

And gladly accept the liberal idols. . . .

The Case of George Will

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FEW WRITERS WHO apply the label "conservative" to themselves have acquired so prominent a position in establishment media as George F. Will. A regular columnist for the *Washington Post* and *Newsweek*, a fixture on national television discussion programs, and a winner of the Pulitzer prize, Will has traveled a long way since he wrote articles for the *Alternative* in the early 1970s. With the possible exception of William Buckley and James Kilpatrick, it is difficult to think of any other self-described conservative publicist who has so strikingly "made it."

The secret of Will's success is only in part attributable to his many merits—his willingness to explore controversial areas of public life in a manner remarkably free of clichés and conventional wisdom, his learning in the literary and philosophical classics, and his habitual articulateness. His success is due also to the general thrust of his distinctive formulation of conservatism and the way in which he applies his ideas to public matters, for it is evident in much of his writing that Will is at considerable pains to separate himself from most Americans who today regard themselves as conservatives and to assure his readers that there are important public institutions and policies, usually criticized by conservatives, with which he has no quarrel.

*Statecraft as Soulcraft*¹ is George Will's first real book, as opposed to collections of his columns, and its purpose is to

develop in a rather systematic way his political beliefs and to explain how these beliefs—"conservatism properly understood"—are different from and superior to the ideas to which most American conservatives subscribe. The most distinctive difference, he tells us in the preface, appears to be his "belief in strong government," and he says:

My aim is to recast conservatism in a form compatible with the broad popular imperatives of the day, but also to change somewhat the agenda and even the vocabulary of contemporary politics. To those who are liberals and to those who call themselves conservatives, I say: Politics is more difficult than you think.

Despite Will's assertion that today "there are almost no conservatives, properly understood," the principal line of argument of *Statecraft as Soulcraft* will be familiar to most and largely congenial to many American conservative intellectuals. It is Will's argument that modern political thought from the time of Machiavelli has ignored or denied the ethical potentialities of human nature and has concentrated on passion and self-interest as the constituent forces of society and government. Modern politics therefore seeks to use these forces, rather than to restrain or elevate them, in designing social and political arrangements in such a way that passion and self-interest will conduce to stability, prosperity, and liberty. "The result," writes Will,

is a radical retrenchment, a lowering of expectations, a constriction of political horizons. By abandoning both divine and natural teleology, modernity radically reoriented politics. The focus of politics shifted away from the question of the most eligible ends of life, to the passional origins of actions. The ancients were resigned to accommodating what the moderns are eager to accommodate: human shortcomings. What once was considered a defect—self-interestedness—became the base on which an edifice of rights was erected.

The Founding Fathers also subscribed to the modernist school of political thought, particularly James Madison, whose “attention is exclusively on controlling passions with countervailing passions; he is not concerned with the amelioration or reform of passions. The political problem is seen entirely in terms of controlling the passions that nature gives, not nurturing the kind of character that the polity might need. He says, ‘We well know that neither moral nor religious motives can be relied on.’”

The result of political modernism and its concentration on the lower elements of human nature has been the loss of ideals of community, citizenship, and the public moral order. With its emphasis on “self-interest” and the proper arrangement or equilibrium of passions and appetites rather than on their reform and improvement, modernism has opened the door to the privatization of politics, distrust of public authority, the pursuit of material and individual self-interest, and the proliferation of individual rights in the form of claims against government and society.

Once politics is defined negatively, as an enterprise for drawing a protective circle around the individual's sphere of self-interested action, then public concerns are by definition distinct from, and secondary to, private concerns. Regardless of democratic forms, when people are taught by philosophy (and the social climate) that they need not govern their actions by calculations of public good, they will come to blame all social shortcomings on the agency of collective considerations, the government, and will absolve themselves.

Contemporary American conservatism, in Will's view, as well as contemporary liberalism, are both derived from political modernism.

They are versions of the basic program of the liberal-democratic political impulse that was born with Machiavelli and Hobbes. Near the core of the philosophy of modern liberalism, as it descends from those two men, is an inadequacy that is becoming glaring. And what in America is called conservatism is only marginally disharmonious with liberalism. This kind of conservatism is an impotent critic of liberalism because it too is a participant in the modern political enterprise. . . . The enterprise is not wrong because it revises, or even because it revises radically. Rather it is wrong because it lowers, radically. It deflates politics, conforming politics to the strongest and commonest impulses in the mass of men.

For Will, then, the proper corrective to the degeneration of democracy and the substitution of private indulgence for the public good is the restoration of ancient and medieval political and ethical philosophy and its vindication of the role of government in constraining private interests in deference to the public moral order and in inculcating virtue—in other words, “legislating morality”:

By the legislation of morality I mean the enactment of laws and implementation of policies that proscribe, mandate, regulate, or subsidize behavior that will, over time, have the predictable effect of nurturing, bolstering or altering habits, dispositions, and values on a broad scale.

He goes on:

The United States acutely needs a real conservatism, characterized by a concern to cultivate the best persons and the best persons. It should express renewed appreciation for the ennobling functions of government. It should challenge the liberal doctrine that regarding one important dimension of life—the “inner life”—there should be less government—less than there is now, less than there recently was, less than most political philosophers have thought prudent.

Despite Will's predilection for putting

down contemporary conservatives, the theoretical dimensions of his argument will come as no great shock to many of them. It has been articulated in one form or another by a number of American writers since the 1940s—Russell Kirk, Leo Strauss, and Eric Voegelin, to name but a few. Will is quite correct that the libertarian and classical liberal faction of American conservatism will dissent vigorously from his thought and that they are not conservatives in the classical sense of the term. Yet many prominent libertarians have resisted and rejected being called conservatives, and it is hardly fair to criticize them for not adhering to a body of ideas with which they have never claimed any connection. Nor is it fair for Will to categorize all conservatives or even the mainstream of American conservatism as libertarian. Although this mainstream has been oriented toward the defense of the bourgeois order as expressed in classical liberal ideology, its principal exponents have generally been aware of the moral and social foundations of classical liberal values and have accepted at least some governmental role in the protection and encouragement of these values.

American conservatism is in effect a reformulation of the Old Whiggery of the eighteenth century and has sought to synthesize Burke and Adam Smith, order and liberty, in what was ascribed to its most representative voice, Frank S. Meyer, as “fusionism.” There are of course serious philosophical problems in effecting this synthesis, and the problems have never been satisfactorily resolved; but the efflorescence of conservative thought around these problems in recent decades shows that American conservatives are neither as simple-minded nor as illiterate as Will wants us to believe. In the last decade conservative political efforts have increasingly emphasized moral issues in campaigns against pornography, abortion, and the dissolution of the family and community, and in favor of public support for religious faith. It is therefore simply a gross error to claim that the American Right, old or new, is oblivious to the role of

government in sustaining morality.

Will, moreover, knows this, because he is himself a well-informed man and because he was at one time an editor of the *National Review* and has had close intellectual and professional connections to the conservative movement. Yet at no place in *Statecraft and Soulcraft* is there any acknowledgment of the richness or variety of contemporary conservative thought, any appreciation for the intellectual and political contributions of serious conservatives to sustaining and reviving premodern political ideas, nor indeed any reference at all to any contemporary conservative thinker. There is only a constant barrage of patronizing and often contemptuous generalization about “*soidisant* conservatives,” “something calling itself conservatism,” and “‘conservatives.’”

Although the traditionalist and most antimodern orientation within American conservatism will probably experience little discomfort at Will’s development of his ideas, it may have problems with some of his applications of his philosophy to contemporary policy. Although Will is consistent in his strong support for the illegalization of pornography and abortion, he also tries to use premodern or classical conservatism to endorse the welfare state and to justify the civil rights legislation of the 1960s, which are the principal creations of modern liberalism and which constitute revolutionary engines by which the radicalizing dynamic of liberalism is built into contemporary American government.

Although Will acknowledges that the “almost limitless expansion of American government since the New Deal . . . was implicit in the commission given to government by modern political philosophy: the commission to increase pleasure and decrease pain,” he also believes that “the political system must also incorporate altruistic motives. It does so in domestic policies associated with the phrase ‘welfare state.’ These are policies that express the community’s acceptance of an ethic of common provision.” He cites Disraeli and Bismarck as conservative architects of the welfare state and regards as the conserva-

tive principle underlying welfare the idea "that private economic decisions often are permeated with a public interest and hence are legitimate subjects of political debate and intervention."

Will is certainly correct in his assertion of this principle, but the centralized, redistributive welfare apparatus created by liberalism and resisted by conservatives is not legitimately derived from the principle. The classical conservative vision of society as an organic, hierarchical, and authoritative structure of reciprocal responsibilities implies a social duty to the poor, but it also implies a responsibility on the part of the poor that the liberal "right to welfare" denies. Moreover, the virtue of charity endorsed by classical conservatives presupposes an inequality of wealth and an ideal of *noblesse oblige* that the architects of liberal welfare states abhor. Nor is the classical conservative ideal of public welfare necessarily or primarily restricted to a centralized apparatus or even to government, but rather allows for social provision of support through family, community, church, and class obligations as well as at local levels of government. Finally, the classical conservative welfare state usually developed in nondemocratic societies in which the lower orders who received public largess did not also possess electoral control of the public leaders who dispensed it. The mass democratic nature of the modern welfare state ensures the indefinite expansion of necessary and desirable public provision into a socialist redistribution of wealth that reduces the public order to a never-ending feast for the private interests and appetites of the masses while destroying their families and communities, ingesting them within the cycles of mass hedonism of bureaucratized capitalism and ensnaring them as the political base of the bureaucratic-political complex in whose interests the welfare state is operated. At the same time, the administrative apparatus of the centralized welfare state subsidizes a bureaucratic and social engineering elite that devotes its energies to the further destruction and redesigning of

the social order.

Will offers some suggestions "for a welfare system that supports rather than disintegrates families" and which "will use government to combat the tendency of the modern bureaucratic state to standardize and suffocate diversity." It is frankly not easy to see how this can be accomplished, since governmental welfare replicates, usurps, and thus weakens the functions of the family and community and must necessarily proceed along uniform legal and administrative lines. Indeed, Will's defense of the welfare state suggests no awareness of the important differences between the concept and the actual functioning of the classical conservative welfare state and those of modern liberalism. An important part of his case is the pragmatic argument that conservatives must accept the welfare state or find themselves consigned to political oblivion. "A conservative doctrine of the welfare state is required if conservatives are even to be included in the contemporary political conversation," and the idea of the welfare state "has now come and is not apt to depart." "Conservatism properly understood," then, is to accept the premises and institutions of contemporary liberalism and must not challenge them if it is to enjoy success and participate in dialogue with a dominant liberalism. Hence, any discussion of the very radical and unsettling reforms that would be necessary to construct a welfare state consistent with genuine classical conservatism, as opposed to the abridged, expurgated, and pop version presented by Will, would defeat his pragmatic purpose by alienating and frightening the liberal and establishment elites he is trying to impress.

Similarly, Will's defense of the civil rights revolution in terms of classical conservatism is an erroneous application of a traditionalist principle. "But the enforcement of the law," he writes, "by making visible and sometimes vivid the community values that are deemed important enough to support by law, can bolster these values. . . . Of course, nothing in a

society, least of all moral sentiment, is permanent and final. Indeed, there have been occasions when the law rightfully set out to change important and passionately held sentiments, and the law proved to be a web of iron." One such occasion was the abrogation of the rights of owners of public accommodations to deny service to blacks, enacted in the civil rights legislation of the 1960s. The exercise of this right became "intolerably divisive" and therefore had to be abridged by congressional action.

The most admirable achievements of modern liberalism—desegregation, and the civil rights act—were explicit and successful attempts to change (among other things) individuals' moral beliefs by compelling them to change their behavior. The theory was that if government compelled people to eat and work and study and play together, government would improve the inner lives of those people.

"Moral sentiment" does indeed change, but absolute moral values do not, and only if we believe that egalitarian values are superior to the rights of property can we accept the legislation Will is defending as legitimate. Nor is it clear that the civil rights revolution has really improved our inner lives or even changed our external conduct to any great degree, and if it has, the change has derived not only from government but also from social and non-public sanctions as well.

That "stateways" can make "folkways," that coercive imposition by an apparatus of power can eventually alter patterns of thinking and conduct, is true. The Christian emperors of Rome after Constantine certainly did so, as did Henry VIII and his successors in the English Reformation. What the conservative wants to know, however, is by what authority a state undertakes such massive transformations and whether what is gained adequately compensates for the damage that is inevitably done. In the case of the suppression of paganism and its replacement by Christianity, Christian conservatives will have little doubt of the authority and ultimate value of the revolution. The proc-

esses by which the civil rights revolution was accomplished are more questionable. It is not clear that they have led or will lead to more justice and tolerance or to greater racial harmony. They certainly did damage to the Constitution by allowing the national legislative branch to override state and local laws. They also damaged the political culture by popularizing and legitimizing the idea that every conceivable "minority" (women, sexual deviants, and all racial and ethnic groups) may use the federal government to satisfy its ambitions at the expense of local jurisdictions, the public treasury, and the social order. Nor is it clear on what authority Congress overrode traditional property rights to impose new rights. The exploitation of the national government to abrogate and create rights by which the ambitions and private dogmas of a faction may be satisfied is no less an instance of the degeneration of modernism than the abuse of government by the constituencies of the welfare state. The civil rights revolution and the welfare state are not, then, reactions against the tendencies of modernism as Will presents them, but rather their fulfillment.

Indeed, for all his expostulations in favor of the high-minded and aristocratic enforcement of virtue, Will repeatedly expresses his deference to the conventional and the popular. The rights of proprietors in 1964 "had become intolerably divisive," so conservatism properly understood accepts the will of those who initiated the division. "An American majority was unusually aroused," so authority must follow the majority. The welfare state is an idea whose time "has now come," so conservatives must accept the idea and must not resist the times. "If conservatism is to engage itself with the way we live now," it must adapt itself to current circumstances, and perish the thought that we might really change the way we live now by rejecting the legacies of liberalism, dismantling its power structure, and enforcing and protecting the real traditions of the West rather than indulging in Will's elegant pretense that that is what he is

doing and expressing open contempt for the only force in American politics that has ever seriously sought to do it.

Throughout Will's articulation of what he takes to be conservatism there is an ambiguity or confusion between the respect for tradition and a given way of life that animates genuine conservatives, on the one hand, and the desire to impose upon and "correct" tradition by acts of power, on the other.

The primary business of conservatism is preservation of the social order that has grown in all its richness—not preserving it like a fly in amber, but protecting it especially from suffocation or dictated alteration by the state. However, the state has a central role to play. The preservation of a nation requires a certain minimum moral continuity, because a nation is not just "territory" or "physical locality." A nation is people "associated in agreement with respect to justice." And continuity cannot be counted on absent precautions.

Will says that "proper conservatism holds that men and women are biological facts, but that ladies and gentlemen fit for self-government are social artifacts, creations of the law." Once again, his idea is unexceptionable, but there is no clarification of what the role of the state, government, and law might properly be. The state is certainly not the only agency that enforces morality, and while it is true that "ladies and gentlemen" are indeed social artifacts, it is untrue that they or many other social artifacts are "creations of the law." Will is again correct that "the political question is always which elites shall rule, not whether elites shall rule," but elites do not always rule by means of the formal apparatus of the state. They also hold and exercise power, provide leadership, enforce public morality, and inform culture through nongovernmental mechanisms in the community, in business, in patronage of the arts and education, and in personal example. Only in the managerial bureaucratic regimes of modernity have elites relied on the state for their power, and they have done so only because the roots of their power and leader-

ship in society have been so shallow that they possess no other institutions of support.

That government has an important and legitimate role to play in enforcing public morality no serious conservative will doubt; but it is nevertheless a limited role and one that is performed mainly not by government but by the institutions of society. Will defines no clear limits either to how far government may go in enforcing moral improvement or how much man can be improved; and on more than one occasion he appears to confuse the legitimate role of the state in protecting the moral order with a kind of environmentalist Pelagianism. Thus, he speaks of "the ancient belief in a connection between human perfectibility and the political order," although few ancients, pagan or Christian, and no conservative of any time or faith ever believed in the perfectibility of man. By failing to clarify the limits and precise functions of the state in enforcing moral norms, Will fails to define classical conservatism adequately or to formulate a theoretical basis for distinguishing the legitimate and proper role of the state that conservatism justifies from the statism and social engineering of the Left.

Will's embrace of the modern bureaucratic state as a proper means of encouraging "soulcraft" is neither realistic nor consistent with the classical conservatism he espouses. It is not realistic because the bureaucratic state of this century is predicated on and devoted to a continuing dynamic of moral and social deracination and cannot merely be adjusted to protect and sustain the moral and social order. It is inconsistent with classical conservatism because classical conservatism flourished in and upheld an aristocratic and limited state that operated on predicates completely different from those of its bloated, abused, alien, suffocating, and often ineffective modern descendent—"bureaucracy tempered by incompetence," as Evelyn Waugh described modern government. Will's ideology is consistent, however, with the agenda of liberalism and the structures that

carry out its agenda, and his self-professed aim "to recast conservatism in a form compatible with the broad popular imperatives of the day" is in fact an admission of his acceptance of and deference to the liberal idols that modern statecraft adores.

Although Will is sometimes called a "neo-conservative," he is not one. Neo-conservatives typically derive more or less conservative policy positions from essentially liberal premises. Will in fact does the opposite: he derives from more or less unexceptionable premises of classical conservatism policy positions that are often congruent with the current liberal agenda. It is because he accepts, and wants to be accepted by, the "achieve-

ments" of modern liberalism that he ignores or sneers at the serious conservative thinkers and leaders of our time who have sought to break liberal idols and that he voices no criticism of the powers that support liberalism. It is therefore not surprising that his commentary is welcomed in and rewarded by liberal power centers. They have little to fear from him and his ideas and much to gain if his version of "conservatism" should gain currency. He enjoys every prospect of a bright future in their company.

¹*Statecraft as Soulcraft: What Government Does*, by George F. Will, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983. 186 pp. \$13.95.

The Radical Crusade of Conor Cruise O'Brien

Edward T. Miles

BEFORE ONE EVEN begins to read Conor Cruise O'Brien's article in the October 10, 1985, issue of the *New York Review of Books* ("The Liberal Pope"), one is aware of the slant of the article. The review is, of course, markedly biased against the pope, and O'Brien's political and intellectual background—that which makes him an *engagé* writer—rules against the possibility of his writing objectively about a subject which makes him, at the very least, uncomfortable. (In O'Brien's unauthorized account of the United Nations, *To Katanga and Back: A U.N. Case History*, the author gives, as an aside, an account of his feelings of unease upon meeting a fellow-member in the Secretariat. That unease, recounted on pages 48-49, occurred because the other diplomat, a Brahmin from South India, reminded O'Brien of a monk, a "holy abbot" who—so the author imagines—reduced him to the status of a neophyte in a temple. And "like many people from highly religious countries, I am made uneasy by the clerical manner . . .") Yet, assuming that a reader new to the *New York Review of Books* is unfamiliar with its history of pope-baiting and assuming that this same reader is unfamiliar with O'Brien's background and clerical obsessions, the slant of the article will still be obvious because of the grotesque caricature that appears on the face of the article. That caricature sets the

stage for the lack of objectivity and journalistic emotiveness that follow, both of which are tainted with malice.

The caricature of Pope John Paul II is offensive and is calculated to assault the unassailable dignity of the pontiff, much as the unspeakable demonstrations against him during his trip to The Netherlands in 1984 attempted to do. To make light of the man who to some 800 million Catholics in the world is the Vicar of Christ, the head of the Church on earth, the supreme authority of the Church, and to make light of one who is to many non-Catholics a symbol of spirituality and morality bespeaks insensitivity at best, maleficent ill-will at worst. It will not do to defend the grotesquerie by noting that the *New York Review of Books* caricatures all its subjects. It will not do to state, in further defense, that caricaturing is nothing new and that this particular caricaturist's craft seems to have had its origin in those nineteenth century caricatures that are housed in Paris's Hotel Carnavelet, that peculiar quasi-museum dedicated to the French Revolution and its aftermath. No, the caricature of John Paul II is inappropriate. It is disrespectful. It is vulgar. And it is an especially crude stereotype that awkwardly attempts to picture the pope as a combination of the imperialistic crusader (the incongruent epaulets attached to the papal soutane) and a cartoon figure (sports pennants