

George Will: a pompous defender of wealth and privilege

David Walsh
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Not to put too fine a point on it, *Washington Post* columnist George Will is a pompous windbag, one of the most obnoxious right-wing media figures in America, and *that* is saying a good deal.

Will's longtime specialty has been the pseudo-erudite defense of wealth and privilege. In his insufferably overblown manner, he has, for example, campaigned for the abolition of the minimum wage, against the paltry \$250 check sent to Social Security beneficiaries—in lieu of a cost-of-living adjustment—in 2009, and, more generally, in defense of social inequality.

Will is an ideal commentator for the nouveau riche who likes to think that his or her brute greed has something elevated about it.

Nearly every one of his pieces operates along these lines, but his May 16 column, “European Union: A coalition of irresponsibility,” is worthy of special note. It is the latest of his splenetic responses to the debt crisis in Greece and Europe.

Will begins his piece by taking note of the election results in North Rhine-Westphalia, which were unfavorable to the right-wing government of Chancellor Angela Merkel. This provides him the chance to assert that “The 1648 Peace of Westphalia, which ended the Thirty Years’ War, ratified Europe’s emerging system of nation-states.”

Admirer of the *ancien régime* that this comment makes him out to be, Will ignores the fact that more than two centuries of social convulsion and revolutionary struggle intervened before the modern European nation-state system fully emerged. As many historians have pointed out, the Peace of Westphalia sanctioned dynastic rule and envisioned a balance of power system that was fatally disrupted by the French Revolution, among other events. Efforts to restore it

after Napoleon’s defeat failed, in the end, because of dramatically altered economic and social conditions.

Will’s empty reference to the Thirty Years’ War is of a piece with his general method. He—or his many editorial assistants—enjoys using “Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations.” The relatively brief May 16 column is peppered with irrelevant citations. William Blackstone, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry James and William Dean Howells all come in for name-dropping, without anyone being the wiser for it.

The column makes no coherent sense, except as an excuse for Will to vent against his fantasized version of European social democracy, with all its dangerous social-leveling and nationality-“neutering” tendencies, and against the Greek population.

Along the way, the columnist displays a degree of unconsciousness about his own function in society that takes the breath away. He writes: “Greece represents a perverse aspiration—a society with (in the words of Wisconsin Republican Rep. Paul Ryan) ‘more takers than makers,’ more people taking benefits from government than there are people making goods and services that produce the social surplus that funds government.”

If one devoted some time to it, one could probably think of more useless parasites than Will and his fellow pundits, but it would take some doing. How does Will classify himself, in social terms, as a ‘maker’ or a ‘taker’? What ‘goods and services’ does he produce?

Nothing enrages the *Post* columnist more than popular opposition to austerity measures. In a May 13 column (“Greece and GM: Too weak to fail”) he observed that “Athens’ ‘anti-government mobs’ have been composed mostly of government employees going berserk about threats to their entitlements.” Will takes low-paid Greek public service workers to task for

defending their jobs and living standards, but never stops to wonder at his own boundless sense of “entitlement,” along with the rest of the American ruling elite and its mouthpieces.

Will makes millions of dollars each year, grabbing as much airtime on ABC News and column space in various publications as he can get away with, as well as lecturing to groups willing to pay tens of thousands of dollars to hear him. He embodies the shameful evolution of the US media. There were honest, self-critical figures in American journalism in the early and mid-20th century who didn’t earn—inflation taken into account—a fraction of what this miserable specimen of a columnist pulls in.

In his May 16 article, Will goes on: “By socializing the consequences of Greece’s misgovernment, Europe has become the world’s leading producer of a toxic product—moral hazard.” Has Will noticed what’s been going on in America? Trillions of dollars have been placed at the disposal of the banks, socializing their bad bets, with hardly a string attached. Wall Street, for whom Will shills, in the final analysis, has looted the economy and the population, bringing about a collapse that has cost 8 million Americans their jobs.

One of the “toxic products” in overabundance at present is rubbish like this.

Will pontificates about Greece’s “dishonesty and indiscipline,” about how its “vices cannot be quarantined,” about how, unhappily, “no nation will be allowed to sink beneath the weight of its recklessness.” Not for the first time, one has to rub one’s eyes. America’s financial elite is the world leader in corporate corruption and swindling, its governments have led the population into two disastrous wars on the basis of shameless lying, its reckless foreign policy and belligerent militarism threaten the human race. Will lives in another world.

As part of his sneering polemic against those who are supposedly conspiring against national sovereignties in Europe (“a continent of distinct and unaffectionate peoples”), Will goes on to say that “‘Europe’ has somehow become against the wishes of most Europeans, a political rather than a merely geographic expression.”

This is more stupidity. How did America become unified? Is the United States—a singular, not a plural—the outcome of geography or politics? The

unification of the original colonies was a pre-eminently political act, bound up with a revolutionary struggle. “Unity,” in a meaningful sense, was only achieved ultimately through a protracted, bloody civil war. Moreover, the American bourgeoisie found it necessary to exterminate the indigenous population in the course of conquering the continent for itself.

The unification of Europe is indeed a political question, but not one that can be solved on a capitalist basis. The United States of Europe is a task that confronts the working class, one that will only be resolved through a new and historic struggle...but this is far beyond Mr. Will.

In another of his brilliant essays, for *Newsweek* this time (“The ‘Tax the Rich!’ Reflex, July 18, 2009), Will argued openly in defense of social inequality. Measures such as progressive taxation, he asserted, “reduce the role of merit in the allocation of social rewards—merit as markets measure it, in terms of value added to the economy.”

Will obviously had himself in mind. Citing the comments of another right-winger, he pointed to the “underlying inequality” beneath “income inequality,” “due to differences in IQ, energy, health, social skills, character, ambition, physical attractiveness, talent, and luck.” He had a point. With the proper amount of those qualities...added to a willingness to defend the status quo with all one’s energy, to say and write always what is pleasing to the rich, to spend one’s life as a right-wing snob and social climber...a healthy living is almost guaranteed.



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