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Book Review: The Conservative Sensibility

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Author Note

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Americans typically view the United States as a democracy and are rightly proud of that. Of course, as those of a more precise nature, along with smug college students enrolled in introductory American government classes, are quick to point out, the United States is technically a republic. This is a bit too clever by half since James Madison, in *The Federalist Papers*, defined a republic the way most people think of a democracy—a system of representative government with elections: “[The]... difference between a Democracy and a Republic are, first the delegation of the Government, in the latter, to a small number of citizens elected by the rest.” What the framers thought of as democracy is today referred to as *direct democracy*, the belief that citizens should have more direct control over governing. The Athenian assembly was what the framers, Madison in particular, saw as the paragon of direct democracy—and as quite dangerous. While direct democracy has its champions, most Americans equate democracy with electing officials to do the business of government.

On these terms, there is no doubt that the country is much more democratic today than it was in 1787. Slavery has ended, voting rights have been greatly expanded to groups that might not even have dreamt of voting in the 1780s, and most states now have referendums and initiatives that give people a direct voice in the creation of law. However, these facts do not foreclose debate. Progressives are quick to highlight the ways the United States falls short of many democratic ideals. Too few people vote, and the level of economic inequality is staggering, giving rise to the belief that political equality is a farce. For those on the political right, the dangers of democracy itself remain central to much of their commentary. They fear that the unthinking masses, with their desire for publicly funded programs, will bring on economic ruin and a populist tyranny. This would take the form of unctuous politicians all too eager to trade prudence for power. No matter what one’s final judgment about democracy is—an absolute good, a necessary evil, or just a plain evil—how it is practiced in the United States remains an ongoing problem requiring constant reflection and evaluation.

These reflections are particularly colored by the historical reality that the United States, unlike most countries, has rather explicit founding and governing documents. The country was founded on a set of principles and animated by ideas that, while open to debate about meaning, most agree are central. For conservatives, the founding is usually seen as paramount, and Americans should maintain their connection to it. The Constitution, they argue, is a brilliant, fixed document that makes America safe for a kind of democracy. To some on the left, the founding and the Constitution represent an unfulfilled set of ideals that are only very imperfectly realized. (To those further to the left, the founding is suspect—window dressing to hide the fact that plutocrats run the country and that democracy is largely a sham.)

Indeed, democracy and the founding are enticing subjects for intellectuals, who are wont to see ideas as supreme. Ideas, after all, are a currency that intellectuals possess in abundance, and admittedly, ideas are important. Much to the chagrin of hard-nosed realists, people are often deeply motivated by ideas, the best of which—freedom, equality, justice, fraternity—are worthy of deep reflection and analysis. Important ideas inspire people to act and help define the values they hold and will fight for. Yet, hard material realities also matter a great deal. The most persuasive writers show a keen felicity of mind with ideas while demonstrating a concrete understanding of how things work on the ground.

I mention all of this because George Will has written what I think can safely be called his magnum opus: *The Conservative Sensibility*. The book addresses both the meaning of conservatism and the nature of the American democratic project, and for those interested in conservatism, or the work of George Will, it will enthrall them with his exploration of the ideas that animate *American* conservatism. The importance of freedom and the political structures best designed to foster freedom are always reason enough for another thoughtful book. Will's writerly ease and wit make it a pleasure, whether one agrees with him or not, to read his account of what is right about America (mostly the founding, the Constitution, and a few later key figures like Lincoln) and what is wrong with contemporary America (mostly every politician today, lazy people, entitlements, and Woodrow Wilson).

Some readers will find contentment gliding along as Will explicates important political thinkers and ideas. Good men (and it is mostly men in the book) are subtly praised and bad men are skewered in elegant prose. What a joy not to have to worry about the lives of anyone but these men. What a satisfaction to think the New Deal was simply a collection of thoughts and bad policies created by a misguided, irritating, problem-solving power seeker like Franklin Roosevelt. However, it is telling that Will only mentions the Great Depression in passing on two occasions in the entire book. One does not have to be an actual worker, African American, or even a field-researching sociologist to wonder: What about all of the people whom FDR was talking to? But why ask this when Will is having so much fun summing up a lifetime of thought? To be fair, this book is not a history but an articulation of a "sensibility." It is not too far removed from the British philosopher Michael Oakeshott's eloquent case for the conservative disposition, made decades ago in his brilliant essay "On Being Conservative." Yet, Will's book is vastly more detailed, systematic, and decidedly American. It is a fascinating account of one influential writer's journey on the philosophic right. In some ways, the book contrasts with his earlier work, *Statecraft as Soul*. A shorter book, *Statecraft* reveals an undeniably more Burkean turn of mind; the role of custom and tradition loom large. That work was published in 1983, and the subsequent decades have forced Will to confront more directly the American version of conservatism. This version accepts the unique characteristics of American history and, most importantly, the classical liberal elements of American conservatism. Burke is still evident in *The Conservative Sensibility*, but he has been effectively retired, a respected distant relative who no longer speaks so vividly to the lives of the American cousins.

In much of the book, Will makes points that many self-identified conservatives will recognize as conservative. He bemoans the rise of the administrative state, with its boundless production of regulations, and he is deeply concerned about the continual flow of power to the executive branch as Congress abdicates its traditional role. The latter point was a hallmark of Republican thinking during the Obama years, though it is much more muted today with Trump, about whom Will is emphatic about not wanting to talk. In these sections of the book, Will sounds like a conservative but not in service to the great American business world; rather, he harkens back to the notion of constitutional balance, once the hallmark of conservative thinking. He also makes clear that the current form of government works "to evade democratic accountability" (p. 132). With so much administration, so many regulations, and so weakened a legislative branch, how can the average citizen possibly render a coherent judgment about what is going on in Washington? Will's concerns are clearly sincere, and he even entertains a number of new constitutional amendments to restore power to Congress, which he rightly observes has delegated

a great deal of power to the executive branch. He offers the impractical (because unlikely) amendments in an attempt to reform and ultimately restore the rightly understood Madisonian balance. At times, Will places himself in the uncomfortable position of a radical serving in the name of conservatism—radial because he suggests significant constitutional reform. However, I think these recommendations are made to make us think, not take to the streets.

Most striking is the extent to which Will's true enemies—the Progressives—and what they wrought are now easily used by the right or left to get what they want. In this sense, Will's target is what he sees as "so called" conservatives. Arguably, his desire is not only to sum up a lifetime of political thought, but also to invigorate a conservative movement that has lost its way. That he recently abandoned the Republican Party is not the least bit surprising. Power must be constrained, and democracy must be limited to protect freedom and maintain a balanced, stable political system.

How one reacts to much of the book's content will depend largely on one's view of the role of government in helping individuals be free and equal citizens. Yet, it is important to emphasize that Will's analysis is all about ideas and is largely devoid of history. The book contains plenty of pithy references to famous people making observations. He cites statistics and provides examples of government mistakes (or what we are to take as mistakes). He tells numerous delightful stories about what politicians did or said. However, the reality of life does not concern him much. As noted earlier, he hardly mentions the Great Depression, and when he does, it is through a vivid image of the Dust Bowl literally landing dust on FDR's desk. A person ignorant of U.S. history would mostly likely come away from the book with a notion of the Progressives as odd creatures out to nefariously transform America, horribly influenced by dangerous European ideas. Though many Progressives were influenced by European ideas, one would hardly know from reading Will that much of what they did was in response to real problems. The political system in the late-19th century was horribly corrupt. Political machines perverted city government, waves of immigration and the rise of modern capitalism created a host of social problems—food unfit to eat, buildings unsafe for workers, and unemployment. No doubt some Progressives were reading Hegel and thinking of the rational German state as a model, but I suspect most were wondering how to help the poor and to find decent water to drink.

The Conservative Sensibility is a call to rethink and clarify what it means to be conservative today in the United States. Will wants his readers to face the reality of a thoughtless culture and an inattentive state linked to a highly populist political system. He is most certainly right to be worried, whether one agrees with all his details or not. There does seem to be wide agreement among both elites and the larger population that something is wrong with America.

If there is hope, one must, of course, look to the future and the rising generations to right current wrongs. On this point, Will is less than sanguine. He treats higher education with a great amount of skepticism—as a place that is dangerously radical, prone to utopianism and muddled thinking. He writes, "We see the spread of intellectual gerrymandering, carving up curricula into protected enclaves for racial, gender, and ethnic factions" (p. 373). One could hardly call universities bastions of conservatism, in his thinking. The excesses of thoughtless faculty, the balkanization of knowledge, and the fostering of grievances all make universities suspect in his eyes. However,

is Will right about this? Maybe there is a way to think about higher education in a more favorable light.

Willam Flores and Katrina Rogers, editors of *Democracy, Civic Engagement, and Citizenship in Higher Education* (2019), offer a quite different, positive perspective on the role universities must play in creating (or recreating) democracy. All of the contributors to the volume work in higher education, but that does not mean their points should be dismissed. As with any multi-author book, there are a myriad of perspectives. However, there are two main themes: American democracy is in serious trouble, and universities are uniquely positioned to do something about it. I should say up front that reading books about higher education in the midst of the current pandemic is sobering. At this point, it is hard to know exactly what post-COVID-19 society will look like, especially when higher education in particular seems to be facing dire challenges. Yet, assuming there will be universities in the future and that they will have some role in the state of American democracy, the book is valuable. Indeed, given the deepening crisis in American democracy, the arguments advanced in the book may be more urgent than at the time it was published.

At the heart of *Democracy, Civic Engagement, and Citizenship in Higher Education* is the argument that colleges play an important role in their communities and in fostering a new generation of engaged citizens. In part, this idea is an old one, that universities have never been simply cloistered places. An overriding concern, though, is that higher education is being transformed by a single-minded devotion to producing skilled workers—the summum bonum of the modern university. This view is seemingly held not just by those who fund higher education, but by those attending. Among the many varied but related themes explored in this book is how intensely the contributors believe in the community-oriented goals of their respective institutions—in the need to give back to those communities. As Jonathan Alger and Abraham Goldberg say of their school, James Madison University, the goal is to prepare “each generation of engaged and enlightened citizens who will learn the skills necessary to identify, articulate, and pursue the common good even as they build their own lives and careers” (p. 106). This brings to mind Tocqueville’s observation about enlightened self-interest. This book attests to the rich variety of efforts being made to “create” a generation that wants to give back, even as individuals strive to get ahead. From high enough, the authors are in general agreement: Universities have a vital role in revitalizing democracy through their curricula and their many civic-learning programs. On the ground, there are friendly differences among the individual authors about the specific means of achieving this revitalization. Some emphasize the need for engaged students—future citizens who vote and volunteer in their local communities—while others are concerned with solving specific problems of inequality and environmental degradation and seeking to further social justice.

This kind of focus on specific problems is bound to offend conservatives like George Will. However, the idea of fostering thoughtful, deliberate citizens is not intrinsically anti-conservative. Indeed, many of the authors are intent on making American democracy stronger and are frequently driven by personal stories of duty and responsibility. Will thinks that universities are driven by “identity politics” and that this means people are not made by “conscious choices but by accidents.” In talking about higher education, Will remarks, “It is prudent to keep one’s capacity for pessimism awake” (p. 375). What is striking in reading

Democracy, Civic Engagement, and Citizenship in Higher Education is the authors' unity of purpose. I do not just mean the unity of the contributors' goals for programs; rather, I mean the idea that civic engagement programs can create a citizenry dedicated to a united country. Furthermore, it is not grievances that animate the authors; it is the fierce desire on the part of college presidents, faculty, and students to give back to their communities. These are not generally communities of ethnicity but the shared communities of their localities. For the most part, their activities are rooted in the nearby. This book is a testament to a strong, reasonable faith that public-spiritedness can be, and is being, awakened in students today—students who have at least some devotion to the common good.

In 1990, William F. Buckley published a little book calling for a program of national service. This book, *Gratitude*, grounded its argument in the notion that much was wrong with the world, that it was hedonistic and corrupt. We needed to be reminded of our debt to the nation and the bonds that unite us as citizens. Buckley wrote that “materialistic democracy beckons every man to make himself a king; republican citizenship incites every man to be a knight.” I am not sure what Buckley would think of the call to civic engagement, but the focus on citizenship would certainly offer common ground. George Will's conservative sensibilities might make him leery of the leftwing “do gooderism” of college programs designed to make students think less about themselves and more about others. Yet, the reality is, higher education is well positioned to call on the more communal nature of individual souls. It strikes me that the liberal or progressive tone of some civic engagement programs is much less essential than the ability to summon students to think less about themselves and more about others. This is neither a right or left ideal but rather a foundation stone for making democracy work better and leading us past the tribal polarization that threatens to weaken the American political edifice.

Author



Joseph Romance is the author or co-author of : *A Republic of Parties?*, *The Challenge of Politics*, and *Democracy's Literature*. He is currently working on a book on the party nomination process. He has taught at Drew University, Fort Hays State University and Grand Canyon University.