



# Death by a Thousand Cuts: The Fight over Taxing Inherited Wealth

*Michael J. Graetz, Ian Shapiro*

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This fast-paced book by Yale professors Michael Graetz and Ian Shapiro unravels the following mystery: How is it that the estate tax, which has been on the books continuously since 1916 and is paid by only the wealthiest two percent of Americans, was repealed in 2001 with broad bipartisan support? The mystery is all the more striking because the repeal was not done in the dead of night, like a congressional pay raise. It came at the end of a multiyear populist campaign launched by a few individuals, and was heralded by its supporters as a signal achievement for Americans who are committed to the work ethic and the American Dream.

Graetz and Shapiro conducted wide-ranging interviews with the relevant players: members of congress, senators, staffers from the key committees and the Bush White House, civil servants, think tank and interest group representatives, and many others. The result is a unique portrait of American politics as viewed through the lens of the death tax repeal saga. Graetz and Shapiro brilliantly illuminate the repeal campaign's many fascinating and unexpected turns--particularly the odd end result whereby the repeal is slated to self-destruct a decade after its passage. They show that the stakes in this fight are exceedingly high; the very survival of the long standing American consensus on progressive taxation is being threatened.

Graetz and Shapiro's rich narrative reads more like a political drama than a conventional work of scholarship. Yet every page is suffused by their intimate knowledge of the history of the tax code, the transformation of American conservatism over the past three decades, and the wider political implications of battles over tax policy.

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