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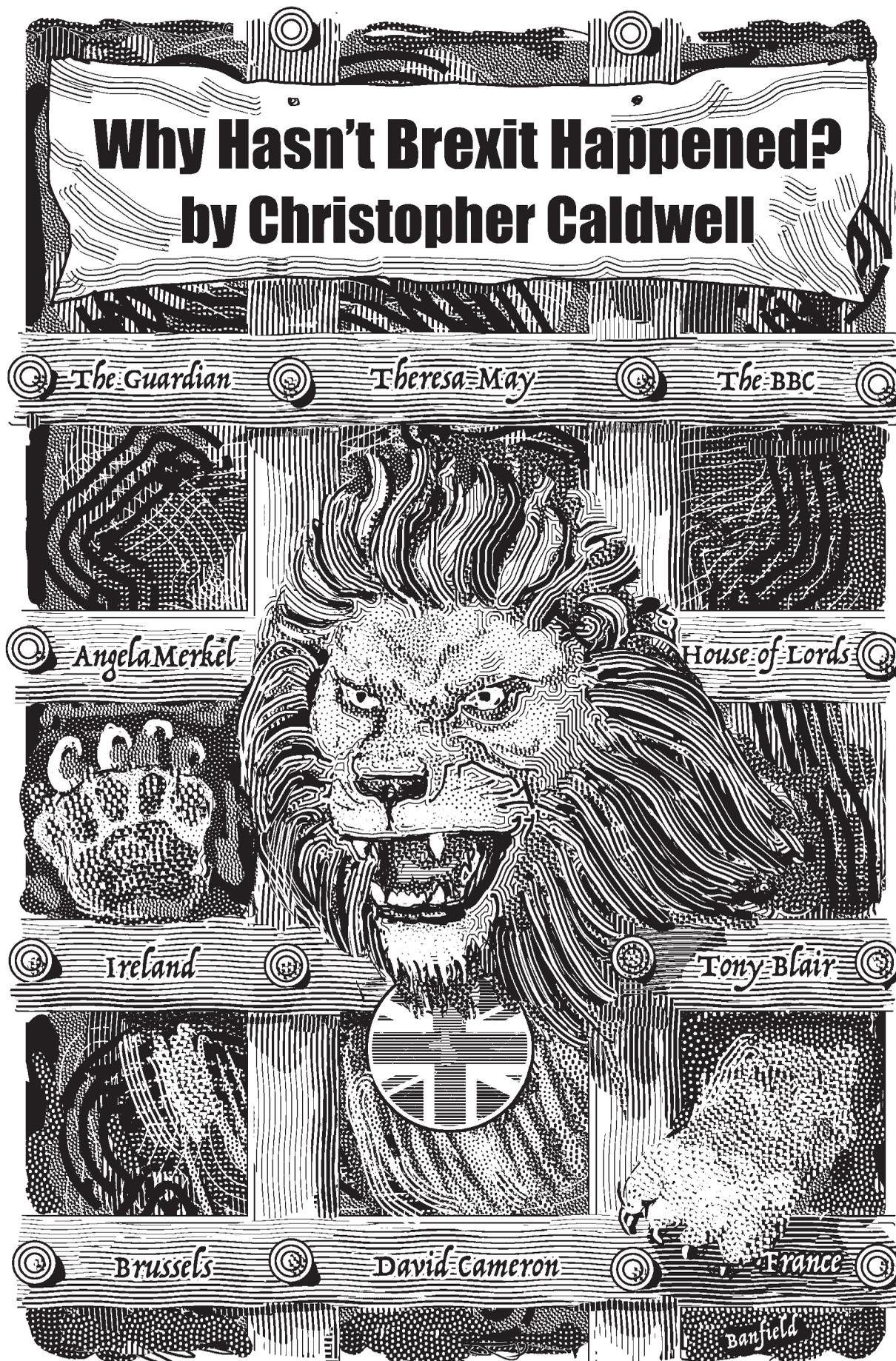
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Book Review by Steven F. Hayward

SENSIBILITY AS SOULCRAFT

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



AS GEORGE WILL NEARS HIS 80TH birthday, he has produced *The Conservative Sensibility*, the summa of his long career in opinion journalism. Unlike his periodic collections of topical columns, this big book is written to last for many seasons to come. (The name “Trump” does not appear once.) A close look at the sweep of Will’s career reveals subtle changes in his political outlook, reflecting the maturation of his own views but also of American conservatism. An impressive achievement, *The Conservative Sensibility* deserves to take its place with such classics as Friedrich Hayek’s *The Road to Serfdom* (1944) and Richard Weaver’s *Ideas Have Consequences* (1948).

In 1981, on the occasion of his 40th birthday, Will whimsically remarked that “I have been eagerly anticipating my ‘mid-life crisis,’ that moment when the middle-aged male does something peculiar.” It was not forthcoming, and he quickly admitted that “my

mid-life crisis is that I am not having a mid-life crisis.” But arguably he did have a slow-moving midlife intellectual crisis: *The Conservative Sensibility* shows him working it out at last. Will’s midlife intellectual crisis, and its resolution, mirrors the midlife crisis of post-Reagan conservatism, which is still working itself out even as it recalibrates its meaning in relation to Donald Trump’s presidency.

WILL ALSO DELIVERED THE GODKIN Lectures at Harvard University in 1981, the basis for his slender book *Statecraft as Soulcraft: What Government Does* (1983). It was, he self-deprecatingly wrote later, “read by dozens,” but some of those dozens found it “peculiar” in just the way a midlife crisis might manifest itself. In those days, Will described himself as a “Tory,” because “I trace the pedigree of my philosophy to Burke, Newman, Disraeli, and others who were more skeptical, even pessimistic,

about the modern world than most people are who today call themselves conservatives.” (His collection of columns published the previous year was titled, *The Pursuit of Virtue and Other Tory Notions*.) Though Will’s erudition encompassed American thinkers and writers, he chose three British thinkers as his inspirations.

The Conservative Sensibility repudiates the main argument of *Statecraft as Soulcraft*. Will now believes that he was “quite wrong” to think “that the American nation was ‘ill-founded’ because too little attention was given to the explicit cultivation of the virtues requisite for the success of a republic.” The “defect of better motives” was, plain and simple, not a defect of the founding. But Will is too hard on himself. Perhaps *Statecraft as Soulcraft* should be thought of as an early first draft for *The Conservative Sensibility*, which is more than three times as long. Some important differences and continuities

between the two books reveal how Will has “refined and enlarged” his views, to borrow a phrase from *The Federalist*.

IN PARTICULAR, HE HAS CHANGED HIS mind about James Madison. In the earlier book Will blamed our supposed neglect of civic and individual virtue on Madison, who had founded a government on the low but solid ground of accommodating and checking the people’s self-interest and passions. Will’s heart belonged to Edmund Burke, the thinker cited most extensively in *Statecraft as Soulcraft*. “American conservatism needs a Burke, a Disraeli—a self-conscious practitioner who can articulate the principles implicit in the statecraft he practices,” Will wrote 36 years ago. Furthermore, “The conservatism for which I argue is a ‘European’ conservatism.... It is the conservatism of Augustine and Aquinas, Shakespeare and Burke, Newman and T.S. Eliot and Thomas Mann.” In calling for revisions to conservative rhetoric about government, Will argued that it should be “less Madisonian and [John] Marshallian.” Like Russell Kirk’s, Will’s brand of American conservatism back then disregarded or disowned the distinctly American elements of our political life.

By contrast, Will’s new book places the American Founding front and center:

Although it distresses some American conservatives to be told this, American conservatism has little in common with European conservatism, which descended from, and often is still tainted by, throne-and-altar, blood-and-soil nostalgia, irrationality, and tribalism. American conservatism has a clear mission: It is to conserve, by articulating and demonstrating the continuing pertinence of, the Founders’ thinking...reconnecting the country with the principles of the Founding [is] conservatism’s core purpose today.

The Conservative Sensibility explicitly repudiates Burke:

Subtle and profound, [Burke’s] works are rich in prudential lessons that remain germane. Nevertheless, his thinking is in the European tradition of throne-and-altar conservatism.... Burke’s conservatism was, in large measure, produced by British premises and French events.... American conservatism is not only different from, it is at bottom antagonistic to British and continental European conservatism.

It is not so much that Will offers a sweeping revision of Madison as that he perceives more fully the virtues of the founders’ thought. Now, he says, “properly understood, conservatism is the Madisonian persuasion,” and “the fundamental political axis of our time is an argument between Madisonians and Wilsonians.” Will joins the growing number of conservatives who, influenced by the work of Ronald J. Pestritto (Pestritto is cited more than any other scholar in Will’s new book), regard Woodrow Wilson and Progressivism, not Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal, as the primary attack on the American Founding. Will does, however, include a good summary of how FDR built upon the Progressive attack.

OF EQUAL SIGNIFICANCE, HE ALSO DISCUSSES extensively and admiringly the Declaration of Independence and its teaching about natural right. In *Statecraft as Soulcraft*, Will is equivocal, even skeptical, of the Declaration, especially its self-evident truths about natural right. He refers to its most famous sentences as a “highly charged declaration of a political philosophy” that ultimately amounts to a “rhetorical flourish” rather than a serious political theory. Will now says, however, that “the most important paragraph in humanity’s political history [is] the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence,” precisely because it does embody serious principles that are the ultimate stumbling block to modern progressive ambitions.

And at the heart of the Declaration’s principles is the central contested issue of our time: human nature. Progressives and their allies consider it unfixed, malleable, and therefore raw material that invites endless progressive social engineering. Will doesn’t equivocate here: “If there is no sense in which there is an eternal human nature, there cannot be eternal principles—certainly no self-evident truths—of political organization and action.” Throughout *The Conservative Sensibility*, he returns to human nature’s centrality. “Civilization’s enemies attack civilization’s foundational idea,” he writes, “the proposition that human nature is not infinitely plastic and therefore that people cannot be socialized to accept or do whatever those in charge of socialization desire.”

Will still believes that “measures must be taken to make virtue less rare and more predictable,” but whereas his earlier book treated our deficiency in promoting virtue as a political failure, his new one understands it primarily as an educational failure. His chapter on the wreck of American education today, a subject absent from *Statecraft as Soulcraft*, notes the continuity between the founders and the classics, a subject usually missing from the “low

but solid” rendering of the founding. “[Madison] and his fellow Founders conceived of happiness as Aristotle did, as a durable state of worthy satisfaction with life.... Happiness, therefore, is an *activity*.”

AND WHAT IS THE PRIMARY “ACTIVITY” of America? Here Will pivots from Madison to Alexander Hamilton, and we see another significant revision. The commercial society that Will had mildly disdained in *Statecraft as Soulcraft* he now sees as an incubator of civility: “In fact, the nature of life in a commercial society under limited government is a daily instruction in the self-reliance and politeness—taken together, the civility—of a lightly governed open society.” The subtitle of the chapter where this appears is “Capitalism as Soulcraft.” Will doesn’t neglect or deny the arguments of Harvard sociologist Daniel Bell and others that dynamic capitalism undermines some virtues necessary for ordered liberty and human flourishing, but regards the welfare state as social decay’s more significant cause.

The subject of political economy displays one of Will’s more important revisions. “If conservatism is to engage itself with the way we live now, it must address government’s graver purposes with an affirmative doctrine of the welfare state,” he argued in *Statecraft as Soulcraft*’s brief chapter on “Conservative Political Economy.” “A welfare state is implied by conservative rhetoric. A welfare state can be an embodiment of a wholesome ethic of common provision.” Back then, Will wasn’t much impressed with libertarians; he called them “ideological capitalists,” and included a genial sideswipe at Milton Friedman just to make sure we got the point.

The difference between this and his much longer “Political Economy” chapter in *The Conservative Sensibility* can be summarized by a single name that never appeared in the earlier book: Friedrich Hayek. Today Will endorses the central insight that Hayek variously described as the “fatal conceit,” “constructivist fallacy,” or “knowledge problem”: the coordination of human knowledge presupposed by socialism or central planning is epistemologically impossible. Will quotes one of Hayek’s shorter formulas as the epigram for the chapter: “The curious task of economics is to demonstrate to men how little they really know about what they imagine they can design,” and Will goes on to give an able summary of Hayek’s seminal 1945 essay “The Use of Knowledge in Society.”

Consequences ensue. Milton Friedman is rehabilitated, and Will calls as witnesses a number of contemporary thinkers who can



be considered Hayek and Friedman’s progeny, such as John Cochrane, Deirdre McCloskey, and Matt Ridley. In perhaps his most startling confession, Will thinks the Supreme Court’s 1905 ruling in *Lochner v. New York* was correct: government regulations cannot violate individuals’ constitutional rights to enter into contracts. His argument owes a great deal to David Bernstein’s powerful revisionist history, *Rehabilitating Lochner: Defending Individual Rights Against Progressive Reform* (2011).

BUT IF WILL IS NOW MORE FRIENDLY TO classical libertarianism and notes that the welfare state is much more pernicious than consumerist capitalism as an acid eating away at family stability and bourgeois virtues, he has not embraced the hyper-libertarianism that disdains *any* political or policy role oriented toward both virtue and greater social equality. His richer understanding of the sensibility conservatives should bring to social policy can be revealed again by comparing parallel passages between *Statecraft as Soulcraft* and *The Conservative Sensibility*. In the former, Will argued:

But conservatives, in their eagerness to put government in its place (which they think is down, and far away), ar-

gue fatuously that “only people produce wealth; government does not.” Government produces the infrastructure of society—legal, physical, educational, from highways through skills—that is a precondition for the production of wealth. The unlovely locution “human capital” reflects the impulse to reduce all social categories to economic ones, but it also reflects a recognition that investment must be made in people before they can be socially competent. And it is obvious, once you think about it, that government is, and must be, a major investor.

This formulation sounds uncomfortably similar to President Obama’s claim, “If you’ve got a business—you didn’t build that. Somebody else made that happen.” Or, as Senator Elizabeth Warren had argued before him, “You moved your goods to market on the roads the rest of us paid for. You hired workers the rest of us paid to educate.”

In *The Conservative Sensibility*, Will correctly discerns that for today’s progressives, emphasizing the governmentally provided “infrastructure of society” is not intended to support the flourishing of individuals or to make greater individual achievement possible. Quite the opposite: Obama and Warren “both

spoke in order to advance the progressive project of diluting the concept of individualism. Dilution is a prerequisite for advancement of a collectivist political agenda.” The progressive appeals to “society” (or, to invoke former Representative Barney Frank’s embrace of government, “the things we do together”) serve as a sanctification of envy, and a justification for wealth confiscation and redistribution. Progressives are usually more artful than New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio, who says that “there’s plenty of money in this country—it’s just in the wrong hands.” As Will warns, “government will not be a disinterested judge of what is its proper share of others’ wealth.”

WITH ONE SIMPLE DISTINCTION, Will’s prior position on government’s affirmative role can be squared with his current clarity about rapacious progressivism: It is conservatives, not progressives, who appreciate society and understand its complexity. And toward the family, the most important aspect of society, progressivism has been indifferent, if not hostile. “It is arguable,” Will writes, “that the most molecular word in political discourse, the noun that denotes something on which all else depends and builds, is neither ‘justice’ nor ‘freedom’ nor ‘equality.’ It is ‘family.’” Whether the struggles of the family in recent



decades should be attributed to progressives' mendacity (such as from feminists) or progressives' incompetence (such as from Great Society programs), the overall moral and cultural decay of our time is beyond the reach of conventional politics.

While pointedly rejecting the conventional narrative about income inequality that holds center stage for progressives today, Will explains in a roundabout way that conservatives should take inequality more seriously than the Left does, largely because conservatives do not avert their gaze from natural and deeply ingrained social causes of unequal outcomes. But he goes on to argue that conservatives should treat more seriously the barriers to equal opportunity. Again, there is a continuity with *Statecraft as Soulcraft*, in which Will argued that our growing understanding of "early childhood development suggests that 'equality of opportunity' is a much more complicated matter than most conservatives can comfortably acknowledge." He goes on in that book to suggest enhancing equality of opportunity by various forms of state action, family-friendly tax credits being one possibility.

IN *THE CONSERVATIVE SENSIBILITY* WILL expounds this subject at greater length, reflecting the insights and concerns of James Q. Wilson and, above all, Will's great friend Daniel Patrick Moynihan. "The depressing truth is that inequality has deeper, more complex origins than we have thought. And America's foundational promise of equality of opportunity is far more problematic and elusive than we, particularly conservatives, have thought." No mention of tax credits or other small-ball this time. To the contrary, channeling both Hayek and Burke, Will warns against the progressive hubris that we know how to fix complex social problems. Intuitive solutions "will be wrong most of the time," and when complex, undesigned systems such as the family "are unintentionally weakened to the point of disintegration, no one knows how to put them back together." What is most needed now is for "government to swear a version of the Hippocratic oath: 'Do no harm.'"

Will's capacious treatment of progressivism's threat to the republic, and robust revisions of his previous perspective on the American Founding, would suffice to make this book interesting and important. But there's

much more. His chapter on "The Judicial Supervision of Democracy" lays out the case for what is today called "judicial engagement" on behalf of protecting natural rights. Will unites the Declaration and the Constitution, consequently endorsing constitutional principles not necessarily in the document's text. He follows Harry V. Jaffa in linking Robert Bork and Antonin Scalia with the majoritarian positivism of Oliver Wendell Holmes. Will says that by criticizing the defective originalism that has facilitated the administrative state's relentless expansion, "Clarence Thomas becomes America's indispensable constitutionalist."

His chapter on foreign policy, "Going Abroad: A Creedal Nation in a World on Probation," is more theoretical than tethered to current events. Aside from a brief critique of George W. Bush's idealism, which manifested itself in the agonizing war and occupation in Iraq, Will takes the long view, revealing a geopolitical realism more harmonious with Thucydides than John Bolton. "Reflection about foreign policy, as about all other spheres of politics, should begin with the basic question: What is the essential, unchanging nature of human beings?" Applying Hayek's "fatal conceit" to the domain of foreign policy, Will finds our incompetence at nation-building has the same root as our incompetence at domestic social engineering.

He wants us to shed not only progressive romanticism about domestic social policy, but also our "temperamental optimism" about foreign policy—a trickier matter, precisely because America is founded on an explicitly idealistic creed. Will doesn't just want us to be realistic or prudent but properly pessimistic about the world. "In foreign policy, as elsewhere, one of conservatism's functions is to say some things that people do not want to hear, such as this: War, which always has been part of the human story, always will be." Offering no brief for isolationism, he merely thinks our departures from John Quincy Adams's declaration that we "do not go abroad searching for monsters to destroy" have lacked prudence.

THE *CONSERVATIVE SENSIBILITY*'S MOST idiosyncratic chapter concerns religion and science. Will describes himself as "an amiable, low-voltage atheist," for whom "[t]heism is an optional component of conservatism." His main object is to fix our

emphasis on the first half of Jefferson's phrase in the Declaration about "the laws of nature" in preference to "nature's God," who was "not necessarily the God of the Bible." His respectful argument curdles only in his discussion of two figures—Whittaker Chambers and Russell Kirk—whose emphasis on the necessity of religious faith is, Will thinks, "politically ruinous" for conservatives.

After 30 pages of discussing religion, the chapter takes a sharp turn to science and cosmology, subjects rarely discussed in Will's newspaper columns. His Cook's tour from physics to biology contends that an entirely secular openness to transcendence is possible: who needs revelation when the awesome mysteries of the cosmos fire human contemplation and creativity? Or as he puts it, "Why speak of emptiness when our world is still filled with...astonishments, including the worlds Shakespeare created and peopled?"

OF COURSE, A KEY ASPECT OF MODERN cosmology is entropy: everything eventually runs down. *The Conservative Sensibility* concludes with a return to entropy in the political realm: "Conservatism's task is to urgently warn about what is perishable: Everything." The remedy is a return to the centrality of reestablishing respect for the principles of constitutional government, which in turn depends on one of the oldest and simplest of virtues: self-control or self-restraint. "[T]he Republican Party's intellectual pedigree traces directly to Lincoln's denial that Kansas could choose to have slaves."

Today's progressives promote a slavishness to the nanny state that doesn't just undermine self-control but debases politics itself. Although George Will can be said to have taken a libertarian turn in his late career, he does not have the anti-political attitude that often accompanies libertarian insights into government failure. He diagnoses a "protracted apostasy from principles that, by limiting the scope of government, protected the stature of politics" as the cause of our contemporary peril. His remedy is a "conservative sensibility [that] knows that the possibilities of politics, although limited, are not negligible."

Steven F. Hayward is a visiting professor at the Goldman School of Public Policy at the University of California, Berkeley, and a fellow at the Bipartisan Policy Center.

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