

Excerpts from *Strictly Right: William F. Buckley Jr. and the American Conservative Movement*

By Linda Bridges and John R. Coyne Jr.

A Rather Dramatic Man

An old friend of Bill Buckley's once observed, "You realize, he is a rather *dramatic* man." So his method of divesting himself of his stock in National Review, Inc. [in June 2004], was entirely in character.... Although many people knew the divestiture was coming, the actual ceremony was planned with a secrecy worthy of Blackford Oakes.... The new directors and a few out-of-towners were asked to save the date, but weren't told why. Three dozen other colleagues and former colleagues were invited *by telephone ... the day of the party*. These are busy people—journalists, presidential speechwriters, lawyers—but the only ones who didn't come were those who were unavoidably in places like Switzerland or Seattle. (pp. 1-2)

Buckley's New Magazine

From the start, [*National Review*] was deliberately eclectic in its choice of editors and contributors. There would be room for adherents of every major strand of right-wing thought: libertarians and Burkeans, free-marketeers and Southern Agrarians, Madisonians and European monarchists.... As *NR*'s second publisher, William A. Rusher, would later put it, Buckley's "getting all these lions, tigers, and bears to lie down with each other, in the name of battling liberalism, was an immense accomplishment." (pp. 41-42)

Purists vs. 'Maneuverers'

The debate between [*NR* editors James Burnham] and [Willi] Schlamm during the 1956 campaign had put in black and white a crucial issue for those who would apply political philosophy to the real world. After the political process has done its initial sifting, do you go for what Buckley would come to call the "rightwardmost viable candidate," even if "rightwardmost" in the case at hand is barely right of center? ... Is giving your support to a candidate who is in no real sense a conservative diluting your principles? Or since, as [Whittaker] Chambers put it, "to live is to maneuver," are we better off supporting the Republican candidate, however unappealing? These are questions that *NR* and its editors, writers, and readers would face again and again over the next decades—indeed, as much today as ever. (pp. 64-65)

Don't Kill the Jokes

Wednesday morning Bill would start by writing his column. One of the present authors, her first summer with the magazine, went to Bill one such morning to ask him to autograph a book for a friend back home. Sure, he said. But then, handing her his just-typed column, he said, "Cut a hundred words out of that—but don't kill any of the jokes." Trembling, she sat down to do so. Her cuts passed the test. (p. 133)

Goldwater in '64

Johnson ... was going to be virtually unbeatable in November. Whoever the Republicans nominated was doomed to a kamikaze run against a ghost. Goldwater knew it; at some level most of us who worked for him knew it. And yet to be young and a conservative in 1964 was very heaven. We had a candidate who actually stood for something other than business as usual. We wore our AuH₂O pins proudly, and we bought our copies of *The Conscience of a Conservative* and extras to give away (it eventually sold three and a half million copies). We cheered when Goldwater stood up at the Republican Convention at the Cow Palace in San Francisco and said, "I would remind you that extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice. And let me remind you also that moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue." (p. 83)

The Early Days of *Firing Line*

Buckley was sometimes accused of incivility—in not being more deferential to the old and nearly blind [Norman] Thomas; in the deliberate provocativeness of his brief introductions of his guests ("[David] Susskind is a staunch liberal. If there were a contest for the title of Mr. Eleanor Roosevelt, he would unquestionably win it"). But there was always serious substance in the conversation—on Vietnam and the Communist threat generally with Thomas and [Staughton] Lynd; on affirmative action with James Farmer, founder of the Congress of Racial Equality; on HUAC [the House Un-American Activities Committee] with John Henry Faulk, who claimed to have been victimized by the Committee. (p. 96)

Buckley's 'Commando Raid'

Kevin Phillips ... had studied the 1965 mayoral race and now pointed to Buckley's strong showing as evidence of a rich new source of Republican votes. The Buckley candidacy had demonstrated that working-class and middle-class ethnic Americans who had traditionally given their votes to the Democratic Party were desperately looking for somewhere else to go as the Democrats moved left.... William Gavin, one of Richard Nixon's first speechwriters, puts it this way: "Bill Buckley's campaign was like one of those daring commando raids into enemy territory in which it is discovered that many in the captive population are on our side, but not yet strong enough to revolt. By the time Nixon made the invasion itself in 1968, a lot of other things had happened that dictated when and where and how he would exploit what Bill had found. But Bill brought back the intelligence." (p. 127)

Verdict on the Nixon Presidency

And was the Nixon presidency an unmitigated disaster? As we've said, the most important charge given to Richard Nixon was to calm the nation after the near civil war of the Sixties. He did this in his own way, drawing all the high emotion and hatred of a decade into himself and his administration. And then, in the final explosion that he himself was primarily responsible for igniting, he cleared the air of a decade's worth of hatred and bad feeling. That explosion destroyed his presidency ... But it also cleared the way for a new conservative synthesis. (pp. 161-162)

When Buckley Took the NR Staff to Russia

Pat [Buckley, Bill's wife] was quoted in the press after our return as saying, "I would have killed for celery." When asked how the trip was, she replied, "Bleak. I was bleak, the Russians were bleak, the weather was bleak. Bleak, bleak, bleak." For the rest of us, though, it was a tremendous adventure. We didn't learn anything substantive about Soviet Communism that we didn't already know, but we accumulated a wealth of images that haven't faded to this day: Red Square with St. Basil's Cathedral at night, lit up like the set of *Boris Godunov*; the pickled corpse of V. I. Lenin, evil incarnate, and the goose-stepping soldiers guarding him ... There was the museum in Kaliningrad, where the guide invited Bill to play something on the piano; he chose "Old Black Joe," and we weren't sure whether he was thinking only of Stephen Foster's politically incorrect character or also of Stalin. (p. 180)

Reagan: Our Guy

For most of us at *NR*, Reagan wasn't just the best available candidate. He was *our guy*, the way Barry Goldwater had been. We hadn't forgotten Bill's warning after the fall of Spiro Agnew: "This tendency to anthropomorphize our ideals is an American habit that can get us, indeed has just now gotten us, into deep trouble." But in Reagan's case, as *NR* put it editorially, "He has been our favorite politician for roughly as long as we have been his favorite magazine." On October 28, Priscilla [Buckley, Bill's elder sister] invited the whole editorial staff to her apartment to have dinner and watch the debate together. We were as nervous as parents whose son had been chosen class valedictorian. (p. 218)

Buckleys, Father and Son

One notable feature of [a] Heritage Foundation award dinner was the identity of Bill's introducer. Ed Feulner had asked Christopher Buckley to do the honors, and he did so with his usual wit and panache. Chris concluded his remarks about his father: "I've watched the President of the United States hang a medal around his neck and call him a hero. I've listened as Cardinal O'Connor ... addressed him in a room crowded with important prelates and called him 'the jewel in the crown of American Catholicism.' And I have heard my mother say one thousand times, 'Your father is impossible.' And you know, they were *all* right." (p. 303)

What if Bill Buckley Had Decided to Be a Playboy?

In one of the more unusual reviews of *Miles Gone By*...veteran journalist Dan Seligman proposed a thought experiment: Suppose the young Bill Buckley had decided to be a playboy instead of working so hard and spending so much money to keep *National Review* afloat. Would there have been a conservative movement as we know it? (Our own genuine playboy friend, Taki Theodoracopulos, e-mailed one of the present authors the day after Bill's 80th birthday party. "When the speakers were praising Bill," Taki wrote, "I told my neighbor, Nancy Kissinger, that what I've always hated about him was that he was so good looking and yet so monogamous. Mrs. Kissinger looked puzzled. Then she laughed. She understood that people like me envy people like Bill not for their intellectual achievements, but for their ability not to be playboys.") (pp. 327-328)

To schedule an interview with the authors, please contact Kristen Schremp at Kristen@kaspublicity.com or 703.928.5527