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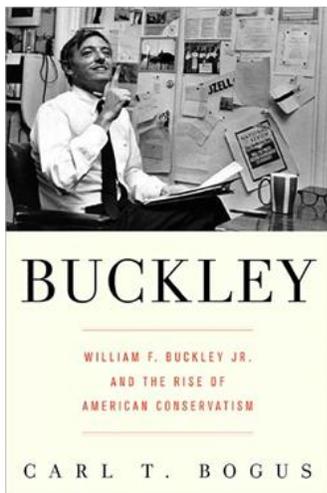
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Newsroom

Bogus on Buckley: A Review

The University Bookman offers a thoughtful and perceptive review of Professor Carl Bogus' new book, "Buckley: William F. Buckley, Jr. and the Rise of American Conservatism"

From THE UNIVERSITY BOOKMAN: "[Buckley and Individualist Conservatism](#)" by Gerald J. Russello



[Buckley: William F. Buckley, Jr. and the Rise of American](#)

[Conservatism](#)

by Carl T. Bogus.

Bloomsbury Press, 2011. 405 pp. \$30.00.

William F. Buckley, Jr. continues to stand as the representative conservative of the postwar era. Bon vivant, former CIA operative, heir to an oil fortune—not to mention best-selling writer of spy novels and founding editor of *National Review*, still conservatism's standard-bearer—and sometime ideological enforcer, Buckley was in many ways larger than life.

Buckley, who died in 2008 at the age of 82, demonstrated for many people that conservatism could combine erudition, style, and a sense of humor. What **Carl Bogus**, a professed liberal and **professor of law at Roger Williams University**, seeks to explain in this new book is how Buckley was able to so completely shape American conservatism in his image. **Bogus argues, effectively**, that Buckley was not only an engaging essayist and wit, but also conservatism's "commander in chief who made many of the strategic and tactical decisions that determined the fate of the conservative movement." This lively study is a welcome contribution to the scholarship of the American Right.



Following World War II,

conservatism was disdained by both Republican Party stalwarts, who tried to elect people like the liberal Wendell Willkie, and intellectuals such as Arthur Schlesinger Jr., who thought conservatism little more than irrational prejudice. But these were outside forces. **Bogus says** the real controversies were within conservatism itself. He focuses on the crucial years between 1951, when the young Buckley published his blockbuster *God and Man* at Yale, and 1968, the *annus terribilis* that both brought the counterculture to power and energized the conservative legions, eventually resulting in the election of Ronald Reagan, who had himself been converted from New Deal liberalism through his reading of *National Review*.

In those years, conservatism was divided among the traditionalists, libertarians, and the ex-Communists. The traditionalists were represented politically by Robert A. Taft and intellectually by the influential critic Russell Kirk, an early *National Review* contributor and author of the foundational text *The Conservative Mind* (1953). Kirk — whom **Bogus treats** respectfully here, better than most liberal commentators — advocated a conservatism, derived from Edmund Burke, that favored gradual change, a small role for government with an emphasis on preserving and strengthening local communities, and an allergy to foreign entanglements.

The implacable Frank Meyer was both ex-Communist and libertarian. Though they vehemently disagreed on conservatism's true nature, both Kirk and Meyer became writers for *National Review*. **Bogus recounts** Buckley's careful courting of these rivals to bring them under the *National Review* umbrella. Buckley was able to unite these schools because he was himself the embodiment of conservatism's various strands: both libertarian and traditional, religious and cosmopolitan, elitist yet opposed to the liberal knowledge classes. Thus when Buckley pronounced certain ideas beyond the pale—most famously, his ostracism of the John Birch Society and the Ayn Randians—they stayed there.

By the time the cultural revolution arrived in 1968, because of Buckley "[c]onservatism was no longer a philosophy about community—a hallmark of Burkeanism; it had become a philosophy of individualism.

Conservatism was no longer wary of military adventurism,” a position that would be better known as neoconservatism. More than any other figure, **Bogus contends**, Buckley transformed a conservatism into a political program based on the individual and a strong nationalism.

Bogus unearths the roots of Buckley’s libertarian streak in this example of his father, Will Buckley, who went to Mexico penniless and came back successful. Bogus finds that the younger Buckley derived a strong sense of individualism from this history, which initially overcame the religious and traditionalist elements in his conservatism. This sometimes translated into shallow critiques of traditionalist thinking, or his holding on too long to positions inconsistent with conservatism, and even of his individualist brand, such as prolonged military actions.

Bogus, however, slightly overstates his case. Buckley became more Burkean as he grew older—acknowledging error in supporting the second Iraq war, for example—and he always maintained a strong affinity for conservative ideas about community, tradition, and the family. (Kirk, meanwhile, was more of an individualist than Bogus acknowledges.) **Bogus’s interpretation** implicitly collapses a capitalist individualism that is more Randian into a Buckleyite mold, which might easily lend itself to a cheap shot at what passes for conservatism today.

Better to say that Buckley used his extraordinary personal abilities to create the kind of culture one would want to preserve. For that achievement, he remains in many ways an admirable conservative.

Gerald J. Russello is editor of The University Bookman (bookman.kirkcenter.org).

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