

JANUARY 2

# George Will's Ethics: None of Our Business?

**W**e can argue about George Will's political views. But there's no need to debate his professional ethics. Late December brought to light a pair of self-inflicted wounds to the famous columnist's ethical pretensions. He broke an elementary rule of journalism — and then, when the *New York Times* called him on it, proclaimed the transgression to be no one's business but his own.

It turns out that George Will was among a number of prominent individuals to receive \$25,000 per day of conversation on a board of advisers for Hollinger International, a newspaper firm controlled by magnate Conrad Black. Although Will has often scorned the convenient forgetfulness of others, the *Times* reported that "Mr. Will could not recall how many meetings he attended." But an aide confirmed the annual \$25,000 fee.

Even for a wealthy commentator, that's a hefty paycheck for one day of talk. But it didn't stop Will from lavishing praise on Black in print — without a word about their financial tie.

In early March, Will wrote a syndicated piece that blasted critics of President Bush's plans to launch an all-out war on Iraq. Several paragraphs of the column featured quotations from a speech by Black. The laudatory treatment began high in the column as Will referred to some criticisms of Bush policies and then wrote: "Into this welter of foolishness has waded Conrad Black."

The column did not contain the slightest hint that this wonderful foe of "foolishness" had provided checks to fatten the columnist's assets at \$25,000 a pop.

But Will claimed in a December interview that nothing was amiss. "Asked in the interview if he should have told his readers of the paymentshe had received from Hollinger," a *New York Times* article reported on Dec. 22, "Mr. Will said he saw no reason to do so."

The *Times* quoted Will as saying: "My business is my business. Got it?"

Yeah. We get it, George. The only question is whether the editors who keep printing your stuff will get it, too.

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After three decades as a superstar pundit, Will continues to flourish. Several hundred newspapers publish his syndicated column, *Newsweek* prints two-dozen essays per year, and he appears each Sunday on ABC's "This Week" television show.

The syndicate with a very big stake in George Will cannot be indifferent to the latest flap, but there's obvious reticence to singe the right-winged golden goose. The man who's the Washington Post Writers Group editorial director and general manager, Alan Shearer, said: "I think I would have liked to have known."

A week later, via a letter in the *New York Times*, a more forthright response came from Gilbert Cranberg, former chairman of the professional standards committee of the National Conference of Editorial Writers: "When a syndicated journalist writes favorably about a benefactor, that is very much the business of Mr. Will's editors and readers."

Cranberg quoted from the National Conference of Editorial Writers code of ethics, which includes provisions that "the writer should be constantly alert to conflicts of interest, real or apparent" – including "those that may arise from financial holdings" and "secondary employment." Noting that "timely public disclosure can minimize suspicion," the code adds: "Editors should seek to hold syndicates to these standards."

But will they? George Will is a syndicated powerhouse. And he has gotten away with hiding other big conflicts of interest over the last quarter-century.

In October 1980, Will appeared on the ABC television program "Nightline" to praise Ronald Reagan's "thoroughbred performance" in a debate with incumbent President Jimmy Carter. But Will did not disclose to viewers that he'd helped coach Reagan for the debate – and, in the process, had read Carter briefing materials stolen from the White House.

When, much later, Will's "debategate" duplicity came to light, his media colleagues let him off with a polite scolding. The incident faded from media memory. Thus, in autumn 1992, when Will reminisced on ABC's "This Week" about the 1980 Carter-Reagan debate, he didn't mention his own devious role, and none of his journalistic buddies in the studio were impolite enough to say anything about it.

Will has also played fast and loose with ethics in the midst of other contests for the presidency. At the media watch group FAIR (where I'm an associate), senior analyst Steve Rendall pointed out: "During the 1996 campaign, Will caught some criticism for commenting on the presidential race while his second wife, Mari Maseng Will, was a senior staffer for the Dole presidential campaign. Defending a Dole speech on ABC News (1/28/96), Will, according to *Washingtonian* magazine (3/96), 'failed to mention ... that his wife not only counseled Dole to give the speech but also helped write it.'"

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In 2000, Will "suffered another ethical lapse," Rendall recounts in *Extra!*, FAIR's magazine. The renowned columnist "met with George W. Bush just before the Republican candidate was to appear on ABC's 'This Week.' Later, in a column (3/4/01), Will admitted that he'd met with Bush to preview questions, not wanting to 'ambush him with unfamiliar material.' In the meeting, Will provided Bush with a 3-by-5 card containing a crucial question he would later ask the candidate on the air."

George Will has long been fond of denouncing moral deficiencies. Typical was this fulmination in a March 1994 column: "Taught that their sincerity legitimized their intentions, the children of the 1960s grew up convinced they could not do wrong. Hence the Clinton administration's genuine bewilderment when accused of ethical lapses."

In what can be understood as a case of psychological projection, Will derisively added: "It is a theoretical impossibility for people in 'the party of compassion' to behave badly because good behavior is whatever they do."

During the past three decades, Will – who chose to become a syndicated Washington Post columnist in the early 1970s rather than continue as a speech writer for Sen. Jesse Helms – has been fond of commenting on the moral failures of black people while depicting programs for equity as ripoff artistry. In February 1991, for instance, he wrote: "The rickety structure of affirmative action, quotas and the rest of the racial spoils system depends on victimology – winning for certain groups the lucrative status of victim."

In subsequent years, not satisfied with his own very lucrative status, Will made a quiet pact with corporate wheeler-dealer Conrad Black. When exposed, Will compounded his malfeasance by declaring that it was only "my business."

Words that George Will wrote 10 years ago now aptly describe his own stance: "It is a theoretical impossibility" that he behaved badly. "Good behavior" is whatever he does.

Nice work if he can get it. And he can.

Got it? ■

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Background link: "*The Hypocrisy of George Will*" by Steve Rendall – *Extra!*, Sept./Oct. 2003 – <http://www.fair.org/extra/0309/will.html>

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