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Will Rogers: Individualist

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NOVEMBER 4, 1979 marked the centennial of the birth of Will Rogers, one of this country's greatest humorists and political commentators. He was a product of our last frontier, of its optimistic outlook, its self-reliance, and its relative freedom.

Will was an individualist in action and in thought. As he himself said, "Most of my life has been lived alone. I never run with a pack."

He was a dedicated non-voter all his life, but that never stopped him from commenting on elections, politicians, and our legislative system.

While he may not be well remembered by our current generation, he was well regarded and loved by his own. He delighted the American public during the initial third of this century, first as a performer and then as a writer and commentator on the passing scene. He had an avid interest in aviation while it was still in its relative infancy, and he flew more miles as a passenger than any of his contemporaries. It was as the victim of a plane crash that he met his death.

His pithy, satirical, good-natured remarks (in lectures, in books, and in a newspaper column he wrote between 1922 and 1935) reflected the thoughts of the average American and made him the common man's philosopher and spokesman. With his wry humor, he expressed the skeptical regard that many of us have for politicians and the political system.

Will had a "horse sense" knowledge of fundamental economics, as indicated by the following quotes:

"Buy land. They ain't making any more of the stuff."

"Invest in inflation. It's always going up."

He rejected the collectivist idea that dictators and social planners could mold "the big honest majority" to their liking and set up an ideal or perfect society. He felt that, left alone, the individual could work out his destiny and provide for himself better than any planner.

The following selection of Will Rogers' remarks, taken from *The Autobiography of Will Rogers*, aptly illustrate his witticism and individualist thought:

This special issue of FRAGMENTS, the self-styled "world's greatest individualistic magazine," examines, at close range, the various shades and meanings of individualism. More than ever, as collectivism "creeps" across the globe, it is necessary to re-examine the values that maintain the supremacy of the individual.

The dictionary defines "individualism" as: 1) a social theory advocating the liberty, rights, or the independent action of the individual; 2) the principle or habit of independent thought or action; 3) the pursuit of individual rather than common or collective interests; egoism; 4) the doctrine or belief that all actions are determined by or take place for the benefit of the individual, not the mass of men.

The encyclopedia, in tracing the word, stresses enlightened self-interest, optimism, faith in the individual, and anti-collectivism.

We devote this entire issue to examining the concept.

On Congress: "THEY are the Professional Joke Makers. Read some of the bills that they have passed, if you think they ain't Joke makers. I could study all my life and not think up half the amount of funny things they can think of in one Session of Congress. Besides my jokes don't do anybody any harm. You don't have to pay any attention to them. But everyone of the jokes those Birds make is a LAW and hurts somebody (generally everybody)."

On the National Debt: "... All of us will work and save, and stint all our lives. For what? Why, to leave something to our children. When we die we want everything we have left clear and unencumbered. We will break our necks to leave them without a single debt. In fact we won't die if we can help it till we get out of debt for their sake. Now that is what we will do as individuals, BUT, when it comes to COLLECTIVELY, why it looks like we will break our neck to see HOW MUCH we can leave them owing."

On Government Bureaucracy: "And the more men that have anything to do with trying to right a thing why the worse off it is. If every man was left absolutely to his own method of righting his own affairs why a big majority would get it done. But he can't do that. The Government has not only hundreds but literally thousands in Washington to see that no man can personally tend to his own business. They go there to do it for him, and a mob always gets panicky quicker than an individual. They hear so much of how bad things are, and that something should be done, and they immediately feel that it's up to them to do it."