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NOTHING IS MORE IMPORTANT

Arguing America

A lot of things are important, but in the context of this week, nothing is more important than getting that done, this week.

—Edwin Meese, March 16, 1986¹

ALMOST SEVENTY YEARS AGO, on a Sunday evening between the surrenders of the Germans and the Japanese in World War II, two visionaries of the public spirit named Martha Rountree and Lawrence Spivak launched a radio program in the basement of a Washington, D.C. hotel that would change the world. Like so many inventions that emerged from the chaos of that great conflict, *Meet the Press* was something genuinely new. Their idea was to argue America, to subject national decision makers at the peak of their influence to critical and probing questions in front of the mass public, thereby bringing the representative and the represented into closer discursive contact. Every week, Spivak and Rountree assembled a panel of ace reporters to fire pointed questions at the week's most salient decision maker in order to get "the story behind the story"—the strategic focus of the policy discussion without the technical dross. It is not that this was the first political talk show—other public affairs programming had been on the radio years before *Meet the Press*—but Spivak and Rountree had found the magic formula: they would use elite print reporters to stage a mass broadcast of a press conference in a conversational style. They would bridge the democratic divide by asking what was described as "the questions you would ask if you were here" and dream big, as it was only possible to do in that pregnant moment after World War II. Martha Rountree imagined that she might one day interview figures like Winston Churchill, Joseph Stalin, and Henry Wallace, thereby transforming the way democracy was lived and performed. As we look back over the astonishing record of the program, which critiqued every major news event

from the establishment of the United Nations, hosted every president after Eisenhower, and showcased the more memorable efforts of the world's popes, philosophers, poets, and kings, Rountree's dream has become our reality.

Center Stage of the National Conversation

In a book celebrating the fifty-year anniversary of *Meet the Press*, the official chronicler of the program, Rick Ball, made a claim about the show's first driving presence, Lawrence E. Spivak, that sounds hyperbolic but is really only descriptive: "Larry Spivak dared to ask the direct question on behalf of the American people. He made *Meet the Press* part of the democratic process."² It is fascinating to imagine that there was a time when one could not expect the secretary of state or the winner of the Iowa straw poll to appear before an attentive and suspicious audience of more than three million people to justify her views and actions. Through a clever combination of insider intrigue and mass appeal, *Meet the Press* muscled its way onto center stage of the national conversation. Now, not only is it possible to use the intimacy of the camera lens to facilitate character assessments of our national leaders but leaders are also expected to reveal themselves to this kind of interrogation in order to reach the pinnacle of American politics. Through diligent commitment to its original format, *Meet the Press* has become the mark of legitimacy in American politics. To avoid a *Meet the Press* appearance is to admit defeat.

On June 15, 2008, in a tribute program to the show's most famous host, Tim Russert, Doris Kearns Goodwin, a celebrated historian and one of the most ebullient and devoted of the program's guests and commentators, responded to a question about Russert's legacy that holds for the program as a whole.

Tom Brokaw (NBC News): And it seems to me, Doris, that in the future, historians will have a rich archive in the *Meet the Press* recordings of the people who have passed through these studios—who they were, how they evolved, and what they became.

Doris Kearns Goodwin: No question about that. I mean, think about the nineteenth century. We had diaries; we had letters. That's what allows historians to re-create those people who lived then. In this broadcast world, what these recordings will show people years from now is not just the questions

he asked, not even just the answers he got, but which people were able to acknowledge errors, which people ruffled under his questions, which ones could share a laugh. You'll get the temperament of these people. They're going to come alive.

As Goodwin recognized, these old shows are important records through which to satisfy our idle curiosities and are also social science data that promise to reveal how American elites narrated history as it happened, revealing how they thought, felt, and spoke about their country, the values on which they based their decisions and policies, and the historical examples and guiding images they used to make their cases come to life. If *Meet the Press* is the mark of legitimacy in American politics, the analysis of its archive is the study of legitimate American arguments. For those who did not live through these events, the *Meet the Press* archive reveals deep channels of political thought and culture, time out of mind of man. For those who did live through them, *Meet the Press* is a systematic record of the state of the elite core of national conversation as it was lived rather than as it is remembered.

Meet the Press is the longest-running television series; there have been more than thirty-five hundred episodes of the program over sixty-seven years of regular operation, and they continue each week. Apart from innovations like adding a roundtable and reducing the number of questioners from four to one, the interview format has remained largely consistent over time, as has the nature of the questioning. The array of guests is of consistently high quality and from the full spectrum of national and global elites. Pick your favorite influential person, and you will probably find him or her at some key moment in his or her career answering questions before a national audience with questions that you might have liked to ask.³ Put another way, *Meet the Press* is a longitudinal collection of consistently prepared and high-quality focus groups and interviews that have been conducted with national leaders in steady intervals and with consistent management for nearly seven decades from the end of World War II to the present time. If in 1945 one had set out to produce a prospective study of the evolution of the national policy conversation over the course of the coming "American Century," it would have been difficult to devise a better plan than this.

Before we wax elegiac about the accomplishments of this organ of the National Broadcasting Company, it will be helpful to remember that there are reasons to be suspicious about the program itself and of the role

it plays in politics and society. Not everyone gets to appear on *Meet the Press*, nor are all of the issues vital to the republic discussed there. *Meet the Press* does reflect the central tendencies of elite opinion, but the performers represent a rarefied slice of the public whose concerns are close to those who have provided them with the opportunities they enjoy. The tension involved in characterizing this kind of program reflects the tension of representative democracy; even as the program represents the vital center of the political classes, many people are left out and many points of view are ignored. In a 1991 interview on C-SPAN about *Meet the Press*'s sister program, *This Week with David Brinkley*, Brinkley was asked about this tricky problem of elitism in shepherding the national debate.

Interviewer: Some critics charge that the Sunday-morning programs appeal only to an intellectual elite.

David Brinkley: What's wrong with that?

Interviewer: Do you have a sense of who your audience is?

Brinkley: Uh, I'm not sure it would be an intellectual elite, but there is very little of a popular, gossipy nature in it, and I think that is a somewhat loaded term, intellectual elite, but I think it is designed for people who really care about public affairs in this country and the world, and would like to maybe bounce their own opinions off ours and see how they compare. Um, not intellectual elite, but those who care about what's happening in the world.⁴

Brinkley's awkward response reveals the tension at the heart not only of public affairs programming but also democracy itself. Not all voices are heard, and not all ideas get equal play. Those that do are often restricted by their appeal to those who have power. The liberal economist John Kenneth Galbraith, a frequent guest on *Meet the Press*, coined a phrase to capture the kinds of arguments that one finds on the program: the "conventional wisdom"—"ideas which are esteemed at any time for their acceptability"—an ironic phrase that summarizes the challenge of governing a polity in which, despite our best efforts, some people are more equal than others. Most of us are doomed to parrot the ideas of some defunct opinion leader, producing unavoidable interpretive disparities. The historian Eric Goldman's description of our plight remains one of the best.

The dominant groups in America had simply done what dominant groups usually do. They had, quite unconsciously, picked from among available theories the ones that best protected their position and had impressed these ideas on the national mind as Truth.⁵

What about political bias? It has become a national pastime to criticize the mainstream media for their gatekeeping function and implicit political biases, but bias is not a problem on *Meet the Press* unless by that you mean bias against the issues for which there is no effective and organized interest or against the more volatile extremes of the political spectrum. The issues that people care most about may never be discussed at length or in a balanced way on the program, but not because the producers and journalists are biased against them. Issues like immigration, gender equality, and abusive powers of corporations may find little play on Sunday morning, but this only reflects the dominant ideology of the country, not that of the staff of *Meet the Press*. Inadvertently, the show's producers do act as gatekeepers of a kind, but what they protect is the integrity of their take on the conventional wisdom as they go about protecting the company brand. One of the reasons that *Meet the Press* has survived what must be seen as several lifetimes in the television news business is that a natural system of feedback in a competitive marketplace ensures that it keeps its focus on what it has set out to do. It is a barometer of the conventional wisdom. It is an index of arguments that succeed, and those arguments that fail to convince will simply precipitate out of this level of the conversation.⁶

The interpretations that make it across the *Meet the Press* threshold have something more important than novelty; they have the robust aura of legitimacy about them. In this harsh glare of public scrutiny, most arguments wither, as do many guests. Those that survive may be little more than dressed-up clichés, but these are clichés with currency. They are the arguments that move America and, in so doing, channel American civic identity just as Jefferson's words in the Declaration did in the beginning. This is what it means to argue America—to bring the country into existence through an act of cooperative imagination. In this sense, many of us can be founders of the republic anew by introducing arguments that stick, thereby delineating the cultural repertoire.

Few things are as important as knowing where this conventional wisdom is headed at any point in time. In the vernacular of our time we speak about this as “the story,” “the narrative,” or the “theory of the case.” What we are getting at is the gist of the policy debate and general direction in which our leaders plan to take the country. We often think of the history of political philosophy as an enduring debate between ideas and interests between Plato and Machiavelli. We might better think of it as a debate between Plato and Homer, that is, between reason and myth: the

strategic and literary dimensions of political experience. It is along this literary dimension where analysis meets imagery, and one doesn't find it in the Gallup Poll or the General Social Survey.

Less sophisticated than a conference at the Brookings Institution or a Yale seminar, what you see on *Meet the Press* is what you get—the leading plotlines of the American political storybook. Love them or hate them, these are the ideas that will work, and they work because they have already worked in the past. This idea—known in some circles as “performativity”—is the inescapable circularity of symbolic politics, and it remains the magic formula of Sunday-morning politics as it was in Spivak's day.

In a sour mood, a critic might justly say of *Meet the Press* that it is a platform for what Antonio Gramsci called hegemony: a process of moral and intellectual leadership through which people consent to and reproduce the structures of power that operate in their own society.⁷ Even in the absence of coercive power, by changing the categories of thought itself, leaders find it possible to direct the people toward ends that they never anticipated and to which they would never have consented. The forum was well exploited by Joseph McCarthy, George Wallace, and others for this purpose. But it is also one where critical voices can think aloud in creative ways. Radical thinkers like Ralph Nader, Ross Perot, Henry Wallace, Grover Norquist, and Ron Paul have all made use of the show in that way.

I think of *Meet the Press* as a regular forum for the American influential, where the most pertinent arguments for the most pressing social issues are shared before a relevant audience. It's the place where the rhetorical rubber hits the road of governance. Its archive should interest you because it is a unique record of peak-level American discursive history, and it is one that still exists in largely uncorrupted form. Because of Larry Spivak's grit and determination, almost the entire record of the program—transcripts, radio broadcasts, television film canisters, letters, and other related material—is sitting in the Library of Congress waiting to be rediscovered. It is like an ice core of the political climate from which one can sample fresh snowpack each week. Thousands of articles have been written using Michigan's National Election Studies data or Chicago's General Social Survey, but the *Meet the Press* archive is a data set that has as yet been largely unexamined. Just as we look back to the old Gallup Polls to investigate the tidal forces in American mass opinion, so, too, we can use the *Meet the Press* archive to time the rhythms of the tides of the conventional wisdom. Both sources are indicators of strategic possibilities.

The Players

It would be impossible to review all of the outsized personalities who appeared on this stage, but to orient and prepare the reader for the selections presented, it will help to have a sense of the most important players on the programs over the years.⁸

Hosts and Moderators

Lawrence (Larry) Spivak—The font of this novel experiment in democracy, who not only bankrolled the program and shepherded it through its first thirty years but also preserved the records of the program at a time when such things were not done. A neocon before neoconservatism was cool, Spivak was a true public intellectual who lives on in this, his greatest product.

Martha Rountree—The visionary saleswoman of the *Meet the Press* idea who carried the program from an idea to full function. Her folksy accent and deferential tendencies belie her powerful ambition, which was ever on display for those on the lookout for it. As is likely true of many pioneering women of this era, Rountree's experience on *Meet the Press* serves as a kind of placeholder for women in the public sphere more generally. It is not an exaggeration to say that Rountree was responsible for selling *Meet the Press* at the outset to the Mutual Broadcasting System, and she was a constant presence in the founding epoch. Yet she was always overshadowed by Larry Spivak and the other larger-than-life men who appeared, and she made her exit in 1954 when she sold her ownership stake.

Albert Warner—The first regular moderator of *Meet the Press*, providing a kind of star power for the fledgling show. Warner was a true showman, with a lilting and engaging voice, capable of turning even the most fraught discussions into an entertainment spectacle.

Ned Brooks—The straight-shooting moderator of the program from 1953 to 1965. Brooks had been around the program from its early days. He was moderator through some of the most volatile moments of the period, including the civil rights movement and the Kennedy assassination.

Bill Monroe—One of the program's most familiar faces and producer and moderator of the program from 1975 to 1984. As moderator, Monroe carried the show through its transition period after Spivak's departure. His reign was marked by his stentorian voice and tough style of questioning, as well as his decision to sit with the panel of questioners.

Marvin Kalb—A notable transitional figure who in concert with NBC's Roger Mudd carried the program from Monroe's era until the late 1980s. Kalb had a tough delivery and academic style that was matched to a richly textured voice that colored much of the program's journey through the Reagan presidency.

Tim Russert—The most famous of the program's hosts, who oversaw the expansion of the show in its post-panel format. Russert was a larger-than-life figure who managed the impossible task of overshadowing Larry Spivak in the show's history. He was the host of the show from 1991 until his untimely death in 2008.

David Gregory—The first permanent host after the tragic death of Tim Russert. Gregory's style has brought the program firmly into the twenty-first century. The tone of the show is now less combative and chummy than was characteristic under Russert's leadership.

Notable Questioners

If you haven't been watching the program for more than twenty years, you might be unaware that there has been one foundational format revision for *Meet the Press* that changes the basic feel of the show. From its debut on radio, *Meet the Press* had a structure in which newspaper reporters came to the show with their own newsmaking questions, while the host or moderator kept the discussion lively and balanced. Larry Spivak then played the role of permanent panel member and in that way had more independent influence on the tone than he would as the moderator. The format evolved after Bill Monroe left the show in the 1980s and has slowly gravitated toward the version we know today on all the Sunday shows, where a single star questioner confronts the newsmaker and the roundtable.

May Craig (*Portland, Maine, Press Herald*)—One of the most colorful panelists, famous for her garish hats and no-nonsense style of questioning. Craig was among the most frequent of the show's questioners and was notable for her pithy and moralistic style that cut to the heart of an issue. I think of her as the skeptical voice of middle America.

Ernest K. Lindley (*Newsweek*)—One of Spivak's early ace reporters. Lindley had become famous as part of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's press corps. Lindley's incisive yet folksy style of delivery was endearing and characteristic of the early episodes.

Marquis Childs (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*)—A unique American product, with a midwestern pedigree and a vaguely aristocratic accent that made

him hard to place while providing him a certain gravitas that the typical member of the press corps lacked. A regular performer on the program through much of its early life, Childs was distinguished there for his insights into the challenges of comparative capitalisms that were a natural outgrowth of his interest in the Swedish compromise between capitalism and Socialism.

David Broder (Washington Post)—Often well described by Tim Russert as the dean of the Washington press corps. Broder became a regular panelist on *Meet the Press* and survived as questioner after the demise of the panel format. Broder's early presence was intense and impassive, but he slowly matured into a more playful and balanced professional role in his own league.

Robert Novak (Wall Street Journal)—The self-described prince of darkness. Novak played the role of the tough conservative in an era when that was not always the popular thing to do. Novak was well known through the famous Evans and Novak column but was one of the most frequent and incisive panelists on *Meet the Press*, who like Broder, survived as a questioner until near the end of his life.

Irving R. Levine (NBC News)—Came onto the program as an economic correspondent and had the opportunity to handle many of the most exalted economists. Levine was known for his ever-present bowtie and deadpan delivery. Levine's role in the national conversation was pronounced both on *Meet the Press* and on NBC more generally in that he was its expert on economics in a time of great transformation.

Gwen Ifill (NBC News)—The only African American reporter to appear in this list. Ifill has played almost as important a role on *Meet the Press* as she has done in her more recently familiar roles at the *Jim Lehrer News Hour* and *Washington Week*. Although her contributions to *Meet the Press* were broad, Ifill stands out in this volume in those scenes where race was most poignantly discussed, where her questions were as penetrating and timely as were those of May Craig before her.

David Brooks (New York Times)—Perhaps the most versatile and widely sourced opinion writer and political columnist in the country. Brooks has made *Meet the Press* one of his regular stops and is known for his eye for popular culture and his balanced, right-of-center perspective that cuts through rhetoric with analytical precision.

The list of questioners is only a small sample of the long list of Washington insiders who plied their trade on NBC's Sunday-morning show. Only the most memorable questioners who also appear in the examples I

cite in this book have been introduced here. Other pillars of the program like Andrea Mitchell, E.J. Dionne, Chuck Todd, and Elizabeth Drew do not appear in the transcript sample material despite their powerful influence.

The Performances

This book takes you through a series of four passes through American discursive history as revealed through the unique perspective of the *Meet the Press* archive, each time focused on a distinctive and central issue. Because the program has documented every political skirmish in national politics since World War II, I am forced to skip over a lot, but I try to focus on the issues that represent the major conversations and most important moral debates that confronted the nation under its gaze.

One consideration in focusing my attention is the volume of conversation on a given topic. On this criterion two topic areas stand out: first, war and foreign affairs, and second, economics, debt, and taxation. These two areas represent the major premise of over half of all the episodes that have aired since 1945. A short answer to the question, What is the American national argument about? is foreign policy with a heavy dose of economics. While we lately find ourselves intrigued by struggles over sexuality, gender relations, immigration, abortion, gun control, and religious conservatism, war and recession, the projection of American power abroad, and its use to foster shared economic prosperity at home are the things that appear of most interest to national policy elites. Presumably the reason is that they are the most central and salient questions of political governance.

Another consideration is quality. I have chosen to write longer explorations of the debates about race and class struggle even though these topics account for far fewer episodes in terms of the raw number of weekly conversations devoted to the topic. But even when these more divisive considerations were not explicitly placed on the table, they were often in the cards, lurking in more innocent-looking hands. In the case of race, it is only a mild overstatement to echo W. E. B. Du Bois's assertion that the problem of the twentieth century was the problem of the color line. Race and racial stereotypes are almost impossible to avoid in the national conversation after World War II, and racial conflict produced some of the country's most inspiring leaders in that period along with some of the most divisive confrontations. As represented in the *Meet the Press* record,

when the national conversation opens, it is dominated by the southern segregationist and, through a passionate series of feints and reversals over time, ends with a popular African American president.

The same is true with respect to the issue of class struggle and labor relations, but with an inverted image of the conversation on race. A good case could be made that *Meet the Press* began as a forum for substantive debate about the issues of class and class struggle in an age when superpowers confronted one another across an ideological divide that was defined by this problem, but it ended with the topic serving almost as taboo for those of good political taste. Of the first twenty regularly scheduled radio programs of *Meet the Press*, eleven were devoted to the problem of class struggle and union power, this at a time when the Far East was on fire and Europe was in shambles. By today's standards this seems almost unbelievable. Not only has the general topic of proactive labor power (strikes, collective bargaining, living wage campaigns) been consigned to the dustbin of American history but the sense that class conflict is a serious problem facing the country feels almost un-American to bring up in serious conversation. No great icon of the class struggle has emerged in American politics to match the likes of Martin Luther King or Roy Wilkins or even Jesse Jackson. Instead, we see a record of antiheroes best represented by Jimmy Hoffa or fallen stars like Ralph Nader in the ranks of those who have visibly promoted a foundational critique of economic power on either the workers' or consumers' rights fronts.

For each of the topical conversations I explore in this book, foreign and economic policy, race and class, I see a common theme; the American debate has developed in the direction of an image that I have chosen for the title of the book, the eclipse of equality. What we see after the close of World War II is a fundamental shift in the way that political causes are consecrated in the ennobling rhetoric of our democratic tradition. Just as Americans are committed to the values of national security, personal freedom, and tolerance of out-groups, so, too, they have traditionally thought of themselves as a people committed to ensuring economic opportunity to individuals irrespective of their background. But, as the record of elite conversations in the *Meet the Press* archive reveals, successive cohorts of opinion leaders and newsmakers have simply forgotten how to care about the threat to civil peace that might arise from those who command concentrations of economic power—what Aristotle would have called the Few. Accordingly, once-potent narratives of class struggle, occupational

stratification, and even comparative social mobility have been consigned to merely symbolic status, having lost their substantive focus and analytic concision; as a result, we are passing through an “eclipse” of one of the driving principles of the liberal, or small-*d*, democratic imagination.

As it has always been, popular politics is a game in which one civil threat is played off against another to the advantage of established interests, but we have lived through something extraordinary; along a circuitous and tangled path, one of the canonical civil virtues, equality, has been effectively removed from serious consideration. Therefore, ours is a public sphere in which we fight for freedom, inveigh against intolerance, and struggle for security, while we have little of substance to say about surging economic inequality in terms either of outcome or opportunity. Even the word has changed in meaning. When someone speaks today of equality in politics, we immediately think of groups rather than individuals, in terms of diversity more than equality itself. Unsurprisingly, in fits and starts, economic inequality has become a problem of sufficient salience to beget the kinds of novel social movements we see everywhere percolating as global justice movements pivot in their emphasis from tolerance to equality.

American politics is organized around a seeming paradox. On the one hand, it functions concretely through an ineffectual system of checked powers that demand compromise, and on the other, it can move forward only when concerned groups of partisans organize around polarizing, Manichean political ideologies that define their causes as the essence of liberty and their opponents’ as synonymous with oppression. More than in any other country, American politicians must govern together yet campaign apart. Without a message drenched in the binary and polluting oppositions of the American creed, no coalition can expect to govern for long. To argue America is to channel the energies of civil power, and this demands the artful deployment of riveting civil drama. Friends and colleagues in the American elite must learn to cooperate while they, at the same time, denounce each other in the language and idioms of the rhetoric of liberty. They have to govern at the center, while extemporizing from their base. How it is they have done this, and to what effect, is the story I explore in the remainder of the book.