenda into policy—as it increasingly does—moderates will be scared off. We got a taste of this in the battle over Terry Schiavo. Even most Republican voters backed the decision to let Schiavo—who had been living in a persistent vegetative state for years—die and opposed intervention in the case by the federal government. A poll after the episode found acute public uneasiness about the right's moral values agenda, with a majority saying that Republicans were “trying to use the federal government to interfere

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with the private lives of most Americans.” More generally, polls show that only a minority of Americans want government to play to a stronger role in enforcing certain values. Americans are “tolerant traditionalists,” in author Alan Wolfe’s words. We don’t believe in heavy-handed attempts to tell people how to live their lives.<sup>6</sup>

The far-right libertarians in the GOP are also out of step with mainstream opinion. These folks may wield even more power in the party than the evangelicals, and they are bent on eroding the protections that shield ordinary Americans from the downsides of a market economy—whether it’s the social safety net or labor rules or the regulations that safeguard food and drugs. They have gotten as far as they have, in part, because they connect with the public’s belief in self-reliance. The rigors of a freer market have been seen as a welcome antidote to a “something for nothing” welfare state and the bad behaviors that go with idleness. In practice, though, most Americans don’t actually want to get rid of the forty-hour workweek or turn Social Security over to Wall Street or starve Medicaid to feed millionaires. We believe in self-reliance up to a point. We also believe in taking care of one another.

As the Republicans veer farther from the center, Democrats—or perhaps a new third party—have a chance to forge a fresh moral vision that can redirect America’s values debate and its politics.

This book offers such a vision. The chapters ahead look

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at seven areas: family, sex, media, crime, work, poverty, and patriotism. In each area, I look at how the values of self-interest have grown too strong, fanning an ethos of “market individualism.” I also propose how to push back against this trend and strike a workable balance between freedom and responsibility.

While Americans believe deeply in liberty, in both the economic and social spheres, we also believe in the common good. And right now, neither left nor right fully melds these two beliefs. Conservatives want few rules about how corporations must behave—even as they try to make all of us live by strict religious morality. Liberals resist limits on social freedoms—but happily heap regulatory burdens onto business owners who dream of independence. In an age of extreme self-interest, the left focuses on collective responsibility as our path to salvation, while the right dwells on personal responsibility. Most ordinary Americans know we need to have both to advance the common good. And the political party that recognizes this has the potential to dominate elections for decades to come.

I’m not ideologically neutral. I don’t think the solution is for everyone to just get along. I’ve met a number of evangelical Christians in the course of writing this book, and I’ve nodded in agreement to some of what they have said while they’ve nodded in response to some of my views. I know that Cares on the left and the right share more common ground

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than they think. I also know that the conservative movement is taking America in the exact wrong direction. The more power the right gains, the more divisive America will become. Don't take my word for this. Just watch C-SPAN for a few hours. National politics is more viciously polarized than ever before. And, as political scientists Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson have documented, it is hard-right conservatives who are mostly responsible for this shift.

Liberalism offers the best foundation upon which to build a moral center. It is liberals—working with moderates—who have historically fought to push back laissez-faire values and to promote the common good. In the past, liberals have naturally blended a commanding vision of freedom with strong expectations from all citizens. In doing so, they built bipartisan majorities for change.

Liberals have made serious mistakes in the past forty years. In a sentence, they have failed to think enough about either the downsides of social freedom or the upsides of economic freedom. But today, if anyone can check the rise of market individualism and spur Americans to look beyond self-interest, it will be a new breed of liberals—liberals who are second to none in their defense of the pre-eminent American value of liberty, and yet demand both personal and collective responsibility across every sphere of life.

Liberals shouldn't try to appease the reactionaries.

## THE MORAL CENTER

They should isolate them by reaching out to the vast ranks of moderate Cares who are now disenchanted with both parties. Listening to talk radio, you'd think we are a nation of ideologues. We aren't. Most Americans already support a blend of freedom and responsibility. One reason a lot of us have tuned out of politics is because neither political party stands for such a synthesis. The culture war turns people off as surely as the constant scandals and endless campaigns and negative ads. It is a war fought by absolutists. Some of these combatants don't believe every word they are saying, but fear that any concessions will be seized on by the enemy. A *New York Times* story reported that fierce ideological adversaries often get along well in the green room where they wait to go on Shout Television, and even end up as friends. Wouldn't you just love to know what Democratic strategist Donna Brazille and Republican senator Rick Santorum have to say to each other over a private breakfast? Sure you would. But as things stand, you never will.

I hope this book can help start a broader, more honest conversation about values. I advance strong views in the chapters to come, but I'm not an absolutist. I've tried to hear out those who see the world differently.

If we can get past all the shouting, building a moral center shouldn't be too hard. The public is already there. Now we just need to get our politics there, too.