

Will's Testament

The dean of conservative columnists turns to Robert Taft.

By W. James Antle III

AS BARACK OBAMA weighed his decision whether to send additional troops to Afghanistan, former Vice President Dick Cheney grew impatient. "The White House must stop dithering while America's armed forces are in danger," Cheney said. "It's time for President Obama to do what it takes to win a war he has repeatedly and rightly called a war of necessity." Most conservative commentators cheered Cheney's broadside, but George F. Will was not amused.

"A bit of dithering might have been in order before we went into Iraq in pursuit of nonexistent weapons of mass destruction," Will said on ABC's "This Week." "For a representative of the Bush administration to accuse someone of taking too much time is missing the point. We have much more to fear in this town from hasty than from slow government action." Thus the dean of Washington conservative columnists refused the helping of red meat being served up by the Spiro Agnew of our time, siding instead with a liberal Democratic president.

One might be tempted to conclude that Will has merely become the latest media figure to be starstruck by Obama, his onetime dining companion. The president has been known to send a thrill up grown men's legs before. Except that when Obama decided he would dispatch 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan after all, Will was just as scathing: "George W. Bush waged preventive war in Iraq regarding (nonexistent) weapons of mass destruction. Obama is waging preventive war in

Afghanistan to prevent it from again becoming 'a staging platform for terrorists,' which Somalia, Yemen or other sovereignty near-vacuums also could become."

Will argued in his syndicated column that to sustain such a commitment, "U.S. forces might have to be engaged in Afghanistan for decades before its government can prevent that by itself." "The president's party will not support his new policy, his budget will not accommodate it, our overstretched and worn down military will be hard-pressed to execute it, and Americans' patience will not be commensurate with Afghanistan's limitless demands for it," he concluded. "This will not end well."

The emergence of George Will as a skeptic of the hyperinterventionist foreign policy favored by many on the Right—the sorts Will describes as the "most magnificently misnamed neoconservatives" who "are the most radical people in this town"—has been one of the most surprising developments in the Washington debate. He seldom deviated from the neoliberal-to-neoconservative consensus on foreign affairs in the past, and his newfound restraint has come at an interesting time.

The deaths of William F. Buckley Jr. and Robert Novak have left Will the most respected conservative columnist in the country. Only Cal Thomas appears in more newspapers; only Will's fellow *Washington Post* scribe Charles Krauthammer is comparably influential among conservative elites. Will is unique in that he is both widely read by rank-

and-file Republicans and also widely listened to by GOP powerbrokers. But the passing of Buckley and Novak has also left Will almost alone among the top conservative columnists as a critic of foreign adventurism—Novak had opposed post-Cold War interventionism from the start, Buckley had begun to turn against it late in life.

As Will has become more outspoken in assessing the distance between conservative foreign-policy rhetoric and reality, his critics on the Right have tried harder to ostracize him as a pseudoconservative elitist along the lines of *New York Times* columnist David Brooks. After Will's first column urging U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, *Weekly Standard* editor William Kristol hit back in the *Washington Post*: "Let's be honest. Will is not calling on the United States to accept a moderate degree of success in Afghanistan, and simply to stop short of some overly ambitious goal. Will is urging retreat, and accepting defeat."

"What is fascinating is how Will writes as if Sept. 11 never happened, and the Afghan war is happening in a vacuum in which the only strategic goal is providing security and economic development for the Afghan people," wrote Jules Crittenden on his website, conceding, "though in fairness Will does, towards the end, mention the goal of denying al Qaeda bases of operation, but only in despair, to suggest it's impossible, so why try?"

In *Commentary*, former Bush pamphleteer Peter Wehner excoriated Will as a for-it-before-he-was-against-it flip-

flopper. “Mr. Will’s shifting stands on these wars is vertigo-inducing,” Wehner wrote. “Once upon a time, supporting the Iraq war was fashionable; large majorities of the public were behind it. So was most of the political class. And so was George Will.” He continued, “Will was not just in favor of the war; he was as passionate and articulate a champion of it as you could possibly find.”

On this point, Will’s detractors are correct. In his columns and television appearances, Will loyally supported President Bush’s decisions to invade Afghanistan and Iraq. He endorsed regime change: “We did it in Grenada, Panama, Serbia. Would the world be better off if Milosevic were back in Serbia? Noriega in Panama? I don’t think so.” He predicted “a happy domino effect” in the Middle East “of democracy knocking over these medieval tyrannies” and agreed with Condoleezza Rice that skepticism about this project reeked of “condescension.”

Conservatives were nearly unanimous in their support for post-9/11 punitive strikes going after bin Laden and the Taliban government that sheltered him. As Pat Buchanan wrote at the time, “Let us pay back those who did this, then let us extricate ourselves.” But Will explicitly touted nation-building, saying it was “part of [Bush’s] education as president” to revise his “hostility to nation-building” upon seeing what occurs in failed states like Afghanistan.

Will once believed that there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, convinced by Colin Powell’s debunked pitch to the United Nations. He wrote at the time, “Powell’s presentation, its power enhanced by his avoidance of histrionics, will change all minds open to evidence.” Will also speculated that war would cost fewer Iraqi lives than continuing the sanctions regime.

Long before 9/11, there was little in Will’s commentary that might suggest

he would part ways with neoconservatives. During the 1996 presidential campaign, for example, he wrote, “the Republican Party’s most pressing task” was “self-defense against Pat Buchanan’s redefinition of it.” Buchanan, Will continued, “mixes a cocktail of resentments and ignorance unmatched since George Wallace went marauding.” If anything, Will was less skeptical of government power than were other conservative columnists, writing of “statecraft as soulcraft” and dismissing eager Reaganites as “taxaphobic.” On U.S. policy toward the Middle East, William F. Buckley once chided him, “If progress of any kind is going to be made in that part of the world, you don’t begin by siding with Israel on every single point.”

Yet Will has been inching toward a more circumscribed view of the state’s potential in recent years. He has, to some extent, rethought his dissents from mainstream conservative orthodoxy on taxes and gun control. His more recent declarations of independence have come in fights between what he describes as “social-issue conservatives” versus “limited-government conservatives” and “Goldwaterism.” Unlike many conservatives, Will has applied his anti-statist inclinations to foreign policy.

As early as 2003, Will was growing skeptical of democratic nation-building in Iraq. “Iraq needs only four people to achieve post-Saddam success,” he wrote. “Unfortunately they are George Washington, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Marshall.” Like most Americans, his view of the wars became grimmer as he was confronted with the facts on the ground—without bin Laden’s head or WMD, the *casus belli* seemed less compelling.

In the fall of 2009, Will wrote back-to-back columns calling for American withdrawal from Afghanistan and Iraq.

He observed that “nation-building would be impossible even if we knew how, and even if Afghanistan were not the second-worst place to try.” Will arrived at the same conclusion concerning Iraq. “If, in spite of contrary evidence, the U.S. surge permanently dampened sectarian violence, *all* U.S. forces can come home sooner than the end of 2011,” he wrote. “If, however, the surge did not so succeed, U.S. forces *must* come home sooner.” Will thus adopted a stricter standard for the surge’s success than its boosters did: the surge worked only if it created conditions that allow us to extricate ourselves from Iraq with a minimum of American and Iraqi bloodshed.

The question is what influence Will’s evolving views will have over the foreign-policy debate. Had he taken these positions from the very beginning, he might have convinced a few more wavering Republicans—think Chuck Hagel—to vote against invading Iraq. Certainly, he would have made it harder to dismiss antiwar conservatives as unpatriotic cranks (though not impossible, as we learned from the treatment of Robert Novak). What impact can he have now?

Alex Koppelman of *Salon* argued, “it’s almost certainly not going to be a Cronkite and Vietnam moment” because “Will doesn’t hold the sway he used to” among the Republican faithful. To some extent this is true; Will is no Rush Limbaugh. But his newspaper and *Newsweek* columns are more widely read than most of his critics. Now that these are Obama’s wars, Republicans are more open to voting against funding them and declaring them lost. The GOP has a new incentive to distance itself from Middle East failures. Perhaps George Will has shown the way. ■

W. James Antle III is associate editor of The American Spectator.

Secret Police

Can personal privacy survive the digital revolution?

By Brian Doherty

CIVIL LIBERTARIANS hoped that the Obama era would see a renewed commitment to privacy protections. But their dreams are being dashed. Congress seems likely to recess without adjusting aspects of the Patriot Act set to expire at the end of the year, which means that the existing law will be temporarily extended. Elements up for reconsideration include roving wiretaps in foreign intelligence investigations that are not targeted to a specific communication mode or person and “section 215” ability to seize business or other records in a presumptive terror investigation.

Different bills to reform these and other powers have come out of the Judiciary Committees of the House and Senate. The House version is slightly better in terms of demands it makes on law enforcement and intelligence agencies to have defensible reasons for their searches and seizures. But the controversial provisions will survive, even if slightly circumscribed.

So will other post-9/11 surveillance practices. Candidate Obama swore that under his reign, Americans would see “no more National Security Letters to spy on citizens who are not suspected of a crime.” But his administration has shown no desire to relieve itself of NSL powers. National Security Letters allow FBI agents to grab records and information about you from third parties without any judicial supervision. The recipients are legally prohibited from telling anyone other than their lawyers that they gave up the information.

The Patriot reauthorization debate

unfolded as the telecommunications industry, already known for craven capitulation to the National Security Agency’s warrantless wiretapping program, was revealed by researcher Chris Soghoian to be continuing to cooperate with law enforcement against customers’ interests at a level that, in the words of a request from Yahoo! to keep its collaboration quiet, would “shock” customers and “shame” telcos.

Sprint Nextel, for example, provided the government with GPS locations of its subscribers via their cell-phone signals 8 million times between September 2008 and October 2009. As Soghoian writes, telecom and Internet providers “all have special departments, many open 24 hours per day, whose staff do nothing but respond to legal requests. Their entire purpose is to facilitate the disclosure of their customers’ records to law enforcement and intelligence agencies.” Verizon, objecting to a FOIA request by Soghoian, expressed concern that subscribers might start bothering it to provide information dumps that the company only provides for cops. Verizon also worried that customers would ask whether their info was being coughed up to law enforcement. Of course, Verizon would not tell them.

These two stories—Patriot reauthorization and telco cooperation—frame the battlefield on which American privacy is being slaughtered. On one end is a government that wants to suck up as much information as it can with as little oversight as possible. On the other end are private companies—to which we entrust more and more information

about what we are saying, writing, buying, and thinking—that in effect act as government information agencies.

So many alarming procedures and plans that impact Americans’ privacy—our ability to move through the world without giving up information to authorities, whether knowingly or unaware—are either in the works or already implemented that if you talk to 10 different privacy-rights advocates, you hear 10 different primary worries. A big one, the de facto national ID card created through the “Real ID” system—a set of federal demands on security and verification measures on state ID’s—has been effectively killed by grassroots federalism: states just refused to go along, and the federal government had pretty much given up, despite the law having passed in 2005. But the Senate is now considering a revival of most of Real ID’s features through the PASS ID act, which the ACLU’s Christopher Calabrese characterizes as “the government giving us a permission slip on whether you can engage in the right to travel, and potentially to work or vote or even own a gun.”

Republicans, both in Congress and in the grassroots, don’t seem particularly concerned with these issues. As Julian Sanchez, who studies privacy and technology issues for the Cato Institute, noted, “Thus far, the approved conservative position appears to have been that Barack Obama is some kind of ruthless Stalinist with a secret plan to turn the United States into a massive gulag—but under no circumstances should there be any additional checks on his administration’s domestic spying powers.”