

One New Book for the Preacher

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Garry Wills, *A NECESSARY EVIL: A HISTORY OF AMERICAN DISTRUST OF GOVERNMENT* by Garry Wills. New York: Simon Schuster, 1999. 365 pages.

Garry Wills (not to be confused with the overly verbose George Will) is a thoughtful critic of American history. He combines shrewd discernment with an intense moral passion, a combination that produces the best of historical scholarship. In his earlier, much celebrated book, *Lincoln at Gettysburg* (Simon and Schuster, 1992). Wills considered the way in which Abraham Lincoln's speech at Gettysburg in a single utterance transposed the Declaration of Independence into a visionary charter for a new vision of the United States as an inclusive community committed to justice that would override every class and sectional fracture. In the present book, Wills addresses a parallel negative task, namely, the way in which the American revolution and the United States constitution have been transposed into a myth that serves ignominious anti-government causes. The book warrants our attention — and a review in this journal — because the way in which *distortion of memory* produces *distorted vision* is a proper critical concern of public theology.

The book is divided into two main parts. In the first part, the most interesting, Wills makes an assessment of two memories that have become the staple of current anti-government attitudes. First he takes up the memory of the "minutemen," the remembered and glorified militia that was thought to be a healthy, authentic, honest, cheap alternative to a standing army, a memory that gives warrant to all sorts of contemporary notions of "militia." Wills concludes that there never was such an effective fighting force. The performance of such minutemen was sporadic, unreliable, and often seduced into "bounty hunting." The actual performance of the militia is remote from its acclaimed ideal that appeals to a past that is in fact "fake history."

Second, Wills reviews and exposes the "constitutional myth" that the framers of the constitution of the United States deliberately set about to create a government that was weak and ineffective in order to protect and preserve states' rights. Such a misreading disregards the evidence that James Madison and those around him were determined to create a strong federal government. Thus Wills indicates that:

The Articles of Confederation, the initial articulation of Union, fostered a "governmental attitude," not an anti-government attitude, and gave little credence to state prerogatives over against the confederation;

The constitution was written to assure the efficiency of the federal government. It was not constructed with "checks and balances" that would disable or render it ineffective;

In the Federalist Papers, Madison worked hard to assure the wholeness of the government, so that it would not become a tool of self-interest, especially the self-interest of the majority;

The Bill of Rights is in the interest of a strong government that can override the heatedness of local causes and not, as is urged by detractors, to weaken the sphere of

government authority;

In the service of a strong military force, the constitution envisioned a standing army alongside a militia. Wills pays particular attention to the Second Amendment and the “right to bear arms” which clearly relates to militia, a right the framers were not eager to encourage.

In each of these cases, there were indeed strong anti-federalist views in the founding debate. But they lost! The framers of the constitution intended and believed in a strong federal government that could override localism. They did so because they believed that only such a government could deliver and protect the vision of the revolution. Thus Wills situates not only the constitution but the revolution itself with a very different, determined political intentionality.

In the second half of the book Wills considers a series of identifiable detractors from the strong Federalist opinion that prevailed:

Nullifiers were those who believed they could nullify the claim of federalist law by appeal to an overriding law, in this case, local law that is claimed to be less artificial and more in touch with lived reality. Among these, the most visible is Thomas Jefferson with his well-known attachment to agrarian visions of reality. In part he is echoed even by Madison on occasion, who more characteristically stood for strong federalism. And of course a generation later John Calhoun was prominent in the cause of nullification. In familiar retrospect nullification is especially linked to Southern agrarianism, especially as urged by Calhoun. Wills, however, notices that in the earlier period around 1812, nullification was on the horizon of northerners who were concerned to protect commercial advantage. Wherever the force of the Union was strong against local interest, nullification emerged, in whatever region the power of the Union was felt.

Seceders, unlike the nullifiers who sought to block the force of the Union, were prepared to withdraw from the Union. Seceders, first in the north and then in the south, appealed to the withdrawal of the colonies from England as a ground for further withdrawal. It was finally Lincoln who articulated “perfect union” in a way that ended serious thought of secession after the end of the Civil War.

Insurrectionists were those who by *ad hoc* acts of violence resisted and refused the authority of the federal government. Wills considers three historic cases, but then concludes with a reflection on Timothy McVeigh and the Oklahoma City bombing. This enduring strand in United States politics is concerned always to resist government that is too repressive.

Vigilantes. In a nice turn of phrase, Wills sees that whereas insurrectionists act against government too repressive, vigilantes act to do the work of government when it is not repressive enough. Among the historical examples, attention is given to the Ku Klux Klan. Noticing how rooted is this propensity in United States politics, Wills reports that Woodrow Wilson commented positively on the Klan, and more recently Shelby Foote likened the Klan to the “Free French Resistance to Nazi occupation.” The theme is carried forward to McCarthyism and the Clinic Bombings by pro-life enthusiasts. Wills ends this section by an acute assessment of the NRA and its appeal to the Second Amendment. A review of the debate behind the Second Amendment shows that the NRA appeals precisely to the arguments that were rejected by the framers of the amendment. Wills offers a review of the revision from “pistol” to “rifle” and the ways in which the glorification of the gun is rooted in a deep distortion of the

actual past in which lawmen and their opponents were not as free with the gun as is imagined.

Withdrawers are those who abstain in principle from government, a kind of extreme individualism that culminates in libertarianism. Best known of these is Henry David Thoreau, though the line is continued into hippie communes.

Disobeyers. This category includes those who deliberately engage in civil disobedience. Particular reference is made to Martin Luther King, a line continued in a variety of forms in the “New Left.”

Anti-government opinion is a deep strand in our political memory as Wills fully acknowledges. It is rooted in Locke’s theory of “individuals in contract” and fed by governments that operate secretly and manipulatively. (Wills has an extended discussion of the justification belatedly given for the dropping of “the bomb” on Japan, a rationale cloaked in manipulative secrecy.) Against all such critique, however, Wills in the end asserts that government is a necessary good as the framers of a strong constitutionalism understood. Remarkably that strong constitutionalism has withstood an amazing variety of assaults. As Wills puckishly observes, moreover, resistance in small matters (like seat belts) is as nothing compared to the deep compliance to government that is everywhere attested in the land.

Readers of the *Journal* might attend to this book for two important reasons. First, Wills is a historian who gathers the data to give perspective on current issues of compliance to government and violent resistance to government. (In the current mood of amnesia, that history is forgotten in a rising tide of ignorance.) Church folk may rightly embrace a deep historical perspective that makes possible a better judgment on the issues of the day, unencumbered by current distraction. Second, the reduction of life to localism and individualism is a profound temptation among us, enforced in part by privatized notions of faith.

Accent on government as a good rings true to our best theological tradition, notably a Calvinist conviction. The book suggests that the recovery of tradition — theological and historical — is a task that belongs properly to the church community. Wills provides entry points for important work to be undertaken in this regard. The embrace of the public reality of life is a way in which citizenship and believing membership converge to provide both great affirmation and compelling summons. Wills does not do our work for us, but provides important impetus and invitation for it.