

Durable, disciplined liberty

By [David Heim](#)

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It's hard to remember when

George Will was a serious political thinker and not a shill for the latest Republican talking point. [E. J. Dionne](#) and the folks at [Front Porch Republic](#) are among several

commentators who recalled those happier days as they confronted Will's recent, [incomprehensible claim](#) that consumer advocate and Senate candidate Elizabeth Warren has a "collectivist" agenda because she thinks that individual fates in modern society are deeply interconnected and that nobody "[got rich on his own](#)."

As Dionne and others point

out, Will once used Warren's very own terms to define what conservatism is. Back in the 1980s, he wrote powerfully on behalf of a political conservatism that was distinctly anti-individualistic and anti-libertarian. "Real conservatism is about balancing many competing values," Will [wrote back then](#),

and

always requires resistance to libertarianism (the doctrine of maximum freedom for private appetites) because libertarianism is a recipe for the dissolution of public authority, social and religious traditions, and other restraints needed to prevent license from replacing durable, disciplined liberty.

Will's 1983 book [Statecraft as Soulcraft](#) displays in its very title a positive vision of government

that would be laughed off the stage at any of the Republican presidential debates. Will argued that statecraft should foster social stability, encourage virtue and serve the common good, and that by necessity such statecraft must restrain individualism and the market. Basically, that's the kind of "disciplined liberty" Warren was defending.

Will's earlier brand of conservatism was a lively conversation partner for liberals who are inclined to lapse into an individualism of their own and to turn issues of substantive good into questions of mere procedural justice. The loss of that conservative philosophy is a loss for liberals as well as for conservatives.