

THE ENDURING CONTRIBUTION OF ED MEESE

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It is a personal pleasure to introduce Ed Meese, because among other things, he gave me my first chance to work for President Reagan. I went into the 1980 campaign prepared for the proverbial smoke-filled rooms, but was resigned to this because of the seismic importance of electing Ronald Reagan. To my delight, I found instead an organization dedicated to a vision of a restored America led by a citizen-politician named Ed Meese, who wanted nothing more or less than the public good.

I have had the privilege of working closely with Ed ever since: the 1980 Campaign, the transition, the White House, the Justice Department, and now the Conservative movement. And the word "good" is one that most often occurs to me when I think of him. He is a good man who always has the well-being of the country foremost in his mind. When Ed is convinced that the Constitution and sound public policy require a certain course, he does not pause to calculate personal costs.

We are marking tonight the publication of Lee Edwards' splendid new biography of Ed Meese, To Preserve and Protect. In our division of labor this evening, I have been asked to discuss Ed's contribution to the Reagan Administration and the Conservative movement. Ted Olson will later talk to us regarding Ed's achievements as Attorney General. At the intersection of these two spheres is the question of judicial selection, which was managed by the Reagan Justice Department but with input and final decisions at the highest levels of the Reagan White House.

Republican presidents from Eisenhower forward had never managed to consistently select judges who would be faithful to the written Constitution. By the end of the Nixon and Ford presidencies, there was only one Democrat appointee in

the liberal majorities of the Burger court, Thurgood Marshall. Brennan had been appointed by Eisenhower, Blackmun and Powell by Nixon, and Stevens by Ford. The circuit courts of appeal were in just as bad shape. The newly-elected President Reagan was determined to do something about it.

Ronald Reagan and Ed Meese had been working on judicial selection ever since California days, and Ed recommended a system that greatly increased the probability that sound judges would be scouted by the Justice Department, with a final vetting by the highest administration officials in the Roosevelt room--just steps away from the oval office. After his decision, President Reagan himself would personally telephone each and every nominee to underscore his high expectations for their fidelity to the written Constitution. By the time Ronald Reagan left office he had appointed more than half of the Federal judiciary. By the time George H. W. Bush left, that figure had grown to 60%. Now President George W. Bush is on the verge of repairing the damage done by 8 years of Bill Clinton. That damage is real, including two Democrat additions to the Supreme Court. Still, with all its faults, the Renquist court is the most conservative court in over 50 years. Otherwise, we would now be in the fifth year of an Al Gore presidency.

Elevating the judicial selection process to the very top of the Reagan Administration is a good example of how Ed Meese was indispensable to Ronald Reagan's success. President Reagan was the ultimate big picture man. His mind engaged at the level of first principles, and he left the details of particular policies to staff. Ronald Reagan supplied the agenda and Ed Meese supplied the ways and means of accomplishing that agenda. But Ed was much more than an implementer, because he brought to the task a profound agreement with Reagan principles and a profound loyalty to Reagan the man.

This turns out to make a difference. Imagine delegating to those who not only disagree with you, but are willing to substitute their judgment for yours, their agenda for your own. Well this happened to Ronald Reagan more than once, even in the West Wing of the White House. But President Reagan knew there was one man he could always, always count on. That is why Ed was the only member of the White House

staff that President Reagan gave cabinet rank. Ronald Reagan was once asked, "Who would you turn to first in a crisis?" Without hesitating, he replied, "Ed Meese."

I sometimes wince when Ronald Reagan's successful presidency is attributed to his communications skills, because this analysis falsely elevates form over substance. After all, if President Reagan had set the wrong goals for America, effective speeches would have only hastened failure. Just so with Ed Meese's deserved reputation for his ability to synthesize and summarize the pros and cons of issues for presidential decision. This too elevates form over substance and underestimates Ed's hard-fought stands for smaller government, lower taxes, deregulation, the defense build-up, and the strategic moves against the Soviet Union. Every one of these stands went against the recalcitrant conventional wisdom in the media, in the career bureaucracies of the government, in much of Congress (including many Republicans), and among some high Administration officials who manned key choke points that could quietly stall progress on the revolutionary aspects of the Reagan agenda.

Against these powerful legions of the status quo, Ed Meese rode point for the Reagan revolution. The other side knew this, and attacked Ed with a furor that makes the Delay and Bolton episodes look like a minuet.

But Ed never wavered. And do you know who recognized his steadfastness? It was the foot soldiers of the revolution, the several thousand political appointees out in the cabinet departments and agencies. More than their own superiors, they looked to Ed Meese, to his staunchness under fire, to his refusal to split the difference on matters of fundamental principle, to his laser-like loyalty to Ronald Reagan.

Each year the Administration held what was in essence a rally in Constitution Hall for the 3,000 top Reagan appointees. Cabinet members would come onstage one-by-one to receptions that ranged from polite to enthusiastic -- but it was Ed Meese who always brought the house down, just by walking on to the stage. The grateful voices of those

young Reaganauts resound in my ears to this day. You see, they understood. And Ronald Reagan understood. I was back at the White House when the second Meese independent counsel was appointed. In my hearing, President Reagan said: "If Ed Meese is not a good man, there are no good men."

When the Reagan Administration was drawing to a close, Ed chose to continue the battle for the Reagan Agenda by formally joining forces with his informal ally of many years, Ed Feulner. It was Ed Meese who ordered the distribution of Heritage's Mandate for Leadership at the first Reagan Cabinet Meeting. We put it in the chairs, so that each Secretary had to physically hold it before sitting down. Since 1990, Ed has held the Ronald Reagan Chair in Public Policy -- the only Reagan Chair personally authorized by Ronald Reagan himself. From there, Ed established Heritage's Center for Legal and Judicial Studies, where he specializes in constitutional and criminal law, and the proper role of the judiciary. Along with the Public Interest Law Firms, the Patriot Act, tort reform, and the Defense of Marriage Act, these are matters within Ed's formal portfolio. But of course, he works just as hard without portfolio, in the myriad good works of the conservative movement, the law enforcement community, and in matters of faith and conscience. Phil Truluck a few years back suggested to Ed that he slow down a little. And he did -- by giving up paid speeches.

If there is an indispensable man in the Conservative movement, it is Ed Meese. He is the glue that holds us together, just as he held the Reagan Revolutionaries together in the 1980's. He has earned the moral stature to ask us all to put aside any institutional differences, to work for the greater good of the cause.

Oliver Wendell Holmes once wrote that, "a great man represents a great ganglion in the nerves of society, or to vary the figure, a strategic point in the campaign of history, and part of his greatness consists of being there."

Ed Meese was there: when Ronald Reagan needed an alter ego to make sure his aggressive policies did not fall victim to politics-as-usual in California and Washington.

Ed Meese was there: to save the Presidency by personally discovering the Iran-Contra diversion and then by quickly announcing the full findings at a White House press conference, before they leaked to Ronald Reagan's enemies.

Ed Meese was there: to serve as President Reagan's chief policy adviser in masterminding the economic recovery program, which cut tax rates, deregulated important segments of industry, and reduced the growth rates of government spending.

Ed Meese was there: to argue for President Reagan's move from the failed policy of containing communism to the military build-up and strategic maneuvers that forced the Soviet Union to spend itself into bankruptcy.

Ed Meese has always walked in lockstep with Ronald Reagan in pursuit of one goal -- human freedom. Not freedom in the vulgar sense of license, nor even the freedom merely to acquire that is sometimes mistaken for the American dream. But freedom in an older sense of the word -- freedom to choose the good. Freedom to make one's own way in life, to choose for oneself how to behave honorably toward one's country, and to live lovingly toward one's family and friends. It is for this freedom to choose that Ed has toiled so mightily and well, and with so little thought for himself. The world is a more hospitable place to that freedom because, at a critical juncture in human affairs, Ed Meese was there.

Ladies and gentlemen, the 75th Attorney General of the United States of America.