



Capital mourns conservative icon

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From Capitol Hill to the airwaves of talk radio, conservatives from multiple generations Wednesday hailed the influence and enduring impact of William F. Buckley, Jr. Seen as the leading intellectual of the conservative movement, Buckley was found dead at his desk in the study of his home in Stamford, Conn. He was 82.

The founder of National Review, Buckley set out early in his life to refashion conservatism and provide a formidable opposition to the dominant midcentury influence of liberal intellectuals. With an indefatigably acute mind and refined manner, he went on to play a pivotal and often defining role in a half-century of political debate.

"When I heard the news this morning, even though we conservatives are supposed to be realists, I couldn't believe it," said Kate O'Beirne, an editor at the Review. "He was larger than life, and what a life he had."

The acclaim was unceasing Wednesday as news of Buckley's death spread through Washington. The Heritage Foundation, the original conservative think tank, credited Buckley as its intellectual inspiration.

House Republican Whip Roy Blunt (Mo.) said in a statement that Buckley "was the indisputable leader of the conservative movement that laid the groundwork for the Reagan Revolution."

"Buckley lighted the fire," former Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole said in an interview. Dole was a regular viewer of Buckley's television show "Firing Line."

"He just always seemed so relaxed. He would lean back and had a pencil in his mouth. He had something that made you want to listen to the guy. He did use these high-powered words only him and Sen. [Daniel Patrick] Moynihan understood," Dole recalled. "He was a strong voice for conservatism, and he filled the void."

Buckley came of age at a time when conservatives faced the daunting task of finding a prominent spot on the national political stage. Democrats had held the White House for five terms.

Famously, it was Lionel Trilling who wrote in 1950 that "in the United States at this time, liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition."

Reflecting upon Trilling's statement in an interview in 2006, Buckley said, "It is a pity a Trilling comment would be so frequently quoted, because it is so manifestly obsolete." And it was Buckley, joined by seminal conservative thinkers such as Russell Kirk, who helped make Trilling's comment obsolete.

Buckley authored 45 books and continued to write a regular column until his death. That he died at his desk was seen by friends and colleagues as a fitting image for the end of an almost absurdly prolific life.

"It's absolutely the intellectual equivalent of dying with your boots on," said Ramesh

Ponnuru, a senior editor for the Review. "I always joked that his retirement was more active than most people's careers."

To the manner born, from his enunciation to his education to his wealth, Buckley stormed onto the national stage in 1951 with his book "God and Man at Yale." It was an indictment of the academic ivy tower for its perceived agnosticism to capitalism and to Christianity, as well as its antagonism to conservative thought.

Four years later, armed with \$100,000 from his father in seed money, Buckley founded National Review, which would become the first forum for a budding conservative coalition. Buckley's magazine would later become the bible for economic, cultural and national security conservatism.

"The magazine he founded ... is a beacon of reason for those who wish to find deeper meaning in the principles upon which our nation was founded," said Florida Rep. Adam Putnam, the third-ranking Republican in the House.

"He is irreplaceable. There will never be anyone else like him. His contribution to conservatism is pretty incalculable," said Rich Lowry, the editor of the Review. "And then there was everything else he did. The best-selling novels, the TV shows, the sailing, harpsichord concerts. He packed nine or 10 lifetimes in what was a full and a very joyful life."

A wordsmith even among wordsmiths, Buckley was unfailingly witty, an intellectual pugilist, a man who even in his last years exuded the boyish energy of the younger man who sought to revive a political party.

"At any dinner with him, he would recall when he was with Ferdinand Marcos or when he was with [Ronald] Reagan," Lowry said. "He knew everyone. Everyone knew him. He had a genius for friendship."

Buckley was also no strict partisan. He was a revolutionary, in the most conservative sense of the word.

Buckley only tepidly endorsed Dwight Eisenhower's bid for reelection in 1956, for example, in part due to Eisenhower's moderate brand of Republican thought.

In 1964, Buckley found a candidate more to his liking: Barry Goldwater, who undid the moderate Northeastern Republican establishment by defeating Nelson Rockefeller. The National Review cheered Goldwater, though Buckley told conservatives that they had to work harder if they wanted one of their own in the White House.

Buckley warned in 1965 that Goldwater could not "have wringed victory from so hostile a Zeitgeist. ... Unless conservatives realize that massive public education must precede any hope of a presidential victory, they will never have a president they can call their own."

Reagan, an avid National Review reader, would become the embodiment of Buckley's ambitions.

In his long life, Buckley would see the political philosophy he so cherished begin to wane. As Republicanism struggled in President George W. Bush's second term, Buckley expressed his grievances to the president. He was unnerved by neo-conservatism and had reservations about the war in Iraq.

Buckley told The New Yorker that “conservatism is to a considerable extent the acknowledgment of realities” and that neoconservatives were “surreal.” In a 2006 interview, Buckley said that the president “knows we are concerned” and wondered whether the president would “deport” himself from policies that Buckley was not shy in criticizing.

Famous for his televised debates with the likes of Norman Mailer and for launching the careers of writers from Joan Didion to Garry Wills, Buckley was “our first pundit,” as O’Beirne put it.

Rush Limbaugh devoted much of the first hour of his talk show to praising and remembering Buckley.

In meeting the icon for the first time at Buckley’s Park Avenue apartment, Limbaugh recalled being racked with nervousness and circling the block four times before going in.

“We conservatives owe William F. Buckley every bit the debt we owe Ronald Reagan,” Limbaugh said, adding that he ranked the conservative commentator “up along with America’s Founding Fathers.”

Still, Buckley had his regrets, few greater than his stand against the landmark civil rights legislation of the 1960s. But Buckley would later help purge his party of racial intolerance, and his place in history, even during his lifetime, was clear.

In an interview with Buckley in October 2005, conservative columnist George Will told him: “Without Bill Buckley, no National Review. Without National Review, no [Barry] Goldwater nomination. Without the Goldwater nomination, no conservative takeover of the Republican Party. Without that, no Reagan.

Without Reagan, no victory in the Cold War. Therefore, Bill Buckley won the Cold War.”

Buckley, always quick with a quip, replied: “That’s a very nice abbreviation, and I hope you will remind historians of it.”