

George Will's Guide to Conserving the Founders' Liberalism

COMMENTARY

By **Peter Berkowitz** - RCP Contributor July 18, 2019

Patrick Deneen's disdainful **review** last month in the Washington Post of George Will's splendid new book, "The Conservative Sensibility," reasserts fashionable misconceptions about liberalism, conservatism, and America. The review — and, more importantly, the book — provide an occasion to clarify the character of the conservatism that takes its bearings from the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, and from the ideas about human nature and freedom that undergird them.

A political science professor at Notre Dame University and author of the 2018 sensation "Why Liberalism Failed," Deneen dismisses the Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist as a cheerleader for a deservedly discredited liberalism. For Deneen, liberalism is vast and enveloping. Its domain stretches from the classical liberalism of Locke, Madison, Mill, and Hayek to contemporary progressivism and encompasses, from Deneen's perspective, most of what still goes under the name of conservatism. In all its guises, for Deneen, liberalism is the enemy of conservatism properly understood. Therefore, Will's reconstruction and celebration of the founders' liberalism looks to Deneen like a betrayal.

"His is a rousing defense of a distinctly American form of 'conservatism,' one that embraces a political, social, and economic system that encourages novelty, dynamism, and constant unpredictable change," scolds Deneen. By placing "conservatism" inside scare quotes, Deneen signals Will's purported confusion: "American conservatism — or classical liberalism — Will acknowledges, does not, and does not wish to, conserve very much."

Will's conservatism *is* distinctly American but, contrary to Deneen, it is also ambitious and demanding, particularly in contrast to Deneen's **anti-liberal zealotry**. In his 2018 book, Deneen contends that the American experiment in liberty and limited government rests on false premises that have poisoned public and private

affairs alike. His extreme conclusions emancipate Deneen from the hard and time-consuming task of analyzing the intricacies of public policy and comparing the advantages and disadvantages of viable reforms. Moreover, his drastic judgment that constitutional government in America must be overcome because it cannot be salvaged liberates him to speculate cryptically — free from the rigors of empirical analysis and the responsibilities of electoral politics and day-to-day governing — about political ideas and

analysis and the responsibilities of electoral politics and day-to-day governing — about political ideas and forms of association that do not yet and may never exist.

Will doesn't let himself off so easily. Fully alert to the pathologies and injustices that afflict the nation, he finds beauty in the fluidity, energy, and pluralism that from early on have marked American society, and he recognizes much for which to be grateful in the constitutionally secured individual rights that enable citizens to pursue happiness as each understands it. Because he believes that liberal democracy in America is an extraordinary accomplishment, Will seeks to conserve it.

The author since the mid-1970s of a twice-weekly syndicated Washington Post column, a TV commentator for almost as long, author of 14 previous books, and holder of a PhD in politics from Princeton University, Will has occupied a position of preeminence among conservative commentators for some four decades. Others may surpass him in this domain or that — as a student of political philosophy, a scholar of the American political tradition, a public policy analyst, an observer of back-room wheeling and dealing and the nitty-gritty of campaigns and elections — but he is unsurpassed in his ability to blend with erudite, elegant, and witty prose essential and enduring political ideas, finely grained episodes of American history, and punctilious reporting of the nation's daily business.

Nevertheless, fellow Washington Post columnist Fareed Zakaria **laments** that though Will “embodies the ideal of thoughtful, learned conservatism,” his time has come and gone. Like so much of the conservative movement, Zakaria asserts, Will is “unsure whether America is a fallen republic or an astonishing success story.”

Not at all. Will incisively argues that America is an astonishing success story that is in danger of deteriorating into a fallen republic.

To help forestall that decline, Will examines “the nature and stakes of today's political arguments” in light of the fundamental debate between Madisonians and Wilsonians — that is, those devoted to conserving the Constitution, and those, since roughly the beginning of the 20th century, striving to break free from its shackles.

As Madisonians, and therefore “custodians of the classical liberal tradition,” American conservatives “espouse the exercise of natural rights within a spacious zone of personal sovereignty guaranteed by governments instituted to serve as guarantors of those rights,” Will writes. The Declaration of Independence enshrined the idea that government's limited purpose is to “secure” the individual liberty shared equally by all citizens. The Constitution, with its separation of powers and checks and balances, protects liberty by keeping government within its limits.

Dedicated to the “overthrow of the Founders' classical liberalism,” early 20th-century progressivism, Will maintains, rejected limited government as an anachronism because of a supposedly “improved understanding of modern social conditions” and “fresh understanding of the human condition.” Affirming the “limitless plasticity” of human beings, progressives embraced limitless government as vital to perfecting the people. Happiness, progressives thought, results from state-supervised integration of individuals' moral and political lives.

Will traces America's “myriad discontents” to excesses of the progressive welfare and regulatory state, which was intended to go beyond maintaining the conditions under which individuals could pursue happiness to actually making citizens happy. But he suffers no illusions about rolling it back significantly. He

appreciates that a government of vast and multifarious powers has struck roots in the American tradition and become enmeshed in citizens' expectations and entangled in constitutional structure. Guided by the nation's founding principles, he hopes to contain the progressive leviathan.

Under the aegis of progressivism, according to Will, the administrative state has mushroomed, and the Supreme Court has arrogated to itself — without mandate in constitutional text and contrary to constitutional structure — authority to resolve divisive social and political questions. To combat these threats to democratic self-government, Will would have Congress restrain its delegations of legislative authority to the executive branch. And, contrary to many conservatives who intone reflexively the mantra of judicial restraint, Will wants the Supreme Court to rein in proliferating executive-branch administrative agencies that doubly erode the separation of powers by adjudicating disputes over laws they themselves have promulgated. More generally, he favors energetic judicial review of congressional statutes that interfere with the individual liberty that it is the Constitution's chief purpose to safeguard.

Propelled by a progressive ambition to dictate economic outcomes, the federal government has increasingly commandeered the American "system of private property regulated minimally by government interventions and mostly by market forces," writes Will. Central control in the name of morality and justice overlooks (as Will acknowledges he himself overlooked in his 1980s book, "Statecraft as Soulcraft") the ways in which "the nature of life in a commercial society under limited government is a daily instruction in the self-reliance and politeness — taken together, the civility — of a lightly governed open society."

Progressive entitlement programs have weakened the institutions of civil society — family, community, and faith — by inducing dependency, and an extensive regulatory apparatus has nurtured rent-seeking. However, it is not too late, Will urges, to scale back intrusive and counterproductive government to allow the culture of freedom to renew itself.

Progressivism, he contends, transformed the mission of education into that "of emancipating young people from ideas and norms formed in, and by, an imperfect past." But the fundamental task of a liberal education — that is, an education suitable for citizens devoted to liberty — "should be the transmission of the basic truths of the arts and sciences in order to enable students to become critical and independent thinkers."

And, maintains Will, progressivism imbued American diplomats with a rationalism and moralism ill-suited to the realities of world affairs. They came to believe that by dint of their intelligence and good intentions they could effectively rearrange borders; build nations; and construct international organizations to establish peace, enforce justice among peoples, and equitably redistribute global wealth. Contrary to such "naiveté and hubris," argues Will, a diplomacy grounded in the Founders' principles recognizes that since human beings are by nature competitive and anxious, they are prone to conflict, and so too are the states they inhabit and govern. Statesmen schooled in American constitutionalism will undertake initiatives, form alliances, and establish institutions — informed by a keen recognition that in a dangerous world such opportunities are limited — to protect American interests, not least supporting those who seek the rights that Americans regard as unalienable.

A "cheerful malcontent" (to borrow a description of Barry Goldwater that he endorses), Will does not purport to solve the problems of immigration, trade, inequality, opioids, the fraying of family and the weakening of community, political polarization, and America's role in the world. Nor does he ignore them. In contrast to Deneen's overwrought animadversions, Will provides a master's class in thinking about politics. Distilling a lifetime of learning about American constitutional government, he clarifies the surpassing advantages of, the mounting dangers to, and the daunting challenges involved in conserving the liberty the Declaration affirms and the Constitution secures.

A constitutional conservatism is not the answer to all that ails us. But a more illuminating guide to the premises on which liberal democracy in America rests and the essential considerations that should guide policymaking is hard to come by.

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