Celebrating William F. Buckley

From George Shadroui, a fresh angle on the phenomenon that was WFB.

by Bruce Bawer

On the evening of November 2, 1965, two days after my ninth birthday, my parents dressed me up in a jacket and tie and took me from our home in central Queens to what I suppose must have been a hotel ballroom somewhere in Manhattan. It was crowded – or at least by the end of the evening would be crowded – but somehow, we managed to secure seats at what appeared to be the center of the action, in proximity to people who, I was told, were leading figures in the candidate's mayoral campaign. In my recollection we sat there in the middle of that high-spirited crowd for hours (although, of course, given the vagaries of childhood memories, it may have been much less), my parents chatting amiably with the

campaign people while, every now and then, the crowd responded to election results with appropriate noises. We were, I understood, waiting for the candidate to arrive, and eventually, arrive he did, borne – and here again I rely on what may be a faulty memory – on the shoulders of a couple of his supporters. You would think he had won, given the cheery mood, but, as it happens, he had come in third. In fact he had never expected to win, telling a reporter during the campaign that by his own conservative estimate he would receive one vote, and replying to the question "What's the first thing you'll do if you win?" with an answer that became famous: "Demand a recount."

That was my first encounter with William F. Buckley. It was also my last. Though I would spend the first decade of my writing career contributing to conservative periodicals and counted many *National Review* writers as friendly acquaintances, somehow I never found myself in WFB's presence again. It's still something of a mystery to me how I ended up at that campaign headquarters on Election Night 1965: my parents were not politically active; indeed, they rarely if ever talked about politics. I do know that during the early 1960s my father, a lifelong New Yorker, had sensed that his beloved country and city were moving in disastrous directions, and I know that in the 1965 mayoral election he must have been appalled by both major-party candidates – John Lindsay, the glamorous but lightweight Republican congressman for an Upper East Side district that was described by Buckley as containing "probably the densest national concentration of vegetarians, pacifists, hermaphrodites, junkies, Communists, Randites, clam-juice-and-betel-nut eaters," and city comptroller Abe Beame, a dreary Democratic Party machine hack of the first water. Both were (for the day) extreme left-wingers, soft on crime, beholden to unions, pioneers in the art of pandering to identity groups, and enthusiasts for public housing, high taxation, generous welfare systems, and "urban renewal," that insane policy of replacing livable neighborhoods with hideous

housing projects.

They were, in short, devoted to policies that, in the view of people like my father (who turned out to be far more correct than they knew), would only drag New York further downhill. It was for this reason, obviously, that my father (in a move utterly out of character for him) decided to drag his wife and son to the election headquarters for Buckley, who had chosen to run against both Lindsay and Beame as the candidate of the three-year-old Conservative Party, explaining, in his magazine, *National Review,* that he wished to "give the people of New York an opportunity to vote for a candidate who consults without embarrassment, and who is proud to be guided by, the root premises of the Republican philosophy of government, the conservative philosophy of government." Only now does it occur to me that my father, a Manhattan internist with tony patients, had likely ended up at Buckley election headquarters that night as a result of an encounter with some member of the Buckley team with whom, during some medical consultation, he had shared his thoughts.

After that 1965 mayoral election, of course, both America and New York City went to hell in a handbasket. In the country at large, the Vietnam War led to intense social division; the era of hippies, LSD, and sexual license began, seemingly overnight; race riots destroyed Detroit, Watts, and other urban centers. Not until Ronald Reagan's presidency in the 1980s did the country seem to find its way at least partially back. Meanwhile, the New York City of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* transformed in the blink of an eye into the New York City of *Taxi Driver;* Lindsay proved a disastrous mayor, and Beame, who ended up succeeding him in 1974, was, if anything, even worse. Ed Koch, mayor from 1978-89, brought a degree of relief, but true recovery did not come until the city's electorate, having watched the Big Apple rot to the core during the single term of the monumentally incompetent David Dinkins, dared to vote for a Republican, Rudy Giuliani, who'd

been smeared in the *New York Times* and elsewhere as a fascist, and who, after taking up residence in Gracie Mansion, proceeded to put the city back together, as if by magic, one broken window at a time. And during all this time Buckley, having been rejected at the polls in 1965, remained at the helm of *National Review,* playing an important role behind the scenes in both national and municipal affairs – counseling Reagan and cheering on Giuliani.

These reflections on Buckley and his times were prompted by my discovery of – or, more correctly, introduction to – a quirkily congenial tome entitled *Crossing Swords: William F. Buckley and the American Left* by George Shadroui, who was a longtime friend and (as is amply evident from the book) a fervent admirer of Buckley, who died in 2008 at the age of 82. Posted online a few months after Buckley's death, and published in book form two years ago, it seeks to "revisit the remarkable intellectual high-wire act Buckley sustained over a half century" as well as "to explore seriously the issues that Buckley and his counterparts debated, often lifting polemics into the realm of art." Despite all the posthumous attention that Buckley has received from biographers and historians, asserts Shadroui, these debates haven't been subjected to very close study – and they deserve such examination, he maintains, because such exchanges "remind us what political discourse should look like in a nation of informed and literate citizens."

Hence this book, which in addition to an explanatory preface and a biographical introduction, contains eight chapters each of which is devoted to one of the big-name leftists who publicly sparred with Buckley on one or more occasions, a ninth chapter giving somewhat shorter shrift to an assortment of other political adversaries of Buckley's, and an appendix consisting of several Buckley-related essays and reviews by Shadroui. At the heart of each of those first eight chapters is an account of the highlights of Buckley's debates with the

interlocutor in question; but preceding each of these accounts is an informative outline and perceptive analysis of that person's career and ideology. For readers who might not wish to peruse a full-bore 400-plus-page biography (such as Carl T. Bogus's 2011 *Buckley: William F. Buckley Jr. and the Rise of American Conservatism*) that focuses relentlessly on WFB, Shadroui has given us a highly agreeable alternative: a volume that, while providing generous doses of Buckley at his liveliest — engaged, that is, in lofty disputation in front of an audience — places him throughout in the context of his intellectual era, which was a mostly left-wing era, dominated by liberal and socialist thinkers many of whom were household names. Buckley, too, was for many decades a household name, but during much of his career was arguably the only conservative writer of whom that could be said.

Here, then, are Dwight Macdonald (1906-82), the capricious critic and *Partisan Review* editor who was described by Norman Podhoretz as having been "a Trotskyist in the thirties, a pacifist in the forties, nonpolitical in the fifties, and…an anarchist for the sixties"; James Baldwin (1924-87), the black novelist and civil-rights activist who sought, he contended, to forge a middle way between Dr. King and Malcolm X; Michael Harrington (1928-89), the socialist writer whose 1962 book *The Other America* inspired LBJ's War on Poverty; Norman Mailer (1923-2007), the bombastic egomaniac who, absurdly, considered himself not only America's top novelist but also one of its most profound thinkers on race, sex, and politics; Gore Vidal (1925-2012), the toweringly vain writer of novels, essays, plays, and screenplays who was also a fixture at the Kennedy White House (and whose clashes with Buckley on ABC-TV during the 1968 Democratic convention provided the template for decades of televisionary disputation); Noam Chomsky (1928-), the distinguished linguist turned anti-American crank, apologist for Communism, and icon to generations of misinformed college students; Garry Wills (1934-), the Buckley protégé and *NR* staffer who ended up as a painfully predictably

hard-left *New York Review of Books* regular and the author of scores of tendentious books about American history, Christianity, and literature; and John Kenneth Galbraith (1908-2006), the much-lauded economist and ornament of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations.

It's interesting to note that several of these men, although diametrically at odds with Buckley on almost all political issues, were far from being his enemies. Macdonald was a yachting chum. Mailer was a pal. And Galbraith, despite the brickbats they frequently hurled at each other in print, was a man for whom Buckley felt immense affection. These ties of amity can seem baffling, to say the least. Mailer, after all, admired Castro, while Galbraith esteemed Mao – views that, one would expect, could not have filled Buckley with anything other than outrage. How, then, to explain these friendships? It's simply not enough to say that Buckley was ecumenical in his social relationships, that he was gifted at separating people's opinions from their personalities, or that, as Shadroui points out, he shared with Macdonald, for example, a disdain for popular culture and bonded with Galbraith over their love of the written word. In the end, it's hard not to conclude that Buckley, who plainly relished his place of honor in the Manhattan elite, enjoyed his ability to win the affection of at least some of the power brokers of the American left – and did not mind being seen by some, consequently, as a leader of a controlled opposition.

No, I can't say I understand Buckley's tenderheartedness for the likes of Mailer and Galbraith. But I always respected his willingness, on his TV program *Firing Line,* to debate almost anything with almost anybody. And I appreciated the courage of his unbending anti-Communism. But his widely admired writing style left me cold: I felt he used recondite words and labyrinthine sentences not to achieve greater precision but to cow opponents and, on occasion, to obscure his lack of a coherent argument. I was also, I have to admit, put off by his

own brand of highborn Roman Catholicism, which brought to mind the Flyte family in *Brideshead Revisited* at its most pompous and peremptory. Reading the texts of his exchanges with Baldwin, moreover, I'm reminded – as someone who spent much of his 1960s childhood in the small-town American South – that Buckley's profoundly misbegotten picture of what was going on at the time below the Mason-Dixon line was based entirely on what he was told by white segregationists. He famously said that he would rather be governed by the first 2000 people listed in the Boston phonebook than by the Harvard faculty; what emerges clearly from *Crossing Swords* is that he would rather have supped, skied, or gone sailing with pretty much any prominent Harvard prof than with any of those unsung Bostonians, to say nothing of the Southern blacks about whose lives he ignorantly pontificated.

I began this article with my boyhood glimpse of Buckley on Election Day 1965. It was not until early one morning 29 years later that I came anywhere near that close to him again. In Washington, D.C., on a book tour in 1994, I had spent the night (chastely) as a guest of Marvin Liebman (1923-97), a veteran conservative activist and deeply loyal Buckley protégé who'd come out as gay in his book *Coming Out Conservative* (1992) and who, after begging Buckley in a letter to soften his position on gay rights, had received a reply, printed in *NR,* that was at once a condescending kick in the teeth and a textbook example of the way in which Buckley could use complex, convoluted verbiage to disguise his lack of a reasonable argument. In Liebman's shoes I'd have said sayonara after that, but Liebman loved Buckley too much – indeed, it's hardly an overstatement to say that he worshiped him – and they remained friends. On that morning in Washington, I was drinking coffee with Marvin, half-awake, when the phone rang – twice. The first call was from a ridiculous queer activist, then at the height of his fifteen minutes of fame, who went by the name Luke Sissyfag, and whom Marvin chatted with for a few minutes; the second was from Buckley. As Marvin sat on the

line with him for (I would guess) close to a half hour, I could hear that familiar orotund voice at the other end, discoursing avidly and energetically, despite the early hour, about the political preoccupations of the moment. At the time, I couldn’t entirely make sense of Marvin’s adoration. But after reading Shadroui’s savvy, sensitive book, which, while not slighting Buckley at his weakest, time and again foregrounds Buckley at his feisty, eloquent best, I can fairly say that I’ve come a good deal closer to getting it.

First published in *Frontpage*.