

BOOK REVIEW

The Buckley Doesn't Stop Here

William F. Buckley, Jr.: Patron Saint of the Conservatives, by John Judis (New York: Simon and Schuster, \$22.95).

Reviewed by R. Emmett Tyrrell, Jr.

In his classic 1931 biography, *The Duke*, Philip Guedalla disinters Wellington's advice to Lady Shelley on the education of her son: "There is nothing like never having an idle moment." Doubtless the subject of this biography would agree. It is hard even for an imaginative fellow, even for a hallucinating fellow, to envisage William F. Buckley, Jr., as ever suffering through an idle moment. He has during his long public life repeatedly notified us of his absolute dread of boredom. Those familiar with Bill know that the Iron Duke is surely his kind of guy, less the libertarian perhaps, more honored in history of course—but could the Duke at the height of his glory put on a more regal lunch? Could he leap from the table and fill the room with Bach played by himself on his own Challis harpsichord? Could he between dessert and coffee compose an 800-word column, lucid and informed? Readers of a psychoanalytical turn of mind, who have yet to be declared *non compos mentis*, will apply themselves to answering why there are men so abhorrent of idleness. For the rest of us, it is sufficient to note that a little idleness can be salutary, and that living the life of a whirlwind—even a heroic whirlwind—is curiously unsettling.

Let us not assume, however, that the Sepoy general, the hero of the Peninsular campaign and Waterloo, would be physically equal to Buckley's four decades of war: founding and editing *National Review*, running for mayor of New York, assisting in the founding of several essential conservative organizations, moderating a weekly television show, and producing spates of printed words, lectured words, debater's words. Buckley's books include treatises, anthologies, and novels. He even has a play in the works. He has delivered thousands of public addresses and participated brilliantly in a sufficient number of debates to make him the nation's foremost practitioner of this gentlemanly form of self-defense. In fact, since the early 1950s until the presidency of Ronald Reagan this private citizen was the Republic's preeminent conservative. As his dogged biographer, John Judis, pronounces early in this tome, "... it is impossible to understand American conservatism without understanding Bill Buckley's extraordinary life."

Yet, though Mr. Judis has put in an admirable effort, his

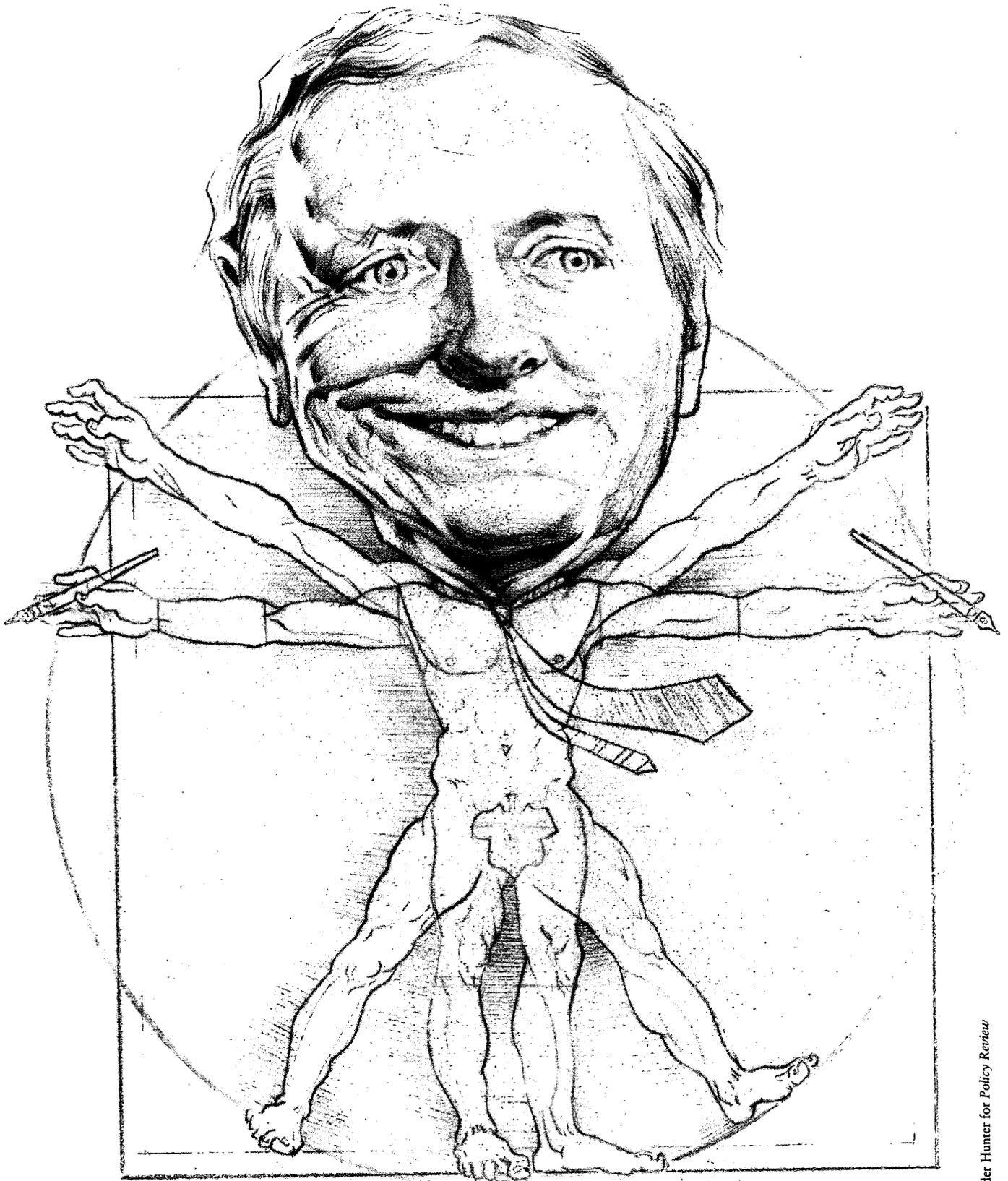
compilation of facts and of affidavits from a wide range of sources fails to give any deeper insight into Buckley than that which we already have. Judis makes it clear that Buckley's beliefs spring from one source, his carefully considered, deeply informed, and ardently held Catholicism. From there everything follows, from his unyielding anti-Communism to his individualism. That still leaves many unanswered questions about Buckley. His relationship with the conservative movement that he was so instrumental in creating has always been elusive. Now he is wowing the hard core with the party line on some intensely sectarian issue, say, education vouchers or the peril of the immanatized eschaton, and again he is off suggesting moderate Republicans such as William Scranton and Nelson Rockefeller for the Nixon cabinet—and this after suggesting that Nixon select John Gardner as his 1968 running mate! Consider that at various times he has been fetched by high intellection, mere journalism, and promoting Red Wing peanut butter. His daily routine is so exhausting as to constitute mortification of the flesh, yet there are times

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when he is sybaritic to the utmost. Judis, a man of the left, has taken great pains to restrain his prejudices toward Buckley, but as a consequence he may have abstained from speculations that would have made his book livelier and Buckley more interesting. Judis has achieved what I would have thought an impossibility. He has made the life of William F. Buckley, Jr., tedious.

Truth be known, Buckley is that rare public figure and rarer still conservative who over decades remains a sought-after figure. I have labored long in my laboratory to account for his durability. According to my examinations his gift is an intuitive capacity for perceiving some current in the *Zeitgeist* and latching on to it without impairing his principles. The *Zeitgeist* gusts through the years, bringing with it issues and tastes and heroes. For a while these issues

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Handwritten text at the bottom of the drawing, including the name "ALEXANDER HUNTER" and other illegible scribbles.

Drawing by Alexander Hunter for Policy Review

and tastes and heroes hold center stage, and then the *Zeitgeist* kicks up again, bringing with it change and new issues, tastes, and heroes. The props of one era influence later eras but rarely endure. A Gene McCarthy uttering the gibberish of the late 1960s launches another and another children's crusade—all in vain. The citizen's band radio sells in vast numbers only to be replaced by the car telephone. And when the *Zeitgeist* is against you not even New Coke has a chance.

Yet Buckley has endured. From the 1951 publication of *God and Man at Yale*, Buckley has been a star. His emphases have changed with the seasons but never his principles. Others have tried to endure but failed. Buckley endures

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effortlessly. When in the 1950s and 1960s the ideological debates were sharply defined and the audience wanted provocative debate, Buckley's dash and irreverence served him well. When intellectual celebrities were in season for their intellect rather than for their scandals, Buckley was there with James Baldwin, John Kenneth Galbraith, Norman Mailer, and Gore Vidal. These were the years of the brilliant dilettante on television and in popular magazines, and Buckley's curiosity and excitement over ideas gained him renown. During the trials of the Vietnam war and of

Watergate his intuitive appreciation of the *Zeitgeist's* flow kept him up to date and stalwart in the defense of right principles. And in the 1980s, as the retreating liberals blurred intellectual distinctions and tried to close off the debate by raising frivolity to a new level of importance amongst American sophisticates, Buckley adapted. For Judis to chide him for mellowing and participating in the soft *kultur* of the 1980s is disingenuous. When did the American of the left admire a conservative for his combativeness and devotion to serious thought? Judis laments that Buckley's celebrity barred him from writing books of deep political theory. Are such books really so dear to Judis's heart? Had Buckley devoted his life to Straussian exegesis would Judis have written a book about him?

Buckley's gift for remaining a star is partially a product of his intuition for the *Zeitgeist*. But there is something else at play. Buckley has a knack for dramatizing issues and for turning his life into theater. Almost no other American conservative has been able to do this. Some probably think it phony. Yet it is a knack that is at the heart of politics, and conservatives had best master it if they are going to play a major role in the years after Ronald Reagan. Why does Buckley have this capacity and not other conservatives? The answer is that Buckley is literary. Most conservatives are from the commercial classes, or they are policy adepts. Few are literary. This has been a conservative defect since the movement's founding. The conservative movement was auspicated by economists, political theorists, activists, and highly principled businessmen. Occasionally one encounters a literary type such as John Dos Passos around the early conservatives. To find literary types active in politics one looks to the liberals. And there one also finds the capacity to create myths and to dramatize.

Buckley has brought to the conservatives verve and polemical genius. He weeded the fanatics out in the '50s and '60s. He made American conservatism intellectually presentable by the 1970s. But in the end his greatest contribution might stand as his capacity to dramatize himself and his ideas. Such a mind can at times be impractical and erratic; but in modern politics one needs this sort of genius. It makes the dull stuff of policy stirring. 

LETTERS

Morton C. Blackwell, Patrick B. McGuigan, Charles C. Richards, Les Csorba, III, Victor R. Obillo, Michael L. Farber, Donna Krause, Peter Barglow, Douglas G. Glasgow and Betty Collier-Watson, Robert W. Kasten, Jr., Frederic P. Rich, W. H. Marshner

Back to the Trenches

Dear Sir:

All of what my admired friend Amy Moritz wrote in "The New Right, It's Time We Led: Conservatism's Parched Grass Roots" (Spring 1988) was interesting. Some of her criticism was useful. Some was potentially harmful. Some was invalid.

Miss Moritz specified issues on which the conservative movement "failed," yet it wasn't always the conservatives who came up short. By denying that Judge Bork was a strong conservative and implying he was oh-so-moderate, the administration made it impossible to fully rally our troops and guarantee his confirmation. The White House failed to lead.

Her criticism of the failure to turn donors and dollars into grass-roots activists and of the lack of vision in developing successful candidates for office is quite valid. That's why my Leadership Institute is expanding its programs, which now train hundreds of promising young conservative activists each year.

By using the wrong tactics, though—making idle threats, setting expectations too high, and putting too much emphasis on the media—conservatives have lost ground. Media hype may satisfy egos, but it's at best a phony substitute for infrastructure building.

Conservatives have been successful at fund-raising. But the Left has identified sources of strength on our side and then claims such activity is unethical, immoral, and ought to be illegal. A structured policing of "un-

ethical" fund-raising in the conservative movement is a bad idea stemming from good motives.

Contributions should be between donors and recipients. We certainly don't need more statutory dogoodism menacing freedom. Let the free market decide where the donations go.

As I have said many times: Sound doctrine is sound policy. But it doesn't guarantee victory. Where we've taken the offensive, where we've framed the issues, conservatives have won. When we relax and let the Left set the agenda, we end up fighting on their terms and they inevitably win. Studying how to win isn't enough. The knowledge must be actively used.

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Working the Press

Dear Sir:

Amy Moritz is absolutely on the mark when she asserts that conservatives cannot compensate for weakness with "frequent, blustering threats." I learned this lesson early in the many struggles for judicial confirmation with which I was involved from 1984-87 as legal affairs analyst at Coalitions for America. I also share her disdain for preprinted postcards as a means of communicating to policymakers. This technique has almost no effect any more, except when the volume is utterly crushing. Much more effective are sincere personal letters. Although

this sort of letter campaign is a little harder to trigger and requires that our troops be more than donors, my experience has shown that movement activists are willing to write such letters to their senators and representatives. The Washington operation should provide the bottom-line talking points needed to make such letters effective, not preprinted cards.

I'm not sure I agree with Moritz's charge that the movement is inappropriately "obsessed" with the press. I think the problem is, rather, that too many conservatives feel that the press is so important to their success that conservative spokesmen feel compelled to comment on literally everything that happens. Not every story is "our story," nor is it possible or appropriate to get in on every single political or policy development in the nation's capital. The most effective way to purchase long-range authority with the press is to comment insightfully, accurately, and honestly on developments in which you or your organization have an actual interest and expertise. The working press is not so much biased against conservatives (although elements of it certainly are) as it is cynical about politicians and those in public life in general. The majority of reporters are looking for the "real thing," someone who actually understands the story they are pursuing. The sort of restraint I am counseling here may mean that weeks, even months, will pass without a given individual or organization appearing in news stories—but when that individual's or organization's