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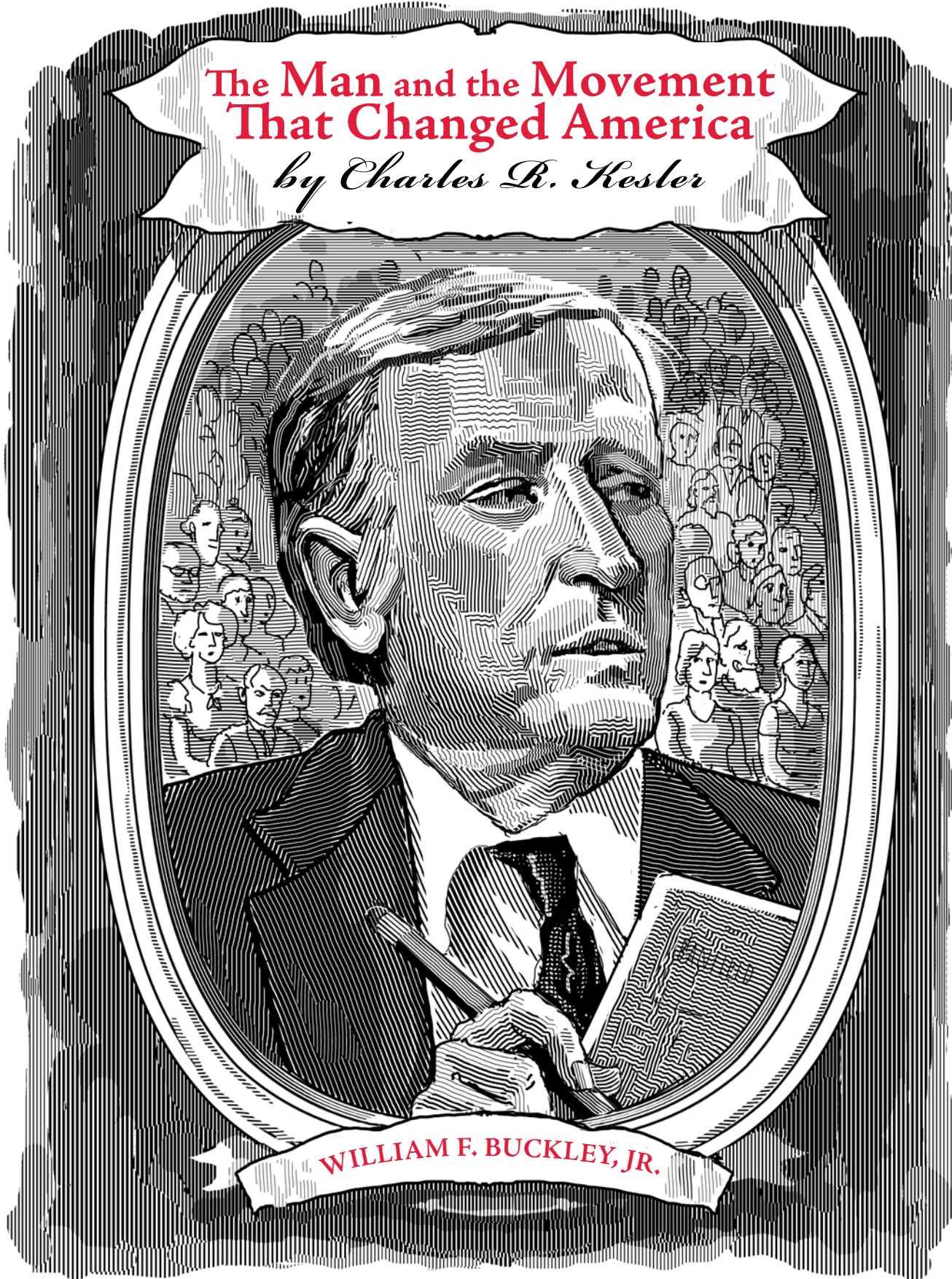
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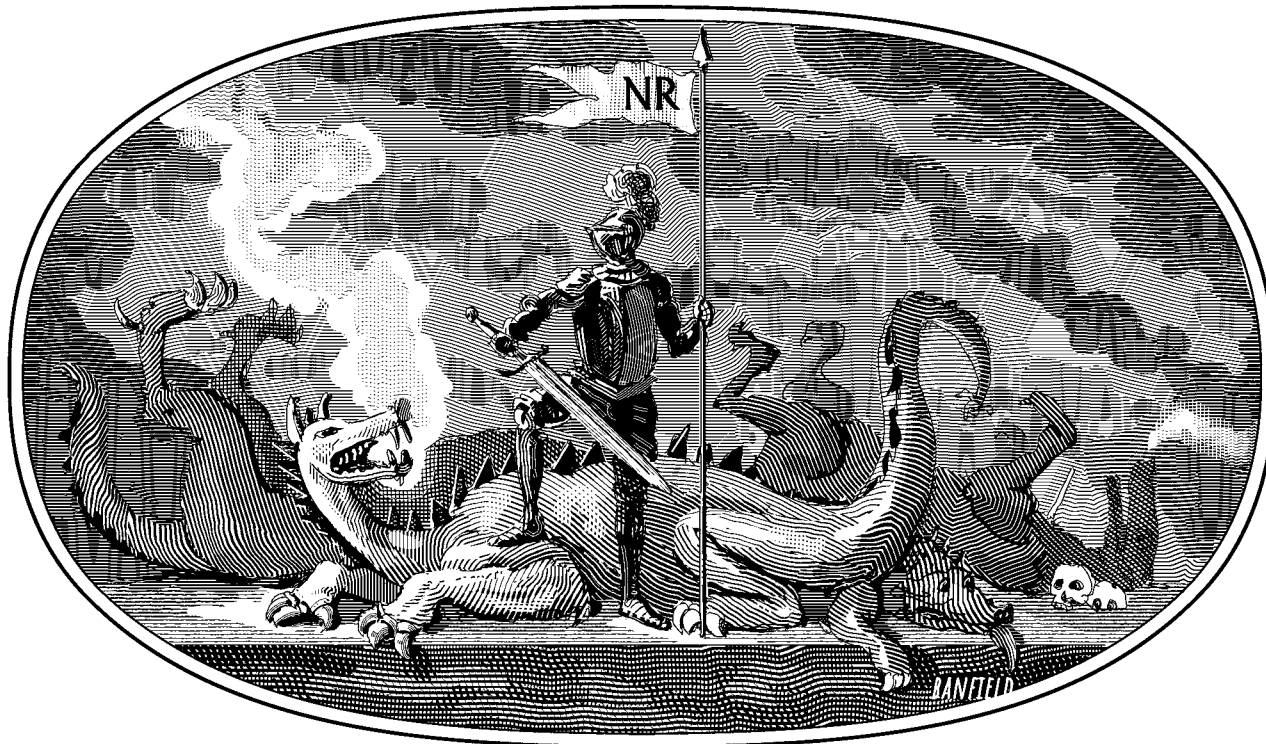
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Book Review by Charles R. Kesler

## BUCKLEY AT 100

*Buckley: The Life and the Revolution That Changed America*, by Sam Tanenhaus.  
Random House, 1,040 pages, \$40



WHEN THE 28-YEAR-OLD BILL BUCKLEY wrote to his new pen pal, Whittaker Chambers, asking permission to come and meet him for the first time, Chambers, recovering at his Maryland farmhouse from another heart attack, replied cheerily, "By all means come. Come anytime of the day." The letter included driving directions and what Sam Tanenhaus calls "a taste of Chambers's signature gloom." Chambers could not sign off without noting, "The score, as the points are chalked up, clearly and boldly, more and more convinces me that the total situation is hopeless, past repair, organically irremediable."

By the "total situation" he referred not merely to his own ailments, though Buckley found him in bed and forbidden by the doctor "even to raise his head." No, Chambers meant the whole situation of modern man, especially in the West. As he wrote in his invitation to Buckley, "Almost the only position of spiritual dignity left to men, therefore, is a kind of stoic silence, made bearable by the amusement of seeing, hearing, and knowing the full historical irony that its victims are blind and deaf to, and disciplined by the act of withholding comment on what we know."

Nonetheless, "the young man of the right and the aging one settled into easy conversa-

tion," Tanenhaus reports. Chambers grasped immediately Buckley's grace and promise, which the ex-spy's historical pessimism did not obscure. As soon as Buckley had departed, ushered out by the patient's anxious wife, Chambers told her: "He is something special. He was born, not made, and not many like that are born in any time."

"I am a heavy man" (*Ernster Mensch*), Chambers would later write to Buckley. Buckley was light on his feet, tall (a little over six feet), "handsome and blue-eyed," and as Tanenhaus put it in his award-winning biography of Chambers, "Bill Buckley brought to the American right qualities no one could remember its ever having possessed: glamour and style, the heedless joy of privileged youth. He was already a celebrity who had catapulted himself toward controversy, blazing out of the consensus fifties as an authentic radical, a firebrand at war with the prevailing orthodoxies of his day, orthodoxies that happened to be liberal."

Buckley in 1954 was also a year away from the inaugural issue of *National Review*, and eager to hire a staff. His ulterior purpose in seeing Chambers was to invite him to join up. To his surprise, Chambers said he very well might, before changing his mind the follow-

ing year, and then changing it twice again. The underlying problem was that "stoic silence" was not the vocation to which Buckley and his magazine felt called. In his Publisher's Statement in the first issue, Buckley inscribed this oft-quoted line: "*National Review*...stands athwart history, yelling Stop, at a time when no one else is inclined to do so, or to have much patience with those who so urge it." *Yelling Stop*. Nor did he share his ex-Communist friend's confidence, left over from his years as a Marxist-Leninist, that history was a rational process that could be understood and mastered, with the ruling class (whatever it would call itself) enjoying "the full historical irony" and everyone else suffering through it unknowingly, as oppressed victims.

IT WAS SAM TANENHAUS'S BEAUTIFUL work in *Whittaker Chambers: A Biography* (1997), the research for which Bill had promoted in numerous ways (while always maintaining "a tactful distance from my work," Tanenhaus acknowledged) that probably led Buckley to commission his own biography from him a year later. That, and his son Christopher's encouragement. After more than a quarter-century, Tanenhaus, the editor of *The New York Times Book Review*



from 2004 to 2013 and now the U.S. Writer-at-Large for *Prospect* magazine, has completed that commission, honorably, resoundingly, massively. *Buckley: The Life and the Revolution That Changed America* clocks in at 1,040 pages, marked by a lively style but an uneven pace. It is a heavy book, not light on its feet, though it has some lovely passages and is, undeniably, the product of prodigious research, far outshining in that category any of the other interesting but narrower accounts of WFB that have appeared in recent years—especially, Lee Edwards’s *William F. Buckley, Jr.: The Maker of a Movement* (2010) and Alvin Felzenberg’s *A Man and His Presidents: The Political Odyssey of William F. Buckley, Jr.* (2017).

Any book whose composition is so protracted (27 years) raises certain questions about itself. What took so long? is the obvious one, though it may be harder to answer than one might think. It takes years to do the kind of interviews and archival research Tanenhaus undertook, as he explains in some detail in the Acknowledgments. The psychological toll of such an enormous project is another factor, about which he says little, other than a poignant mention of Bill’s last words to him, less than three weeks before WFB died in February 2008: “I know I won’t see my biography.” This year will mark the hundredth anniversary of

Bill’s birth, and Tanenhaus must feel that centenary approaching. More difficult to estimate is a third factor: how did the shifting currents of politics between 1998 and 2025 change the perceived significance, or influence the author’s interpretation, of Bill’s life and times? To take a singular instance, Bill probably never heard the words “President” and “Trump” used together, except perhaps in a fever dream. What Bill would have thought of the current chief executive or of the direction he has taken conservatism and the country is, therefore, a matter for conjecture, though not for that reason nonsensical. It’s a natural enough question to ask. The only manner in which Tanenhaus could answer it in *this* book, however, would have been by a close, sympathetic, and faithful interpretation of Bill’s principles and how he reasoned about them in the context of the circumstances of his times, as he saw them. To disparage Trump by comparison with Buckley, or Buckley by comparison with Trump, may be tempting but is too simplistic.

**T**ANENHAUS STEERS CLEAR OF SUCH FACILE comparisons. On the left, recently, many have succumbed to them. Books have been devoted to identifying Buckley as the sorcerer who summoned the populist demons from the vasty deep. The argument, to

the extent there is one, goes something like this: though it may be true that Buckley famously expelled the John Birch Society conspiracy theorists and the anti-Semites from the conservative movement, he never even tried to expel the *racists*, of which he was (therefore?) one, nor to anathematize the anti-immigrant and anti-LGBTQ bigots, of which he was also (though less manifestly) one. Hence the line from racist Buckley to semi-fascist Trump is a short and pretty direct one, as our progressives see it. It is a measure of Nicholas Buccola’s moderation (he is my colleague at Claremont McKenna College) that in his book, *The Fire Is upon Us: James Baldwin, William F. Buckley, Jr., and the Debate over Race in America* (2019) it takes him a few hundred pages to get to what he regards as his ace card, which is that the reason Buckley himself “resisted just about every step forward in the black liberation struggle” was his indelible “assumption of white supremacy,” with its corollary assumption of black inferiority. That was more or less how James Baldwin saw Buckley, his adversary in several epic debates of the 1960s. At least Buccola does not disguise the fact that he is taking Baldwin’s side.

**F**OR A MORE IMMODERATE EXAMPLE, consider David Austin Walsh’s debut volume, *Taking America Back: The Conservative Movement and the Far Right*, just out from Yale University Press. (Not much has changed apparently since Bill was an undergraduate there.) It contends that the “far right,” i.e., unashamed American racists, anti-Semites, and fascists, and the respectable right, i.e., so-called mainstream conservatives, beginning with Buckley, have always been secret or not-so-secret allies since they first joined hands against the New Deal. He presents a rogue’s gallery of now mostly obscure midcentury figures like Merwin Hart (also discussed by Tanenhaus), Russell Maguire (ditto), George Lincoln Rockwell, Revilo Oliver, Joe Sobran, and even Pat Buchanan, all of whom “have something in common,” he announces portentously. “They were all connected in some way to William F. Buckley, Jr.” The omnipresent WFB of Walsh’s potted history was, he claims, a “stalwart defender of white supremacy in America,” an indictment that Walsh comes closer to assuming than to proving. Far from Buckley’s legacy being his purge of the kooks from the movement, his is “the purge that wasn’t.” In effect, Buckley is charged with being Trump’s ideological and extremist godfather, and Walsh proves, to his own satisfaction at least, that American conservatism is kooks all the way down.

None of these books’ arguments would survive prolonged contact with the evidence

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of Tanenhaus's *Buckley*. But we are a long way from the days in the 1990s and 2000s when Buckley enjoyed a kind of honeymoon with American liberals who professed to regard him as, more or less, the model conservative intellectual. Compared to Rush Limbaugh or Glenn Beck back then, Buckley was thought respectable. Those were the heady days when Tanenhaus accepted the job of writing Bill's authorized biography. Since then American progressives have turned more and more woke, which in this case implies more openly hostile to, or even contemptuous of, Bill Buckley. Alas, a similar coldness to Buckley has grown up on the youthful Right, which calls itself, unimaginatively, the New Right, again. So the present-day Left's reaction to this biography could be as interesting as the present-day Right's.

IN ANY CASE, THE LEADING POLITICAL prejudices have changed and Tanenhaus knows that. The winds were fair and the waters calm when he started out. The same pleasant sailing cannot be counted on now. Has the author adjusted his course, his destination? He does not say. Perhaps the biographer's own political views have evolved *pari passu*, as Bill would say, with those of the contemporary readership. We don't need to pursue that speculation because to my mind, the author of *Buckley* seems pretty unchanged from the author of *Whittaker Chambers: A Biography*. Tanenhaus is the same center-Left figure we remember, unafraid to take Chambers's side against Alger Hiss; that is, Tanenhaus does not flinch at accepting the penetration of American government and cultural institutions by Communist spies or fellow travelers as an actual, not imaginary, danger in the 1940s and '50s. He regards Buckley's and the nascent conservative movement's focus on that question as, in the main, responsible, however hysterical and irresponsible McCarthy and the Right may have turned on occasion. Tanenhaus then and now admires the anti-Communist liberals in Harry Truman's administration and in the original Americans for Democratic Action. Then and now he seems to take his political cues largely from his hero Chambers's own brand of temperate conservatism—Chambers favored moderate statemen like Benjamin Disraeli, Dwight Eisenhower, and Richard Nixon—pragmatic conservatives, not reactionaries. Bill Buckley interests his biographer partly because WFB openly wrestled with the tension between pragmatic and ideological thinking. Despite the hard line he favored in the Cold War and his deep-seated dissatisfaction with the “modulation” of Eisenhower and Nixon, Bill liked

to quote a line of Chambers that Tanenhaus also favors: “To live is not to hold the lost redoubt. To live is to maneuver.”

WE DON'T HAVE TO WONDER WHERE such a commitment to pragmatism would take Tanenhaus politically. He wrote a book on the subject, which helps to explain the distance that separates him from Buckley conservatism, despite his daydreams of being the last of the responsible conservatives. *The Death of Conservatism: A Movement and Its Consequences*, Tanenhaus's premature obituary for Buckley-style movement conservatism, appeared in 2009, not long after Buckley's death in early 2008. As a political movement, Tanenhaus argued, post-Buckley conservatism is committing suicide. The “revanchist” Right, as he calls it, is pledged not to conserve America's actual governing arrangements, namely, the ideals and institutions of post-New Deal liberalism, as the newly elected President Barack Obama was boldly attempting to do in those years; instead, conservatism is hell-bent on a “counterrevolution,” variously defined as “the restoration of America's pre-New Deal *ancien regime*, the return to Cold War-style Manichaeism, or the revival of premodern ‘family values.’” Today's conservatives, he charged, including their latest manifestation in the Tea Party movement, are *radicals*, effectively “the heirs of the French rather than of the American Revolution.”

There are serious problems with this analysis. How could a counterrevolution be Jacobin? The French Jacobins were implacable and cruel drivers of the Revolution, not of the revolts against it, e.g., as in the Vendée. What did the populist upswell of the Tea Party have to do with the spirit of the guillotine? Yet some of Tanenhaus's finest political writing is in *The Death of Conservatism*; it helps to fill in his view of the New Deal and of the nascent American Right's reaction to it—to what Frank Meyer, Willmoore Kendall, and others had called the Revolution of 1932. Tanenhaus says remarkably little about the New Deal in *Buckley*. In the biography, 20th-century American conservatism seems to emerge more from the America First movement than from the shock of the Depression and the New Deal. At any rate, the reader hears more about the Buckley family's fervent America First proclivities, its Anglophobia, isolationism, and love of Charles Lindbergh than about the family's hostility to taxes and regulatory power or its enthusiasm for private business, two sentiments it shared with most opponents of Roosevelt's revolution.

TANENHAUS DIAGNOSES “MOVEMENT conservatism” circa 2009 as atavistic and extremist. Borrowing a dubious distinction from Garry Wills's essay “The Convenient State,” written when Wills was an employee of *National Review* and a protégé of Buckley, Tanenhaus divides the political world according to two forms of love—the love of consensus versus the love of orthodoxy. He cites Wills: “A consensus, as the word's form indicates, is a meeting of several views on common ground; an orthodoxy is the reduction of all views to a single view. Consensus implies compromise.... Orthodoxy goes to the roots of metaphysical and religious awareness and demands a ‘right view’ on these things, not merely a *modus vivendi*.” In case you don't come to the right view he favors, Tanenhaus makes it explicit: “Liberals place faith in the inter-related processes of politics and governance. Conservatives subordinate governance to politics and ideological certitude—or in the Catholic formulation favored by some conservatives, to *recta ratio*, right reason.” In the first place, “right reason” as a term predates Catholicism; it is a classical concept. But Tanenhaus wants to argue that Buckley bequeathed to America a conservative movement that is hobbled and (worse) fanaticized by its dedication to political orthodoxy, its insistence on truth as it sees it. The *liberal* idea of consensus, once promoted by Chambers, has now lost any purchase on the Right, according to Tanenhaus. Chambers had warned that this would happen, and had hoped to steer *National Review* toward a realistic politics of consensus, but failed. To his regret, the magazine and the movement embraced ideology, that is, the radical politics of orthodoxy, from supporting Joe McCarthy after 1954 to opposing federal civil rights legislation in 1957 and 1964.

Much depends, to be sure, on where one draws the line between consensus and orthodoxy. For instance, Tanenhaus declares, without a touch of irony, that the Democratic Party has a “recent history of choosing centrist, explicitly non-ideological presidential candidates (Kennedy, Johnson, Carter, Clinton, Obama), as contrasted with the Republicans' preference for ideologically committed ones (Goldwater, Reagan, George W. Bush).” Explicitly non-ideological candidates—like LBJ and Barack Obama? At any rate, it is revealing Tanenhaus doesn't feel it necessary or even polite to warn his readers, as Steven F. Hayward did in these pages (“Reading Up on the Right,” Winter 2009/10) to “resist the urge to snort coffee out your nose” when our author matter-of-factly declares, for instance, that the late Justice David Souter was “the most authentic conservative in the Court's

modern history.” Only a liberal could say that with such presumptuous abandon.

TANENHAUS’S ADVICE TO MODERN conservatives who are not suicidal is to face “historical reality,” the same advice Chambers offered half a century ago. Tanenhaus means historical reality with a capital H. American conservatives need to understand they are on the losing side of History and will remain so until they renounce their ideology, and learn to take lessons in proper political adjustment from those masters of the *Zeitgeist*, American liberals. Despite his opposition to second-class citizenship for any American, Tanenhaus doesn’t seem to mind inflicting it on conservatives. And despite his resistance to Willmoore Kendall’s theory of hyper-majority rule, which reserves to the majority the right and the duty to exclude certain opinions or political parties as “unassimilable” by the body politic, Tanenhaus’s thoughts trace a similar path when he ponders the problem of ideological conservatism, or how to return the Right from “revanchism” to “realism.”

Tanenhaus’s *Buckley* bears the revealing subtitle *The Life and the Revolution That Changed America*. The reader will find some topics missing or surprisingly underplayed, despite the book’s ample girth. *Buckley* is not a detailed history of *National Review*—a book that someone should write—nor is it a thematic history of the conservative movement, a book that has been written several times with varying success. This is, primarily, a rich and fascinating guide to the great man’s life (and Tanenhaus does pronounce WFB “a great man,” though not without a bit of surrounding hesitation or plausible deniability: Bill was, writes his biographer, “one it seemed natural to speak of as a great man”). Tanenhaus does not specify either the exact parameters of that “revolution” nor whether it “changed America” for better or worse. He provides evidence on both sides. If you want a more introspective account of what *N.R.* was publishing and what the editors were quarreling over, you can find it in John B. Judis’s earlier biography, the first full-scale one, *William F. Buckley, Jr.: Patron Saint of the Conservatives* (1988). Judis too is a man of the Left and an astute political observer. Although his book does not manage the flair or the detail of Tanenhaus’s, and has a jejune subtitle, it comes in at (only) 528 pages. The major interpretive difference between them is that Judis understands WFB’s life and career to fall decisively into two periods: the serious insurgent Buckley, at Yale and the early *National Review*; and after about 1970,

the celebrity intellectual. Judis’s explanation of the transition, or decline, I have never found persuasive.

Tanenhaus does not perceive such a sharp demarcation. His more comprehensive account of Buckley’s life, the fullest we are likely to have, judges Bill’s career to be more unified, sustained, and even in a way high-minded than does Judis.

EACH BIOGRAPHER IS STRUCK BY BUCKLEY’S inability to write the “big book” on conservatism that as a young man he was eager to furnish as his enduring contribution to the short shelf of classic works on political philosophy, his volume to stand beside Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, as it were. Buckley did write a few chapters of what he called *The Revolt Against the Masses*, the title a play on Ortega y Gasset’s minor 20th-century classic, *The Revolt of the Masses*. Judis seems to blame Buckley more for this failure, to regard him as culpable for succumbing to the distractions of fame

Tanenhaus does  
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and money-making. Tanenhaus, for his part, has lower expectations to begin with, and at any rate is friendlier to his subject and does not blame him as severely, especially considering how much Buckley accomplished anyway in his amazing life: some 50 books, written or edited; almost 3,000 public speeches; 1,505 episodes of *Firing Line*, his TV debate/discussion show; 35 years as editor of *National Review*; decades of “On the Right,” his syndicated column, which at its peak appeared thrice weekly.

One odd result is that Tanenhaus deploys a long list of extenuating explanations that amount to a repertory of damning with faint praise. For example, in the classroom young Buckley “sounded better informed than he actually was. He was ‘very good at discussing books he hadn’t read,’ as one of Bill’s favorite professors, the Yale philosopher Paul Weiss, later said.” “Buckley’s true métier as writer and talker—eventually reaching levels approaching genius,” according to Tanenhaus, “was for intellectual comedy, an almost con-

tinual repartee.” “His weapons were not his ideas, which could be heard elsewhere, but his words, which sparkled with freshness—much of the time, anyway.” “[Buckley] had befriended enough scholars to know he was not one of them. He liked knowing all the arguments—had an almost preternatural gift for assimilating first principles and lines of reasoning. But discovering new ideas or uncovering the hidden meanings of the old ones was not for him. He already knew what he thought and believed.” “He was a controversialist, not a thinker and still less a theorist.”

THERE IS TRUTH IN TANENHAUS’S backhanded compliments. Still, they would go down better if he had at least discussed Bill’s controversial contentions more seriously. For instance, he credits Buckley’s mentor at Yale, the political scientist Willmoore Kendall, as the chief influence on Buckley’s arguments in his first three books, *God and Man At Yale* (1951), *McCarthy and His Enemies* (1954; written with Brent Bozell), and *Up From Liberalism* (1959). Yet Tanenhaus does not explore those arguments sufficiently to let the reader appreciate what was so controversial about them. Buckley, in his indictments of what he called “the superstitions of academic freedom” and the dogmas of democracy made very cogent arguments against the fact-value distinction and the progressive faith in History as the inevitable march of freedom and reason. The author doesn’t let us see the courage and the clarity of WFB’s arguments as over against the conformism of mid-century American public life. Nor does he show Buckley’s own indebtedness to Kendall’s later teachers and guides, Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin, whether directly or through such intermediaries as Harry V. Jaffa and Richard Weaver. Tanenhaus would have seen those debts if he had spent some time with the two philosophical anthologies of modern conservative thought that Buckley edited—*Did You Ever See a Dream Walking?* (1970) and its sequel (which I co-edited), *Keeping the Tablets: Modern American Conservative Thought* (1988). The first is mentioned only in the bibliography’s opening list of sources, and the second is not mentioned at all. Both volumes show that Buckley was not a mere popularizer and that his credentials as a thinker and even theorist are more substantial than Tanenhaus allows, or perhaps knows.

Weaver was the source of Buckley’s favorite one-sentence definition of conservatism, which, as he wrote in both of his anthologies, he used to “punish” lecture audiences with when they persisted in asking for one: “the



paradigm of essences towards which the phenomenology of the world is in continuing approximation." He called that formulation "as noble and ingenious an effort as any I have ever read." Derived from Voegelin, it was a dressed-up version of the imperative that used to appear on conservative bumper stickers: "Don't immanentize the eschaton!" You won't encounter it in this book.

Tanenhaus's confidence that Kendall was Buckley's guru, as it were, shortchanges Bill in another way, too. Bill's early books, which owed a lot to Kendall's tutelage—Tanenhaus is right about that—were not Bill's best. Kendall himself, later in his career, moved away from the consensus argument for democracy that informs Buckley's first three bestsellers. I would say Bill was at his intellectual best in debates, when he was reasoning on his own two feet. His free-wheeling prudence was wiser than Kendall's reliance on a peculiar brand of majoritarianism or Chambers's belief in historical "realism." That superiority shines in Bill's book on his 1965 run for New York mayor, *The Unmaking of a Mayor* (1966); in *United Nations Journal* (1974), his account of his year on the U.N.'s Human Rights Commission; and in his best columns and debates, especially the special *Firing Line* debate on the Panama Canal treaty. Have a

look at them if you want to see Buckley at his deliberative best.

**B**UCKLEY WAS ALWAYS GREAT FUN TO be around, and Tanenhaus's outsize biography reminds the reader of that fact and invites him into Bill's gregarious company, vicariously. For that reason alone, the volume is memorable and enjoyable, especially for those of us fortunate enough to have known him. He and I met in 1973, when as a 16-year-old editor of my high school newspaper I wrote him, requesting an interview. The occasion was improbable: he was flying into West Virginia for a few hours to give a speech at a nearby college. His reply was still more improbable—a telegram, delivered by Western Union to my little house in the mountains (and still the only telegram I've ever received). Yes, we could do the interview in the car taking him back to the Charleston airport after the speech. I sent him the interview, and thus began our correspondence and friendship, which lasted 35 years. It was what Aristotle would call an unequal friendship. He was older, wiser, renowned. He generously wrote me letters of recommendation to Yale and Harvard. He hired me as an intern at *N.R.* in summer 1978. I have been an *N.R.* contributor ever since. I took the train to Stamford to

see him and his lovely wife, Pat, a few times a semester for the next couple of years, and attended every *N.R.* anniversary banquet as his guest. We did a book together. I last saw him in late January 2008, at his house in Wal-lacks Point, two weeks or so before his death. He had fallen some weeks before and broken his wrist, so he enlisted me to take dictation and type out what proved to be his final syndicated column. That was more difficult than it sounds, because he was still using Wordstar, a program I had forgotten years before. Bill had a genius for friendship, so the story is not unusual except in its details.

**T**HE IMPORTANCE ASSIGNED BY THE AUTHOR to the multifarious facets of Bill's life raises familiar questions of emphasis or interpretation. Tanenhaus's sensibilities are not Bill's, and probably not yours. He dwells understandably on Bill's early family life—Bill's roommate at Millbrook, Alistair Horne, who became a renowned historian and writer, left this description (as conveyed by Tanenhaus) of visiting Bill at Great Elm, the Buckley estate in Sharon, Connecticut, during their prep school days:

[T]he "sumptuous white mansion," the towering elm with its spreading crown

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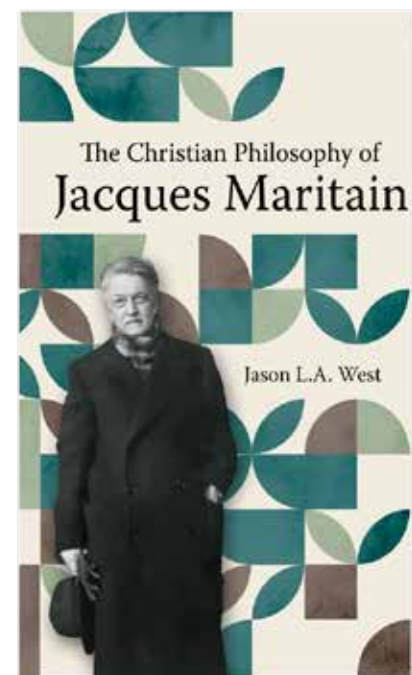
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casting cool, wide shadows, the rolling lawns, the army of white-jacketed servants and black-uniformed maids, the tutors and teachers for the youngest children. And, of course, the large family. “The father frankly terrified me,” said Horne. “He was quite austere, probably very shy.” But the tiny, radiant Aloise [Bill’s mother] greeted him “as if I were the one person she had been waiting all her life to meet” and seated him next to her at the impressive table. Most of all he was enchanted by the siblings. There were so many of them, [10, counting Bill] of all ages, “a vast gaggle of smiling, brilliant children, all chattering—in several languages—at once, playing the piano, but, above all, laughing with each other.... The whole place rang with music and laughter. It was a very wonderful place to go.”

Tanenhaus, with an eye to today’s audience, moves on to what might be called the family prejudices. Mother and Father, very strong Catholics and Southerners both, were not keen on Jews, blacks, gays, or the British Empire. To his credit, Tanenhaus does not deny the diminishing influence of these opinions on the family, particularly on the next generation. He tells this story: after Buckley Sr.’s first stroke, he had been unconscious four days “when his wife, at his bedside with his Bible, began reading from the Old Testament psalms. Bill Buckley recalled, ‘Father’s voice rang out for the first time in four days: “Boy, could those Jews write!” He then relapsed into his coma.”

Tanenhaus makes a half-hearted effort to Gatsbyize Bill Buckley and the Buckley clan. They were get-rich-quick oil speculators, we learn, whose wealth proved fleeting and did not bring happiness, at least not in the sense of happy endings. It’s the Gilded Age all over again, he implies, chronicling the dry holes the family company drilled and the alcoholism, mental illness, and other maladies that claimed the siblings one by one. True enough, but this parable is a dry hole, too. The family’s misfortunes and tragedies do not cancel out their music, laughter, and love.

**T**HERE ARE MANY PAGES DEVOTED TO Joe McCarthy, as one would expect, since WFB was among his staunchest defenders. On these controversies Tanenhaus does not wax indignant and treats Buckley’s and his brother-in-law Brent Bozell’s arguments carefully. They were always more interested in McCarthyism than in McCarthy himself, a very imperfect man and politician, as

they realized. They admired, however, that he attacked “twenty years of treason,” connecting the Communist infiltrations with FDR’s New Deal and internationalism. Though McCarthy was the “political tribune” of the emerging Right, Buckley staked out his position as the movement’s “emerging intellectual voice.” The brothers-in-law (as Tanenhaus calls them) did not fancy McCarthy as the future leader of the conservative movement. “Our idea of a president,” said Buckley later, “was [Robert] Taft. First in his class at Yale, first in his class at Harvard Law School.”

As one would expect from a 21st-century biographer, Tanenhaus takes Bill’s position on civil rights very seriously, as he should. Even biographers more sympathetic to Buckley’s politics find little admirable about the positions he took regarding the civil rights revolution. Lee Edwards in 2010 wrote that Buckley and his magazine “did not acquit themselves...well on the issue of civil rights, taking a rigid states’ rights position that equaled, in the eyes of many liberals and almost all black Americans, a stand in favor of segregation and therefore racism.” Alvin Felzenberg, in his life of WFB, emphasized that Bill’s position evolved and that by the late 1960s was less doctrinaire.

**I**N BUCKLEY, TANENHAUS RESISTS SCORING cheap points and introduces facts and considerations that expand the usual back-and-forth over the subject, somewhat along Felzenberg’s lines. On the one hand, Tanenhaus traces the Buckley family’s roots in the South, providing the fullest treatment so far of life in Camden, South Carolina, where the family lived in the cold months at their other estate, called Kamschatka. The servants tending the terraced lawns and doing the other chores at Kamschatka were mostly blacks, local residents who seemed happy to have good jobs and decent employers. Tanenhaus is not embarrassed to explain why, and to display his writing skills. “Everyone, Black and white, wanted to work for the Buckleys,” recalled Edward Allen, the principal groundskeeper’s son in 2016. He remembered the incident in the early 1940s when his father and Will Buckley [Bill’s father] were together on the lawn in the front of the house. “A white man, a stranger, came through the gate...and, without a glance in the direction of Walter Allen, offered his groundskeeping services to the master of Kamschatka. Walter Allen stood by silently. He knew the man was brazenly asking for his job but also knew it was not his place to speak. That night, however, he told his children how Will Buckley, blazing with fury, all but spat at this stranger. ‘I

wouldn’t hire *ten* of you,’ Buckley said. ‘Get off my place.’”

“To some, these warm relations might seem stale largesse, cheaply purchased servitude,” comments Tanenhaus. “But it ‘changed the culture’ of Camden, Edward Allen said. It created a new atmosphere of loyalty and obligation in which the needs of Blacks were taken into consideration by some in the wealthy winter colony.” “Long afterward,” continues Tanenhaus, “Edward Allen, himself in his eighties, often strolled past in the evenings, remembering distant times there. ‘Every time, I look up at the heavens and thank God for the Buckleys.’”

When the season ended, Buckley Sr. “continued to employ the Kamschatka staff,” transferring some north every year to Great Elm, retaining others in Camden or hiring them out to other employers. The moral decency of the Buckleys as a family did not lead them to enlightened attitudes on federal civil rights laws, to be sure. It did suggest, however, that WFB was not being insincere in his appeal to Christian charity concerning the question of what to do about *de jure* segregation. “My position is that whatever are the differences among the races, and I suppose they exist,” he wrote, “they are utterly immaterial when put alongside...their unity in the brotherhood of man.” Tanenhaus emphasizes that although Buckley defended the South’s “deeply rooted folkways and mores,” he thought the political problems facing the South and the nation were rooted not in any supposed biological inferiority but in the temporary cultural and educational inferiority of blacks. He was searching for a non-racist defense of “Southern Civilization,” which proved difficult to find or sustain. This led him into some very bad arguments, such as dismissing the 14th and 15th Amendments to the Constitution as “inorganic accretions to the original document,” or comparing the National Guardsmen sent to Little Rock, Arkansas, to the Soviet tank commanders ordered to Hungary and Poland to reimpose Soviet control.

**N**ATIONAL REVIEW PRINTED BOZELL’S astute criticisms of some of Buckley’s weaker arguments, and at Bill’s instigation kept up a running debate among its contributors over the meaning of the Civil War and the Civil War amendments, as well as the implications of Abraham Lincoln’s statesmanship. These debates often pitted Willmoore Kendall, Frank Meyer, and later Mel Bradford, among others, against Socratic gadfly Harry V. Jaffa, the Straussian political scientist, who always praised Buckley



as his patron and sponsor and thanked him for insisting he be admitted to *N.R.*'s pages. Although Tanenhaus says too little about these important debates, or about Jaffa's influence on Buckley in the 1980s and later, he rightly points out the baleful influence that John C. Calhoun, the 19th-century defender of states' rights, nullification, and the "positive good" of black slavery, had on the mid-century conservative movement's defense of segregation.

Tanenhaus pays fresh attention, too, to the eye-opening effects on Buckley of his *Firing Line* conversations with black radicals like Huey Newton, Eldridge Cleaver, and Roy Innis, not to mention with civil rights pioneers like Muhammad Ali, Julian Bond, and John Lewis. It is true that Buckley was a very close listener, which helped to make him such a formidable debater. Tanenhaus even credits him with learning from his encounters with James Baldwin, and especially from the week-long national tour of black neighborhoods and ghettos organized for the press by the National Urban League in 1969. By 1970 the columnist who had questioned the wisdom of the 15th Amendment's extending the vote to blacks was arguing that "we need a Black president."

**P**ERHAPS THE MOST STRIKING ELEMENT of Tanenhaus's account of Buckley's views concerning the South and civil rights, however, is the light he shines on Bill's antipathy to George Wallace. Plenty of people around *N.R.*, especially the publisher, William Rusher, were eager to combine the GOP's economic conservatives with Wallace's social conservatives into what they were confident could be a new majority party—a conservative majority party, at last. Buckley and Reagan were cool to the idea, Reagan because he did not wish to abandon the GOP, and Buckley because he was "repulsed," in Tanenhaus's word, by Wallace's opportunism and Southern-fried demagoguery. Bill sensed that Wallace was genuinely dangerous to the republic, an essentially nihilist force, as Garry

Wills would describe him in *Nixon Agonistes* (1970). Resisting the conservative movement's gravitation toward Wallace was in its own way a contribution to civil rights and to helping the American center hold in the perilous circumstances of the late '60s.

"The revolution that changed America," the revolution in which "the man," Buckley, was intimately involved, is left strangely undefined in this book. Tanenhaus's position seems to be that Buckley himself never knew what conservatism was *for*, though he had lots of ideas concerning what it was *against*; and that after 27 years of studying Buckley, Tanenhaus doesn't know either, though he is confident his readers can tell who the greatest conservative of them all was. Nonetheless, some of the most luminous pages of this stimulating volume are devoted to Tanenhaus's discussions of Samuel Lubell, Mike Bernstein, and Kevin Phillips—not household names, but three of the best electoral analysts of the past 75 years. Each of these political analysts specialized in tying changes in partisan ideas and programs—what used to be dignified as "public philosophy"—to their effects on the voting allegiance of sectors of the electorate, and vice versa.

**T**Hese analysts' interpretation of the revolution that changed American politics uncovers not so much the Buckleyite revolution in ideas discussed in the pages of his magazine, what Frank Meyer at his most theoretical termed "fusionism," the result of combining tradition and liberty, or more precisely, traditionalism, libertarianism, and neoconservatism, but a rather different phenomenon. They observed a middle-class revolution, a cultural and political rebellion against the managerial elite, whether that elite was called the Machiavellians, the New Class, the pointy-heads, the knowledge sector, the ruling class, or the Deep State. American voters, as in the 2024 elections, proved themselves again and again to be conservative of American traditions, morals, and liberty out of a kind of patriotic love of their own, not out of fidelity to libertarian, traditionalist, or

any other kind of theory. This was the actual revolution that changed America, or at least attempted to change her.

"I can tell you that it surprised me," Neal Freeman [who worked at *N.R.* and in Buckley's mayoral campaign] recalled in 2005" to Tanenhaus. "I suppose that I was expecting our supporters [in 1965] to be *National Review* types—car dealers, academic moles, literate dentists, dissenting students, whatever. As soon as we hired halls, though, we learned that [Buckley] was speaking for the people who made the city go—corner-store owners, cops, schoolteachers, first-home owners, firemen, coping parents."

Buckley chose not to write his own autobiography, and Sam Tanenhaus is a brave man to agree to tell the story of a writer who could write a syndicated column in 20 minutes and a book in five or six weeks. Bill solved the problem by inventing a new literary form, the autobiography based on a busy week in his life—*Cruising Speed* (1971), and then because one week was not enough, a sequel based on another week in his life, called *Overdrive* (1983). How does one keep up? How does one do justice to WFB? By the end one can detect some languor creeping into Tanenhaus's narrative. He reaches 1976, the year of Reagan's primary challenge against Gerald Ford, by page 813. Reagan is elected president by page 824, the Berlin Wall falls on 846, Buckley is awarded an honorary degree at Yale in 2000, 50 years after his graduation, on page 859. Five pages later it is 2008 and he is with his God.

Bill Buckley was a great man, with a great capacity for friendship and excellence. To use the older language, he had a great soul. Perhaps that is what his fellow Americans recognized in him.

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