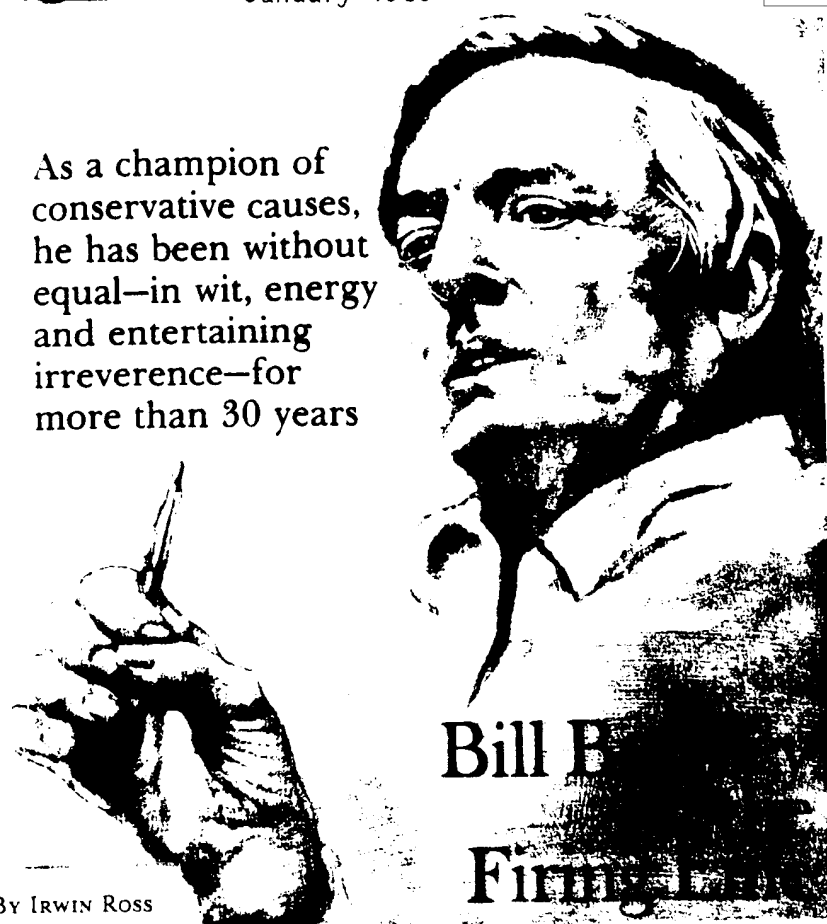


As a champion of conservative causes, he has been without equal—in wit, energy and entertaining irreverence—for more than 30 years



Bill F.

Firing Line

BY IRWIN ROSS

DURING THE 1980 Presidential campaign, Ronald Reagan joked to his old friend Bill Buckley that he was thinking of appointing him ambassador to Afghanistan. "Only if you give me fifteen divisions," Buckley retorted. Buckley was, in fact, later sounded out about a less whimsical job—ambassador to the United Nations. But he said no. He was having much too good a time in the private sector.

William F. Buckley, Jr., is a dazzling phenomenon, a kind of one-man communications industry who for over 30 years has probably done more than any other non-politician to advance the conservative cause—as well as entertain a vast reading public. With enormous zest and energy, Buckley edits a biweekly magazine, the *National Review*, writes a three-times-a-week newspaper column, presides over a weekly TV talk show, "Firing Line," delivers 45 lectures a year (at fees ranging from \$7,000 to \$12,000), and has had 24 books published to date, including novels

(six best-sellers), memoirs, political tracts and descriptions of sailing adventures (he has twice sailed the Atlantic to Europe). At odd intervals he tosses off magazine articles, plays the harpsichord, and skis in Switzerland.

At 60, Buckley is tall and lean, with angular features and a mobile face so expressive in argument—eyes rolling or suddenly bulging, lips pursed or tongue flicking across lips—that at times he seems animated by tics. What truly animates him, however, is the strength and pungency of his opinions:

On Southeast Asia: "We set out, in Vietnam, to make a resonant point. We did not make it resonantly. In international affairs, as in domestic affairs, crime is deterred by the predictability of decisive and conclusive retaliation."

On the government rescue effort of near-bankrupt Continental Illinois National Bank: "On the one hand, we favor deregulation of the banking industry as economically

healthy for America. On the other hand, we appear to be weaving a security blanket which argues that competition is ultimately meaningless because, when all is said and done, government is there to protect against risk."

On the Postal Service's exhortations to use ZIP codes: "The only instruction I would take seriously from the post office these days is the recommendation that I deliver my own mail."

Despite the vigor of his conservative convictions, Buckley is notable for his ecumenical personal relationships. Many of his friends are liberal—journalist Richard M. Clurman, economist John Kenneth Galbraith, columnist Murray Kempton.

His friendship with Ken Galbraith, 17 years his senior, surprises many, for the two are passionately committed to political views that place them on opposite sides of most fences. But they are both witty, acerbic polemicists, capable of the same hauteur toward their intellectual inferiors, and each admires the other's skills. "The basic

fact about Bill Buckley," says Galbraith, "is that he is a very kindly man. I find him one of the world's more informed, diversely educated and amusing people."

Early Rebel. Bill Buckley was to the manor and the manner born. He grew up in a large house in Sharon, Conn., with nine brothers and sisters. His father, William F., Sr., was a lawyer, then an oil wild-

catter who made a fortune. Bill Sr. was a dominant figure of awesome moral authority, conservative politics and Catholic dedication. None of the children rebelled against parental politics and attitudes.

After Army service in World War II, Buckley, then 20, entered Yale in 1946. His talent and high spirits made him popular, and he was elected chairman of the *Yale Daily News*. Yet he soon made his mark as a rebel. His editorials inveighed against the left-liberal ideology he saw all about Yale and what he regarded as the anti-religious bias of the faculty.

Buckley graduated in 1950 and soon after married Patricia Taylor, a witty young woman who came from a wealthy Canadian family. They have one child, Christopher, who followed his father in becoming a writer.

In 1951 Buckley published *God and Man at Yale*, a scorching indictment of his alma mater. The book, denounced by the Yale establishment, made its author a national figure. Lecture invitations piled up.

He added to his following on the right with *McCarthy and His Enemies*, co-authored with his brother-in-law L. Brent Bozell. It was published in 1954—the year the Senate voted to condemn Joe McCarthy for his conduct—and was a vigorous, if unpersuasive, apologia for the rambunctious Senator whose delinquencies added a new "ism" to the language. Buckley is still unrepentant about the book.

In 1955, *National Review* made its debut. Many on the right had long deplored the lack of a conservative journal of opinion. William Schlamme, who had long labored in Henry Luce's Time Inc. empire, thought 29-year-old Bill Buckley would be able to mediate the intellectual quarrels of his elders, as he lacked their emotional attachment to past positions.

Buckley was agreeable, and conservative luminaries such as James Burnham, Whittaker Chambers, John Chamberlain and Max Eastman joined the effort. A total of \$350,000 was raised to start the magazine, plus a pledge of \$100,000 from Buckley's family. Despite a current circulation of 120,000, the magazine has been running annual deficits of \$450,000 to \$550,000 in recent years. Buckley gets a salary from the *National Review*, with the magazine receiving the income from his lectures, column and TV program.

CIA Switch. With Buckley's growing success as a conservative spokesman came other ventures. In 1962 he started his newspaper column; it now appears in over 300 papers. In 1966 came "Firing Line," in which Buckley presents a variety of guests in lively debate. This hour-long show is today an institution on more than 200 PBS-TV stations. In 1981 a throng of former guests gathered for the show's 15th-birthday party at the New York Yacht Club—among them Henry Kissinger, Vernon

Jordan, Jr., William E. Simon, poet Allen Ginsberg, ex-Yippie Jerry Rubin, Betty Friedan and Theodore H. White, not to mention Watergate alumni G. Gordon Liddy and E. Howard Hunt.

In the midst of the festivities, Ronald Reagan, who had also been a guest on the show, telephoned with his congratulations. "Thank you, Mr. President," Buckley boomed jovially, then added, "By the way, I have Gordon Liddy and Howard Hunt here. Do you have any instructions?"

Buckley came to novel writing late in life, at age 50, with publication of *Saving the Queen*. His notion was to pull a switch on the standard espionage thriller, in which the tendency is to equate the CIA or British intelligence with the KGB. "I decided to write a book in which the good guys and the bad guys were distinguishable," Buckley explains. "I further resolved that the good guys would be—Americans."

As his hero, Buckley created Blackford Oakes, an urbane, literate young man who went to Yale and was later recruited by the CIA. So, indeed, was Buckley, who in 1951 served in Mexico under Howard Hunt.

"My admiration for the mission of the CIA," Buckley stresses, "was never confused with any evaluation of its overall effectiveness." After leaving the agency, he noted in *National Review*: "The attempted assassination of Sukarno has all the look of an 'operation' by the CIA:

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everyone got killed except the appointed victim."

Wit as Weapon. The speed of Buckley's mind—and output—is astonishing. "He can write as fast as he types," says Dick Clurman. If pressed, Buckley can turn out a newspaper column in 20 minutes. I once asked him how much time his novels required. "The first draft of the last one took too long—45 days," he said.

Buckley fears boredom. "I would not cross the street without a magazine or a paperback, in case traffic should immobilize me for more than ten seconds." In transit between his sprawling Connecticut sea-front home (complete with indoor and outdoor swimming pools) and his New York City duplex, he is chauffeured in a stretch limousine, in effect a motorized office with telephone, dictating machine, portable computer and two or three briefcases of correspondence.

While he has a crowded schedule, Buckley still leaves time for fun. A guest at a dinner party he gave for Henry Kissinger received an invitation with the suggestion at the end to "bring your copy of Seymour Hersh's book for Mr. Kissinger to autograph"—referring to the uninhibited assault on Kissinger by the former *New York Times* writer.

Although politically typecast

early in life, Buckley delights in being unpredictable. He astonished many of his supporters in 1972 when he came out for decriminalizing pot smoking. He dismayed fans even more when he endorsed the ratification of the Panama Canal treaties during the Carter Administration. Early in 1978, on "Firing Line," he took on Ronald Reagan in a two-hour debate on the subject of the canal. "If Lloyds of London had been asked to give odds that I would be disagreeing with Ronald Reagan on a matter of public policy," he said, "I doubt they could have flogged a quotation out of their swingiest betting-man."

Among the concerns closest to Buckley's heart are U.S.-Soviet relations and the danger of a nuclear exchange. "Conservatism cannot retreat from its traditional position—that some things are worth dying for," he has said. "All our strategic wit must be summoned to prevent such an exchange, but the deepest reserve of that wit is the willingness to say, acquiescently, that yes, rather a nuclear exchange than the sale of our souls to the Faustian monsters who sit unsmiling behind their hydrogen missiles."

If wit is indeed a weapon in this struggle—and all the others that confront this country—then America stands well-armed, thanks to Bill Buckley.