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Moral Education in the Age of Reagan

On Some Recent Proposals for a Culture Without Criticism

Modern conservatives since Edmund Burke have held a difficult position, at least in part because of the distinctiveness of their view. They defend the things of the past, and are inclined to respect history; and yet, it is a foregone conclusion that history will ratify many of the causes they set out by opposing. John Crowe Ransom described this predicament vividly in a review of Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind*, where he noticed "how conservatives when they return to power do not proceed heroically to undo the innovations of their enemies, as they may have threatened they would; but acquiesce in them, almost without a word of explanation, as if another chapter of history had been written irrevocably." Accordingly, much of William F. Buckley's reputation as the spokesman for a serious movement, or of Ronald Reagan's image as a leader in tune with America in the 1980s, depends on our forgetting that these men opposed the civil rights laws of the 1960s and have long been committed to abolishing Social Security if they could. All the way to their assumption of power, they argued for the retrenchment or repeal of a variety of measures that began as innovations, but which the suffrage of American opinion has preferred to keep as traditions. This, however, is a commonplace irony of the sort that all of us confront, simply by virtue of our existence in time. It is no more embarrassing than the liberal's frequent discovery that what the people need does not happen to be what they want. A more

persistent difficulty, for American conservatives particularly, arises from their uncritical acceptance of the capitalist market.

FOR THE MARKET IS JUST WHERE THE SPIRIT OF reckless innovation begins. It is an institution that cannot affect to speak sincerely for public virtue, or the common good, or any of the more local values that conservatives evoke to shore up against the tidal weight of modernity. The market itself has been the single most volatile and relentless force for modernization in our time. These are platitudes; but the ideologists I will be discussing in these pages, George F. Will and William J. Bennett, have said that they aim to bring to light the platitudes we live by. Given this conception of their role, it is noteworthy that they have professed innocence, and tried to assure the innocence of their public, concerning one main fact about our culture—its relationship to the social and economic arrangements of modern capitalism. This has not been the policy of conservatives at other times and in other places. It was William Cobbett's love of an older way of life that in nineteenth-century England informed his attacks on the emergent mores of capitalism. Burke himself disdained any tactic that would have appeared at once to defend an existing order and to favor the instrumentalities of rapid change. Thus, in his speeches for the prosecution of Warren Hastings, on which he labored at the same time that he was writing his pamphlets against the French Jacobins, one

will find countless passages like the following:

We dread the operation of money. Do we not know that there are many men who wait, and who indeed hardly wait, the event of this prosecution, to let loose all the corrupt wealth of India, acquired by the oppression of that country, for the corruption of the liberties of this, and to fill the parliament with men who are now the object of its indignation? Today the Commons of Great Britain prosecute the delinquents of India: tomorrow the delinquents of India may be the Commons of Great Britain. We know, I say, and feel the force of money; and we now call upon your Lordships for justice in this cause of money. We call upon you for the preservation of our manners, of our virtues. We call upon you for our national character. We call upon you for our liberties.

Hastings was an early imperial entrepreneur, in charge of the British East India Company's operations throughout India, before he was charged, by Burke's party in the House of Commons, with bribery, embezzlement, extortion, and murder, and impeached before the House of Lords. But here is his prosecutor, Edmund Burke, a conservative, arguing that a connection exists between the abuse of wealth and power and the corruption of morals. What Burke calls "our national character" and what he calls "our liberties" are not indifferent to the way authority and privilege are given by the Parliament to those who serve the nation.

I HAVE STARTED WITH BURKE because I want to detach modern American conservatives from their claim to a precursor as morally impressive as he is. They do not deserve him. Nor is the disparity solely a matter of intellectual and argumentative strength. Writers like Will and Bennett also define their subject—the defense of tradition—in a far more specialized way than Burke ever did. The sort of questions that the conduct of Hastings prompted Burke to ask, they understand in advance that we will not expect them to ask about an Edwin Meese or a Michael Deaver. To return to such matters often and insistently would be beyond bounds for a party loyalist. But I will suggest something more in these pages. By a careful consideration of the leading conservative doctrines of moral education in the age of Reagan, I will

show that Will, whom I take to be a significant case, and Bennett, whom I take to be a significant echo, have proposed habits of thought to shelter the culture of the past from the influence of the social and economic arrangements of the present. They hope in this way to sponsor the revival of a strong morality and the preservation of a high culture in America. I will give reasons for concluding that their program is impracticable in its details, that it is founded on a shallow idea of tradition, and that it appeals to a superstitious belief in the dependence of a moral consensus on a shared religious faith. But I have to begin by observing that the premise on which the Will-Bennett analysis of culture rests is altogether strange and new. It is, that a culture can save a society from itself.

George Will is best known these days for his work as a television commentator on politics, where he has cast himself as an intellectual apologist for the Reagan administration. But he achieved his fame earlier and otherwise, in the years of the Watergate investigations and their aftermath. In columns for the *Washington Post*, the *National Review*, and *Newsweek*, Will mounted a consistent polemic against the liberal ethic of tolerance that he took to prevail in America. That ethic, he said, had given implicit license to the disorders of the 1960s, and culminated, in Watergate, with contempt for the law at the highest levels of government. Against liberalism, Will urged a return to an older tradition of civic virtue, which required both the inculcation and the enforcement of morals. Such a tradition was, he conceded, foreign to the history of American individualism; but it had better be acquired late than not at all, for what was at stake was America's survival. Many readers who have followed Will's progress in a desultory way must have felt that his politics evolved in response to a certain historical moment. At any rate his writings seemed to offer a reply—whether calculated or not—to the liberal and radical politics of the 1960s.

This picture of Will, I now have to report, was not quite accurate. I have looked up his 1968 Ph.D. dissertation, *Beyond the Reach of*

Majorities: Closed Questions in the Open Society. It is a massive concatenation of notes, written in a lively middle-journalistic style, and, in its leading doctrines, indistinguishable from the mature writings of George Will. Only a few of his columns (collected in three books: *The Pursuit of Happiness and Other Sobering Thoughts*, *The Pursuit of Virtue and Other Tory Notions*, and *The Morning After*, the last of which is forthcoming from the Free Press), and bits of his Godkin Lectures at Harvard University (published in *Statecraft as Soulcraft: What Government Does*), have been cribbed from it. But the striking thing is not that points of continuity may be found; it is that the continuity appears to be of a kind unalterable by events. Will, at the age of twenty-six, writing in an academic context and well before what one now thinks of as the more thuggish manifestations of the 1960s, was already fully formed as the opinion-maker that he would become. There are several possible ways of describing a consistency as thorough-paced as this. Bagehot said of Macaulay that he had “an inexperiencing nature,” and I think it would be plain to many of Will’s readers in what sense these words apply to him. It could also be argued—and this is the way Will himself has preferred to see it—that he has both an unusually steady and a peculiarly unfashionable temperament. Perhaps the fairest conclusion is simply that, like many political commentators, he waited for his moment, and with Ronald Reagan’s election his moment came.

“A specter is haunting American liberals,” Will declared in his dissertation, “the specter of confident politics.” And he added that “the kind of open mind the liberal favors is a political menace.” The growth of the menace was partly owing to the liberal’s reliance on familiar and misleading slogans: the conceit, for example, of a political *tabula rasa*, in the form of an “open society” or “marketplace of ideas,” with which the liberal deluded himself that moral debates in society would tend to their own resolution. Will aimed to replace these untenable notions with some version of a consciously articulated public philosophy. If asked to specify a particular version, Will, at any time from 1968 to 1986, has often retreated to broad allusions to the need “every community

[has] for an ‘economy of intolerance.’” This means that the citizens of a republic ought to be interested in legislating morality: as a case in point, Will has sometimes cited the civil-rights legislation of the Johnson administration. But much more commonly in the balance of his writings, his own economy of intolerance has sided with such campaigns as those that would outlaw pornography, obstruct abortions, and qualify the legal application of constitutional rights to homosexuals. So, of a proposed city law in Miami in 1977, which would have repealed an earlier ordinance that had banned “discrimination in housing, jobs, or public accommodations based on ‘affectional or sexual preferences,’” Will remarked (in a column he chose to reprint in *The Pursuit of Happiness*) that the repeal was “eminently defensible” since the earlier ordinance had failed the test of any law, “to point people toward more human ways of living and to shore up what the community considers essential values.” The phrase, *more human*, is remarkable in itself, and the more so in that it appears to have been thrown in carelessly: a mere Christian moralist would have balked at this, as betraying a pride that may be a greater menace than the liberal’s confidence. As an agitator for a public philosophy, however, Will’s innovation has been to borrow the authority, without the humility, of the older moralists whom he seeks to emulate.

A COMMON FEATURE OF THE PASSAGES quoted above is that they concentrate their blame on tolerance. This makes for a coincidence, which seems to have eluded Will’s reviewers, between his thinking and that of several radical speculators in the 1960s, many of them employed like him in university departments of politics. The Woolf-Moore-Marcuse *Critique of Pure Tolerance* appeared in time to receive an entry in Will’s doctoral bibliography, and its ghost has had a flickering afterlife in his later writings as well. Like Herbert Marcuse in particular, Will has no hesitation in assigning to a vanguard in society the practices most worth fostering at a given time. Again, like Marcuse, he does not shrink from the sacrifice of competing and apparently harmless practices. A new name probably has to be invented to suggest the savor of an ideology like Will’s. And yet, its

sources are evident on any page he writes. They are not in the Founding Fathers (from whom he does not pretend to have learned much), nor in Abraham Lincoln (for whom he sometimes has a good word), nor even in Burke or Cicero. Least of all can they be traced to Locke, Hume, or Mill, all of whom Will condemns, in keeping with a general polemic against modernity which he derives, with a minimum of acknowledgment, from the writings of Leo Strauss. The theorist, in fact, to whom his thinking is most directly as well as obliquely indebted, is Rousseau. This seems to me to hold true in everything from Will's talk about civic virtue to his judgments of the naturalness or unnaturalness of mores which, in many post-Enlightenment accounts, would hardly come under public scrutiny at all.

Now, an indisputable fact about Rousseau's ideas of virtue and nature is that they are nonempirical. Indeed, the language of the *Social Contract*, the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, and the *Letter to M. d'Alembert on the Theater*, makes every adjustment it can to place this fact beyond doubt. Matters like these are less certain with Will. At the point where one feels sure that one has captured him as a theoretical republican, he is apt to put on a different look entirely, that of the empirical and practical-minded observer of a common life. Thus "it is reasonable," he asserts in *Statecraft as Soulcraft*, "to note that we serve good governance by acting on the assumptions that underlie our moral language." Such appeals to ordinary language, in the work of other thinkers, are supported by examples of overheard or imagined speech, the muttered notations of a person weighing a difficulty, or trying to persuade someone else, or actually responding at a moment in a dialogue. The assumption that guides the appeal is that language—as the most subtle and flexible means by which we tacitly, but habitually, realize an understanding of life—incorporates and even anticipates the conscious sense of our relation to our world, our neighbors, and ourselves. Yet nowhere in all Will's writings is an *example* cited from ordinary usage. In him, the empirical-sounding appeal to "our moral language" turns out to be an exordium to a performance that never occurs. One may regret this chiefly on the ground

that we all hope to derive instruction from evidence that is indeed drawn from our linguistic usage. There ought to be nothing mysterious about such evidence.

IN THE QUESTION OF THE legality of abortions, for instance, our language has no common phrase to suggest the constitutional rights of the unborn. It does, however, include expressions like these: "It *isn't right*, somehow"; "It's something I hope I never have to do, even if I don't feel easy about judging others"; "It's almost like killing a person." Our linguistic habits are, in short, full of the conviction that abortion is wrong. But then, and equally, one has to take stock of expressions like these: "A woman in that position is going through hell as it is"; "It's no good having the government muck around in people's lives." So one must add that our habits are likewise full of reservations about compelling a mother to bear a child against her will. If one pushed this experiment further, one would very likely arrive at a complicated verdict. In the moral language of Americans today, there is something repulsive, and something to be avoided, in the act of abortion. And in the moral language of the same Americans, there is something repulsive, and something to be avoided, in empowering the government as an interested guardian to assure the full duration of an unwanted pregnancy and the birth of an unwanted child. What the *legal* result ought to be of such a discovery, no sane person will now try to specify in much detail. For the situation is difficult, not because there is moral conviction on one side and tolerant immoralism on the other, but because our moral convictions make opposite claims at a great depth on both sides.

It is characteristic of Will that he should hasten past moments of reflection like this. In a 1978 column (which he chose to reprint in *The Pursuit of Virtue*), he was even capable of summing up the case against government funding for abortions with a remark that though the vast majority of operations "are performed by persons licensed to practice medicine, they serve not the pursuit of health, but rather the woman's desire for convenience, absence of distress—in a word, happiness." He uses polls as he likes, to suit his need of the moment, and

without regard to the decadence of plebiscites. Here, then, are statistics that appear unambiguously to bear out the claims of a moral argument: the questions (we are asked to believe) were devised to register the precise distinctions between health and convenience, convenience and absence of distress, absence of distress and “in a word, happiness.” I mention this faith in polls as one piece of evidence—we shall come to others by and by—that Will has been touched by the spirit of modernity in spite of himself. The dubiousness of his procedure apart, I find as an American that the lofty tone in which it is carried off has become hard even to describe. Butler wrote *The Way of All Flesh* a hundred years ago. To say now what is *for other people*, “in a word, happiness”; to say what is, *for all of us*, “more human”: these accidents of phrasing point to a smugness more settled than mere complacency.

III

Statecraft as Soulcraft is a short and repetitious book. But there are signs that it has been taken seriously in the Reagan administration; and, since it comes as near as we are likely to get to a full statement of Will's creed, it is worth examining closely. Will announces at the start that he is concerned with the “slow-motion barbarization from within of the few polities which are all that stand between today's worst regimes and the fulfillment of their barbaric ends.” As for the American polity, it is less well fortified than Will believes it ought to be as the home base of all resistance. The fragility of our republican life, says Will, originated with an intellectual error by the Founding Fathers. On their analysis of political society, “The scope of the passions is to be circumscribed only by the virtue of tolerance. That becomes the foremost (and perhaps the only) public virtue in a society composed of people endowed with equal rights grounded in their common passions.” It may be replied that tolerance is not, and was not meant to be, a virtue at all but rather a practice, whose renewal takes the form of a daily wager. It is for this reason that the good of a society's decision to foster tolerance can be seen by its members, few of whom would claim across-the-board tolerance as a personal disposition, but almost

all of whom consent to it because they are taught to generalize from what tolerance they do possess and from the benefits they derive from the tolerance of others. Still, this does not dispose of Will's larger point. He thinks we have overestimated the value of tolerance, and so allowed it to drive out other, indispensable, moral goods.

Let tolerance be replaced or, at least, augmented by some sturdier great ideas, from “a core consensus of the Western political tradition as first defined by Aristotle, and added to, by Burke and others.” Do this, urges Will, and you will be bound eventually to recognize that the maintenance of a society requires giving more attention to the souls of citizens than we in America had supposed. It may be useful here to observe close up how Will introduces his key word: “Keats said the world is ‘a vale of soul-making.’ I say statecraft is soulcraft.” The word *soulcraft* is apt to grate on an ear accustomed to English words. It is not quite at home in the language; and yet, it is not immediately clear what foreign word it might be a translation of. But the mention of Keats is awkward for a different reason. When Keats spoke of the world as a vale of soul-making, he meant that it was a place where, with pains, individual men and women could distinguish themselves from others of their kind. Soul, for Keats, implied something very like self, and hardly separable from the body. The background of his phrase, now so famous as to be known even to those unacquainted with his writing, is therefore not pious as Will imagines it must have been. Rather, it is naturalistic and probably agnostic.

WE SHALL HAVE TO MAKE other corrections presently, but this will do for a preliminary demonstration that secular morals have had a long history in the West, and have often thrived among the very people whom a casual historian trusts to fall into line as religious types (e.g., poets). A corollary lesson ought to be that the “core consensus” of the West is not singular but plural, with not a single tradition but several shifting ones. A tradition, after all, far from being what a few writers “define” and others “add to,” is a process that begins elusively, takes on bolder outlines as it is interpreted both by those who admire and those

who criticize it, and changes even as its authority grows.

What, then, does Will himself mean by soulcraft? A cultural faculty to supervise education in good morals, pursue a steady surveillance of personal conduct, and, where necessary, censure and punish delinquent morals. This, Will tells us, is just what was never provided by "the liberal-democratic political impulse that was born with Machiavelli and Hobbes." But, at the command of an impulse opposed to that of liberal democracy, "a purpose of politics" has always been "to help persons want what they ought to want." The republican author whom this sentence recalls is, of course, Plato (whom Rousseau exempted from his strictures against philosophy in general). But Will disarms the objection that such custodianship is strong medicine by advising us to think of it on the analogy of a pastor's role in his parish. "Politics should share one purpose with religion: the steady emancipation of the individual through the education of his passions." An emancipated individual will be less narrowly individualistic. He will be socialized by a knowledge of the

mutual obligations he shares with others like himself.

So far, this is a familiar sermon; and it may be one that Americans are eager to hear several times in a generation, because they often feel on the verge of forgetting the degree of truth it contains. As a critic of liberal individualism, however, Will belongs to a special class. A moralist of the public good, he has also been, fairly consistently, a defender of the welfare state *in principle*. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to conclude that he is in some sense a social democrat, or even a communitarian. He has a more exalted idea of the state than of the community; and he subjects democracy itself to a satire that he spares the leading bureaucrats of the state. Hence (what may seem surprising in so severe a moralist) his exorbitant admiration for Henry Kissinger, the most successful antidemocratic statesman of our time—the style of whose memoirs Will compared to the style of Monet, and praised for covering "a large canvas with small strokes that have a remarkable cumulative effect." A critic, then, of liberalism, democracy, and the forms of solidarity that have made the welfare state attractive to its less eccentric advocates; a believer in the necessity of "soulcraft," and yet a very limited believer, according to the low-church style of the age, in the necessity of a revived Christian orthodoxy to augment the powers of the state: we have only begun to describe Will's politics, but what are we describing? He is, it seems to me, a paternalist, in the sense of the word defined by George Kateb: a holder of the view "that the state is expected to remain indifferent to no sort of behavior, no matter how private, but must endorse what it does not penalize, and become the moral parent and preceptor of otherwise wayward, weak, self-indulgent, or stubbornly transgressive creatures."

The slightest of pretexts will often serve for Will to give a paternalist emphasis to his usual idea of tradition. In *Statecraft as Soulcraft*, for example, he quotes Keynes to the effect that in the long run we are all dead. Will comments: "The author of that sentiment, Keynes, was, of course, childless." This is not just a matter of wily sarcasm—though, if one tries the experiment of imagining the same

Let Them Eat Caviar

The following is excerpted from a cable sent to Arthur Gelb, deputy managing editor of the *New York Times*, by Patricia Wells, a food writer in Paris. Gelb seems to have asked Wells to look into the impact of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster on the gourmet food market.

I've thoroughly checked into the situation on "radioactive" caviar, foie gras, snails, frog legs, etc. For many reasons, there is no big story here. The French have blocked the import of foie gras, frog legs, and snails from Eastern Europe. (. . . until the end of this week). . . . If the nuclear disaster had occurred before Christmas time, when about 80 percent of the foie gras is imported and consumed, it would have been another story. Also, am pretty well convinced that the caviar is safe, for the spring catch was in the tins at time of the disaster. Because there is so little information coming out of Eastern Europe on the subject, no one here seems to have a clue as to long range effects, but I'll continue to follow the story in case something develops.

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retort in a column by Buckley, one may decide that it includes an element of that. But Will has in view an argument about the enforcement of morals that transcends such local skirmishes. "Parents," he says, continuing the exegesis of Keynes's quip, "do not think that way. The great conservatizing experience is having children." For by having them, adults learn "how much this most important of social tasks is a task of transmission. Parents and schools are primary instruments of transmitting." *Transmission*, Will's term for the imitative (not inventive) continuity of a tradition, involves the pouring of a contained substance into a new container. The word seems to call attention to itself; and I ask leave here for a digression. At the university where I teach, there is a member of the faculty who greets a debate on almost any question by intoning a version of the following litany: "A university is an institution that exists for the creation, transmission, and preservation of knowledge, and for these tasks alone." I have found these words a calming and at times an almost sedative influence on my moods, but in lapses of attention I sometimes meditate a plausible extension of the ritual formula. I want to say, "The creation, transmission, preservation—and destruction of knowledge"; for, of course, knowledge does now and then escape from our tradition, never to return again. This was what happened to the phlogiston theory concerning the elementary matter once supposed to have caused fire. Until it was replaced by something else, phlogiston held the field, it was thoroughly preserved and transmitted. Whereas now, for students who know about it at all, it holds interest only as a dead idea. The same is true of the theory of natural law: roughly speaking, the belief that our moral obligations to our neighbors and to other persons are true, and not only right and binding, because they were engraved on our hearts by God. Many popular writers like Will, but many academic scholars too, are afraid that morality will be smashed to atoms if natural law ceases to be credited; and they are therefore even willing to cultivate orthodoxies they do not share, as a superstitious outwork of faith. The mistake of such writers is that they underrate the inertia—or, to put it more eulogistically, the interest in order, and the at-

tachment to a common routine—which may be inseparable from human life under every form of government except the most extreme tyrannies. It follows that our moral obligations to each other may not require the aid of natural law theories, any more than the making of fire required the aid of the phlogiston theory. If this is so, what Will takes to be the very core of a tradition of *conduct*, and therefore the foundation of the free polities of the West, is in fact as dispensable as the Gothic extravagance of flying buttresses in architecture.

IN WILL'S THEORY OF CULTURE, our ideas, if rightly presented and candidly received, will exhibit a behavior as regular as that of a genetic code transmitted under ideal laboratory conditions. The assurance he wants from his idea of transmission is visible at times in small traits of style, as when he writes that a constitution "presupposes efforts to predispose rising generations to the 'views' and habits and dispositions that underlie institutional arrangements." Burke, who believed that "art is man's nature," would have agreed with this sentence, but would also have wanted to turn it around. Our habits and dispositions do underlie institutional arrangements; but those arrangements also underlie our habits and dispositions. Our virtues, such as they are, flourish in a place, and do not exist before in any conceivable place. This brings us to another curious detail of the same remark, the self-conscious insistence of its *pre*'s: the constitution "presupposes efforts to predispose rising generations. . . ." Only ponderous constructions like these suffice to give Will the sanction he demands. But why? A problem for any constitutional government, and a problem Will would like to evade, is that its conditions at a given time may actually help to decide the "polity's frame of mind." The latter is not entirely separable from its frame of body. At the present moment, for example, there is an unprecedented danger that a generation of Americans will be made permanently cynical, and overlook the things that have been and remain most admirable in our social arrangements, all because an ethic of greed, which they rightly associate with Ronald Reagan, has absorbed or else repelled them but in any case has relieved them of the obliga-

tion to think. When they watch this president on television and see him gift-wrap lies (Our Founding Fathers the Terrorists), dissolve facts (the very existence of Americans who cannot find work), smile and forge ahead, they can hardly still rely on presuppositions and predispositions for guidance. Their leading question becomes, whether this man will finally succeed in educating all of us down to his level; and, if so, what adaptations we shall have to make.

As one inquires further into the character of Will's paternalism, its sharper features seem to recede and grow vague in the middle distance. Keen as his instincts are, on the track of any liberal cant-term, he falls here into the cant of the age by exhorting us to heed well the true worth of (unworldly riches? friendship? learning? no, none of these, but)—"Excellence." I do not rise to attack excellence. But I cannot help observing that it looks like an effort to split the difference between the old virtues—prudence, fortitude, temperance, justice—and a native utilitarianism that reserves its highest position for the spirit of self-advancing enterprise. Of course, Will writes in a nobler strain: "The abandonment of soulcraft was an abandonment of a pursuit of excellence." And maybe, after all, the native overtones are merely incidental. Maybe we are back with the original paternalist, the author of *The Republic*. The virtue (excellence) of a knife is to cut; the virtue (excellence) of a dog is to hunt or watch; likewise the virtue of a human being is to be more human: a phrase, as we have already seen, which Will felt confident of his power to interpret and which, taken literally, meant the state of being *heterosexual* and *not childless*. "A society," he now continues, "that has no closed questions cannot count on remaining an open society. Citizenship is a state of mind. A completely and permanently open mind will be an empty mind—if it is a mind at all. A mind cannot be shapeless; it must be moulded." And the jeremiad, for it no longer has even the form of an argument, ends by asserting: "he who moulds public sentiments goes deeper than he who enacts statutes and pronounces decisions. He makes statutes and decisions possible or impossible to be executed." Though these last sentences appear in quotation marks, they are

incorporated in Will's argument almost as if they were his, and it is left to a reader of his endnotes to discover that they come from Lincoln's first debate with Douglas. I will try to suggest what the words are likely to have meant to Lincoln. But first, it is necessary to surmise what they are likely to have meant to Will.

RECALL THAT IN WILL's idea of political education, the docility of a good citizen is such that he may be compared to a vessel that needs only to be filled. (If, instead of instructing a citizen in political life, one wanted to teach him how to play a game—say, chess—one would have to break the mold occasionally, since otherwise one would be condemning one's pupil to replay the same moves forever. Political life, however, unlike chess, is a serious business.) As Will peers into the mind in the vessel, he sees that it not only exhibits behavior but possesses an inner state. Now, this naturally fascinates him, from a censorial point of view: so much so that the subject of his argument seems to change without his noticing it. It began by having to do with the necessity of calling some questions closed. But it has come to center on a different concern altogether, the naturalness of regarding citizenship as a state of mind. The sentence from Lincoln which Will quoted without attribution, as part of the Mind of the West, related in its context not to the psychological process by which minds are closed, but to the social recognition by which debates on certain issues are *implicitly foreclosed*. Burke's whole philosophy was a continuous lesson in how that happens, and in why we ought to care about how it happens. Thus, Lincoln was a careful reader of Burke, just where Will is an impatient disciple; for he saw that such acts of closure were not a matter of setting "ought" before "is." They were a matter rather of seeing how much of what is, how great a preponderance of the sentiments we know as ours, incline us in a certain direction at a certain moment in our history. Will pictures educators building a state of mind which in turn produces good laws. Burke and Lincoln pictured no educators in this sense, but a citizenry coming to self-knowledge, person by person, and seeing where the laws do and do not

answer to a state of mind they hold in common. Decisions of this sort (it is part of Burke's and Lincoln's purpose to suggest) often take place in public, and not always at what has been designated a scene of instruction. Wherever they do occur, they teach us to move, in imagination, from ourselves to the little platoon we belong to in society, to a love of our country and of mankind.

The confusion of "closed questions" with a regulated inner "state of mind" has marked Will's thinking all the way from his dissertation to his most recent columns. Indeed, he sometimes makes the jump in the space of a few lines, where it is impossible to miss what is happening. In *Statecraft as Soulcraft*, he commends President Johnson's statement that the Civil Rights Bill was enacted because "a man has a right not to be insulted in front of his children." These are eloquent words, though it would be difficult to say in what their eloquence consists: perhaps it is that they echo a sentiment which many people have always felt more deeply than they knew. The aim of the words was to recollect, for an entire nation, certain standards of conduct that its citizens held inviolable. But now, here is Will's comment: "The theory was that if government compelled people to eat and work and study and play together, government would improve the inner lives of those people." This could not be more wrong. Johnson's statement concerned the limits of what was conscionable in public life; it said not a word about what went on in the minds of citizens. There remains an important sense in which public mores and personal impulses are mutually influential. And yet, to portray this relation as constant and reciprocal would require a complete revision of Will's understanding of a healthy republican education. "Prejudice," wrote Burke, "renders a man's virtue his habit." Without pretending to the full aesthetic mastery of a Kissinger, one may feel that this aphorism suggests a nuance of the moral life which Will has never properly described. For it is always in the power of a government to help certain virtues to prevail, by encouraging some prejudices at the expense of others. In the instance of the civil rights

laws, the American government did just that. A prejudice (the kind that makes us favor people like ourselves over people unlike us) was declared to be *legally outranked* by another prejudice (the kind that makes us think a man ought not to insult another man in front of his children). As to which came first, the law or the state of mind, the answer is probably in this case the law. Nor did the law work chiefly because minds had been molded. Minds, in some measure anyway, were molded because troops were called out to enforce the law. And we made the law, not because we had inherited an idea of excellence which it allowed us to realize more truly, but because we thought it was right.

APART FROM A FAMILY TREE OF THE FATHERS, paternalism needs to tell a story about the pertinence of their wisdom to the present generation. As we have seen, the fathers in Will's version are the tradition, all core, that runs unbroken from Aristotle to Augustine to Burke. How then does he account for the melancholy fact of its decline, conspicuous in the stunting of so many later, smaller branches? This part of the story begins with the unhappy invention of rights (as opposed to duties), of the autonomous self (as opposed to the responsible social being), and of the personal, symbolic, and disruptive uses of the past which received a first impetus from the success of modernism in the arts. All this is plausible, and a man like Will, whose favorite word is *pedigree*, would scarcely want to claim that it is original with him. The trouble is that he writes the kind of history in which ideas themselves have an agency, as if they operated independently of those who make or change them. Thus Will's bad modernists, like his good traditionalists, are always "contributing" to a project that comes before them, in this resembling the late-coming inheritors of a copyright. "Marcel Proust," he notes in a typical sentence, "contributed the idea (anticipated by William Wordsworth and others) that the self is a retrospective construct of memory." In response to learning cast in this mold, which is usually found in books with titles like *Perennial Problems: Their Cause and Cure*, it is fair to ask whether its narration follows the conven-

tions of grammar. To what did Proust contribute his idea? A close scanning of the previous page will yield a general answer (modern life, the subjective impulse, the decline of the West); though nobody who had read and been moved by reading Proust would recruit him in this way to the intentions of a nameless global project. It is, however, of the essence of the didactic story Will has to tell, that it should reproduce the texture of its episodes in an undifferentiated a fashion as possible.

Near the end of the story, we learn that it holds a moral for American writers in particular. "We have had quite enough Leatherstocking Tales, thank you," Will observes tartly and primly. "We need a literature of cheerful sociability." Prescriptions of a similar pattern are, of course, mandatory in the work of a government critic, whether the republican mores he aims to correct are socialist or capitalist, and whether the state he serves is pluralistic or totalitarian. Why cannot American writers come up with something to meet the order? We need, says Will, a literature of cheerful sociability; and from each according to his ability, to each—but let us stop a moment at the phrase "we need." It occurs at the beginning of perhaps two dozen sentences (many of them close together) in the text of *Statecraft as Soulcraft*. But it is a phrase most commonly heard at the end of committee reports or academic reviews; and it is a nuisance. To begin with, it does not identify the "we" who need. That it has no intention of doing so makes it a hollow, pretentious, after-dinner nuisance. The truth is, all that we, as participants in a culture, need at any time, and all we can intelligibly ask for, are interested descriptions of our way of life, which set us thinking about how it might be strengthened and how it might be reformed. By contrast, the *topos* of "we need" always has an effect of bullying. It insinuates that the committee member, or reviewer, or professional moralist knows in advance along what lines of force, in what subfield or discipline, the helpful descriptions are likely to fall. Now this is presumption; and it finds its proper reward, however many "Hear! Hear!s" later, by the reward of inattention. It is (to conscript Will's favorite example against his favorite way of talking) an easy thing to say "We need a

society free of racial bigotry." It is only a little harder to say, "The integration of blacks and whites is a necessary step to that achievement." But from neither of these statements will it follow logically that we need school busing. It is with culture as with society; and Will's pleas for a "thicker" American literature are, in effect, a course in school busing for novelists.

He encumbers himself with embarrassments like these from a motive that remains steady throughout all his writings. I mean his distrust of secularism. This looks at first glance identical with, but proves on reflection to be much harder than, his almost conventional distrust of individualism. The two issues are brought together revealingly in a passage of *Statecraft as Soulcraft*:

Writing in favor of religious toleration, Jefferson said something quoted and admired today: "... it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no God. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg." Yet in the same essay (*Notes on Virginia*) he wrote: "And can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are the gift of God? That they are not to be violated but by his wrath?" How can religious convictions, or their absence, be a matter of indifference if the liberty of the nation—and hence the safety of his pocketbook and even his limbs—depends on a particular conviction? Whether Jefferson is correct about the connection between the security of liberty and the prevalence of a particular conviction is an empirical question, and perhaps still an open one. But the logic of his position is awkward, as is the logic of modern politics generally.

One may as well start by correcting a secondary but by no means trivial error. The "connection" Jefferson believed he saw was *not* an "empirical question"—not, that is, testable or open to testing—for the reason that no society, including ours, was ever formed by postulating such connections in a mood of experiment. Jefferson held an uncompromising belief, which he wanted to strengthen, and not to test, by carrying it into action. The belief was that in a free society, liberties could only be secure in the presence of a deeply shared common morality.

Because the only practical instance of such a morality in his time came from religious belief, Jefferson wrote the sentence about God's wrath which Will finds awkward for his position. But it was the regulation of conduct, more than the content of the regulative beliefs, that mainly concerned Jefferson, as his sentence about one God or twenty gods makes clear. And we, the beneficiaries of his thinking, are free to sustain his belief as we choose, in keeping with the best plan we can devise for the coexistence of the two goods mentioned in these sentences: the survival of our liberties, and the survival of our morals. There is only a natural difficulty, rather than a logical awkwardness, in trying to combine these goods. There would be the same difficulty whether we chose a religious or a secular principle of combination. Indeed, it is perhaps merely an instinct, or an instinct informed by a reading of history, that finally decides one's choice of one principle or the other. Like most consistent paternalists, Will has an instinct (which looks to me like superstition) that tells him morals cannot survive without the prop of religious faith. Like most consistent individualists, I have an instinct (which looks to Will like the blindness of enlightenment) that tells me morals can in fact survive without such a prop.

TO FRAME THE ARGUMENT so may seem to reduce it to a contest between two irreconcilable prejudices. Yet it is striking that Will, as much as Jefferson, appears indifferent to the content of the faith he believes to be necessary. This suggests a germ of antipaternalism in his thinking, and its failure to develop betrays, at

least, as awkward a logic as anything in Jefferson's *Notes on Virginia*. The most curious aspect of this encounter is not, however, that Will's position is closer to Jefferson's than he wants to admit. It is that Jefferson's statements may themselves be read as harmonizing with a secularism which he only anticipated in part. The first sentence Will quotes is about the nation; the second, about the individuals who compose it. Of the latter Jefferson supposes only that they must share a strong belief in a common morality, a belief which religion alone in the eighteenth century seemed to support in the lives of most people. Does the same hold true in our own time? If so, to be a faithful Jeffersonian will mean advocating religion as a fact of private life; but this, it may be added, is already a smaller demand than Will and many of his party now make. On the other hand, if a coherent public morality can be sustained free of religious sanction, then one may as a good Jeffersonian advocate secular private beliefs, in addition to a secular public philosophy, and still suppose that one is helping to resist every imaginable form of social chaos.

Since Will is among the very few persons who now occupy anything like the role once filled by Walter Lippmann, Stuart Chase, James Burnham, and a host of others, one may regret that he has settled for a story as four-square as that of tradition vs. modernity, virtue vs. tolerance, classical republicanism vs. American individualism. Still, most of his predecessors did the same thing. It is only when one looks more closely at Will's educational methods that a vague initial sense of doubt changes to something sharper. For a columnist even

Doonesbury

BY GARRY TRUDEAU



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more than for other writers, mannerisms are an index of character, and Will's writing from the first has been notable for two: the ventriloquized gruffness of a downright Oxford slang ("Moynihan's basic point is bang on"), which inadvertently carries the Gatsby trademark ("old sport"); and the studding of his text with the names of learned authorities, whom Will brings forward much as an *arriviste* displays silverware, to dazzle, stagger, oppress, and sicken the visitor to his study, his emporium.

The hard-earned, half-found Anglophilia is innocuous, in Will as it is in others, though some Americans may find it rather a tease, like his thin smile and his walking stick. The pre-Montaigne style of enlisting, for one's own provisional cause, the sayings of any number of sages, is a more dubious practice, because it strikes a slightly dishonest bargain with the unlettered reader's piety about tradition. Plainly Will does think in lists of names, but lists of names do not think. "Jean Cocteau said . . .", "As Emerson says . . .": never mind what Cocteau has to do with Emerson, it is a commonplace occurrence for the reader to be led by Will, with distinguished and ill-sorted companions like these, through a pathless wilderness of *sententiae*, to emerge suddenly into a clearing somewhere near 800 words, at the prospect of a decided opinion on the advisability of sex education in Ferndale, California.

We may now come to a more vivid sense of the design of Will's methods by observing how they are brought to bear on a particular occasion. On June 18, 1978, he devoted a column to Alexander Solzhenitsyn's Harvard commencement address. In that speech Solzhenitsyn had attacked the intellectual promiscuousness of the West, and raised doubts about the unconditional acceptance of freedom of speech in a secular society, as distinct from the conditional acceptance of it in a religious order. In a comment in *Dissent*, I remarked that there were great writers whom we could not use all of, and on the evidence of this diatribe Solzhenitsyn was one of them: he himself had not been rescued by his great force of spirit alone; he had been rescued by a principle, the principle of freedom of speech; and in proportion as

we admired him, we were obliged to continue upholding that principle. Will took a very different line. He was disposed to appreciate both Solzhenitsyn's strictures on "America's flaccid consensus" and his proposal of a more rigid exclusionism in morals. This could not have been meant to suggest Will's assent to the politics of agrarian messianism that underlay Solzhenitsyn's criticisms, as a program well suited to modern America. But he did go the length of announcing that Solzhenitsyn's views were "congruent with" those of "Augustine, Aquinas, Richard Hooker, Pascal, Thomas More, Burke, Hegel, and others." Briefly pausing to cheer the warm, if distant, handshake between Hooker and Hegel, the reader to whom these names are not just names may return uncertainly to *congruent with*. That phrase works hard to conceal the wide difference between an analogical affinity which may be shared by discrete things, and a total identity in the aspects of things as interpreted by a strong-minded observer. In what ways, however, could Solzhenitsyn be supposed to have conformed to the views of any one of these thinkers? Consider his doctrine that great souls are formed by suffering against the grain of their times: that much alone excludes Hegel. Or his belief that the policies of a nation ought to be shaped by a cooperative understanding of theocratic edicts and the wisdom of the folk: Burke, and probably also Pascal, drop out of the picture here. Indeed, only in a very contingent sense can the remaining names be said to share a pattern of thought; we have to keep shifting about different features of all of them, to rearrange the composite likeness. This is not a manner in which history can afford to be written. Is it, nevertheless, a manner in which a popular education in the history of morals can afford to conduct itself, in the format of twice-weekly seminars on the opinion page?

WHAT MAKES WILL SO WEAK A SKEPTIC in an encounter like this is his notion that traditional culture, if absorbed intensely enough, can repair the corrupt mores of a republic, the way a vitamin injection revives the spirits of a depressed patient. This is what I meant at the start by the illusion that a culture can save a society from itself. Will's argument proceeds

as if we could recover by cultural means the very things we lost in the processes of social development or decay. At the same time, his sense of the texture of social life itself is rather abstract: certainly no more resourceful than the average person's, outside the class and milieu to which he or she belongs; and positively dull when compared with the nervous inquisitiveness of a rival columnist like Russell Baker.

It is perhaps the same constitutional delicacy, combined, as it is, with theoretical assurance, that makes Will suspect our daily lives have no solidity, that they are capable at any moment of dissolving into something insubstantial and possibly anarchic. And this is where religion enters the scene: to complete the work of culture, by assembling the fragments and restoring the substance of our experience. "Mankind," Will writes, in the last chapter of *Statecraft as Soulcraft*, "has needs—call them spiritual, moral, emotional." It does matter what we call them; but soulcraft anyway embraces all three: "The soulcraft component of statecraft has one proper aim. It is to maintain the basis of government that is itself governed by the best in a 2,500 year legacy of thought and action—social arrangements known to be right because of what is known about human nature." The date Will picks as a point of origin takes us back to Plato. And there already is a first complication. What Plato knew about human nature—not suspected, but knew—included an idea of the necessity of slavery. Will himself would renounce that part of "the soulcraft component." But are we as free as this to alter bits of the cultural legacy? To the extent that we are and to the extent that we press our advantage, our self-interested use of tradition exemplifies the same pragmatic and modern approach that Will deplores in the Founding Fathers.

Here is the climactic paragraph of Will's peroration, concerning the definition of man that we Americans, on pain of extinction, are now obliged to relearn in full:

When man is defined in terms of his nature, he is prey to tyrannies that frustrate his nature by making him subservient to the tyrant's will. But worse comes when man is defined not in terms of his nature but in terms of his history. What

comes is totalitarianism, which aims to reconstitute man to reduce him to raw material for history's processes and purposes. Thus, for example, Soviet totalitarianism cannot be considered an accident of Marxism, the result of a wrong turn by Lenin or Stalin. It is the result of doing what Marx did when he defined man in terms of man's experience rather than his essence.

These sentences make a confused web of assertions to which I can only begin to do justice. But their most inventive touch is to have lined up historical consciousness and an interest in human experience *on the same side with* totalitarian politics; and to have lined up a theory of man's essential nature and of a stability that reposes outside history *on the same side with* conservative politics. This is an extraordinary error, and shocking to find in the last pages of a book of political philosophy (however condensed). If we know one thing about the totalitarian governments of modernity, it is that they have sought to obliterate all consciousness of history, and that they have done so in the name of a theory of man's essential nature. By contrast, Burke, when he wrote against the French *idéologues*, wrote above all as the defender of experience *against* theory—which was, as he described it, the work of "refining speculators," "political aeronauts," "smugglers of adulterated metaphysics." To the dismay of the pamphleteers and columnists of his day, who altered their calendars the year of the revolution to begin again at zero, Burke spoke for history and nothing if not history. How then—by what feat of political aeronautics and smuggled metaphysics—can a modern conservative propose to write off history and experience together? They belong, says Will, to the totalitarian party now. But here again he takes a shocking, an extraordinary and, if one may say so, a *historically* false view. Leave aside the question whether Lenin and Stalin are the legitimate successors of Marx—as barren a question anyway as whether George Will is the legitimate successor of Burke. It remains worth saying that Marx, as the subject of active and not just scholastic discussion, was revised in the 1950s by several *anti*-totalitarian writers, on the ground that he sought to determine the limits of experience too narrowly. To Will,

however, this characteristic alone would serve to recommend any thinker. To be sure of numbering Marx among his enemies, Will has to blame him for prejudices he happens to share with Burke.

THE EXPOSURE OF ERRORS LIKE THESE is a slow business. But what has distinguished Will's career thus far is the pertinacity with which he has survived exposures of a much swifter sort. He has sometimes appeared to flout even the decorum that urges a temporary silence in the face of public embarrassment. He published, for example, in March 1979, in the week before Three Mile Island, a resonant endorsement of the whole nuclear industry, a bill of health so comprehensive as to leave its critics on a par with believers in miasma, witchcraft, and other precivilized phantasms of pollution anxiety. Understandably, he does not reprint that column in *The Pursuit of Virtue*; but he does, oddly, reprint the self-vindication that he published a few weeks later, when the worst possible short-term disaster had been averted. "Events," Will reported, "have not contradicted most of what was said here about nuclear safety. . . . The record of commercial reactors remains what it was: no one has been killed and public-health damage, if any, is unmeasured." Was this after all the voice of prudence? Or was it rather a reflex sentiment of commercial optimism, in the service of a corporate good which the genius of public relations has lately captured in the phrase *damage control*? Seldom before at any rate, in the work of a republican moralist, have the ancient words *caveat emptor* been given so euphemistic a gloss. But Will's poor judgment in his Three Mile Island columns was an occasional and adventitious matter; and readers faithful to a given opinion-maker will pardon his faults until they come to seem qualitative and essential. This was not yet the case with Will when he wrote of a well-known leader, "He has relied so much on merchandising novelties that he has devalued the theatrical dimension of politics." And yet, the president to whom Will applied those words was not Reagan, but Carter. Even the staunchest of Will's loyalists, as they look at the theatrical appreciations of *The Morning After*, may be

puzzled to reconcile the milder words with the grosser offenses of the past three years.

Just as I finished the last paragraph, a fresh example came into view. There on television was George Will defending the president's nomination to the federal bench of the barely literate Birch Society enthusiast and law school graduate Daniel Manion. Why does a man like Will venture so far that one may now reasonably charge him with practicing a double standard? I believe the answer is that he himself, these many mornings after, across the boundary from the Carter to the Reagan administration, has become part of the "merchandise" in the "theatrical dimension" he began by criticizing. To restate the fact in more familiar terms: he himself has been partly responsible for a recent innovation in American politics which seems to have changed republican mores for the worse. As a purveyor of instant commentaries on David Brinkley's "This Week," Will has been helping to shift the intuitions of millions of Americans; and not about issues only, but about the comparative status of elected or appointed officials and the journalists through whom their positions are mediated. Like his fellow commentator, Sam Donaldson, Will by his very conduct habituates viewers to a treatment of public servants that often ranges from intemperateness to insolence. The lowest habit that the new opinion-makers are adding to the customary practices of an interview is that of interrupting the guest without apology; and my impression is that in this, as in the assumption of a competence at once above the people and their leaders, Will has been among the worst offenders; though all, from Rather to Brokaw to Koppel, are disgraceful by the standards of American television journalism only a decade ago. Neoconservative writers have pointed out some of these abuses for interested reasons of their own. But they still keep a soft place for Will, and exempt him from every stricture they correctly apply to the rest. They take him at his word as a public educator on the neglected subject of our need for a public philosophy. Up to now I have been treating him in much the same way. Yet it is beginning to appear that in the years of Ronald Reagan's ascendancy, Will may have become, behind our backs and as it

were behind his own, a different moral quantity from what he set out to be.

The *Wall Street Journal* recently carried a long article on Will, which mentioned his frequent and sympathetic meetings with Nancy Reagan, and reported that the Wills have the Reagans to dinner about once a year "just to relax." Other Washington journalists have prepared the way for this sort of thing, and anticipated Will's standard reply to challenges: conflict of interest is in the eye of the beholder. Even six years ago, when he arranged a party to introduce the new president to Washington, it could be said that Will was simply making the most of his contacts, and thus following a pattern which had never damaged the reputations of columnists like James Reston and William Safire. In one choice of his career, however, Will moved outside the norms of journalistic conduct. He coached Ronald Reagan for his debate against Jimmy Carter, then went on the record with praise for Reagan as the superior debater, without ever declaring that to do so made him a double weight in the scale, the first time as a participant and the second time as a reporter. This did not cost Will any of his syndicated outlets; and from the point of view of circulation why should it? What it ought to cost him is some part of the reputation he holds for personal probity and public virtue. For, if this act of connivance was unscrupulous even by the standards of the Reston-Safire tradition, it was beyond conceiving by the standards of a tradition Will affects to cherish more dearly.

IN THE SUMMER OF 1797, Burke was on his deathbed, and Charles James Fox, with whom he had broken ranks over the French Revolution, made inquiries in order to pay his last respects. Burke would gladly have seen Fox if he could, but he sent a message through his wife,

to inform Mr. Fox that it has cost Mr. Burke the most heart-felt pain to obey the stern voice of his duty in rending asunder a long friendship, but that he deemed this sacrifice necessary; that his principles remained the same; and that in whatever of life yet remained to him, he conceives he must live for others and not himself. Mr. Burke is convinced that the principles which he has

endeavoured to maintain are necessary to the welfare and dignity of his country, and that these principles can be enforced only by the general persuasion of his sincerity.

Will's defense, when questioned about his coaching of Reagan, was that he was wholly sincere in estimating Reagan the better man in the debate: whatever his own commitments, this was also his honest opinion. Yet he neglected every measure to assure "the general persuasion of his sincerity." It is the steady pursuit of good conduct, under the eye of such persuasion, where no division is recognized between public knowledge and private reassurances, that chiefly serves to distinguish the ethic of virtue which Will admires from the ethic of self-interest which in theory he despises. As Burke wrote in another place, of an advantageous private connection which he believed himself obliged to refuse: "The operation of honour (as separated from *conscience*, which is not as between man and man but as between man and God) is to suppose the world acquainted with the transaction, and then to consider in what light the wise and virtuous would regard it. I am sure such men would not justify my conduct." Will has come to ask himself less and less whether such men would justify his conduct.

VI

IN turning from George Will to William Bennett one is conscious of a change of atmosphere in several respects. Bennett's position as the current secretary of education might have situated him to become an even more efficient publicist than Will; and he appears to agree at every point with Will's stress on the need to propagate a traditional culture closed to criticism. Yet Bennett is the less skillful writer of the two, as well as the less agile thinker, so that he often brings to light, by stating quite unguardedly, assumptions that Will has taken care to hold in reserve. Indeed, in Bennett's best-known campaign, his public sponsorship of a "core curriculum" for higher education in the humanities, the resemblances to Will's "core consensus" of tradition are so close as to warrant quotation in detail. "The late twentieth century," writes Will, "needs what the mid-nineteenth century had, a Matthew Arnold to

insist that everything connected with culture, from literature through science, depends upon a network of received authority." This is the challenge that Bennett means to take up: he will address, he says in his 1984 pamphlet *To Reclaim a Legacy*, "the great task of transmitting a culture to its rightful heirs." To assist him in defining that task, Bennett assembled a "study group" of teachers and administrators with long experience in higher education, among them David Riesman, Hanna H. Gray, Wayne C. Booth, and William Arrowsmith. But, perhaps deliberately, Bennett leaves unclear the role that this group played in preparing the text of his pamphlet; and in any case, he tells us that he solicited contributions from another forum and by other means: "The general public was also invited in a newspaper column by George F. Will to send me their lists" of "ten books that any high school student should have read." Certainly, Bennett's stylistic affinities are with Will, too, more than with any of the eminent persons whom he summoned to his study group. In seeking to give a vivid shape to their idea of education, both writers equally tend to picture the process as one of *combustion*: "the fuel that carries a social tradition forward is tradition," says Will. But sometimes their figures of speech offer an alternative view of the process as one of *si-phoning*: the aim of reading great books is "to tap the conscious memory of civilization," replies Bennett. In spite of their announced design, these metaphors imply just the practical, optative, and head-on approach to tradition as a business of technical know-how, which has characterized the more lugubrious American plans for the reclamation of culture over the past two centuries.

The latest decline of standards, Bennett thinks, has been visible above all in the humanities, which are now often taught "in ways that discourage further study." Others have argued that American society itself does not encourage further study of the humanities; and that the problem is daily exhibited at the highest levels of presidential government. *You can get this far without knowing anything*, is the message sent to millions of viewers by the ignorant old charmer himself. It is stamped on their minds by every improvised word he speaks, and

by every stupefied answer he makes in reply to an honest question. To pursue this line of attack, however, is irresponsible from Bennett's perspective, which stops inside the school gates. In order to limit the grounds of argument, I prefer to concede the point, and will therefore confront Bennett's analysis on its own terms. As a main cause of the crisis in the humanities, Bennett adduces the negligence of teachers themselves. They have, he believes, lost sight of "life's enduring, fundamental questions: What is justice? What should be loved? What deserves to be defended? What is courage? What is noble? What is base? Why do civilizations flourish? Why do they decline?" Some of these questions, of course, have room for several more within them. For they have been asked, at different times, with implications so widely disparate that one may feel the questions were really changing, even if the words stayed the same. But it is the last two of Bennett's "enduring, fundamental questions" that give the game away. They are in fact anything but perennial questions.

CIVILIZATION AS A CONSCIOUS ENTERPRISE, or an unconscious process susceptible of conscious helps; a past accomplishment that has now become fragile, and the destruction of which may be hastened by the neglect of its inheritors: civilization in this sense is a concept special to the historical thought of the last two hundred and fifty years. It started with the invention, by Burke, of an idea called "Europe" and the invention, by nineteenth-century Russians, of a dream called "the West." Hegel and Carlyle fortified it with dramatic accounts of a hero who alone embodied the distinctive good and evil of a race. Now, Bennett's narrowly inspirational sense of the word derives from theirs, but at two removes. Talk about civilization as a matter of pedagogy began in earnest with Ruskin. It was popularized by Kipling and reached its height in the years between the two great wars of this century. "Why do civilizations flourish? Why do they decline?" Spengler, Eliot, Yeats, Pound, Aldous Huxley, Christopher Dawson, all took a crack at it; and one had thought that period was over for good. It is understandable that a revival of the cold war would prompt a revival

of just such questions as these. What is scandalous is that they should ever be placed on a par with "What is justice?"

A civilization, says Bennett, is transmitted by its teachers—"transmit" being a favorite word with him, as it is with Will. Accordingly, he does not speak of teachers as "expounding" or "interpreting" their subjects. These last words would imply for the student a kind of *thinking* that Bennett wants to supplant by *reception*. Proper transmission, then, with proper reception, is to rescue from utter decadence a pedagogy which, at present, offers students a choice between two unpleasant extremes. It can be "lifeless or tendentious, mechanical or ideological." These make a curious pair of antitheses, as Bennett himself appears to recognize later on, when he writes that teachers "cannot be dispassionate about the works they teach." If we take this last remark as somehow consistent with the descriptions cited above, we arrive at a distinct but perplexing sense of Bennett's proposals. Teaching is to be passionate in some way, but tending to no conclusion, and least of all an ideological one. As to why we need a revival of the humanities at all—let alone a revival so carefully enclosed and supervised—Bennett gives a familiar justification for his appeal. He is disturbed by the narrowness with which students today regard their future vocations (an attitude that can hardly be called either passionate or ideological). They are "preoccupied (even obsessed) with vocational goals at the expense of broadening the intellect."

But whose fault is this? Bennett wants very much not to blame it on the social and economic arrangements that have made a career in a large corporation appear almost inevitable to any student who cherishes worldly ambitions for himself. Such a student naturally wonders what a few books of history, or literature, or philosophy can do for his earnings. Whose then is the failure of nerve? Bennett wants to say: the modern liberal's or radical's. Involved, as he is here, in a difficult tactical maneuver, he travels lightly and talks in code, and we shall have to interpret him as we can.

IT WOULD SEEM TO FOLLOW FROM Bennett's analysis that we ought to demand, for the sake

of our culture, a broader and deeper education in the humanities, however that may be brought about. Yet at this point Bennett seems to stop short: "I must emphasize," he warns, "that our aim is not to argue for more majors in the humanities, but to state as emphatically as we can that the humanities should have a place in the education of all." If one were to try to parse this complex of intentions, the result would perhaps be something like, "Stimulate them with the humanities, but not too much!" (Or, "A place for the humanities, and the humanities in their place.") Having stepped forward so boldly, why does Bennett now step back so timidly? One may read him as enforcing a constraint dictated in part by a rational sense of limits. Yet, as the clause about the numbers of majors suggests, in doing so he aimed for a conclusion altogether congenial with the spirit of humanistic consumerism. And that is a spirit full of concessions. Of course, it says, we still need more personal injury lawyers; more real estate developers; more copy writers for public relations firms; more cosmopolitan influence peddlers. But please, while you are transmitting on their frequency, at least fill their heads with the right names to drop at cocktail parties. It would be shallow to suppose that Bennett sympathizes with this point of view. But, in his present position, serving the people whom he serves, he is cautious not to offend those who do.

ONCE THE SOCIAL DETERMINANTS of the crisis have been safely nullified, Bennett's story about liberals and radicals can go into full swing. In his account there have been two separate phases of our decline. These are, "ideology" and "subjectivity," and he calls them opposite poles. But the description is, as we shall see, slightly disingenuous. For Bennett does not believe that ideology and subjectivity are the twin perils of a single epoch. Rather, subjectivity came first and prepared the way: it is, in effect, the liberal parent of a radical child. Bennett will say as much when he feels sure of a familiar and appreciative audience. In *To Reclaim a Legacy*, published for general distribution by the National Endowment for the Humanities, he adopts a more diplomatic tone. He tells us that his "study group"—by speak-

ing in whose name, Bennett leads us to believe that he sought their permission for every statement—were “alarmed by the tendency of some humanities professors to present their subjects in a tendentious, ideological manner. Sometimes,” he continues, “the humanities are used as if they were the handmaiden of ideology, subordinated to particular prejudices and valued or rejected on the basis of their relation to a certain social stance.” But, “at the other extreme, the humanities are declared to have no inherent meaning because all meaning is subjective and relative to one’s own perspective. There is no longer agreement on the value of historical facts, empirical evidence, or even rationality itself.” As one who believes in the value of historical facts, and who knows that the facts say nothing without a perspective, I will try to explain more clearly than Bennett what is at issue here.

Let us start by accepting Bennett’s premise that “the highest purpose of reading is to be in the company of great souls.” Further, let us, in imagination, place ourselves in that company. Finally let us take note of the respect we feel for, but also the distance we feel from, a revered presence we will never wholly come to know. Well, but what then? We can watch the company hold a colloquium among themselves, in a language foreign to ours, and with sounds as strange as those of any conversation from which we have been excluded. Or we can try to join the company (deferentially still, it goes without saying); and ask them questions, with the aim of learning something; and even give replies, in the hope of suggesting an unexpected counter-statement. This has always been one convincing picture—it is at any rate an old picture—of what happens in education. But once we join a conversation like this, we necessarily work in a medium that includes prejudices (ours, and those of the company) and that yields perspectives (determined by our time as well as theirs). When we try to make sense of the ideas that form such a perspective, we may generalize about them by speaking of “ideology.” There is, as all teachers know, an educational use of ideology and a repressive use of it. The mark of the former is that it assumes something may be learned from the past; the mark of the latter is that it is

concerned only with framing a rebuke to the past. In Bennett’s view, however, both of these practices are equally vicious, since they license the same elementary act of irreverence. They allow us to join the company in a conversation. Somehow, Bennett has concluded that the move from listening to joining is also a move from impartiality to bias.

VII

To help decode the more abstract features of Bennett’s program in *To Reclaim a Legacy*, I have found it useful to compare the sometimes evasive language of that document with the always forthright language of his recent speech, “In Defense of the Common Culture.” This was an address given by Bennett on May 15, 1986 to the American Jewish Committee in Washington, D.C. If I have interpreted the argument rightly, it not only supplies some of the missing details of his educational policy, it also suggests that a strong motive of the policy from the start has been a reaction against the radical politics of the 1960s. Already in *To Reclaim a Legacy*, Bennett had noted that “intellectual authority” in the 1960s “came to be replaced by intellectual relativism as a guiding principle of the curriculum. . . . We began to see colleges listing their objectives as teaching such skills as reading, critical thinking and awareness of other points of view.” Bennett, in short, already treated the adoption of these ends—reading, critical thinking, and an awareness of other points of view—as more or less catastrophic, and likely in themselves to induce an adversarial relationship to authority. But the same theme is resumed less temperately in his American Jewish Committee speech. “Campus radicals,” he says there, “nowadays tend to see the university as a kind of fortress at war with society, an arsenal whose principal task is to raise ‘revolutionary consciousness,’ frustrate the government, discredit authority and promote a radical transformation of society.” The key word is *nowadays*. It was written in 1986, by a sentient being, a reader of the newspapers, the secretary of education of the United States. The 1960s are a nightmare from which Bennett cannot awake. However becalmed the life may be on campuses today, however many radicals of an earlier decade

give up the *hortus siccus* of dissent for the *hortus conclusus* of Wall Street, Bennett will not rest content until he is cured of his memories; and nothing will ever cure him. I believe there is a connection between the obsessional quality of thinking like this and the proposition, advanced by Will and now seconded by Bennett, that civility alone no longer affords a strong enough sanction for the morals of a republic.

BENNETT IN THIS SPEECH argues that to preserve our way of life we shall have to inculcate religious belief by the agency of government itself. It is an extraordinary proposal and, therefore, its reasons have to go a long way back. Of the core tradition to which we can still choose to belong, Bennett remarks "We are part and a product of Western civilization"; and he cites, as earlier resting places of our tradition, "Enlightenment England and France, Renaissance Florence, and Periclean Athens." These were our precursors in coming to live by the ideas of justice, liberty, equality, and government with the consent of the governed, ideas which are "the glue that binds together our pluralistic nation." Here one may be conscious of a gratifying symmetry. Just as the morals that bind us to each other gradually congeal into religious doctrine, so the little allegories that describe the process of cohesion itself appear to harden. They began (in what we may now call Will, Stage 1) with a Burkean trope: "conservatism teaches the dignity of government that grows organically from the native soil." Then (in Will, Stage 2, which corresponds to Bennett, Stage 1) came the revised view of tradition as a capacious fuel tank, or a reservoir to be tapped. But now, in a still more striking, if also more puzzling idiom, we have (Bennett, Stage 2) tradition as a sort of *glue*; with the hint that here, as in the paper chains that students make with library paste, to take up a single link is to encumber ourselves with the whole.

Still, it is noteworthy that Bennett's list of precursors—Athens, Florence, Enlightenment England and France—adds up to a largely secular tradition. Why then does he not follow the advice of the Founding Fathers, and opt for an American version of out-and-out secular-

ism? After all, as we saw when discussing a similar turn near the end of Will's argument, an American secular morality can be rendered sufficiently binding by the enforcement of a strong nonreligious consensus. To discover the reasons for Bennett's choice, we have to move outside the field of education and culture entirely. For his ideas have been shaped to fit the larger policies of the Reagan administration. Nor have they been designed, by conviction, in keeping with its politics of principle alone. They have likewise been trimmed for expedience, to help shore up its alliances of the moment. These are serious charges, but, as I will show, they are charges for which Bennett himself has volunteered all the evidence.

In his address to the American Jewish Committee, the secretary of education spoke of something even more important than our system of schools, something he called the "common culture" of Americans. That culture on his analysis has three distinguishable elements: first, "the democratic ethic"; second, "the work ethic"; and third, "the Judeo-Christian ethic." The division of the subject itself betrays a remarkable imprecision, like that of the baseball coach who split the game into three parts: first, playing; second, batting and fielding; and third, fear. It is, however, the last, vaguest, and most doubtful of Bennett's elements that occupies most of his attention. The Judeo-Christian ethic "provides the fundamental ideals that underlie our entire political and social system—ideals like respect for the individual, standards for individual behavior, and a commitment to decency and to service to others." After Will's thoroughgoing paternalism, this defense of individualism is almost invigorating. I can agree with, and indeed would like to live my life by, all of Bennett's "fundamental ideals." But I am uncertain in what sense any of them is Judeo-Christian. Perhaps they are if one adds, "in heavily reformed versions of both religions." Nevertheless, respect for the individual, standards of individual behavior, and commitment to decency are as much Roman-Republican as they are Judeo-Christian virtues. What for that matter is the Judeo-Christian ethic? Bennett is no help. It "isn't," he says, "something manufactured by the upper stratum of society in the elegant salons of

Washington, New York, or Cambridge.” By contrast, it flourishes in the common culture of “most Americans.”

When pressed for details, Bennett replies that the ethic has to do with “moral imagination”; and “the moral imagination of most Americans is,” in his opinion, “sound.” This last word *sound* does much the same work in Bennett’s analysis that the cover-virtue *excellence* did in Will’s. As applied to moral imagination, the adjective “sound” is merely a solecism. Moral imaginations are not sound or unsound, they are alive or dead. To imagine a thing morally is an individual act and a positive exertion; it is not to be accomplished by sharing a condition, like a state of health. But Bennett needed to misconstrue the English language, and pay irrelevant compliments to the audience who stood him as proxies for *most Americans*, because his business on this occasion was not to educate but to raise morale. The year being 1986, our common culture was under assault by an adversarial culture; and “One important feature of this adversarial culture . . . is the theme that the U.S. is the incarnation of evil, the common enemy of mankind.” Bennett went on to characterize the adversarial culture in a manner that more prudent conservatives have tended to avoid ever since the anti-Semitic campaigns of Europe in the 1930s. He compared its agents to a kind of virus: “Most Americans, of course, reject the perverted culture of our adversaries. . . . Our common culture serves as a kind of immunological system,

destroying the values and attitudes promulgated by our adversaries before they can infect our body politic.” Burke was at once less dramatic and more cogent when he conceived of this power of resistance as inertia. The very presence of habits, and a way of thinking and feeling to which people have accustomed themselves, explains, far better than immunology does, the ability to survive which their culture may exhibit even in the absence of their knowledge of its reasons for surviving.

AFTER SHARING SOME PLAUSIBLE evidence that our failures of cultural reception begin long before college, Bennett proceeds to render this demonstration pointless by urging a defense of our culture and morals by other than educational means. “Last summer,” he recalls, “in a speech to the Knights of Columbus, I argued that ‘Our values as a free people and the central values of the Judeo-Christian tradition are flesh of the flesh, blood of the blood.’ For this,” he laments, “I was called an Ayatollah.” Whoever thought of calling him that was a wit; and the label ought to stick. Flesh of the flesh, blood of the blood: this is bizarre language to be used by the holder of a nondenominational office, in a secular nation whose pledge of allegiance omitted the words “under God” until the mid-1950s. What did they make of this at the American Jewish Committee? We must go slowly here, for there do seem to be further signs that Bennett’s sense of his occasion was somewhat ill-defined. Students today,

Poverty Rises in Cleveland

Poverty has increased 40 percent in Cuyahoga County since 1980, with no signs of leveling off, according to a new study by the Council for Economic Opportunities in Greater Cleveland.

Of the county’s 1.46 million residents, 250,000, or more than 17 percent, are at or below the poverty level defined by the federal government, according to George C. Zeller, the CEO planning research analyst who did the study.

The federal government defines the poverty level as \$5,360-a-year income for a single person, \$7,240 for a family of two, \$9,120 for a family of three and \$11,000 for a family of four.

The study, called the Poverty Indicators, was the third done in the past two years. It showed that those most likely to be poor are families with a female household head, regardless of race or educational level, and male and female blacks, said Zeller.

The CEO report was grimmer for Cleveland. It showed 35 percent, or 192,000 of its 573,822 residents, mired in poverty, Zeller said.

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he informed his listeners, “may grow up ignorant of the role of religion, of religious freedom and religious faith in American life.” Now, religious freedom is not quite the same thing as religious faith, however much the unifying phrase “role of religion” may try to make them so. At bottom, the secretary of education seems to be saying that the sentiment of religion in general is more vital to Americans than the particular tenets of a believer’s faith. We have seen a similar thought framed by Jefferson for pragmatic reasons, and by George Will for reasons he insisted were more than pragmatic, but of which he could not give a coherent account. What all earlier thinkers on the subject have acknowledged, however, is just what Bennett cannot afford to admit: that religious liberty may, as a matter of fact and precedent, have shown itself to be at odds with “the role of religion.”

The strangest twist of Bennett’s reasoning comes at the end of his speech. Here I must quote at some length:

All surveys show that most Americans today believe in “the father of all mercies.” But, whether individuals give personal assent to a father of all mercies or not, the extra gift of our common culture is this: the mercies—rights, freedoms, liberties—belong to us all. It is the heritage of our common culture, grounded in the Judeo-Christian tradition, that helps to support not just religious liberty, but our free society as a whole. Again, one does not have to assent to the religious beliefs that are at the heart of our common culture to enjoy its benefits. For example: “We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights. . . . And for the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.” Whatever one’s personal views, the religious tradition at the heart of our culture does require, in our time, common acknowledgment, respect, attention, nurture, and defense.

When Bennett agreed to speak to the American Jewish Committee, what exactly had he been told about his audience? Was he under the impression that they numbered themselves among the believers in a “father of mercies?” (The phrase occurs once in the King James

Bible, at Second Corinthians 1:3.) Or did he mean to suggest that these mercies included a protective tolerance of Jews in spite of their unbelief?

It is true that the rights, freedoms, and liberties to which Bennett alludes may count as mercies on a broad construction of that word. But then, one may well feel that one belongs to the “us” to whom they are given, without therefore supposing that they were given by the Christian God. Evidently, Bennett wanted to assure this moral but not Christian gathering that the founders of America associated the good of their way of life with a religious sentiment rather than a religious doctrine. Yet he does this by quoting, as an example of “enjoyment” without “assent,” the famous words of the Declaration of Independence, which do mention a Creator and “the protection of divine providence.” Into a very short stretch of argument Bennett has here managed to compress two non sequiturs. For, to the Declaration as a whole, the founders *did* believe that we must assent in order to enjoy the benefits of American society. But they did *not* believe, and it is a matter of record that they did not believe, religious faith played any important part in the assent that they required. On the contrary, they gave much thought to religious freedom, but left no provision for “the role of religion” in the forms of loyalty that they inculcated.

Thus, as someone who believes our common culture ought to be predominantly secular, I have a much better claim than William Bennett to be counted as a moral and intellectual descendant of the signers of the Declaration. The evidence is not only in that great document, but in the Constitution of the United States, the Bill of Rights, the Federalist Papers, and in other works by the authors of all of these, especially Jefferson, Madison, and Hamilton. The America to which I feel a strong loyalty began to exist two hundred and ten years ago. The America to which Bennett wants to divert my loyalty has been cooked up in the past few years, on curious occasions like that of the secretary of education’s speech, with its appeal to a Father of All Mercies under the auspices of the American Jewish Committee. The heart of this new, fake “common

culture" is a stillborn marvel of the ideological laboratory, with no utility outside the parlors of Heritage Societies. And yet "whatever one's personal views," Bennett insists, it requires nothing less than "common acknowledgment, respect, attention, nurture, and defense." All these, he must be saying, are possible *without assent*. And here I believe is an interesting problem for the modern conservative adepts of character-building. What kind of person is it who can attend to, acknowledge, respect, defend, and even nurture an entity from which he withholds his assent? I would think such a person not far this side of a hypocrite.

Difficult as it is, we have to go on trying (hardest of all where the new cultural scientists do most to make cartoons of our creeds) not to confuse tradition with imbecility, or moral soundness with moral idiocy. Ideas matter: Bennett and Will, like many weightier thinkers, have said this again and again, and they are right. It is because ideas do matter that it is wrong to defend and even to nurture ideas one believes to be deeply in error. For those who accept Bennett's truth about culture, he holds out the promise that "This truth will keep them free." Those who both know and assent to what they believe may prefer the older saying as the better one. The truth will make them free. It is not a secret that was found long ago but a gradual discovery that is still going on.

VIII

I have to conclude with what may seem an awkward confession. In the most general form of a great many issues that Will and Bennett raise, I feel a certain sympathy with their warnings. A common sense of the past is rapidly vanishing, from the educational curriculum as it is from the culture at large. More than any other agency of the change, the mass media have been responsible for the pace of this obliteration; and, even within the academy, their influence is growing every day. One result is the displacement of old books by new ones, and if I had to choose I would side with the old. But my reason is not that I regard them as "cultural capital" (to borrow a symptomatic phrase of Will's) or that I believe by learning their lessons I will be better able to protect my culture against reading, critical thinking, and

other points of view (to return to Bennett's leading signs of decay). It is rather that books which have been tested by a lot of people for a long time seem to me precisely those that teach the most about reading and are likeliest of all others to foster critical thinking. They can make other points of view so vivid that even our shared life seems foreign to us for a while. Great books, much more than timely ones, suggest a detached and therefore an unpredictable view of our culture. Their good derives from their peculiar power to make us think, and the right use of that power is to reform, and not to console, the culture and society in which we are at home.

YET BENNETT AND WILL, instead of ever suggesting a vindication of culture along these lines, have preferred to teach the great ideas as a master clue to the defense of the West. The latter cause in turn has become for them, in a very confused way, identical with the maintenance of religious beliefs against the onslaught of secular ideals. Throughout their polemics, therefore, they are obliged to be reticent about, or else cryptically to disguise, the political concerns that preoccupy them both. In the body count of their mimic wars between the ancients and moderns, they have started and finished wrong for a visible reason. They have had to take the current president, and the culture that he represents, as a more than implicit exemplar of tradition. But he is the reverse of that. The greatest of all modernizers, the unexampled master and servant of images, the destroyer of the past and the somnambulist of memory: these are the terms in which he will be remembered, if a culture markedly different from his survives to remember at all. From such a future perspective the motives, as well as the judgment, of men like George Will and William Bennett, will be difficult to recover or imagine.

In one respect, however, both their motives and their judgment are intelligible even now. I mean the service into which they press religious doctrines as the necessary bulwark of an otherwise secular culture. This demand propels them to the outmost bounds of sophistry, far from their own sources in the Enlightenment tradition they cannot help invoking. But they

take these risks for the sake of an ad hoc coalition of the mid-1980s that merges Christian fundamentalists, whose main political idea is that the Constitution needs to be scrapped, and neoconservative intellectuals, whose hatred of the left supersedes every consideration of empirical prudence. Temporary as the alliance may be, the reaction it exhibits is part of an enduring pattern in America. It remains a commonplace view now, as it was two centuries ago, that secularization cannot be had without demoralization. The anti-Enlightenment argument against America has always begun here. It says that we had better act as if we believed religion's claims, even if that forces us to do some fancy bookkeeping. But the reply of our native tradition remains what it always was. It

grants that the state Jefferson and Washington founded is hard to live with now, as it was from the first. But the role of an intellectual may sometimes be to challenge the common view of things. As Jefferson and Washington believed, America's unique mission in the world was also to challenge it, by showing that a moral life could be established without metaphysical tests or sanctions. A conservative plea may now perhaps be allowed after so many words in reply to those who take the name of conservatives. Our constitutional and secular state, and the individualist culture that has reflected many of its complex qualities, are doubtless not the best we can envision, but they are what we have to begin with and they are worth defending today. □



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