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How to Read Willmoore Kendall

Willmoore Kendall Contra Mundum. By Willmoore Kendall. New Rochelle, New York: Arlington House, 1971. 640 pp. \$11.95.

WHEN writing about Willmoore Kendall a strong temptation exists to deal with the man, not his teachings or theory. This I have always felt to be a shame, and, at times, a deliberate dodge because the reviewer or commentator sought to avoid coming to grips with the substance of his thought. I content myself with noting, as does Jeffrey Hart in his introduction to this volume, that Willmoore was a character of the first order who could on occasion be extremely perverse.

This perversity, manifested in his personal life, is not evident in his writings. To be sure, many will complain about his style. They will talk about "involved sentences" that seem to run on indefinitely with dashes, colons, semicolons, and parentheses. Criticisms of Willmoore on these grounds are not well taken. His mind was a far-ranging one and he used the English language (he was, believe me, a craftsman) as best he could to set forth the nuances of his theory and arguments, as well as the depth of his

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emotional conviction. Students and teachers alike would do well to "pick" at those so-called involved sentences. They will find them to be not only sentences that conform with the Queen's English but, more importantly, stuffed with intellectually rewarding and provocative thoughts. Illustrative of this is one of the few pieces in this collection that I had never read before, entitled "Who Should Control Our Public Schools?" Read also in this connection "American Conservatism and the 'Prayer Decision.'" I know of no writings (and we have been flooded with them over the years) that simultaneously bring us to the issues at stake, state the conservative alternatives on these questions, and reflect the depths of conservative outrage concerning the course of events, a course dictated, no less, by the imperious masters of the American liberal establishment.

What was Kendall trying to tell us? What were his central teachings? I will list some that are highly interrelated.

(1) He told us to trust the American people. He always loved America and in his later years he came to love its political institutions and procedures. That is one theme that permeates most of his works dealing with the American system and his critiques of the proposals for reform offered by the modern American liberal. The three articles that best reflect this are "Dialogues on Americanism," "Deadlock," and "How to Read Richard Weaver: Philosopher of 'We the (Virtuous) People'."

Having noted this much we must proceed to (2). Willmoore was a majoritarian of very special order. He was a conservative populist of sorts. One will detect a shift of thinking on his part over the years. His early writings, and even those not published here which appeared in the middle 1950's, illustrate this. "Majority Principle and the Scientific Elite" and "On Preservation of Democracy in America," both reproduced in this volume, indicate his early

liberal bent of mind. (See in this regard the first four chapters of Ranney and Kendall, *Democracy and the American Party System*, for which he bears primary responsibility. See also his classic, *John Locke and Majority Rule*.)

What brought about the obvious change in his thinking and in what ways did he change? The reader of this work can readily see that in his early writing he accepted all the fundamental premises of liberalism. All opinions were deemed equal, which in very short order led him to the proposition that all values are equal, and, then, into the swamps of relativism. In sum, by a tortuous route well known to Western man, he accepted the fact-value dichotomy. By the late 1950's, certainly after his conversion to Catholicism, we can discern a distinct shift in his writings with respect to the fact-value dichotomy and the liberal interpretation of majority rule. This is brilliantly manifest in his seldom-read article, "The People Versus Socrates Revisited." And he hammers away at this thesis in "How to Read Milton's *Areopagitica*." He nails all of this to the door with his "Fallacies of the Open Society," an article which oddly enough is not reproduced in this volume but which did appear in the *American Political Science Review* in the same year as the Milton article (1960).

I do not mean to imply that Willmoore's conversion to Catholicism produced the change in his thinking to which I have referred. It was, so far as I can determine, the other way around. In his earliest writings such as those I have cited, one will, if he reads closely enough, detect a tension, points and issues involving liberal premises with which Kendall did not quite feel at home. Contrast the "Preservation of Democracy" article with the "Weaver" article, or, better yet, "How to Read *The Federalist*." Over the years he came to realize that there is a hierarchy of values, that there are transcendent Truths which, however clumsily we might try, we should seek to explore with our "heart" and intellect. The tensions produced by this realization led him to join the Catholic Church. But this was simply the result of reading carefully the works of Voegelin and Strauss, along with a very careful re-reading of *The Federalist*. In retrospect we can see that his early writings manifested the latent potential for a major shift in his thinking.

In what ways did his views shift on the matter of majoritarianism? He came to rec-

ognize that there are several senses in which an individual can legitimately talk about majority rule. A truly brilliant article, ignored in the political science profession, is the "Two Majorities."¹ His major query is at what level or in what dimension can we speak about majority will and which of the American institutions (Congress or the President) has the best claim to represent majorities? I urge all students of American politics to read this particular article for it embodies best the Kendallian theory that a people carry more sense "in their hips" than all of the intellectuals combined.²

Still another reason for his transformation can be detected from his article "John Locke Revisited." Strongly influenced by Locke in his early career (as are most liberals), he came to recognize that Lockean theory is as base and morally corrupt as Hobbesianism, a point that escapes the likes of a Louis Hartz and his smug legions who are so pretentious about explaining the "real" American tradition.

His final thoughts about majority rule and the American system come across most clearly in Section IV of "The 'Intensity' Problem and Majority Rule." Here he sets to rest and bids a "long farewell" to his liberal notions about majority rule. He is primarily responsible for this section of the article which he considered to be his finest theoretical statement on this issue relative to the American system. Indeed, it is. Again, I urge all students of the American tradition and system to read this article. Here we find the mature Kendall speaking with an insight, depth, perception, wisdom, and respect about the traditional values and precepts which in the 30's and 40's he lacked.

(3) Another theme that permeates his writing is this: He was not going to be bullied or shoved around by presumed "intellectuals." He thrashed out violently and savagely against those who would pretend to be our intellectual and moral guardians, that is, the American liberal whose moral arrogance still remains unbounded. He liked nothing better than to corner them at our professional conventions and call them

1. The exception is to be found in Charles S. Hyneman's, *The Supreme Court Trial*. This brilliant book is now out of print, a fact which is of some interest.

2. To paraphrase Bill Buckley, Willmoore would have preferred to be ruled by the first 2000 residents listed in the New Haven telephone directory rather than by the faculty of Yale.

to account for their irresponsible statements. This is evident from his writings in this book. However, one will have to go elsewhere to see the full force of his convictions in this regard. Professor Herbert McClosky wrote an article in the *American Political Science Review* which "scientifically" proved that all American conservatives are either insane or stupid. Willmoore's rejoinder (1957 Volume) is classic. And, in this vein, one ought to read "The Roster Device"; J. S. Mill and Contemporary Elitism." Difficult as it is to digest, the assumptions and values of liberalism are laid bare for all to see. It is not a pleasant sight to behold.

(4) I would caution the reader of this volume from placing too much stress on the "original" materials, those dealing with Clinton Rossiter, Russell Kirk, and John Courtney Murray. For one thing, Rossiter, as Willmoore knew very well, was not a conservative. Rossiter never pretended to be such.

As for Kendall's critique of Kirk, I can say so much: While it is true that in Kirk's monumental work, *The Conservative Mind*, we do not find any precise definition of conservatism (Willmoore never gave us one, either) Willmoore was concerned with the utility of Kirk's criteria for definition. He, after all, had to go into class day after day and face up to the question of "What is Conservatism?", a question which no one has satisfactorily answered to this day.

I cannot explain Willmoore's warm embrace of John Courtney Murray's *We Hold These Truths*. True it is that both did hold to natural law theory and faced the question of how "open" an open society can be and still remain open. But I also know that they differed on fundamental questions (see in this connection "The Bill of Rights and American Freedom"). Father Murray was himself a liberal who sought to provide the profoundest arguments possible for his version of the American political tradition. Willmoore, upon extensive investigation, found that Father Murray did not know whereof he spoke. Read "Equal-

ity and the American Political Tradition" or "The Civil Rights Movement and the Coming Constitutional Crisis."

The "original" material was written in the Spring of 1962 for a class at Georgetown University on contemporary political thought. It was written under the pressure of time (that I know) and I do not believe it will withstand sustained analysis. Its value rests, in my judgment, in forcing others to help clarify the basic tenets of conservatism, an enterprise that Willmoore was so much interested in, as attested to by his articles "Toward a Definition of Conservatism" and "Basic Issues between Conservatives and Liberals."

And (5), what will Kendall's impact be? I have heard varying estimates. This much I can say with certainty. First, he had guts and fortitude. He stood, almost alone in academic circles, against the crushing orthodoxy of the times. No doubt, if he had been something other than a *Christian American* (e.g., a communist, fascist, or "enlightened" agnostic) Yale would have promoted him — perhaps, dare I say it, made him president. But, he was at least there when and where needed the most. And for this reason he has made an impact on many younger scholars in the political science profession who otherwise would have, understandably enough, felt quite lonesome. Second, his writings will continually haunt us, and that is the virtue of this volume. He had the genius to focus on the central issues of the problems confronting us as well as the alternatives available. He was possessed of a rare insight. And third, he taught countless students how to read. Willmoore's *forte* was "textual analysis." He simply demanded this of his students and peers.

Now, a man who teaches us how to read and the principal values of our civilization is mighty unique. That's Willmoore. We will not soon see his likes again.

This book, I can state unequivocally, should be on the shelf of not only every political scientist, but every individual who is genuinely concerned about our country and its future.