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Books: George Will's Spectacular 'The Conservative Sensibility'

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While reading Steven Hayward's thoroughly excellent two book history of Ronald Reagan (*The Age of Reagan*), I found myself becoming exhausted at times. Not in a bad way. What it came down to was that Hayward's research was so incredibly *exhaustive*. On one page he would be discussing a weapons system in detail, on the next he would be talking about a judicial appointment, the next would be about the intricacies of a tax bill. I was exhausted because I couldn't imagine how Hayward did what he did. He's told me that he loves research. Simple as that, I suppose.

In his *Age of Reagan* books, Hayward regularly quoted the great George Will. Why wouldn't he have? If the purpose is to chronicle the age during which Reagan was wildly consequential, how could a historian not regularly reference one of the most consequential thinkers in the history of the conservative movement? Will is again all over Hayward's history, and in reading Will's excellent new love letter, policy guide and (perhaps) goodbye (let's hope not) to the conservative movement that he so shaped, *The Conservative Sensibility*, I found myself thinking of Hayward again. I did because like Hayward's, Will's analysis is so very thorough, so *exhausting* in a good way. How did he do this? Amazing quotes from Montesquieu, Lincoln, Rawls, Robespierre, and seemingly everyone else of historical, philosophical and political importance on page after page, along with countless historical tidbits that bring life to what he's explaining. To say that Will wrote a brilliant book brings new meaning to understatement. I wish it was more optimistic, I think there's an optimistic case to be made about what has him pessimistic, but it doesn't mean the book isn't a great read.

With *The Conservative Sensibility* Will aims to educate. The meaning of conservatism has seemingly been forgotten, or to believe this reviewer, it was never really well understood. More on this at review's end, but for now it should be said that "conservative" to the very libertarian Will is rooted in an aim "to conserve the American founding." His book is his "unapologetic presentation to unbelievers, who are a majority of contemporary Americans, of reasons why they should recur to the wisdom of the nation's founding."

And as readers can (or should imagine), Will's revival of the founding vision is one of limited government. But at the same time it's one of *active government* insofar as the federal

government's mission is one of preserving our rights to live as we want to since our natural rights as human beings logically "pre-exist government." The previous view is a regular theme of *The Conservative Sensibility* (TCS going forward), which helps explain why Will is eager to rehabilitate the notion of "judicial activism" in the minds of conservatives. The notion of activism among judges has taken a beating in the last several decades as conservatives have reflexively recoiled at the idea of judges essentially "legislating" from the bench, but Will believes they should be active when it comes to securing our rights as individuals to do as we wish, and to also limit the scope of a federal government possessing very limited powers that are most certainly "few and defined."

Will is melancholy about what our constitutionally limited federal government has become. Though the Declaration of Independence makes plain that "government is instituted to 'secure' rights that pre-exist government," it's more and more true that government acts as the *allocator* of rights whereby government acts as the entity empowered to transfer rights and "wealth to members of groups that the government has decided are entitled to transfers." In a philosophical sense, Will bills the present fight about what government should be as one between those who side with John Locke and "'for whom individual liberty is their first principle of social ordering,'" versus Thomas Hobbes and the belief that government must "'provide social order and pursue social ends.'" In political terms, this debate, one that Will believes conservatives are losing, began with the unfortunate presidency of Woodrow Wilson. As Will puts it, more than a century after Wilson's time in the White House, "the nation's constitutional architecture has become ramshackle, incoherent, and incapable of protecting government, the rule of law, and liberty." Translated, in the last century the federal government has morphed from protector of our right to pursue happiness into a structure that presumes to act, in the words of the author, as "deliverer of happiness itself."

This destruction of the Constitution is seemingly rooted in a failure on the part of Congress, and a judiciary that isn't activist enough, to limit the power of the presidency. Here is where Will is his most fascinating in a book that was already hard to put down. About the presidency, Will writes that the "very parsimony of Article II's language about presidential power has facilitated the growth of that power." As Will sees it, we've invested far too much majesty in the presidency. Amen. Conservatives and liberals will never admit it, but when they claimed that a loss for their preferred presidential candidate in 2016 would mark the beginning of rapid American decline, they were thoroughly insulting the country they claim to love. If one person can wreck a country, it's arguably not worth saving in the first place.

More important, presidents aren't supposed to be able to bring about national decline, and this is something both conservatives and liberals have plainly forgotten. Will aims to revive this truth. He points out that while "[N]o newspaper had posted a reporter at the White House in the nineteenth century," by the end of that century President McKinley set aside a cigar ahead of a photo; telling the photographer that "'We must not let the young men of this country see their president smoking!'" That some would agree with McKinley's sentiment is a source of concern for Will. Presidents once again aren't supposed to matter very much, yet they increasingly do.

Will notes that while Ulysses S. Grant had a staff of three, and President Cleveland remarkably used to answer the White House door, the modern president is very visible and important. It's

first among equals. Figure that FDR mastered the radio in the 1930s; his skill with this most advanced of technologies for its time helping to put the presidency on a higher plain than its constitutional checks that were and are Congress and the Supreme Court. JFK theoretically mastered TV. Barack Obama was the first president to develop a Twitter presence. He famously Tweeted on May 15, 2015, "Hello, Twitter! It's Barack. Really!" About the Tweet, Will acidly observed "First name? Two exclamation marks? Really?" As the constitutionalist went on to point out, George Washington averaged three major speeches per year, John Adams just one, and Thomas Jefferson five. My, how the presidency has changed, and Will reasonably presumes that the Founders "would be appalled" by the change. Though the job was designed to be limited in scope, the aforementioned failure of the Founders to strictly define the presidency has freed it to grow to the offensive point that Michelle Obama was telling people sans "wholesome guffaws" in 2008 that "her husband 'will never allow you to go back to your lives as usual, uninvolved, uninformed.'"

So the presidency has become too majestic, too untethered from Founders' norms. About that, there's no disagreement. In my case I subscribe to Cato co-founder Ed Crane's wise assertion that people should go to bed early on election night. Crane's point, one that Will would no doubt nod his head along to, is that with the Constitution very much limiting the powers of the presidency (Will recalls that he used to tell his kids in the mid '80s something along the lines of "Go ahead. It's a free country. Mondale lost."), it shouldn't really matter who is elected. If presidents can't do much, we needn't worry too much about who occupies the White House. All of which brings on a brief digression.

There's a president who never rates even one mention in *TCS*. Readers can guess who this individual is. Obviously this was by design. Yet in not mentioning the current White House occupant one could argue that Will was in a sense shouting his name rather loudly. I'd like to ask Will so many questions about the unnamed, and the first one would be if there's an argument for him *precisely because* he's sucked so much of the majesty out of the presidency? This same question has been posed to Crane a number of times, but a full answer from the father of modern libertarianism has been hard to come by. I'm eager to find out from Will what he thinks. Don't we want more presidents who, either on purpose or unwittingly, go about shrinking the presidency?

Will's discussion of the presidency also brought on at least one notable disagreement. Will yet again believes the presidency has become way too powerful. And in discussing it, he observed that the "governmental activism of the 1930s," though it "may or may not have been, on balance, wise," was at least "driven by something dire – the Depression." Here I think Will ignores a crucial truth about recessions. They're a certain sign that the economy is *recovering*. During boom times it's only natural that bad habits are developed, riskier loans and investments are made than would otherwise be the norm, and individual hires are made that arguably represent a misuse of human capital. In short, it's during the boom times that we're most prone to make mistakes; recessions merely the periods during which we're forced to realize and correct our errors. That's why when left untouched, recessions foretell economic booms. Will's reluctant excusing of excessive presidential power in the '30s glossed over that it was the very activism of Presidents Hoover and Roosevelt that turned what should have been a brief downturn into something that lingered throughout the 1930s. Will cites Randolph Bourne and his (in a very

literal sense) throwaway line about how wars are the health of the state, and it's worth adding that if they are in fact the health of the state, recessions are the state's *oxygen*. They enable activism that otherwise wouldn't rear its ugly head, and that always takes place to our economic detriment.

Moving more directly to the Constitution and the Supreme Courts, Will revealed something that I'd never read before. While I well understood the Founders' powerful skepticism about democracy (Will stresses that the Founders created for us a republic; as in "a government which derives all its powers directly *or indirectly* from the great body of the people"), Will notes that the word "democracy" appears "in neither that document [the Constitution] nor the Declaration of Independence." And in the killer line of all killer lines (at least to this reviewer), Will went on to clarify that "[T]he Constitution was adopted to confine that power." Yes! Democracy is as Will puts it all about the allocation of political power that is confined by the founding document. The political power, once allocated through the democratic process, would quickly be limited. It's not mob rule, much as Democrats *AND* Republicans would frequently wish or believe otherwise.

From there, Will address the famous *Lochner v. New York* case. Briefly, Joseph Lochner owned a bakery in Utica. One of his employees, Aman Schmitter, voluntarily chose "longer working days and weeks" while in the employ of Lochner. The state of New York had rules against hours worked, and this dispute was ultimately brought before the Supreme Court. To Will, and most any free thinker who properly believes that we as individuals have rights that naturally pre-exist the Constitution, the ruling would be a no-brainer. While "economic liberty" isn't written up in the Constitution, it's presumed that we as free individuals have "a right to liberty of contract." Basically, we as individuals should be free to work as much or as little as we want, and at whatever rate of pay we desire. Liberty of contract reads as something fundamental to conservatism. Not so fast.

No less than the late conservative hero Antonin Scalia contended in 2005 (while addressing *Lawrence v. Texas*, a sodomy case from the Lone Star state) that, in Will's words, "the Constitution no more protects the right to engage in such intimacy [sodomy] than it protects the right to work 'more than 60 hours per week in a bakery.'" In Scalia's case, he was supporting majoritarianism whereby states are free to make rules about labor, sexual relations, and seemingly anything else. Scalia's position reads as odd when it's remembered why the Founders led a revolution in the first place. Put simply, they didn't shed overwhelming rule from England only to enshrine mob rule into the U.S. Constitution. It can't be stated enough that there are rights we have as individuals that pre-exist government. Will would argue that the 9th Amendment makes plain yet again that we do have rights that exist by nature. As the 9th states, "The enumeration in the Constitution, of certain rights, shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the people." While the Constitution most notably exists as a limiting document on government, it also lists some of our rights; free speech most notably. Still, not every right could possibly be listed, hence the 9th Amendment.

Looked at through a conservative lens, it would seem our natural rights would be something that conservatives would generally strive to protect. But as the quote from Scalia makes plain, along with the line from Robert Bork about the 9th Amendment being nothing more than an "inkblot,"

there's plainly dispute on the matter. Will comes down in favor of freedom. About Scalia's dissent in the *Lawrence v. Texas* case, Will writes that "Scalia, consistent in his majoritarianism, was as wrong about *Lawrence* as he was about *Lochner*."

Will's discussion of the Constitution positively sizzles, plus it will open the eyes of many conservatives and libertarians who've long believed that legal scholars like Bork and Scalia were in strong agreement with the Supreme Court justice with whom Will seemingly agrees with the most: Clarence Thomas. Except that per Will, there's a "deep division in American conservatism" when it comes to the Constitution. All of which leads to two more questions that I'd like to ask Will; questions that weren't answered in *TCS*. I'm very curious to know why he thinks Bork and Scalia so blatantly missed what's seemingly obvious and fundamental to an ideology that prizes liberty and protection of same above all else. Specifically, why does Will think Bork and Scalia, two legal giants, disagreed about natural rights pre-existing government?

Secondly, it would be interesting to ask Will how his view of the Constitution applies to Obamacare. My non-legal mind way back when said that the 9th Amendment should protect me from having to purchase health insurance. Better yet, I argued (not in column form, but to colleagues) that that same 9th Amendment would have protected me from coerced purchase of healthcare even if I'd been a citizen of Massachusetts back when Mitt Romney foisted the model for Obamacare on his constituents. I ask this question because I know true-blue libertarians, the kind of people who are major supporters of Institute for Justice, who've said that Romney's imposition of a local health plan in Massachusetts was legal. They said the 14th Amendment protected just this? I'd like to know where Will comes down on the matter.

On the economics front, those who are more interested in those matters will find a lot to enjoy in *TCS*. Though his columns seemingly accent the constitutional more than they do the economic, Will spends a lot of time on the economic. And it's very good.

For one, Will very happily does not give sustenance to the increasingly bipartisan view that wealth inequality is a problem. Instead, he makes a crucial argument (crucial because it's coming from him) that gaps in wealth are "not inherently injurious to anyone." That's true because capitalism "depends on what it makes possible: *mass consumption*."

As Will makes plain, inequality is the happy result of individual genius reaching more and more people. Lest readers forget, 100 years ago it's more than likely that Jeff Bezos would be very rich, but a fraction of his present rich self precisely because his brilliance wouldn't be improving the lives of people around the world. He's clear that with technological advances whereby the world has shrunk in a figurative sense, inequality has been the logical result of vast improvements in living standards as genius has been globalized. To use but one example provided by the author, in the 19th century commerce "depended on sailing ships and riverboats, and the cost of moving goods thirty miles inland equaled the cost of moving them across the Atlantic." Yes! And thinking about the latter, is it any surprise that inequality has surged amid rampant technological leaps that enable more and more of us to summon the world's plenty with the click of a computer mouse? Often with little to no shipping fee? When the deep in thought lament a growing wealth gap, they reveal impressive ignorance.

In the latter half of the 19th century, Will reports that 3,700 miles of canals were created, and then the proliferation of “railroads freed commerce from frozen canals in winter...” Readers can see where this is going. So much of human effort has been about reducing barriers to trade, which raises the obvious question of why protectionism remains popular in some quarters to this day. It’s really sad, and strange. Will is clearly not a protectionist, but it was at the same time surprising that he would support the Simon Winchester contention that “Without an engaged and functioning federal government, the development of these various strands of the country’s connective tissue would probably have been either delayed or never achieved at all.” Will himself adds that “Governments, federal and state, have long been involved in stimulating and steering economic growth.” None of this rings true, and it doesn’t take a libertarian mindset to make this basic case. Stated simply, all entrepreneurial endeavor is rooted in reaching more and more people in faster and faster ways. Implicit in the arguments made by Winchester and Will is that absent the wise hand of government, the profit-motivated wouldn’t have devised ways to connect the world’s producers. That’s hard to take seriously. More realistically, it’s easy to make a case that absent the government’s taxing power that many of these advances would have reached us even more quickly thanks to substantially less waste in the form of government spending itself.

And for those who say government must exist to create order, I submit to you the *not-so-wild* West. Some will respond that the “rule of law” has been an essential driver of American progress, but then there had to have already been a substantial natural order in the United States so that the “rule of law” could have impact. Will himself writes later in *TCS* “that the Declaration of Independence was less the creator of independence than the affirmation that Americans had already become independent.” Absolutely, and the fact that Americans were already independent is similarly a reminder that Americans were already innovative and profit-focused such that with or without government or government spending, they were going to figure out a way to connect the U.S., and later the world. Will’s agreement with Winchester arguably doesn’t square with his so very correct view that “Americans had already become independent.” Yes they had, and they were also already innovative. They didn’t need politicians, nor do they.

On the tax front, Will makes the essential point that an equal tax rate is not the same as equal taxation. This is important in consideration of consumption and/or flat taxes; the two most popular forms of taxation among libertarians and conservatives. There’s nothing equal about them. They’re clearly progressive. As Will so correctly explains, “If taxpayer A earns twenty times more than taxpayer B earns, taxpayer A pays twenty times more dollars.” The only difference under a “progressive tax” is that “taxpayer A pays more than twenty times more dollars.” The right would be wise to remember this as they bash individuals for doing all they can to bring down their tax rates, not to mention corporations. Indeed, if we ignore that corporations are owned by individuals who’ve already paid income taxes, it was popular among libertarians to feign endless outrage when Amazon had the temerity to protect its individual owners through its efforts to secure good tax treatment away from Seattle. Libertarians screamed “cronism,” and “equal tax treatment for all corporations” as though some kind of flat tax in northern Virginia and Queens would somehow lead to tax equality between Amazon and the proverbial corner store.

About the market economy more broadly, Will observes that markets produce everything from “shoes to trucks to novels,” but “primarily they produce information.” Yes, they’re information machines. They’re the combined wisdom and views of everyone. Including those on the sidelines. To remain sidelined is a market signal too. That’s why Will disdains the John Kenneth Galbraith view from *The Affluent Society*, one that said large businesses were all-powerful to change “consumer wants willy-nilly.” Will rejects that consumers are so easily gulled, and among other things reminds readers how the Edsel failed despite Ford Motor Co. putting “all of its marketing muscle behind” a product company executives were sure would fly out of showrooms. He also references Galbraith’s 1978 presumption that General Motors (GM) would be the only global survivor if automakers engaged in serious competition. Woops! Economists have a tendency to be wrong about everything, and Will's discussion of Galbraith is a reminder of this truth.

Still, it brings up a dispute with the author about unfunded liabilities and budget deficits. In the Introduction, and then in other parts of the book, Will argues that the U.S.’s “most ominous governance problem is the unsustainable trajectory of the entitlement state because of the unfunded promises that have been made regarding pensions and medical care.” This argument doesn’t square with the one made about markets primarily producing information. Getting right to the point, markets *do* produce information in voluminous fashion, markets for Treasury debt are easily among the deepest in the world, and yields on Treasuries (the source of market information about the reliability of U.S. debt) signal that entitlements aren’t anywhere close to a problem. This isn’t to defend Social Security, Medicare and any other governmental promises for even a second. Let’s get it out of the way right away that these programs were and are incredibly unwise. An innovative marketplace that produces planes that take us around the world, cars that are on the verge of driving themselves, and that puts literal supercomputers in our pockets, can easily mass produce access to the kinds of things the feds are offering on the backs of others, and in very expensive fashion.

But the above truth doesn’t change the fact that some of the most informed and deepest markets in the world think the unfunded liability crisis is something much less than a crisis. If the great big marketplace can spot losers like the Edsel, New Coke and the Amazon Fire, can’t it sniff out lousy debt? It says here that it can, and that conservatives can’t have it both ways about the market’s combined wisdom. Figure that yields on 10-year Treasuries were above 11% in the early 1980s, but now they’re just above 2%. That’s a very informed, and very powerful market signal of Treasury’s ability to pay back monies borrowed. Will writes that the “state cannot, as a political matter, be funded by taxation sufficient to fund the government that the political class has been pleased to create and that the public has been pleased to have created. And there is approximately no constituency for additional kinds of taxes – consumption or value added taxes – to fund the entitlement state architecture.” And while his statement may be true in the literal sense, there’s a strong market-based argument that a very informed market thinks that what has Will worried is actually of no consequence.

Taking this further, Treasuries are just income streams paid out in dollars, and often well into the future. This is worth clarifying mainly as a way of saying that the real problem with entitlements is that taxation is *way too sufficient*, and markets confident that taxation will *remain sufficient* to easily pay off the promises made by the prodigals in Washington, D.C. Contrary to Will’s

analysis, market signals suggest the clowns in Washington have set up a tax collection system that will easily collect the monies necessary to pay off the debt.

Which brings us to the question of “budget deficits” more broadly. Will describes the “national norm” as one driven by “Infantilism – the refusal to will the means for the ends that one wills.” I say this approach to deficits hands the argument to those eager to grow government more and more. Indeed, it presumes a problem of too little revenue, when the yields on Treasuries signal a problem of *too much revenue*. If Treasury were collecting too little to pay off all the promises, yields would reflect this truth. Translated, they would be rising to reflect the growing risk that monies borrowed won’t be paid back.

As for a balanced budget to fix what markets consider less than a problem, this too hands the argument to big government apologists. For one, it assumes government has resources, and that a balanced budget rule would limit the borrowing in excess. No, government has no resources. Per Will, government “derives all its powers directly *or indirectly* from the great body of the people.” Looked at through Will’s reading of the how and why behind government, *all* government spending is deficit spending for it signaling the extraction of resources from the people; deficits merely signaling how much a government pays for the right to waste precious resources versus it taxing the resources away without compensation for those fleeced.

Furthermore, Will might agree that a balanced budget has nothing to do with limited government as is. That’s why his remark that a lack of a balanced budget speaks to “the abandonment of the original understanding of the Constitution and the death of the political reality that expressed that understanding” didn’t ring true. The American people are the most productive people on earth. That they are explains why the U.S. Treasury can borrow in copious amounts, yet most governments around the world can borrow next to nothing. Investors figure that a government which “derives all its powers directly *or indirectly* from the great body of the people” won’t have trouble paying monies borrowed back. It’s a reminder that the U.S. Treasury can borrow in gargantuan amounts precisely because the American people produce taxable revenues in gargantuan amounts. That they do ensures that a balanced budget amendment will do next to nothing when it comes to preserving the original understanding of the Constitution. Quite the opposite.

Tax revenues are way too high, and at least for now they’ll continue to be too high assuming the information producers that are market prices continue to signal to us what they’re signaling. Government is massive and growing because present and future tax revenues fund just that. As Will writes later in *TCS*, “although prosperity makes people confident and assertive, and gives them the means to be self-sufficient, it is not conducive to small government or self-sufficiency.” Which is precisely the point. Government is collecting way too much in the way of revenue. The previous truth enables the Hobbesian view of government that Will disdains, but it also mocks the faux-Lockean view that says tax cuts lead to limited government. The markets disagree with the latter. And while tax cuts are always the answer to this reviewer, it should be said that modern conservatives have brought great harm to the limited government movement with their models meant to unearth “revenue-maximizing” rates of taxation. No. Once the discussion is about revenues the limited government crowd loses the argument. Whether

Treasury collects tax dollars through direct taxation or through borrowing, we're harmed either way. Call it a distinction without a difference. Every dollar collected by Treasury is an extra dollar of control over the economy handed to the political class. The goal should be lower federal revenues through tax cuts large enough that collections decline. At risk of offending supply siders, it's not unreasonable to say that supply-side economics has never really been tried. Government is a tax. Period.

On the subject of education, Will makes an argument that conservatives have increasingly abandoned given their desire to score points against the other side. Will argues that "the crucial predictor of a school's performance is the quality of the families from which the children come." Crucial here is that Will isn't making a money, or private school argument. Will has spent enough time out in California to know that some of the most accomplished high school students there in the 1980s came from desperately poor families who reached the U.S. by boat from Vietnam. Yet the parents cared. And so did the kids. This is all somewhat of an inconvenient truth for conservatives who increasingly blame poor educational performance on schools that allegedly "don't teach." Their answer is vouchers, or educational tax deductions. Talk about a non sequitur. More realistically the answer is parents and kids who care. And government can't force us to give a damn.

Considering career achievement that school can't realistically teach, Will focuses a bit on the rise of what Charles Murray describes as "assortative mating" whereby the well born marry others who are well born. Unknown is whether this is new. "Birds of a feather" is a truth that's been around for a long time. Better yet, even if we assume "birds of a feather" is a problem, it's one that is seemingly fixed by prosperity. My basis for making this argument is Will's wonderful book *Men at Work*. In it, Will first acknowledges that writing it was too much fun for it to be called work, after which he described baseball brilliant people and their approach to what is a game. This is more than something. What we see in a prosperous society is that with more and more of life's necessities mass produced either by robots or by people in other countries, more and more people are able to escape work that has nothing to do with their skills. Translated, they can focus on what used to *not* be work. And make a career of it. It's arguably a reminder that assortative mating, assuming it's a problem, can be mitigated by economic growth that creates more and more avenues for people to showcase their unique brilliance in the marketplace; brilliance that in less flush times had no market application. Video game coaches? Yes, this is a real profession. And it grows by the day.

About the sickening need within society to punish people for past sins, Will introduces a word that I'll be using over and over again: *presentism*. The latter is "the practice of judging the past by the standards of the present." Will is clearly disappointed, as is this reviewer, that so many lives and careers are being wrecked by the application of new standards to the past. Will adds that people "who flatter themselves by engaging in presentism should remember that they are tomorrow's past." Amen!

Still, I'd like to ask him if, in so expertly discrediting presentism, if he's in fact engaging in pastism. Lest readers forget, *TCS* is about conserving "the American founding," which is Will's way of saying we're not presently preserving it. He's worried that America's universities, which "are entrusted with a task central to the nation's identity and success," are increasingly shielding

students from truth. That they're pleasing them as opposed to teaching them. Maybe, but I found myself unconvinced. For one, I think conservatives overstate the debauched state of universities as they always have. One useful source of my argument is Steven Hayward, who was mentioned prominently early in this review. He relayed to readers in book one of *The Age of Reagan* that hard-boiled liberals were but 5% of the Cal-Berkeley student body in the late '60s, but media accounts would have given (and still give) the impression that the hard boiled were something much more than a majority of the student body. The reality is that most kids are at college to make friends, attain a credential, have fun, and get a job.

But the bigger question is one of when were universities ever as Will wants them to be? William F. Buckley's *God and Man at Yale* was released in 1951. Before that, how many Americans as a percentage of the total population actually went to college? Will laments "academic developments that impede understanding," but are the students really listening? This is asked in positive fashion. Kids are once again at school to get jobs, have fun, get a credential make friends, maybe get married. We don't hear about them. We just hear about the ones on the fringe. Furthermore, assuming a much better past, when was it? It certainly wasn't the 1970s. In the 1940s, 50s and 60s America's youth faced the very real prospect of war. The 1930s? Presentism is so wrongheaded, but if it is there's also an argument that the elevation of the past similarly makes little sense. Worse, it's anti-wealth. Warren Buffett has been buying from the pessimists for decades.

Which brings us back to a president who will go unnamed in honor of Will's book. This most brilliant of thinkers isn't a fan, but I'd still like to ask him what he thinks the reaction would be among libertarians if a President Rand Paul signed a tax cut into law (the cut was too small, and *way too Keynesian* for it foolishly being directed at middle earners, but then the unnamed would have signed anything), allowed 22 regulations to lapse for every regulation implemented, signed the Second Chance Act into law meant to release the drug-offense incarcerated from prison, appointed a libertarian to head the FCC, sprinkled various other Cato types throughout his administration, called for the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan and Syria all the while disagreeing with the AEI hawks in his administration about making war with Iran, and outsourced his judicial appointments to the Federalist Society. No doubt he was flamboyantly wrong about immigration and trade, but in fairness every president since at least Reagan has (sadly) used protectionist measures (just not as loudly) with politics in mind, and seemingly every president has punted on immigration once again with politics in mind. And oh by the way, this same president went out of his way to shrink the majesty of the presidency. It's hard to separate the ridiculous rhetoric from the policy, but it's not unreasonable to suggest that with politics being the art of the possible, that libertarians might be cheering a lot of Rand Paul's achievements if they resembled those of the unnamed.

As endlessly brilliant as *The Conservative Sensibility* is, this reviewer hoped for a more optimistic assessment from Will. But he wrote toward the end of *TCS* that "This book is, among other things, a summons to pessimism." I chose to read it differently. From it I derived optimism. Indeed, the fact that Americans don't know who their senators are, don't know how many Supreme Court justices there are, and plainly don't know conservatism (I say they never did), is a flashing sign of optimism. My source is the author himself. As Will makes plain in his disdain for those like Galbraith who thought so little of the wisdom of people, the actual people get it.

They do. When businesses err, they correct them. That the masses are not revolting, that the people haven't bothered to learn who governs them, is the surest sign that the U.S. remains closer to the "American founding" than most would want to admit. George Will's unputdownable book is arguably evidence of this optimistic truth.