

Standing Athwart History: The Political Thought of William F. Buckley Jr.

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Abstract: *In the mid-1950s, the danger of an ever-expanding state was clear, but conservatives could not agree on an appropriate response, including whether the greater danger lay at home or abroad. The three main branches of conservatism—traditional conservatives appalled by secular mass society, libertarians repelled by the Leviathan state, and ex-Leftists alarmed by international Communism led by the Soviet Union—remained divided. Noting that “The few spasmodic victories conservatives are winning are aimless, uncoordinated, and inconclusive...because many years have gone by since the philosophy of freedom has been expounded systematically, brilliantly, and resourcefully,” William F. Buckley Jr. resolved to change that. His vision of ordered liberty shaped 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.*

In the summer of 1954, American conservatism seemed to be going nowhere.

Politically, it was bereft of national leadership. Senator Robert A. Taft of Ohio, the valiant champion of the Old Right, had died of cancer the previous year. Senator Joseph R. McCarthy of Wisconsin, the zealous apostle of anti-Communism, faced censure by the U.S. Senate and almost certain political oblivion. Barry Goldwater was an unknown freshman Senator from the electorally marginal state of Arizona. Pollsters were predicting that the Democrats would recapture the Congress in the fall and press their Fabian Socialist dream of making America into a social democracy run from Washington.

Intellectually, there was a near vacuum on the

Right. There were only three opinion journals of import: the weekly Washington newsletter *Human Events*; the economic monthly *The Freeman*; and the once-influential *American Mercury*, now brimming with anti-Semitic diatribes. Aside from the *Chicago Tribune* and the *New York Daily News*, the major daily newspapers leaned left. Of the three weekly news-magazines, only *U.S. News & World Report* was reliably right.

Commentators like syndicated columnist George Sokolsky and radio broadcaster Fulton Lewis Jr. had their national audiences, but liberals smoothly undermined their effectiveness by associating them with extremists. CBS’s Mike Wallace invited television viewers one evening to listen to his guest Fulton Lewis

explain “the attraction the far right has for crackpot fascist groups in America.”¹

In contrast, liberals dominated every important part of American intellectual life from *The New York Times* and Harvard to the *New Republic* and the Council on Foreign Relations. So it was, so it had always been, so it will always be, asserted liberal intellectuals.

In *The Liberal Imagination*, literary critic Lionel Trilling declared that “liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition” in America. When conservatives did attempt to express themselves, he wrote almost regretfully, the result was at best “irritable mental gestures which seem to resemble ideas.”²

Reviewing Russell Kirk’s *The Conservative Mind*, Harvard professor Arthur Schlesinger Jr. remarked dismissively that Kirk’s “scurrying about” for intellectual respectability had produced only “an odd and often contradictory collection of figures” that did not rise “to the dignity of a conservative tradition.”³ Prize-winning liberal historian Clinton Rossiter stated that America was “a progressive country with a Liberal tradition,” making conservatism, despite its contributions here and there, a “thankless persuasion.”⁴

By the mid-1950s, however, a congeries of critics of the Left had surfaced. They represented three quite different groups: traditional conservatives appalled by the secular mass society surrounding them, libertarians repelled by a Leviathan state that threatened free enterprise and individualism, and ex-Leftists alarmed by international Communism led by the Soviet Union.⁵

Yet divided they were, and divided they would

¹ “Mike Wallace Interviews Fulton Lewis Jr.,” February 1, 1958, Post-Presidential File: Fulton Lewis, Jr., Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, Iowa.

² Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: Viking Press, 1950), p. ix.

³ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., “The New Conservatism in America,” *Confluence*, December 1953, pp. 65–66.

⁴ Clinton Rossiter, *Conservatism in America: The Thankless Persuasion* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962), pp. 262, 235.

⁵ George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 1996), p. 118.

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remain—unless an overriding event or an individual of unusual resolve and charisma brought them together. The catalyst turned out to be William F. Buckley Jr., a 29-year-old Yale graduate and privileged son of an oil millionaire who could have been the playboy of the Western world but chose instead to be the St. Paul of the modern conservative movement in America.

Bill Buckley embodied the three main branches of modern American conservatism. He had read the radical libertarian Albert Jay Nock as a teenager and often quoted from Nock’s *Memoirs of a Superfluous Man*, with its belief in a “Remnant” of elite writers and thinkers who would one day build a new and free society on the ruins of the modern welfare state.

He admired traditionalist Russell Kirk’s groundbreaking work *The Conservative Mind*, which describes the conservative intellectual patrimony of America from Founding Father John Adams to Anglo-American poet T. S. Eliot. Buckley noted with approval Kirk’s warning in the last chapter that “simple expostulation and lamentation” will not suffice to resist the liberals’ planned society. Conservatives will have to grapple, Kirk writes, with the problem of “spiritual and moral regeneration”; the problem of leadership, which will require a thorough reform of the education system; the problem of enabling the mass of men to find “status and hope within society”; and, finally, the problem of “economic stability.”⁶

Already firmly anti-Communist because of his father’s experience with Mexican-style Marxism and his own rock-solid Catholicism, Buckley was mesmerized by Whittaker Chambers’ best-selling autobiography, *Witness*. The book recounts Chambers’ journey

⁶ Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Santayana* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1953), pp. 414–416.

from Communist Party member and Soviet spy in the 1930s to fervent anti-Communist and witness against fellow espionage agent Alger Hiss, a golden boy of the liberal establishment. In renouncing Communism, Chambers admits that he is probably leaving the winning side but finds reason to keep fighting against Communism in his children.

Buckley endorsed Chambers' analysis of modern liberalism as a watered-down version of Communist ideology. The New Deal, Chambers insists, is not liberal democratic but "revolutionary" in its nature and intentions, seeking "a basic change in the social and, above all, the power relationships within the nation."⁷

Looking about him in the early 1950s, Buckley observed that the Right lacked focus and cohesion. "The few spasmodic victories conservatives are winning," he wrote, "are aimless, uncoordinated, and inclusive. This is so...because many years have gone by since the philosophy of freedom has been expounded systematically, brilliantly, and resourcefully."⁸ He resolved to change that.

BUCKLEY AT YALE

At the invitation of conservative publisher Henry Regnery, Buckley and his brother-in-law L. Brent Bozell had written a massive 250,000-word manuscript about the anti-Communist activities of Senator Joe McCarthy. Regnery commissioned Willi Schlamm, a brilliant, *Time*-tested editor, to shorten the manuscript and write an introduction.

While they were working together, Schlamm shared with Buckley his long-held dream of starting a weekly conservative journal of opinion. After several lengthy discussions, Schlamm secured Buckley's commitment to the undertaking with the understanding that the American *wunderkind* would serve as editor in chief and the 47-year-old Austrian intellectual and former Communist would fill the role of senior editor and *éminence grise*.

⁷ Whittaker Chambers, *Witness* (New York: Random House, 1952), pp. 471–473.

⁸ Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America*, p. 127.

Buckley's assent flowed from two factors. He had already been thinking about starting a magazine, mentioning it to a CIA colleague (Buckley served briefly in the agency after graduating from Yale) and to his best Yale friend, Evan Galbraith. He had sought the advice of publisher Regnery, who suggested he edit a prospective monthly along with Russell Kirk. But Buckley was not interested in a scholarly journal of limited circulation and influence. He wanted to have an impact on the power centers of America, and right away.

The other factor in his decision was the intellectual vacuum that existed in the still amorphous conservative movement—a vacuum he intended to fill.

Present at the creation of *National Review* were traditional conservatives Russell Kirk and Richard Weaver, libertarians Frank Chodorov and John Chamberlain, and anti-Communists James Burnham and Frank Meyer. The largest group by far comprised the anti-Communists, all of whom were ex-Communists: Willi Schlamm, James Burnham, Frank Meyer, Freda Utey, Max Eastman, and Whittaker Chambers, who did not formally become an editor until 1957.

It was Bill Buckley's special genius as an editor that he was able to keep these philosophically dissimilar and doctrinaire writers on the same masthead for years to come. In fact, he had been honing a philosophical fusionism since his days as "chairman" (i.e., editor) of the *Yale Daily News*.

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Pre-Buckley, the *Yale Daily News* had followed the usual course of college newspapers, dutifully reporting the results of fraternity elections, the latest administration press releases, and the ups and downs of the various athletic teams. Now the *News* sent reporters to New York and Washington to cover national stories while Buckley editorialized about Yale's educa-

tional flaws, the dangers of Communism, the virtues of capitalism, and the welfarist thrust of the Truman Administration. (“There is no indication,” he wrote, “that the majority of his backers have elevated Mr. Truman to the White House to lead the United States to socialism.”)

While other college editors of the day shied away from discussing religion and politics, Buckley most days wrote about nothing else. He stressed the importance of religions banding together “in their struggle against the godless materialism whose headway in the last 30 years threatens civilization.” He endorsed the convictions of the Smith Act trials of 11 Communist leaders. He attacked the hypocrisy of liberals who protested the U.S. appearance of German musicians like pianist Walter Gieseking, who had performed in Nazi Germany, but not the U.S. appearance of Soviet composer Dimitri Shostakovich.⁹

The young conservative editor wondered why anybody should be shocked that spokesmen for the American Communist Party had declared that in the event of war with Russia, American Communists would side with the Soviet Union: “We must here assert a well-known fact.... [T]he Communist Party of the United States is an agent of Soviet Russia.” He encouraged the Young Republicans holding a two-day convention nearby to reassert “the principles of freedom of enterprise [and] anti-New Dealism.” He defended pre-World War II isolationism as a “sane” policy while conceding that the “world division into two ideological camps” made such isolationism in 1949 “impossible.”¹⁰ The latter was a significant concession by Buckley, who as editor of *National Review* would approve the existence of a formidable U.S. military establishment in what he regarded as a life-and-death struggle against Communism.

⁹ John B. Judis, *William F. Buckley, Jr.: Patron Saint of the Conservatives* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), p. 67.

¹⁰ “A Call for an Indigenous Communist Party—I,” *Yale Daily News*, March 23, 1948; “For the Republican Conclave,” *Yale Daily News*, April 30, 1949; “An Easy Out,” *Yale Daily News*, November 21, 1949.

When a reader challenged an editorial’s argument that Yale University had the right, as a private institution, to exclude any and all minorities, Buckley did not back down, anticipating the conservative arguments of the 1960s against civil rights legislation. We believe, he wrote, that “discrimination of sorts [is] indispensable to the free society.... Human beings are equal only in the eyes of God.”¹¹

His most controversial editorials criticized a popular Yale professor of anthropology, Raymond Kennedy, who routinely dismissed religion in his class as a “matter of ghosts, spirits, and emotions.” Buckley was aroused by the professor’s attacks on a pillar of the American experiment and by what he perceived as an abuse of the principle of academic freedom.

While conceding that Kennedy was entitled to his own beliefs about the existence of God, Buckley insisted that he was not entitled to undermine religion in the classroom through “bawdy and slap-stick humor” and “emotive innuendoes” such as: “Chaplains accompa-

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nying modern armies are comparable to witch doctors accompanying tribes.” In his sociology class, Buckley charged, Kennedy “has made a cult of anti-religion” and thereby undermined “the tenets of Christianity,” especially among impressionable, malleable freshmen and sophomores. In so acting, Kennedy was “guilty of an injustice to and imposition upon his students and the University.”¹²

As we will see, the question of whether Yale had abandoned God would be a major theme of Buckley’s

¹¹ “Needed: A Little Intolerance,” *Yale Daily News*, October 12, 1949; editor’s note, *Yale Daily News*, December 12, 1949.

¹² Judis, *William F. Buckley, Jr.*, p. 67; “For a Fair Approach,” *Yale Daily News*, March 9, 1949.

first (and best-selling) book, *God and Man at Yale*. Later, as editor of *National Review*, Buckley would state that although agnostics and even atheists were welcome in the pages of the magazine, “God-haters” were not.

At the end of his one-year term as chairman of the *News*, Buckley wrote a series of editorials titled “What to Do?” in which he called on Yale and other universities to defend free enterprise against the challenge of socialism—another major theme of *God and Man at Yale*. He wrote:

The battle to retain free enterprise as the fundamental economic philosophy for America is being lost, and there are those of us who mind. The battle is even being lost at Yale.... We are losing the battle for a variety of reasons. Perhaps the most influential is the spirit of restlessness, of iconoclasm, of pragmatism that is intellectually au courant and that is warmly embraced by so many evangelistic young intellectuals who find...their most enthusiastic disciples in the cloistered halls of a university, where everything goes in the name of the search for truth and freedom of inquiry.¹³

For Bill Buckley, the idea of “everything goes” was absurd and to be dismissed along with pragmatism and its sibling relativism, which were at the root of the restlessness that afflicted so many young intellectuals. The philosophical alternative was a blend of conservatism, with its emphasis on order and custom, and libertarianism, with its belief in freedom. Buckley called on Yale and other colleges to establish “Adam Smith chairs of Political and Economic Philosophy” in which the adherents of free enterprise could present the arguments for the system which had made America the most prosperous and free nation in the world.

The *Yale Daily News* editorials are worthy of examination, not only for the high rhetoric and easy insouciance that would characterize Buckley’s mature writing,

but because they reflect the major strains of American conservatism in the 1950s and 1960s—traditionalist, libertarian, and anti-Communist.

Buckley would take up the same themes in *God and Man at Yale*, which he published a year after he graduated. He offers a searing critique of his alma mater, charging that its values are agnostic as to religion, “interventionist” and Keynesian as to economics, and collectivist as regards the relation of the individual to society and government. While conceding the validity of academic freedom for a professor’s research, Buckley insists that the professor does not have the right to “inseminate” values into the minds of his students that are counter to the values of the parents paying his salary.

Drawing on his university experience, Buckley submits that Yale has abandoned both Christianity and free enterprise or what he calls “individualism.” Throughout the book, he calls himself not a “conservative” but an “individualist,” a term borrowed from his libertarian mentor Frank Chodorov. Buckley says that Yale faculty members who foster atheism and socialism ought to be fired because the primary goal of education is to familiarize students with an existing body of truth, of which Christianity and free enterprise are the foundation. “Individualism is dying at Yale,” Buckley says flatly, “and without a fight.”¹⁴

The Yale administration was not pleased with Buckley’s conclusions—indeed, it was furious. Yale officers and their supporters heaped bitter invective upon Buckley, calling his book “dishonest,” “ignorant,” and reminiscent of “a fiery cross on a hillside.” Some critics praised the work, including the *New Republic*’s Selden Rodman, who said that Buckley wrote with “a clarity, a sobriety, and intellectual honesty that would be noteworthy if it came from a college president.”¹⁵

¹⁴ William F. Buckley Jr., *God and Man at Yale: The Superstitions of “Academic Freedom”* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1951), p. 113.

¹⁵ See Buckley’s recollections in William F. Buckley Jr., *Miles Gone By* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing Co., 2004), p. 74.

¹³ Judis, *William F. Buckley, Jr.*, p. 75.

Buckley was where he loved to be—in the middle of a red-hot controversy.

A decisive intellectual influence on Buckley at Yale and someone who did considerable editing of *God and Man at Yale* was political scientist Willmoore Kendall. “He was a conservative all right,” Buckley said later, “but invariably he gave the impression that he was being a conservative because he was surrounded by liberals; that he’d have been a revolutionist if that had been required in order to be socially disruptive.” He said of Kendall: “I attribute whatever political and philosophical insights I have to his tutelage and his friendship.”¹⁶

Kendall was known for his groundbreaking work on John Locke and the principle of majority rule, going so far as to favor unlimited majority rule. But Georgetown University’s George Carey points out that Kendall “refined his views considerably in light of the American political system.” Kendall argued that the Founding Fathers placed a premium on achieving consensus “rather than simply counting heads” and intended that Congress express the popular will through such consensus. However, he said, liberals have succeeded in establishing the President as “the most authentic representative of the people’s values and aspirations.”¹⁷

As a result, there were two majorities in America: the congressional majority, based on the values and interests of the thousands of communities across the country, and the presidential majority, which spoke for the people as a mass. Kendall asserted that Congress as an institution was inherently more conservative than the presidency.

Buckley was struck by Kendall’s Nock-like metaphor that the conservative forces were strung out in isolated outposts over a wide front which the liberals could overrun one at a time because they, unlike the conservatives, were able to concentrate and coordinate their forces. Only when the conservative outposts

united in recognition of their common enemy “would conservatism prevail.”¹⁸ Buckley would adopt and adhere to a strategy of unification or fusionism as editor in chief of the magazine that he and Willi Schlamm proposed to launch.

THE BIRTH OF NATIONAL REVIEW

First, however, he had to raise an estimated \$550,000 (\$4.4 million in 2010 dollars) to underwrite the magazine until it had a sufficient number of subscribers and advertisers. He went calling on wealthy conservatives in the Midwest, the Deep South, and Texas, where Buckley was judged by billionaire oilman H. L. Hunt and other wildcat Texans to be too Catholic, too Eastern, and too moderate. Not even his father’s Texas background and degree from the University of Texas made a difference.

Hollywood was more receptive, thanks to the award-winning screenwriter Morrie Ryskind (among his credits, the Marx Brothers’ films), who introduced the young conservative to John Wayne, Bing Crosby, Adolphe Menjou, Ward Bond, Robert Montgomery, and other film stars as well as businessmen Henry Salvatori and Frank Seaver.

Buckley’s experiences with the different brands of conservatism strengthened his resolution to steer a course between the right-wing cave of Scylla and the modern Republican whirlpool of Charybdis.

Along with fund-raising, Buckley was busy trying to enlist the right people to edit his magazine. He had three writers in mind: James Burnham, the Trotskyite turned *realpolitik* conservative; Whittaker Chambers, the former Soviet spy who now called himself a man of the Right; and Russell Kirk, the traditional Midwestern conservative. He would later add the staunchly libertarian Frank Meyer, ensuring that his journal would articulate the conservative, libertarian, and anti-Communist positions.

Burnham, who had been asked to leave *Partisan Review* for being too sympathetic to Joe McCarthy,

¹⁶ *Ibid.*; WFB to Henry Regnery, September 1950, Regnery Papers, Hoover Institution, Stanford University.

¹⁷ “Willmoore Kendall,” in George W. Carey, *American Conservatism: An Encyclopedia* (Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 2006), p. 465.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

quickly accepted Buckley's offer. He too had been thinking about a weekly conservative magazine that dealt with the issues of the day. Burnham was Buckley's first recruit and would become first among equals of the senior editors. His realist arguments would serve to alleviate Buckley's idealism.

Russell Kirk was happily ensconced in isolated Mecosta, Michigan, where he could read all day and write all night. He had no intention of removing himself to New York City where the new magazine would be headquartered, and he was adamant about not associating with what he called "the Supreme Soviet of Libertarianism" represented by Frank Chodorov and Frank Meyer. Kirk was still incensed over Meyer's charge in *The Freeman* that he and other "new conservatives" had no grounding in "clear and distinct principle." According to Meyer, Kirk did not comprehend the ideas and institutions of a free society.¹⁹

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Undaunted, Buckley traveled to Mecosta where, after an extended evening of Tom Collinses and conversation about the world, the flesh, and the devil, Kirk agreed to write a column about higher education in America, although not to serve as an editor. Buckley worked hard to maintain the Kirk-NR relationship in recognition of Kirk as a preeminent voice of conservatism. He reassured Kirk that Chodorov and Meyer did not bear any malice toward him but attached "a great deal of importance to one aspect of the current [philosophical controversy]." He wrote Kirk that "just as you reproach them for being too sectarian, I would reproach any magazine that closed its eyes to the transcendent affinities between you and

Meyer and chose to be so sectarian as to run only the one or the other."²⁰

Buckley's fusionist balm helped heal some of the animosity, although the two intellectuals never had a true meeting of the minds, even after Meyer abandoned his staunchly libertarian position while creating a new philosophical construct that came to be called fusionism.

Next on the list was Whittaker Chambers, "the most important American defector from communism." Buckley had been spellbound by Chambers' Dostoyevskian memoir *Witness*, and he was eager to bring the former Communist and senior *Time* editor on board his magazine. He and Schlamm made several visits to Chambers' Maryland farm, and there was extensive correspondence in which Buckley sought to allay any doubts Chambers might have, even offering at one point to remove himself as editor if that was an obstacle to Chambers' participation.

In the process, Buckley and Chambers became friends, but Chambers still declined to join the venture. Buckley thought the reason was that he and the magazine entertained doubts "about Richard Nixon's fitness to succeed Eisenhower," who had suffered a heart attack in 1955 and, it was rumored, would not seek a second presidential term. Liberal biographer John Judis suggests that Chambers believed that Buckley and his colleagues were too ideological, whereas he preferred the "Beaconsfield position," a more pragmatic approach to politics.

"That is what conservatives must decide," Chambers wrote Buckley: "how much to give in order to survive at all; how much to give in order not to give up the basic principles." It is a fundamental question that confronts every participant in politics.

Jeffrey Hart, who served as a senior editor of *National Review* for more than 30 years and wrote a discerning history of the magazine, regards the issue Chambers raised as central to the evolution of *National Review*. It

¹⁹ Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America*, p. 146.

²⁰ WFB to Russell Kirk, September 14, 1955, Buckley Papers, Sterling Library, Yale University.

can be framed, Hart says, as the choice “between right-wing Paradigm and realistic Possibility.”

Chambers described his politics as “dialectical”; that is, he would assess a political situation as accurately as he could and then take corrective action. The result might only be a small gain in the right direction, but a gain was better than nothing. (During his presidency, Ronald Reagan would often say that he would accept 70 or 80 percent of what he wanted if he could come back for the other 20 or 30 percent later.) Over the years, Hart says, James Burnham would come to “embody [the Chambers] strategy, gradually prevailing over Buckley’s ‘ideal’ impulses.” The cumulative effect was to move Bill Buckley toward a Chambers–Burnham realism and “the magazine toward greater effectiveness.”²¹

This writer agrees with Hart’s analysis except on the issue of Communism. Here Buckley’s “ideal impulse” produced an uncompromising anti-Communist stance, not far from the slogan of hard-core McCarthyites that “the only good Communist is a dead Communist.”

Joining libertarian Albert Jay Nock, conservative Willmoore Kendall, and realist James Burnham, Whitaker Chambers was the fourth consequential influence on Buckley’s political thinking. When Chambers died in 1961, Buckley compared his singular voice to that of the famed Wagnerian soprano Kirsten Flagstad, saying it was “magnificent in tone, speaking to our time from the center of sorrow, from the center of the earth.”²²

BUCKLEY’S AMBITION FOR NATIONAL REVIEW

The objective of his new magazine, Buckley wrote a prospective supporter, was “to revitalize the conservative position” and “influence the opinion-makers” of the nation. Liberals “know the power of ideas,” Buckley said, “and it is largely for this reason that socialist-liberal forces have made such a great headway in the

past thirty years.” The young editor took an openly elitist position, stating that his journal would not attempt to appeal to the grassroots but to conservative intellectuals and to those who “have midwived and implemented the [socialist-liberal] revolution. We have got to have allies among [them]”²³

In their prospectus for investors, Buckley and Schlamm rejected Eisenhowerism or modern Republicanism as “politically, intellectually, and morally repugnant.” The most alarming single danger to the American political system, they said, was that a team of Fabian operators “is bent on controlling both our major parties—under the sanction of such fatuous and unreasoned slogans as ‘national unity,’ ‘middle-of-the-road,’ ‘progressivism,’ and ‘bipartisanship.’”²⁴

In a separate memorandum, Buckley called his publication “a formative journal” that would “change the nation’s intellectual and political climate” just as *The Nation* and *The New Republic* helped usher in “the New Deal revolution.” He conceded the boldness of his ambition but insisted that the time was right for a magazine (and, by implication, a movement) that would oppose the growth of government, “Social Engineers,” those who counsel co-existence with Communism, intellectual conformity, the elimination of the market economy, and world government. Every one of these themes resonated strongly with the different branches of conservatism.

In its first issue in November 1955, the magazine offered not just one but two explanations of its *raison d’être*, a “Publisher’s Statement” and “The Magazine’s Credenda.” The former, bylined by Buckley, who served as both editor and publisher, contained the famous phrase about “stand[ing] athwart history, yelling Stop.” This is what Buckley wrote:

The launching of a conservative weekly journal of opinion in a country widely assumed to be a

²¹ Jeffrey Hart, *The Making of the American Conservative Mind: National Review and Its Times* (Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 2005), pp. 12–13.

²² Buckley, *Miles Gone By*, p. 91.

²³ Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America*, pp. 134–135.

²⁴ Judis, *William F. Buckley, Jr.*, p. 133.

bastion of conservatism at first glance looks like a work of supererogation, rather like publishing a royalist weekly within the walls of Buckingham Palace. It is not that, of course; if *National Review* is superfluous, it is so for very different reasons: It stands athwart history, yelling Stop, at a time when no one is inclined to do so, or to have much patience with those who so urge it.²⁵

The passage was vintage Buckley: unexpected, describing America as a bastion not of liberalism but of conservatism; erudite, using “a work of supererogation” (going beyond what is necessary) rather than something like “a gratuitous act”; and audacious, presenting *NR* as a mini-colossus standing athwart history yelling the impossible: Stop.

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The publisher explained that *National Review* was out of place in the sense that the United Nations and League of Women Voters and *The New York Times* and the liberal historian Henry Steele Commager were in place. Liberals were in fact running just about everything: “there never was an age of conformity quite like this one.”

Conservatives in America, Buckley wrote, “are non-licensed nonconformists and this is a dangerous business in a Liberal world.” However, added the grateful publisher, there were conservatives of “a generous impulse and a sincere desire to encourage a responsible dissent from the Liberal orthodoxy.” (As we will see from Buckley’s treatment of the John Birch Society and other extremists, “responsible” was an operative word.) These conservatives agreed that “a vigorous

and incorruptible journal of conservative opinion is—dare we say it?—as necessary to better living as Chemistry.”

Despite the heavy odds, Buckley said, *NR* was starting with a considered optimism. After all, more than 120 investors had made the magazine possible, including several of small means. A score of professional writers had pledged their devotion. There was solid evidence that hundreds of thoughtful men and women believed that such a journal as *National Review* “would profoundly affect their lives.”

And so, Buckley concluded, “we offer, besides ourselves, a position that has not grown old under the weight of gigantic parasitic bureaucracy, a position untempered by the doctoral dissertations of a generation of Ph.D.’s in social architecture, unattenuated by a thousand vulgar promises to a thousand different pressure groups, uncorroded by a cynical contempt for human freedom. And that, ladies and gentlemen, leaves us just about the hottest thing in town.”²⁶

The language was provocative, poetic, slangy, and irresistible, and there was more. In a separate one-page “The Magazine’s Credenda” the editors declared themselves to be “irrevocably” at war with “satanic” Communism: Victory, not accommodation, must be the goal. They were unapologetically “libertarian” in the battle against the growth of government. They described themselves as “conservative” in the struggle between “the Social Engineers” who try to adjust mankind to scientific utopias and “the disciples of Truth” who defend the organic moral order.²⁷

On the back cover were congratulatory messages from 19 of conservatism’s finest, nicely distributed among competing points of view, including columnist and one-time FDR adviser Raymond Moley, steel executive and retired Admiral Ben Moreell, Utah Governor (and Mormon) J. Bracken Lee, free-market economist Ludwig von Mises, ACLU lawyer and honest liberal

²⁵ William F. Buckley Jr., “Publisher’s Statement,” *National Review*, November 19, 1955, p. 5.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ “The Magazine’s Credenda,” *National Review*, November 19, 1955, p. 6.

Irving Ferman, Hollywood producer Cecil B. DeMille, former New Jersey Governor (and son of Thomas) Charles Edison, former Sunoco president J. Howard Pew, ex-boxing champion Gene Tunney, and anti-tax activist Vivien Kellems.

Liberals did their best to belittle and bury the new journal. Murray Kempton in *The Progressive* called it a “national bore”—an opinion he would later recant. Kempton would in fact become a frequent guest on *Firing Line* and a good friend of its host. Dwight Macdonald in *Commentary* wrote that the magazine appealed to “the half-educated, half-successful provincials... who responded to Huey Long, Father Coughlin and Senator McCarthy.” *Harper’s* editor John Fischer saw deeper, more dangerous currents in the magazine, writing that *National Review* was not “an organ of conservatism, but of radicalism.”²⁸

Buckley was not disturbed by these charges; far better to be unfairly criticized than to be ignored.

The great majority of conservative intellectuals warmly welcomed the new journal and lined up to write for it. A few declined, like the Southern agrarian Allen Tate, who did not share *NR’s* enthusiasm for McCarthy, and the Anglo-American poet T. S. Eliot, who wrote Russell Kirk that the publication was “too consciously the vehicle of a defiant minority.”²⁹

But if *National Review* had not been founded, wrote George Nash, “there would probably have been no cohesive intellectual force on the Right in the 1960s and 1970s.” We can delete the word “probably.” As Nash said, “much of the history of American conservatism after 1955 is the history of the individuals associated with the magazine William F. Buckley Jr. founded.”³⁰

UP FROM LIBERALISM:

THE BEGINNINGS OF NATIONAL REVIEW

In the first critical years of *NR* and until 1962 when he began writing a syndicated newspaper column,

²⁸ *The National Review Reader*, ed. John Chamberlain (New York: The Bookmailer, 1975), p. 24; Judis, *William F. Buckley, Jr.*, p. 141.

²⁹ Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America*, p. 138.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

Bill Buckley devoted almost 90 percent of his working time to the magazine. During this period, he published only one book, *Up from Liberalism*, which argues that modern liberalism is more deserving of the label “reactionary” than is modern conservatism.

If National Review had not been founded, wrote George Nash, “there would probably have been no cohesive intellectual force on the Right in the 1960s and 1970s.”

Modern liberals, he says scornfully, believe that “truths are transitory and empirically determined,” “equality is desirable and attainable through the action of state power,” and “all peoples and societies should strive to organize themselves upon a rationalist and scientific paradigm.” The conservative alternative, Buckley says, is based on “freedom, individuality, the sense of community, the sanctity of the family, the supremacy of the conscience, the spiritual view of life.”³¹

As to a specific course of action, conservatives must maintain and wherever possible enhance “the freedom of the individual to acquire property and dispose of that property in ways that he decides on.” With regard to the perennial problem of unemployment, Buckley says, we should eliminate monopoly unionism, featherbedding, and inflexibilities in the labor market. “Let the natural desire of the individual for more goods and better education and more leisure... find satisfaction in individual encounters with the marketplace, in the growth of private schools, in the myriad economic and charitable activities.”

Echoing his libertarian mentors Albert Jay Nock and Frank Chodorov, Buckley says flatly that “I will not cede more power to the state. I will not willingly cede more power to anyone, not to the state, not to General Motors, not to the CIO. I will hoard my power like a miser, resisting every effort to drain it away from me.”

³¹ William F. Buckley Jr., *Up from Liberalism* (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1959), pp. 5, 197.

He continues defiantly: “I will use *my* power as *I* see fit. I mean to live my life an obedient man, but obedient to God, subservient to the wisdom of my ancestors; never to the authority of political truths arrived at yesterday at the voting booth.” Such a program, he ends, is enough “to keep conservatism busy, and Liberals at bay. And the nation free.”³²

Slowly but steadily, Buckley constructed a strategy with the following objectives: Keep the Republican Party—the chosen political vehicle of conservatives—tilted to the Right; eliminate any and all extremists from the movement; flay and fleece the liberals at every opportunity; and push hard for a policy of victory over Communism in the Cold War.

It was therefore no surprise when, in the spring of 1960, *National Review* published a glowing review of a little book that became the most widely circulated political manifesto of the decade: Barry Goldwater’s *The Conscience of a Conservative*. Remarking the lucidity and power of the author’s rhetoric, Frank Meyer praised Goldwater for his firm handling of the liberal argument that the conservative position was irrelevant in today’s world. He quoted Goldwater:

Conservatism, we are told, is out of date. The charge is preposterous, and we ought boldly to say no. The laws of God, and of nature, have no deadline. The principles on which the conservative political position is based...are derived from the nature of man, and from the truths that God has revealed about His creation.³³

Having laid down a philosophical foundation, Goldwater proposes a program “for the extension of freedom at home and for the defense of freedom against Soviet aggression”—the latter the more pressing challenge. The “awful truth” confronting America, he insists, is that we could establish the domestic

conditions for maximizing freedom “and yet become slaves. We can do this by losing the Cold War to the Soviet Union.” Goldwater is as blunt as a two-by-four: “A tolerable peace...must follow victory over Communism.”³⁴

In the area of domestic policy, Goldwater calls for a reduction in federal spending of 10 percent; “the prompt and final termination of the farm subsidy program”; the enactment of state right-to-work laws; and a flat income tax because “government has a right to claim an equal percentage of each man’s wealth, and no more.” The last idea came from University of Chicago economist and future Nobel Laureate Milton Friedman, with whom Goldwater developed a lasting friendship.

“I mean to live my life an obedient man, but obedient to God, subservient to the wisdom of my ancestors; never to the authority of political truths arrived at yesterday at the voting booth.”

Meyer conceded in his review that the Goldwater strategy was startling but argued that nothing less would express the dictates of conservative principle “in this crisis of the Republic.”³⁵ He did not mention that the actual writing of the book had been done by another senior editor of *National Review*, Brent Bozell.

The Goldwater–Bozell collaboration produced an enormous best-seller—3.5 million copies were in circulation by 1964—incorporating the ideas of the major strains of modern American conservatism, traditional conservatism, libertarianism, and anti-Communism. The little book created a new national spokesman in Goldwater and advanced the conservative movement more quickly than anyone, including Bill Buckley, expected.

In September of that same year, Buckley hosted at his home in Sharon, Connecticut, the founding meet-

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 202–203.

³³ Frank S. Meyer, “A Man of Principle,” *National Review*, April 23, 1960, pp. 269–270.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

ing of Young Americans for Freedom, which became the political youth arm of the conservative movement. YAF's statement of principles, the Sharon Statement, was drafted by self-identified fusionist M. Stanton Evans, a frequent *NR* contributor. The statement affirmed certain eternal truths at "this time of moral and political crisis":

- That foremost among the transcendent values is the individual's use of his God-given free will, whence derives his right to be free from the restrictions of arbitrary force;
- That liberty is indivisible, and that political freedom cannot long exist without economic freedom;
- That the purpose of government is to protect these freedoms through the preservation of internal order, the provision of national defense, and the administration of justice;
- That the market economy, allocating resources by the free play of supply and demand, is the single economic system compatible with the requirements of personal freedom and constitutional government;
- That the forces of international Communism are, at present, the greatest single threat to these liberties;
- That the United States should stress victory over, rather than coexistence with, this menace.³⁶

Here are the central themes that lie at the core of modern American conservatism: Free will and moral authority come from God; political and economic liberty are essential to the preservation of free people and free institutions; government must be strictly and constitutionally limited; the market economy is the system most compatible with freedom; and Communism must be defeated, not simply contained. These ideas also form the core of Bill Buckley's personal political philosophy.

³⁶ Lee Edwards, *You Can Make the Difference* (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1980), pp. 241–242.

In November 1960, Buckley hosted an elegant black-tie banquet in New York City's famed Waldorf Astoria Hotel commemorating the fifth anniversary of *National Review*. (The magazine would hold a celebratory dinner every five years into the 21st century.) Buckley was by turns jubilant, pessimistic, pixieish. He noted the presence of such distinguished sponsors as former President Herbert Hoover, General of the Army Douglas MacArthur, and Admiral Lewis L. Strauss, former chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission. He reminded the audience that *NR* remained dedicated to defending freedom and opposing Communism—"the worst abuse of freedom in history"—and "the socialized state [which] is to justice, order, and freedom what the Marquis de Sade is to love."

He entertained with one-liners by *NR* writers, including: "To sigh, as James Burnham has done, that Mrs. [Eleanor] Roosevelt viewed the world as one vast slum project" and to write, as Willmoore Kendall did, that "Gerald Johnson, columnist of the *New Republic*, wonders what a football would think of the game if a football could think. Very interesting, but less relevant than to ask, What would a *New Republic* reader think of the *New Republic* if a *New Republic* reader could think?"

Amid the merriment, he cautioned fellow conservatives that "we are probably destined to live out our lives in something less than a totally harmonious relationship with our times" but asserted that they could rely on *National Review*, as long as it was "mechanically possible," to be "a continuing witness to those truths which animated the birth of our country, and continue to animate our lives."³⁷

BUCKLEY DEFINES THE MOVEMENT

When necessary, Buckley took decisive action against the irresponsible Right. The first prominent extremist read out of the movement was the philos-

³⁷ William F. Buckley Jr., "Remarks on a Fifth Anniversary," reprinted in William F. Buckley Jr., *Rumbles Left and Right: A Book About Troublesome People and Ideas* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1963), pp. 85–89.

opher-novelist Ayn Rand, whose growing influence among young conservatives alarmed Buckley and other conservatives. In December 1957, Whittaker Chambers took up arms against the founder of objectivism and her 1,168-page novel *Atlas Shrugged*.

Chambers, the former Communist atheist and now firm believer in a transcendent God, declared that the story of *Atlas Shrugged* was preposterous, its characters crude caricatures, its message “dictatorial.” Although Rand, a refugee from Soviet Russia, insisted that she was anti-statist, she called for a society run by a technocratic elite. “Out of a lifetime of reading,” Chambers said, “I can recall no other book in which a tone of overriding arrogance was so implacably sustained.”³⁸

Buckley ensured that Chambers was joined by other influential conservatives. Russell Kirk called objectivism a false and detestable “inverted religion.” Frank Meyer accused Rand of “calculated cruelties” and the presentation of an “arid subhuman image of man.” Garry Wills, a Buckley protégé, called Rand a “fanatic.” A furious Rand described *National Review* as “the worst and most dangerous magazine in America” and vowed never again to remain in the same room with Bill Buckley, a promise that she scrupulously kept.³⁹

The casting out of Robert Welch and the extremist positions of the John Birch Society that he headed proved more difficult and contentious but was necessary, in accordance with Buckley’s design to build an effective, prudential conservative counter-establishment.

Over the objections of Brent Bozell, publisher William Rusher, Frank Meyer, and new senior editor William Rickenbacker, Buckley wrote an extended editorial expelling Welch from the conservative movement. Supported by James Burnham and his sister Priscilla, Buckley declared that Welch was “damaging the cause of anti-Communism” with his inability to make the

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critical distinction between an “active pro-Communist” and an “ineffectually anti-Communist Liberal.” He said scornfully that Welch’s scoreboard describing the United States as “50–70 percent Communist-controlled” was in effect saying that “the government of the United States is under operational control of the Communist Party.” Buckley yielded to no one in his passionate opposition to Communism, but Welch’s position was not only wrong but harmful to the cause of anti-Communism. He concluded his editorial by saying that “love of truth and country called for the firm rejection of Welch’s false counsels.”⁴⁰

Some subscribers who were John Birch Society members angrily cancelled their subscriptions, as Rusher had warned they would, but the great majority of readers agreed with Senators Barry Goldwater and John Tower, who wrote letters to the editor endorsing the magazine’s stand. They understood that, rather than dividing the conservative cause, Buckley had strengthened it. Another letter read: “You have once again given a voice to the conscience of conservatism.” It was signed “Ronald Reagan, Pacific Palisades, Cal.”⁴¹

Buckley also took a firm stand against anti-Semitism, informing *NR* writers that the magazine would “not carry on its masthead the name of any person whose name also appears on the masthead of the *American Mercury*.” Under owner Russell Maguire, the once-respected magazine had descended into the

³⁸ Whittaker Chambers, “Big Sister Is Watching You,” *National Review*, December 28, 1957, pp. 594–596.

³⁹ Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America*, pp. 144–145.

⁴⁰ “The Question of Robert Welch,” *National Review*, February 13, 1962, pp. 83–88.

⁴¹ Linda Bridges and John R. Coyne, Jr., *Strictly Right: William F. Buckley Jr. and the American Conservative Movement* (Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons, 2007), p. 87.

swamps of neo-Nazism, endorsing, for example, the theory of a worldwide Jewish conspiracy set forth in the fraudulent *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.⁴²

Buckley and the magazine did not acquit themselves as well on the issue of civil rights, taking a rigid states' rights position that equaled, in the eyes of many liberals and almost all black Americans, a stand in favor of segregation and therefore racism. In his articles and editorials, Buckley clearly rejected the politics of Southern racists like Ross Barnett of Mississippi and George Wallace of Alabama, but he also argued that the federal enforcement of integration was worse than the *temporary* continuation of segregation. Consistent with the conservative principle of federalism, he favored voluntary gradual change by the states.

But Mississippi was burning, and freedom riders were being murdered. "You are either for civil rights or against them," declared blacks who did not see a dime's worth of difference between Wallace and Buckley. As a result of *National Review's* above-the-fray philosophizing and Barry Goldwater's vote, on constitutional grounds, against the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the albatross of racism was hung around the neck of American conservatism and remained there for decades and even to the present.

In a panel discussion in October 2005 marking *NR's* 50th anniversary, liberal commentator Jeff Greenfield asked Buckley whether he regretted his own and the magazine's resistance to the civil rights movement. Yes, the 80-year-old Buckley replied. He realized that, in retrospect, he and his colleagues were relying too much on normal political processes as outlined in the Constitution to fully incorporate blacks into American public life. Many Southern states, he admitted, simply did not permit blacks to participate.⁴³

A CONSENSUS OF PRINCIPLE

One other critical step had to be taken before the conservative movement could be a major player in

⁴² Judis, *William F. Buckley, Jr.*, p. 173.

⁴³ Bridges and Coyne, *Strictly Right*, p. 87.

American politics: It had to be philosophically united. Throughout the 1950s and into the early 1960s, traditionalists and libertarians snapped and snarled at each other in *National Review*, *The Freeman*, and other publications as well as public forums. Traditionalist

One other critical step had to be taken before the conservative movement could be a major player in American politics: It had to be philosophically united.

Russell Kirk was accused of being hostile to individualism and laissez-faire economics, while libertarian F. A. Hayek was faulted for defending freedom on strictly utilitarian grounds rather than according to "the absolute transcendent values on which its strength is founded."⁴⁴

One conservative became convinced that beneath the raw rhetoric lay a true consensus of principle: Frank Meyer, the fast-talking, chain-smoking, ex-Communist senior editor of *National Review*. Through articles, books, and endless late-evening telephone calls, Meyer communicated his synthesis of the disparate elements of conservatism that came to be called *fusionism*—a term coined not by Meyer but by traditionalist Brent Bozell, who argued that any lasting correlation of freedom and virtue was not possible.⁴⁵

The core fundamental of conservatism, Meyer said, was "the freedom of the person, the central and primary end of political society." To Meyer, man was a "rational, volitional, autonomous individual." Political order should be judged as to whether it increases or decreases individual freedom. The state had only three limited functions: national defense, the preservation of domestic order, and the administration of justice between citizens. "Society and the states

⁴⁴ Lee Edwards, *The Conservative Revolution: The Movement That Remade America* (New York: Free Press, 1999), p. 128.

⁴⁵ See L. Brent Bozell, "Freedom or Virtue?" *National Review*, September 11, 1962, p. 181.

were made for individual men," he insisted, "not men for them."⁴⁶

Freedom was the indispensable condition for the pursuit of virtue, Meyer wrote. No community can make men virtuous, but he adds this about the relationship between virtue and God: "the church is, of all human associations, the most important and the most directly related to the inculcation of virtue."⁴⁷ Why the emphasis on virtue? Because, as John Adams wrote, "public virtue is the only foundation of republics." There must be "a positive passion for the public good" established in the minds of the people, he said, or there can be "no republican government, nor any real liberty."⁴⁸

Meyer said that modern American conservatism was not classical liberalism, which had been significantly weakened by utilitarianism and secularism. Most classical liberals, he said, were seemingly unable to distinguish between "the authoritarianism" of the state, which suppresses human freedom, and "the authority of God and truth." Conservatives, he said, were trying to save the Christian understanding of "the nature and destiny of man."⁴⁹ To do that, they had to absorb the best of both branches of the divided conservative mainstream.

Meyer insisted that he was not creating something new but articulating an already existing conservative consensus forged brilliantly by the Founders in 1787 at the Constitutional Convention. John Adams, James Madison, George Washington, and others agreed that Americans must use liberty to choose virtue.

In a typically generous obituary, Buckley described

⁴⁶ Frank S. Meyer, *In Defense of Freedom: A Conservative Credo* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1962), pp. 22–23, 27. See also George Nash's brilliant summary of Meyer's thought in *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, pp. 159–161 *et seq.*

⁴⁷ Meyer, *In Defense of Freedom*, p. 165.

⁴⁸ *The Founders' Almanac*, ed. Matthew Spalding (Washington, D.C.: Heritage Books, 2002), pp. 207–208.

⁴⁹ *What Is Conservatism?* ed. Frank S. Meyer (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), pp. 15–16 *et seq.*; see also Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America*, p. 161.

Meyer as "the principal living American theorist of freedom." He was, Buckley wrote, "the father of the 'fusionist' movement in American conservatism" that "seeks to bring together into symbiotic harmony the classical laissez-faire of the 19th century liberal and the reverence for tradition of Edmund Burke," a fusion amply felt by the Founding Fathers and "defended empirically by conservatives during the past 150 years."⁵⁰

Regardless of philosophical orientation, George Nash observed, all conservatives were agreed that the state should be circumscribed and were deeply suspicious of federal planning and attempts to centralize power. They defended the Constitution "as originally conceived" and opposed the "messianic" Communist

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threat to Western civilization. In an essay titled "Notes Toward an Empirical Definition of Conservatism," Buckley wrote that what *National Review* had striven to do from the beginning was to achieve "a general consensus on the proper balance between freedom, order, justice, and tradition"—that is, to fuse the basic ideas of traditional conservatism and libertarianism.

The political climax of conservatism in the 1960s was Barry Goldwater's historic presidential campaign when, George Nash points out, politics and ideas were related as they had not been for a long time. Goldwater was the conservative movement's own. *National Review* enthusiastically promoted his candidacy. Russell Kirk drafted a couple of his speeches, including a major address at Notre Dame University, and praised him in his newspaper column. Professor Harry Jaffa of Ohio State University wrote Goldwater's acceptance speech

⁵⁰ William F. Buckley Jr., "Frank S. Meyer: R. I. P.," *Washington Star Syndicate*, April 15–16, 1972.

at the Republican National Convention. Milton Friedman, among other conservative academics such as Stefan Possony, Warren Nutter, and Richard Ware, served as an academic adviser. “It is likely,” Nash wrote, “that without the patient spadework of the intellectual Right, the conservative *political* movement of the 1960s would have remained disorganized and defeated.”⁵¹

Buckley was personally cautious about Goldwater, affected by James Burnham’s doubts about the Senator’s intellectual capacity, but he was attracted to Goldwater’s libertarian views on government. In *The Conscience of a Conservative*, Goldwater says that we must elect Members of Congress who declare, “I did not come to Washington to pass laws but to repeal them.” Buckley also admired Goldwater’s uncompromising anti-Communism, spelled out in *Conscience* and a subsequent book, *Why Not Victory?* But like Goldwater himself, he knew that the conservative Senator had very little chance of winning the presidency in 1964.

After Goldwater won the Republican primary in California and effectively clinched his nomination, Buckley tried to prepare fellow conservatives for the inevitable outcome in the general election. He wrote, “This is probably Lyndon Johnson’s year, and the Archangel Gabriel running on the Republican ticket probably couldn’t win.”⁵²

However, Buckley realized that Goldwater’s presidential bid enabled him to raise issues and propose conservative solutions such as a flat tax, an end of farm subsidies, and a victory policy in the Cold War; to forge a national political organization that could be used by future conservative candidates; to establish for the first time a broad financial base for the conservative movement through direct mail and television appeals; and to demonstrate that there was a political force called conservatism that could no longer be dismissed but could nominate a conservative and capture millions of votes—all of which went far beyond Bill Buckley’s original goal of trying to stop history and

⁵¹ Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America*, p. 273; emphasis in original.

⁵² Judis, *William F. Buckley, Jr.*, p. 228.

Buckley argued that if conservative politics wanted to be successful, it had to steer a middle course between the ideal and the prudential.

entered a new world of attempting to shape history.

One month before Election Day, at the anniversary dinner of the Conservative Party of New York, Buckley mentioned Goldwater only once and instead focused on what conservatives might accomplish in the following decades. He spoke of the possible and the ideal in politics. “How this movement, considering the contrary tug of history,” he said, “has got as far as it has got, is something that surpasses the understanding of natural pessimists like myself.”

He argued that if conservative politics wanted to be successful, it had to steer a middle course between the ideal and the prudential. This golden mean, influenced by James Burnham, very much alive, and Chambers, dead but not forgotten, became Buckley’s guiding principle and would, in John Judis’s words, “influence a great many conservative politicians” in the years ahead.⁵³

However, the golden mean is not a precise point midway between two extremes, but rather a shifting point that sometimes winds up closer to the ideal and sometimes to the prudential. Buckley would veer between the two ends, depending upon the issue and the state of the conservative movement.

BUCKLEY’S RUN FOR MAYOR

In 1965, he decided to put his political philosophy to the test by running for public office. Never one to start at the bottom, he decided to run for mayor of New York City. His reasons were several. He wanted to help block the political ascendancy of Representative John Lindsay, whom liberal Republicans regarded as a serious presidential possibility. A good showing in New York City would bolster conservative spirits,

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

depressed by the devastating Goldwater defeat in November (the Arizona Senator had carried only six states and received just 38.5 percent of the popular vote). He had some definite ideas about the management of a metropolis, borrowed heavily from Harvard professors Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan.

In June, he wrote a column titled “Mayor, Anyone?” that set forth a 10-point platform on which a candidate might run. What strikes one forcibly is its strongly libertarian character. He recommended that “antinarcotic laws for adults” be repealed; that gambling be legalized; that anyone without a police record be allowed to operate a car as a taxi; and that communities be encouraged to finance their own “watchmen,” relieving the municipal police force of what he called “an almost impossible job.”⁵⁴

Buckley also anticipated Representative Jack Kemp’s free-enterprise zone proposal a decade later by suggesting that state and federal authorities suspend property and income taxes for all “Negro or Puerto Rican entrepreneurs” who established businesses in depressed areas in the inner city. He also proposed, several years before Governor Ronald Reagan offered his welfare reform program in California, that all welfare recipients be required to do “street cleaning or general prettification work” for the city. Here was the first conservative articulation of the workfare principle.⁵⁵

On Election Day, an impressive 13.4 percent of the New York City electorate (341,226) voted for Bill Buckley on the Conservative Party line while John Lindsay eked out a narrow win, receiving 45.3 percent to Democrat Abe Beame’s 41.3 percent. That Buckley’s mayoral effort sketched the outlines of a winning political coalition of ethnic Catholic Democrats and middle-class Republicans was later confirmed by political analyst Kevin Phillips. In his landmark study *The Emerging Republican Majority*, published in 1969, Phillips cited Buckley’s 1965 vote as a “harbinger” of the new majority.

Despite his considerable political success, Buckley offered a pessimistic appraisal of the future at *National Review*’s 10th anniversary dinner. He recalled that “Albert Jay Nock once wondered whether it would be possible to write an essay demonstrating that the world is moving into a Dark Age.” Buckley dismissed politics as “the pre-occupation of the quarter-educated” and cursed the 20th century for giving “sentient beings very little alternative than to occupy themselves with politics.”

Still, he admitted, it was impossible to ignore politics, given the ever-expanding nature of the Great Society and the reality of “the dark side of the Iron Curtain.” And so, he said, we pursue the “homelier, and headier, pleasure of duty and restraint, of order and peace, of self-discipline and self-cultivation,” aware all the while that victory “is beyond our reach.” All that he could offer in consolation, he told a hushed audience, was T. S. Eliot’s stern observation, “There are no lost causes because there are no gained causes.”⁵⁶

The autumnal mood was maintained in *The Unmaking of a Mayor*. Buckley asserted that the conservative doctrine lacked “mass appeal.” Conservatism in America, he wrote, was a “force” rather than “a political movement.” He went so far as to declare that the Republican Party would not survive as “a major party,” a probability he deeply regretted for the alternative was likely to be a “congeries of third parties, adamantly doctrinaire, inadequately led, insufficiently thoughtful, improvidently angry, self-defeatingly sectarian.”⁵⁷

However, Buckley’s prolonged lamentation was soon overtaken by events, including Ronald Reagan’s declaration that he would run for governor of California and the launching of *Firing Line* in April 1966. The weekly public affairs program pitted Bill Buckley against any and all liberals—and others—and would stay on the air for more than 33 years, setting a broadcasting record.

⁵⁴ William F. Buckley Jr., “Remarks at the Anniversary Dinner,” *National Review*, November 30, 1965, pp. 1127–1128.

⁵⁷ William F. Buckley Jr., *The Unmaking of a Mayor* (New York: Viking Press, 1966), pp. 307–308.

⁵⁴ Edwards, *The Conservative Revolution*, p. 146.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

For all his pessimism, Buckley retained his belief that God knew what he was doing and that, in any case, we should be more concerned about where we ended up in the City of God than where we ended up in the City of Man. He often quoted the Russian poet Ilya Ehrenburg: "If the whole world were to be covered with asphalt, one day a crack would appear in the asphalt; and in that crack grass would grow."⁵⁸

BUCKLEY AND RICHARD NIXON

The year 1968 was chaos from beginning to end, from the Communist offensive of Tet to the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy to the near anarchy of the Democratic National Convention. Like China, America was going through a Great Cultural Revolution with the attempted annihilation of the Four Olds: old customs, old habits, old culture, old thinking. Nothing seemed safe or sacred.

Buckley and *National Review* carefully considered the 1968 presidential campaign, focusing on a practical question: Who was the most viable conservative candidate? Barry Goldwater had already endorsed Richard Nixon. Ronald Reagan had been governor of California for little more than a year. Nelson Rockefeller was an impossibility for any right-thinking conservative. That left Nixon, whom Buckley admired as the man who had stoutly defended Whittaker Chambers against the liberal establishment and ensured that Alger Hiss went to jail.

Buckley was no longer the idealist of 1955, when he roundly criticized President Eisenhower's "modern Republican" positions, but a pragmatist willing to support an anti-Communist moderate open to conservative ideas and influence. And so *NR*, with James Burnham as the writer, endorsed Nixon as a "competent, intelligent, experienced, professional politician" known for his "election-machine style of politics."⁵⁹

Nothing equals the anger of a woman scorned except,

⁵⁸ William F. Buckley Jr., *On the Firing Line: The Public Life of Our Public Figures* (New York: Random House, 1989), p. 448.

⁵⁹ Judis, *William F. Buckley, Jr.*, p. 279.

perhaps, the anger of a conservative who feels he has been betrayed. In 1971, Henry Kissinger's secret trips to Communist China were revealed, and Nixon unveiled his New Economic Plan featuring wage and price controls. "We are all Keynesians now," Nixon said in a bit of bombast sharply challenged by conservatives.

Twelve leaders of the Right, with William F. Buckley Jr. at the top of the list, announced that they were suspending "our support of the Administration." Buckley's core anti-Communism in particular caused him to take a strong public stand against an American President. And then there was Watergate. The affair, *National Review* said editorially, "has acquired a sour, rotting quality that can only be cleaned up by the truth... [T]he Administration should purge itself of any person at whatever level whose relation to the Watergate was legally or morally culpable."⁶⁰

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As with the Goldwater candidacy a decade earlier, Buckley was concerned about the negative impact of Nixon's fate on the conservative movement to which he had devoted so much time and care.

By now there were four kinds of conservatives: classical liberals, traditional conservatives, anti-Communists, and New Right populists or social conservatives. After some hesitation, Buckley welcomed the last group, noting that Richard Viguerie and other New Right leaders had been key players in the formation of Young Americans for Freedom and were staunch anti-Communists.

A fifth variety now appeared, the neoconservatives, with whom Buckley, the master fusionist, would form a close relationship. Buckley recognized that the formidable brain power of the neoconservatives along with

⁶⁰ Bridges and Coyne, *Strictly Right*, p. 147.

the burgeoning manpower of the New Right gave the conservative movement a powerful one-two political punch it had previously lacked.

If the 1970s were nearly the worst of times for conservatives—Watergate, Vietnam, Jimmy Carter—then the 1980s were the best of times because of the political success and leadership of Ronald Reagan. For Bill Buckley, it was possible, even for an ingrained pessimist like him, to talk realistically about shaping, not just stopping, history.

When Reagan won the presidency in a landslide and liberal pundits fumbled for explanations, columnist George Will wrote, “What happened in 1980 is that American conservatism came of age.” Speaking at *National Review’s* 25th anniversary dinner, Will said that 16 years before, Barry Goldwater had made the Republican Party “a vessel of conservatism” and *NR* had filled the vessel with “an intellectually defensible modern conservatism.” The principal architect of that achievement, he said, was William F. Buckley, “the Pope of the conservative movement, operating out of a little Vatican on 35th Street” in New York.⁶¹

Let me suggest a different metaphor: William F. Buckley Jr. was the Saint Paul of the conservative movement, proselytizing tirelessly across America, fighting the good fight against liberal heresies, exhorting and when necessary warning the conservative faithful to mend their ways, knowing that the race was not over even with the coming of the Reagan presidency.

Buckley was no longer a lonely champion in the lists but *the* spokesman—second only to Reagan—of a conservative phalanx out to change the direction of the nation and the world. Conservative ideas were no longer derided but accepted. Proposals like victory in the Cold War and a rolling back of the welfare state were no longer extreme but even mainstream.

Communism was no longer expanding but contracting. Capitalism was spreading from continent to continent, inspiring some exuberant conservatives to exclaim, “Now we are all Hayekians.” But, cautioned

Buckley in an address about Hayek to the Mont Pelerin Society, “What we do not need is anything that suggests that human freedom is going to lead us to Utopia.”⁶²

During a tribute to President Reagan in 1985 on the occasion of *NR’s* 30th anniversary, Buckley pointed out that the current issue discussed the Geneva sum-

Buckley was no longer a lonely champion in the lists but the spokesman—second only to Reagan—of a conservative phalanx out to change the direction of the nation and the world.

mit, the war in Afghanistan, Sandinista involvement in Colombia, the attrition of order and discipline in the public schools, and the underrated legacy of Herman Kahn. Everyone in the audience, including the President, got the point: *National Review* and its editor were carefully monitoring the events of the day from a conservative perspective and providing the right answers when and as required.

Turning to President Reagan, Buckley offered this encomium: “What at *National Review* we labor to keep fresh, alive, deep, you are intuitively drawn to. As an individual you incarnate American ideals at many levels. As the final responsible authority, in any hour of great challenge, we depend on you.”⁶³

One Reagan action that Buckley and *National Review* opposed was the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty with the Soviets. Buckley feared the consequences of no land-based U.S. missiles in Western Europe in a “post-Reagan age.” Reagan reassured his fellow conservative privately that the United States would follow a policy of “trust but verify.” His position was verified when political forces, accelerated by the Reagan Doctrine, obliged Gorbachev to abandon the Brezhnev Doctrine and give up the “leading role”

⁶² William F. Buckley Jr., “The Courage of Friedrich Hayek,” in *Let Us Talk of Many Things: The Collected Speeches* (Roseville, Cal.: Forum, 2000), p. 233.

⁶³ William F. Buckley Jr., Remarks at *NR’s* 30th Anniversary Dinner, *National Review*, December 31, 1985, p. 132.

⁶¹ Judis, *William F. Buckley, Jr.*, p. 435.

of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union. Without the Communist Party there was no ideological rationale for the Soviet Union and its empire, which quietly expired in December 1991.

National Review's 35th anniversary dinner in the fall of 1990 coincided with Bill Buckley's 65th birthday, and as he had long planned, he announced his retirement—after 1,014 issues—as editor in chief. There were tears and exclamations of protest among those at the traditional black-tie banquet.

Do not despair, a smiling Buckley said; he would not discontinue his newspaper column or *Firing Line* or public speaking or book writing. But prudence, that cardinal virtue, he said, required him to arrange for the continuation of *National Review*, which, "I like to think, will be here, enlivening right reason, for as long as there is anything left in America to celebrate."⁶⁴

When, in late 1995, *National Review* celebrated its 40th birthday, editor at large Bill Buckley took time to say a few words about the role of fusionism in the development of modern American conservatism. When *NR* was launched in 1955, he said, two traditions were at odds, although not with daggers drawn: the libertarian and the traditionalist. The former was "anti-statist, pure and simple." The latter spoke of traditional values, calling for respect for our forefathers and mediating institutions such as the family, the church, and the courts.

Libertarian Frank Meyer was ultimately persuaded that "tradition was important to the good health of libertarian mores." Traditionalist Russell Kirk acknowledged that the state was "the presumptive enemy of useful social energy, as the predictable obstacle to liberal progress." The two schools came together in *National Review*, Buckley said, which "gave enthusiastic shelter to advocates of both." The meeting of such minds as those of Meyer and Kirk "grew to be known as Fusionism; and little fusionists were born and baptized from coast to coast."⁶⁵

⁶⁴ William F. Buckley Jr., "Time to Go to Bed," *Let Us Talk of Many Things*, p. 362.

⁶⁵ William F. Buckley Jr., "Standing Athwart," *National Review*,

Buckley went on to examine what history can tell us about the future of representative democracy—i.e., the United States of America. Is it certain? Is history on our side? He noted that Lincoln had questioned whether future generations would have as strong a "desire for freedom through self-government."

Public support of Social Security and public willingness to accept the decisions of an activist Supreme Court suggest, he said, "a gradual impoverishment of genuine public sovereignty." The collapse of Communism and a turning away from socialism in Western Europe were certainly encouraging, he conceded, but would "an acceleration of the historical process" take Americans "into a better world with reduced government or "to a kind of Orwellian transcription of democracy"?

We cannot be certain, Buckley inferred, but we do know that "history triumphant awaits the crystallization of an informed public intelligence seeking maximum human freedom." The easiest way for history to take its cue, he said, impishly, "is to maintain its subscription to *National Review*."⁶⁶

BUCKLEY'S FINAL YEARS

At the magazine's 50th anniversary dinner in 2005, Buckley reassured his listeners that he would not burden them with his analysis of "current discontents" (such as the Iraq War and the excessive domestic spending of the Bush Administration). He then alarmed them by referring to "my terminal appearance with you"—the operative word being terminal. He explained that he was stepping down as editor at large and turning over the ownership of the magazine to a board of directors.

While elated by the witness of *National Review* over the years and touched by the faith and tenacity of its friends, he admitted he was not sorry to be going. In fact, he took considerable satisfaction in his orderly retreat from "the old tempos," including his duties as

December 11, 1995, p. 46.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

editor in chief of the magazine and host of *Firing Line*, public lectures, skiing, sailing, and even the harpsichord. Still, ever gracious, he recorded his gratitude that “NR had a voice over the past 50 years in affirming the durability of American ideas.”⁶⁷

But that was far from the last word from the master of words. In a November 2007 interview, he remarked that the “conservative revolution” had “peaked” with Ronald Reagan’s victory in 1980. Since then and even before, he said, conservatism had forgotten the libertarian message of Albert Jay Nock’s *Our Enemy, the State*, “the consequences of which we have yet to pay for.” While it is not fair to say that we have lost the war against the welfare state, Buckley argued, “it is correct to say that it’s a war that we need to continue to fight and concern ourselves with.”⁶⁸

Approaching the end and knowing it, Bill Buckley still managed to write not one but two little books: memoirs about the two most influential conservative politicians of the 20th century, Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan.

In *Flying High*, Buckley concentrates on the 1960s when Goldwater’s forthright enunciation of conservative ideas inspired thousands of young people to enter and stay in politics. The book is Buckley’s fond farewell to a politician who, refusing to compromise his principles, offered a stirring profile in courage and candor.

The Reagan I Knew includes private letters, recorded exchanges, and personal reminiscences on issues such as the INF Treaty (Reagan kept reassuring Buckley that he had not gone soft on Communism) and Supreme Court nominees (Buckley urged the nomination of Robert Bork). Missing is Reagan’s warm “Happy Birthday” letter to Buckley, dated November 24, 1994, less than three weeks after the former President had informed

the American people that he had Alzheimer’s. “As I get on in years and reflect back on those individuals who have meant the most to me throughout my lifetime,” Reagan wrote, “I am grateful for you and the many ways in which you have touched my life. Nancy and I are blessed to know you and you a friend.”⁶⁹

While it is not fair to say that we have lost the war against the welfare state, it is correct to say that it’s a war that we need to continue to fight and concern ourselves with.

Buckley 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.” Because of his life and work, says National Review Online editor Kathryn Lopez, “conservatives will never be...lost in the wilderness.”⁷⁰

William F. Buckley Jr.’s vision of ordered liberty shaped 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.

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⁶⁷ William F. Buckley Jr., Remarks at NR’s 50th Anniversary Dinner, October 6, 2005, *National Review*, December 19, 2005, pp. 18, 20.

⁶⁸ Bill Steigewall, “William F. Buckley—A Nov. 14, 2007 Interview,” at Townhall.com.

⁶⁹ Ronald Reagan to William F. Buckley Jr., November 24, 1994, Buckley–Reagan Correspondence, Offices of *National Review*. The letters have now been added to the Buckley Papers in the Sterling Library at Yale University.

⁷⁰ Daniel Oliver, “Bill Buckley: A Life ‘On the Right,’” remarks delivered at The Heritage Foundation’s 31st annual Resource Bank meeting, April 24, 2008, reprinted in *The Insider*, Summer 2008; Kathryn Lopez, “Gratitude,” *National Review Online*, November 26, 2008.