

William F. Buckley, Jr. on America's Heritage

October 20, 1999

INTRODUCTION

The irrepressible William F. Buckley, Jr. (1925–2008) was the renaissance man of modern American conservatism. He was the founder and editor in chief of *National Review*, a syndicated columnist, the host of *Firing Line* (TV's longest-running weekly program), the author of more than 50 books, and college lecturer for nearly five decades.

In "Heritage," an artfully crafted speech delivered to the Heritage Foundation in 1999, Buckley examines his own and America's heritage. His father, who was a friend of the Old Right libertarian author Albert Jay Nock, gave William Jr. his initial political education. Refining this heritage, Buckley recollects his own relationship with "the American legacy—opposition to unnecessary activity by the state." Even while defending limited government, Buckley grasps the need to embrace the "sovereign historical responsibility" to "protect the American people, and their government."

This in turn led the author of *God and Man at Yale* to consider another element of our political heritage,

Christianity. Buckley points to the explicit appeal to God in the Declaration of Independence, and consequently in the Constitution. Invoking Washington's admonitions about the necessity of religion for self-government, Buckley cites with studied care Martin Luther King's last sermons, noting that his holiday honors a Christian minister. "A bizarre paradox in the new secular order is the celebration of Dr. King's birthday, a national holiday acclaimed as the heartbeat of articulated idealism in race relations, conscientiously observed in our schools, with, however, scant thought given to Dr. King's own faith." Ever the gracious servant, Buckley saves Martin Luther King from his secular liberal exploiters.

Inspired by Founders John Adams and James Madison, who "had no...categorical illusions about the causes of human strife," Buckley remains a skeptic of virtue's political potency. Although the Founders expected at least some virtue in America, they never relied on it to further utopian schemes of government. Yet their belief in "right reason" inspires us.

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Buckley closes by proclaiming that “the attritions notwithstanding, our heritage is there”—in the optimistic “American sound,” in our cheerful-

ness, hopes, admonitions, and prayers. “To the end of its preservation, with reverence and gratitude, we dedicate ourselves.”

“Heritage”

William F. Buckley, Jr.

*Speech delivered in New York City on October 20, 1999, upon accepting
The Heritage Foundation’s Clare Boothe Luce Award*

My father was a friend of Albert Jay Nock who, silver-headed with a trim moustache and rimless glasses, was often at our house in Sharon, Connecticut. There, at age thirteen or fourteen, I scurried about, going to some pains to avoid being trapped into hearing anything spoken by someone so manifestly professorial. Most of what my father would relate about him—relate to me and my siblings—was amusing and informative, not so much about such Nockean specialties as Thomas Jefferson or Rabelais or the recondite assurances of the Remnant; but informative about him. I remember hearing that Mr. Nock had made some point of informing my father that he never read any newspapers, judging them to be useless and, really, *infra dignitatem*.

But one day my father stopped by at the little inn Mr. Nock inhabited in nearby Lakeville, Connecticut, to escort Mr. Nock to lunch, as arranged. Inadvertently my father arrived a half hour earlier than their planned meeting time. He opened the door to Mr. Nock’s quarters and came upon him on hands and knees, surrounded by the massive Sunday editions of the *New York Herald Tribune* and the *New York Times*. My father controlled his amusement on the spot, but not later, when he chatted delightedly with his children about the eccentricities of this august figure, this great stylist—my father preferred good prose to any other pleasure on earth, if that can be said credibly of someone who sired ten children. He thought Mr. Nock the most eloquent critic in America of, among

other things, the shortcomings of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

My father’s disapproval of FDR engaged the collaborative attention of my brother Jim. He was fifteen and had a brand new rowboat. He launched it after painting on its side a prolix baptismal name. He called it: “My Alabaster Baby, or To Hell With Roosevelt.” When father heard this, he instructed Jimmy immediately to alter the name. “He is the president of the United States:” my father said, no further elaboration on FDR’s immunity from certain forms of raillery being thought necessary; besides which, my father observed, his days in the White House were numbered.

Because that summer Wendell Willkie ran against FDR. My father went to the polls and voted for Willkie, thinking him a reliable adversary of America’s march towards war. A year later, in conversation with Mr. Nock, my father disclosed that he had voted for Willkie, thus departing from near-lifelong resolution never to vote for any political candidate. He now reaffirmed, with Mr. Nock’s hearty approval, his determination to renew his resolution never again to vote for anyone, having been exposed to the later Willkie who was now revealed—I remember the term he used—as a “mountebank.”

They are all mountebanks, Mr. Nock said. It was about that time that I began reading Albert Jay Nock, from whom I imbibed deeply the anti-statist tradition which he accepted, celebrated, and enhanced. One of his proteges, who served also as his literary executor,

was Frank Chodorov. He became my closest intellectual friend early in the 1950s. Chodorov accepted wholly the anarchical conclusions of Mr. Nock, though when we worked together, on the *Freeman* and at *National Review*, Mr. Chodorov temporized with that total disdain for politics that had overcome his mentor. Mr. Chodorov permitted himself to express relative approval, from time to time, for this or another political figure, notably Senator Robert A. Taft in 1952.

I remember, in the work of Nock and in the work of American historical figures he cited, the felt keenness of that heritage, the presumptive resistance to state activity. It was very nearly devotional in character. It was in one of his essays, I think, that I first saw quoted John Adams' admonition that the state seeks to turn every contingency into an excuse for enhancing power in itself, and of course Jefferson's adage that the government can only do something for the people in proportion as it can do something to the people. The ultimate repudiation of the institution was pronounced by a noted contemporary of Albert Jay Nock, his friend H. L. Mencken. He said apodictically that the state is "the enemy of all well-disposed, decent, and industrious men." I remember thinking that that formulation seemed to me to stretch things a bit far, and so began my own introduction into the practical limits of anarchy.

But the American legacy—opposition to unnecessary activity by the state—was from the start an attitude I found entirely agreeable, in my own thinking, and in my student journalism. And when *National Review* was launched I found myself in the company of thoughtful and learned anti-statists. Our managing editor, Suzanne LaFollette, had served as managing editor of the original *Freeman*, of which Mr. Nock was the founder and editor. That magazine, after several years, failed in the 1920s. In his memoirs Mr. Nock reported fatalistically that it was a journal that had had its day on earth, and should be, after four years, ready to phase out, even as, a generation later, there were those who thought it appropriate that the Mont

Pelerin Society, after twenty-five years, should end its life uncomplaining. And then too, Mr. Nock conceded retrospectively, there might have been failures in his own administration of the enterprise. "As a judge of talent:" he wrote in his recollection, "I am worth a ducal salary. As a judge of character, I cannot tell the difference between a survivor of the saints and the devil's ragbaby."

Max Eastman was also with us in 1955. Now a heated enemy of the state, the poet-philosopher-journalist had been a fervent communist. James Burnham, who was by this time questioning the authority of government even to outlaw fireworks in private hands on the Fourth of July, had been a leading Trotskyist. Frank Meyer was for some years a high official of the Communist Party in Great Britain and in America. His newfound antipathy to collectivist thought stayed with him to the very end. He was suffering terminally from his cancer, on that last Friday I visited with him in Woodstock. He told me hoarsely that he hoped to join the Catholic Church before he died, but was held back by that clause in the Creed that spoke of the communion of the saints, which he judged to be a concession to collectivist formulations. He overcame his misgiving the very next day after my visit, on Saturday, and died the following day, on Easter Sunday, at peace with the Lord who made us all equal, but individuated. And of course Frank Chodorov came to us after the resurrected *Freeman* folded. He had just published a book. Frank chose a subtle way of making his point about the undesirability of collectivism: He called his book, *Two Is a Crowd*.

HISTORICAL RESPONSIBILITY

How might we reconcile the American heritage of opposition to distorted growth in the state with the august, aspirant movement to which the Founding Fathers plighted their trust? The impulse to categorical renunciation, in the language of Mr. Nock and Frank Chodorov, ran up against what we at *National Review* deemed a sovereign historical responsibility in the

postwar years. It was to protect the American people, and their government—to protect the state, yes—from threats to its own existence. After the Soviet leaders had acquired the atom bomb, all the while reiterating a historical commitment to impose dominion over the whole world, the primary responsibility of our own state became at the very least coexistence, at best liberation. In the vigorous anti-communist enterprise we were joined by the most categorical anti-statists of the day, including Milton Friedman and Ayn Rand, even though to achieve our purposes meant alliances, military deployments abroad, and, yes, wars.

There would be no denying the relevance of John Adams' monitory words, because even as we developed the military and institutional strength necessary to face down, and eventually to cause to collapse, the communist aggressor, unrelated branches of government swelled. It was not only our defensive capabilities, military and paramilitary, that prospered. The contingencies of which Mr. Adams warned were everywhere inducing public-sector growth and government intervention, as for instance in university life after the first Soviet satellite. It was as if only federal dollars could attract twenty-year-olds to science. The momentum brought statist programs that all but took over graduate education, and we issued regulations in the tens of thousands, regulations that direct much of what we do, or keep us from doing what we otherwise would do. And today, while our military requirements are met with 3 percent of the gross national product, 21 percent of what we produce is commandeered by the federal government, in its feverish self-application of more and more lures and wiles, the better to seduce the voting public. There are those—I think of the late Murray Rothbard—who cried out against the politics of coexistence and liberation, but his perspective was so much the captive of an anti-statist obsession that his eyes squinted, and at the end he was incapable of distinguishing—he loudly boasted—between the leaders of the Soviet Union and the leaders of the United States. On this matter, in those frenzied days,

I counter-preached that the man who pushes an old lady into the path of an oncoming truck, and the man who pushes an old lady out of the path of an oncoming truck, are not to be denounced evenhandedly as men who push old ladies around.

APPEALING TO THE TRANSCENDENT

In college, in the late 1940s, I had remarked a general conformity by the majority of our faculty on the matter of state enterprise. Almost uniformly the scholars urged its expansion. I noted also what I thought the parlous direction of religious intellectual life, condescendingly treated, when it was not actively disdained. Was there—is there?—a nexus? Mr. Nock began his professional life as an ordained minister of God; but then, I remembered irreverently, at age forty suddenly (by contemporary account) left his wife and two sons to pursue his famous career as a dilettante scholar.

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The state got in his way, and we do not know whether God ever asserted himself. Although not combative on the religious question in his writings, Mr. Nock left the discerning to suppose that he had abandoned his sometime commitment to Christian dogma, though not to the secular transcription of the Christian idea, which is that all men are equal and born to be free. Whittaker Chambers said in passing that liberal democracy was a political reading of the Bible. Certainly we were cautioned very early, in theological thought, against coveting our neighbors' goods.

In my published reflections on the neglect of religion at Yale, I remembered, of course, the heritage of Christianity in the life of the country and of the university I had attended. That heritage was boldly proclaimed in the inaugural address of the scholar-historian who was president of Yale when I studied

there. Charles Seymour had said in 1937, “I call on all members of the faculty, as members of a thinking body, freely to recognize the tremendous validity and power of the teachings of Christ in our life-and-death struggle against the forces of selfish materialism.” It appears to me now, sixty years after he spoke those words, that we can lay claim to having defeated the immediate threat to which Mr. Seymour pointed (when he spoke, Hitler had only eight years to live). But what he called selfish materialism is something we need always to pray about, if we remember to pray.

In hindsight I note what may have been a careful circumlocution when the president of Yale, an American historian, spoke of the validity and power of the teachings of Christ in our life-and-death struggle. There is pretty wide support for the teachings of Christ, if we subtract from them that teaching which he obtrusively listed as the preeminent obligation of his flock, namely to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind. Most of the elite in our culture have jettisoned this injunction. We are taught in effect that what is important in Christianity is the YMCA, not the church.

I wonder whether this truncation—the love of God’s other teachings, the love of one’s neighbor—dis-membered from the love of God, is philosophically reliable? The old chestnut tells of the husband leaving a church service with downcast countenance after hearing a rousing sermon on the Ten Commandments. Suddenly he takes heart and, tapping his wife on the arm, says, “I never made any graven images!”

The Founders sought out divine providence in several perspectives, as they gathered together to mint the American legacy. They staked out a claim to the “separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God” entitled them. This tells us that, in their understanding, to assert persuasively the right of a people to declare their independence, something like a divine warrant is needed. The specific qualifications for such a warrant are not given—the signers were not applying for a driver’s license. Were they supplicants, appealing for divine favor? Or

is it a part of our heritage that they acknowledged a transcendent authority, whose acquiescence in their enterprise they deemed themselves entitled to? We do not find any answer to that in the Constitution. But the Declaration is surely the lodestar of the Constitutional assumption.

The second invocation asked “the Supreme Judge of the world”—they were not referring to the Supreme Court—to aver the “rectitude” of the fathers’ “intentions.” The appeal was to sanction the drastic action the signers were now taking, a declaration not only of independence, but of war. War against the resident authorities, with the inevitable loss of American lives. And, finally, the signers were telling the world that they proceeded to independence “with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence.” This was Thomas Jefferson’s variation on the conventional formulation, *Thy will be done*.

We had, then, a) an appeal to transcendent law, b) an appeal to transcendent modes of understanding national perspective, and c) an appeal to transcendent solicitude. We are reminded of the widening gulf between that one part of our heritage, thought critical by the signers, and the secularist transformation; the attenuations of it today in the feel-good Judeo-Christianity which, however welcome its balm, gives off less than the heat sometimes needed to light critical fires. We read the speeches of Martin Luther King Jr., whose life we celebrate while tending to ignore the essence of his ideals, the ideals acclaimed by him, as by Abraham Lincoln, as the ground of his idealism. A bizarre paradox in the new secular order is the celebration of Dr. King’s birthday, a national holiday acclaimed as the heartbeat of articulated idealism in race relations, conscientiously observed in our schools, with, however, scant thought given to Dr. King’s own faith. What is largely overlooked, in the matter of Dr. King, is his Christian training and explicitly Christian commitment. Every student is familiar with the incantation, “I have a dream.” Not many are familiar with the peroration. The closing words were, “and the glory

of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together." The sermon Martin Luther King preached at the Ebenezer Baptist Church three months before he was killed was selected by his votaries as the words to be replayed at his funeral. It closed, "If I can do my duty as a Christian ought, then my living will not be in vain." George Washington would not have been surprised by Dr. King's formulation. Washington admonished against any "supposition" that "morality can be maintained without religion." "Reason and experience," he commented, "both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle." Two centuries before the advent of Dr. King, George Washington wrote with poetic force a letter to the Hebrew congregation of Savannah on the divine auspices of intercreedal toleration. "May the same wonder-working Deity, who long since delivered the Hebrews from their Egyptian oppressors ... continue to water them with the dews of heaven and make the inhabitants of every denomination participate in the temporal and spiritual blessings of that people whose God is Jehovah."

The infrastructure of our governing assumption—that human beings are equal—derives from our conviction that they are singularly creatures of God. If they are less than that—mere evolutionary oddments—we will need to busy ourselves mightily to construct rationales for treating alike disparate elements of humanity which anthropological research might persuasively claim to be unequal. A professor newly appointed to Princeton has no problem with infanticide. Those who believe in metaphysical equality will resist any attempt to extend *Homo sapiens* to *Homo sapienter* by saying, What have such findings to do with the respect, civil and spiritual, that every American owes to every other American? The political turmoil of this year left us in moral incoherence. The most eloquent escapist summoned to make the case against removal, following the impeachment vote, was former Senator Dale Bumpers. In making his argument for the defendant, he acknowledged that the presidential behavior had been, to use his own words,

"indefensible:" and "unforgivable." What he meant by indefensible, it transpired, was "defensible." What he meant by unforgivable was—something that should be forgiven. In the absence of durable perspectives, language loses its meaning and reality slips through the mind's grasp.

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It is reassuring that our heritage, having finally excreted slavery and apartheid, appears to be in lively acquiescence on the matter of equality. We no longer suffer from civil encumbrances to the freedom to seek happiness, the search for which was held out to us in the Declaration as a birthright of the new republic. Yet the American Revolution was done entirely without the ideological afflatus that, a dozen years later, launched another revolution, this one symbolized by the guillotine. It never occurred to any of the signers to doubt the distempers Hamilton spoke of as an inevitable part of the human experience. On the most dramatic eve in American history, the night of the third of July 1776, John Adams was, as usual, writing a letter to Abigail. He had zero illusions about human frailty. On the contrary, his words seethed with both excitement and trepidation. "The furnace of affliction," he wrote solemnly, "produces refinement in states as well as individuals." But to inaugurate the new regime would require, as he put it, a "purification from our vices, and an augmentation of our virtues, or there will be no blessings." In France it was postulated that with the elimination of a social class, the wellsprings of human virtue would repopulate the land with a new breed. The succeeding revolution to that of the Jacobins came in Russia in the twentieth century. Its lodestar was the elimination of property, an end of which would bring on an end to the causes of human friction.

The Founders had no such categorical illusions about the causes of human strife. James Madison cherished the prospect of a favorable *balance* in human performance, but a balance it would always be: “As there is a degree of depravity in mankind which requires a certain degree of circumspection and distrust, so there are other qualities in human nature which justify a certain portion of esteem and confidence.” Note, *a certain portion* of esteem and confidence. He went on: “Republican government presupposes the existence of these [last] qualities in a higher degree than any other form. Were the pictures which have been drawn by the political jealousy of some among us”—he meant by the term jealousy, a resentful desire for others’ advantages—“faithful likenesses of the human character:” then “the inference would be that there is not sufficient virtue among men for self-government; and that nothing less than the chains of despotism can restrain them from destroying and devouring one another.”

The harvest of “jealousy,” to use Madison’s term, is everywhere, as he expected. In contemporary language, there is romantic jealousy; at street level, there is rivalry; at the national political level, jealousy strives to make public laws and practices.

Here, I think, susceptibility to the vices John Adams pleaded that we guard against is critically encouraged by the amendment that authorized unequal taxation, giving constitutional rise to jealous appetites that have taken redistribution to the level of confiscatory legislation. Mr. Nock described what he considered the single most ominous institutional development of his lifetime, namely, as he put it, the “substitution of political for economic energy as a means of self-aggrandizement.” It is tempting to build your house by enticing the legislature, rather than the market. Professor Hayek, looking back on the century he so singularly adorned, pointed to progressive taxation as the Achilles’ heel of self-government. Even as a consensus flourishes that property should be protected, a consensus withers on the definition of property, which becomes now that much of a citizen’s earnings left to

him, or to his estate, by sufferance of Congress. The Constitutional amendment that promises equal treatment under the law was succeeded irreconcilably by a one-sentence amendment that, fifty years later, authorized discriminatory taxation.

THE AMERICAN SOUND

In the 1950s, young American adults had the routine experiences—at college, after college, in the professional schools engaging business, law, medicine, the humanities. Those who got around to lifting their sights in search of perspective in politics had reason to wonder whether the infrastructure of marketplace thinking had been quite simply abandoned by the productive sector of the American establishment.

In the years immediately after the war the productive community, browbeaten by twelve years of the New Deal, by four years of *dirigiste* policies in a military-minded economy, by the socialist emanations of postwar Europe, was listless in the defense of its own values. Men of affairs are—men of affairs. They do not to linger over brewing consequences of intellectual and polemical torpor. I remember in senior year the excruciating experience of seeing in public debate an American businessman trying hopelessly to contend against hard-wired enthusiasts for statist activity. It was so also with the polished academic establishmentarians, who held out hoops at every trustees’ meeting, through which our men of affairs would jump, as if trained to do so from childhood. With distressing frequency those who upheld the heritage left the stage or studio exposed to humiliation by the poverty of their resources. It’s different now. We have substantially to thank for it the institution whose anniversary these lectures celebrate. What began as tinkertoy research grew in twenty-five years into the dominant think tank in the country.

The aim of The Heritage Foundation is to heighten economic and political literacy among those men and women whose decisions affect the course of the republic. In pursuit of this aim the Foundation had an exhilarating hour when Ronald Reagan was elected Presi-

dent in November of 1980. The new president found waiting for him in the White House three volumes of material designed to help him chart the course to take the nation back in the right direction. Of the suggestions enjoined on the new president, I am advised, 60 percent were acted upon (which is why Mr. Reagan's tenure was 60 percent successful).

The broader community of journalists, opinion-makers, and academics is hardly ignored. The masses of material generated by Heritage flow out into the major arteries of American thought. We rest more comfortable in the knowledge that high ideals have intoned their enduring pitch in the tumult of a century that strove mightily to inter the heritage of American idealism.

We have come to the end of our inquiry into the roots of American order, begun by Lady Thatcher who, in her talk on the theme of Courage, could hardly avoid autobiography. Clarence Thomas spoke about Character, which he has helped to define; Bill Bennett about Truth, of which he arrantly acknowledges the existence; and Steve Forbes about Enterprise, and who, without that spirit of enterprise supercharged, would undertake to compete for president?

So it has been: Michael Joyce on Self-Government, which he encourages in practical measures, year after year; Peggy Noonan on the subject of Patrio-

tism, which flows in hot poetry from her pen. And on with Midge Decter, George Will, and James Q. Wilson, Ed Meese and Father Neuhaus; Vaclav Klaus and Gary Becker celebrating Liberty and the Rule of Law; Newt Gingrich and Jeane Kirkpatrick clearly distinguishing between authority and authoritarianism, between responsibility and officiousness.

We comfort ourselves that right reason will prevail, that our heritage will survive. I close by summoning two injunctions. The first, the closing sentence of a letter from George Washington, again to a Hebrew congregation, in Newport, Rhode Island. "May the father of all mercies:" he wrote, "scatter light, and not darkness, upon our paths, and make us all in our several vocations useful here, and in His own due time and way everlastingly happy."

Two hundred years after Washington wrote these words, an American president, Ronald Reagan, closed his second inaugural address by describing what he called "the American sound." It is, he said, "hopeful, big-hearted, idealistic-daring, decent, and fair. We sing it still," he said. "We raise our voices to the God who is the author of this most tender music." We hear that sound, and call back to say that the attritions notwithstanding, our heritage is there. To the end of its preservation, with reverence and gratitude, we dedicate ourselves.