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THE MEANING OF FREEDOM

by

GEORGE F. WILL

The following article is drawn from the Tenth Sol Feinstone Lecture, presented at the US Military Academy on 5 October 1982.

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I have had essentially two careers. My current profession is as a journalist, commenting on the day's news. My training is as a political philosopher. I want to try, with your indulgence, to combine these two pursuits; to briefly survey the political climate of this country in the 1980s; and then to say what I think is alarming about it and why I think it derives from a difficult, ambiguous, and perhaps wrong idea of freedom—a four-century-old error now that represents a kind of wrong-turning in the American, and indeed the Western, tradition of political philosophy. Which is to say, I'm going to be mildly depressing. That's all right; I subscribe to the Ohio-in-1895 theory of history, so named by me for the little known fact that in Ohio in 1895 there were just two automobiles, and they collided.

I have a strong sense that things go wrong in America because of certain wrong ideas about freedom and the political order and what we owe to our society. This country is increasingly at the mercy of hostile forces and increasingly finding it difficult to defend itself. I believe that we have for too long subscribed to the belief that freedom is the absence of restraints imposed by others. And I believe that a natural corollary to that erroneous belief is the erroneous belief that government exists simply to facilitate, to the maximum extent possible, the unrestrained enjoyment of private appetites. This is a political philosophy flowing directly from a

concept of freedom that I take to be, in the long run, disastrous; and to the extent that our country is founded on it, our country is ill-founded. I shall come to that gloomy conclusion, and perhaps an optimistic coda, a few pages hence.

Let me begin by telling you where we are and then try to relate where we are, in our political and economic argument, to what, indeed, I take to be our philosophic roots.

The place to begin to understand the political climate of the 1980s is with the only recent political benchmark, the 1980 presidential election. The Republicans, after they won that election, set about doing what the winner of every election does systematically and aggressively, which is to misconstrue the results, to wring from the results an alleged mandate to do precisely what the person winning wanted to do anyway. In this case, the winners said that the 1980 election was that most unusual of American experiences: a positive, forward-looking affirmation of the winner's political philosophy. I see no evidence in any of the election analysis to confirm that. It seems to me reasonably clear that it was a classic, normal American election, which is to say that someone lost it, not that someone won it; indeed, the 1980 national election was a repudiation of its immediate predecessor. And if you look at the results, it wasn't as astonishing as most people thought. It was the case, I believe, that the President's margin of victory, although substantial, was only the ninth largest margin of victory in this century. Further, although the Republicans won substantial Senate gains (12 seats), Democratic candidates to the Senate won more votes in 1980 because, while Republicans

were winning close victories in small states, Glenn in Ohio and Cranston in California, for example, were winning tremendous victories for the Democratic Party.

My point is simply that the mood of the American people was divided and remains divided today. It is in this division that we see the root of the structural, systemic, political problems in this country: a problem in defining and, because of the problem in defining, a problem in defending freedom.

In the last two years, we have seen the divisions in the American mind writ large.

We have, I think, learned three important lessons. The first is that the American people talk a very different (you might say, a very much more conservative) game than they are prepared to have their government play. The second lesson is that the American middle class, the broad mass of the country, which is the articulate, organized, intense complainer about big government, is incomparably the biggest beneficiary of big government and is determined to use all its wiles and guiles to remain so. And the third lesson of the last two years—the most amusing to some and the most alarming to others—is that the conservative agenda for the United States costs more money than the liberal agenda.

Let me go over these briefly to set the stage for how we got to this peculiar argument about our politics.

When Ronald Reagan won the presidency, people said that his victory marked the end of an era. Ronald Reagan was going to melt, or so the theory was, the iron triangles that have dominated our politics in Washington, for these many years. By “iron triangle” I mean the three-sided relationship that exists between the congressional committee that authorizes a particular program, the executive bureaucracy that administers that program, and the client group in the country that benefits from it. There are 10,000 iron triangles in this interest-group-brokered liberalism we practice in Washington.

It is, indeed, the nature of our politics, of our political philosophy, to justify

organizing into private groups to bend public power to private purposes. I have often said that if you want to understand the American government, do not read the Constitution; that has precious little to do with it. Read instead the Washington telephone directory, and especially those pages that carry the listings “National Association of” There you will find some of the 2200 trade associations and other lobbies that are, after government and then publishing in all its forms, the third largest employer group in Washington. You know the big ones: the National Association of Manufacturers, the National Association of Broadcasters. You may not have heard of the National Crushed Stone Association, or the National Ice Association, or the National Truck Stop Association. Every interest group, every economic group in the country, is organized to bend the public power to its purposes.

And, indeed, why not? Listen as we go through an election year: There is one word you will hear over and over again—“responsive.” Candidate after candidate pledges that he or she will be a “responsive” officeholder. It is my thesis that what ails our government is that it is “responsive” to a fault, that it has a hair trigger to every organized and intense interest group, that it is big but not strong. It does not have the internal strength to say “no.”

A few years ago, Burger King ran a television commercial in which Burger King’s claim to fame was that at Burger King, unlike at McDonald’s, they would take the pickle off your hamburger if you didn’t want it.

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They had a jingle that went, "Hold the pickle, hold the lettuce. Special orders don't upset us Get it your way at Burger King." Government is a giant Burger King. Everyone comes to place his order and, to the extent possible, the brokered government simply delivers favors.

This is not, by the way, a partisan observation. The Republicans are just as guilty as the Democrats. Indeed, the clearest example of this degradation of the democratic dogma, this purely responsive government, is the doctrine of democracy that leaves no room for leadership. Leadership, after all, has been called the ability to inflict pain and get away with it (short-term pain for long-term gain, it is hoped). Leadership is getting people to do something they'd rather not do at the moment. It surely is the job of government to have a longer view than the average individual has, to get people to look to the future and provide for the national strength.

When Gerry Ford became President, he conducted a press conference at which he was asked if he favored a stiff tax on a gallon of gasoline as a form of price rationing to dampen demand. His answer was, and it was exactly, this: "Today I saw a poll that shows that eighty-one percent of the American people do not want to pay more for a gallon of gasoline. Therefore," said the President, "I am on solid ground in opposing it." Well, all ground seems solid when your ear is to it; and, as Churchill said, "It is very difficult to look up to someone in that position."

But it is increasingly the philosophic position of the democracies that democracy exists to do nothing more than read the latest polls and act accordingly.

Well, how do you do that if you're looking at the divided opinion of the American electorate today, the American people who complain bitterly about big government? The American electorate is comprised of people, one in seven of whom is a Social Security recipient, Social Security being incomparably the biggest component of big government, and

incomparably the most sacrosanct. One in six Americans who work off the farm works for government. And 48 or 49 percent of America's families this year will receive some form or other of transfer payment from the government about which they merrily complain, the day long.

The President says we must get government off the backs of the American people. Who does he think put it there? It was put there by legislators, elected and reelected. The Congress of the United States passed 3500 laws in the decade of the seventies. That's nearly one law a day, seven days a week, for ten years. It couldn't happen, of course, if Congress had a simple rule that said you cannot vote for a bill you have not read. But the state legislatures, which are ostensibly more responsive to the real desires of the American public, are worse. The state legislature of New York passed 9500 laws in one decade. The 50 state legislatures combined passed a quarter of a million.

They are not doing so because the legislators, who are professional politicians, get up in the morning and say, "How today can I be obnoxious to my voters?" They are doing it because the American people have a voracious appetite for public services. They also have a negligible willingness to pay for them, which accounts for our inflationary bias. Indeed, someone has said that today's conservatism is, in many cases, the prayerful belief that it is time to cut thy neighbor's subsidy.

Of course, the great American middle class is the primary beneficiary of this largess, not surprisingly. Most Americans are in the middle class; most benefits go to the middle class. This explains why, once Congress got done cutting means-tested welfare programs last year, the will to cut any further evaporated.

Now we come to the most alarming note of all for conservatives, namely, that their agenda for the country costs more than the liberal agenda, because it begins by accepting 95 percent of the liberal agenda: most of Social Security, most of Medicare, Medicaid, and Food Stamps. The argument we've been

having with such great fanfare and rolling of drums in Washington is about the very margins of the modern welfare state.

Ronald Reagan and the Republican Party were perceived as accepting the basic American consensus for the welfare state, a consensus that has been growing steadily since 1932. For 50 years now the American government has grown at a constant pace in a constant direction under both parties. If Ronald Reagan and the Republicans had *not* been seen as accepting this growth, Reagan would have lost, not won, 44 states. On top of everything else, the Republicans are adding, or trying to add (and the question is very much open), \$1.5 trillion for national defense, \$8 billion for new prisons, and a \$5 billion revenue loss for tuition tax credits. As Everett Dirksen once said, "A billion here, a billion there, it adds up to real money." And it is adding up very fast.

We see in the United States today a kind of despair, a kind of cultural and political despair about the inability of the American people to, on the one hand, cut the demands they make on government or, on the other, pay the taxes necessary to pay the bills for the services they manifestly demand politically.

Where then does this leave us? It leaves us in a crisis. We, like all other Western, developed industrial democracies, have built an enormous welfare state. We have come to a consensus, which I think is by and large correct, that it is humane and, in many cases, efficient to purchase a number of things collectively: some pensions, some medical care, some housing. In the great postwar period of economic growth, our economy was strong, and the going was easy, and the growth came fast, and the gusher of revenues to the government at constant tax rates made building a welfare state effortless. In that great 25-year period roughly between 1948, the beginning of the Marshall Plan, and 1973, the Yom Kippur War and the consequent revolution in energy prices and the slowdown of growth throughout the industrial world, we made a whole series of promises to ourselves—promises of entitlements that constitute claims on the future wealth of this country, promises made on the assumption

that the economic growth of those 25 years was the norm for the foreseeable future. But that was an economic growth we have not seen since and do not know today how to restore.

As we enter the middle 1980s, then, the American political system is being asked to do something it has no experience in doing, something no one went into politics to do, no one knows how to do, and no one wants to learn. And that is to break promises or to raise taxes, to break promises or to impose pain and get away with it. We have a uniquely difficult time now in the 1980s. We are being asked not to think as individuals but to think collectively, not to think as isolated, self-interested people but to think as citizens, something we have rarely been required to do in the past, as a reading of those pages in the Washington telephone directory will tell you. Generally, Americans relate to their government as individual or organized claimants. Now we are being asked to think about giving back, or enduring pain.

There is one other thing that illustrates the divided mind of the American people today. As we enter the middle of this decade, the peculiarity of politics is that rarely in America has there been such a clear consensus for one overriding public goal. That goal is a balanced budget. The goal is clear, and there is no intellectual mystery about how to achieve it. If you want to balance the budget, do the following four things: end the deductibility for tax purposes of mortgage interest payments; tax entitlement programs as income; lower the indexing of entitlement programs; and tax employer-paid health insurance as compensation. With these steps you would more than balance the budget. At any given time there are only 537 people in Washington because they were elected; and if we did these four things, we would end the careers of 537 politicians—because, loudly though the American people clamor for a balanced budget, they will reject every one of the four measures just suggested that together would bring about what they say they desire. We have for the past 50 years had a govern-

ment devoted to inflaming appetite and facilitating consumption to the point at which we now have a deeply underfunded economy; naturally, consuming too much, we save too little. Having lost the habit of deferring gratifications, we have lost the habit of thrift and investment. The American people today are saving five percent of their disposable income—approximately half of what the Germans are saving, approximately a third of what the Japanese are saving. We have been living for a long time off the seed corn of our future, and now we are beginning to pay for it.

How did we become an improvident people? The answer, I think, like the answer to all great questions of human life, is an idea. History is the history of the human mind. And our problem is deeply rooted in a doctrine of what government is for, and that doctrine derives from a concept of freedom that I think is mistaken.

We have today a government that is, as few governments ever have been, omnipresent and omniprovident. And, as the government has become more and more solicitous, it has become less and less respected—a great paradox of modern life. Never has government tried harder to do more; never has it been less respected.

In this regard, conservatives have talked themselves into a terrible dilemma. On the one hand, they preach the doctrine that the government is too clumsy and too stupid, too venal and too poorly motivated, to do anything much to help, say, Cleveland. But, the next moment, the conservatives turn around and say to the country, "Give us \$1.5 trillion for national defense and give us your young men and women." Now a government that is too incompetent to help Cleveland cannot make those kinds of claims on the American people.

How did we get to this incoherence about the point of government? It is in the history of our political philosophy that we must seek the answer. The history of Western political philosophy divides, not altogether neatly but reasonably neatly, into two periods, the ancient and the modern—the modern period beginning and turning, really, with Machiavelli and Hobbes. And between the

ancient and the modern doctrines, one thing stands out: a different definition of natural right and of freedom.

To the ancient, the idea of freedom was this: A person is free when he lives as human beings are supposed to live, when he lives as is appropriate for this kind of creature, when he lives in the way that is by nature right. There were certain patterns of noble behavior. And it was the duty of government, as ancients understood it, to so draw the laws to shape the citizens so that they could, in the end, be worthy of the good society. The basic doctrine of ancient political philosophy was that men and women are biological facts. But ladies and gentlemen suited for free government are social artifacts, creatures of the law—difficult to bring about.

This was the controlling doctrine of Western political philosophy from its inception in Plato to the Renaissance. It obviously is a doctrine of politics as a branch of education. Indeed, the book that launched Western political philosophy, Plato's *Republic*, is a book about education.

Then, with Machiavelli and Hobbes, something changed. Machiavelli lived in the tumult, the constant, angry civil strife of Italy, populated by warring city-states. Hobbes lived in the decay of Tudor institutions in England, a civil war looming and sometimes raging. To these two men, the political problem was different. It was order. "Stop being so ambitious," they said. "Don't try to make men more noble. Look at them square and look at them whole. Take them as they are and make them behave. That is the only political problem. Do not—repeat, do not—try to improve them. Indeed, if you look at man," they said, "he is a simple, not very noble creature." And the very simplicity of man—the fact that, if left alone, mankind is under the sway of a few simple strong passions—makes him very easy to control. Hobbes said that man is under the sovereign mastery of pain and pleasure. He's afraid of death, and he desires fame and security. Fine. Give him that, and he will behave. Others said that people are inherently self-interested: "Give them a commercial country. Subsume

all human passions in getting and giving and gaining. We shall have a commercial republic in which all the energies that have hitherto made political societies tumultuous will be channeled into commerce. It's not noble, it's not pretty, but it solves the political problem. After all," they said, "natural right is not living as it is naturally appropriate for man. Natural right shall henceforth be defined as a right to those things toward which our strongest passions incline us."

Generally, it was a revolution of self-interestedness. Mankind was to be viewed as a self-interested animal—not attractive, not noble, but manageable. And so we got modern political philosophy. And we came to the founding of the first modern nation, the first militantly, proudly, self-consciously modern nation, the United States. We came to the revolution in democratic theory, wrought by the most creative political philosopher we have produced, James Madison.

Before the United States was founded, all political philosophers had agreed about one thing: *If* democracy is possible, it is only possible in a small, face-to-face society—Pericles' Athens or Rousseau's Geneva. For when you have a large society, you have factions, and factions are the enemy of democracy. Madison took that theory, turned it on its head, and turned it inside out. He said, "Not true; the more factions the better." Madison said that we must have an extensive republic.

You can state the Founding Fathers' political philosophy in a kind of catechism: What is the great problem in politics? The answer is tyranny. To what tyranny is a democracy prey? The tyranny of the majority. How do you prevent that? By not having any majorities. By having only minorities. So that any majority at any given time will be just a shifting, unstable coalition of minorities, constantly changing kaleidoscopically.

Therefore, we must expand the country, not have a small democracy but a huge one. When the Founding Fathers met in Philadelphia, however, this was a country of only 3 million free souls, and eighty percent of them lived within 20 miles of tidewater,

strung out along the fringe of an unexplored continent. But what did they call the congress that they convened in Philadelphia? They called it the Continental Congress. That is *chutzpah*.

They called it the Continental Congress because they knew where they were going. Roughly, they were going to California, but, basically, they were going west. They were going to have a huge democracy filled with factions because, that way, they would avoid a tyrannical majority.

So it came to pass that James Madison—in what I take to be the two great documents of American political thought, Federalist Papers 10 and 51—pointed the way. In Paper 10, he said that we must have the saving multiplicity of factions. And in Federalist Paper 51, in a sentence crucial to the thrust of his thought, he said, "We see throughout our system the process of supplying, by opposite and rival interests, the defect of better motives."

This was a country founded, to a remarkable and, I increasingly find, an alarming extent, on the expectation that no one would operate from public-spirited motives. Everyone would operate from factional motives. But, because there would be so many factions pursuing their self-interest, and the government would be restricted to simply an umpire's role keeping the competition and the factionalism peaceful, there would be no tyrannical majority.

Well, I think it works. If all the country has to worry about is the absence of a tyrannical domestic majority, then it works. And, at that point, when we were surrounded by protective oceans, months away from Europe, instead of 30 minutes away from Moscow by missile, that might have been an adequate philosophy of freedom and an adequate conception of government. It is, I suggest, no longer so, because what we have is the need, increasingly, to have better motives.

It is perfectly understandable why the 18th century fell for this particular doctrine of philosophy. The 18th century discovered astronomy. The 18th century, in a

sense, discovered modern physics, too, and fell in love with both subjects. The heavens at that time looked like a marvelous clockwork of orderly planets. We now know from better telescopes and other instruments that there is a lot of wobbling and banging about among the planets, and it's not so tidy as it appears. But it looked then as though the universe itself was run by a benevolent clockmaker-god, and that the same principle could be applied to politics.

Hence, the doctrine of separation of powers. Hence, the checks-and-balances system of the American government. Rival institutions with rival interests would be held in equipoise, just like the solar system—all parties acting self-interestedly but holding one another apart in preempting tyranny.

And so we came, in this country, to define the public interest as whatever results from this maelstrom of private interests. One might call it the Cuisinart theory of government: You just stir things up, and out comes a kind of puree, something to be called, by semantic fiat, "the public interest."

Well, it's not that simple. It's not that effortless. It leaves you, as I've said, with a doctrine of merely responsive government. And, if I am right in my definition of leadership as the ability to inflict pain and get away with it, it leaves you, technically, disarmed. It leaves you unable to have even a doctrine of, let alone the fact of, leadership.

It leaves us with a country with enormous disintegrative forces. It leaves us with those pages in the Washington telephone directory. It leaves us with brokered government. It leaves us a society given over to the instant satisfaction of demands. It leaves us with a society incapable of deferring gratifications. It gives us, for that reason, an economy perennially underinvesting, an economy of declining productivity, an economy consuming more money than it is generating in revenues, and an economy about to produce, in the middle of this decade, a serious turning, I believe, on the defense budget.

This last point is so, I think, because when a country is asked to pay for its national security, it is being asked to look to

the future. It is being asked to think collectively. And we have no habit of that, we have no history of that, and we decreasingly have an ability to do that, because we have no public philosophy that tells us to do that.

After all, we are a country in which we see, throughout our system, a process of supplying, by opposite and rival interests, a "defect of better motives." And we are in a decade when, preeminently, we need good motives.

Well, what, then, are we to do about it? To me it seems clear that in order to defend freedom in the late 20th century, we need to define it correctly. We need to go back from whence we came. We need to go back to Greece and Rome. We need to go back to the understanding that freedom is not just the absence of restraints imposed by others. Someone operating in the absence of restraints can be governed by passion, can be enslaved by appetite.

Consider those words. They are not careless metaphor. They are the language of politics: "governed" by passion, "enslaved" by appetite. We are not free when we are unable, either individually or collectively, to control our passional, appetitive side.

To that end, the redefining of freedom, I suggest there is a place to which we can turn—the beginning. If you've taken a wrong turn early in the road, you wind up very far from where you want to be, and you have to go back. I would suggest that we go back to Socrates. In *The Crito*, one of *The Dialogues*, Socrates is about to die. He has been sentenced to death by Athens for corrupting the youth. Whether or not he did so, I shall not dwell upon here. He has been duly tried and sentenced, and some of his friends come to him and say, "We will help you escape; it has been an unjust trial; it is an unjust law. You're innocent. We will get you out. You will not have to drink the hemlock and die." And Socrates says, "No, I shall not leave. Because I would thus be untrue to my parents. Because," he says, "the laws of Athens are my parents. They shaped my parents who made me. They brought my parents together in matrimony, they sustain the family, they sustain life. The laws of the

community make us. We do not make the community.”

That is Socrates' view of the world. What is ours? Ours is captured in the idea of a social contract. That concept is the fiction behind modern politics: that we came together one day as a people and decided it served our individual interests to contract to set up a society. Historically the idea of a social contract is quite preposterous, but it continues to be an analytic metaphor expressing the doctrine of modern politics, a doctrine of self-interest.

Well, now I ask you to justify conscription. I ask you to justify having an army to defend a social contract. No one risks his or her life to defend a contract that he or she entered into voluntarily simply for convenience. If all our institutions and all our laws represent nothing more than the momentary calculation of convenience by disparate, self-interested individuals, then they are not only undefended, they are, in a way, indefensible.

We need a longer view of the social order. We need what the Greeks had, what Socrates had, what Western political philosophy had until we made a wrong turn about 400 years ago. We need a sense that we are bound and obligated to our society because we are not free without laws. We are not free without the restraints imposed on us by the law. We are not free, we are unformed. We are governed by passion and enslaved by appetite until we become not just men and women, but gentlemen and ladies; not just biological facts, but social artifacts.

Amplification of this idea was provided by Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln took on the great topic of freedom: To what extent is the law of a community legitimately concerned with the inner life of man?

The reason we had a civil war can be perhaps best articulated by reference to a single episode: Lincoln was debating Stephen Douglas for a Senate seat in 1858 in Illinois. Lincoln, of course, would lose. Douglas, at one point, said, “What we should do about the question of slavery in the territories [whether Kansas and Nebraska should be free

states or slave territory] is let them vote. Put it to the test. Let them decide what it is in their interest to do.” And Lincoln said, “No, there are limits.” He said, “There are limits to the sway of self-interest.” He said, “Stephen Douglas is preaching the doctrine that there is no test of right or wrong but self-interest.”

And on that issue, this republic nearly foundered in the middle of the last century. And on the subject of the primacy of the doctrine of self-interest, it can again be threatened and, indeed, can founder.

In a speech at the Wisconsin state fair at approximately the same time, Lincoln told a story. He said there was an oriental despot who summoned together his wise men and challenged them to invent a sentence to be carved in stone, to be forever in view, and to be always true. The wise men went away and came back after a while and said, “We've got the sentence.” It was: “This, too, shall pass away.” And Lincoln, on the eve of the Civil War, when it was very possible that the American experiment in democracy would pass away, went on to say, “If we attend to the cultivation of not only the physical world around us, but of the moral world around us, we can endure.” To adopt another phrase of his, it was the duty of government not just to minister to self-interestedness, but to summon, as he said, “the better angels of our nature.”

It is the purpose of government not just to tantalize self-interest, but to call people above it. This was an echo, in our 16th President, of the ancient political philosophy and the ancient political vision to which I think we need to recur. That, I think, is the challenge for everyone in the United States who understands that leadership is about sacrifice.

Obviously, the good society is a society that allows an enormous range of private freedom. I'm not questioning that. Obviously, the good society has an enormous sphere in which we are not told what to do. But that sphere is not without limits. This is not a popular message. And I know all the arguments. It is said, for example, that the sale of pornography should

be viewed as a private transaction; the law should treat it as a private transaction between an individual buyer and an individual seller. Indeed, the law can so treat it, but the law cannot make the results, which include Times Square and a billion-dollar pornography industry, a private phenomenon. That's public. That has to do with the quality of our lives.

Abortion is an issue on which honorable men and women of good will disagree. The law can treat an abortion as a private transaction between an individual and her doctor. The law can treat it that way, but nothing can make 1.7 million abortions a year a private phenomenon. That's a public phenomenon that has to do with the way we live, the way we treat sexuality, and life, and relations between the sexes.

We are, like it or not, involved in our laws, in shaping our own inner lives. Statecraft is, inevitably, soulcraft. The question is whether it will be good soulcraft or bad soulcraft. My point is that the doctrine of self-interestedness is self-fulfilling. Treat people as being purely self-interested and, sooner or later, you get people capable of nothing higher.

We need to recur, as Lincoln did, to a grander rhetoric, to the politics of exhorting people and, indeed, to laws—conscriptio being, I believe, one of them—that stipulate and embody the principle that we, like Socrates, are the creatures of our laws, and, as they give us life and character and freedom and restraints and virtues, so too we have a debt to pay back.

