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# BUCKLEY

*William F. Buckley Jr.  
and the Rise of  
American Conservatism*

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For Elizabeth, Ian, and Zoe

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## Preface

“[It is] no more possible to conduct affairs of state without reference to political philosophy than it is to do business without money.”

—WHITNEY GRISWOLD<sup>1</sup>

William F. Buckley Jr. is one of the most consequential figures in the latter half of the twentieth century. He refashioned conservatism and propelled it into becoming a powerful force in American intellectual and political life. Conservatism as it existed before Buckley was a different philosophy. The rise of modern conservatism as we know it today would never have happened without Buckley—and the course of history would not have been the same.

Buckley was not a political philosopher with original ideas. He more or less inherited his ideas from his father and took them for granted. He took a disparate collection of ideas—some of which were contradictory or disdained even by leading conservatives of the day—melded them together, and personally represented this new ideology so appealingly that many people became Buckley-style conservatives because they passionately admired William F. Buckley Jr. Yet Buckley was no piper. He did not place himself, alone, at the head of a column of followers. He selected other leaders and promoted them and their ideas. He established not merely a band of followers but a community. He encouraged wide—but not unlimited—discussion and debate. When he believed other conservative leaders offered ideas that threatened his core vision, he deftly marginalized them or decisively excommunicated them. In all of these ways and more, Buckley created a movement.

This book will focus on the seminal period of the creation of the modern conservative movement, which I believe to be from 1955 to 1968. It was in 1955 that Buckley founded *National Review*, and by 1968—a year of enormous political and social turmoil in America—he had largely completed the process of defining conservatism and fashioning a robust movement to advance it. The introduction includes a section defining what conservatism was before Buckley because that is necessary to understanding how he changed it. And chapter 1 deals with events before 1955, including Buckley's father's experiences in Mexico during the Mexican Revolution, because that is necessary to understanding the environment in which the ideas Buckley inherited were initially formed.

I should tell the reader up front that I am a liberal and thus critical—in some instances, highly critical—of Buckley's ideology. I nevertheless admire William F. Buckley Jr. enormously. He was an imperfect human being as all of us are, but he was a man of marvelous talents. Moreover, as someone who dedicated his career to promoting ideas he believed would be good for America, he was a true patriot. I take solace from knowing that Buckley was not thin-skinned. He could take as well as he could give, and what he could give to liberals and others with whom he disagreed was considerable.

He would undoubtedly have disagreed with much in this book, but I hope he would have found merit in the treatment of him and the movement he shaped carefully considered, fair, and provocative in the best sense of the word.

Although I am a committed liberal, I believe liberalism and conservatism are the yin and yang of American political thought. America can achieve no balance and perhaps no wisdom without both of them. Like many, I am disheartened by the present state of partisan animosity. I believe one solution to this state of affairs is to take opposing ideas seriously. That does not mean pulling punches in debate; it means honestly trying to understand the other side. This book is my contribution to that effort.

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## Introduction

An illustration of a man appeared on the cover of the November 3, 1967, issue of *Time* magazine. The man held a pen in his right hand, its tip casually touching his lower lip, and he peered out at the reader with a droll expression. No identification was necessary. The visage was unmistakable and as instantly recognizable as that of a movie star or high government official. A small caption read WILLIAM F. BUCKLEY/CONSERVATISM CAN BE FUN.

The story described then forty-two-year-old Buckley's current activities: Buckley wrote a syndicated column, *On the Right*, which was carried three times per week by 205 newspapers; he edited the conservative journal of opinion *National Review*, which he founded twelve years earlier and that now boasted a circulation of ninety-four thousand; he wrote frequently for other major magazines; he hosted a weekly TV show, *Firing Line*, on which he interviewed—or, perhaps more accurately, debated—many of the nation's most prominent political figures and intellectuals; he even taught a course relating conservative principles to urban problems at the New School for Social Research. Buckley was also the author of seven books, and he had made a big splash two years earlier when he ran for mayor of New York City. Buckley was, moreover, a celebrity. He was a frequent guest on *The Tonight Show* and similar programs. He and his wife, Pat, a handsome and elegant couple—had been recently featured on the cover of *Town & Country*.

*Time's* article presented three principal themes about Buckley; two were on the mark but the third was terribly mistaken. As the cover suggested, *Time's* first theme was that Buckley was enormous fun. He had charisma, panache, and a wit that was often breathtakingly surprising. At a press conference during his 1965 New York City mayoral race, for example, Buckley was asked if he really wanted to be mayor. His response: "I have never considered it." When asked how many votes he expected to get, he replied, "Conservatively speaking, one." This prompted a reporter to ask, "What would you do if you were elected?" "Demand a recount," Buckley answered.

When, several years later, Buckley was asked why as a conservative complaining about the decadence of American culture he consented to give an interview to *Playboy*, he answered, "To communicate my views to my son." When asked why Robert F. Kennedy consistently refused to appear with him on *Firing Line*, Buckley replied, "Why does the baloney reject the grinder?" It is no wonder that an MIT political scientist told *Time* that Buckley was "an exceedingly witty, attractive and rather insidious spokesman for a point of view for which I have few sympathies." He added, "But if we don't want to die of sheer boredom, the Buckleys should be encouraged."

*Time's* second theme was that Buckley's brilliance was superficial. The article put it this way: "Buckley is a gifted polemicist; a philosopher he is not." This too was accurate. Buckley was far more clever than thoughtful. Indeed, the article reported that Buckley was then working on a book to be titled *The Revolt Against the Masses*. Though *Time* did not say it, Buckley intended this to be his grand work of political philosophy, in which he would elaborate his breed of conservatism. Buckley

ultimately was to produce fifty-seven books, yet he never was able to finish that one. It was not for want of trying. He had devoted his two-month winter vacation in 1964 in Gstaad, Switzerland, to writing *Revolt Against the Masses*—Gstaad is where he wrote many of his books, writing in the morning and skiing in the afternoons, and attending dinner parties in the evenings—but his routine failed him this time round. He had produced only ten thousand words, about 10 percent of a book, and what he had gotten down on paper showed that he was floundering. He was simply lost when he sat down and tried to elaborate a coherent political philosophy.

Trying to set forth the basic principles of his philosophy also forced Buckley to confront the fact that many of the ideas he expressed with such verve and wit were inconsistent. Buckley had famously said that he would “sooner be governed by the first two thousand people in the Boston telephone directory, than by the two thousand members of the faculty of Harvard University.” This was a clever put-down of what Buckley denounced as the “intellectual elite.” The problem was that Buckley was not a populist. A good part of him wanted an elite group to govern America; he just wanted it to be a conservative elite rather than the then-dominant liberal elite.

*Time*'s third theme was that Buckley was too much an individualist to be a leader and not savvy enough about practical politics to make a difference. “Daily, Bill Buckley stands at some conservative Armageddon, but not as the leader of an army or even a division.” Buckley was, according to *Time*, “a solitary sniper.” “Sometimes,” the story said, “even an enemy smiles as Buckley hits the mark, but sometimes his own rhetorical smoke obscures the target. Yet he never tires of the battle. Or is it sport?” “Nowhere was Buckley's lack of realism as a politician better demonstrated than in his 1964 madcap race for mayor,” said *Time*. All Buckley accomplished by running for mayor of New York—winning and capturing 13.4 percent of the vote in a three-way race—was to drain away votes from the conservative Democrat and thereby elect the candidate Buckley most disliked, liberal Republican John Lindsay. According to *Time*, Barry Goldwater told Buckley, “As a political kingmaker, you're doing it the wrong-way Corrigan.”

*Time*, however, was exceedingly wrong about Buckley's leadership and influence. The magazine's ultimate take on Buckley was that he was entertaining but inconsequential. *Time* argued that Buckley's fatal flaw was his lack of realism, and it offered the following example: “His politics largely formed by the neat formulations of books rather than everyday life, Buckley would like to see a clear-cut ideological division between the two parties: all the conservatives in the Republican Party, all the liberals in the Democratic.” Buckley failed to grasp that this was unrealistic, said *Time*, because he “misunderstands the fluid nature of U.S. party politics.”

Buckley was certainly entertaining but he was not a mere entertainer. He was a man with a mission—to refashion conservatism and bring it to power—and he pursued that mission prodigiously, relentlessly, and brilliantly. He used every vehicle he could think of to advance his cause. When, in September 1959, Nikita Khrushchev visited the United States at President Eisenhower's invitation, Buckley had *National Review* rent Carnegie Hall for a protest rally. Remarks by the eleven speakers at that rally—and especially those by the twenty-nine-year-old Buckley—made an impact, not only on the more than two thousand people who attended, but also through media reports on people throughout the country. Buckley would also write a series of spy mysteries, several of which became national bestsellers. These books were fun, but they also promoted Buckley's worldview about the Cold War.



and foreign affairs.

Because of his wit, playfulness, and élan, Buckley's seriousness of purpose was often underestimated. Buckley ran for mayor of New York City neither for sport nor to win. He ran to use the race as a platform for promoting conservatism. *Time* observed that Buckley's campaign "momentarily fascinated many liberals with some thoughtful proposals," but far more important Buckley recruited to the movement people with conservative sensibilities.

Buckley founded *National Review* with the goal of reaching "a relatively select group of people, the opinion makers, mostly, and future opinion makers."<sup>1</sup> He hoped this would become a "small, but crucial group" of about 150,000 people. *Time* did not realize just how effectively Buckley was achieving that goal. Nor did *Time* realize how profound an impact Buckley and his cohorts at *National Review* were then having on two generations of future leaders—the generation then on the threshold of power, and the following generation of young men and women who were then in school or college.

When Buckley founded *National Review* in 1955, Barry Goldwater, then forty-six, was the junior senator from Arizona. From time to time, Goldwater's blunt way of speaking got attention, but attention is not the same thing as respect. Few of the nation's kingmakers—key journalists and party leaders—thought of Goldwater as a national figure until June of 1960, when his iconic manifesto, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, was released. The book was an instant bestseller. By the fall, half a million copies were in print, and Goldwater was being discussed as a possible future presidential nominee. Although some of the book was drawn from his speeches, Goldwater himself could not have produced so evocative a statement of conservatism. *Conscience* was ghostwritten by Buckley's brother-in-law and *National Review* associate, L. Brent Bozell. The following fall William A. Rusher, publisher of *National Review*, helped create the National Draft Goldwater Committee, the organization that shoved a reluctant Goldwater—who realized his candidacy was premature and that he was being used to build a conservative constituency for the future—into the 1964 presidential race.<sup>2</sup>

Ronald Reagan was forty-four, a liberal Democrat, and a fan of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal when Buckley formed *National Review*. Reagan had begun drifting away from acting. He had taken a job the year before as a spokesperson for General Electric. His job was to host *General Electric Theater* Sunday evenings on CBS, and to travel the country speaking at GE facilities in forty states, as well as to civic groups in communities where those facilities were located. By making Reagan's sunny visage the public face of GE, Reagan's boss—Lemuel Boulware, who was in charge of labor relations and public relations—hoped to increase the company's goodwill. Boulware, however, had strong political views: He believed that conservatism would be good for business generally, for GE specifically, and for the country as a whole. He was one of *National Review's* original financial backers. Boulware gave Reagan (as well as senior GE managers) a reading list, and high on that list were *National Review* and Buckley's syndicated newspaper columns.

Reagan became one of the magazine's earliest subscribers. Because he hated to fly, Reagan's contract with GE stipulated he could travel by train. This gave him plenty of time with Buckley at *National Review*, and other conservative writers assigned by Boulware. Reagan emerged from his seven-year stint with GE as a conservative. *National Review* ideas and rhetoric shaped Reagan's basic message, developed in what friends called The Speech, the talk Reagan gave to countless community groups, constantly refining it until it was pitch-perfect.<sup>3</sup> (Reagan became a national political figure of

October 27, 1964, when he delivered a half-hour version of *The Speech* on NBC in support of Goldwater's presidential campaign.) Reagan gave Buckley and *National Review* much of the credit for his conversion. The year after he assumed the presidency, Reagan awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom to James Burnham, who was Buckley's de facto number two at *National Review* and author of its foreign policy column titled *The Third World War*. "I owe [you] a personal debt," Reagan told Burnham when he conferred the medal, "because throughout the years traveling the mashed-potato circuit I have quoted you widely."<sup>4</sup>

The following generation was even more deeply affected by Buckley and his magazine. These were baby boomers, born in the post-World War II era, and raised during a time of both rapidly expanding material wealth and existential anxiety. On the one hand, modern technology was producing an unprecedented cornucopia of benefits for a rapidly expanding middle class—single-family homes, automobiles, televisions, refrigerators, automatic dishwashers, clothes washers and driers, leisure time, vacation travel, and college educations. At the same time, modern technology had produced the equally unprecedented terror of nuclear war. The prospect of a conflagration snuffing out all life on earth was chillingly real. It is no surprise that this generation would become acutely politically aware and seek a worldview that offered both meaning and solutions. The dominant culture was liberal, and those who turned left for answers readily found thinkers who spoke to them. But young people with conservative sensibilities felt lost until they discovered Buckley and his magazine.

Karl Rove was about fifteen when he discovered *National Review* at the Sparks, Nevada, library. "I eagerly awaited its arrival each week, devouring articles using words I didn't know (such as *denouement*) but whose meaning I could often guess," Rove said in his autobiography. "I couldn't get my hands on Buckley's books quickly enough. At age fifteen I laughed out loud all the way through *The Unmaking of a Mayor*," he continued. Rush Limbaugh has written: "I grew up on *National Review* and Mr. Buckley. Aside from my father, he's the most influential man in my life." When, as a young lawyer, future Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito applied for a job in the Department of Justice, he wrote in his application: "When I first became interested in government and politics during the 1960s, the greatest influences on my views were the writings of William F. Buckley, Jr., the *National Review*, and Barry Goldwater's 1964 campaign." That is how Alito signaled to Reaganites then in charge of the department that he was one of them.

Conservative historian George H. Nash writes:

As the only significantly avowedly conservative journal of opinion for a long time after 1955, *National Review* was far more indispensable to the Right than any single liberal journal was to the Left ... If *National Review* (or something like it) had not been founded, there would probably have been no cohesive intellectual force on the Right in the 1960s and 1970s. To a very substantial degree, the history of reflective conservatism in America after 1955 is the history of the individuals who collaborated in—or were discovered by—the magazine William F. Buckley, Jr. founded.<sup>5</sup>

When we consider *Time*'s article from our present vantage point, we cannot help being struck by its statement that Buckley was unrealistic—evidenced, according to *Time*, by Buckley's wish that the

Republican Party become exclusively conservative and the Democratic Party exclusively liberal. Y  
Time magazine was not wrong; Buckley's view was, in fact, unrealistic based on the realities of 1960.  
What happened, quite simply, is that Buckley and his colleagues changed America's political realities.  
It was a feat so great that it is almost impossible to overstate.

Conservatism was moribund when Buckley founded *National Review* in 1955. The Republican Party  
had consistently rejected conservatism's champion, Senator Robert A. Taft of Ohio, in favor of a  
series of progressives: Wendell Willkie in 1940, Thomas E. Dewey in 1944 and 1948, and Dwight D. Eisenhower,  
who when elected president in 1952 identified himself as a "modern Republican" and a  
"liberal Republican." Conservatism was on its deathbed not only in the realm of active politics but  
the intellectual world as well. In his 1950 book, *The Liberal Imagination*, the acute observer of the  
American scene Lionel Trilling had written: "In the United States at this time liberalism is not only  
the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition. For it is the plain fact that nowadays there are no  
conservative or reactionary ideas in general circulation."<sup>6</sup>

Conservatism was not merely out of favor; it was disrespected. The leading public intellectuals  
of the day—people such as Lionel Trilling, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., and John Kenneth Galbraith—looked  
down on both conservatism as a philosophy and those who were foolish enough to subscribe to it. This  
was not new; a century earlier, John Stuart Mill had called conservatives the "stupid party." Social  
scientists were now saying research showed that Mill was right. Political scientist Herbert McClosky  
conducted a series of sophisticated studies involving thousands of subjects. First, he tested and refined  
questionnaires that determined how liberal or conservative someone was; then he correlated those  
results with other instruments that revealed characteristics about the individual subjects. "By every  
measure available to us," McClosky wrote in the *American Political Science Review* in 1955,  
"conservative beliefs are found most frequently among the uninformed, the poorly educated, and  
as far as we can determine, the less intelligent."<sup>7</sup> Only 12 percent of the most conservative group had  
some college education compared to 47 percent of the most liberal group. It is perhaps telling that  
McClosky labeled the most conservative group "Extreme Conservatives" and the most liberal group  
"Liberals," as if only people with very conservative views were extreme.

On an "Awareness Scale" that McClosky said reflected "not only actual knowledge but also the  
clarity of one's grasp of the social process, past and present" and also served "as a crude intelligence  
test," 66 percent of Extreme Conservatives scored low while only 9 percent scored high. The Liberal  
group was just the opposite: Only 9 percent scored low and 54 percent scored high. A separate  
measure of "Intellectuality" produced nearly identical results. "The data show clearly ... that the most  
articulate and informed classes in our society are preponderantly liberal in their outlook," he wrote.  
McClosky also gave his subjects psychological tests and found that conservatives were more  
submissive, alienated, bewildered, suspicious, hostile, rigid, and pessimistic, and had far lower self-  
confidence and higher levels of guilt than liberals—differences that remained after controlling for  
education and social status.

Of course, not all conservatives were dull witted or dysfunctional, but conservative causes attracted  
far more than their fair share of kooks and bigots. Even Buckley privately lamented, "Why is it on  
this side is afflicted with all the loonies?"<sup>8</sup> One of Buckley's first lessons in just how prevalent

undesirables were in the conservative ranks occurred in 1959 when he decreed that no one on the masthead of the *National Review* could write for *American Mercury*, the journal once edited by the great H. L. Mencken that had since become virulently anti-Semitic. When his edict became public, Buckley found himself pelted with angry letters from *National Review* subscribers who were also faithful readers of *American Mercury*. To one such letter writer who demanded that Buckley cancel his *National Review* subscription, an exasperated Buckley replied:

I have this day instructed the circulation department to cancel your subscription to *National Review* and to make you an appropriate refund. I have also instructed the department that it is not to enter a subscription from you in the future, unless it comes accompanied by a sworn affidavit to the effect that you will no longer pester us with any of your ignorant letters.<sup>9</sup>

By becoming its most prominent adherent, Buckley gave conservatism a new image. Buckley was well educated, accomplished, wealthy, handsome, self-assured, cosmopolitan, witty, and apparently erudite. Not only had he been educated at Yale but even as a student he had made Yale sit up and take notice. As chairman of the *Yale Daily News* (the paper's equivalent of editor in chief), Buckley seized the comfortably liberal campus by its lapels and shook it with biting conservative editorials. Just two years out of college, he wrote a nationally bestselling book, and four years later founded what would become the most influential journal of political opinion of its time.

Buckley seemed to have six careers—magazine editor, newspaper columnist, writer of nonfiction books and articles, novelist, host of a weekly television show, and public speaker—any one of which would have been a full-time occupation for most mortals. He is surely one of the most prolific writers in American history, leaving behind fifty-seven books, four thousand newspaper columns, and four hundred articles and book reviews, not only in *National Review* but other magazines such as the *New Yorker* and *Esquire*. Moreover, Buckley did not merely do many things; he did many things superlatively well. He won not only the Best Columnist of the Year Award (1967), but also an Emmy for Outstanding Achievement (1969), an American Book Award for Best Mystery in paperback (1980), and a Lowell Thomas Travel Journalism Award (1989). He also received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President George H. W. Bush in 1991.

It was not merely Buckley's talents that caused young men and women to so admire—and secretly desire to emulate—him, it was his style and elegance as well. Buckley's baritone voice and unique speech pattern made him sound learned, aristocratic, and perhaps slightly British. His language was sprinkled with the most wonderful, arcane words—words such as gallimaufry, rodomontade, and belletristic—that sent even professors scurrying for dictionaries. He was not showboating (at least, not entirely). He used these words precisely and naturally, just as much in private letters as in published writings.<sup>1</sup> Veteran publishers thought using such words ill advised. William Loeb, publisher of the archconservative *Manchester Union Leader*, sought to go over the young editor's head by warning Bill's father, Will Buckley, about the foolishness of using such words. "The word 'usufructs' has no place in any popular magazine, and is one of the reasons the circulation of *National Review* doesn't go up any faster," Loeb wrote to Will in a private letter.<sup>10</sup> The reply Loeb received came directly from



I am sorry you don't like words like "usufruct." I think one of the most precious possessions of the English speaking world is a large and very subtle vocabulary. I believe everyone should make a modest effort to pass on to the next generation as beautiful and flexible a language as he inherited. That responsibility the editors of *National Review* undertake, in a moderate way, to assume.<sup>11</sup>

When Bill began writing a syndicated newspaper column, James J. Kilpatrick, editor of the *Richmond News Leader*, warned him against forcing upon editors "a vocabulary they simply cannot bring to the day's page."<sup>12</sup> Buckley did seem thereafter to try to rein in his vocabulary for his newspaper column, although not for magazine articles, books, or public appearances. Bill turned out to be right: *National Review* readers liked being talked up to. It made them feel part of a highbrow community.

If Buckley was fun to read, he was positively galvanizing to listen to or watch, all the more so because he sliced up debating partners and constantly delighted audiences with his wit. And enthralled high school and college students also knew that Buckley lived an enviable life: He was married to a beautiful woman, skied in Switzerland, sailed (twice across the Atlantic Ocean), enjoyed music and high culture, and counted among his friends famous writers, movie stars, and at least one president.

Buckley's first contribution to conservatism, therefore, was to become its most visible representative. When people thought of conservatives, they no longer thought of simpletons and screwballs, or even the admirable but gray Senator Robert A. Taft, but of Buckley. Committed conservatives felt safe coming out of the closet to friends and co-workers; young men and women of conservative sensibilities had someone to emulate. Having Buckley as a leader made it possible to assemble a conservative army—the very army, in fact, that in 1967 *Time* magazine did not think existed. Subscribers to *National Review* were not merely readers of a magazine; they were part of a movement.

Buckley was not just the public face of conservatism; he was also its commander in chief who made many of the strategic and tactical decisions that determined the fate of the conservative movement. His first task was to decide who should write for and edit *National Review*, and then to recruit them. Many of the people Buckley wanted were prima donnas. They had to be wooed, and once on board required attentive care and feeding. There was intramural strife. Some members of the *National Review* inner circle disliked other members; some believed that views advocated by others were apostasy. In recruiting—and then keeping happy and productive—a cadre of conservative thinkers with large egos, eccentricities, and interpersonal animosities, Buckley exercised the same kinds of skills that General Dwight David Eisenhower deployed in leading fellow generals Sir Bernard Montgomery, George Patton, and Charles de Gaulle. Making his role especially challenging was Buckley's relative youth. It would have been easy for a callow young man to be steamrolled by more established and experienced luminaries of the conservative firmament.

Buckley, however, was up to the challenge. He was young but not callow. His interpersonal skills—which he consciously developed during a tour in the army—were considerable. He knew how to flatter

without kowtowing. He was charming. He was generous. He genuinely liked people, and respected them for their particular skills (while recognizing their deficits). But Buckley also possessed the will to lay down the law when necessary, and because he held all of the *National Review* common stock with voting rights, he had the ability to do so.

Buckley became so respected that he was also able to read individuals and groups out of the conservative movement. In 1955, it was difficult to draw distinctions between reputable and disreputable conservatives, to demark the boundaries of responsible conservatism, to discern when debate was healthy and when it was dangerously divisive. Repudiating fellow conservatives would be viewed by some as treasonous. Buckley would be told time and again that conservatives must hang together or they would all hang separately. But Buckley understood that if conservatives were to shed the image of being wacky, dysfunctional, and anti-intellectual, they had to separate themselves from the kooks. In addition, while a healthy movement benefits from a considerable breadth of views and robust discussion, it also needs to remain coherent. Buckley's determinations to amputate gangrenous limbs comprise some of the most intriguing portions of the story to come. It was sometimes uncertain whether the surgery itself would prove fatal.

For Buckley, *National Review* was a vehicle for fashioning a new political philosophy and bringing it to political power. He never saw the magazine merely as a pulpit for preaching to the converted; he was particularly interested in readers who could be brought into the fold. "I want the students, the professors, the tentatively interested readers, who are looking in, many of them, wondering whether conservatives have the right idea," he explained.<sup>13</sup> Among other things, Buckley persuaded financial backers to provide free *National Review* subscriptions to students and school libraries.

Buckley was also the principal financial engine for the magazine. No national journal of opinion—whether *National Review* or magazines on the left such as the *Nation* and *New Republic*—has ever been able to sustain itself on subscriptions and advertising alone. When he launched the magazine, Bill's father helped by plunking down \$100,000 (the equivalent of more than \$750,000 today), and Bill raised more than \$300,000 by selling debentures and nonvoting stock to a few other wealthy conservatives. The need to raise money never ended however. Buckley did not enjoy fund-raising, but he devoted considerable portions of his time to it nonetheless. Moreover, he never personally drew salary from *National Review*.<sup>14</sup> In 1959, he got an agent to book him on the lecture circuit for a couple of weeks in both the fall and the spring. His typical speaker's fee in the early years was \$300 to \$400 per lecture plus expenses, about \$2,100 to \$2,800 in today's dollars.

Buckley's greatest contribution was redefining conservatism. Almost from its founding, *National Review* became the quasi-official organ of the movement. Conservative views were those that *National Review* published. In his role as editor in chief, from the time the magazine was founded in 1955 until 1990 when he retired from that position, Buckley not only commissioned articles and hired and fired the magazine's regular columnists but—with the exception only of when he was vacationing or on the lecture circuit—was the principal editor of the editorial section and decided whether or not to run every signed article published by the magazine.<sup>15</sup> Buckley determined not only *National Review*'s editorial positions but, far more importantly, who would write for the magazine, what they would write about, which arguments would be presented and which would not, and how much space and prominence would be given to particular topics and writers. When editors or writers drifted too far

from what he deemed permissible, Buckley, as he himself put it, banished them.<sup>16</sup> These cumulative decisions fashioned conservatism. Thus, what Buckley was unable to do reflectively—sitting down to write a great treatise of conservatism—he did intuitively in response to the flow of current events.

Journals of opinion have exerted a special influence on American politics and policy. The *Nation* was an important voice during the progressive era, and both the *Nation* and the *New Republic* were vital promoters of the New Deal. It was the examples set by these magazines that persuaded Buckley that the conservative movement needed a journal of opinion. But *National Review* became much more than the right's counterpart to those journals. Its circulation grew to exceed that of any other opinion journal, but that is not what most differentiated it. Buckley, and thus *National Review*, personified American conservatism in a way unparalleled by other journals. Readers of other magazines read an article and thought, *That's interesting!* Subscribers of *National Review* read an article and thought, *That's what conservatives think! That's how conservatives think!*

Buckley did not act alone. Despite all of his individual achievements, he was more the conductor of an orchestra than a one-man band. The orchestra was, of course, the writers and editors of *National Review*, and the expanding conservative intellectual community it spawned. Buckley not only recruited established figures for his magazines but he also discovered some of the greatest new talents of his time, among them Garry Wills, Joan Didion, John Leonard, George F. Will, David Brooks, and Richard Brookhiser, all of whom began their careers (or in Will's case, began writing for a general audience rather than for scholarly journals) at *National Review*. Today, of course, Wills, Didion, and the late John Leonard are considered liberals. They are some of the writers who strayed too far from conservative doctrine and either departed voluntarily or were banished by Buckley.

The principal battles and intrigue at *National Review* that led to redefining conservatism, however, were not between conservatives and liberals. They were among conservatives. Besides Buckley, three figures are of special importance to this story.

The first is Russell Kirk. Like Buckley, Kirk was propelled to fame as a young man. Kirk was an obscure, thirty-five-year-old assistant professor of history at what is now Michigan State University when, in 1953, he wrote *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot*, a book that has been described as the “landmark study” that provided conservatives “with a sense that their movement had inherited a serious intellectual legacy.”<sup>17</sup> *Time* magazine greeted its publication with an especially long and laudatory review, and the first printing sold out by the end of the month. Kirk's book was so successful that he resigned his appointment at Michigan State to earn his livelihood as an independent writer and lecturer in the conservative establishment. More than half a century later, *The Conservative Mind* is still widely read, and it is considered one of the iconic conservative texts.

Kirk rooted conservatism in the philosophy of eighteenth-century British statesman Edmund Burke. “Burke's is the true school of conservative thought,” Kirk declared. Burke believed that societies had become constructed in particular ways for particular reasons, even though the reasons were not always apparent. For Burke, this did not mean that change should be resisted. On the contrary, Burke was a reformer, and Kirk acknowledged that Burke was both a liberal and a conservative. Burke believed that changes should be made carefully and with a healthy respect for the risks of unintended consequences. Cultures were different, and their differences gave rise to different governments.

societal structures, and religions. No form of government was universally best; no great religion possessed greater truth than others. Burke was a pragmatist who eschewed overarching philosophies. Public policy had to take into account a host of factors including sociology, economics (Adam Smith considered Burke one of the few people who truly understood his theories), and most especially history.

When William F. Buckley founded *National Review*, Kirk, quite understandably, was one of the people he most wanted to recruit. Kirk was happy to come on board. But when Kirk saw the magazine's masthead, he was much less happy. Kirk stunned Buckley by vehemently objecting to having his name "cheek by jowl" on the masthead with two libertarians. Buckley tried to assuage Kirk by explaining that *National Review* was dedicated to reexamining the nature of conservatism by presenting a variety of viewpoints. Kirk would have none of it. He considered libertarianism a threat to the republic. If libertarians were to be on the masthead, Kirk's name would have to be removed. He agreed to write a regular column titled *From the Academy* for *National Review*, but he would not lend his name as an editor to any periodical that welcomed libertarians.

A second individual of importance is one of the libertarians whose name on the masthead so upset Kirk, namely, Frank S. Meyer. Meyer, who was forty-six when Buckley founded *National Review*, had studied at Princeton, Oxford, and the London School of Economics, where he had become a committed communist. He served the party as educational director in Illinois and Indiana before making a dramatic switch to the political right. Buckley appointed Meyer book review editor, and also assigned him a regular column called *Principles and Heresies*.

One thing that Kirk and Meyer had in common was their iconoclasm: Kirk lived a nearly Luddite existence without radio and phonograph in remote Mecosta, Michigan; Meyer lived a nocturnal existence—his workday generally began around five P.M. in rural Woodstock, New York. Another thing they had in common was that they both converted to Catholicism. Kirk, who had been brought up by non-church-going parents, converted to Catholicism when he was forty-six. Meyer, who had been raised Jewish, made the final submission on his deathbed. (Jeffrey Hart was a third member of the *National Review* circle who converted to Catholicism.) In fact, Catholicism—or more precisely, right-wing Catholic tradition—was integral to Buckley and *National Review*'s philosophy, particularly in the early years when the magazine routinely published articles about Catholic theology.

Despite these personal similarities, Meyer and Kirk both saw themselves as ideological adversaries. It is often said that Frank Meyer was the architect of "fusionism," sometimes described as fusing libertarianism and traditional conservatism. That is not entirely correct. The confusion originates from an article by Brent Bozell that made such a claim, but in fact Meyer wrote a subsequent article "to plead innocent" to Bozell's "indictment."<sup>18</sup> Meyer explained he advocated fusing libertarianism with virtue, not with traditional conservatism. While traditional conservatives also place great importance on virtue, the disagreements between the two schools of thought are profound and irreconcilable. Libertarians believe in the transcendent importance of the individual while traditional conservatives stress the importance of the community. Libertarians want the free market to be as unregulated as possible while traditional conservatives believe that big business, if unconstrained, can impoverish national life and threaten freedom. Libertarians believe a strong state threatens freedom while traditional conservatives believe that a strong state—properly constructed to ensure that too much



power does not accumulate in any one branch—is necessary to ensure freedom.

Libertarians and traditional conservatives even disagree about such fundamental issues as what words such as *freedom* and *liberty* mean. Libertarianism is elaborated from a set of abstract principles. Its first principle is that there is an overarching natural right that no government may legitimately curtail: “the right to live your life as you choose so long as you don’t infringe on the equal right of others.”<sup>19</sup> By contrast, traditional conservatives prefer specifics to abstractions. “Abstract liberty, like other abstractions, is not to be found,” Edmund Burke famously declared.<sup>20</sup> To Burke, Kirk, and other traditional conservatives, rights come not from God, nature, or a priori reasoning; they are products of experience. They are, in the best sense of the term, socially constructed.

Frank Meyer argued that the state has only two natural functions: “to protect the rights of citizens against violent or fraudulent assault and to judge in conflicts of right with right.”<sup>21</sup> He believed that government should maintain police, courts of law, and a military to protect citizens against foreign assault, but little else. “To give to it in addition any further power is fraught with danger,” he wrote. The idea that government should provide institutions and public services that citizens cannot profitably furnish fits comfortably with Burkean philosophy but not with libertarianism.

To traditional conservatives such as Russell Kirk, libertarianism would lead to decadence, deterioration, and decay. Kirk believed that by glorifying the individual, the free market, and the dog-eat-dog struggle for material success, libertarianism weakened community, promoted materialism, and undermined appreciation of the things that truly matter, namely, “the permanent things” of true community: tradition, love, learning, and aesthetics. Kirk lambasted libertarians for holding unbridled capitalism as an absolute good. True conservatives, he maintained, valued not the individual acquisition of property but what can be created by and for “true community, the union of men, through love and common interest, for the common welfare.”<sup>23</sup> He argued that “economic self-interest is ridiculously inadequate to hold an economic system together, and even less adequate to preserve order.”

Kirk and Meyer both understood that Burkeanism and libertarianism were incompatible. They saw their philosophies engaged in a death struggle for the soul of conservatism. Their animosities became personal. It was evident to all that Meyer actively hated Kirk.<sup>24</sup> Though Buckley admired Kirk, Kirk surely understood that he could never prevail within the councils of *National Review* for the simple reason that Buckley was a libertarian. If Kirk were to help traditional conservatism prevail over libertarianism, his best chance was to remain outside of *National Review*, make common cause with other Burkeans, and try to rally conservatives to their flag. Yet Kirk rejected that approach.<sup>25</sup> A large part of the story is why that came to be.

The third member of the *National Review* family who warrants special attention is James Burnham. Compared to Buckley and Russell Kirk, James Burnham, fifty years of age in 1955, was a grown-up. He looked and acted the part: He wore impeccably tailored suits and was exceptionally well-mannered. Like his coeditors, Burnham possessed a stellar academic pedigree: He graduated first in his class from Princeton, earned a master’s degree from Oxford, and had been a tenured professor at New York University. He authored six books about the future of the world, international affairs, and the struggle between the West and communism. Moreover, Burnham was, or at least had been, famous—far better known than Kirk or Buckley. His first nonacademic book, *The Managerial Revolution*, published

fifteen years earlier, had been not merely a bestseller but a sensation: It sold more than two hundred thousand copies in the United States alone and was translated into fourteen languages. Burnham's book inspired many of the ideas in George Orwell's *1984* and appears in the novel under a different name.

Buckley and Burnham had met briefly and under improbable circumstances in 1950. Buckley, having just graduated from Yale and looking for a way of avoiding being called back for service in the Korean War, decided to apply for covert work with the CIA. Burnham was then secretly working in Washington, D.C., for the CIA's Office of Policy Coordination, and when Buckley presented himself to be interviewed at a CIA safe house in Georgetown, it was James Burnham who interviewed him. This brief meeting presumably had nothing to do with Buckley's hiring Burnham for *National Review* five years later however. Buckley wanted Burnham to be the magazine's foreign policy editor and to write a regular column titled The Third World War. Considering Burnham's marquee appeal, it is easy to understand why Buckley considered him a catch. Yet for several reasons, Burnham was a strange choice. For one thing, Burnham had no formal training in foreign affairs. His academic training was in English literature. For another thing, Burnham did not fit easily into the conservative mold. His favorite Republican was liberal Nelson Rockefeller, who—to the consternation of his fellow editors—Burnham repeatedly wanted *National Review* to endorse for president.

Burnham had also been a former communist, a Trotskyite to be exact. He had been a regular correspondent of Trotsky and one of Trotsky's most trusted American supporters. Burnham served Trotsky and the Communist Party for seven years as a writer and editor of socialist journals but became disillusioned with communism when the Soviet Union invaded Poland. Burnham was one of no less than seven former communists among the small circle of editors and contributors for *National Review*. (The others were Meyer, William S. Schlam, Will Herberg, Whittaker Chambers, Malcolm Eastman, and John Dos Passos.) The magazine liked to suggest these three men had become vigorous anticommunists because they had seen communism firsthand. The alternative explanation is that they were people who desperately needed ideology and doctrine, and when an ideological system to which they had clung became unacceptable, they had to find another.

The second explanation, however, fits Burnham only up to a point. Burnham was a theorist when it came to the Cold War. Believing "containment" was an inadequate policy for dealing with international communism—a "guarantor of ultimate defeat," as he put it<sup>27</sup>—Burnham developed the competing strategy of "rollback." Thus, Burnham did not merely want to contain communism within the areas already under its sphere of influence, including Eastern Europe; rather, he advocated an aggressive approach of rolling back communism and liberating areas under communist control. This would be accomplished principally through political warfare, or "polwar," which would consist of propaganda, psychological warfare, sabotage, subversion, and guerilla warfare. But on other topics Burnham was far less doctrinaire, and often viewed as a pragmatist. Burnham became Buckley's closest confidante outside his own family and the de facto number two at *National Review*, the person who made decisions when Buckley was unavailable.

Jeffrey Hart, a longtime senior editor at *National Review*, says that Burnham was invaluable because he moderated Buckley's tendencies; he stopped Buckley and the magazine from becoming too libertarian, too religious, too doctrinaire.<sup>28</sup> Buckley's sister Priscilla, who served as managing editor

of *National Review*, says that Burnham insisted that practical considerations, experience, and facts be taken into account and thereby kept Buckley and the magazine anchored in reality and stopped them from drifting too far into ideological abstractions. Burnham was also a force for maintaining a sense of dignity. He was not opposed to spirited attacks on political opponents but he was offended by attacks that were sophomoric or mean-spirited, and therefore provided a force for restraint.

Burnham was the first neoconservative. Irving Kristol famously said, “A neoconservative is a liberal who has been mugged by reality.”<sup>29</sup> What Kristol meant was that the world was a hard place. Some people were bad, some people were lazy, and it was a mistake to coddle them. Crime had to be deterred with swift and certain punishment, undiminished by pathos for criminals’ unfortunate childhoods or indigent circumstances. Government handouts to the poor only made them dependent. It was better to make people stand on their own feet and hold them accountable for their actions. The “neoconservative” label was first used by Kristol and a group of former liberals—including, notably, Kristol and Norman Podhoretz—in the 1970s and 1980s. At first, neoconservatives were primarily focused on domestic policies, but over time they became more interested in foreign affairs—and applied the same thinking to the international stage. The world, they argued, was a dangerous place. Some nations were our enemies. The communist bloc was bent on world domination, and it was not going to be dissuaded from its ambitions through negotiations and mutual understanding. America had to rely on military might. It had to be tough. In November 1979, Jeane Kirkpatrick wrote an article titled “Dictatorships and Double Standards” that became a neoconservative classic. She argued that America should not be squeamish about using double standards for dictatorial regimes. Where it was in our self-interest to befriend anticommunist dictators, we should do so. “Liberal idealism need not be identical with masochism, and need not be incompatible with the defense of freedom and the national interest,” she wrote. James Burnham advocated such views long before these other thinkers, which is why historians H. W. Brands and Richard Brookhiser have called him the originator of neoconservatism.<sup>30</sup>

Burnham believed that American military might should be used not only for defense—not just to deter or repulse attacks on America and its allies—but offensively as well. Communism should not only be contained but pushed back. America should project its way of life (capitalism even more than democracy) across the globe through force, sometimes applied covertly and, when necessary, overtly. The world is a dangerous place; evil exists; adversaries cannot be reasoned out of pursuing their goals. In the end, the only effective weapon is force. As Burnham saw it, America did not need to be afraid. Its military was the most powerful on earth. Yet its leaders—the liberals especially—were timid, gullible, and naïve.

It is a paradox that Burnham was generally a force for moderation and yet an extreme hard-liner within foreign affairs, where his influence was greatest. Buckley considered Burnham the preeminent expert in that sphere. Burnham’s views about the Cold War became conservative orthodoxy. If Buckley had selected someone else as *National Review*’s foreign affairs expert, conservatism might have developed differently. It was not preordained, for example, that conservatives would wind up supporting the war in Vietnam. The traditional conservative position was to be suspicious of foreign military adventures. Garry Wills, for example, privately argued that the war was not sensible on either anticommunist or conservative grounds.<sup>31</sup> A Burkean who believed that studying the history and

culture of Vietnam was essential to understanding what was feasible would have concluded that the war was unwinnable, no matter how many troops were sent or how many bombs were dropped. Had Buckley, in 1955, selected a Burkean instead of Burnham as the magazine's expert on foreign affairs, it is possible the conservative movement would have wound up criticizing Lyndon Johnson for pursuing a futile war instead of criticizing him for not pursuing the war aggressively enough. Had that occurred, Johnson, who harbored deep misgivings about the war even as he escalated it, might have reversed course in the early stages of the conflict. But it was not mere chance that Buckley selected Burnham; he did so because Burnham's neoconservative approach was consistent with his own predilections.

Conservatism today is a three-legged stool. It is based upon libertarianism, religious conservatism, and neoconservatism. We think of these as three distinct schools of thought that developed separately and have different constituencies. There are, moreover, fundamental disagreements among the three schools. Social conservatives consider abortion a critical issue. Libertarians believe that government should not regulate morality and outlaw private conduct such as abortion or drug use. Neoconservatives tend to consider drug use socially corrosive and therefore warranting government regulation, and abortion a private matter that the government should not regulate. Yet, despite these and other differences, all three schools were able to make common cause in the conservative movement because William F. Buckley Jr. was himself a libertarian, a religious conservative, and neoconservative. As a result, he and *National Review* defined conservatism in a way that accommodated all three schools of thought.

But the coalition among those groups is now breaking down. We are entering a new period of ideological searching and transformation for both conservatism and liberalism. This is partly due to the "March of Dimes effect," the phenomenon that occurs when a cause has achieved its goals. In 1938, President Franklin D. Roosevelt founded the March of Dimes organization to defeat poliomyelitis. Twenty years later, the Salk and Sabin vaccines had wiped out polio, and the March of Dimes had to decide whether to go out of business or take on another cause. (It took the latter course.) Similarly, modern liberalism and conservatism have both realized many of their defining goals. Two of liberalism's greatest causes—the civil rights movement and the women's movement—have largely succeeded. Liberalism has also had considerable successes with the consumer and the environmental movements, though the latter may now face its greatest challenge in climate change. Although another important cause of liberalism, the war on poverty, has largely been a failure, liberalism is uncertain about whether, or how, to attempt to wage that war again. Meanwhile, modern conservatism's most important cause was realized when the Soviet Union ended and Russia and China began converting to market economies. Some conservatives have tried replacing anticommunism with the war on terror as a defining cause, but that may not succeed.

Of course, liberals and conservatives have not joined hands, poured each other glasses of champagne, and celebrated unity. Just the opposite has happened: We are experiencing hyperpartisanship. Paradoxically, it is confusion within each camp—not certainty—that fuels this vehemence. It is because each side can't see its own compass clearly that makes it so distrustful and defiant whenever the other side suggests a direction.

The tea party movement is one manifestation of our entering a time of ideological reconsideration.

The tea parties were ignited by a fear that government bailouts of banks, financial institutions, and automobile manufacturers meant the end of capitalism, even though those decisions were made by both the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations. Tea party members are considered generally conservative—but they did not rush to defend conservative battlements. They instead created new organizations and often supported unorthodox politicians over established conservative ones. The tea parties too are searching, and even they do not yet know exactly for what.

This book is about the rise of modern American conservatism—about the last time conservatism was refashioned. I hope that by examining that period, conservatives may gain a better understanding of the direction they now wish to take. Although this book is about the rise of modern conservatism, I believe it can be just as helpful to liberals looking to the future. We often get a better grasp of our own perspective by reflecting on opposing perspectives; sometimes, in fact, that is the best method of self-understanding. It is for these reasons that I believe the story of William F. Buckley Jr. and the rise of modern American conservatism is not only interesting, but also relevant to our present moment.

To appreciate how Buckley changed conservatism, we must first understand what conservatism was before Buckley and *National Review*. For that we need an appropriate benchmark—a gold standard of conservatism before 1955, if we can find one. It is natural to look first to the conservative journals of the time, but that will not do. When *National Review* began publishing in 1955, it filled a void in conservative opinion, but that will not do. When *National Review* began publishing in 1955, it filled a void in conservative opinion. Although two conservative journals then existed, both were troubled. The *Freeman* had begun publishing in 1950 under the slogan “a fortnightly for individualists.”<sup>32</sup> Taking its name from a journal coedited by Albert Jay Nock in the 1920s, the new venture included John Chamberlain and a number of other veteran editors and writers. However, circulation was low, the magazine was in financial distress, and the editors became embroiled in angry fights over whether to defend Joseph McCarthy or to endorse Taft or Eisenhower for the 1952 Republican nomination. It is unclear whether the split was precipitated by financial or editorial reasons, but either way Chamberlain and the magazine’s other top talents walked out in 1953. The following year, the *Freeman* was converted into a monthly and devoted itself largely to publishing essays on libertarian economics and otherwise ignoring the political and policy issues of the day. It quickly receded in importance.

With a circulation of ninety thousand, *American Mercury* had a far larger readership as well as a distinguished heritage. *American Mercury* was cofounded in 1924 by the journalist and cultural and literary critic H. L. Mencken, and became famous publishing works by the likes of F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, Carl Sandburg, and Sherwood Anderson. When in 1926 a prosecutor declared an article about a prostitute obscene, H. L. Mencken rushed to Cambridge, Massachusetts, to personally sell the offending issue to a prominent clergyman who had raised the hue and cry over the scandalous article. Thus, Mencken got himself dramatically arrested, and proceeded to challenge censorship in the courts. (He won.) *American Mercury*, however, was badly buffeted by the Great Depression. Under new editorial leadership in 1950, it changed its format from a primarily literary journal to a journal of conservative opinion. Only two years later, however, J. Russell Maguire purchased the magazine. Maguire was a miscreant. He had been convicted of both violating the securities laws by deliberately manipulating stock prices and making excess profits selling guns to the armed forces during World War II. He had other problems too. Under his ownership, *American Mercury* became a crude tract



loony conspiracy theories and vile anti-Semitism.

Nor can we benchmark conservatism before Buckley by looking to the philosophy of a consensus among conservative writers or to that of a preeminent conservative intellectual. No group or individual is adequate to the purpose.

Happily, however, there is someone who can serve as the quintessential exemplar of conservatism before Buckley: Robert A. Taft, the United States senator from Ohio from 1939 until his premature death, at age sixty-three, in 1953.<sup>33</sup> Taft was known as Mr. Republican because he was generally considered the real leader of his party in Congress even while others held the formal leadership positions. “Taft is the man you want to see,” Republican senate majority leader Wallace Whittaker Chambers famously told reporters in 1946, acknowledging that it was Taft who really spoke for the Republican Party. Taft was the conservative favorite for the Republican presidential nomination in 1940, 1948, and 1952. There were conservatives both to the right and left of Taft, but they all admired—and followed—him. Taft was also considered “the dominant conservative of his time,” and “the very model of the American conservative.”<sup>34</sup> To understand what conservatism was before Buckley changed it, we need to spend a little time understanding Taft’s political philosophy and the background that shaped it.

Bob Taft came from formidable stock. His grandfather Alphonso was born in Vermont, graduated third in his class at Yale University (where he cofounded the secret society Skull and Bones), went on to Yale Law School, and then moved to New York City to practice law. Reflecting a temperament that would epitomize three generations, Alphonso was repulsed by what he considered to be the materialism and self-centeredness of New York. “Money is the all in all,” and the “great mass of men are characterized by “notorious selfishness and dishonesty,” he said. He moved to Cincinnati, where he became involved in the Whig Party and subsequently in the Republican Party, at a time when it was still very much the party of Lincoln. He was a city councilman and then a judge on the Superior Court of Cincinnati, during which time he courageously handed down a decision prohibiting compulsory Bible reading in the public schools. In 1876, seeking rectitude for an administration blemished by scandals, President Ulysses S. Grant appointed Alphonso Taft to his cabinet, where Taft served briefly as secretary of war and then attorney general. After Grant left office, Alphonso moved back to Cincinnati and lost two races for governor of Ohio, one against Rutherford B. Hayes. Taft believed, in part, that he lost those elections because of his decision against Bible reading in the schools.

Alphonso and his wife, Louise, had five sons and a daughter. All of the boys followed their dad into Yale, the study of law, and the Republican Party. One of those boys was William Howard Taft. William outperformed his father by ranking second in his class at Yale College.<sup>2</sup> It was an omen of things to come. William became a Superior Court judge at age thirty-two, and handed down a decision—in this instance a decision against a secondary boycott by bricklayers—that created a national hubbub. He (and his son Robert) would be forever after distrusted by labor unions. Soon thereafter President Benjamin Harrison appointed William solicitor general of the United States, a post in which he served for two years before returning to Ohio to take a seat on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit. For several years he served simultaneously as judge and dean of his law school alma mater, the Cincinnati Law School.

Howard Taft’s ambition was to live a life in the law culminating in a seat on the United States

Supreme Court, but to please his wife, who wanted him to pursue a career in politics, he accepted the position of governor-general of the Philippines. He received high marks in that post for building schools and roads and improving the economy, and four years later President Theodore Roosevelt brought Taft back to Washington as his secretary of war. The two men became mutual admirers and fast friends, and Roosevelt designated Taft as his successor. With Roosevelt's blessing, Taft received the Republican nomination and was easily elected president in 1908.

Roosevelt and progressive Republicans enthusiastically supported Taft in the election, but in office Taft disappointed them by being bullied by the right-wing Republican leadership in Congress in supporting high tariffs and also by failing to aggressively pursue conservation.<sup>35</sup> Taft was progressive in many other ways. He supported a constitutional amendment authorizing the income tax, directed the Interstate Commerce Committee to regulate railroad rates, and aggressively fought big business by filing more than eighty antitrust suits. The Rough Rider was not mollified however. He returned from his African safaris to challenge Taft for the Republican nomination in 1912, and failing in that effort, ran for president on the Progressive Party ticket. The hapless Taft, who was so personally pained over Roosevelt's rejection that he literally wept, ran third in a four-candidate race behind Woodrow Wilson and Teddy Roosevelt and ahead of Eugene V. Debs. Taft spent the next eight years on the faculty of the Yale Law School. His lifelong dream came true in 1930 when President Warren G. Harding nominated him as chief justice of the United States Supreme Court. He served nine happy years in that position, once stating, "I don't remember that I was ever president."

Robert A. Taft, Will's oldest child, was born in Cincinnati in 1889, when his father was a superior court judge. At thirteen, his parents sent him to board at the Taft School in Connecticut, the elite prep school founded and then personally run by his uncle Horace Taft. Bob followed the family path to Yale College, and like his father was tapped for Skull and Bones. He was a junior at Yale when his father became president. Bob capped a three-generation trajectory by graduating first in his class. Although there was no family tradition about where to study law, Bob was free to go where he wanted for law school, and he chose Harvard. Bob was in his last year of law school when he watched his father try to rally the Republican faithful in the 1912 presidential campaign by claiming that Teddy Roosevelt was advocating theories "as Socialistic as anything that has been proposed in the countries of Europe." That statement, as Bob surely understood, fell somewhere between hyperbole and hokum; it was also ironic considering that one of the candidates in the race, Eugene Debs, was a real socialist.

When Bob graduated from law school, William Howard Taft was so eager that Bob return to Cincinnati to pursue a career in law and politics that without even discussing it with Bob he made arrangements for Bob to join a law firm headed by a former colleague at the Cincinnati Law School. Negotiating for his son, who was not only valedictorian of his class but also an editor of the *Harvard Law Review*, the breathtaking starting salary of nothing. ("I don't want you to be anxious about the compensation you are getting," Will told his son. "You can count on me to give you enough to live on but not to splurge on.") Bob would have to learn to develop his own clientele, but as the son of a former president this may not have been difficult.

Bob was practicing law in Cincinnati when World War I broke out. He originally opposed American involvement, but when Germany instituted unrestricted submarine warfare, Taft, along with many Americans, favored America's joining the Allies. After being rejected for military service because of

poor eyesight, Taft looked for another way to serve. He admired the relief work Herbert Hoover had done for Belgium before America entered the war. Hoover now headed the American Food Administration, and Taft signed on as an assistant counsel. Taft found that the agency suffered from “red tape and delay and confusion,” and his experience left him skeptical about bureaucracies. Hoover caught Hoover’s eye however. When the war ended, Hoover took the twenty-nine-year-old Taft to Europe as legal adviser to the American Relief Administration.

“Famine is the mother of anarchy,” Hoover declared. In Europe, however, Taft witnessed how shortsighted nations can be. The Allies refused to permit food shipments to former neutrals and enemies. Under pressure from Hoover, the Allies relented with respect to neutrals but long maintained a ban on food shipments to former enemies. Taft’s biographer, James T. Patterson, says that this experience did not transform Taft into an isolationist. Taft later would support the League of Nations, the World Court, and the United Nations, but he would have a narrow, and as Patterson puts it, “legalistic” view of international organizations, believing their role should be limited to promulgating international law and adjudicating disputes but not as actively guaranteeing peace.

After returning to Cincinnati, Taft supported Herbert Hoover for the 1920 Republican presidential nomination. Taft—the man who would become the standard-bearer for conservatism—said he supported Hoover because it was “necessary to nominate a moderate progressive who will defend the existing system ... avoiding Socialism and Radicalism on one hand and reaction on the other.”

Hoover lost the nomination to Warren G. Harding, but Taft had a success of his own: He was elected that fall to the Ohio House of Representatives. Bob Taft spent six years in the state assembly, his final year as speaker, followed by one term as a member of the state senate. He was particularly interested in tax policy. He was not a fan of the sales tax, which he considered regressive—a tax “reaching the taxpayers in proportion to their expenditures rather than in proportion to their income and property.” Taft preferred an income tax. Moreover, he preferred taxing investment income to taxing income on labor. Major newspapers praised Taft for devising a plan to replace the state tax on an investor’s total holdings with a 5 percent tax on investment income only, and for successfully maneuvering his proposal through the legislature. Taft argued that by making the investment tax less burdensome and bringing it line with that of other states, Ohio’s revenues would actually increase because fewer investors would avoid the tax by failing to report or moving out of state.

Bob Taft’s most courageous episode in the state legislature may have been his decision to fight the Ku Klux Klan on bills outlawing Sunday dancing and requiring public schoolteachers to read ten Bible verses to their classes every day. The Klan was then powerful in Ohio, and these measures were popular in the wider population. When the bill banning dancing on Sundays passed the assembly 82-11, Taft knew the Bible reading measure would pass regardless of what he did. He also knew that when his grandfather had run for governor, he had paid a heavy political price for his judicial opinion against compulsory Bible reading. Nevertheless, Bob not only voted against the measure but also made a passionate speech against it on the floor of the assembly. Scripture may be considered great literature, yet “in it religion overshadows all else,” and religion should be taught only in churches, he said. The newspapers gave his speech prominent coverage. The bill passed, as expected, but the governor vetoed it.

Like other conservatives, Bob Taft was hostile to Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal.



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