American Will: The Forgotten Choices That Changed Our Republic

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After reading American Will, the Forgotten Choices that Changed our Republic, by former Governor of Louisiana Bobby Jindal, I am confused as to why the man chose to write a piece of history. Governor Jindal is a capable politician and has written a book that contains, in places, very astute political content. Indeed the most interesting and thought provoking elements of American Will are the areas where Jindal relates the vignettes he employs from history back to topical political points. In this political analysis Jindal warns the Republican Party, of which he is a member, about the dangers of disunity, and of not articulating a constructive conservative message. However, the connections between these political points and the ten historical examples he chooses are at times tenuous, and at others nonsensical. American Will would be a much better piece of straight politics than a toying with history.

Before launching into a discussion of the book it is perhaps useful to detail who Governor Jindal is. His personal narrative comes up repeatedly in American Will. Bobby Jindal is not the United States’ most representative Republican. The son of Indian immigrants born and raised in Louisiana, the most important point in Jindal’s life, indeed the personal element that is most present in the book is his teenage embrace of Roman Catholicism. In a number of places throughout the book Jindal’s conversion appears to illustrate the importance of freedom of religion, and it is clear the Governor considers this experience more paramount than his political career. Jindal is also a more curious character in the GOP for other reasons. He has at times offered sharp criticisms of his own party. While still something of a reactionary politically, Jindal has also voiced the need within the Republican Party to articulate constructive conservative policy. Retrenchment, Jindal has noted publically, is not enough to win presidential elections. Indeed the Governor went even
further in 2013 when he, addressing a Republican National Committee meeting, told his audience that the GOP needed to stop appearing as the ‘stupid party,’ to stop pandering to bigoted voices and thus turning away voters. Jindal then is a more nuanced and interesting voice within the Republican Party, willing to deliver the hard truths that might make the party more electable. Indeed American Will is replete with this argument for a better argued more constructive American conservatism.

American Will presents ten ‘turning points’ in the history of the United States that Jindal relates back to the politics of today. Some of these decisive turning points are quite obvious. Most historians of the United States would agree the decision to include a Bill of Rights, as part of the passage of the Constitution, is an important event in national history. Other sections, though, like the discovery of oil in Pennsylvania, which Jindal writes about extensively, are a bit more problematic. In that case the narrative does not seem to fit with the rest of the political decisions, and appears as a much longer process. While the other sections isolate one act of government or policy, the chapter on oil sticks out for its long timeframe, and more complicated discussion of change. There are other thematic issues with the selection of events; some seem chosen merely to score, it must be noted rather feeble, political points against the Democratic Party. Other turning points are told with a focus on accentuating heroic qualities of some of the participants rather than a concern for facts. There are also more practical problems with American Will. Much of Jindal’s source material is secondary, and the list of books used very small. Finally the book is at times oddly written, and the prose can be plodding and dull, particularly in its discussion of history, although it becomes a bit fuller when dealing with politics.

Each of the ten sections of the book contain problems, but I have chosen four to discuss which highlight the weaknesses and strengths of the book. The Purchase of Louisiana, the disastrous career of Joseph Kennedy as American ambassador to London, the 1912 Presidential election, and the Blaine Amendment. Beginning with the Purchase of Louisiana Jindal has a weakness for choosing heroes and villains in American history with too few scruples. Jindal’s recounting of the Louisiana Purchase Thomas Jefferson is the clear hero, Napoleon Bonaparte the clear villain. There is, I think, a way to write this kind of moral history of the Louisiana Purchase. Leave out Jefferson’s dithering about whether he had the legal authority to make the purchase. Omit too the fact that Napoleon offered all of the Louisiana territory without even being asked, rather than just the area around New Orleans desired by the United States. Throw in the Lewis and Clark expedition, a few descriptions of Bonapartist tyranny and you have some great patriotic history, with Jefferson as a wise leader taking advantage of a despot. This structure is basically the one Jindal follows. However he does not keep his chapter simple, and instead presents the Louisiana Purchase in its true international context. The importance of the Haitian Revolution is noted; indeed it is used as a stick with which to beat Bonaparte. Jindal also admits that the rising of the formerly enslaved in Haiti frightened Southerners. Even Jefferson’s opposition to the Haitian Revolution is noted. This admission makes the chapter a bit too muddled as a narrative. Jindal clearly wants Jefferson to be the intelligent hero but that image is complicated when he is presented as a quite forceful proponent of slavery. It is difficult to read that Napoleon was evil for trying to crush a slave insurrection, but that Jefferson was not as a slave owner. The morality that Jindal tries to inject into history becomes too strained and therefore ineffective.

A different and more boring problem exists with Jindal’s chapter on Joseph Kennedy’s ignominious stint as American Ambassador to the United Kingdom. It is simply unclear in the chapter why the tenure of Joseph Kennedy is at all important. Sure Kennedy was a proponent of appeasement – many notable Americans of all political stripes were. True also that Kennedy was too open about his pessimism over Britain’s capability for victory once the war began. However in the grand scheme of transatlantic politics Franklin Roosevelt’s good relationship with Winston Churchill overrode the problems caused by Kennedy. The problem of Kennedy’s ambassadorship was not that the United States was not going to aid Britain, and indeed Lend Lease proves that it did, more the issue of Kennedy’s tenure was his public pronouncements of defeatism and American isolationism. There is no real turning point, or decision point here, and what is worse Jindal cannot help but take a swipe at Democrats. Joseph Kennedy’s position in the Democratic Party, and his children’s future political careers come up a lot in the chapter and Jindal suggests that this kind of wrongheaded isolationism has held sway amongst the party for a long time. John F. Kennedy, though, could
sabre rattle as well as anyone else, outdoing Nixon on national defence in 1960. It is then unclear why this chapter is included. Sure Kennedy was a bad ambassador, but I am not sure why the reader should care unless the point Jindal was trying to make is a silly one about Democrats being soft on defence. There is simply no turning point really to discuss and the chapter appears just to be a poorly thought out hatchet job.

The final section of American Will concerns the history of faith in the United States. Jindal’s final turning point is the suggested Blaine Amendment to the Constitution that, had it passed, prohibited the public funding of religious schools. Jindal is correct that the amendment’s goal was to prevent public funding of Catholic schools. He is also correct that James G. Blaine played on nativist anti-Catholic prejudices to move the amendment forward. Jindal also includes a history of anti-Catholicism in the United States from the 1850s to help illustrate his point, but there is simply not enough room to give the discussion a full explanation. The chapter is too jumpy and underdeveloped. This lack of a full discussion makes the second, topical, political point of the chapter unclear. Jindal uses the Blaine Amendment to argue for school choice, and public money to support charter schools, but the initial historical discussion is so weak it makes the following point a bit confusing. How the reader is meant to get from James G. Blaine to school choice is unclear. There may be a very good political point at the end of this chapter but Jindal’s discussion is not developed enough.

However, there are in places good historical elements of American Will. Jindal is clearly a political junkie, and the chapter on the 1912 Presidential Election is particularly good. The cause of the division between William Howard Taft and Theodore Roosevelt is spelled out well, and it is clear Jindal enjoys the topic. Not simply is the narrative compelling, but so is the intellectual payoff at the end. Wilson’s victory is used as an example of how disunity within a party, a move to political extremes, and concession of the centre, can lead to defeat. The narrative of Roosevelt and Taft’s infighting and Roosevelt’s extremism, as well as Wilson’s move to the centre leading to Republican disaster, is well argued. At the end connection of this story to the current state of the GOP is clear, the party must not fail to articulate its ideology as Taft did, and must not support vanity campaigns only interested in political power like Roosevelt’s. The whole chapter does what Jindal appears to want to do throughout the book; relate an event from American history to the politics of today. When this synthesis works it is incredibly effective and thoughtful.

There are some more simple issues with American Will. Unsurprisingly the source material is not terribly broad. Jindal only engages with primary sources in any kind of detail when writing about the health care debates in the mid 1990s. The number of secondary books used is also small and mainly constrained to biographies. Perhaps this is why the chapters can be at times too hagiographic, and divorced from larger themes of American history. American Will is also written ploddingly, making it tough to read. Jindal states in the introduction that the simple, at times halting, language is purposeful, to make the book accessible to all readers. The effect, though, is to make the book a bit boring to read. The sentences in American Will are faltering, and the word order at times confusing or ungrammatical. This kind of writing also seems wilful and worse, even calculated. Governor Jindal was a Rhodes Scholar so one presumes he can put a sentence together. One could even imagine this kind of language might be purposefully bad.
There are places where *American Will* is much more effective. Towards the end of the book the political analysis of the chapters gets much better. Jindal makes well-articulated points about the place of faith in American public life. One of the Governor’s chief concerns is with healthcare in the United States, and he does in places make a fair case for the failures of Obamacare. Sticking to his point of expressing constructive conservative alternatives Jindal uses *American Will* to put forward his own ideas for healthcare. However, these discussions are buried in fawning descriptions of the Governorship of Ronald Reagan (as a native of California this chapter is particularly hard to swallow) and Senator Phil Gramm’s opposition to Clinton era (or should one now write Clinton era I) health policy. This joining is the key problem with *American Will*. I simply cannot understand why the Governor felt he must build his political points on the foundations of history. *American Will* is not a piece of effective history, but a good piece of politics. If the Governor wrote a kind of state of the party book I would gladly read that, but *American Will* tries to do too much joining of history with Jindal’s political project. It’s not simply that the history is – at times – flawed: Jindal’s connections between past and present are also tenuous, which can dilute his political points.

*Reviews in History* offers a rare opportunity for the authors of books to respond to what is published. Perhaps I am being too optimistic to believe Bobby Jindal will read and respond to a review of *American Will*, though he is no longer running for president, and has left the Governor’s office, so maybe he has less to do these days and can read reviews of his book at leisure. On the rare chance you are reading this, Governor Jindal, I would be remiss if I did not utilize my platform, and address you directly. You’re a smart guy with a compelling personal narrative. I’ve read your book and you are an adept politician, who writes well on the topic. But your behaviour is a negation of your writing. *American Will* demands that the Republican Party be a united force that offers constructive conservative policy and avoids extremism. WHY THEN HAVE YOU ENDORSED DONALD TRUMP? No one is more extreme and no one offers the American people more reductionist, lowest common denominator conservative policy. The bits in *American Will* I like are the extensions of your point that the GOP cannot be the party of bigotry, the ‘stupid party’. Your deeds invalidate your words. Your political points are thoughtful and interesting, enough to make me, a smarmy academic, consider them. However, you have negated them, which makes me as a reader pause.

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