

NATIONAL REVIEW

***The Conservative Sensibility* Is George Will's Definitive Declaration**

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In 1975, shortly after she was elected leader of the Tories, Margaret Thatcher found herself in a debate over the party platform. As one speaker called for moderation and accommodation with Labour, Thatcher reached into her briefcase, pulled out a heavy book, and said, “*This* is what we believe.” Then she slammed the book on a table. It was Hayek’s *Constitution of Liberty*.

George Will may have had this anecdote in mind when he began work on *The Conservative Sensibility*. The syndicated columnist’s 15th book is weighty, learned, comprehensive, philosophical, and perfect for thumping on furniture. “What I have written,” Will says, “is the distilled wisdom, as I understand this, that I have acquired from half a century in Washington, my home, which I love.” Admirers of Will — I plead guilty — now have what amounts to a definitive statement, a summation of his remarkable career in journalism and politics.

Like many careers, Will’s began by chance. He was a 28-year-old professor at the University of Toronto when Everett Dirksen, leader of the Senate Republicans, died in 1969. Soon thereafter, Senator Gordon Allott of Colorado was elevated to chairman of the Republican Policy Committee. Allott wanted a conservative academic as his writer. One thing led to another, and Will, who recently had made his first contribution to National Review, got the job. He moved to D.C. in January 1970.

Allott was defeated two years later. Looking for work, Will called William F. Buckley Jr. and said this publication needed a Washington editor. Buckley agreed. He also made Will the book editor, replacing Elsie Meyer, who had been filling the role of her husband Frank since his death the previous April. Will’s first “Capitol Issues” column appeared in the February 2, 1973, issue. “It is possible,” he wrote, “that this president, beginning his second term in an unusually sullen Washington, will re-invigorate the Congress.” More than possible, as it turned out.

What reinvigorated Congress was the news that President Nixon had attempted to conceal his administration’s involvement in the Watergate break-in. Will was a tough critic of Nixon’s, putting him at odds with both NR’s readers and NR’s publisher, Bill Rusher. “As an occasional writer of article-length pieces on the Washington scene, George Will would have a great deal to recommend him,” Rusher wrote to the editors in 1973. “As the Washington editor of National Review, he is little short of a disaster.” Buckley and senior editor James Burnham disagreed.

They stood by Will, who began his twice-weekly *Washington Post* column in 1974, the year of Nixon's resignation.

In 1976 Will contributed his first semimonthly essay for *Newsweek*. He won the Pulitzer Prize for commentary the following year. The year after that, he published *The Pursuit of Happiness and Other Sobering Thoughts*, the first of eight collections of columns, essays, reviews, and speeches. In November 1981, he joined *This Week with David Brinkley* and quickly became a television celebrity. *Men at Work*, one of three volumes on baseball, was published in 1990 and, Will likes to joke, has almost outsold all the other books put together.

This list of accomplishments and accolades, as well as his genteel persona, should not mask Will's talent for controversy. Bill Rusher was neither the first nor the last conservative to disagree with Will, who is equally capable of annoying the Left. He has found himself at odds with every president, and every political party, since he started writing for a living.

According to Will, Carter was an incompetent moralist, and Reagan a friend who won the Cold War but was nevertheless incapable of restraining the appetites of voters for big government. George H. W. Bush was a "lapdog," and Bill Clinton a narcissistic technocrat. George W. Bush began as a capable leader but ended up making the worst foreign-policy decision "in American history." Obama, the paradigmatic Wilsonian, was a relentless agent of the administrative state. Trump is "an almost inexpressibly sad specimen."

The rise of Trump caused Will to change his Maryland voter registration from Republican to unaffiliated in June 2016. Will, whose first article in these pages ("What Happened to the Democratic Coalition?" April 8, 1969) described and critiqued George Wallace's Jacksonian populism, could not and does not support the latest of Jackson's heirs. It may surprise Will's comrades in the Resistance that the book under review does not so much as mention the name of the 45th president. What it offers instead is a deep and sustained reflection on American conservatism.

Or, more accurately, one man's conservative sensibility: The landscape of the Right is vast, and filled with traditionalists, neos, paleos, hawks, doves, counterrevolutionaries, communitarians, classical liberals, post-liberals, libertarians, and reactionaries. With *The Conservative Sensibility*, George Will takes a stand amid the rabble.

There is nothing worse than a predictable columnist, and Will is anything but predictable. One reads him not only for his prose but also for the chance to observe a great and restless intellect. The careful reader of his work over the years will have noticed that Will has moved away from Burke, Disraeli, and Newman and toward Madison, Hayek, and Darwin. His jurisprudence these days is more Jaffa and Barnett than Scalia and Bork, his foreign policy more Rand Paul than Marco Rubio. This onetime friendly critic of Manchester liberalism is now at home with the Cato Institute.

"Invariably," Will wrote in 1981, "it is this for which I write: the joy, than which there is nothing purer, of an argument firmly made, like a nail straightly driven, its head flush to the plank." The argument he makes in *The Conservative Sensibility* is characteristically epigrammatic, heavy with quotation and anecdote, and steeped in history and literature. It not only informs the reader of George Will's sensibility but also helps you see more clearly the fissures within the American Right.

And what fissures. The conservative intellectual movement is engaged in a debate over nothing less than the foundation of our regime, the nature of liberalism, the virtues of the market, the role of the state, and the value of freedom. Some conservatives, especially young ones, have turned their attention away from the free choices of individuals to the institutions — family, community, religion, and nation — that provide authoritative guidance for those choices and shape personal characters. Will, who dedicates this book to Barry Goldwater, reminds us of what the conservative mainstream looked like for much of the 20th century, and what it might look like again.

“The proper question for conservatives is, What do you seek to conserve?” Will asks. “The proper answer is concise but deceptively simple: We seek to conserve the American Founding.” Whereas Burke and European conservatives defended throne and altar, American conservatism ought to protect the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution and the principles that inform them.

“The price of accuracy might be confusion,” Will says, “but this point must be made: American conservatives are the custodians of the classical liberal tradition.” In place of a king and established church, Americans have equal natural rights, federalism, separation of powers, checks and balances, and a written charter of government that — thank goodness — is difficult to amend.

Part of the American inheritance is judicial review. It is on this issue that Will finds himself opposed to many fellow conservatives. Since the beginnings of originalism in the 1970s, most conservatives have advocated an ethic of judicial restraint. Absent egregious violations of the Framers’ original intention, conservatives say, judges should defer to legislatures. Where the Constitution is silent, majorities rule.

Not for Will. Rather than judicial restraint, he advocates “judicial supervision” or what others call “judicial engagement.” When judges decide cases, Will says, they should have in mind not only the Constitution but also the Declaration of Independence. “And a properly engaged judiciary is duty-bound to declare majority acts invalid when they abridge natural rights,” including rights not mentioned explicitly in the Constitution. That is because the Founders “thought that individuals have property in — ownership of — themselves which is necessary for the pursuit of happiness. And they understood that ownership of property provides the individual with a zone of sovereignty in which the individual is at liberty to use his resources for the pursuit of happiness.”

But what, exactly, are the dimensions of this zone of sovereignty? There must be limits. And who defines these boundaries — the legislature or the judiciary? Such questions are the axis around which American political history has turned. And one of the lessons of history is this: While elected majorities infringe upon liberty, so too do unelected judges.

It is easy for bureaucracies and judges to thwart majorities. It is far harder for majorities to restrain judges. Their constraints must be self-imposed. As Robert Bork told the 1985 convention of the American Bar Association: “Any defensible theory of constitutional interpretation must demonstrate that it has the capacity to control judges. An observer must be able to say whether or not the judge’s result follows fairly from the premises and is not merely a question of taste or opinion.” The credibility of the judiciary, as well as the stability of our constitutional order, suffers if the observer cannot say this.

Will's support for judicial engagement is all the more notable because restraint and humility are great themes of his work. Human beings are imperfect creatures. Our limitations require us to be skeptical of hubristic undertakings in economics, social policy, foreign intervention, and moral and religious uplift. "Conservatism's task today," Will writes, "is to demonstrate that the dignity of constitutional government depends on restraints of a sort that do not come easily to conservatives or any other Americans." He continues:

And these restraints will not come automatically or spontaneously from institutional arrangements — from federalism or the separation of powers or juridical review. The restraints requisite for limited government, and hence requisite for the virtues that republican government presupposes, will come only from thoughtful reverence for the nation's founding, a reverence that not only honors the memory of the Founders but is conscientious in understanding their principles.

Here, then, is George Will's task: to remind Americans of our unique heritage by connecting present debates and public figures to our nation's fundamental ideas, disagreements, problems, and statesmen. "The more educated a person is about fine things and noble behavior," he writes, "the more a person is equipped for the pleasures of intelligent praising, the more he or she is equipped for intelligent pessimism, a prerequisite for the defense of liberty." Such is the education that awaits the reader of this beautiful, graceful, profound book.