

The Cheshire Cat Conservative

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Peter Berkowitz on *Athwart History: Half a Century of Polemics, Animadversions, and Illuminations: A William F. Buckley Jr. Omnibus*. by Linda Bridges and Roger Kimball, eds.

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Linda Bridges and Roger Kimball, eds. *Athwart History: Half a Century of Polemics, Animadversions, and Illuminations: A William F. Buckley Jr. Omnibus*. Encounter Books. \$29.95. 518 Pages.

When not despising conservatism, progressives tend to frown upon or simply ignore it. This is odd.

After all, conservatism in America seeks to safeguard what is best in the American tradition. It cherishes individual liberty and seeks to limit government to secure it. It places a special priority on religious and economic freedom, for their own sake, certainly, but also because it believes that they secure the foundations for freedom generally. It takes a keen interest in the virtues that must be exercised to maintain a free society, and in the institutions — families, schools, civic associations, religious communities — that foster them. It celebrates honor, duty, and country. It insists on the practical relevance of philosophical writings about politics from Locke, Madison, Burke, and Tocqueville to Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, and Maimonides, familiarity with which all educated people should desire. And it celebrates the great achievements in literature, music, and the fine arts.

New conceptions of culture and novel modes of education have arisen, of course. But that conservatism is out of step with fashionable opinion is not an adequate explanation for the lack of interest in it among well-educated progressives, let alone their contempt for it. Officially, at least, fashionable opinion prizes novelty, dissenting voices, and the variety of choices about how to live.

Nor do the right-wing rabble rousers, panderers, and hacks explain progressives' disregard or disparagement of conservatism. Politics in a free society inevitably draws forth, on both sides of the aisle, not only devoted public servants but also knaves and fools, scoundrels and crooks, and a colorful cast of characters in between. Who among progressives would wish to have their political sensibility judged exclusively or primarily by the ethical lapses of Charles Rangel, the nightly vituperation of Keith Olbermann, and the behind-the-scenes machinations of Harry Reid and Nancy Pelosi?

And notwithstanding reactions bordering on the hysterical by leading progressive commentators, the recent upsurge of populist energies crystallized in the Tea Party movement cannot explain progressive scorn and indifference toward conservatism. For one

thing, such attitudes are long-standing among progressives. For another, only a year before the first Tea Party rally was held, few if any were the progressive voices that expressed the slightest discomfort with the grassroots organizing, massive crowds, cultish chanting, and ardent proclamations of the dawn of a glorious new era that marked candidate Obama's 2008 presidential campaign.

Whatever the causes of its enmity for or lack of interest in conservatism, the consequences for the progressive mind are unfortunate. It is cut off from a vital root of the American political tradition. It is impelled to view a substantial portion of American citizens as lost souls, unruly children, or un-American menaces. And it is deprived of a perspective from which it can more effectively observe the exaggerations and blind spots that typify its own point of view.

One excellent way to begin to acquire an education in the conservative tradition in America is to delve into the writings of William F. Buckley, Jr. (1925–2008), a central figure as a young man in the reawakening of self-consciously conservative thought in the 1950s and, over the course of the next 60 years, the single most influential figure in the renaissance of conservative thinking in America. Conservatives too would benefit from a reconsideration of Buckley's writings, particularly his seemingly effortless reconciliation of conservatism's social conservative and libertarian camps which, having achieved a *modus vivendi* in the Reagan years, have been at loggerheads since the decline of the Bush administration's fortunes. A new reconciliation is crucial to any politically viable conservative movement in America.

Buckley was larger than life. He was born to a wealthy, patrician family. In 1951, at a time when conservative voices were few and disorganized, the 25-year-old Buckley published his first book, *God and Man at Yale*. A withering critique of the dogmatic atheism and reflexive progressivism (Buckley called it statism or collectivism) that, he argued, prevailed among his alma mater's faculty and which was inscribed in Yale's curriculum, the book catapulted him to national fame. In 1955 he founded *National Review*, which became the principal organ of conservative ideas in America. The magazine brought together conservatives of various persuasions, crafting a synthesis of traditionalists, libertarians, and national security hawks that would reach a culmination in 1980 with the election of Ronald Reagan as the 40th president of the United States. In addition to serving as *National Review*'s editor until 1998, Buckley wrote three newspaper columns a week for several decades and for much of that time was also on the road upwards of two months a year lecturing. And for more than 30 years, from the mid-1960s to the late 1990s, he hosted *Firing Line*, to this day the most thoughtful and entertaining tv show ever devoted to the debate of political ideas and public policy.

And that's not nearly all. Buckley ran for mayor of New York City in 1965, losing in a landslide to John Lindsay but in the process disseminating a rich assortment of ideas for conservative reform. He was an expert sailor and played piano well enough to perform with symphony orchestras. His more than 50 books include an exuberant account of his mayoral campaign, volumes about sailing the Atlantic and Pacific, a dizzying exposition of his daily adventures

called *Overdrive* (1983), numerous collections of previously published articles, two volumes analyzing the McCarthy era, reminiscences of Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan, eleven novels chronicling the exploits of cia agent Blackford Oakes, and another eight works of fiction. All the while Buckley and his beloved wife Pat, whom he married in 1950 and who died at age 80 in 2007, generously entertained, both at their Upper East Side apartment and their Connecticut home, a steady stream of young up-and-comers, National Review stalwarts, New York City intelligentsia, and distinguished public officials.

This collection of columns and essays was lovingly assembled by Linda Bridges, longtime managing editor of National Review, and Roger Kimball, coeditor and publisher of the *New Criterion*, president and publisher of Encounter Books, author of books on culture and education, and blogger extraordinaire. The book is a marvelous tribute to Buckley's journalistic achievement and an excellent introduction to the engaged and engaging conservative spirit. The sections by which the editors have organized the pieces give a good sense of the range of Buckley's interests and the focus of his concerns: from "Politics in Principle" and "Politics in Practice" to "Dealing with the Communist World" and "The Cold War at Home" to "The Raging Sixties" and "Manners and Morals."

The earliest of the essays, "Too Much to Take," appeared in *Human Events* on July 18, 1951. In it, the young Buckley impatiently rebuffs the advice to conservatives proffered by confident and perhaps even well-meaning Democratic sages about how they, conservatives, ought to act and what conservatism really is. That advice culminated in the exhortation to conservatives to accept the New Deal in letter and spirit and to make a positive contribution to public life by formulating a constructive set of proposals to improve the New Deal's efficiency and effectiveness. Buckley would have none of it. Instead, he proclaims that the Republican Party should rededicate itself to casting off government paternalism and to waging an effective fight against Stalinism.

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The most recent piece, "Inside Obama," was published on January 11, 2008, a month and a half before Buckley's death. As Obama was pulling ahead of Clinton in the Democratic primary, the 82-year-old Buckley wrote admiringly of the young senator's political gifts while criticizing incisively the wildly exaggerated powers Obama ascribed to government. These two essays, along with the more than 150 others included in the volume, display a fertile and indefatigable mind; an elegant stylist; a formidable polemicist; a loyal friend and loving husband, father, and brother; and a lover of liberty and the cultural inheritance that in America nourished it.

In a valuable preface, George Will credits Buckley with standing at the head of “the most important intellectual event of the twentieth century.” That event was “the revolt against the idea that vast, impersonal forces made a mockery of the illusion that we make meaningful choices about how we shall live.” Karl Marx was the most politically significant theoretician of the idea which crystallized in the 19th century that History was governed by iron laws; that it was moving toward a fixed destination ideally suited to human wants and needs; that the laws and destination could be rationally discerned by intellectuals; and that their special knowledge enabled intellectuals to aggressively intervene in politics to hasten History’s progress. Communism, the most lethal political ideology of all time, was also the most influential to subscribe to the idea of History. But the left-wing interpretation of liberalism in America — which, in the second half of the 20th century, came to be called liberalism simply but is more accurately labeled progressivism, as has become increasingly common in recent years — also subscribes to the idea of History, albeit a progressive version. Accordingly, it granted progressive intellectuals a privileged place to accelerate the pace at which humanity ineluctably develops toward progressive goals.

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Buckley rejected both the determinism implicit in American progressivism and the goodness of the destination that progressives celebrated as rational and inevitable. This was encapsulated in his famous manifesto in the debut issue of National Review, echoed in the title of Bridges and Kimball’s collection, in which Buckley declared that the task for conservatives is “to stand athwart history, yelling stop.” Of course Buckley did not mean that conservatives should devote themselves exclusively to obstructing progressive ambitions, much less undertake to return the nation to some golden era in the past. Such would have reflected a most unconservative failure to begin political deliberations with an understanding of the world as it is, and an abdication of the conservative responsibility to pursue prudent reforms calibrated to citizens’ material conditions, manners, and mores. It would also have been inconsistent with Buckley’s own enthusiastic embrace of the technological wonders and breakneck pace of modern life.

In other words, it was not history, but the interpretation of history as History, both the communist and progressive, to which Buckley summoned conservatives to yell stop. Particularly in the 1950s, this did mean vigorous, sometimes uncompromising, opposition to the then young New Deal. And it did involve a determination, futile though it would turn out, to reverse if not repeal it. Confusion about the conservative orientation toward the welfare and regulatory state, moreover, persists in some conservative circles long after the idea that it is the federal government’s responsibility to provide a social safety net and to regulate all kinds of economic activity has been absorbed into the nation’s shared values and understandings and entrenched in commercial life. The confusion is between reasonably restraining government’s growth in the spirit of the country’s founding principles, which is a

necessary and proper task, and shrinking government to pre-New Deal size, which is a snare and a delusion, and a break with the spirit of moderation embedded in the nation's constitutional order.

As the witty and literate essays in this volume abundantly demonstrate, Buckley's conservatism was grounded in the messy realities of everyday politics. At the same time, it focused on the goods at which politics aims as well as on the goods that transcend politics. Buckley's overriding political aim was to conserve freedom, the individual's freedom to pursue happiness and to take responsibility for his choices. While good in itself, political freedom was particularly to be cherished because it allowed individuals to devote themselves to those transpolitical goods, prominent among them family and faith, which Buckley never tired of arguing were essential to human happiness well understood.

It doesn't follow, as Buckley well knew, that government should therefore seek to impose correct beliefs about family and faith. Indeed, in the age of big government the chief challenge for conservatives is to ensure that government policy does not actively undermine families, which remain the principal and indispensable social unit, or weaken faith, a key source of moral education. Accordingly, conservatism, as explicated and embodied by Buckley, even after it abandoned the idea of reversing or repealing the New Deal, remained devoted to imposing limits, sometimes severe and sometimes overly severe, on government activity.

But Buckley's conservatism was rarely stodgy or stuffy. Even his reminiscence, appearing in the *Saturday Evening Post* in August 1968, of his original denunciation of the Beatles is written with a wide and mischievous smile:

I spent an evening — a very short evening — listening to one part of my son's collection. I found the noise quite scandalous. I remember a critic, writing for *National Review* after seeing Mr. Presley writhe his way through one of Ed Sullivan's shows, remarking that an extrapolation from the demure bumps and grinds of Frank Sinatra, on to the orgiastic b's and g's of Elvis Presley, suggested that future entertainers would have to wrestle with live octopuses in order to entertain a mass American audience. The Beatles don't in fact do this, I observed at the end of that brain-rattling evening, but how one wishes they did, and how this listener wishes the octopus would win. I proceeded to write a most unfortunate judgment. "Let me say as evidence of my final measure of devotion to the truth," said I in a newspaper column, "that the Beatles are not merely awful: I would consider it sacrilegious to say anything less than that they are God-awful. They are so unbelievably horrible, so appallingly unmusical, so dogmatically insensitive to the magic of the art, that they qualify as the crowned heads of antimusic."

Though his original judgment about the Beatles, as Buckley delicately concedes, was unfortunate, the spirit in which it was rendered is captivating.

Indeed, as Will observes, Buckley's conservatism proceeded from "the high spirits and sense of fun that should accompany a quickened sense that humanity had emancipated itself from fear of all determinisms." And it displays "the compatibility of seriousness, even occasional indignation, with an unfailing sense of merriment about the pleasures of intellectual combat."

In highlighting the ebullience of Buckley's conservatism, Will at the same time suggests something of its complexity and special challenge. In his invigorating Introduction, Roger Kimball refers to Buckley's "enlightened conservatism." The clarifying phrase contributes an important piece to the puzzle.

Buckley's conservatism is enlightened in several senses. It presupposes — not in the sense of philosophizing on the basis of, but in that of accepting with gratitude — the Enlightenment's leading moral and political principles. That is, with the Enlightenment, Buckley's conservatism admires people with independent minds who take responsibility for themselves and their families. And it embraces a politics devoted to individual freedom.

Buckley's conservatism is also enlightened in a more complex sense: It embodies a critique of Enlightenment excesses, particularly the unreasonable reliance of Enlightenment thinking on abstract reasoning about morals and politics. In this sense, Buckley's enlightened conservatism is more enlightened than much of actual Enlightenment thought and much of present day progressivism. Not that one finds much in the way of speculative thought or philosophical critique proper in Buckley. But in exploring the blessings of liberty, the hubris of progressivism, the evils of communism, the pleasures of music, the rewards of friendship and family, and the consolations of religion, Buckley sheds light on the limits of abstract reason in politics. Appreciating those limits is a rational imperative and a moral and political priority.

Finally, Buckley's conservatism is enlightened in the sense that it self-consciously reasons about what's worthy in our heritage and deserving of conservation. In its simplest form conservatism seeks to preserve inherited moral and religious beliefs and to pass them to the next generation. Buckley's conservatism confronts a more complex task. A crucial part of the American inheritance are the fundamental beliefs, practices, and institutions on which freedom rests. But freedom makes us distrustful of tradition, impatient with order, and dismissive of virtue, encouraging habits of heart and mind that threaten the conditions that sustain freedom.

Buckley reconciles liberty and tradition not by means of philosophical argument, but by rendering practical judgments that embody due respect for both. At this particular moment, progressives might find greatest profit in studying the case Buckley makes for individual liberty and the one he makes for tradition. And, at our current juncture, conservatives might derive greatest benefit from observing the spirit in which he so joyously combines them.

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