

The lives of two great men

NCR Staff | Sep. 1, 2009

Editorial

The "great man" theory of history -- the idea that individuals (mostly men) of high social, political, economic or scientific rank shape destiny -- has been largely eclipsed. There is much good in that. Today, the stories of the marginalized (such as women, persons of color, the disabled, laborers and farmers, slaves and soldiers, the poor) are now studied in a manner once exclusively reserved to kings and princes, presidents and prime ministers, the rich and famous.

And yet, we are reminded in this issue of NCR, great people do shape events. Edward Kennedy ([see story](#) [1]) and William F. Buckley ([see story](#) [2]) were two such individuals.

To be "great" does not, to be sure, mean to be always correct. Many in the Catholic community, for example, look at Kennedy's record on abortion and ask, what if the great liberal lawmaker had used his stature and abilities to promote legal protection to the unborn? He chose another course.

Likewise, today's sensible conservatives cringe when reading Buckley's early writings on the civil rights movement (for which he largely repented) or his affection for witch-hunting Sen. Joseph McCarthy (for which he never apologized).

No, greatness here is defined as maximizing talents and resources to achieve large aims in the public arena.

Thanks largely to Kennedy, millions of hard-working Americans earn a better wage than that they might otherwise have garnered, the disabled face fewer barriers than they did just a generation ago, hundreds of thousands of inner-city and rural kids get a decent meal before the school day begins, and the rights of minorities have been strengthened. Universal access to affordable health care may yet be his lasting legacy.

Meanwhile, Fr. George Rutler recently said that Buckley found the *National Catholic Reporter* "useful as a source of wrong opinions on almost every subject." While Buckley's notions of what represented the common good differed "on almost every subject" from ours, none should doubt that his influence saved American conservatism from its worst and most intolerant instincts. A not inconsiderable legacy, that.

Kennedy and Buckley are remembered for many things, not least for the gift of friendship they shared. Political foe Orrin Hatch, a conservative from Utah, counted Kennedy among his dearest friends; in his later years, Buckley grew close to former South Dakota Sen. George McGovern, and enjoyed convivial relationships for decades with such progressives as economist John Kenneth Galbraith and former ACLU president Ira Glasser.

Kinda makes one proud to be a Catholic.

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