

## What would Buckley do?

Joe Feuerherd | Aug. 28, 2009



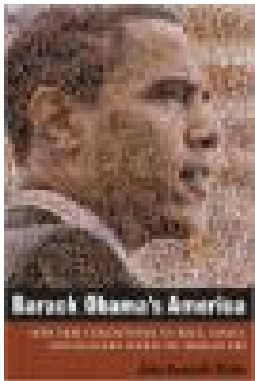
William F. Buckley Jr. (CNS/Reuters)

In *Losing Mum and Pup* Christopher Buckley recalls his father's funeral planning. If still famous when I die, William F. Buckley Jr. instructed his son, have the funeral at St. Patrick's Cathedral.

It was a majestic Mass. Henry Kissinger provided one tribute, Christopher Buckley another.

“José Martí famously said that a man must do three things in life: write a book, plant a tree, have a son,” Christopher eulogized. “I don’t know that my father ever planted a tree. Surely whole forests -- enough to make Al Gore weep -- were put to the ax on his account. But he did plant a great many seeds, and many of them, grown to fruition, are here today. Quite a harvest that.”

One suspects Buckley -- founder of *National Review*, author of more than 50 books, host of the first combative political face-off television program, and Catholic crafter of a conservative movement that dominated U.S. politics for two-plus generations -- would have appreciated the sendoff. But if it is a tragedy for a parent to survive a child, then Buckley's death was a blessing. For in less than nine months, with the election of Barack Obama, the final nails were being hammered into the conservative movement he fathered. Bereft of ideas, facing a demographic tidal wave, and scornful of the economic concerns of the largely Catholic “Reagan Democrats” who were key to the Republican Party's success, the once mighty American conservative political movement Buckley husbanded lies in ruins, its base reduced to an aging core of white Protestant Southerners.



BARACK OBAMA'S AMERICA: HOW NEW CONCEPTIONS OF RACE, FAMILY,

## AND RELIGION ENDED THE REAGAN ERA

By John Kenneth White

Published by University of Michigan Press, \$27.95

In *Barack Obama's America: How New Conceptions of Race, Family, and Religion Ended the Reagan Era*, Catholic University of America political scientist John Kenneth White describes the new reality: "Today the political demography that gave Nixon, Reagan and both Bushes the presidency -- that is, near-lockstep Southern support and backing among suburban whites who were married, divided their religious loyalties between some variant of Protestantism and Roman Catholicism, and had kids living at home -- has changed dramatically. With each passing year, the Republican share of the presidential vote has declined to the point where old rules are again about to be broken."

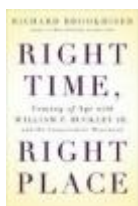
White quotes Minnesota Republican Gov. Tim Pawlenty, a likely 2012 presidential aspirant, making an obvious point: "We cannot be a majority governing party when we essentially cannot compete in the Northeast, we are losing our ability to compete in Great Lakes States, we cannot compete on the West Coast, we are increasingly in danger of [not] competing in the Mid-Atlantic States, and the Democrats are now winning some of the Western states."

Political parties exist for one reason: to win elections. That requires a politics of addition -- bringing together different constituencies with varied interests. By narrowing the focus of their outreach to Catholics in the regions Pawlenty cites to rhetoric on the "social issues" -- abortion, gay marriage, "death panels" -- today's conservative party, the Republicans, have abandoned Buckley's grand project.

The remains of the conservative movement seem increasingly tied to what columnist Kathleen Parker, herself a former *National Review* contributor, calls the "South's worst ideas."

### Let in on a secret

To political junkies coming of age in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, Buckley represented celebrity journalism of an altogether different ilk than that offered elsewhere. In *Right Place Right Time: Coming of Age with William F. Buckley Jr. and the Conservative Movement*, Richard Brookhiser, senior editor of *National Review*, recalls the growth of the conservative movement.



### RIGHT PLACE RIGHT TIME: COMING OF AGE WITH WILLIAM F. BUCKLEY JR. AND THE CONSERVATIVE MOVEMENT

By Richard Brookhiser

Published by Basic Books, \$27.50

The pre-blog, pre-24/7 news cycle was many things -- more in depth, serious, self-consciously educationally minded than what we see, hear and read today. But it was also boring: *The New York Times* (the old grey lady), one-hour of local news followed by 22 minutes of Cronkite, Huntley and Brinkley, and later Chancellor. All of it oh-so-serious.

Sure, there were feisty tabloids. And on television, the ambush interviews of "60 Minutes" or the political satire of "Laugh-In" and later "Saturday Night Live" provided some relief. But to read *National Review* in those days was to be let in on a secret: Politics could be fun, sharp-elbowed public debate was interesting, ideas mattered. Buckley was *National Review*. "The only other magazine that was so personal was [Hugh Hefner's] *Playboy*,"

writes Brookhiser.

Buckley said things polite pundits did not. To an outraged *National Review* reader no longer wishing to receive the publication: "Dear Mr. Morris: Cancel your own goddamn subscription."

On drugs: "I think it is fair to say that the overwhelming majority of those who are against any reform in the present marijuana laws are, in fact, not in favor of the vigorous prosecution of the marijuana laws. In other words, they are opposed to their own children going to jail."

He jostled with Gore Vidal and Arthur Schlesinger, welcomed liberals and leftists to "Firing Line," and penned profiles and punditry not only in a thrice-weekly syndicated column but also in the pages of *Esquire*, *The New York Times Magazine* and *Playboy*. And there was something else: Subscribers to *National Review* were reading the strategy memos of the conservative counter establishment that would, with Reagan's election in 1980, claim dominant power in American politics for more than two decades.

Buckley popularized what would eventually be termed "fusionism," the melding of cultural conservatives (including, eventually, many blue-collar Catholics), hard-line anticommunists (*National Review* favored "rollback" not "containment" of the Soviet empire), and antigovernment advocates into a single movement. Every other week, *National Review* served as a meeting place for thousands of educated conservatives who heretofore did not know each other existed.

The assumptions of the postwar post-New Deal political culture, which had witnessed government action to end a great depression and win a great war, were liberal through and through, so much so that literary critic Lionel Trilling declared in 1950 that in "the United States at this time liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition."

It was in this environment that Buckley launched the magazine, which, according to its inaugural manifesto, would stand "athwart history, yelling Stop." It did so with style, sometimes sympathetic to but distinctly separate from the yahoos of the John Birch Society or the bizarre conspiratorialists of the Liberty League.

The magazine provided the platform by which the Ivy League alum who first captivated public debate with *God and Man at Yale* would recast American conservatism, a then-moribund political philosophy dominated by racists, anti-Semites, the quirky ("Dwight Eisenhower is a communist?"), and the quixotic ("get the U.S. out of the U.N.?). Significantly, if not surprisingly (in the 1950s, Buckley tried to purchase *Commonweal*), *National Review* was decidedly Catholic. "Catholicism," writes Brookhiser, "drenched the magazine."

All this, but to what end?

"Without Buckley, no *National Review*," syndicated columnist George Will told a *National Review* anniversary dinner. "Without *National Review*, no conservative takeover of the Republican Party; without that, no Reagan; without Reagan, no victory in the Cold War." Will's overly simplistic syllogism is an article of faith among movement conservatives, but it misses an essential element.

Buckley's Catholic faith provided him an understanding that today's political battles, however important or pitched, are not of ultimate importance. "Buckley was a Catholic before he was a conservative and that saved his conservatism from both narrowness and nostalgia," Fr. George Rutler told a two-and-a-half-day early summer conference on "The Catholic William F. Buckley Jr." (see accompanying story). (Rutler noted that Buckley found the *National Catholic Reporter* useful "as a source of wrong opinions on almost every subject.")

Such an outlook endeared Buckley even to those who didn't share his political views. E.J. Dionne, liberal columnist for *The Washington Post*, told the same gathering that he is "one of scores of liberals who have

always been soft, very soft, on William F. Buckley Jr.? Dionne recalled a previous column, written during the presidency of George W. Bush, in which he wrote: "My main criticism of Buckley is that he was far too effective on behalf of a movement that I think should be driven from power."

"The writings of Buckley through the 1950s assumed Catholicism," Joseph Bottum, editor of First Things, told conference attendees. "They took it as a place to stand and look outward on the world. They accepted it as the system of truth by which other things could be judged. Who speaks more about their eyeglasses than what they see through those eyeglasses? William F. Buckley, like much of his confident generation, was far more interested in evaluating what he saw, rather than describing the Catholicism that allowed him to see it."



Following his talk, Bottum took questions, one of particular significance. Who is the next William F. Buckley? Sensibly, Bottum deferred, noting that times and circumstances and the modern media culture require different approaches.

Which is, of course, true. And yet without another Buckley -- a skilled polemicist, pundit and organizer infused with Catholic sensibilities capable of transcending whatever the current debate might be -- the conservative movement in this country will grow increasingly narrow, increasingly nostalgic for an era that never really existed.

It cannot be a good thing for the country to have the political opposition to the current administration, and future administrations, captive to its largely white, overwhelming Protestant, and almost exclusively Southern political base. This is where the "birthers" (those who claim Obama is not native to the United States) and other kooks find solace. Buckley's great contribution was in drawing lines -- declaring that the anti-Semites and other fringe players could not be a part of the conservative movement.

The conservative movement needs another William F. Buckley Jr. So does the United States.

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