

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

George F. Will. *The Leveling Wind: The Culture & Other News 1990-1994*. New York: Viking, 1994. xix + 473 pp. \$23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-14-024702-2.

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In this collection covering the first half of the 1990s, the syndicated columnist, contributing *Newsweek* editor, and *ABC News* political analyst, George F. Will, offers his assessment of the nation's recent political and cultural life. As everyone who reads his columns knows, Mr. Will is an accomplished word-smith. His columns, actually well-polished essays, are generously seasoned with piquant quotations and historical references. Yet reading of the half-decade's worth of writing contained in this volume reveals, unlike the occasional taste of them one gets from the Op-ed pages, that their elegant presentation often conceals a lack of substance. A steady diet of Mr. Will's writings, as this book provides, often leaves the reader's intellectual appetite unsatisfied.

In examining the social and cultural climate of the United States in the early 1990s, Mr. Will finds many things distasteful. From the soaring rates of urban crime and illegitimacy, to rap music or limited access highways that obscure the regional diversity that once characterized this nation, Mr. Will's essays generally lament the modern era. American in the 1990s, he writes, "... is in danger of evolving into a kind of civilization heretofore unknown in the modern world, one in which cities are important not as centers of commercial and cultural vitality, but rather as burdens" (p. xv). The portrait his essays draw of the political climate is similarly bleak. The bloated, inefficient federal government, staffed generally by spineless and/or unprincipled politicians leave Mr. Will longing for the moral certainties of a past golden age. Will is clearly a pessimist who views modern America's glass as half empty.

If the author is proficient at diagnosing the ills that plague contemporary America, he is far less convincing in suggesting solutions. Essentially Mr. Will believes that if the power of the federal government is reduced

substantially and if the presidency is Woodrow Wilson state (i.e., before the president came to be regarded as the nation's tribune), the individual's self-reliance will be re-invigorated and the nation will be well on its way to solving the problems he has so painstakingly catalogued. As his remarks on the 250th anniversary of Thomas Jefferson's birth indicate, the positive state as it has evolved in the twentieth century is in Mr. Will's mind at the root of our current evils. Our third president, he argued, aimed to create a society

... that nurtures individuals to self-sufficiency ... Now more than ever we need to be focused on that task of nurturing, because ... urbanization and statism are exerting a powerful pull toward an enervating dependency ... Ultimately, it is dependency on—an addiction to—security as the highest aim of life. This addiction produces, over time, a timid fearful, debased people, erecting barriers against a competitive world, and expressing an entitlement mentality, insisting that they are entitled to government protection from uncertainty ... (pp.77-78)

If many will find Mr. Will's reassertion of rugged individualism unsatisfactory as a solution to the problems of modern society, all who are concerned with the state of American life at the end of the twentieth century will find the book to be of value. Indeed, as the new Republican majority in Congress grapples for solutions to the nation's ills, this work reminds us of the fragmentation that has afflicted American conservatism since the beginning of the New Deal. It remains to be seen if conservatism will be able to set its face resolutely against the future, as Mr. Will clearly prefers, or if it will be able to adapt its philosophy to the conditions of modern urban, industrial life as perhaps a Jack Kemp has sought to do. But as the initial skirmishes have already indicated, it is certain to be an interesting ride.

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