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An old saying goes that people become more conservative as they age. George Will's new book, "The Conservative Sensibility," shows that the opposite can be true. This book is not so much a brief for conservatism as it is a learned and lengthy defense of liberalism: the philosophy of John Locke and America's Founding Fathers; the economic theories of Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman; and the theological skepticism of Lucretius and Charles Darwin. 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. Thus, American conservatism — or classical liberalism — Will acknowledges, does not, and does not wish to, conserve very much.

Government is always and everywhere the nemesis in Will's new book. The rise and growth of government thwart humans' natural sociability, produce unintended consequences that pervert the beneficial logic of market forces, and undermine the health of civil society. Will looks to the wisdom of America's Founding Fathers — especially the natural-rights philosophy of individual liberty embedded in the Declaration of Independence and the principles of limited government animating the Constitution — as the lodestars of his vision of a rebirth of American conservatism. Animated by a conservative skepticism of the belief in sufficient human knowledge to control circumstance, and a pessimism about the capacity of human beings to consistently act from noble intentions (or that such noble intentions are likely to lead to noble ends), Will calls for a minimalist state allowing for maximal expression of "spontaneous order."

Will credits one Princetonian, James Madison, as the visionary who crafted the classical liberal political frame of individual liberty, economic dynamism and a constitutional mechanism that presumed human self-interest without counting on public virtue. He blames a second Princetonian, Woodrow Wilson, for contriving a second form of liberalism, grounded in a belief not in individual liberty but in the ability of government to fashion an equitable economy, make human beings more social in orientation and remake the world into a global liberal democracy. The growth of a sclerotic administrative state has been a consequence, leading to a decrease in individual economic liberty, manifold perversions of the markets by government intervention and bipartisan Wilsonian overconfidence in America's ability to remake the world through liberal imperialism. A strength of libertarian analysis is the recognition of the perverse consequences and often opposite results of "do-gooder-ism," and these constitute some of the strongest parts of Will's book, including a welcome critique of the overweening confidence leading to the war in Iraq.

Will calls above all for a renewed “thoughtful reverence for the nation’s founding.” He appears to envision a night watchman state approximately the same size and undertaking the same level of activities as that before the Civil War, while endorsing an economic and social sphere that produces the constant innovation, upheaval, social transformation and economic inequality of today’s world. Presumably, a wholly unleashed market would result only in an intensification of economic innovation, inequality and social transformation.

He charges both parties with abandoning the founders’ vision in the aftermath of the Civil War — indeed, he claims that “John Locke died at Antietam” — both increasingly seeking to use government as “the provider and enlarger of freedom” but achieving the opposite. Will concludes that a rededication to a classical liberal philosophy will usher in better (or less) politics, a result of a liberated economy and a more spontaneous order.

In these calls, Will is arguing against not only Wilson but a third Princeton man: namely, a younger George Will. The author of the 1983 book “Statecraft as Soulcraft” held that government needs to play a positive role in supporting the social institutions that a dynamic society consistently undermines, and he argued that liberal American society draws down a “dwindling legacy of cultural capital” that cannot “regenerate spontaneously.” In contrast to the younger Will, today’s Will refuses to consider that classical philosophy finally proves unbearable in practice to actual human beings, and that it was abandoned early in the republic not because of the corruptions of Germanic philosophy but because of a social and economic order that had become too costly for too many people. Someone with a conservative sensibility would be sufficiently Burkean to recognize in that abandonment not a condemnation of his countrymen but a genuine response from real people unwilling to live under a philosophy that does not work.

In 1983 Will argued that economics ought not aim merely to generate overall prosperity but additional foundational goods. He argued that a “mixture of free trade and protection and subsidies and entitlements should be discussed as expedients” toward ends of “equality of opportunity, neighborliness, equitable material allocation, happiness, social cohesion, justice.” Today, the debate between progressives and conservatives reflects these concerns of the younger Will. On the left, we witness the attractions of democratic socialism aimed at the promotion of a fairer economic order, wed to a social libertarianism that endorses unbridled individual freedom in the sexual and familial domain. On the right, we witness growing concerns about the effects of economic libertarianism and market forces on national solidarity and social stability needed to form families and stable communities. The younger Will knew that if one wishes to avoid the rise of socialism, one would need the assistance of government to restrain the destructive aspects of market economies upon social institutions prized by conservatives.

More peculiarly still, Will does not mention the great anxieties within conservatism today arising not only from economic dislocation but the threat posed to traditional beliefs and practices by economic institutions, particularly corporations. Nowhere to be found in the 538 pages of text is a discussion of conservative commitments to the unborn, the threats posed by the advance of the sexual liberation movement, and commitments to religious liberty. It is as if the book was written in 1944, the same year as Hayek’s “Road to Serfdom,” animated by a fear that the greatest threat

to humanity lies in the advance of collectivist ideology. Today's rank-and-file conservatives, however, perceive the greatest threat to conservative social forms, practices and beliefs to be coming not from collectivism but hyper-individualism; not from too little liberty in the economic realm but a religious devotion to consumerism that supplants religion of self-discipline; and not necessarily from the state but the economic order. Will seems uninformed or uninterested about the manifold ways that the economic order today directly attacks social conservatism, particularly "woke" corporate activism on behalf of progressive causes.

Against efforts by states such as Indiana, North Carolina and Georgia to pass legislation protecting religious liberty, restricting transgender normalization or banning abortion, powerful corporations have used threats of economic ruination to attack and even overturn duly enacted legislation friendly to social conservatives. Does Will envision a society dominated by monopolists like Amazon, Apple and Netflix — advancing a libertarian sexual ethos, including support for unlimited abortion on demand — to be the aspiration to which conservatism should aim? Is government today the greatest threat to "the conservative sensibility"? This might be the view in certain corners of Washington but not the conservative electorate. (Amazon chief executive Jeff Bezos owns The Washington Post.)

Will wrote a conservative book during the ascendancy of libertarianism in the 1980s, and today, a more libertarian book in an age when conservatives see more clearly how economic and social libertarianism combine to undermine conservatism. His current book has one vice that is frequently attributed to conservatives: It is backward-looking, proposing a solution relevant to a bygone era. By contrast, his conservatism in 1983 was prophetic, anticipating the forces that are today on full display. It is the very dynamism of America that Will now celebrates that has made his new book antiquated upon arrival, an insight he might have recognized had he harked back to his younger, more conservative self.

THE CONSERVATIVE SENSIBILITY
By George Will.

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