

**FIGHTING FOR THE  
PROGRESSIVE  
CENTER**



**IN THE  
AGE OF TRUMP**

**JOSEPH M. HOEFFEL**

**In Praise of**  
*Fighting for the Progressive Center in the Age of Trump*

“Joe Hoeffel is the genuine article. He’s run for and held public office, at the county and country levels. He’s won and lost elections. He’s dealt with the real voters with real problems. He knows what matters to people. His voice comes from forty years dealing with people’s real, kitchen-table politics. As someone who grew up and went to school near him, I know these challenges. People don’t have time for all the polarization and demonization out there today. No one enjoys watching the rough-and-tumble of politics more than I do, but the time has come for political parties to get serious. Joe Hoeffel’s book shows that he’s way ahead of them. If the Democrats are smart they’ll read this book.”

—Chris Matthews, Anchor of MSNBC’s *Hardball*

“When I joined the Congress in 2001, Joe Hoeffel stood out as a thoughtful, insightful Democrat, with a rare gift for communicating smart, progressive policies, and the even rarer gift of knowing how to win in the toughest districts. His newest book, *Fighting for the Progressive Center in the Age of Trump*, finds him as politically astute as ever, making the case for a ‘progressive center’ focused on improving the quality of life for all Americans. As Democrats move forward from the disaster of the 2016 election, Joe makes a timely case for policies and a message that can rise above our broken politics and get down to the business of governing.”

—Adam B. Schiff, U.S. Congressman from California

“My good friend Joe Hoeffel has dedicated his life to public service and this book encapsulates his lessons for a Trump-era America. It is imperative that our country comes together to solve the challenges that we encounter in our daily lives. To truly make America even greater, Joe has put forward an agenda that is progressive and prioritizes jobs, health care, and a better quality of life for our hard-working families. We miss Joe on Capitol Hill, but this book makes clear that his leadership to Pennsylvania and America is far from finished.”

—Edward Markey, U.S. Senator from Massachusetts

“Our country is divided more than ever. Yet, at the end of the day, most Americans want the same things—a good job, affordable health care for their families, retirement security, and opportunities for their children. Joe Hoeffel understands we have more in common than we have differences. *Fighting for the Progressive Center* speaks to what Americans want from government, and offers prescriptions for the pressing issues of the day—health care, economic development, Social Security, education reform.”

—Tom Udall, U.S. Senator from New Mexico

“Hoeffel puts into words what so many of us wished for last election day—the requirements for a progressive candidate we could vote for. This book outlines how government has a valuable role to play in our society without dominating society, how our compassion towards each other, expressed through single-payer health care and a social safety net, is the answer America needs, not simple appeals to ideology and party memes.”

—Peter Van Buren, Author, *Ghosts of Tom Joad: A Story of the 99 Percent*

“Joe Hoeffel’s book speaks to America’s character when ‘We the People’ are at our best: the individual pursuit of happiness properly aligned with the common good. Joe recognizes that we are in a fight for the very soul of America—where we are united despite our differences in facing our challenges—and therefore his policy ideas are principled compromises without compromising one’s principles. He eschews party or politics as ever being above the nation, recognizing that it is to the people leaders owe their first allegiance. It is the exact approach that our countrymen and women are demanding from today’s leaders, and his book shows the way.”

—Joe Sestak, Rear Admiral, USN (Ret.) and former U.S. Congressman from Pennsylvania

“At a time when progressive and other reasonable Americans are desperately searching for ways to regain the upper hand in the face of the insanity of Donald Trump, Joe Hoeffel offers a smart, sensible, and insightful roadmap for us to seize the initiative and lead towards the future. Joe’s experience in various levels of government shines through brightly. He’s been there, he’s done that, and he knows what it will take for us to do it again. You want to know how to appeal to a broader swath of voters? Read Joe’s book. It’s a great, fun read. And I truly believe we will look back on *Fighting for the Progressive Center in the Age of Trump* as one of the seminal books of our troubled times.”

—Daylin Leach, Pennsylvania State Senator, President of Americans for Democratic Action

“How to fix America’s broken politics? This savvy guide from a progressive centrist, featuring socially liberal and fiscally responsible policies, points the way. It’s doable, people.”

—Carla Seaquist, *HuffPost*

# Fighting for the Progressive Center in the Age of Trump

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Joseph M. Hoeffel



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Manufactured in the United States of America

*To Elsa, Mavis, Luisa, and Nellie*

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# Preface

On a blustery day in March 1974, in my first campaign for public office, I knocked on the door of a house in Rockledge, Pennsylvania. I was running for state representative as a liberal, idealistic 23-year-old Democrat against an entrenched Republican incumbent in the suburbs of Philadelphia.

A kindly looking old lady came to the living room window, peered out at me around the drapes and shook her head negatively to indicate she didn't want to open the front door to talk. I smiled at her encouragingly, waved my campaign brochure in front of the window, and indicated with hand gestures that she should open the front door. After all, I was her friendly neighborhood politician, and I was there to help.

She responded by producing a butcher knife from behind her back, waving it menacingly in the window, then tapping the knife point on the glass and indicating that it was time for me to get off her front steps and back on the sidewalk.

I complied and my political career was launched. I have enjoyed my time in politics and government. It is a privilege to have a voice and a vote in the public issues of the day. Government service is rewarding and political competition is exhilarating. It is immensely satisfying to help craft a solution to a public policy challenge, or to help a constituent cut some red tape and solve a problem with their government.

Sometimes public life can be a lot of fun. One of the benefits of serving in Congress is the opportunity to impress your family. I tried to wow my wife Francesca while I was on a flight on Air Force One with President Clinton from Washington, D.C. to Philadelphia in 2000 for a bill signing ceremony at Independence National Historical Park. I was duly impressed myself to be on that flight, and as we took off I was eyeing the phone in the armrest of my seat in the VIP section of the plane. The steward had said the phone was at my disposal and all I had to do was pick it up to



and the images of John being beaten, and then back at John coming down the aisle toward me. This quiet man's enormous strength gave me goose bumps.

Whether fun, embarrassing, or inspiring, I have worked at my political calling for a long time. As congressman, state representative, and county commissioner, and a candidate for senator and governor, I have 15 general elections under my belt.

The victories have been sweet, the defeats not so much. In the small hours of the night of my first victory in 1976, I found myself suddenly out of bed, dancing around in my pajamas, bobbing and weaving, throwing a flurry of jabs and uppercuts, shadowboxing in the moonlight, and beating the hell out of the world.

The night of my last campaign, a fourth place finish in a four-way primary for governor in 2010, was a lot more subdued. I didn't do any shadowboxing around the bedroom that evening.

So life in politics can be exciting and rewarding, as well as frustrating and deeply disappointing. But in the midst of the pomp and the perks, the joys and the sorrows, the victories and the defeats, there is always important work to get done for the American people. The personal ambitions of elected officials must yield to doing what is right for the greatest number of people. The public good must come before private agendas.

But that is not happening in America today. My frustrations have grown in recent years as I have watched the rich get richer, the poor get poorer, and the middle class get stuck paying all the bills. Income inequality is growing greater year by year, standards of living are not rising as they once did, and economic stagnation stifles hope. People are not as optimistic about the future as they used to be. The American Dream no longer seems to be within everyone's reach.

The country has been put through the wringer during my lifetime. Our failed intervention in Vietnam led most Americans to question the limits of our military power and doubt our abilities to influence events around the world. The lies and lawbreaking of Watergate taught many of us to distrust our government. The false pretenses that led to war in Iraq took a toll on this country and further shook people's confidence in their government.

I remember being convinced that the Nixon administration was lying to me in 1972 when I was a college student. So I marched in protest of the Vietnam War and proudly co-chaired Boston University Students for McGovern. I felt totally alienated from my national government and didn't trust anyone over 30.

By the spring of 2003, when I was serving my third term in the U.S. Congress, I concluded that my federal government was lying to me again,

this time about the war in Iraq. I realized I had come full circle. Once again I found that I totally distrusted my national government, but now I was part of that government.

Now, in the Age of Trump, I am more astonished and distrustful than ever before. It is hard for me to tell when Donald Trump is telling the truth, greatly exaggerating, or simply lying. I cannot trust my president, which is a sorry state of affairs for any citizen.

Donald Trump took advantage of our desire for political change and our fears about the economy and won an improbable victory as our new president. But his actions and statements continue to divide the country and raise doubts about the future of our democracy. People either love him or hate him, while he makes no effort to unify the warring sides. The chasm in our body politic grows.

Our national government seems unable to bring people together as our politicians bicker, try to settle old scores, and prepare for their next election.

When I was a young state legislator in Harrisburg we had plenty of partisan battles by day in the state capitol, but we were able to set aside our differences at night over drinks and dinner in the local restaurants. We listened to each other and respected each other. That is missing from today's politics, and we need to get it back.

We can do better. We face three great national challenges: restoring our economic strength, getting our fiscal house in order, and keeping the country safe. We need a plan and a commitment to do all three.

This book promotes the fight for the progressive center based upon my perspectives, ideas, and experiences of 40 years in public life. I certainly do not have all of the answers to the challenges we face. But the lessons of my career teach me that constant obstruction in our government and endless demonization in our politics are not in the public interest. We need to seek common ground to take public action for the public good.

Progressives need to fight for the political center of our civic arena with policies that are both socially liberal and fiscally responsible if we are going to win the battle for public support against Donald Trump.

We need to fight for the progressive center. The time has come to march and protest, to tweet and shout, to make our voices heard, to seek change and reform in the public arena. The fight starts now.

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# Introduction

The 2016 presidential election demonstrated that national Democrats have lost touch with their working-class roots. The surprising result of that astonishing lapse was the defeat of Hillary Clinton by Donald Trump in an election nearly everyone expected Clinton to win.

Of course, Hillary Clinton actually won the popular vote by a margin of almost 3 million and received 48 percent of the vote to Donald Trump's 46 percent. But the Electoral College, although antiquated, undemocratic, and unnecessary, nevertheless delivered the presidential victory to Trump, fair and square under the rules.

Hillary Clinton did not lose because the Russians meddled in the election, or because John Podesta's e-mails were stolen and disclosed, or because FBI Director Comey violated procedures by publicly discussing his investigation of Clinton's e-mails. Those things happened and they were outrageous. Clinton lost because too many working-class voters did not believe she could change their daily lives for the better.

The hard truth for Democrats is their national ticket underperformed in rust-belt states such as Pennsylvania, Ohio, Wisconsin, and Minnesota where working-class voters hold the key to Electoral College majorities. Clinton's failure to win the expected support in those states from working Americans cost her the election.

Democrats should have known before election night that their political success depends upon fighting for working-class Americans and those struggling to join the working class. It is not sufficient for the Democrats just to rally those liberals and progressives who are willing to use the power of government to help the working class. Democrats must actually talk to those working-class voters and motivate them to come to the polls.

The national Democratic campaign attempted to assemble a winning coalition by appealing to different groups in the party's base with targeted

messages, but it was not enough. Democrats failed to deliver a compelling and positive economic message to American workers who are still struggling mightily with the negative effects of the 2008 Great Recession, globalization, and unfair trade.

American politics has not worked well in recent years. During the presidencies of George W. Bush and Barack Obama, excessive partisan warfare dominated the nation's capital, and legislative gridlock usually prevented meaningful action to help the people. Politicians in both parties proved by their actions they would rather fight than compromise. Public action was rarely taken for the public good, and the American people lost trust in their political leaders. The voters became angry and frustrated, and they wanted change.

Donald Trump represents that change. He campaigned for president as a vulgarian. He insulted people and groups left and right and broke many of the rules in the politicians' handbook. He bragged about groping women, mocked a disabled reporter, suggested a religious test for legal immigration, and belittled the parents of an American soldier who died in Iraq. He campaigned as a demagogue who gave the impression that he often does not say what he means or mean what he says.

However, many of those angry and frustrated voters did not seem to mind the many nasty insults and fact-free boasts of the Trump campaign. The voters took Trump seriously but not literally. They were more interested in supporting a candidate who promised to create political change and overcome economic stagnation. The public concluded that Trump could deliver on both counts, and Clinton could not.

Donald Trump's election was a remarkable political success for the ultimate outsider and was the biggest presidential upset since Truman defeated Dewey. Trump's campaign resonated with millions of Americans who quite rightly believe that their government has failed them. But the election also stoked the fears and hatreds of many Americans and left the country deeply divided.

Now, Donald Trump is president of the United States and the Republican Party enjoys solid majorities in the House of Representatives and the Senate. Now in charge, the Trump administration and the Republican Congress are in debt to right-wing conservatives, Tea Partiers, and the white nationalists of the Alt-Right. Team Trump has the votes to enact into the law the most cherished conservative goals of the last decade, including repeal of Obama's Affordable Care Act, reductions in civil rights for religious and ethnic minorities, weakened environmental laws and rules, expanded tax breaks for the wealthy, and promotion of corporate interests at the expense of the best interests of working men and women.

President Trump has a thin skin, a bullying manner, and an oversized ego. He is a fear monger, trying to alarm the public while claiming that only he can save us. He promotes authoritarian policies that are pro-business, anti-labor, anti-environment, anti-immigrant, and isolationist. Many Americans feel excluded from his vision. He will continue to do things in ways no president has done those things before, and his struggles will continue with the partisans and traditionalists in both parties in Congress.

The president seems to relish making corrosive commentaries on social media about critics, opponents, and the mainstream media. The simplicities of his tweets do not match the complexities of governing. President Trump faces a growing credibility gap as the bold actions and glib solutions promised in his tweets seldom occur amid the complicated realities of running the national government.

President Trump and his administration are being investigated by Congress and the Department of Justice for possible collusion with Russian meddling in the 2016 election. As a result of Trump's firing of FBI Director James Comey, another line of inquiry started whether the president obstructed justice by trying to derail the Russia investigation. The Justice Department appointed former FBI director Robert Mueller as special counsel to lead its investigation.

Congress should be interested in public disclosure of all the facts, and the Justice Department will decide whether to prosecute criminal behavior. The country learned after Watergate that the cover-up is usually worse than the crime. In the looming public, legal, and constitutional showdown between the president on one hand and Congress and the Justice Department on the other, Donald Trump will be the big loser.

What is next for our democracy in the uncertain Age of Trump after the unproductive political battling of the Obama and Bush years? How do we escape the clutches of the partisan warriors in both parties and the unpredictable pronouncements and actions of President Trump? Can we find a common ground to achieve good things for the American people?

I believe the answer is found in the progressive center of American politics. We must fight to attain that progressive center by rejecting the partisan extremes and embracing reasonable and progressive policies that will benefit all Americans.

The progressive center is where people of goodwill should come together to reject rigid ideology and embrace fair agreement on public action for the public good. The progressive center is the place for people who believe in a robust public sector, with policies that are socially liberal and fiscally responsible.



The progressive center offers the best opportunity to improve the quality of our lives and to build a secure future for our families. Liberals and moderates and even some conservatives from both political parties should be able to rally together, without abandoning their principles, to provide the leadership and the reform that is necessary to move the country forward.

*Progressives* understand that government has a valuable and important role to play in our society. Our competitive, profit-driven, free-market system creates boundless opportunities for all and rightfully is the envy of the world. Still, there is an obvious need for a strong safety net provided by the public sector to catch those who cannot compete successfully. There is also an important role for government to play in areas where the private sector falls short: in education, health-care coverage, environmental protection, and old age security. *Progressives* regardless of party embrace the essential role of government instead of demonizing it and work to reform programs that do not work and to implement solutions that do.

The *center* is a vibrant political middle ground where meaningful government action can blossom when public citizens of goodwill seek balanced agreement. The *center* is a broad space of consensus that rejects the apostles of absolutism from both extremes of America's political parties. The *center* embraces policies that are thoughtful, inclusive and, if possible, bipartisan in order to achieve lasting and productive reform.

In contrast, the political right wing promotes policies that are short-sighted and selfish, primarily advocating the interests of the already well off and the well connected. The right-wingers in Congress and the Trump White House want to cut taxes for the wealthy and corporations, while reducing spending for the poor and gutting middle-class entitlements. The Alt-Right movement has brought an ugly white nationalism to the fore of our national politics, and the destructive rage of the Tea Party lingers on in the highest Republican councils. These bitter and angry policies will not benefit most Americans.

Across the aisle, many Democrats still seethe at the obstructionism and invective hurled at Barack Obama for eight years by the Republican Party, and they are outraged that Donald Trump won the presidency although 54 percent of the voters cast their ballots against him. Democrats nurse their grievances and plot their revenge.

The hard-line advocates in both major political parties who clamor for ideological purity, and who want to destroy the careers and even the personal lives of their political opponents, simply do not offer us a sensible way forward. They are not capable of reaching the reasonable compromise that is necessary to make our democratic system work well for all Americans. These partisan warriors threaten our nation's future, both home and

abroad. They are dragging down our politics, dividing our government and holding back our country.

America's leadership in the world, and our status as the world's only superpower, is challenged by this endless partisan combat. There was a time during and after World War II when our national leaders prized bipartisanship in foreign affairs and boasted that politics ended "at the water's edge." They quite properly understood that a bipartisan foreign policy is essential in order to present a united face to a dangerous world.

But now, there is a growing and dangerous isolationism in the land, ranging from the "America First" policies of President Trump to the nativist fearmongering of many right-wing leaders. Enflamed by their excessive partisanship, these obstructionists were not able to accept Barack Obama's foreign policy leadership on behalf of the country. Now, they are not capable of working across the aisle to achieve the bipartisan approach necessary for successful American foreign policy.

The question is how do we rid ourselves of the endless partisan warfare and political obstruction that poisons our domestic politics and hampers our international relations.

The answer is to fight for the progressive center in our national politics, while rejecting the partisan calls to battle that come from extremists in both parties. This is how we implement progressive values in a tolerant, rational government that is responsive to all Americans.

We need to ask more of ourselves, while we demand much more from our politicians. We must stop rewarding with our support and our votes the politicians who pander to the extremes in both parties. So many of our elected officials have fallen into a bottomless pit of partisan accusation and recrimination, and the voters too often rally favorably behind those promoting the loudest and most extreme views.

In many gerrymandered congressional districts, where the lines have been drawn to virtually guarantee the victory of the candidate of the majority political party, the incumbents believe they only need to pay attention to the partisan extremes of their political base in order to get reelected. In fact, politicians willing to compromise and do the people's business on a bipartisan basis are often punished, not rewarded, by voters in their next party primary.

We are teaching our representatives the wrong lesson. Our angry and hyperpartisan voting habits lead them to believe it is politically safer to relentlessly fight with the opposing party than to seek meaningful compromise that may be controversial.

We should reward those politicians who, regardless of their ideology, are willing to work together to reach consensus. We must demand that