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George Will's *Statecraft as Soulcraft*: Selected Passages

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Abstract: I select 46 passages from George Will's *Statecraft as Soulcraft: What Government Does* (1983), because they deserve a fresh hearing.

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Acknowledgment: Mr. G.F. Will holds the copyright on *Statecraft as Soulcraft* and kindly granted permission to reproduce the 46 quotations contained in this paper.

During the past fifteen years I have grown fonder of George Will, particularly as he has grown more libertarian. Recently I reread the book based on the Godkin Lectures he delivered at Harvard University in 1981, now 36 years ago, and many of the passages struck me as worth hearing freshly again today. The book is *Statecraft as Soulcraft: What Government Does* (1983). The basic drift is that government inevitably affects the moral character of the governed and inevitably does so in ways non-neutral with respect to the higher things, and that we need to understand such truths to govern better and more responsibly. The term *soulcraft*, however, overstates what Will wants to say, as it conjures a coven of sorcerers creating and designing souls. Will then labors to dial back the impression left by *soulcraft*. The Will of today probably would dial it back even more, or avoid *soulcraft* altogether. The quotations that follow are amiably selected. The order follows that in which they appear in the book.

#1 (p. 20)

And it is, among other things, untidy and aesthetically displeasing for government to deny that it does what it cannot avoid doing. Government would do better what it does if it would admit what it is doing. The aim of government is justice, which is more apt to come about if government is more aware of, and forthright about, the fact that statecraft is, inevitably, soulcraft.

#2 (p. 20)

The idea that governments should be neutral in major conflicts about social values is only slightly more peculiar than the idea that government can be neutral.

#3 (p. 27)

The greatest modern political philosopher to take the ancients' view of things was Burke. He was a man of Ciceronean (and Licolneqsue) rhetorical gifts. This is not coincidental: If you believe in the better angels of our nature, and that the purpose of politics is to summon them, you shall do so with rhetoric. Burke believed, as Cicero did, that human beings "are bound, and are generally disposed, to look up with reverence to the best patterns of the species."

#4 (p. 29)

What made Machiavelli so indicative of a new age is less what he said than his saying of it. Worldly people were not amazed by his idea that civil and moral life may depend on political practices that are uncivil and immoral. What was remarkable was that the world had reached a point where such things were said in a matter-of-fact tone of voice.

#5 (p. 31)

Why is military conscription such a difficult issue for liberal democratic states? Because the means necessary to protect such states often conflict with the reasons for such states.

#6 (p. 40)

But prudent political thinkers have more worries than appear prominently in Madison's philosophy. The American Founders talked almost exclusively about institutional arrangements and the sociology of the factions presupposed by the institutional arrangements. They talked little about the sociology of virtue, or the husbandry of exemplary elites – the “best patterns of the species” of which Burke wrote. Perhaps this is because they assumed that the necessity of constant, systematic concern for the cultivation of character was plain as a pikestaff; perhaps it is because the continuous existence in America of an aristocracy of public-spirited talents was assumed. Rashly.

#7 (p. 41)

The oldest conundrum in political philosophy is this: If there is a natural right, should not knowledge of it be natural?

#8 (p. 44)

As has been recently demonstrated in the worlds of art and academics, if you redefine excellence recklessly enough, there will be no shortage of excellence.

#9 (p. 50)

A completely and permanently open mind will be an empty mind – if it is a mind at all.

#10 (p. 55)

Political philosophy began in Greek city-states. Its origin was urban, and it is a question how much the density of a society can be thinned before the idea of citizenship becomes too attenuated to hold meaning.

#11 (p. 56)

The fact that Americans were not physically close might be compensated for by making them morally close through a crucial shared proposition. Philosophy would supply an intimacy that geography impeded.

#12 (p. 56)

The emergence of the Christian Church, which asserted custody over the inner life of Western man, set the stage for the abdication of state responsibility in that sphere. By the eighteenth century, the abdication was justified without reference to religious responsibilities or any division of labor with other institutions.

#13 (p. 56)

The most politically important idea of the last two centuries is the idea that human nature has a history.

#14 (p. 67)

The oldest question of political philosophy is still the right question: What kinds of conventions are especially suited to human nature?

#15 (p. 68)

Begin at the outer edges of the awful. Begin from circumstances that are so intolerable that they drive many persons to desperation. Then work in, by small inferences, toward an understanding of political excellence. Along the way, much will be learned about how excellence is related to essential human traits – the very traits thwarted by inhuman regimes.

#16 (p. 70)

We serve good governance by acting on the assumptions that underlie our moral language.

#17 (p. 79)

But a prudent legal system will respect Professor Lon Fuller's distinction between morality of aspiration and the morality of duty.

#18 (p. 81)

But between compulsion and indifference stands a broad area of persuasion, incentives and other non-coercive encouragements to better living.

#19 (p. 82)

Fuller vigorously rejects the idea that "In order to judge what is bad in human conduct, we must know what is perfectly good." Thus the morality of aspiration need not be the foundation of all morality, and men can achieve a political arrangement – a consensus on social duties – without first achieving consensus on the upper reaches of human aspiration. The moral injunction "Thou shalt not kill" implies no picture of the perfect life.

#20 (p. 90)

The transformation of the word "elite" into an epithet is a symptom that society no longer understands that the political question is always which elites shall rule, not whether elites shall rule. The use of "elite" as an epithet is symptomatic of a society in which the standards of excellence are regarded as a form of aggression.

#21 (pp. 94-5)

Statecraft as soulcraft should mean only a steady inclination, generally unfelt and unthought. It should mean a disposition, in the weighing of political persons and measures, to include consideration of whether they accord with worthy ends for the polity. Such ends conduce – that word is strong enough – to the improvement of persons. When this political inclination is a community instinct, there is no question of a particular arm or agency of government’s being restlessly responsible for civic virtue. A particular institution charged with the routinized planning of virtue, the way the Federal Highway Administration plans highways, would be ominous and would deserve the ridicule it would receive.

#22 (p. 95)

But it is a *non sequitur* to say that because the state has a monopoly on legitimate coercion, its essence is coercion, actual or latent.

#23 (p. 106)

Today in the Federal City – the seat of the government that Hamilton did more than anyone except Washington to establish – there is a splendid memorial of Hamilton’s rival, Jefferson. There is no Hamilton memorial. But if you seek his monument, look around. This is Hamilton’s America.

#24 (p. 119)

Socialism is an expression of the disease for which it purports to be the cure.

#25 (p. 120)

Industrialism has been a thorough solvent of traditional values, a revolutionary force for change.

#26 (p. 124)

Many conservatives are fond of the epigram that the phrase “political economy” represents the marriage of two words that should be divorced on the grounds of incompatibility. But clear-minded persons can more reasonably object to the phrase on the ground that the adjective “political” is a superfluous modifier because any economic arrangement is, by definition, a political arrangement.

#27 (pp. 125-6)

It is comparably untenable for those who favor a purer capitalism to argue that they, unlike all advocates of different systems, are acting “neutrally” by keeping or taking “economics” out of politics, or vice versa.

#28 (p. 126)

A famous economist, who has a Nobel Prize and (what is almost as much fun) a regular column in *Newsweek*, recently became so exasperated with me (for some deviation from *laissez-faire* orthodoxy) that he wrote a stiff note. He said that he likes what I write – except when I write about economics. I am too exquisitely polite to have replied that I like what he writes – except when he writes about politics, and he rarely writes about anything else.

#29 (p. 132)

Federalist 51 is, with the possible exception of *Federalist* 10, the most important short essay on the American government and psyche.

#30 (p. 134)

I understand, and really am reasonably cheerful about, the irrevocable triumph of modernity in justifying social orders based on wide release of passions and appetites. That is why I am so concerned about the shaping of passions and desires in the direction of virtue. By virtue I mean nothing arcane or obscure. I mean good citizenship, whose principal components are moderation, social sympathy and willingness to sacrifice private desires for public ends.

#31 (p. 140)

AMERICANS, more than most people, believe that history is the result of individual decisions to implement conscious intentions. For Americans, more than most people, history has been that. After all, the nation began, not so long ago, as a virgin continent planted along the Atlantic edge with many people who chose to come there for reasons of religious scruple or other sharply defined convictions. [¶] This sense of openness, of possibility and autonomy, has been a national asset as precious as the topsoil of the Middle West. But like topsoil, it is subject to erosion; it requires tending. And it is not bad for Americans to come to terms with the fact that for them too, history is a story of inertia and the unforeseen. What is most often unforeseen is the inertia.

#32 (p. 142)

Homer can be said to have been the true founder of his people because he gave them what made them distinctive: their gods, and heroes as incarnations of the virtues. But today there is no canon of books that play the role the Bible and Shakespeare once played in the education of English-speaking people. There are few books which supply civilizing models of virtue and vice, or which make possible a unifying common bond of communication.

#33 (p. 144)

My political thinking has been defined by simultaneous reflection about the best and worst in the Western political tradition. But I am bound to say that the worst example – totalitarianism – has been especially influential. Its most lurid eruption was in the middle of Europe, in what was, by many measures, Europe's most educated and generally advanced nation. I have been an almost obsessive student of the Nazi episode, and I believe that when it is properly fathomed, it yields lessons that point toward the political philosophy I have sketched in this volume.

#34 (p. 144)

My point, remember, is not just that statecraft should be soulcraft. My point is that statecraft *is* soulcraft. It is by its very nature. Statecraft need not be conscious of itself as soulcraft; it need not affect the citizens' inner lives skillfully, or creatively, or decently. But the one thing it cannot be, over time, is irrelevant to those inner lives.

#35 (p. 149)

Hitler and other villains – Mussolini and Mao, Khomeini and Nasser and Castro and others – have been wind-makers, blowing the masses like dust, giving shape to societies that have become, for one reason or another, invertebrate. A society in which the public turns to dust of mere “interests” is reduced to hoping that the wind will not rise. Prudence requires measures to encourage citizens to be linked by ideas that give public content to the public mind, and give it in a shape and substance that deflect idle winds.

#36 (p. 149)

Biologically, we are directed toward culture; we are pointed beyond our individual existences, toward our species, in the form of our community and progeny.

#37 (p. 150)

Robert Peel defined conservatism as the practice of “that combination of laws, of institutions, of usages, of habits and of manners which has contributed to mould and form the character of Englishmen.”

#38 (p. 154)

Because “national character” is not a concept that lends itself to quantification, it is not the sort of variable with which social scientists enjoy dealing. That is one reason there is a reluctance to consider why national character is a variable – why a nation's character varies over time. But the reluctance must be overcome; as Walter Lippmann said, “The acquired culture is not transmitted in our genes, and so the issue is always in doubt.”

#39 (p. 154-5)

The development of the ability to distinguish between the good and the traditional was an important accomplishment in the history of the human race. But that invention posed a problem which is inherently perennial: assessing the traditional and deciding which portions of it to relinquish, and which to transmit. There is all the difference in the world between regarding tradition as instrumental in achieving justice and regarding it as the standard of justice.

#40 (p. 158)

Because of the scale of modern government, the great majority of the people know relatively little about what the government is doing, at least until it has done it, and generally do not know much about it even then. Indeed, it is at least arguable that a century ago, before the expansion of print journalism and before the invention of broadcast journalism, the great majority of the people knew about a larger fraction of what their government was doing than the great majority knows today.

#41 (p. 159)

To revitalize politics and strengthen government, we need to talk about talk. We need a new, respectful rhetoric – respectful, that is, of the better angels of mankind’s nature. It must be more Ciceronian, more Lincolnesque, less Madisonian and Marshalllean. Talk matters, because mankind is not just matter, not just a machine with an appetitive ghost in it. We are not what we eat. We are, to some extent, what we and our leaders – the emblematic figures of our polity – say we are.

#42 (p. 162)

All things can pass away, including a citizenry’s sense of what kind of people they want to be. So a nation requires a constant philosophic contemplation about its ends. But in this country, with the high drama of its founding moment and the articulateness of its Founders, contemplation of ends involves – in fact, must begin with – contemplation of beginnings.

#43 (p. 162)

America's Centennial and Bicentennial celebrations differed in one striking particular. In 1876, the Centennial was resolutely forward-looking. It focused on the latest machinery. But in 1976, the public's imagination was caught only by an elegant anachronism, the "tall ships." It is possible to put a positive cast on this contrast. In the last century, Americans have learned to look back. Looking forward is natural and easy; the future is coming, whether we like it or not, and it will be a realm of action. Looking back is optional; it is an acquired taste and a learned skill. But is the requisite reflectiveness in evidence? Nostalgia is sterile when it reflects only a failure of nerve, a flinching from an arduous present or a daunting future. We need an intellectual, not a sentimental encounter with our past – with the mental world that has produced the present world.

#44 (pp. 163-4)

A theme of modern American historiography is that something epochal occurred about 1890, when the frontier was "closed." Certainly something changed – some source of energy, some agreeable itch or tingle in the nation's soul – when the age of physical exploration ended.

#45 (p. 165)

In a world that is increasingly inhospitable to the ideas and disciplines of liberty, this Republic continues to live improvidently off a dwindling legacy of cultural capital which was accumulated in sterner, more thoughtful eras. That legacy is a renewable resource, but it will not regenerate spontaneously.

#46 (p. 165)

By not drawing deeply enough from the Western political tradition, this nation has acquired political values and practices which involve a disproportionate individualism and an inadequate sense of human beings as social creatures. The older, richer part of the Western political tradition is now too remote for our own good. But a tradition need not remain as remote as time and negligence have made it. If the wine of the Western tradition has become watery, let us pour some of the vintage that is in the old bottles.

One quibble (aside, that is, from the book's sometimes being insufficiently anti-statist, something that Will today might say as well): He expresses a characterization of the moderns also found for example in Leo Strauss and Allan Bloom I think dubious: that the moderns forsake the higher things. The reader gets the impression that the one notable political-philosopher exception to that broad stroke is Burke (pp. 27, 79, 146). Yes to Burke, but Burke is by no means the only. Hume and Smith, for example, are also suitably non-"modern," as Strauss, Bloom, and Will invest *modern*, and given that Smith is quite emblematically modern, that alone leaves the whole stroke a runny mess. In fact, some of Will's sentences (pp. 32, 34, 62, 134) tend to portray Hume and Smith as envisioning a society of human lives spent on low things (even while Smith was the inspiration for something Will lauds, 79-82, namely the dual-moralities analysis of Lon Fuller (1969)¹). As for Burke, Will promulgates the understanding of him as conservative as opposed to liberal; Will insufficiently relates Burke's liberalism. Thus Burke on the one side and Hume and Smith on the other are inversely distorted. Rather than two moral visions at odds, they were pretty much three peas in a pod.

The Wikipedia page on Will includes a section "References in Popular Culture," describing bits from the *Simpsons*, *Saturday Night Live*, *30 Rock*, and so on, and the following:

¹ Fuller (1969, 6) acknowledges that his dual-moralities analysis borrows from Adam Smith. I love Fuller's analysis, but I have reservations about the appellations he gives. Regarding "the morality of duty," the problem is that duty is something in Smith clearly not confined to grammar-like rules (which are characteristic of the virtue of commutative justice); duty also extends to the other virtues as well. Regarding "the morality of aspiration," that name highlights the praiseworthy side only, leaving the blameworthy side in the shadows. For a similar dual-moralities presentation, drawing heavily from Smith, see Clark and Lee (2017), who use "mundane" and "amiable."

In the 1995 *Seinfeld* episode "The Jimmy", Kramer mentions Will during a conversation with Jerry, George, and Elaine about men finding other men attractive. While Jerry and George say they "can't find beauty in a man", Kramer says, "I'll tell you who is an attractive man ... George Will." However, when Elaine suggests that Will is smart, Kramer says "No, no I don't find him all that bright."

Wikipedia page on George Will

Don't let anyone tell you pushpin is as good as poetry.

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