

Tricia Johnson, host of the show:

It's Aspen Ideas to Go from The Aspen Institute. I'm Tricia Johnson. George Will, a political commentator and writer says the Republican Party has gone from being the party of ideas to a cult of personality. He says it used to stand for congressional supremacy, free trade, and fiscal realism. Now he thinks there is no conservative party.

George Will:

Conservatism right now is an orphan persuasion in a cold and uncaring world. To be a persuasion without a party is to risk kind of irrelevance, but that is better than pretending that you have a home when you really don't.

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Today, Will talks about modern American conservatism. Aspen Ideas to Go brings you compelling conversations from The Aspen Institute, which drives change through dialogue, leadership and action to help solve our greatest challenges. Today's discussion is from the McCloskey Speaker series, held by the Aspen community programs. Four years ago George Will changed his political affiliation from Republican to unaffiliated. He says the party no longer represents his beliefs. Last year his book *The Conservative Sensibility* was released. In it he says conservatism is under threat, both from progressives and elements inside the Republican party. In a conversation with USA Today Washington Bureau Chief Susan Page, he talks about the party's transformation, the 2020 election, and the link between Christian Evangelicals and conservatism. Here's Page.

Susan Page:

So I started out with a Washington read of your new book. I went to the index. I found no entry between Truman, Harry and [inaudible 00:01:46] that is no entry for Trump, Donald. Now it's not that it's such a short book, it's 600 pages long. Why isn't President Trump mentioned in it?

George Will:

Two reasons, it's a book about ideas, and I don't think he participates in that grand adventure. Second, it's a book that I hope will last longer than his presidency. [inaudible 00:02:12] said "You don't mention Trump in your book." I said, "I don't mention Doris Day either."

Susan Page:

Just for the record, Donald Trump doesn't like you either.

George Will:

I gather.

Susan Page:

He had a rally in the last campaign and he said that, "George Will looks smart because he wears those little glasses. If you take those glasses away from him, he's a dummy."

George Will:

Well I changed my glasses yes.

Susan Page:

What's it like to be dissed by the President in that way?

George Will:

Well he wasn't President at that point, but I'll tell you a story. Long ago, he invited me to come give a speech to him and his friends at Mar-a-Lago, which I did. After he endorsed Mitt Romney in 2012, I was asked on television by George Stephanopoulos about that, and I said I didn't see the upside of being endorsed by a [inaudible 00:03:03] ignoramus [inaudible 00:03:06] high enough net worth [inaudible 00:03:08] to lower the tone of American politics. Someone went to him and said, "Why doesn't George Will like you?" He says, "Well I invited him to Mar-a-Lago to give a speech, but I knew he was going to be so boring, I wouldn't attend and I stood out on the patio during it" which raised to questions. If he knew I was going to be so boring, why did he invite me, and second, who was the guy with the orange hair in the front row throughout the speech?

George Will:

My experience with him is roughly that of the country's, don't believe everything you hear.

Susan Page:

So you may not respect for him, however he is the President of the United States. He is in fact a Republican President of the United States. What does President Trump's tenure, his success in politics in 2016 that put him in the White House for now close to four years, what does it say about the state of the Republican party, and of conservatism? Because we do think of the Republican party as being a conservative party in the country.

George Will:

Well he was put into power by an extraordinary concatenation of events, most particularly, fewer than 78,000 votes spread over three states, Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania, otherwise, he wouldn't be President, and we would have been spared an enormous outpouring of sociology about the forces that made him President. I think what's happened is to an extraordinary extent, the Republican Party which had been since the late 1970s a party of ideas in the United States. My dear friend, my best friend was Pat Moynihan, the Senator from New York. He wrote in the late 1970's "Something extraordinary has happened. The Republican Party has become a party of ideas." After 2016, it hollowed itself out, and became a cult of personality rather than ideas. The Republican party had believed in often congressional supremacy. It had believed in most of all free trade. Trump said better we don't believe in free trade anymore, and we said, "All right, you're right, we don't."

George Will:

The Republican party used to be the party of realism, about the entitlement programs and their unsustainable trajectory. Trump when it was explained to him this unsustainable trajectory said, "Yeah, but I won't be here when the crisis comes." That was the end of that. He campaigned promising not to touch the entitlement programs in any way. So the Republican party went from being the party of sort of fiscal realism. Remember, we had a trillion dollar deficit before the pandemic. We had a trillion dollar deficit, had more than full employment, had reasonable two percent economic growth at which point the anxiety was, "What's going to happen if we have a recession that starts with trillion dollar deficits? We're going to find out aren't we?"

Susan Page:

What does happen?

George Will:

Well we don't know because in so many things, this is unprecedented. My gear is a very simple one, there are two ways to finance the government. One is with present taxes, the other is with future taxes. So sooner or later, this borrowing binge, the bill for that is going to come due. Now I happen to believe that for all the talk about the discord in the United States, the biggest threat to our country domestically is a consensus, goes from Ted Cruz on the right, to Elizabeth Warren on the left, it's as broad as the republic itself, it's as deep as the Grand Canyon, and it's this. We should have a large, generous, omni present, ever expanding entitlement state, and not pay for it. Everyone's agreed on this as far as I can tell.

George Will:

The political class has a permanent powerful incentive for deficit spending because it enables the political class to give the American people a dollar's worth of government, and charge then 80 cents for it. The public likes that, the politicians like that, everyone likes it except the unconsenting, unvoting, and unborn future generations that are going to pay and bill.

Susan Page:

[inaudible 00:07:20] if the Republican party's been hollowed out and there's this consensus from Ted Cruz to Elizabeth Warren, where is the home for the conservative like yourself?

George Will:

Candor compels one to face facts, that's what conservatives are supposed to do. They're the grumpy people, the people that spoil the party by facing facts. The fact is that conservatism right now as I understand conservatism, is an orphan persuasion in a cold and uncaring world. To be a persuasion about a party is to risk kind of irrelevance, but that is better than pretending that you have a home when you really don't. So right now, there is no conservative party. Depending on the outcome of the 2016 election, the Republican party may become more hospitable to conservatism after 2021. People may wake up and say, "Trump I barely remember the name." They'll snap back to something like being the party of ideas.

Susan Page:

Here's a question, the column you wrote last week in the Washington Post makes me think about this because it was actually reasonably dire. You said first of all you had a lead which I love and doesn't relate to my question [inaudible 00:08:41] in any way, which was you said "Because of his incompetent use of it, the rhetorical mustard that the President slathers on every subject has lost its tang." Then you wrote about the part I want to ask you about. You said the [inaudible 00:08:55] of a down ward spiral, its not reached its depth. At least its reached a point where worse is helpful and worse can be confidently expected. What does that mean, worse is helpful?

George Will:

Worse is helpful in the sense that, and the example I gave that I can give others was the pardon of Roger Stone. If you have an administration that has gathered around itself, and a President who is attracted to

himself as a magnet attracts iron grounds, the bottom dwelling dregs of the Republican party like Manafort and Stone and the rest, it's helpful to have that made clear. His pardon of Stone said there's a kind of brazenness to the exercise of the Presidential pardon power that is helpful in that as we approach an election that will inevitably be a referendum on the incumbent, to have the country give him an unvarnished, undisguised look at what they're running off of. That's the sense in which worse is better.

Susan Page:

Who do you plan to vote for in November?

George Will:

Biden.

Susan Page:

Biden.

George Will:

Oh yes.

Susan Page:

Have you voted for a Democrat before?

George Will:

Never.

Susan Page:

First time you've ever voted for a Democrat for President.

George Will:

That's right, although when I first came to Washington in 1970 to work on the Senate staff, my first political hero as it were was a Senator, a Democratic Senator was Scoop Jackson of Washington. I was working on the Senate staff for a Republican [inaudible 00:10:38] out of Colorado. As I said earlier, my best friend was Senator from New York, Pat Moynihan. So I have nothing against Democrats, but I've never had the occasion to vote for one. This year I will.

Susan Page:

Have you ever voted for a Democrat for any office before?

George Will:

I don't think so. I'm a big believer in parties, and party strength, and party tickets, not this year because I don't have a party, which is I'm a free agent.

Susan Page:

You literally don't have a party because you left the Republican party and registered as unaffiliated four years ago right-

George Will:

I did.

Susan Page:

... when Trump was nominated.

George Will:

On June second 2016, my friend Paul Ryan then Speaker of the House endorsed Donald Trump, and the next morning I changed my registration, reasoning that if someone as cheerful, intelligent, public spirited, policy oriented as Paul Ryan is going to endorse Trump, nothing will prevent the normalization of him, and I didn't want to be part of that.

Susan Page:

Just one last, I realize your vote is supposed to be secret, so you can refuse to answer, but who'd you vote for four years ago?

George Will:

Romney.

Susan Page:

Romney yeah.

George Will:

Oh I forgot. I wrote someone in. I can't remember who. Oh I do remember. I wrote in Ben Sasse [inaudible 00:12:05].

Susan Page:

We're 106 days out from the election. Who do you think wins?

George Will:

Political prophecy is optional folly, and I'm not about to commit it. I believe the polls have been remarkably stable. I don't think there's been a pool taken in 2020 pitting Biden against Trump that Trump has won. I tend to believe the polls now, with Biden having a double digit lead. I believe that it will be a decisive victory, and I think very important because the President has already announced that he might not accept, I don't know what that means, but he might not accept the outcome. Therefore, it's wise to have a tsunami of popular votes. Remember the President complained about and cried fraud in 2016 when he won. [inaudible 00:13:04] when he loses as I expect him to do. People are saying, "Gosh, because of the pandemic, there will be so many mail ballots cast, and so much early voting, all the rest. Perhaps we won't know the outcome for some weeks." My risky but fun projection is that by 11 o'clock eastern time on election night, we can all go to bed.

George Will:

My projection is that Biden would have carried the most important swing state of Florida, he would have carried another swing state, North Carolina. He will have carried the aforementioned Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania, and it'll be over.

Susan Page:

So you're voting for Biden. Do you think he will be a good President, or will he just not be Donald Trump?

George Will:

I think he'll be an adequate President, but then I'm much less ... Donald Trump has cured me of Presidential fastidiousness. Everyone looks good now. Joe Biden is an amiable, decent man, 46 years in the Senate, 34 of them on the Foreign Relations Committee. We tend to forget that foreign relations is one of the presidential power, his largest and presidential discretion is rightly at its broadest, so all this matters. I think he has a taste for talented people to have around him. It'll be a distinct improvement. That's a low bar, but worth saying.

Susan Page:

In your new book *The Conservative Sensibility*, you write about the birth of American conservatism. It's very sweeping in its look at where conservatism has been, its ebbs and flows, various times in our history. Thinking about looking forward, say what you say is right, that President Trump loses his bid for reelection, what happens then? Of course a lot of Trump forces have taken control of state parties, he's got very high approval rating with Republican voters. Does conservatism reassert itself in the Republican party? How do you envision this post Trump era?

George Will:

Depends partly on how decisive the election is. If my prediction were to come true, if there's a decisive tsunami, people would say, "Well that was perhaps an experiment they really shouldn't do again, particularly if it cost the Republicans the Senate." If it's a narrow victory, the party would be consumed by vitriolic name calling and finger pointing. People would say it was the Never Trumpers and the media who did it to us, and the media and all this, and you'll have a party that says, "Well, we're going to stick to the Trump lesson, and next time we'll do it better. Of course if he wins, they will feel ratified, and what we will have is a number of people trying to compete to be oxymoron [inaudible 00:16:16] the thinking person's Trump. That would be extremely difficult for Republicans. Right now, the intellectual energy in the Republican party is with people who say, "Well the lesson of Trump's success is that capitalism and free markets have not served a portion of America well."

George Will:

"Therefore, we need certain things normally associated with the Democratic party, industrial policy, protectionism, a general skepticism about markets as an equitable allocator of wealth and opportunity in our society. I'm thinking of people like Marco Rubio and Josh Hawley, people of this sort. So it depends on what happens, how emphatic the loss is. Right now, Mr. Trump, his reelection strategy seems to me to be to get a larger portion of an ever smaller portion of the American electorate, that is an ever larger portion of non college educated white voters, that is a steeply declining portion of the population, and it is an extremely risky strategy that he is relying on. The amazing thing about this presidency is for three years and six months now, a man who lost the popular vote by approximately

five times more than George W Bush lost the popular vote a while ago in 2000, Trump has done nothing to expand his base.

George Will:

He's done much to inflame his base and keep it loyal, which I think he's done, but when you acquire the Presidency losing the popular vote, you'd think you'd do something to change that.

Susan Page:

In your book, you reveal something, maybe you don't reveal it, but it's something I didn't know. I've always thought, George Well, he's probably an Episcopalian. Maybe it's the bow ties, I don't know. But in the book you say that you are an atheist. Your grandfather, your father's father was a Lutheran minister, but your father, a Professor of philosophy was and atheist. You write, "I grew up in a completely secular home, where the subject of religion simply did not arise." You say that like your father you are "an amiable, low voltage atheist." What is that?

George Will:

Well first I use the word atheist rather than agnostic because it's more honest. An agnostic is someone that's got his doubts. I don't have doubts. I'm not wired that way. Transcendence just doesn't appeal to me, or convince me. My father became a philosopher because as a young boy, he would sit outside pastor Will's study, and my grandfather the Lutheran minister had small churches in Maryland and Western Pennsylvania, and Eastern Ohio. My father the young man would sit outside the pastor's study, and listening to the pastor Will talk to some of his more reflective parishioners, trying to reconcile the doctrines of free will and grace. My father thought this was fun stuff to listen to, and went off to become an academic philosopher. As I say, it never entered my kin as I grew up. It just wasn't part of the mental furniture of the Will household, which is what I meant by amiable levels.

George Will:

I don't want to convert anybody, far against. I'm perfectly happy. I'm married to a ferocious Presbyterian, so I'm quite calm about this. It just doesn't connect with my wiring.

Susan Page:

I would just note as a Presbyterian myself, the idea of a ferocious Presbyterian is sort of an oxymoron, but we'll let that go. We find people who are very serious about their religion play increasingly important roles in the Republican party, especially Christian evangelicals. Do you worry about that, or do you think that's a good thing? What's your perspective on that?

George Will:

I think the Evangelical Christians have become such an important part of the Republican base, that it makes the Republican party a bit hesitant and tentative, and I won't saw crippled but awkward in appealing to a large and growing portion of the country who are what are called nones, not N-U-N-S but N-O-N-E-S, people who say they have no religious affiliation. Among those 18 to 24, I think it's something like 40% of that cohort. To the extent that Republicans say in order to be Republican, in order to be a Conservative, you have to be a theist of something sort, and Republicans are again limiting [inaudible 00:21:31] ... The chapter in my book to which you're referring is called Conservatism Without Theism is the one I had the most fun writing.

Susan Page:

Why was it the most fun?

George Will:

Well because it's counterintuitive. Because generally conservatism as it came, at least as it was born in Europe in reaction to the secularization forces of the French Revolution was a kind of thrown on altar, blood in soil, defensive hierarchies including confessional states, so conservatism as it came from Europe was definitely entangled with a theistic approach to life. I'm not of that persuasion.

Tricia Johnson, host of the show:

It's Aspen Ideas To Go. Thanks for listening. The United States is in the midst of a National uprising unlike any we have seen in modern history. Protests over racism and police violence have happened before, but now Americans of all colors are railing against injustice. Alicia Garza, co-creator of Black Lives Matter says she hopes that the result is real change.

Alicia Garza:

While this is an incredible moment of uprising, and an incredible moment of reckoning, I really long for this to also be a moment for change. I think there are a lot of rules that have been rigged against black communities for a very long time, that we need to see the courage, and drive the political will to actually start to shift.

Tricia Johnson, host of the show:

Hear her conversation with Georgetown professor Michael Eric Dyson, and journalist Eugene Scott on our website [aspenideas.org](http://aspenideas.org), that's [aspenideas.org](http://aspenideas.org). Here's the rest of today's conversation, Susan Page.

Susan Page:

Now I love the dedication in this book. Let me just read it. You dedicate it to Barry Goldwater. You call him "the cheerful malcontent, who showed that it is possible to wed that adjective and that noun," cheerful and malcontent. Then in the book itself, you write more about Goldwater and you say that "his losing campaign would invigorate a political tradition that had become dormant and inarticulate. In this sense, Goldwater won in 1964. It just took 16 years to count the votes." Tell us about Barry Goldwater.

George Will:

First of all, the footnote here, the phrase a cheerful malcontent was a title of a very slender book written by Goldwater in 1963 or 64 by Richard [inaudible 00:24:28], the very fine political correspondent for the New Yorker. I cast my very first vote for Barry Goldwater, and my first presidential vote in 1964. I'd been a kind of normal college Democrat. I was active in [inaudible 00:24:48] in 1960s. Then I went to England to study for two years at Oxford, saw the Berlin Wall, saw British statism and watery socialism suffocating, and I felt the energies of a creative people, came back and voted for Goldwater. Goldwater demonstrated constructive losing, that is after Goldwater, the Republican party became a conservative party. I thought it was part of the ideological sorting out of American politics. He didn't accomplish it, he started it. When I came to Washington to work on the Senate staff for a Republican, the Democrats controlled the Senate.

George Will:



The Democrats controlling the Senate were Richard Russel from Winder, Georgia, John Stennis from Corinth, Mississippi, James [inaudible 00:25:46] from Southern Mississippi, [inaudible 00:25:49] of Arkansas, Holland of Florida, Sparkman of Alabama. It was entirely run by conservative southern Democrats. They're all gone. There are no more conservative Democrats to speak of. There are very few of them that are Republicans. The Republicans when I came to work in the Senate included Brooke of Massachusetts, Case of New Jersey, Keating and Javits of New York, Percy of Illinois, et cetera, et cetera. The political scientists [inaudible 00:26:21] in the 1950 said, "Wouldn't it be great if we could sort our parties out the way the Europeans have done, have ideological parties, and we'd responsible party government. It would be okay." Another political scientist said this.

George Will:

Boy we've done it. Is everybody happy? I'm not quite sure.

Susan Page:

Got it. So Barry Goldwater made Ronald Regan possible-

George Will:

Yes he did.

Susan Page:

... [inaudible 00:26:46] in getting to the White House. But in your book, I think you're putting "Regan Revolution" in quotes. Is that meaningful? Did you not think it was such a revolution?

George Will:

Well the Regan Revolution as people think of it is someone who frontally and aggressively challenged the ligaments of the welfare state, not true. Ronald Wilson Regan never challenged the new deal, which was put in place by the man who came to Washington first to be Woodrow Wilson's Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Franklin Roosevelt. Ronald Regan's complaint was with the great society, not with the basic social safety net. Remember, Ronald Regan was someone who came to political consciousness, and his formative years as a political person were in the 1930s during the Depression. He was a man who firmly believed, what he incessantly said which was he did not leave the Democratic Party. The Democratic Party left him. So he was someone ... The story by the way about Ronald Regan and Goldwater I think it's true, someone wrote a speech for Goldwater to give at this nationally televised fundraising broadcast. Goldwater read it with that no nonsense gruff manner of him, says, "That doesn't sound like me. Get Ronnie to do it."

George Will:

Ronald Regan gave the speech known as the speech among conservatives. It's called A Time To Choose. The fundraising phones lit up, and a star was born.

Susan Page:

I've many times heard about that first speech by Regan that was so important to his career, but I did not realize it was a speech written for Goldwater.

George Will:

That's the story I have heard. It certainly sounds like Barry who minced no words.

Susan Page:

It's not true technically in a technical sense maybe.

George Will:

It's probably true. True enough [inaudible 00:28:50].

Susan Page:

So if Barry Goldwater is a cheerful malcontent, an adjective and a noun, what is George Will? What is your adjective and noun?

George Will:

I hope I'm cheerful. One of the things I try to advocate in my book is intelligent pessimism. Pessimism was not fatalism. Fatalism is you say things are going to hell in a hand [inaudible 00:29:17] and nothing can be done. An intelligent pessimist says there are lots of ways that democracies can go wrong. The founding generation consisted of intelligent pessimists, not Jefferson so much. He was too optimistic for my taste but he was here when the Constitution was written. I'm thinking of Hamilton, and Madison, and George Mason and others who said they worried a lot about the problems of democracy which causes some people to say, "Well the founders really didn't have a heart in democracy" quite wrong. They worried only about the problems of democracy because they said, "Only a democracy will do for our country. Therefore, we have to concentrate on the possible problems of a democracy."

Susan Page:

I think intelligent pessimism sounds a little downbeat for George Will, but I'll let that go. Here's something President Trump has done, that he didn't start, but he certainly has continued this trend toward a more and more powerful President, exerting powers that we didn't previously realize that a President could assert. This is something that you write about in your book that concerns you. Talk about that.

George Will:

The problem began with Theodore Roosevelt and his stewardship model of the presidency, which he said meant a president is entitled to do anything he is explicitly forbidden to do. Well his practice found a theoretician in Woodrow Wilson. Woodrow Wilson was the first President to criticize the American family, which he did not do peripherally, he did [inaudible 00:31:06]. He said, "The doctrine of natural rights is nonsense." He said, "Don't read the first two paragraphs of the Declaration of Independence. It's [inaudible 00:31:15]." Fact is, he said the very [inaudible 00:31:21] architecture of our constitution with the separation of powers is a mistake. He says, "It's all very well" back when there were four million of us spread thinly across the eastern shore of the continent, 80% of us living within 20 miles of Atlantic tidewater. "But now" said Wilson, "we're a complex society united by steel rails, and copper wire, and we need a more, nimble, assertive, emphatic governor, which requires transcending the separation of powers, marginalizing powers, and having a free willing, emphatic, unfettered executive" of the sort Woodrow Wilson tried to be.

George Will:

Then came after that as I mentioned before the man who came to Washington to be his Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Franklin Roosevelt, who took us a long way. As I say it in my book, a great moment of [inaudible 00:32:22] of the modern presidency was when F.D.R. gave his first fireside chat, shortly after inauguration. The first two words he spoke do not appear in the text of his fireside chat, but is in the library at Hyde Park, but they're very important. His first two words were, "My friends." Now, can you imagine George Washington addressing the American people "My friends" that austere man? Chester Arthur, Grover Cleveland, Calvin Coolidge, no President before would have done that. Radio giving a new intimacy to the presidency, bringing the presidency into everyone's living rooms, F.D.R. pioneered the idea that our Presidents are our friends, that we are to have an intimate relationship with them, that they are much more than the head of one of the three branches of one of our governments.

George Will:

They are much more than assigned to in the rather austere language of article two of the Constitution that they are to take care that the laws are faithfully executed. They have a semi [inaudible 00:33:34] role, moral leaders, national tutors. All of this magnified by modern technologies, first by radio, then by television have given us a swollen presidency that has outgrown constitutional restraints, and has worried me for 30 or 40 years, that should worry my progressive friends now that they see a President occupying what is not in the Teddy Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt tradition. I like to think that one of the again in my worse is better theme here that one of the effects of the current Present would be to cause my progressive friends to rethink their infatuation with executive power.

Susan Page:

Do you think that's likely I mean because Democrats have a big head of steam toward undoing things that President Trump has done, and doing things that they think are important. They don't seem to be taking a less is more attitude.

George Will:

No I don't think it's likely. I know a lost cause when I see one, having backed enough of them. I think the idea of restraining executive powers is not going to be done by the Democrats or by anyone else anytime soon. I remember during the run up to the primaries this year, Elizabeth Warren and Kamala Harris outdid themselves saying, "Here's what I will do by executive order. This is what Barack Obama did in his 'I have a thumb and I can give these executive orders.'" No, I think that the intoxication of executive powers is overwhelming. Republicans for many years believed as I still do in congressional supremacy. Then beginning in 1981, they had the heady experience of Ronald Regan, and they said, "Gosh, executive power is a lot of fun when your guy is wielding it." Then that was the end of the in my judgment wholesome Republic skepticism about the modern presidency.

George Will:

My choice for the Democratic nomination this year was Senator Bennet of Colorado who said at one point said, he says, "My theme is elect me President, and you'll have a President you won't have to think about for weeks at a time" my kind of guy.

Susan Page:

You mentioned F.D.R. as the radio president. Of course, we know that John Kennedy was the TV President, and the effects that that has had on the way politicians communicate, and what Americans

are looking for. Obviously Donald Trump is the Twitter President. He uses that new platform in a way no one had imagined could be used. What's the effect do you think of that?

George Will:

It's the dumbing down of public discourse. It's brief. It lends itself to instantaneous communications of half baked thoughts. It lends itself to [inaudible 00:36:42] and abuse all around. It communicates abuse and generates reciprocal abuse. It's made for people who think they can say something profound or [inaudible 00:36:58] many subjects can say all that they know, think and believe in 280 characters. It's just not the way adults ought to want to communicate.

Susan Page:

I know we're getting toward the end of our conversation before we go to audience questions. As I mentioned at the beginning of our conversation, your first book dealing with these topics came out in 1978, a half century ago. I'm wondering, of course we think about conservatism as being very respectful of consistency of thought. On the other hand, in what ways has your perspective changed over that time? For instance, what would a 2020 George Will tell the 1978 George Will? What do you know now that you didn't understand then?

George Will:

I know that modern government itself becomes an interest group, that government becomes to become the Madisonian term, a faction. I believe Elizabeth Warren has a firm grip on half of a point. She says that it is ominous, and she's right. It is ominous that five of the 10 wealthiest counties in the United States by per capita income are in the Washington DC area. Washington DC has no manufacturing, it has no natural resources. It makes nothing but rules, laws and trouble. Why is it so rich? It's because trillions of dollars rush through the federal government, which becomes a haven for rent seekers, becomes the target of capture by organized, compact, intense, educated, articulate, wealthy and well lawyered factions, that know how to work the gears and pulleys of government. Therefore, when you have an interventionist government, it will inevitably be dominated by these groups, and will inevitably redistribute wealth upward, which is in fact how the current government works, so that's the first thing.

George Will:

The second thing I've learned, and I don't want to filibuster here is I used to be a believer in judicial modesty. I'm now a believer in an assertive, more engaged judiciary, because I think America is not about a process majority rule, rather it is about a conditioned liberty that majorities can often be, as the founders understood better than I did in 1978. The fact that majority rule is a problem, it's a means to an end, it is not an end, and that we need a more engaged judiciary to temper the excesses of majority rule, which is why the chapter in my book is called The Judicial Supervision of Democracy.

Susan Page:

Thank you so much for this conversation. I'm going to turn it back over to Cristal, who is going to pose some questions posed by our audience. Thank you.

George Will:

Thank you.

Tricia Johnson, host of the show:

Cristal Logan, Vice President of Community Programs and Engagement at the Aspen Institute reads questions from the online audience.

Cristal Logan:

Our first question is how significant will Biden's VP choice be in driving voter turnout by Democrats and Republicans, and who do you think he should pick?

George Will:

I don't think Vice Presidents very often matter very much. The one exception to the rule is Jack Kennedy picking against his brother's advice and a lot of others. He picked Lyndon Johnson to run with. Without that, I think he would have lost. He needed Lyndon Johnson to hold portions of the south that had begun to drift away under Dwight Eisenhower. 2004 John Kerry said, "We have a chance to carry North Carolina, therefore, I'll run with North Carolina Senator John Edwards." He picked Edwards, he lost North Carolina by I think 13 points. It's pretty hard to find an American who says, "I voted for President A because of running mate B" doesn't happen that often. Second, the idea that Donald Trump won't be a sufficient motivator for Democratic turnout strikes me as passing strange, particularly for African Americans. Now Joe Biden in a debate ruled out half the American public as his running mate by saying he wanted a woman.

George Will:

It seems likely, I'm not certain, likely that events since then, the atrocity in Minneapolis that it has to be an African American. That being the case, I am in favor of Karen Bass, the African American woman congresswoman from the Los Angeles area, leader of the Congressional Black Caucus.

Cristal Logan:

Thank you. Assuming Trump is out, how does the Republican party go about rebuilding?

George Will:

It has to the old cliché of psychoanalysis, in order to get well, you have to want to get well. I'm not sure the Republican party is going to want to get well. If as I expect the Republicans are defeated this fall so decisively that they also lose the Senate, that would be the equivalent of the old story about a man who says, "My [inaudible 00:42:16] perfectly fine, but in order to get his attention, you have to hit it over the nose with a two by four." I think being smacked with a two by four an election like this would get their attention that this was really not a good idea. They will learn that lesson. If however it is a dusty result, that they lose the White House, maybe lose the Senate but not by emphatic margins, then you'll have a great fight with the bitter end Trumpkins, against people who are more prudent and who read the election results differently. You'll get [inaudible 00:42:57] for four years.

Cristal Logan:

Our next question is what are your thoughts on the Black Lives Matter movement?

George Will:

Clearly there is a problem in this country that is hardly exhausted by the difficult relations between the African American community and armed policing. There are grievances and unhappiness and difficult aspirations that the country has to renew its commitment to. I would like to see in addition to all the

legitimate grievances that have come out, I would like to see the conversation broadened. As I have said earlier in this discussion, my best friend was Pat Moynihan who as a 38 year old social scientist in Lyndon Johnson's Labor Department produced what to this day is known as the Moynihan Report in which he said, "We have a national crisis because 23.7% of African American children are born are unmarried mothers." Today, it's 69%. 40% of all American first births regardless of race, color, creed or national origin are born to unmarried mothers.

George Will:

A majority of American mothers under 30, think about this, a majority of American mothers under 30 are not living with the fathers of their children because the family is, and always has been, and always will be the primary transmitter of social capital, the habits, customs, mores, dispositions necessary to thrive in free society. Family disintegration is the biggest probably confronting our country, and particularly confronting the African American community. It's a lot harder to talk about this then it is to talk about [inaudible 00:44:46] behavior, but it is at least as urgent to talk about this.

Cristal Logan:

As a follow on, what do you think the cause is for that family disintegration?

George Will:

Oh Lord knows. It didn't exist in 1950. I think the out of wedlock birth rate at that point was 5%. I don't know what happened in the 1960s, but it did happen in the 1960s when we begin to see the intergenerational transmission of poverty because of this. Social scientists of extraordinary talent write about this, tracing some root causes back to slavery, and the damage it did to family traditions in African American community, that's part of it, but that's all of it. The answer is I don't know and nobody else does, but we better keep thinking about it.

Cristal Logan:

Thank you. Our next question is will we see the return of compromise in Congress any time soon?

George Will:

I don't know I doubt it. As I expect, Democrats will commute and probably end the legislative filibuster, which was supposed to be an inconvenience that would cause by being an inconvenience compromise. It hasn't done so. It's partly because Mike Mansfield when he was majority leader of the Senate, Senator from Montana, because he in the early 1970s said, "Well a filibuster will [inaudible 00:46:24] filibuster that bill, but we'll go onto other business." If they would just go back to saying, "We're not going to do anything else except the filibuster, and you're going to have to hold the floor the way they wish to", if they'd go back to that, then the filibuster by being a major nuisance might indeed drive people to compromise. But I expect that train has left the station. I expect the Democrats will put an end to the filibuster, and to the effective 60 vote requirement to pass anything of significance, which the founding fathers did not want, of course within the Constitution and the Senate rules, which are changeable, and will I think will change.

Cristal Logan:

Thank you. My next question is you mentioned past conservative heroes. Who do you see as potential up and coming conservative leaders?

George Will:

Well we've got a number of them in the Republican party. Ben Sasse is one. There are some people who call themselves conservatives, and I would dispute their title, but Josh Hawleys, Marco Rubios, others who offer what they consider new and improved forms of capitalism, and new and improved forms of conservatism. It's an argument worth having. Conservatism has as one of its principles is in order to conserve, you have to be willing to change. Conservatism will have to adapt to new grievances in the society. We've yet to see the future conservative leaders in my judgment.

Cristal Logan:

Thank you. Our next question is why don't more Republicans in the Senate and House stand up to Trump?

George Will:

[inaudible 00:48:06].

Cristal Logan:

Have they lost their morals?

George Will:

They're afraid. They're terrified of their own voters. That is, they're terrified of their base. They saw what happened with a few Presidential tweets to former Senator Bob Corker [inaudible 00:48:22] former Senator Jeff Flake in Arizona, and former Congressman Mark Sanford of South Carolina. They've seen what happens when Mr Trump inflames the Republican base against the Republican office holder, and they are frankly frightened.

Cristal Logan:

My next question is what do you think of the Lincoln Project? Can they have an effect?

George Will:

Well the Lincoln Project is a lot of fun, I mean they are producing ads that are terrific fun to watch. I'm not sure what effect they're having because again, who is this country is undecided about Donald Trump after all these years? The latest Gallup poll showed 38% approval rating of the President. That's pretty low, and it means more than one in three Americans has watched this stuff for three and a half years and likes it. Now again, who's undecided? So I'm not sure what the target audience for these as I say highly amusing and well produced Lincoln Project ads are. I'm not sure what the demographic is here that they're after.

Cristal Logan:

What are the three worst things that can happen if Trump wins? What about the three best things if Biden wins?

George Will:

The three worst things that happen if Mr Trump wins is A, he continues to do the damage he has done to the quality of our public discourse. I believe what he has done with the name calling, and the lying, and the general coarsening of public life has done more lasting damage than Richard Nixon's

surreptitious felonies did. They were revealed, they were punished, and we moved on as a nation with an improved ethical public conduct. Second, I think you'll see an even more unhinged assertion of executive prerogatives that will not be resisted by the Senate if he wins. Third, you will see a continued retreat from the world, and an increasing world anarchy filling the vacuum. If Mr. Biden wins, I would hope the first thing he would do would be undo the worst thing that Mr. Trump did in his first major act as President which was withdraw us from the TPP, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which spread the free trade regime, got 11 nations in the Pacific area to sign on, was a wonderful counterweight to an expansive time.

George Will:

Second thing that Mr. Biden would do is lower the temperature. He would say, "Everybody [inaudible 00:51:08]." He will give an inaugural address where he won't dwell on American carnage, as was done in Mr. Trump's 2016 inaugural address. Third, I would expect President Biden to perhaps have a good relationship with the Senate where he served happily, with Congress which he is an institutional protector, and I would hope that he would have a Republican or two in his camp.

Cristal Logan:

Can you talk about the failure of the Never Trump movement to recruit more moderate Republicans, and sustain its momentum?

George Will:

I'm sometimes called a Never Trumper, but I don't think [inaudible 00:51:51]. I mean I'm a never a lot of people. Mr Trump is awfully [inaudible 00:51:58] in my judgment. I go back to the original answer. The failure to recruit Republicans of any sort is fear. They have decided, and they may be right for all I know, but if they want a career in Republican politics, they have to tow the line. Now one of the reasons that I felt strongly enough about term limits to write a book on the subject is it seems to me that if you can't make a lifelong career in politics, you have to be braver. You have to be willing to risk a limited tenure in politics because losing an election is not career annihilation. That doesn't change your life. You can run to something else. We've don't have term limits. We do have unlimited aspirations for careers in politics, and that explains the invertebrate nature of so many Republicans.

Cristal Logan:

Why do you think that science in general has been politicized recently, and specifically COVID protocol has become so political?

George Will:

Well because everything's become political. I think both parties frankly are mildly disgraceful in the way they cherry pick the science that is convenient for their ideological agendas. Republicans have their obvious problems with science. Democrats have their problems with social science because they say lots of things will how this, that and the other affect whereas we have abundant social science that should make them more skeptical. But again, when you have a thoroughly saturated political age in which everything becomes political, science will not be exempt.

Cristal Logan:

Our last question is given the court term this past spring, how important do you see the election as a vote on the court itself?



George Will:

I think people may treat it as that. I think if Mr. Scalia had not died when he did in February 2016, and Mitch McConnell had not instantly said they're going to keep his seat open, I don't think Mr Trump would have won because one in five Trump voters in one plausible exit poll said the reason they voted for Mr Trump was they were worried about the composition of the Supreme Court. That's unhealthy for the judiciary to be that important, but there you have it. I think again however, I'm not sure how many people are movable at this point. I mean I think we can have the election tomorrow, because people know how they're going to vote in this. For many reasons, I wish Ruth Bader Ginsburg well. I wish her a long and vigorous life as much as her body will permit.

George Will:

We really don't want an open Supreme Court seat in this electoral season.

Cristal Logan:

Thank you so much George Will, and thank you Susan Page. That was a fascinating discussion.

Tricia Johnson, host of the show:

George Will is a Pulitzer Prize winning syndicated columnist whose latest book is *The Conservative Sensibility*. USA Today journalist Susan Page has covered six administrations and 10 presidential elections. Her book is *The Matriarch*. Their conversation part of the McCloskey Speaker series at the Aspen Institute was held July 20th. Make sure to subscribe to Aspen Ideas To Go wherever you listen to podcasts. Follow us on social media @aspensideas. Listen on our website, [aspensideas.org](http://aspensideas.org), and sign up for our newsletter. Today's show was produced by [inaudible 00:55:44]. It was programmed by the Aspen Community Programs team, which includes Zoe Brown, Katie Carlsen, Cristal Logan and Jillian Scott. Our music is by Wonderly. I'm Tricia Johnson. Thanks for joining me.