

A POWERFUL PEN

If George Will Had His Way

By Rebecca Patrick

He's been called an elitist on more than one occasion, but Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist George Will merely brushes aside any intended criticism and veers, instead, down a political path.

"To write a column is to make some people happy and other people unhappy – and I've written more than 5,000 columns. So, you either get a thick skin or you get out of the business," he says matter-of-factly during a July phone interview.

"And I don't quite understand the phrase elitist. The question in politics is not whether elites are going to rule; it is which elites are going to rule. By definition, in the senior levels of the political pyramid in a continental nation, there are going to be a few people and we call them elites. The question is to get good elites and to get people to consent in democratic elections."

That take is quintessential George Will. Known for conservative commentary branded with lofty, acerbic wit – and often a dash of his beloved baseball – Will started as a journalist in the early 1970s. He connected with *The Washington Post* in 1974 – penning a syndicated biweekly column that continues today. His foray into television has lasted more than four decades as well; the most noted work coming during ABC's *This Week with David Brinkley* (1981-1996).

On November 15, Will is set to address the Indiana Chamber's 27th Annual Awards Dinner with his impressions of the election and "the ongoing, slow, predictable crisis of the entitlement state."

Take him out to a ballgame

Will was born in Champaign, Ill. and became a Chicago Cubs fan at age seven in 1948. His love of baseball led him to author several books on the pastime, including *The New York Times* best-seller, "Men at Work: The Craft of Baseball".

Will famously has said Cub fans are "99 and 44/100th percent scar tissue." Still, he persists and even hopes.

"I was at the (Steve) Bartman

(postseason) game (in 2003). I've seen the lows – and there have been very few highs. However, this year it's quite clear the Cubs are the best team in the National League Central. Though I try to keep expectations under control," he reasons.

"The (Pittsburgh) Pirates are good and the (St. Louis) Cardinals are good, but the Cubs are better. I expect the Cubs will play in October. The three best teams in baseball are all in the National League, the Cubs, the



Next to politics and policy, baseball is perhaps George Will's most prolific topic; the 75-year-old has been a diehard Chicago Cubs fan since he was a child.

(Washington) Nationals and the (San Francisco) Giants. So it's going to be tough to get to the World Series, but the Cubs have a good shot."

Baseball has spent the better part of two decades cleaning up the game – from players using performance-enhancing drugs to umpire miscues. Will believes the sport is vastly improved.

"I think the instant replay is good. While you'll never be completely free of those who try and cheat chemically, great progress has been made there. As a result of that, baseball is younger and more athletic.

"There has probably never in the history of the game been such a constellation of extraordinary young stars: Mike Trout, Bryce Harper, Manny Machado, Kris Bryant, Anthony Rizzo. I think the national pastime is in better shape than the nation," he quips.

Yet Will does have a few qualms.

"There's also been a huge spike in home runs, which suggests people are content to taking an 'all or nothing' approach to hitting. There's really too much nothing – too many strikeouts. Too much of the game is without the ball put in play."

Professional snapshots

When it comes to Will's own career, there have been countless highs; still he was quick to single out several.

"I have a handicapped son with Down Syndrome – and I've written about his progress; he is 44 years old. Those are the columns that people have probably responded most to. It's interesting that the columns people respond to with most warmth and remember most are not about public policy.

"And there were so many interesting moments on *This Week with David Brinkley*. When (in November 1985, Ferdinand Marcos), the head of the Philippines, announced (with contrived spontaneity) a national election on our show. That was actually in response to a question of mine that I was prompted to ask by a member of the Reagan administration, who knew the answer that I'd get. (In the end,) Marcos called for the election that ended his career."

Since 2013, Will has been a contributor for *Fox News*. Less than a year ago, Will gave a rather scathing review of Bill O'Reilly's book, "Killing Reagan" but agreed to appear on his colleague's program.

"It certainly detonated Mr. O'Reilly. He's an excitable fellow. That was the first and certainly will be the last time (I appear). That's not the kind of person I do journalism with."

Independent streak

Never shy with words, Will has been especially forthcoming in his dislike for Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump. In early June, Will officially had enough of Trump and those supporting him.

"I disaffiliated from the Republican Party because so many Republicans came to terms so easily with Mr. Trump. Regarding Mr. Trump, it is not just the coarseness of his manner; it is his indifference to the truth. It is his constant, almost reflexive lying. I'd love to be able to find nicer words to put it, but these words fit," he stresses.

"The Republican convention (was) the one-year anniversary of

him saying John McCain was not a war hero, because Trump said, 'I prefer people who weren't captured'. John McCain was offered release by the North Vietnamese – who were torturing him – because he was an admiral's son. John McCain said I'm not leaving behind my fellow prisoners, and stayed there to endure more years of torture. While Donald Trump enjoyed four or five student deferments.

"Please. You don't have room in your magazine for all the things he has said that were offensive and false."



"The phenomenon of Mr. Trump thoroughly blurred the line between entertainment and politics. I don't think people have quite focused on the fact that whoever wins this presidential election is going to be given the nuclear launch codes. The ultimate seriousness of the stakes of American politics has been lost in the somewhat frivolous approach to this campaign."

– George Will

The blame game

When Trump's ascension was a fait accompli, many pundits and long-time Republicans sought to make sense of how it happened.

Will points to certain party dissatisfaction and Trump's understanding the mood (and fears) of the nation.

"The Republicans, in the way of the elections of 2010 and 2014, took control of both houses of Congress – and still weren't able to work their will to the satisfaction of the base of the Republican Party.

"It's unavailing to try to explain to people that the separation of powers that Madison and the other framers of the constitution put in place is supposed to make it difficult to work your will. You cannot govern this country just from Congress; similarly, you cannot govern it just from the White House. The separation of powers and checks and balance is supposed to provide compromise and centrism and moderation – and it hasn't done so," he declares.

"Second, globalization, trade, the churning of our American economy under these forces has left some people injured and behind, and they are understandably resentful.

"Third, immigration has given Americans the sense that things are out of control. That control of the borders is an essential attribute of national sovereignty, and we seemed to have forfeited it in the view of many Americans," he acknowledges.

But there are two other factors, according to Will, that are perhaps even more at play here.

"The phenomenon of Mr. Trump thoroughly blurred the line between entertainment and politics. I don't think people have quite focused on the fact that whoever wins this presidential election is going to be given the nuclear launch codes. The ultimate seriousness of the stakes of American politics has been lost in the somewhat frivolous approach to this campaign."

And to that end, Will maintains the media must share some of the burden.

"Trump is a creature of free media. He spent very little to get the Republican nomination. The media was – particularly cable television – absolutely obsessed with him. He was very good for ratings; he made them a lot of money. They could pursue this money while chanting the public's right to know. A great cover for avarice."

Oh no, it's you!

A record number of voters this cycle have serious misgivings with their presidential candidate – never mind their feelings for the other



Research from *The New York Times* shows that only 9% of the U.S. population chose Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump as the major party nominees for President.

party's nominee. Meanwhile Will, whose Libertarian leanings have been on more frequent display in recent years, thinks that ticket could have chosen more wisely too.

"(Some) 320 million Americans and we've got these two (Trump and Hillary Clinton)! That's what Americans are saying. How in the world could this have happened?"

"Every four years it's different. The nominating process – we keep tweaking it to see what can be done to make it generate more talent. But when you start with 17 people on the Republican stage and one of them is a carnival barker of great skill at rousing crowds and attracting free media, the carnival barker has a great advantage," he muses.

"Mr. (Gary) Johnson, who is at the top of the Libertarian ticket, is not gifted at the presentational side of politics. Bill Weld, former two-term governor of Massachusetts, is his running mate. If he were at the top of the ticket, this would be a formidable thing, because Bill is experienced and articulate and funny. He doesn't have that crankiness that sometimes comes with people associated with the Libertarian Party. Libertarians are about 95% right and about 5% stark raving mad. The 5% sometimes drives out the 95%," he contends.

The Republicans are in dramatic straits as well. George W. Bush allegedly told his former aides that he fears that he will be the last Republican president.

Will cautions that it all rides on the election night results.

"If (Trump) wins, the Republican Party as the carrier of conservative ideas is over. It would be at least until 2024 before the Republican Party will be recognizable as a vessel of conservative thinking," he begins.

"If (Trump) loses, much will depend on how badly he loses. If he loses by, say, four points, there will be a great outburst of acrimony and finger pointing, and people will say, 'Well, (House Speaker) Paul Ryan did it. So and so did it because they didn't rally around Trump and help him cross the finish line.' If he loses by say, 10 points, people will say, 'This was really not a good idea; let's not do that again.' The question is does he win or lose, and if he loses, by how much."

The Reagan he knew

On the campaign trail, Indiana Gov. Mike Pence has taken to mentioning his running mate in the same breath as President Ronald Reagan. Needless to say, Will bristles at the suggestion.

"I've never seen anyone in American public life less like Ronald Reagan than Donald Trump. It is unimaginable that Ronald Reagan would say any of the 500 or so things that Mr. Trump has said that have been so notable in the last year. Rounding up 11 million people to deport them, making fun of the handicapped, wanting to ban an

entire religious category from this country. It's unthinkable that Ronald Reagan would say these things."

Whereas the 40th U.S. President was, as Will puts it, a "gifted politician."

"He had – and I don't say this at all disparagingly – he had an actor's knack for connecting with an audience. Democracy is a kind of theater in which you try to move by persuading, with rhetoric and words and gestures, large numbers of people. That's what an actor does. Some of the greatest actors of the 20th century included Charles de Gaulle, Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill, as well as Richard Burton and Lawrence Olivier. Ronald Reagan once said he wondered how you can be successful in politics without an acting background."

Will enjoyed a friendly rapport with Reagan and even helped prep him for a 1980 debate against President Jimmy Carter.

"Ronald Reagan came to my house for dinner six times when he was president. ... I saw him after the presidency at his home in Bel Air. He was a friendly man with one friend and he married her. By that, I mean he was friendly to everyone, but open to only one person (Nancy Reagan)," he explains.

"His affability and his humor and his endless store of anecdotes and jokes were a way of keeping people close to him, but at a distance."

Coming together

Democrats were also counted among Will's most cherished friends on Capitol Hill.

"Few people today remember Henry Jackson, who died more than 30 years ago. He was a great Democratic senator from the state of Washington who resisted the drift away from strong Cold War strength in the Democratic Party, after it nominated George McGovern in 1972.

"My closest friend in Washington was Sen. Pat Moynihan from New York. A good New Deal Democrat, but probably the most accomplished social scientist to serve in the government, certainly the most to serve in elected office," he shares.

The intense partisan atmosphere in Congress bothers Will, who thinks it may get better – depending on who wins the presidency.

"There was a time – and there should be a time again – when it will be normal to have friendships across party lines.

"My hunch is that the great demographic factors militate against Mr. Trump, but we shall see. ...

"It's quite possible that Mrs. Clinton, if she wins, says 'I really don't want four or eight years like the eight we've just had' and will try to find some way to bridge these gaps. When she was a senator, she had the admiration of a number of Republican senators. So, maybe there's hope."