

Garry Wills, *Bomb Power: The Modern Presidency and the National Security State*, New York: Penguin, 2010. Pp. 288. \$20.00.

Garry Wills' new book, *Bomb Power: The Modern Presidency and the National Security State*, is at once a work of history, a rant, and a noble attempt by an historian to introduce historical discourse into the public arena. This last point is of the utmost importance. The debate surrounding the national security state has largely abated since the election of Barack Obama. Wire-tapping, 'enhanced interrogation' and the closure of Guantanamo Bay have fallen somewhat out of style in the world of political discussion. For Garry Wills, this is unacceptable. The failure of the Obama administration to slow the trend of keeping secrets in the name of national security has earned him Wills' considerable ire:

His backtracking on the treatment of torture (and photographs of torture), his hesitations to give up on rendition, on detentions, on military commissions, and on signing statements, are disheartening continuations of George W. Bush's heritage.¹

For Wills, the notion of a 'secret-driven state' is anathema to the intention of the Constitution and therefore to the underpinning principles of traditional American legal values and cultural mores. This point is not unimportant. Wills has long been an historian of American culture. Trained at Yale as a classicist, he worked as a journalist out of college when William F. Buckley hired him to be a drama critic for his famed conservative magazine, the *National Review*. This job - which Wills later remarked with a bit of levity was a way to get other people to pay for his education - eventually found him work as a feature writer for *Esquire*, and later as a contributor to many other high-circulation publications, including the *New York Review of Books*.

Largely borne of his journalistic experience, Wills began producing books on American politicians, presidents and other important figures. Most remarkable among these are *The Kennedy Imprisonment*, *Reagan's America*, and *Nixon Agonistes*. This last title had him placed on Nixon's 'enemies' master list. Regardless of the biographical subject at hand, Wills has

¹ <http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2009/dec/02/afghanistan-the-betrayal/>

always possessed the ability to relate his topic not only to its influence on American culture – which any individual with the ability to read and see could do with some success – but also to understand how the cultural *America* from which these individuals came has left its respective mark. Better than any author writing today, Wills understands and can articulate with great erudition and lyric beauty the *quid pro quo* that necessarily exists between a national figure and the culture that begat them.

This is why, in many ways, *Bomb Power* is a departure for Wills. He contends that the development of the nuclear bomb, both in a material and – for lack of a better term – metaphysical sense, has palpably altered the presidency. This thesis, as Wills points out in his introduction, is incredibly direct and simple. The bomb, he asserts, “redefined the presidency.” It altered the concept of commander and chief. In all respects,

It redefined the government as a National Security State, with an apparatus of secrecy and executive control...all this grew out of the Manhattan Project, out of its product, and even more out of its process.

The proposition, much like his argumentation here, lacks the nuanced analysis which has thus far been characteristic of Wills’ work. Wills undertakes a close examination of many of the landmark events in the formation of the National Security State, but his analysis, while well articulated – if too brief in parts – lacks any new insight. This is one of the book’s greatest weaknesses. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., wrote *The Imperial Presidency* more than three decades ago and in doing so produced a more intellectually powerful work on the expanding presidency that is both much longer than Wills’ book (which is a sparse 277 pages) and more complete, with a weightier discussion of the pertinent debates surrounding the power of the executive. (It is worth noting that Wills quotes Schlesinger often, sometimes at length, and cites him frequently). If Wills could produce an intellectual departure from this scholarship the academic value of *Bomb Power* might be saved. But, regrettably, Wills spends comparatively little time discussing the cultural implications of the bomb – which would have added life to a tired subject – beyond the obvious ‘culture of secrecy’ contentions which offer little room for nuanced or elaborate analysis. *Bomb Power* reads, for the most part, like a good undergraduate paper gone awry. Not bad; but not worthy of an intellect such as Wills’.

The most invigorating part of the book is, predictably, when Wills is unafraid to be iconoclastic. His interpretation of the Bay of Pigs for example, and, especially, of the Cuban Missile Crisis – where he contends that

the cult of secrecy surrounding the placement of and possible uses for nuclear weapons served only to elevate the crisis – is interesting, if debatable. But, while it reads well, it is at this part of *Bomb Power* that Wills begins to regress into a rant. This is never more evident than in his choices of topics for further chapters. Wills chides presidents for using signing statements – legal documents attached to signed laws explaining the Executive’s understanding of how said law should be interpreted – for instance, because he believes that they alter laws passed by congress. This is an interesting discussion, but also one rooted in a complicated body of legal scholarship that cannot reasonably be conveyed in a mere few pages. It is also only related to the bomb in a most cursory way. One could also begin to take issue with his periodization. His discussion of the bomb disproportionately increases the power of the executive; however, in the context of national security, it is less convincing when applied to other aspects of the bloated executive. The tacit power of the presidency, it could be argued, has been expanding since the McKinley-Roosevelt era.²

Where Wills is most successful, though, is not in the form or tone of the text, but rather in its intention. The integration of historical examples into political discourse has often been a fool’s errand. Men like Ronald Reagan – and many, many others – abused concepts of history to advance political ends. *Bomb Power*, while obviously something of a polemic, is also a well-researched, fairly well argued work of history that is both accessible to the general public and likely to provoke debate. In the end, this was Garry Wills’ stated purpose. The afterword of the book is a three page analysis of the present political situation; it succinctly and deliberately places the threat of a national security state in the modern context. At once political and philosophical, Wills openly muses on the broad range of problems facing a country that must protect secrets in order to protect itself:

He [the president] feels we must avoid embarrassing the hordes of agents, military personnel, and diplomatic instruments whose loyalty he must command. Keeping up morale in this vast shady enterprise is

² Wills himself points out that the Teddy Roosevelt was the president who began using executive orders *very* frequently, and in a departure from their traditional purpose. Executive orders – which have the full force of law – had been used to make simple procedural or ceremonial pronouncements. Roosevelt expanded their use to other, more substantive areas. He also issued almost as many EOs in his time in office as had been written by *all* preceding presidents.

something impressed upon him by all manner of commitments. He becomes the prisoner of his own power. As President Truman could not *not* use the Bomb, a modern President cannot *not* use his power base. It has all been to him as the legacy of Bomb Power, the thing that makes him not only the Commander and chief but Leader of the Free World. He is a self-entangling giant.

In many ways Wills has written a plea to the modern political community to heed the lessons of the past – or at least to understand the roots of the present condition and hopefully to recognize the effect that they can have on the future. He readily grants that this may well be a losing battle. “It may be too late to return to [the Constitution’s] ideals, but the effort should be made,” Wills notes, somewhat ruefully. He then concludes the book with an at once defeatist and empowering statement of battle: “As Cyrano said,” Wills adds, “...*on ne se bat pas dans l’espoir du succès.*” This is the old Wills at work – the one who is regrettably absent from most of *Bomb Power*: erudite, self-assured, uncompromising and more than just a touch psychoanalytical. That Wills’ true voice comes through only at the end makes one feel that there is a great cruelty in realizing that they have just read a great author’s mediocre book. It should be commended for its effort, but left for its overall paucity. The intellectual excitement that Wills used to produce so effortlessly is missing from most of *Bomb Power*. One hopes that this failure is the result of a topic that is less than invigorating for such a putative mind. Nevertheless, it may mark the beginning of a noble and natural deterioration of a public intellectual’s career. Perhaps Charles Peguy, then, deserves the last word: “*Tout commence en mystique et finit en politique.*”

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James M. Pitsula, *For All We Have and Are: Regina and the Experience of the Great War*, Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2008. Pp. 369. \$26.95.

James Pitsula is a professor of history at the University of Regina, where he has taught since 1978. *For All We Have and Are: Regina and the Experience of the Great War* is one of several books written by Pitsula investigating the underpinnings of social change in twentieth century Saskatchewan. In his latest work, Pitsula investigates social change in the