

# A Guide To George Will's Decades Of Attacks On Sexual Assault Victims And "Rape Crisis Feminists"

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October 15, 2014

George Will has been dropped by a major newspaper and had a planned speech at a California college canceled for his recent comments dismissing the epidemic of sexual assault. The comments are nothing new for Will, who belittled victims, mocked efforts to codify consent, and attacked what he calls "rape crisis feminists" over two decades ago.

## In 2014, Will Claimed Sexual Assault Victim Is A "Coveted Status" And Criticized Efforts To Combat The Epidemic

**Washington Post's George Will: Sexual Assault Victim Is "A Coveted Status That Confers Privileges."** In a June 2014 column, Will suggested that college sexual assault victims -- and people Will suggested were pretending to be victims -- enjoyed "a coveted status that confers privileges." He also disputed the statistic that 1 in 5 women experience assault on college campuses in the U.S., and dismissed the story of an individual survivor from Swarthmore College, whom he suggested didn't qualify as an actual "victim." He concluded by mocking efforts to combat the growing epidemic, criticizing the Obama administration for "riding to the rescue of 'sexual assault' victims." [*The Washington Post*, [6/6/14](#), via *Media Matters*]

**Will Refused To Back Down.** After facing criticism for his remarks, Will told CSPAN he refused to apologize:

C-SPAN: You wouldn't take back any of the words you used?

WILL: No, no. [CSPAN, [6/20/14](#), via *Media Matters*]

**Will: "I Think I Take Sexual Assault Much More Seriously" Than U.S. Senators.** When four U.S. senators criticized Will's "coveted status" comments on sexual assault, he responded by claiming he thinks he takes "sexual assault much more seriously" than them, because he believes in a more narrow definition of the crime:

As for what you call my "ancient beliefs," which you think derive from an "antiquated" and "counterintuitive" culture, allow me to tell you something really counterintuitive: I think I take sexual assault much more seriously than you do. Which is why I worry about definitions of that category of crime that might, by their breadth, tend to trivialize it. And why I think sexual assault is a felony that should be dealt with by the criminal justice system, and not be adjudicated by improvised campus processes. [*Media Matters*, [6/12/14](#); *The Washington Post*, [6/13/14](#)]

**Will Criticizes Government For "Monitoring Sex On Campuses."** Will continued his criticism of efforts to combat the growing sexual assault epidemic on the October 5 edition of *Fox News Sunday*, where he said that the government shouldn't be "monitoring sex on campuses." From ThinkProgress:

Arguing that "government is not competent," Will complained that it has "a monopoly" and "monopolies are not disciplined by market forces." "You asked, can we trust the government to do its job? What isn't its job nowadays?" Will asked on Fox News Sunday.

"It's fine-tuning the curriculum of our students K through 12. It's monitoring sex on campuses. It's deciding how much ethanol we should put in our gas tanks. It has designed our light bulbs and is worried sick over the name of the Washington football team." He added, "this is a government that doesn't know when to stop." [ThinkProgress, [10/5/14](#)]

## **Two Decades Ago, Will Mocked The "Victimization Sweepstakes" And "Rape Crisis Feminists" Who Combat Sexual Assault And Harassment**

**Will In 1993: "Victimization Sweepstakes" Features "Rape Crisis Feminists," Preoccupied With Consent.** In 1993, Will highlighted in his syndicated *Washington Post* column the work of Katie Roiphe, who he praised for pushing back on "rape crisis feminists" for their "preoccupation ... with explicit, verbal, step-by-step consent to everything sexual -- anything less supposedly is rape." Will also criticized what he called the "victimization sweepstakes," in which "many prizes, including media attention and therapeutic preferences from government, go to those who succeed at being seen as vulnerable and suffering," specifically for experiencing rape on college campuses, and dismissed Anita Hill's testimony about her experience of sexual harassment:

In today's victimization sweepstakes, many prizes, including media attention and therapeutic preferences from government, go to those who succeed at being seen as vulnerable and suffering. So hell hath no fury like that directed against someone like Roiphe, who casts a cool eye on the claims and logic of some women who consider their victimhood compounded by any calm analysis of their claims. This Roiphe provides in *The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism on Campus*. It is giving some feminists the vapors.

[...]

The preoccupation of rape crisis feminists with explicit, verbal, step-by-step consent to everything sexual -- anything less supposedly is rape -- rests, Roiphe says, on antique assumptions about the way men and women experience sex. Men are supposedly lascivious; women are innocents who, like children, have trouble ascertaining or communicating their desires.

One pamphlet defines rape to include "a woman's consenting to unwanted sexual activity because of a man's verbal arguments not including verbal threats of force." By means of "verbal coercion," cunning rakes (the language of Victorian melodramas seems natural here) turn the pretty little heads of weak-willed women. No wonder feminists who think like this are so smitten with that quintessential contemporary victim, the woman whose story was so uncannily -- or perhaps cannily -- congruent with this latest fashion in feminism, the woman who herself said she passively followed her supposed sexual harasser from one job to another: Anita Hill. [*The Washington Post* syndicated column, [10/24/93](#)]

**Will In 1994: "Campus Sexual Assault Study" Is Based On A "Feminist Fiction."** In a 1994 column, Will criticized the Violence Against Women Act, and mocked the government for conducting a campus sexual assault study, which he claimed was based on the "feminist fiction" that women risk "life and limb just walking from dorms to libraries":

The "Violence Against Women Act" genuflects at every altar in the feminist church. For example, it funds "gender sensitivity" training for judges. And the federal government is going to matriculate: It is off to college to conduct a "campus sexual assault study," a monument to the feminist fiction that in a world infested with predatory males, women students risk life and limb just walking from dorms to libraries, not to mention the terrors of dating. [*The Washington Post* syndicated column, [7/14/94](#)]

**Will In 1996: Hyped Claims That "Battered Woman Syndrome" Reinforces Stereotypes Of Women As "Frail Creatures, Easily Unhinged"; "Yes Means Yes" Consent "Patronizes Women."** A 1996 Will column opened by citing a Cato Institute study which dismissed women who said they suffered from Battered Woman Syndrome when charged with their husbands' murders, implying that the use of the condition reinforced women as "frail creatures, easily unhinged" and had overturned "the traditional rule that deadly force can only be justified by an imminent threat." Will's piece went on to claim that feminists were defining sexual harassment too broadly, and to criticize "yes means yes" consent law, citing an unnamed feminist to claim the need for explicit consent "patronizes women":

Weiss, a law professor associated with the Texas Public Policy Foundation, and Young, vice president of the Women's Freedom Network, argue that feminist jurisprudence is portraying women as perpetual victims in need of dispensations that seem to ratify some unflattering stereotypes. These include the neo-Victorian notion that women are frail creatures, easily unhinged, and perhaps having a single sensibility.

[...]

[O]bviously hostile environments exist and should be actionable.

But some feminists insist that harassment be defined as any behavior or "environment" that causes any woman "discomfort." Mr. Weiss and Ms. Young compare that to replacing speed limits with a law under which one could be fined for driving through a neighborhood at any speed that made any resident uncomfortable. And is there not something amiss when, as in Minnesota, sexual-harassment law covers children from kindergarten on?

Regarding rape, for too long many courts considered rape complaints inherently less trustworthy than complaints pertaining to other crimes, and rape laws unjustly required proof not only of force but of resistance to force, a standard that required victims to risk additional physical harm. But now, write Weiss and Young, some states' laws have eliminated physical force as an element of the crime. Others, virtually reversing the burden of proof, require the accused to prove consent as an affirmative defense.

In Canada, sex is rape when the man fails to "take reasonable steps" to ensure consent. Weiss and Young worry that rape law is sliding from "no means no" to "absence of a yes means no" to a strict criminal liability regime in which "all heterosexual sex is like statutory rape unless affirmative, explicit verbal consent given in a clear and sober frame of mind can be demonstrated." They cite a dissenting feminist who says "the idea that only an explicit yes means yes" patronizes women by implying "that women, like children, have trouble communicating what they want." [*The Washington Post* syndicated column, [7/18/96](#)]

**Will In 1998: "Hostile Work Environments" Are "Whatever Annoys A Particular Woman On A Particular Day."** A 1998 Will column lamented that a federal judge held "that use of gender-based terms such as 'foreman' or 'draftsman' could constitute sexual harassment." Will also mocked the idea of "hostile work environments," defining them as "whatever annoys a particular woman on a particular day." [*The Washington Post*, [6/4/98](#)]

**Will In 2013: Government Efforts To Combat Campus Sexual Harassment Are "Censorship Regimes."** A 2013 column criticized the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) and the Department of Justice's efforts to combat campus sexual assaults and harassment by claiming they pushed "censorship regimes" to punish students:

Responding to what it considers the University of Montana's defective handling of complaints about sexual assaults, OCR, in conjunction with the Justice Department, sent the university a letter intended as a "blueprint" for institutions nationwide when handling sexual harassment, too. The letter, sent on May 9, encourages (see below) adoption of speech codes - actually, censorship regimes - to punish students who:

Make "sexual or dirty jokes" that are "unwelcome." Or disseminate "sexual rumors" (even if true) that are "unwelcome." Or make "unwelcome" sexual invitations. Or engage in the "unwelcome" circulation or showing of "e-mails or Web sites of a sexual nature." Or display or distribute "sexually explicit drawings, pictures, or written materials" that are "unwelcome."

[...]

Greg Lukianoff, president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, says a single hypersensitive person could declare herself sexually harassed because she considers "unwelcome" a classroom lecture on the novel "Lolita" or a campus performance of "The Vagina Monologues." Do not even attempt a sex education class.

Wendy Kaminer, a civil liberties lawyer who writes for the Atlantic, traces the pedigree of the OCR-DOJ thinking to the attempt by some feminists in the 1980s to define pornography as a form of sexual assault and hence a civil rights violation. Volokh, too, believes that the government is blurring the distinction between physical assaults and "sexually themed" speech in order to justify censoring and punishing the latter. [*The Washington Post* syndicated column, [5/24/13](#)]

## **Senators, Survivors, Media, And Women's Rights Groups Have Slammed Will For His Recent Comments**

**U.S. Senators Criticized Will For "Trivializing" Sexual Assault.** Democratic Senators Richard Blumenthal, Dianne Feinstein, Tammy Baldwin, and Robert P. Casey, Jr. condemned Will's "coveted status" comments:

Having an ongoing interest in ways to reduce sexual assaults on college campuses, we read your June 6 column on campus sexual assault with particular dismay. Your thesis and statistics fly in the face of everything we know about this issue. More egregiously, you trivialize the scourge of sexual assault, putting the phrase in scare quotes and treating this crime as a socially acceptable phenomenon. It is in fact a spreading epidemic, and you legitimize the myths that victims and victim advocates have worked tirelessly for decades to combat. [*Media Matters*, [6/12/14](#)]

**UltraViolet Called On Papers To Drop Will's Column, Asks *Post* To Fire Him.** Women's rights group UltraViolet started a petition to tell the *Post* to fire Will, and asked five newspapers to drop his column:

The ads seek the removal of Will's syndicated column from the *Chicago Tribune*, *San Jose Mercury News*, *Orlando Sentinel*, *The Detroit News*, and *Richmond Times-Dispatch*. The group has been running an online petition urging *The Washington Post*, Will's flagship paper, to drop him as well.

"Rape is a crime that keeps women from having equal access to essential services, like education, and addressing that is essential to equality," Shaunna Thomas, co-founder of UltraViolet, said in a release. [*Media Matters*, [7/3/14](#)]

**NOW President Terry O'Neill: George Will "Doesn't Deserve To Be In *The Washington Post*" After Rape Column.** National Organization for Women President Terry O'Neill told *Media Matters Radio* that Will "doesn't deserve to be in *The Washington Post*" after his column. She also told *Media Matters* the *Post* needs "to dump him":

"George Will needs to take a break from his column and *The Washington Post* needs to take a break from his column, they need to dump him," O'Neill told *Media Matters* in a phone interview Tuesday afternoon. "It is actively harmful for the victims of sexual assault when that kind of man writes a piece that says to assault victims, 'it didn't happen and if it did happen you deserve it.' That re-traumatizes victims. I can't believe that Mr. Will has had this experience if he would put out such a hateful message."

"We want him to back off and we want *The Washington Post* to stop carrying his column."

O'Neill later added, "That is absolutely the kind of further attack on victims that just does such extraordinary harm ... The media blaming women for the horrific rape of violence against women and sexual assault it is really shameful." [*Media Matters*, [6/14/14](#); [6/10/14](#)]

**Lisa Sendrow, The Sexual Assault Survivor Will Dismissed: "I Absolutely Have Not Received Any Privileges From Sexual Assault."** Lisa Sendrow, the former Swarthmore College student and sexual assault survivor Will wrote about in his June column, blasted his rhetoric in an interview with *Media Matters*:

Sendrow also vehemently rejected Will's claim that survivors might have a coveted status. "I absolutely have not received any privileges from sexual assault. [Will] has clearly never experienced the fear of sexual assault," she said. "He clearly has no idea how hard it is to sleep, to walk around, thinking at any moment this person that you live down the hall from could come out." [*Media Matters*, [7/1/14](#)]

***Washington Post's Erik Wemple Criticized His Paper For Only Having Men Edit Will's Column.*** In a June 20 blog post for the *Washington Post*, Erik Wemple wrote that no female editors reviewed Will's column before the *Post* published it, a significant problem given that women are the predominant victims of sexual assault:

Were there any women in the group that reviewed Will's piece? "On that day, there were three males, if that is important to you," Shearer told us after a followup inquiry on the editing lineup.

It is indeed important. Women are the predominant victims of rape and sexual assault; therefore, they may have some insight on the editing of a column on sexual assault. A study by the Women's Media Center showed that women staffers at newspapers are outnumbered. [Washington Post, [6/20/14](#)]

## **Will Was Dropped From A Newspaper And A College Speaking Gig Over Latest Comments**

***St. Louis Post-Dispatch Dropped Will's Column.*** *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch* dropped Will's syndicated column after the editor reviewed the response to Will's rhetoric and his "coveted status remarks":

The change has been under consideration for several months, but a column published June 5, in which Mr. Will suggested that sexual assault victims on college campuses enjoy a privileged status, made the decision easier. The column was offensive and inaccurate; we apologize for publishing it. [*Media Matters*, [6/19/14](#)]

**Will Uninvited To Scripps College's Conservative Speaker Program Over Column.** The all-female Scripps College revoked an invitation for Will to speak as part of a program "designed to promote conservative views on campus." The college's president said in a statement that sexual assault was not an ideological topic and that Scripps had chosen not to finalize the speaking agreement with Will after his "coveted status" column "trivialized" these cases:

Sexual assault is not a conservative or liberal issue. And it is too important to be trivialized in a political debate or wrapped into a celebrity controversy. For that reason, after Mr. Will authored a column questioning the validity of a specific sexual assault case that reflects similar experiences reported by Scripps students, we decided not to finalize the speaker agreement. [*Media Matters*, [10/7/14](#)]

***The Chicago Tribune*: "The Column Was Misguided And Insensitive."** *The Chicago Tribune* said they had decided to not run Will's "coveted status" column because it was "misguided and insensitive":

"I thought the column was misguided and insensitive," Dold told *Media Matters* Thursday. "We didn't publish it. Marcia Lythcott, the Op-Ed editor, made that decision and it was the right call." [*Media Matters*, [6/20/14](#)]

*Cal Colgan contributed research.*