

Was George Will Wrong?

If Rush Limbaugh can pass for a conservative these days, it's no marvel that George Will can, too. Unlike Limbaugh, he at least reads books, especially Victorian ones. (He even named his daughter Victoria.) But he shares with Limbaugh an easygoing approach to defining conservatism, to the extent that a tabloid tramp such as Rudy Giuliani makes Will's cut, while a far more principled man such as Rep. Ron Paul (one of the very few members of today's Congress who could converse about something other than the weather with James Madison) is faintly risible—at best, “a useful anachronism.” Yes, this of one of the few who opposed invading Iraq from the start.

But then, Will would probably speak condescendingly of the Sermon on the Mount, and, as one wag has quipped, he “could bring an air of pomposity to a nudist colony, with or without his bow tie.” He has announced that the Tenth Amendment is “as dead as a doornail,” which may be true, although that is nothing to smirk about. The U.S. Constitution is related to today's U.S. government roughly as the Book of Revelation is related to the Unitarian Church, which is to say, rather tenuously; but, like the Devil citing Scripture, Will can use it when he wants to, as in hurling imprecations against McCain-Feingold limits on campaign spending. First Amendment, you know.

Will's style is simply to announce, as ineluctable facts, things principled conservatives don't like, with the unspoken counsel, “So, get over it, children.” Franklin D. Roosevelt's legacy is “an ethic of common provision.” Affirmative action means a “racial spoils system.” As for reversing legal abortion, “the culture has moved on.” Well, that's that! Will has always treated ordinary conservatives, such as pro-lifers, as disreputable poor relations.

To give him his due, Will has also been a staunch defender of the state of Israel and an unflinching critic—nay, an utterly fearless foe—of holocaust deniers. Sometimes suspected of plagiarism himself, he has flagged Thomas Aquinas for his “intellectual hijacking” of Aristotle. He has nailed the Catholic Church for

antisemitism and Pius XII for his silence about the holocaust. He has also taken the side of the great Victorian scientist Charles Darwin against the benighted apostles of “intelligent design.”

I first met George at *National Review* in 1972. I was a green editorial writer; he was our new Washington correspondent—smart and well informed, but cocky and priggish, the sort of impressive young man who, knowing how to wow his elders, only gets more precocious with age. I knew of his brilliant father, Frederick L. Will, from my philosophy studies. His grandfather was a Lutheran minister, and with this background, George somehow felt entitled to make snide but not original—in fact, trite—remarks about Saint Augustine. (Luther wouldn't have approved.)

Egotistical and opinionated without having a really independent mind, George was confident that he was among suckers and could get away with pretty much anything, including a bit of occasional minor plagiarism. And he did and does. Nobody told him to come off it. He quickly made his way as a Washington pundit, rising to the top of the tree in record time. A few critics have pointed out how derivative his views are, but he has never let this slow him down.

Washington is not a city to which would-be martyrs flock in large numbers, and I have never known George to take a position knowing that it would cost him anything. On the contrary, he has always had a shrewd sense of which side his bagel is buttered on. He was among the first in the punditry racket to perceive that neoconservatism could be more lucrative than actual, old-fashioned conservatism. He has been careful not to call himself a neoconservative, but he ran with the neocons rhetorically until they fell into disrepute a couple of years ago, at which point he scolded them as if he'd never known them. He now writes about the Iraq war as if he'd been warning against it from the start. Which is not quite the case.

In fact, in early 2003, George was applauding the other George for threatening to invade Iraq, using the full arsenal of Bush-Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocon ratio-



nales and slogans: “weapons of mass destruction,” “regime change,” “Nuremberg trials,” etc., with swipes at Franco-European cowardice. In fact, to read those columns now is to return to the enchanted land of early Limbaugh. A book I don't expect to read soon is *The Confessions of George Will*.

Conservatism? Again, it depends on how you define it. The English philosopher Michael Oakeshott, whose name Will used to drop when he was showing the rubes how tony true conservatism could be, warned against using government as “a vast reservoir of power” in pursuit of “favorite projects.” Such talk now sounds archaic. But so, already, do David Brooks' “national-greatness conservatism” and Fred Barnes' eulogies of Bush's “big-government conservatism,” to say nothing of Barnes' judgment that the Iraq invasion was “the greatest act of benevolence one nation has ever performed for another” and Richard Lowry's 2005 effusion on the cover of *National Review*: “We Are Winning!” No wonder conservatives aren't quoting themselves much these days. Only the neocons, or at least the few who still admit they are neocons, still insist that the war was a splendid idea until Bush & Co. made a hash of it.

How did it come to this? *National Review* has had to repudiate its own founder, the aging, ailing Bill Buckley, who has written that he would have opposed the war had he known in 2003 what he knows now. Will has taken a wiser approach: Get lost in the crowd, act as if it had all been someone else's blunder, and pray that nobody digs up your old columns.

And if you write about someone who was right all along, such as Ron Paul, just sneer at him.

Property Rights and the Founding

The Classical Liberal Reading

by Marco Bassani

Americans entertain the peculiar idea that history—or, at least, “our history”—is the reign of continuity. In spite of all the talk about revolution, there appears to be a remarkable degree of stability in every substantial political rupture. The American Revolution was, in fact (we are told by historians), a “conservative one,” restoring the political order the British had wrecked. The not-so-civil “Civil War” was a much-needed Second American Revolution that finally rendered everyone a citizen, making the promises of the first “conservative revolution” available to human beings of all races and, eventually, to every nation on earth. The Progressive Era, New Deal, and Great Society actually reshaped the role of the federal government in the era of mass politics. However, this was invariably presented as a natural expansion and development of the original American experiment in self-government and framed in the half-clever motto: “Hamiltonian means to achieve Jeffersonian ends.”

History, in this country, is seen as a narrative without the solution of continuity. In Montgomery, one can find the George Wallace Museum and the Rosa Parks Memorial within a few yards. While the Confederate flag has recently been the object of much controversy, the men who fought under it are celebrated alongside those who destroyed the Old South. With the possible exception of the faceless Klan of the 1950’s, American history lacks villains. From Aaron Burr and George A. Custer up to Richard Nixon, revisionist historians are ever at work rendering the label of scoundrel always provisional for notable characters. While this general outlook may have some merits—after all, this is a free country; politicians are criticized when they are alive and cherished when they are dead—it also engenders some peculiar delusions.

The notion of living in a republic that is pretty much the same as the one envisioned by the Founding Fathers is indeed an enduring figment of the American imagination. In the field of politics, this, in turn, could be seen as the hallucination that this country’s moral philosophy is not so distant after all from that of the Founding Fathers. Washington, Adams, and Jefferson are considered permanent contemporaries, as their voices have been sought by politicians and historians alike to tell us something about the perennial “heart and soul” of America.

Nowhere is the separation of the America of 2007 and that of the founding era more patent than in the field of property rights. The way the Founding Fathers thought about property (and, thus, about the legitimate scope and role of political institutions) is utterly at odds with any notion of rights that has been circulating in America in the past century.

The Unanimous Declaration of the Thirteen United States is still respected, but mainly as the “birth certificate of the na-

tion.” The fact that it is probably the document most closely related to the natural-rights doctrine ever written in the history of mankind is certainly less than cherished. The Declaration contains a sweeping array of notions about power, individuals, their rights, the legitimate ends of government; in brief, about the substance of a just political order. Thomas Jefferson was only the best representative of a revolutionary generation that grew up in a natural-rights mind-set, as political arguments based on natural rights permeate the thinking of the Founding Fathers, as well as the debates of the early republic. The Preamble to the Declaration declares all rights, starting from the colonies’ right to independence, unmistakably prescribed by the “Laws of Nature and Nature’s God.”

Although Jefferson did not mention the right to own property, the finest scholars have always argued that the “pursuit of happiness” was so broad as to incorporate property rights into the system. Ronald Hamowy explained several years ago the true significance of the “pursuit of happiness” very nicely and persuasively: Human beings “may act as they choose in their search for ease, comfort, felicity, and grace, either by owning property or not, by accumulating wealth or distributing it, by opting for material success or asceticism, in a word, by determining the path to their own earthly and heavenly salvation as they alone see fit.” In other words, the true meaning of the “pursuit of happiness” in Jeffersonian doctrine is the right to have a government that does not infringe on one’s own natural rights—on property rights, in particular.

This “classical liberalism” that was prominent at the founding, embodied in a radicalization of Lockean political thought, guarantees first and foremost full moral and political legitimacy to the pursuit of purely private interests. Such a general vision implies that the individual is portrayed in a different set of relations, with other men in the free market, and with agents acting on behalf of the government. The free-market consensual relations regulate the legitimate order of dealings with other individuals, and the natural-rights doctrine (the idea that there are certain inalienable rights that cannot be encroached upon by government) limits justifiable state actions. The boundaries of the political sphere are watertight, at least in principle: Government is there just to provide a safe environment for the individual’s enjoyment of his natural rights.

Influenced by John Locke’s political doctrine, or at least a popular version of it (as contained in *Cato’s Letters*, the collection of political essays written by English pamphleteers John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon in the 1720’s, or in William Blackstone’s *Commentaries*), the revolutionary generation thought that the rights to life, liberty, and property were absolute. The noted historian Forrest McDonald wrote that, “almost to a man, Patriots were agreed that the proper ends of government were to protect people in their lives, liberty, and property.”

Marco Bassani is a professor of the history of political thought at University of Milan, Italy.