

# Buckley: true conservative

*"It is the chronic failure of liberalism that it obliges circumstance because it has an inadequate discriminatory apparatus which might cause it to take any other course."*

Wm. F. Buckley, Jr.

by Peter Michalyszyn

*How I spent Christmas, or A Beguiling Journey with William F. Buckley Jr.*

*(The scene: Bach's second Brandenburg Concerto (third movement (allegro assai) playing gaily in the background).*

*Gateway: Mr. Buckley, tell us really, how wonderful are you?*

*WFB: Very funny. What is your real question?*

*Gateway: Please don't misunderstand. I'm just the editor of a schizophrenic university newspaper....*

*WFB: I was too, once: the Yale Daily News. I was considered the most dangerous undergraduate at Yale in my time, and that because I was anti-radical. Imagine!*

*Gateway: Yes, I do, often. But as I was saying, this Andersen, the Arts editor, had the effrontery to poke fun — well, his exact words were: Jens gets off his butt and finally writes his long-awaited essay "A conservative rationale for hating William F. Buckley's guts."*

*WFB: Well, I wish him well. To be sure, it is easier to tell what is un-conservative from what is not. I said in an essay in *Did You Ever See a Dream Walking?* that I felt I know, if not what conservatism is, at least who a conservative is. I confess that I know who is a conservative less surely than I know who is a liberal. Blindfold me, spin me about like a top, and I will walk up to the single liberal in the room without zig or zag and find him even if he is hiding behind the flower pot.*

*Gateway: Where he is to be found, would you say?*

*WFB: Whereabouts.*

*Gateway: You have been criticized, widely and virulently, both for your personal views and for those views you allow to be published in your magazine, *National Review*, and aired on your television program, *Firing Line*.*

*WFB: Oh yes, people withdraw, and write and denounce you, and swear that green grass will never grow over your grave on account of this or that offensive article or editorial or book review; but these losses are merely the human attrition of outspoken journalism.*

*Gateway: Yet, some people say you are a pussy-footing patrician blowhard, too soft on liberalism for the 'real' conservatives or say your opinions on foreign affairs are too dogmatically McCarthyite. What do you think about that?*

*WFB: Oh my! Would you care to be more specific?*

*Gateway: All right. United Nations American Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick believes that right-wing "moderately repressive" dictatorships are preferable to Marxist regimes. Do you concur?*

*WFB: John Stuart Mill says that despotism is excused as a temporary arrangement, provided the purpose of that despotism is to maximize rather than minimize freedom. I would like to note that the Soviet Union has never supported a war in which the objective was national*

liberation. When the Communist powers get involved, the point is *never* national liberation, always satellization. Now, it seems to me that the United States position ought to be to support whatever elements in a particular country are heading in the better of the apparently available directions.

*Gateway: I sense that you dislike Communism.*

*WFB: You are correct. I also dislike detente, what we call 'coexistence'; the philosophical acceptance of coexistence ends us up in hot pursuit of reasons for that acceptance. We continue to find excuses for being cordial to the Soviet Union. Our denunciations of that country's periodic barbarisms — like Afghanistan — become purely perfunctory. This is a callousing experience; it is a lesion of our moral conscience, the historical effects of which cannot be calculated, but they will be bad.*

*Gateway: I can imagine they're saying the same things in the Soviet Union about coexistence with the American imperialists. How can you be so sure you're right?*

*WFB: Alas, we are always at the mercy of the naive.*

Imperialism suggests the domination of a country for the commercial or glorious benefit of oneself. The Soviet Union began its experience in imperialism not merely by jailing and executing people who disagreed with it but by systematic despoliation. In Czechoslovakia, for instance, they took one, two three billion dollars' worth of capital goods, and removed them physically to the Soviet Union. Far from doing anything of the sort, we did exactly the contrary: we sent our own capital goods to places like France and England and Spain and Latin America. I can't think of any country we've "dominated" or "imperialized" — in the sense in which you use those words — that is worse off as a result of its experience with America than it would have been had we not entered into a temporary relationship with it.

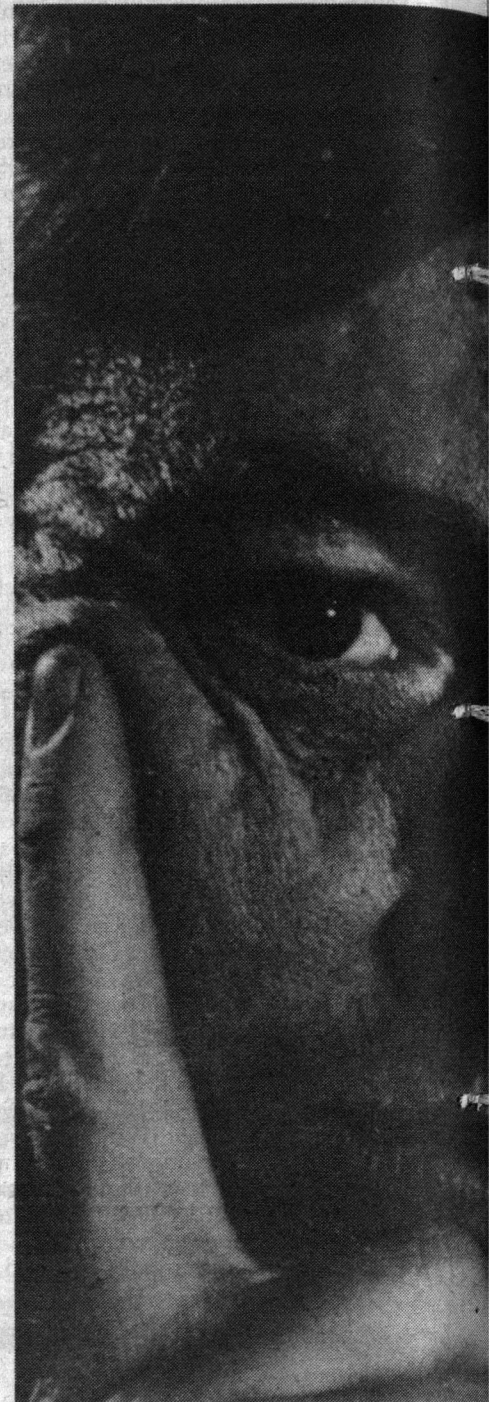
*Gateway: In a previous interview, South Vietnam was put up as an example of such a country.*

*WFB: South Vietnam! My God! Above all, not South Vietnam. Not unless one is willing to say that South Vietnam would be better off satellized by North Vietnam — and drivatively by Asian Communism — and consigned to perpetual tyranny. Put it this way: I will assent to the proposition that South Vietnam has been harmed by America's efforts there only to somebody who would say that France was harmed by the efforts of the Allied armies to liberate it during the Second World War.*

Look, we conservatives stand for certain things — the "permanent things" — which transcend us and which we must defend lest our civilization collapse utterly. Willmoore Kendall said it forcefully:

*Survival, in itself, is not the highest value; on the contrary under the ethos of Western civilization, as revealed to us by that civilization's central teaching, survival is a relatively low value; above it, for example, ranks truth; above it also, ranks beauty; above it, far above it, ranks justice, and along with justice true religion; above it finally....ranks freedom, and along with freedom those processes of rational deliberation and discussion....that we know to be the characteristic features of truly civil society.*

*Gateway: When does the maximization of individual freedom lead to anarchy, or, equally bad, the kind of extreme libertarianism you called 'technocratic materialism' — "of the relentless self-server who lives for himself and for absolutely no one else, whose concern for others is expainable merely as an intellectualized recognition of the relationship between helping others and helping*



William F. J

oneself." What right have conservatives, whose program consists traditionally of family, church, and community, to embrace the libertarian themes of individualism, freedom, and anti-statism? Is not conservatism, as Ronald Hamowy charged, the "polar opposite" of libertarianism?

*WFB: That people disagree does not mean conservatism is empty of structural content. I could give you professor Richard Weaver's definition of conservatism as "the paradigm of essences toward which the phenomenology of the world is in continuing approximation." Simultaneously, Weaver would tell you about "social bond" individualism, admitting man is a social animal belonging to the Christian humanist tradition, yet he struggles for local rights and limited government.*

If I may continue, I will point out another apparent contradiction that Weaver observed: "that capitalism cannot be conservative is the true sense as long as its reliance is upon industrialism, whose very nature is to unsettle any establishment and initiate the endless innovation of technological 'progress'." Yet you find conservatives embracing the essentially libertarian 'laissez-faire' market ideology. There are other confusions. Perhaps it will suffice to say that one man's anarchism is another man's statism.

*Gateway: Perhaps this traditionalist-libertarian 'fusion' or 'middle way' as Frank Meyer called it, is a response to a common enemy — modern liberalism?*

*WFB: Well, let me say that we grant the generality that the world would probably be better off, not worse, if a lot of people (among them a great many liberals) who are currently hard at work thinking, should disist from doing so, and spend their time, instead, cultivating the elevated thought of others.*

*Gateway: The wisdom-of the ages?*

*WFB: Precisely. Plato, Socrates,*

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