

# The New Criterion

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## George Will's "conservatism"

by James Piereson

*On The Conservative Sensibility, by George F. Will.*

### BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE

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George Will has been writing books and newspaper columns from a conservative point of view for close to a half century, since William F. Buckley Jr. hired him in 1972 as the Washington editor of *National Review*. Soon after taking that post, and propelled by his writings for the magazine, he signed on as a regular columnist for *The Washington Post* (winning a Pulitzer Prize for that work in 1977), and later as a weekly commentator for *abc News* and, still later, for *Fox News*. From the beginning, he has sprinkled his columns with historical references and quotations to illuminate the themes he sought to advance, a style that has won him a following across the political spectrum at the same time that it demonstrated that there were conservatives who could engage liberals in debates over ideas and political philosophy. Next to Buckley himself, Will has done more to make the case for conservative ideas over these many decades than any other writer.

This is not to say that he has written or spoken as a down-the-line Republican. Indeed, he has been as critical of Republican as of Democratic presidents—perhaps more so. He took Richard Nixon to task over Watergate, Ronald Reagan over the deficits he accumulated while in office, George H. W. Bush for inept political leadership, and George W. Bush for launching an invasion of Iraq on a nation-building agenda. It would be an understatement to say that he disapproves of Donald Trump, writing that he hoped that Hillary Clinton would defeat him in a fifty-state sweep. (Fortunately, he does not mention the forty-fifth president in the volume under review.) He has nurtured a reputation for being independent and unpredictable in his judgments, and not always consistent through his long career. Whatever his views on particular issues, he has never been a party man, an ideologue, or a card-carrying member of a political movement.

His most recent book, *The Conservative Sensibility*, will be read by some as a summation of views formed over a lengthy career of writing and public speaking and by others as a revision and re-thinking of previously expressed views.<sup>1</sup> In truth, it is a

little of both. The book contains an original and carefully developed argument, rather than (like some of his other books) a compilation of previously published writings. The conservatively inclined reader, interested in the history of the United States and the politics of the present era, will find in the author's reflections much to enjoy and from which to learn—and a fair amount with which to disagree. Will seems not all that interested in how others think about conservatism, more concerned to work through and sketch out his own views, many of which depart in important ways from orthodox conservative thinking. In that sense, the book does not describe the conservative sensibility as much as it outlines the author's own views of the subject.

"This book's primary purpose," he writes in its introduction, "is not to tell readers what to think about this or that particular problem or policy . . . but rather to suggest how to think about the enduring questions concerning the proper scope and actual competence of government." In the event, however, Will informs his readers not only how to think about government, but *what* they should think about it as well. His view, advanced throughout the book, is that government is much too large today and should be limited in keeping with the Founders' constitutional design; and that, in any case, the government is not competent to carry out most of the tasks it has assigned itself.

**T**he United States has arrived at this point, as he lays it out, due to a long-running clash between two Princetonians: James Madison, the principal author of the Constitution and fourth President of the United States and a pre-revolutionary graduate of the College of New Jersey (later renamed Princeton University), and Woodrow Wilson, Princeton class of 1879, later the President of Princeton (1902–10), a left-wing leader, and the twenty-eighth President of the United States. Madison designed the Constitution to divide and limit governmental power so as to protect liberty and natural rights. Wilson claimed, along with other progressives and many liberals today, that Madison's Constitution is outdated in the modern world of democracy, large organizations, and scientific knowledge.

Wilson and his fellow progressives have thus aimed to undo Madison's separation of powers by centralizing power in the presidency, reformulating judicial review in terms of majority rule, and giving expert administrators more leverage over national policy. Wilson also sought, during the Great War, to use American power to promote democracy around the world and to replace balance of power politics with collective security and diplomacy. Wilson, in short, aimed to "modernize" American government for the purposes of efficiency, majoritarianism, and administrative expertise, while projecting American ideals upon the wider world. Will, who earned a graduate

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degree in politics at Princeton, is solidly on Madison's side in this ongoing conflict. As he writes, "My conviction is that, properly understood, conservatism is the Madisonian persuasion."

Will is not the first to suggest that conservatism is more a sensibility or a persuasion than an ideology or a systematic philosophy based upon abstract principles. Conservatives are said to be suspicious of programs of reform, in the belief that efforts to fix existing problems are likely to lead to new ones, and thus to make matters worse. Edmund Burke, usually viewed as the original source of modern conservative thought, wrote that there should be a presumption in favor of any settled scheme of government against any untried project—a succinct statement of the conservative sensibility as traditionally understood.

But Will means something different when he writes about "the conservative sensibility," which is, as he puts it, "more than an attitude and less than an agenda," more a way of thinking about politics and public life, less a slate of principles and policies. What, exactly, does that mean? The conservative sensibility starts with an appreciation of the wisdom of the nation's Founding Fathers and proceeds from there to a commitment to preserve that wisdom and apply it to public affairs. That enduring notion—Madison's wisdom—consists of a belief in an unchanging human nature, skepticism about the uses of government power, and a commitment to limiting and dividing it so as to protect liberty.

The conservative sensibility points back to a political philosophy: the doctrine of natural rights as set forth by John Locke in the seventeenth century and applied to American affairs in the eighteenth by our Founding Fathers when they approved the Declaration of Independence and drafted and ratified the United States Constitution. These documents, Will reminds us, are grounded on the assumptions that individual rights to life and liberty exist by nature and that the first duty of government is to protect those rights in civil society. The Declaration of Independence, following Locke, states this explicitly; the Constitution, with its separation of powers and its checks and balances, created a structure of government designed to protect those rights and to maintain a division between public and private affairs. Is conservatism a sensibility or a philosophy? In Will's mind, it is mostly the latter, because the philosophy of natural rights supplies meaning and purpose to the conservative sensibility.

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This distinguishes American conservatism from varieties found in other countries, since here conservatism must be in service to the nation's founding principles. The Founding Fathers led the revolution against Great Britain and wrote the Constitution on behalf

of liberal ideals: natural rights, representation and popular rule, the right of revolution, the separation of church and state—with governmental powers circumscribed by a written constitution. It follows that conservatism in America, to the degree that it expresses the "Madisonian persuasion," boils down to a defense of the nation's ancient liberal tradition. For this

reason, Will rejects Burke as a model for American conservatives: “Burke wrote in the European tradition of throne and altar conservatism rather than in the liberal tradition of natural rights.” He thus writes that American conservatives should not take their bearings from Burke, as Russell Kirk, Buckley, and many others have done, but rather from Locke and Madison, the two great theorists of the natural rights revolution and the U.S. Constitution.

Will uses this Madisonian framework as a basis for discussing a range of contemporary issues, including judicial review, America’s welfare state, the economy, and the nation’s role in international affairs. He acknowledges that progressives and their left-wing successors routed the Madisonian constitution over the course of the twentieth century, and he is dogged in cataloguing the damage they have done to the constitutional order in their century-long march through our institutions.

He demonstrates in impressive detail—drawing upon statistics, expert testimony, and pithy observations from his late friend Daniel Patrick Moynihan—how the welfare state, and the overblown federal establishment that it has created, has undermined the virtues upon which a free and prosperous country must depend. He parts company with many conservatives, such as Justice Antonin Scalia and Judge Robert Bork, who argued that the Supreme Court should defer to the wisdom of Congress and state legislatures in most areas of the law because those branches are accountable to the voters while the courts are not. Will views this as a capitulation to majoritarian prejudices and argues that the federal courts should intervene to defend liberty and the separation of powers against legislative overreach and the ongoing concentration of power in the executive. He is in favor of an “activist” court, but one that intervenes to defend liberty and Madison’s Constitution.

**T**he strongest chapter in this book, among many strong chapters, deals with economics, or what Will prefers to call “political economy.” He writes knowledgeably (but not technically) about the virtues of free markets in aggregating knowledge through the price system and creating efficient outcomes that no single person or committee could design. Here he is indebted to Adam Smith and Friedrich Hayek, both of whom deployed the concept of “the fatal conceit” to describe the misbegotten idea that committees of experts have sufficient knowledge to plan and organize complex economic systems. The point is difficult for many to grasp—that beneficial outcomes can occur without anyone having planned or intended them. Free and flexible markets, Will argues, are instruments both of liberty and progress—and much more than that: of innovation, variety, and decentralization of power. He acknowledges that markets can be revolutionary in the way they upset customs and settled ways of life, which concerns many conservatives today, though not Will.

Will describes himself as an “amiable atheist,” sympathetic to the role religion plays in society but too much of a skeptic to subscribe to any orthodox system of belief or to find supernatural design in the unfolding of the universe. He does not care much for post-war conservatives, like Kirk and Whittaker Chambers, who insisted that religious belief is central both to civilization and to the conservative sensibility. That view, he writes, is dangerously intolerant, and also off-putting to

atheists, agnostics, and skeptics who might otherwise be sympathetic to conservative ideas. The Founding Fathers, he points out, were mostly Deists and religious skeptics who grounded liberty in “the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God.” He suggests that a prudent skepticism is the appropriate position to take on all subjects—from religion to politics to theories of the natural world—and says this is fully in keeping with a conservative “sensibility.”

Will is well aware of the difficulty of resurrecting Madison’s Constitution in an age of democracy and ever-expanding government, and he does not back away from the challenge. “Do conservatives have the steely resolve,” he asks, “to tell the country the hard truth about how radically it has gone wrong in its thinking about, and expectations of, government?” Conservatives, he writes, have thus far failed to tell those hard truths, and for this reason have permitted Woodrow Wilson’s constitution to prevail over Madison’s. He concludes the book with a call for conservatives to embrace the confrontation between the modern and the ancient constitution, paraphrasing F. Scott Fitzgerald in writing that “We cannot escape the challenge of living by the exacting principles of our Founding, so we should beat on, boats against many modern currents, borne back ceaselessly toward a still usable past.”

Will deserves credit for forthrightly facing this difficulty, though he still leaves us with a question: how useful is the Madisonian persuasion in guiding conservatives through the contemporary political landscape?

**I**t takes nothing away from Madison’s genius (nicely elucidated in this book) to suggest that the application may be limited. What was Madison’s Constitution? As soon as it was ratified, sharp controversies broke out in Washington’s cabinet over the powers granted to the federal government under the new regime. Madison, along with Jefferson, was defeated by Alexander Hamilton (whose side George Washington took) on every major financial and constitutional issue that arose at that time. Neither Madison nor Jefferson knew anything about banking and financial affairs, and neither could have guided the new nation through the financial difficulties it faced at its beginnings. Both Jefferson and Madison defended the French Revolution, even as it descended into the Terror, while Hamilton correctly predicted that it would end in catastrophe for France. Madison, along with Jefferson, formed the nation’s first popular party to combat Hamilton’s schemes, and they are thus to some extent responsible for the majoritarianism that Will deplors. Will attacks Wilson’s foreign policy, but where did Wilson get those ideas about “making the world safe for democracy” and “open covenants openly arrived at”? He got them in the first place from Jefferson and Madison. Not to belabor the point, but Madison owned slaves and defended the institution of slavery throughout his career (albeit reluctantly), in contradiction to the doctrine of natural rights—frequently by citing the kinds of arguments Burke used against the French Revolution. A complete defense of Madison’s philosophy or the Madisonian persuasion should bring these considerations into play, in addition to the important ideas he set forth in Numbers 10, 14, and 51 of *The Federalist*.

Is it fair or wise to castigate Burke as a “throne and altar conservative” and to advise contemporary conservatives to cast aside his wisdom about politics and government? In the first place, it is an error to say that Burke was a “throne and altar conservative.” In the context of his time, he was a Whig, a liberal, and mostly a free trader. The political order he defended was neither feudal nor primarily aristocratic or theocratic. He defended the “Glorious Revolution” based upon Locke’s principles of parliamentary supremacy. He did not accept Locke’s proposition that legitimate political authority is derived from an original contract, though neither did others at that time, including David Hume. But Burke, in his attack on the French Revolution, did mobilize powerful arguments against radical changes in the political order based upon abstract ideas. Might those arguments also be mobilized to defend the Madisonian constitution against progressive efforts to overcome it—or to use Burke’s conservative propositions to defend Locke? After all, as Louis Hartz observed in *The Liberal Tradition in America* (1955), “In America, Burke equals Locke.” Burke could not have written the Declaration of Independence, but he might well have defended it better than anyone.

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## It is an error to say that Burke was a “throne and altar conservative.”

Is it accurate to say that progressivism, as most clearly reflected in the thought and action of Woodrow Wilson, is primarily responsible for the contemporary ills that Will describes in his book? That is a debatable proposition. Richard Hofstadter wrote, in *The*

*Age of Reform* (1955), that the progressives sought in their reforms to recapture the nineteenth-century spirit of individualism in opposition to the emerging system of large organizations. The early progressives for the most part did not envision a mammoth welfare state, with tens of millions of Americans receiving checks from the national government. That was left for a later generation of liberals (not “progressives”) to bring about. Nor can they be held responsible for the various perverse doctrines that are prevalent today, from “New Leftism” to radical feminism to critical race theory and the rest of it. It is true that progressives were the first to argue that the eighteenth-century constitution was in need of reform and modernization, but their successors in this enterprise have taken it much further than Wilson and his allies could have imagined.

Finally, on the evidence of this book, can we say that Will really is a conservative, as he has described himself over these many decades? When the reader adds up the author’s case—his defense of markets, limited government, the Madisonian constitution, modern science, and natural rights, along with his reservations about religion and his criticisms of Burke, progressivism, and the welfare state—he is apt to conclude that these are more the thoughts of a classical liberal than those of a modern conservative. His book contains many favorable references to Adam Smith, the first of that line of thinkers, but also to Friedrich Hayek, the great twentieth-century proponent of classical liberalism. Will promotes a free society, with ordered liberty as its foundation, much as Smith and Hayek did, in contrast to conservatives who stress the importance of religion, consensus, and community morals and mores. Hayek inserted into *The Constitution of Liberty* a chapter titled “Why I Am Not a Conservative,” where he wrote that

Conservatism by its very nature cannot offer an alternative to the direction in which we are moving. It may succeed by its resistance to current tendencies in slowing down undesirable developments, but, since it does not indicate another direction, it cannot prevent their continuance. It has, for this reason, invariably been the fate of conservatism to be dragged along a path not of its own choosing.

In order to reverse the direction of events, someone must formulate an alternative to it—which George Will has done in this fine book.

Will writes much as Hayek did in calling for a restoration of Madison's Constitution and a politics that emphasizes liberty, rather than like the conservatives who want to slow down the general direction of affairs. In this, Will's advice may seem impractical or even utopian, but it has the virtue of being principled—and entirely honest about our situation.

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1 *The Conservative Sensibility*, by George F. Will; Hachette Books, 640 pages, \$35.

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