

# UNDER COVER

## The State and the Soul

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The great issue of politics is not *whether* government will engage in soulcraft, since all policy does, implicitly or explicitly; rather, the first question concerns the *kind* of souls government aims to produce and the second, the means it selects to that end. George Will's *Statecraft as Soulcraft* (Simon & Schuster, \$13.95) begins with what ought to be commonplace: Government helps to shape the way we live and, hence, the kind of people we are. President Reagan to the contrary, all tax laws regulate the economy and "bring about social change"; the fact that moving expenses are deductible, for example, subsidizes mobility, helps to liberate individuals, and destabilizes local communities.

We really know this already. When Mr. Reagan attacks "meddling" in economic and social life, we know he means that government should not *tamper* with the established forms for American soulcraft. It is that position, after all, that makes us willing to call the president a conservative.

The problem, as Will indicates, is that America is founded on the liberal "science of politics" to which the Framers adhered; in America, political conservatives become defenders of philosophic liberalism. Will's argument is radical in this essential sense: He regards America as "ill-founded," and he is asking us to change the kind of soul cherished by the laws.

The Founders of the American Republic knew that they were molding character. They believed that human beings are, by nature, separate beings, concerned with material welfare and self-preservation, not yearning souls drawn by the love of higher things. They framed institutions meant to encourage Americans to be acquisitive and private-spirited—no threat to the public order of a regime designed to combine individual freedom with durability, a republic intended to further our mastery over nature, not to elevate our souls.

Will wants something better, a political society devoted to high goods and excellences, and especially one worthy of our devotion. As Will observes, a polity founded on the proposition that self-preservation is the highest human good has difficulty with military policy, just as the legitimation of self-interest makes it difficult to call for public-spirited sacrifice.

Will hopes to "recast" conservatism in support of these ends, which seemingly amount to making conservatives into revolutionaries. That paradoxical result is possible, in Will's view, because conservatives "worry in collective terms" even though they "govern in terms of severe individualism." In practical life, conservatives see the need for patriotism, community spirit, and stable social groups. Will hopes that these practical concerns will lead conservatives to change their theory, at least tempering the "fierce and ideological" individualism and the "economic egoism" that found their doctrine.

Yet while practical constraints may lead conservatives to moderate their teaching, such considerations do not

require them to change it. Even practice is not wholly on Will's side: Conservatives "worry" about the decay of morality, but they are *driven* to produce economic growth. The Republican party is the party of business as much, or more, than it is the party of conservatism. It stands, consequently, for change and material wealth, for well-being measured in the crude but rigorous scale of the bottom line. In practice, in other words, it is quite impossible for the Republicans to be a party of *philosophic* conservatism.

There is, however, a more basic flaw in Will's thesis. Will is not only observing that thought *does* tend to follow practice; he is arguing that it *ought* to do so. Conservatives should yield to "the broad popular imperatives of the day" in thought as well as policy. Yet it is hard to combine this sort of pragmatism with the teaching that the things of the soul are higher than those of the body.

Will admires Edmund Burke, as one might expect, and he identifies Burke's doctrine with that of ancient political philosophy, exemplified by Aristotle. But while Burke deplored speculative political philosophy on principle, classical political thought did not believe—as Will does—that it is impossible and unwise, "in theory or in fact," to fuse the good man and the good citizen. Classical thought, even in its Aristotelian form, insisted on the importance in *theory* of that best state in which a good human being can be a good citizen. Such a state illumines practice by emphasizing the distinction between what is best in theory and what is best in fact. Will suggests, by contrast, that theory should submit to the limits of practice.

This has an important meaning for practical politics. Burke argued, as Will does, that man is "naturally social," meaning that in practice human beings *need* society. Aristotle, however, called human beings "political animals," meaning that they are naturally *drawn* toward self-government and the good life. For Burke and Will, politically what matters most about human beings is their material needs; Aristotle teaches us never to slight the human yearning for dignity.

Will argues for a conservative political economy that, while attempting to strengthen crucial institutions like the family and the community, would follow an "ethic of common provision." Government would "provide the poor with cash to buy necessities from the private sector," thus reducing the need for bureaucracy. These are valuable goals, but they are not *enough*. To care for the poor via a more efficient dole is to debase souls, not to elevate them, nor can such an ethic remoralize society. Will's "ethic of common provision" is materialism with compassion, the New Deal at its worst. The New Deal at its best insisted on work as the basis for provision because it had regard for the dignity of citizens. The "warm citizenship approximating friendship" that Will values requires more than common *provision*: Our friends demand a great deal of us, in addition to helping and encouraging us, and our best friends perceive and insist on our highest excellences of spirit.

*Wilson Carey McWilliams*