Why the Right Turned Left

They bought into the progressive idea of History with a capital H, says George F. Will, but couldn't stand to see the other side having all the fun.

By Barton Swaim

ILLUSTRATION: BARBARA KELLEY

On the American right, from 1980 to 2016 the basic principles held: limited government, low taxation. There were departures, to be sure. "We have a responsibility that when somebody hurts, government has got to move," George W. Bush said in 2003, shortly before signing into

law a Medicare expansion passed by a GOP Congress. But the ideal toward which conservatives were striving—that remained.

The rise of Donald Trump signaled something new. Mr. Trump himself had no interest in philosophical arguments for or against state intervention, but he won in 2016—or so a lot of Republican politicos told themselves—by promising to bring industrial production back to the American homeland. Suddenly high-level Republicans rediscovered the virtues of central planning. Sen. Marco Rubio, who in his 2015 presidential campaign announcement had bewailed "the weight of more taxes, more regulations and more government," was soon able to proclaim the virtues of industrial policy. Several of his GOP colleagues in the Senate—Josh Hawley and J.D. Vance most vocally—are now doing the same. For the first time in many decades, Congressional Republicans don't even claim to care about slowing the growth of mandatory social-welfare programs, which together comprise two thirds of the federal budget.

A vocal and not negligible number of conservative intellectuals, most of them marching under the banner of "national conservatism," gleefully scorn the postwar right's "libertarian" or "neoliberal" veneration of markets. National conservatism is a baggy term—for some it means traditional conservatism with a particular concern for the American nation-state; for others it signifies collectivist social policies combined with social conservatism.

George F. Will, columnist for the last half-century for the Washington Post, has traveled in the opposite direction. In "Statecraft as Soulcraft," published 40 years ago, Mr. Will, now 81, made the case for government's ability, and therefore duty, to encourage virtue in the citizenry. Readers of Mr. Will's columns from the 1990s to the 2020s, however, are likelier to think of him as a proponent of the free market. His most recent book, "The Conservative Sensibility" (2019), makes a cogent case for the removal of government, to the extent possible, from social and economic life.

I came to D.C. to ask Mr. Will about the transition from ordinary American conservatism to the big-government variety, or vice versa.

At the Peacock Cafe in Georgetown—he arrives precisely on time, wearing a navy jacket of superior quality and red tie—we talk about the craft of writing. He is a great writer of what journalists call "ledes." On his iPhone he shows me his latest column, posted that morning online. Its opening words: "When her parents gave her an appealing adjective for a first name . . . " The second word, I note, is a pronoun; the reader has to keep reading to find the antecedent. "Exactly," he says. (The antecedent is, of course, Winsome Sears, Virginia's lieutenant governor.)

After lunch we walk several blocks to his office. I am a devoted walker 31 years his junior, but there is no need to take it slow for the old-timer. We arrive at the place, a handsome two-story townhouse, all the walls lined with books, framed letters and baseball paraphernalia.

Once we're seated, I put to him the question I came to ask: What changed? What moved him from a kind of Burkean communitarianism to an outlook much friendlier to—let's call it—lightly regulated capitalism? Mr. Will acknowledges the change but insists he hasn't departed altogether from the fundamental argument of "Statecraft." He notes the book's three-word subtitle: "What Government Does." "Not what it should do, but what it cannot avoid doing."

Government, he says, “shapes the characters of the citizenry by the habits, mores, and dispositions the legal regime encourages.” There’s something to that, even for a hidebound free-marketeer like me. Reading “Statecraft” again, I take its author to be challenging the looser rhetoric of early-’80s Reaganites. On page 123 he reprimands Reagan himself for saying more than once in his 1976 campaign, “I’ve always thought that the best thing government can do is nothing.” The younger Mr. Will: “But surely the truth, regarding every significant aspect of social life, is that the one thing government cannot do is ‘nothing.’ ”

(Not that Mr. Will is anything but an admirer of the 40th president. One of the framed shapshots displayed in his office shows Mr. Will and the Gipper, the latter clad in a white dinner jacket, watching fireworks from the Truman Balcony of the White House. That photograph is mounted near the front door.)

“What I did not fully appreciate when I wrote ‘Statecraft as Soulcraft,’ ” Mr. Will says, “was that a market-based capitalist society of spontaneous order—I’m using Hayekian language—is good for the soul. People used to say ‘An armed society is a polite society’—if everyone had a Colt on their hip or a dagger on their belt, they’d be polite to each other. Well I think a commercial society is a polite society.” Here Mr. Will does what he is famous for doing in his columns; rather than elaborating a nuanced explanation for what he’s just said, he puts it concretely in a line: “What’s the first thing you hear when you walk into a store? ‘How may I help you?’ ”

He says the word “help” slowly, gesturing with an outstretched hand. “The market is a cooperative culture.”

The usual question in conversations like this one: Why is our politics so embittered? Mr. Will begins with what I would term a more proximate answer:

“There was a qualitative change when Newt Gingrich became leader of the Republicans,” he says. I am skeptical of this interpretation, if only because it’s asserted so often by precisely the people—liberal journalists and academics—one would expect to offer it. He acknowledges the argument can be overdone but thinks there’s truth in it. “Forty years of Democratic control of the House of Representatives, which Gingrich to his great credit ended, was bound to produce this kind of vinegary politics. But Gingrich took it to another level.”

He asks if I remember Bob Michel. “The wonderful, sweet-tempered Peorian” is Mr. Will’s description of the man who led House Republicans from 1981 to the year Republicans took the House. “That’s what Republicans were before 1995. But they decided—many Republicans did, including Joe Scarborough and some others—that people like Michel were the problem. So they went the Gingrich way.”

But Mr. Will has a far more expansive explanation for the “vinegary” nature of our politics, too. “The other reason, the bigger reason, is that the stakes are higher than they ever have been before,” he says. “They’re not what we used to understand as political stakes—who gets what, all that distributional stuff. I think our politics today is part of the long reverberation of the most important thing that’s happened in Western politics in the last two centuries. That is that consciousness itself has become a political project.”

He lets that last statement linger. I wait for more.

"You can blame Marx, or his precursor Hegel," he goes on. "Once you decide that human nature is a fiction, that human beings are merely the sum of impressions made on them by their surrounding culture, then politics acquires an enormous jurisdiction. Consciousness becomes a political project, and the point of politics becomes the control of culture in order to control the imposition of proper consciousnesses."

Consciousness in the Marxian sense refers to the working class's awareness of its revolutionary future; the proletarians' consciousness is "false" until they understand their position as tools manipulated by the capitalists and bourgeoisie. In the American circumstance, if I understand Mr. Will, the struggle takes place between knowledge-class progressive elites and more or less everybody else.

Mr. Will thinks Vladimir Lenin, not Marx or Hegel, is the key figure here. Lenin "understood that the party is everything, and the party is everything because it's a vanguard—it understands the ineluctable unfolding of the laws of history," he says. "Conservatives don't often speak of being 'on the right side of history.' Progressives say it all the time, because they've figured out that History is an autonomous proper noun, capital H, and people who don't understand ought to get out of the way. One way to make them get out of the way is to tell them to shut up, or make them change their language."

Progressives really do think, he says, that "consciousness is to be transmitted by the government. And they're working on it, starting with kindergarten. The academic culture, from the Harvard graduate school of education to kindergarten in Flagstaff, Ariz., is the same now, coast to coast, as far as I can tell." A core mission of K-12 education, in the progressive view of things, is to inculcate the values of diversity and equity. This Marxian project of consciousness-formation is "all over the country now," he says. "Think of the DEI statements you're supposed to make. It's the threshold step in being considered for a faculty position. You express support for, enthusiastic support for, a political agenda. It's quite explicit."

I point out that it isn't recognized as a political agenda. "That's right," he agrees. "A political agenda is contingent. But if History is unfolding, it's not a choice, it's not contingent."

This is all very appealing, he thinks, to a certain kind of conservative or tradition-minded person who's grown weary of the choices and contingencies of modern America. "I think the national conservatives envy the progressives for having all the fun. The progressives are having all the fun because they have a great and stately mandate, a project, which is to purge the world of false consciousness." The last thing we need, he thinks, "are a lot of conservatives trying to get in on the fun."

Mr. Will's belief in the old "liberal" ideals of free speech and the settling of disputes by compromise has a corollary: He's suspicious of too much concord. "On policy," he says, "I'm much more alarmed by the consensus than the discord."

One form of consensus he finds particularly destructive. "I think the political class is far more united by class interest than it is divided by ideology. From Elizabeth Warren on the left to Ted Cruz on the right, they all subscribe to the permanent powerful incentive to run deficits—

peacetime, full-employment, large deficits. Because the perception that they won't be here when the crash comes."

He has a point. I once worked for a politician whose entire political persona was premised on the coming of a crash. It never came. Well—in a way it came, in 2008. But it wasn't the sort of cataclysm a rational person might have expected from the practice of running ever-larger trillion-dollar deficits year after year. What happens when the crash finally happens?

"I don't know," Mr. Will says. "I noticed during the kerfuffle over Kevin McCarthy and the speakership, the Republicans said, 'We are really serious about spending.' Well, 67% of the budget is entitlements. Show of hands," he says, "everyone who's gonna take on Social Security and Medicare? Not gonna happen."

Mr. Will is fond of an old joke: **The first law of economics is, scarcity is real; the first law of politics is, ignore the first law of economics.** "Everyone's agreed on that," he says. "They say Social Security's trust fund will be exhausted in 10 years, at which point there will be a mandatory cut of 18% for all benefits. No there won't. We'll use general revenues, we'll go on borrowing." He ends this polite tirade against the political consensus with a perfectly Willian formulation: "People always ask, 'What's the biggest threat to American democracy?' The biggest threat to American democracy *is* American democracy. It is the fact that we have incontinent appetites and no restraint on them."

As we descend the steep staircase of his upper-floor office, the 81-year-old advises me to watch my step. When the crash finally happens, will George Will still be around to write two columns a week about it? He just might be.

Mr. Swaim is a Journal editorial page writer.