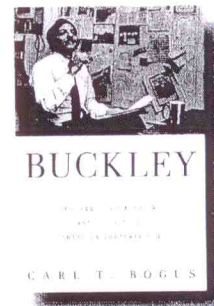


Buckley for the Masses

by Allen Mendenhall



Buckley: William F. Buckley Jr. and the Rise of American Conservatism
by Carl T. Bogus
Bloomsbury Press

OVERLY COMMITTED as he was to supposedly universal political ideals and to the spread of American liberal democracy throughout the world, William F. Buckley, Jr., was not my kind of conservative. He could be tactless and cruel, as when he wrote in an obituary for Murray Rothbard that “Rothbard had defective judgment” and “couldn’t handle moral priorities.” Buckley then trumpeted some unflattering anecdotes about Rothbard before likening him to David Koresh. Yet, despite such tantrums and vendettas, something in the way he conducted himself—his showy decorum, flaunted manners, and sophisticated rhetoric—appealed to me.

Carl T. Bogus, an American law professor, seems to share my qualified respect for Buckley, despite disagreeing with him on important political and theoretical issues. “I should tell the reader up front,” Bogus warns, “that I am a liberal and thus critical—in some instances, highly critical—of Buckley’s ideology.” Yet, adds Bogus, “I admire William F. Buckley Jr. enormously.”

Unlike bobble-headed television personalities and think-tank sycophants, Bogus does justice to his subject, treating Buckley’s ideas evenhandedly. “[D]isheartened by the present state of partisan animosity,” he argues that one solution “is to take opposing ideas seriously.” Indeed, Bogus

not only takes Buckley seriously but credits him for having changed America’s political realities.

The book focuses on what Bogus deems the “creation of the modern conservative movement”—namely, the years between 1955 and 1968—but attends as well to events before 1955 that served as formative influences on Buckley. Hence Bogus devotes much space to explaining the characteristics of the conservative movement before the rise of *National Review* in order to suggest that Buckley transformed the movement into something new and dynamic. Toward that end, he assesses the significance of William Howard Taft and Sen. Robert Taft, publications such as *The American Mercury*, and journalists like H.L. Mencken. All of this is good by way of introduction, if a little humdrum for those already familiar with the subject.

At points Bogus lapses into cliché, as when he declares that “Conservatism today is a three-legged stool . . . based upon libertarianism, religious conservatism, and neoconservatism.” This rhetorical resurrection of fusionism lacks both nuance and precision even as it invites tremendous questions about definitions: What exactly is meant by “libertarian,” “religious conservative,” and “neoconservative”? The average American “conservative,” informed by FOX News and Rush Limbaugh, will, as a matter of course, have developed odd notions about who represents which category in this triad. But Bogus leads the reader to believe that the meaning of such

terms is not fraught with confusion and highly contested.

Bogus’s claim that “Buckley was himself a libertarian, a religious conservative, and a neoconservative” will come as news to libertarians and admirers of Buckley alike. The terms may overlap, but the political beliefs they represent consist of too many ideas that are mutually exclusive.

Conservatives with an historical sense will be surprised and perhaps annoyed by Bogus’s frequent grandiose claims—for example, that James Burnham was “the first neoconservative,” or that the “conservative movement was born on November 19, 1955.” That remark, besides being silly, would seem to undermine the very meaning of the word *conservative*, as it is impossible for the birth of a political philosophy to entail preservation or restoration. To make matters worse, Bogus overstates the friction between Buckley and Russell Kirk. “Though Buckley admired Kirk,” Bogus explains, “Kirk surely understood that he could never prevail within the councils of *National Review* for the simple reason that Buckley was a libertarian.” This opinion is repeated elsewhere: “Kirk championed a form of conservatism that Buckley quite distinctly did not favor. Buckley was himself a libertarian, even if he had not yet so described himself.”

Buckley was hardly a libertarian, however liberally the word is defined, let alone an advocate for “hard-edged libertarianism.” (Bogus bases this claim on the title of Buckley’s recklessly named book *Hap-*

py Days Were Here Again: Reflections of a Libertarian Journalist.)

Buckley did, it is true, have trouble recruiting Kirk to *National Review*, in part because, as Bogus points out, Buckley had unfavorably reviewed Kirk's *Academic Freedom* in another publication, just before the launch of NR. Buckley and Kirk also disagreed, often vehemently, about matters of public policy. Yet the two men got along, and not just because their relationship was "symbiotic," the adjective Bogus uses to suggest that they benefited financially from their professional association. In fact, Russell Kirk and William Buckley, appreciating a cultivated intellect, respected each other. Whatever differences existed between them were not so extreme as to harden into insurmountable disdain or contempt. Modern conservatism re-

quired both the scholarship of Kirk and Buckley's animated spokesmanship, and both men knew it.

Without Kirk, there would be no conservative canon, no intellectual inheritance for the conservative movement; without Buckley, no animated spokesman for conservatism. And without the threat of communism and the Cold War, there would be no motive for collective action for any who might have considered themselves champions or defenders of conservatism. That is the standard narrative of the conservative movement, and Bogus more or less sticks to it. The notable exception is the attention paid to Buckley's obsessive purges, his relentless attempts to narrow the scope of conservatism to fit his own constricted definition. Bogus discusses at length the concerted efforts of *National Review* edi-

tors to stigmatize Ayn Rand and the Objectivists, Robert Welch and the Birchers, and, of course, Rothbard and other libertarian purists. Bogus ignores the paleo-conservatives altogether.

Although fair in its treatment of an ideological rival, *Buckley* is neither an original nor an instructive book, though it is ultimately saved by William Buckley himself, a delightful and intriguing figure—sometimes a blowhard, sometimes a dandy—who makes up in charisma what Bogus lacks in meticulousness. Yet Bogus's book deserves an audience: the politically unsophisticated, whose understanding of conservatism derives from Republican politicians and the media.

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The Long View

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