

# William F. Buckley, longtime propagandist for US ultra-right, dies at 82

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The death of William F. Buckley, founder of the *National Review* magazine and long-time media publicist for the American political right, has prompted an outpouring of tributes and praise in the American press, out of all proportion to the significance and stature of its subject.

The encomiums for Buckley from the likes of William Kristol, David Brooks and George Will are predictable, but they seem unaware that in proclaiming Buckley their political mentor and forerunner, they demonstrate their own intellectual and political poverty.

If one examines Buckley's biography dispassionately, it is clear that he was a talented promoter of noxious, reactionary and anti-democratic ideas. He took the initiative to refurbish American conservatism in the early 1950s, at a time when the political right had been completely discredited by its ties to Nazism, fascism and the Great Depression.

For some 30 years, from the founding of *National Review* in 1955 to the rise of right-wing talk radio in the 1980s, Buckley was the most prominent advocate for what would become the dominant position within the American ruling class: opposition to any government effort to alleviate social distress; hostility to popular movements of the oppressed, whether in the United States or internationally; and a repudiation of the compromises made on both these fronts by the New Deal of the 1930s.

Buckley was put in a position to play this role because of his family's wealth and connections. His father, William F. Buckley, Sr., was a wealthy oilman with holdings in Mexico and Venezuela, who reportedly played a role in financing the Cristero rebellion in Mexico—a right-wing, Catholic Church-inspired revolt in reaction to the Mexican Revolution of 1911-1919.

These two themes—conservative Catholicism and hostility to social revolution—became the axis of Buckley's political life. After graduation from Yale in 1950, he enlisted in the Central Intelligence Agency, working as an undercover agent in Mexico reporting on left-wing student groups. His supervisor was E. Howard Hunt, then CIA station chief in Mexico City, later one of the organizers of the Watergate burglary that brought down the Nixon administration.

Buckley decided against a CIA career after his first book, *God and Man at Yale*, a memoir attacking the liberal proclivities of the university faculty, found a wide reception in right-wing circles and became a best-seller. He and his brother-in-law, L. Brent Bozell, published a 1954 polemic, *McCarthy and His Enemies*, which declared, "As long as McCarthyism fixes its goals with its present precision, it is a movement around which men of good will and stern morality can close ranks."

In *1955*, Buckley, launched magazine by his own money and that of other wealthy supporters, and enlisting such figures as the ex-Stalinist Whittaker Chambers and the ex-Trotskyist Professor James Burnham.

The standpoint adopted by the magazine, as the founder declared it, was "to stand athwart history, yelling, 'Stop!'" By this he meant not only opposition to then-dominant American liberalism, and to the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union, but hostility to the growth of progressive and revolutionary movements throughout the world.

Buckley packaged his ferocious anti-communism as the defense of the "free world" against totalitarian rule in Russia and China, making full use of the crimes of the Stalinist bureaucracy to discredit socialism. But his outlook was rooted in a class opposition to all genuine struggles for freedom and democratic rights on the part of the oppressed workers and peasants in the capitalist countries.

Thus, Buckley was an adamant opponent of the civil rights struggles in the American South, declaring, in a *National Review* editorial in 1957:

"The central question that emerges—and it is not a parliamentary question or a question that is answered by merely consulting a catalog of the rights of American citizens, born Equal—is whether the White community in the South is entitled to take such measures as are necessary to prevail, politically and culturally, in areas in which it does not predominate numerically? The sobering answer is Yes—the White community is so entitled because, for the time being, it is the advanced race."

Answering the charge that the Southern segregationists were defying the will of the majority of the American people, expressed in civil rights laws, executive orders by elected presidents, and the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, Buckley argued in favor of resistance:

"National Review believes that the South's premises are correct. If the majority wills what is socially atavistic, then to thwart the majority may be, though undemocratic, enlightened. It is more important for any community, anywhere in the world, to affirm and live by civilized standards, than to bow to the demands of the numerical majority. Sometimes it becomes impossible to assert the will of a minority, in which case it must give way; and the society will regress; sometimes the numerical minority cannot prevail except by violence: then it must determine whether the prevalence of its will is worth the terrible price of violence" (This whole passage was cited by *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman in his recent book, *The Conscience of a Liberal*).

This apologia for violence against demands for the abolition of Jim Crow came at the opening of an increasingly bloody decade that

included the beating of Freedom Riders, the murders of Medgar Evers, Schwerner, Chaney and Goodman, Viola Liuzzo, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and dozens of others. Buckley's only concession to criticism of this defense of racial oppression was to suggest that uneducated whites as well as blacks could be denied the vote.

Despite—or perhaps because of—this identification with the last-ditch defenders of Southern segregation, Buckley enjoyed increasing prominence as the media spokesman for the American right, beginning a syndicated newspaper column, “On the Right,” in 1962, and a weekly television interview program, “Firing Line,” in 1966, which ran for 33 years. He enthusiastically backed the campaign of Senator Barry Goldwater, who won the Republican presidential nomination in 1964 only to lose in a landslide to Democrat Lyndon Johnson.

To preserve his role as the “respectable” right-wing alternative in official political circles, Buckley was careful to distance himself from the more deranged segments of the ultra-right. *National Review* conducted a public campaign against the John Birch Society, whose founder accused President Eisenhower, General George Marshall, and other pillars of the US political establishment of being conscious agents of a world communist conspiracy.

Buckley also insisted, at least in public, on a break with anti-Semitism, which discredited the ultra-right in the wake of the Holocaust. He was not so careful about fascism, at least in its less populist form as espoused in Spain by Generalissimo Francisco Franco, whom Buckley repeatedly championed.

“General Franco is an authentic national hero,” he wrote in a “Letter from Spain,” published in his magazine, and widely quoted in press obituaries last week. “It is generally conceded that he above others had the combination of talents, the perseverance, and the sense of righteousness of his cause, that were required to wrest Spain from the hands of the visionaries, ideologues, Marxists and nihilists that were imposing on her, in the thirties, a regime so grotesque as to do violence to the Spanish soul, to deny, even Spain's historical identity.”

Buckley defended other right-wing dictators whose regimes were aligned with US foreign policy, including Augusto Pinochet of Chile. He criticized the 1998 effort to bring criminal charges against Pinochet in Spain as “an act of ideological malice” and praised the military dictator for ousting Salvador Allende, “a president who was defiling the Chilean constitution and waving proudly the banner of his friend and idol, Fidel Castro.”

Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, Buckley served more as a right-wing gadfly than an actual influencer of policy. He ran for mayor of New York City in 1965, winning 13 percent of the vote as the Conservative Party candidate. He participated in frequent debates with liberals on college campuses and was a diehard defender of the Vietnam War. In one notorious live appearance on ABC television during the 1968 Democratic National Convention, he was paired with liberal author Gore Vidal, whose verbal sallies so infuriated Buckley that he threatened violence, shouting, “Now listen, you queer, stop calling me a crypto-Nazi or I'll sock you in the goddamn face.”

Only the swing to the right in the American ruling elite, from the mid-1970s on, brought Buckley from the fringes of official politics into its center. Ronald Reagan was an admirer of Buckley and longtime reader of *National Review*, and with the Reagan administration, a whole layer of right-wing advocates trained in the Buckley school entered political office and rose to top positions in the media as well.

Buckley was not, however, entirely in step with some elements of the “Reagan coalition,” including the Christian fundamentalists who were, in many cases, virulently anti-Catholic, and the neo-conservatives, many of them Jews and former liberals who had supported the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

His orientation was always towards the worldwide struggle against social revolution, which he identified with the Soviet Union, and after the collapse of the USSR he evinced less interest in a militaristic foreign policy and more sympathy for the isolationism once traditional in the American right. He expressed regret that the conservative coalition was no longer held together by “the galvanizing thread that the Soviet Union provided. And for that reason I think conservatism has become a little bit slothful. It could be very decisive when the alternative was the apocalyptic reordering presented by the Soviet Union.”

Buckley eventually disavowed the longstanding blockade of Cuba after the collapse of Castro's Soviet sponsor, on the grounds that the island nation no longer represented a security threat to the United States. He showed little enthusiasm for the Bush administration's invasion and conquest of Iraq, observing that the “insurrectionists in Iraq can't be defeated by any means that we would consent to use.”

The tributes from the right-wing pundits give a glimpse of the social milieu which produced Buckley and which remained a powerful source of attraction for corrupt elements of the aspiring middle class. David Brooks, now a *New York Times* columnist, gushes: “To enter Buckley's world was to enter the world of yachts, limousines, finger bowls at dinner, celebrities like David Niven and tales of skiing at Gstaad ... He showered affection on his friends, and he had an endless stream of them, old and young. He took me sailing, invited me to concerts and included me at dinners with the great and the good.”

Apparently there were limits to this affection, however. According to Timothy Noah, columnist for the online magazine *Slate*, “Christian piety and anti-communism were Buckley's twin pillars, the former to such an extent that Buckley ruled out David Brooks, his onetime protégé, as a possible editor of *National Review* on the grounds that Brooks was Jewish. Buckley wasn't willing to sacrifice *National Review*'s identity as a publication whose mission was at least partly theological.”

The depth of Buckley's embrace of reaction is summed up in another widely quoted remark in which he defined his conservative political philosophy as “tacit acknowledgment that all that is finally important in human experience is behind us.” It would be difficult to find a pithier summation of the obscurantism and hostility to the development of science, technology and human culture which characterize the right-wing world view.



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