

Edwards, Lee. William F. Buckley, Jr.: The Maker of a Movement (Intercollegiate Studies Institute Books, 2010), pp. 9-16, 189-191.

PREFACE

They came from Washington, D.C., New York City, and Los Angeles, as well as places far from the centers of power. They were worldly diplomats and influential commentators, powerful politicians and popular actors, public intellectuals and legendary entrepreneurs, bestselling writers and quiet scholars. They were conservatives, libertarians, and liberals; believers and atheists; young and old; high society and Middle American; white, black, and beige—a panorama of twenty-first-century America. They came from Harvard and Yale, Hillsdale and Grove City, Notre Dame and the University of Chicago. They filled New York's St. Patrick's Cathedral that early April morning as they raised their voices in praise of an extraordinary man, William F. Buckley Jr., who had died as he had lived, at his desk, writing.

George Weigel, the author of an illuminating biography of Pope John Paul II, said that Bill Buckley was one

of the most publicly influential American Catholics of the twentieth century. His ideas, wrote Weigel, “changed the way Americans think” and “reshaped our politics and our public policy.”¹

In his St. Patrick’s homily, principal celebrant Rev. George W. Rutler explained that Bill Buckley’s first formative academy had been his father’s dinner table, where he was taught that the most important things in life are “God, truth, and beauty.” Buckley adamantly opposed Communism all his life not just because it was a tyranny but also because it was a heresy. His categories, Father Rutler said, were not “Right and Left but right and wrong.”²

Nicholas Lemann, a discerning liberal and dean of the Columbia University School of Journalism, said that during the Reagan administration “the 5,000 middle-level officials, journalists and policy intellectuals that it takes to run a government” were “deeply influenced by Buckley’s example.” Some of them had been personally groomed by Buckley, and “most of the rest saw him as a role model.”³

They had been shaped by the mighty stream of words that flowed from Bill Buckley’s Royal typewriter and then PC—a Mississippi River of words. Christopher Buckley, Bill and Pat Buckley’s only child, recounted at the memorial mass how he had gone to the Sterling Library at Yale University to inspect his father’s papers. They totaled 248.8 linear feet, higher than the spire of St. Patrick’s. That did not include the 6,000 newspaper columns, 1,504 *Firing Line* television programs, and some fifty-five works of fiction and nonfiction.

Christopher leavened his remarks with a wry humor that would have pleased his father and that delighted the

congregation of more than two thousand. He revealed that he and the elder Buckley had discussed his funeral service. “If I’m still famous,” his father said, “try to convince the cardinal to do the service at St. Patrick’s. If I’m not, just tuck me away in Stamford.” Christopher acknowledged the many editorial cartoons about his father’s death, including the one showing Bill Buckley at the pearly gates and St. Peter groaning, “I’m going to need a bigger dictionary.” He recalled his father’s appearance on ABC’s *Nightline* the day he retired from his long-running television program, *Firing Line*. At the end of the interview Ted Koppel said, “Bill, we have one minute left. Would you care to sum up your thirty-three years in television?” To which Buckley replied, “No.”⁴

Searching for an epitaph, Christopher recalled that his father once gave an interview to *Playboy* magazine. Asked why he had agreed to appear in so unconservative a publication, the elder Buckley replied, “In order to communicate with my sixteen-year-old son.” At the interview’s end he was asked what he would like for an epitaph, and he replied, “I know that my Redeemer liveth.” Only “Pup,” Christopher said, “could manage to work the Book of Job into a Hugh Hefner publication.”⁵

He ended by quoting from Robert Louis Stevenson’s “Requiem,” one of Bill Buckley’s favorite poems:

Under the wide and starry sky,
Dig the grave and let me lie.
Glad did I live and gladly die,
And I lay me down with a will.
This be the verse you ’grave for me:

*Here he lies where he long'd to be;
Home is the sailor, home from the sea,
And the hunter home from the hill.*⁶

In the defiant mission statement in the first issue of *National Review*, Buckley famously wrote that his magazine would “stand athwart history, yelling Stop.” But, said Michael Barone, editor of the definitive *Almanac of American Politics*, “Buckley and *National Review* did more than yell ‘Stop!’ at history; they turned it around, first of all by establishing a coherent and respectable conservatism.” Ideas and words have power, Barone said, “and no one has shown more *joie de vivre* in deploying the power of ideas and words than William F. Buckley Jr.”⁷

In his St. Patrick’s eulogy, Henry Kissinger, the former secretary of state and an old friend, reminded the audience that Bill Buckley was not a utopian but a Burkean. “I believe neither in permanent victories nor in permanent defeats,” Buckley would say, but he did believe in permanent values—and striving to preserve them.

“We must do what we can,” Buckley once wrote Kissinger, “to bring hammer blows against the bell jar that protects the dreamers from reality.” And then came this typically sinuous sentence: “The ideal scenario is that pounding from without we can effect resonances, which will one day crack through to the latent impulses of those who dream within bringing to life a circuit which will spare the republic.”⁸

Shifting from the philosophical to the personal, Kissinger revealed how much Buckley’s friendship had meant to him—as it had to so many. When things were really

difficult, Kissinger said—“and I mean really difficult”—he did not have to look around to know that Bill Buckley would “always be there beside me.” With tears in his eyes, the veteran diplomat recalled “Bill’s special serenity” in his final years. Let us all give thanks, he said, to “a benign Providence that enabled us to walk part of our way with this noble, gentle, and valiant man who was truly touched by the grace of God.”⁹

In the weeks following his death on February 27, 2008, the encomiums poured forth.

“He is irreplaceable,” remarked radio talkmeister Rush Limbaugh, who described Bill Buckley as his “greatest inspiration” from the age of twelve, when he read his first Buckley column in the local St. Louis newspaper. Limbaugh recalled that when he was invited to an editorial dinner at Buckley’s Park Avenue home, he had his driver go around the block a couple of times “while I built up the courage to actually enter the place.”¹⁰

“Before Buckley,” wrote William Kristol, editor of the neoconservative *Weekly Standard*, “there was no American conservative movement. There were interesting (if mostly little-known) conservative thinkers. Plenty of Americans had conservative inclinations and sentiments. But Buckley created conservatism as a political and intellectual movement.”¹¹

“He united the fragments of American conservatism,” wrote Michael Kinsley, founder of the liberal website *Slate*, “and paved the way for Goldwater and then Reagan.”¹²

“Without Bill—if he had decided to become an academic or a businessman or something else,” said Hugh Kenner, a biographer of Ezra Pound and a frequent con-

tributor to *National Review*, “without him, there probably would be no respectable conservative movement in this country.”¹³

“Facing him,” wrote Christopher Hitchens, the arch-liberal writer and militant atheist who had often appeared on *Firing Line*,

one confronted somebody who had striven to take the “cold” out of the phrase “Cold War”; who had backed Joseph McCarthy, praised General Franco, opposed the Civil Rights Act, advocated rather than merely supported the intervention in Vietnam, and seemed meanwhile to embody a character hovering somewhere between Skull-and-Bones and his former CIA boss Howard Hunt. On the other hand, this was the same man who had picked an open fight with the John Birch Society, taken on the fringe anti-Semites and weirdo isolationists of the old Right, and helped to condition the Republican comeback of 1980. Was he really, as he once claimed, yelling “stop” at the locomotive of history, or was he a closet “progressive”?¹⁴

It is a provocative suggestion, but the late Tim Russert, then the moderator of NBC’s *Meet the Press*, rightly emphasized that Bill Buckley was “a conservative and proud of it.” He understood the rhythms of history, said Russert: “that there was a race worth running in 1964 with Barry Goldwater that would probably be unsuccessful but it would lay the groundwork for a successive takeover of the Republican Party, and the White House, to wit Ronald Reagan—and he was right.”¹⁵

Not everyone was so complimentary, even within the conservative movement.

Christopher Westley, a professor of economics and contributor to the libertarian website LewRockwell.com, wrote disapprovingly that Buckley urged conservatives to embrace a large centralized government as “a necessary strategy to defeat the Soviets.” Lew Rockwell himself described Buckley as the “enforcer of welfare-state discipline on the right,” an “enabler of neoconservatism,” and a “thoroughly bad ideological influence in general.”¹⁶

The prominent paleoconservative academic Paul Gottfried quoted anti-immigration advocates Peter Brimelow and Larry Auster, who argued that Buckley had become “the captive of a leftward-moving American culture.” Gottfried insisted that Buckley “had handed over American conservatism to neoconservative adventurers from the Left,” making neoconservatism “the only permissible form of thinking on the right.”¹⁷

A more favorable reading was offered by President Ronald Reagan at *National Review*’s thirtieth anniversary in 1985, when he said that the magazine and its indefatigable editor “didn’t just part the Red Sea—you rolled it back, dried it up and left exposed, for all the world to see, the naked desert that is statism.”

And then, as if that were not enough, the president said, “You gave the world something different, something in its weariness it desperately needed, the sound of laughter and the sight of the rich, green uplands of freedom.”¹⁸

What shaped this polymathic, polysyllabic man, who almost single-handedly created an intellectual and political movement, uniting the several fragments of American

conservatism and paving the way for Ronald Reagan, the most influential political leader in America in the second half of the twentieth century? To begin with, there were his closely knit, unshakably conservative family and his unwavering Roman Catholic faith.

CODA

He was *the* maker of the American conservative movement—a master fusionist.

Until Bill Buckley came along, says William A. Rusher, who worked beside him for thirty years as publisher of *National Review*, “there was a congeries of ill assorted half-enemies. He brought them together into a unified movement by pointing out they all had the same enemy—the liberals.”¹

“He did it all,” says *NR* editor Rich Lowry. “He combined George Will, the columnist; Rush Limbaugh, the voice; Tim Russert, the interviewer; Ann Coulter, the liberals’ *bête noir*; and Tom Clancy, the novelist.”²

Because of his life and work, says *National Review* Online editor Kathryn Lopez, “conservatives will never be seriously lost in the wilderness.”³

He was philosophically conservative but temperamentally free-spirited. He was fearless, says Thomas (Dusty)

Rhodes, chairman of *National Review*. “Nothing got to him, sailing, skiing, nothing.” His courage derived from his religion—he believed “he was going to Heaven.” Frances Bronson, his personal assistant for four decades, agrees: “His faith was his grounding.”²⁴

He never pandered in his writing. Says *NR* senior editor Jay Nordlinger, he sought “the right word, not just big words.”²⁵

He could not bear to be idle or without a book. “His nightmare,” says Kate O’Beirne, president of the National Review Institute, “was to be stuck somewhere where he had nothing to read—not even at a street corner.”²⁶

Among the books that made a difference in his life—Albert Jay Nock’s *Memoirs of a Superfluous Man* and Bruce Marshall’s *Father Malachy’s Miracle*.

He revered his father, he loved Our Lady, and he was bereft when his wife, Pat, died before he did.

He viewed Communism as the great enemy of America and the West, an enemy to be defeated, not accommodated.

He saw his goals achieved, says longtime friend and colleague Daniel Oliver: “Communism defeated, free market economics widely understood if not widely enough practiced, and some sense that government could be, not the solution, but the problem.”²⁷

He will live on in the sturdy journal of conservative opinion he founded; in his books, columns, speeches, and debates; in television interviews by him and of him; in the editorials, reviews, forewords, and letters he composed; in a mighty stream of words unequalled—according to the historian George Nash—by any writer of the last century.

Bill Buckley could have been the playboy of the West-

ern world but chose instead to be the St. Paul of the modern American conservative movement. His vision of ordered liberty shaped and molded and guided American conservatism from its infancy to its maturity, from a cramped suite of offices on Manhattan’s East Side to the Oval Office of the White House, from a set of “irritable mental gestures” to a political force that transformed American politics.