

THE MAKING OF THE
AMERICAN
CONSERVATIVE
MIND

National Review
AND ITS TIMES

JEFFREY HART

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*This book is dedicated to my wife Nancy,
whose love every day makes
everything possible.*

Fifty Years

*They who were are not, and
These who are were not.
See how they go, now they are here.
Now not, O Palinur . . .
but here, in the stillness, here,
And the house echoes, echoes
As the leaf falls near the cataract and the
New thrush sings in the pines.*



—JH (with WS and WW)



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Acknowledgments

Without William F. Buckley Jr., *National Review* would not have existed. His cooperation has also been invaluable in the writing of this book. Yet this history of *National Review* during its first half-century is in no sense an official history, as will be more than evident to the reader. Throughout, the evaluations and judgments are my own, and they come from a conservative perspective I would characterize as Burkean, yet interpreted for the American situation. I confess to a fondness for gossip, which, indeed, is a conservative genre. Gossips do not want to change the world; they want to enjoy it.

The learned help of my editor at ISI, Mark Henrie, has been enormously useful. He is a stylist, a scholar, and a political theorist; he has focused my mind on important issues such as theology, abortion, and political philosophy and otherwise has been a valuable guide. But my conclusions are not necessarily his. I have known Mark since his undergraduate days at Dartmouth and am not surprised by his brilliance now. Priscilla Buckley had the idea for this book; she and Linda Bridges have helped immensely with their inside knowledge of the history of the magazine. Rich Lowry, current editor of *National Review*, has been forthcoming with information, not only about the magazine since the Clinton years—Clinton being the subject of his fine history, *Legacy*—but helpful also about the current editorial positions of the magazine.

As well as serving as a senior editor at *National Review*, I am de facto poetry editor, that feature having been reestablished in 2002 after a long hiatus since Hugh Kenner handled it in *National Review's* earliest days; Books editor Mike Potemra has been splendidly cooperative there. John Virtes, research director at *National Review*, has been ever willing to provide valuable help. Ed Capano, publisher of the magazine, maintains an expert eye on its entire operation and has been generous with his time and knowledge of its operations, circulation, and many other matters. My thanks to all.


Jeffrey Hart
Lyme, New Hampshire
August 2005



Preface

The history of *National Review* represents a Quest Narrative: the quest for a politically viable and thoughtful American conservatism. The journey is difficult, because it involves the search not merely for political positions—which are, after all, ephemeral—but for the underlying basis upon which such positions ought to be derived: which is to say, abiding principles. This history of *National Review* is thus, in one sense, a course in how to think, which is much more important than transitory advocacy, in which one might be correct by chance, or by echo.

The journey recorded here is far from tranquil, since it has sometimes involved throwing much overboard, and this entails a continuing struggle to discipline desire with a sense of changing social, economic, and scientific actuality. As the historian here, I have been educated myself, first as a reader of the magazine since 1955, then as a senior editor beginning in 1969, and most recently as a reader of the entire corpus of the magazine in its very heavy forty-nine bound volumes. I have sometimes felt more like a foreman than a writer. To come to my judgments, I have compared what *National Review* said on a given occasion with what the relevant historians now can tell us about it. Hell for opinion journalists must consist of the perpetual re-reading of last year's editorials.



Throughout the history of *National Review* we find a struggle going on, in diverse ways, between Idea and Actuality. Success is sometimes achieved, as Idea adjusts to Actuality, but sometimes there is a lurch back toward the Idea at odds with Actuality: utopianism. A nonnegotiable maxim emerges from a fixed Idea, or many fixed Ideas, often parading as “principles,” but when these are excessively abstract they become *ideology*, the lethal enemy of thought. To think, as in another connection the great West Point football coach Earl “Red” Blaik once said, means “You have to pay the price”—that is, the price in pain and sorrow as favorite notions go overboard when contradicted by the facts. Reading the books that have lasted acclimates one to a sense of changing, surprising, disappointing, and joyful Actuality—a vale of laughs as much as a vale of tears—and also requires a sense of readiness and flexibility in the face of changing circumstances. Change is part of Actuality, and the struggle against Actuality is an uneven contest.

When Idea becomes divorced from Actuality, the result is fanaticism, the wings of discourse beating in a void. Over the entrance to the first of the three kingdoms in Dante’s *Divine Comedy* stands this forbidding notice:

Abandon all hope, you who enter here.

Fortunately, the journey the reader is about to take with this book will not be as arduous as that of the pilgrim Dante in that great poem, because *National Review* has pioneered the journey already. The historian who tells this story of *National Review*’s quest has himself been shaped in good measure by reading the magazine from November 1955 through the present. So what judgments are passed along the way amount to *National Review* examining itself. In this narrative, the pilgrim magazine followed the guide James Burnham for much of the way, as the pilgrim Dante followed the guide Virgil, who brought the pilgrim much of the way up the cleansing Mountain, but unfortunately dropped away before the journey ended. Similarly, the guide Burnham leaves part of the way through the journey, even as the helmsman Palinurus does in Virgil’s earlier epic.

So, reader, let us now take the journey together through the refining fire, the sign above our first gate reading:

Abandon hope—but not quite all hope—all you fanatics, dogmatists, single-issue obsessives, all you wild-eyed apparitions with straws in your hair, all you who have forgotten that man is neither angel nor brute, and through the disciplines of the great historians, lasting books, and alertness to experience, learn prudence, measured skepticism, and other sober virtues, which in politics translate into consensus government through the deliberate sense of the governed. For some, the way will be hard, but fare forward, voyagers! and avoid the whirlpools of nonsense and the fever swamps of prefabricated thought.



1

William F. Buckley Jr.: Present at the Creation

“T o a very considerable degree,” writes George Nash, “the history of reflective conservatism in America after 1955 is the history of individuals who collaborated in—or were discovered by—the magazine William F. Buckley founded.”¹ A similar observation was made recently by Niels Bjerre-Poulsen in *Right Face: Organizing the American Conservative Movement, 1945–65*. Buckley, “more than any single figure, made conservatism a respectable force in American life.”² Before the New Deal, conservative assumptions were not felt to need much articulation or defense. Then, during the Depression and Franklin Roosevelt’s ascendancy, the defeat of conservative assumptions seemed complete, their spokesmen few, and the universities captured by liberalism. A profound creative work needed to be undertaken, though scattered recent materials were beginning to become visible again after the war. To quote Bjerre-Poulsen, Buckley “personally seemed to be able to embody most of the apparent contradictions and incoherence of American conservatism. . . . Despite Buckley’s considerable diplomatic skills and firm intent to defuse the various ideological controversies, the relationship between the various factions in the magazine was not always one of ‘peaceful coexistence.’”³

John Leonard, at the time of the following interview (July 6, 1973) the liberal editor of the *New York Times Book Review*, talks with Neal Freeman, a

longtime *National Review* contributor, and describes the atmosphere that made collegiality possible:

FREEMAN: Garry Wills has referred to the “open secret” that the [*Times Book Review*] owes a large debt to *National Review*. Could you describe that debt, if there is one?

LEONARD: Not exactly a secret: I wrote a letter that *NR* uses as a promotional piece talking about the writers Bill Buckley discovered in *NR* that I’ve begged, borrowed, or stolen. On a deeper level, I’m indebted to the atmosphere Bill created at *NR* while I was there. The pick-up picnics that substituted for staff meetings; the encouraging of the staff to enter into the decision-making at every level of assignment and production; the sense that everybody working for you knows *why* you are doing something, and feels free to argue against it; the blending of office life into social life—I’ve adapted all these aspects to TBR procedure as it is now, with happy results. It wasn’t that way before I became editor; and it wouldn’t be that way now if I hadn’t enjoyed the *NR* stint.

One of Buckley’s strengths as an editor was a remarkable magnanimity. He enjoyed disputations involving principle, as between libertarian and traditionalist, enjoyed them for their own sake, and because he had both positions in his own makeup. He was also an impresario, orchestrating a magazine for an audience containing many variations within the conservative spectrum: which in turn meant that he would have to define what was outside that spectrum, or beyond the pale altogether.

National Review would prove the foundation for a career that was to make Buckley the most important journalist since Walter Lippmann. In fact, Buckley’s career was more impressive. Lippmann had been the ultimate insider, an explainer of things already in process. To a considerable degree, Buckley, coming from the outside, played a central role in *creating* the politics of which he would also be the principal interpreter.

NO ENTIRELY SATISFACTORY biography of Buckley has yet been written, and while the odds against one appearing are steep, surprise is always possible. To succeed, a writer would have to combine political and historical acumen with a visual and auditory imagination, psychological insight, and

literary skill. Gibbon with Henry James. A biographer of Buckley would have to communicate so many things, and in particular the relationship between Buckley and James Burnham, a key to the whole enterprise, and through it to American conservatism. As Alexander Pope said of Bolingbroke, Burnham was Buckley's "guide, philosopher and friend." He and Buckley undertook the journey together, and both were shaped by the experience.

What I can offer here are only a few notes toward a portrait of, and understanding of, Buckley, such as might contribute to an understanding of the creation of *National Review*. In conversation, and publicly on the speaker's platform or on television, Buckley's voice was so distinctive that it amounted to a dramatic event in itself. Willmoore Kendall once said that Buckley could do as much with his voice as Laurence Olivier. Perhaps the effect was produced by the multiple linguistic environments in which he grew up. His first language was Spanish. His father, William Sr., was a successful oil entrepreneur in Mexico, Venezuela, and Canada, and he surrounded his family with Spanish-speaking nannies. (He still has Spanish-speaking servants.) Buckley also had a French governess. His education was also unusual. The ten children were taught at home by tutors. The family lived extensively in Europe, where the children either attended schools or were tutored. Surprisingly, Buckley learned to speak English at a day school in England when he was seven years old. His first regular grade school was in Paris, where he picked up workable French. Reaching prep school age, he attended an English Catholic boarding school, St. John's Beaumont, and British English became part of his linguistic mix. He found his Catholicism deepened by the experience.

The Buckleys had a large estate in Camden, South Carolina, located in the middle of that most southern of states. Charleston, social and spiritual capital of the old Confederacy, had the harbor where Confederate artillery opened up on Fort Sumter. Camden, famed for horses and hunting, also was the site of the estate of Mary Chesnut, whose luminous diary recounted the life of Charleston in the days of Jefferson Davis and the Confederate aristocracy. A Southern drawl hides somewhere in Bill Buckley's voice, reflecting also his mother's Louisiana background. The South became part of the amalgam that constituted the early *National Review*, with such contributors as

Richard Weaver and James Jackson Kilpatrick, and, through the Agrarians, was part of Russell Kirk's self-creation.

I record here an anecdote about Camden, a brief moment after the 1972 Democratic convention in Miami that nominated George McGovern, a wild happening surrounded outside the Convention Center by beards, beads, bongos, and, as young women nursed infants, the sweet smells of the counter-culture at play. Late in the convention, Buckley, Garry Wills, a few of Bill's old friends, and I left Miami and sailed from Coral Gables headed for Connecticut on Buckley's yacht "Cyrano."

On the Gulf Stream, pausing to swim, admiring the colorful, sinister Portuguese Men of War with their gelatin sails and poisonous tentacles, we eventually reached Charleston; with supplies running low, we docked. Bill proposed we rent a plane and fly to Camden for lunch, and at once the decision was made.

On the Buckley estate, near the main house, there stood a classical structure, which had been the elder William Buckley's office when in residence. He had lived in Sharon, Connecticut, during the summer and fall, until he died of a stroke in 1958. At the door of the main house, Negro servants greeted us, immensely dignified, slow of speech and movement. These were among the sounds with which Buckley grew up, the Carolina drawls of both whites and blacks. By the time he reached the last three years of prep school—at the Millbrook School, in Millbrook, New York, not far from Sharon—his combination of American English, Carolina English, and British English, with possible tinctures of Spanish and French, produced what now everyone knows: a diction American and, not surprisingly, not quite American.

I mentioned Sharon, the site of the main Buckley home, Great Elm, on a large tract of land. Its venerable Elm, the tallest in the state of Connecticut, was there until it succumbed to Dutch Elm Disease in 1954. On the weekend of September 9, 1960, about ninety students showed up at Great Elm for the founding of Young Americans for Freedom, an offshoot of the multiple Buckley operations. A student there is said to have observed: "Now I know what Russell Kirk means by 'the permanent things.'" To express things of even more permanence, Buckley in 1955 founded *National Review* and made it into the arbiter and educator of the American conservative mind.

BUCKLEY IN SO MANY ways stood apart from mainstream American culture, stood apart when he graduated from the Millbrook School and, after two uncomfortable years in the Army, stood apart when he entered Yale in 1946. As an undergraduate, he only irregularly saw football games. Once, at a *National Review* editorial meeting, he had to be gently corrected when using the baseball term “stealing a base” to mean something crooked. Similarly, when his brother Senator James Buckley was asked at a press conference what the death of coach Vince Lombardi meant to America, he answered, “New Year’s Eve will never be the same again.” It took the reporters a while to figure out that he was confusing coach Lombardi with Guy Lombardo, of “Auld Lange Syne” fame. To some extent, the brothers were separated from mainstream America by their unusual childhoods.

Throughout Buckley’s adult life there persisted a tension in his politics. On the one hand was an aristocratic conservatism, influenced by his early admiration for family friend and prose stylist Alfred Jay Nock, author of *Memoirs of a Superfluous Man*, a conservatism that was pessimistic and felt doom to be near at hand. But that kind of conservatism collided with a rival pull, toward the necessities of practical reform under American democratic conditions. Buckley once expressed his intermittent populism when he said that he would rather be governed by the first two thousand names in the Boston telephone directory than by the faculty of Harvard University. But he contradictorily admired Ortega y Gasset’s Nietzschean-aristocratic *Revolt of the Masses*, and at one point contemplated a book to be titled *Revolt Against the Masses*.

At Yale, his institutional social life centered on the Fence fraternity, the Whiffenpoofs, and Skull and Bones. At that time, the names of those annually selected as Bonesmen were listed in the *New York Herald-Tribune*. One can see many things in his Yale experience that were important for Buckley: experience in journalism, for example, as editor of the *Yale Daily News*, and his assessment of the Yale curriculum, about which he wrote his first book, *God and Man at Yale* (1951). Indeed, Buckley’s particular experience of undergraduate life, which included teaching Spanish, was a period about which he remains cheerful and anecdotal.

Especially important was Professor of Political Science Willmoore Kendall, a man of penetrating and original intelligence, who later followed Buckley to

the new *National Review* as a senior editor. Kendall had come to Yale with an enormous reputation in political theory, based on his published work and especially his 1941 study *John Locke and the Doctrine of Majority Rule*. A tall man with blue eyes and graying hair parted in the middle, speaking sometimes with an Oklahoma accent and sometimes in clipped British tones left over from his Rhodes Scholarship and Pembroke College, Oxford, Kendall was a charismatic teacher. But at Yale, and almost everywhere else, he could be the most difficult personality either Buckley or I have ever met. Though a conservative and a patriot, his temperament was that of a revolutionary, which in a sense he was, against the then-dominant liberalism.

At Yale Buckley also became notable for his talents as a debater, afterwards to be displayed on public platforms and on TV's *Firing Line*. He and his best friend Brent Bozell, a tall, red-haired Merchant Marine veteran from Omaha, were the stars of the undefeated Yale Debating Team.

It is said famously that Bozell began at Yale a Protestant and liberal World Federalist, but soon became a conservative and zealous Roman Catholic, one who got into trouble in Spain by questioning Franco's orthodoxy. He married Buckley's sister Patricia. After a productive senior editorship at *National Review*, he left to found his own rival magazine. In *Triumph*, Bozell broke with *National Review* philosophically and politically, becoming theocratic, indeed anti-American. This was a losing proposition for a magazine hoping to find a readership among American Catholics, a conspicuously patriotic group. *Triumph* was useful to me, since it published several of my longer essays, later to appear in my volume *Acts of Recovery* (1989). Several of these were written in Sacramento, when I was there as a writer for Governor Reagan. In 1968, however, I ceased publishing in *Triumph* after it editorially endorsed the black riots in Washington, D.C., as a rebellion against "materialism." Strange, on TV the rioters I saw were shattering store windows and stealing all they could carry away. The absence in Buckley of any temptation toward theocracy and political dogmatism and his embrace of constitutional "deliberate sense" politics made him a pariah to *Triumph*: Buckley was heretically American.

AN IMMEDIATE RESULT of Buckley's college experience, *God and Man at Yale* became a best-selling scandal. People outside an Ivy League university

always want to know what is going on inside it. This early work still commands an interest of various kinds. Yale's religion had become a liberalized Protestantism tending toward secularism, its politics liberal, and its economics Keynesian–New Deal. There was poignancy in the fact that Buckley, a firm Catholic, tried in this book to recall the elite of Protestant Yale to their roots in Christianity and to their institutional debt to capitalism. The Yale administration was scandalized, however, and had the book denounced wherever its influence reached.

When Buckley graduated with the Class of 1950, he had been admitted to Yale Law School and also to Yale's Graduate School for further work in political science. His father advised the latter and more study with Kendall, but that was not the path Buckley chose to take. His mind was acute, very quick to grasp an argument, but disinclined to work patiently at theory. The Korean War had broken out in June; Kendall recommended the CIA and referred his student to James Burnham, then a consultant to the Office of Policy Coordination, the CIA covert action wing. At Burnham's Washington apartment Buckley met E. Howard Hunt, a Brown graduate, author of popular espionage novels, and about to take over covert action in Mexico City. Buckley's fluent Spanish, obvious intelligence, and anticommunist convictions impressed Hunt, and so Buckley went to Mexico City. Hunt had yet to star in the best real-life espionage novel of all, the Watergate break-in, coauthored with G. Gordon Liddy, and ending with the destruction of a presidency.

Buckley wanted to have a more direct impact than academic life offered, and he had his Yale experience in journalism to draw upon. In the phrase of Richard Weaver, he believed that ideas have consequences, and when he surveyed the magazine field it was clear that a gap existed for a new conservative journal. He considered that the success of New Deal liberalism as a collection of ideas had been greatly fostered by the *New Republic* and the *Nation*, magazines which reached the educated classes, especially through the 1930s and the 1940s, and which had published important journalists and literary figures. These magazines were read in the academy, in Washington, and by a wider literate audience.

There existed no comparable conservative outlet. The existing conservative magazines were variously inadequate, including the *American Mercury*,

the monthly once made famous by H. L. Mencken. Buckley worked for it, but only for a few months, and withdrew to write a book with L. Brent Bozell, now his brother-in-law, *McCarthy and His Enemies* (1954), a mildly critical defense of the anticommunist muckraker. Here again we see one of the contradictions in Buckley, and derivatively in *National Review*: the contradiction between elite sensibility and populist power, now represented by McCarthy. Dwight Macdonald hit off the contradiction vividly when he wrote in *Partisan Review* that *McCarthy and His Enemies* defended “a coarse demagogue in an elegantly academic style replete with nice discriminations and pedantic hair-splittings, giving the general effect of a brief by Cadwalader, Wickersham and Taft on behalf of a pickpocket arrested in a subway men’s room.”

Burnham, Max Eastman, and Whittaker Chambers all were wary of McCarthy, Chambers writing to Buckley,

McCarthy divides the ranks of the right. . . . He is a man fighting almost wholly by instinct and intuition against forces for the most part coldly conscious of their ways, means and ends. In other words, he scarcely knows what he is doing. He knows that somebody threw a tomato at him and the general direction from whence it came.⁴

IN 1954, BUCKLEY MET William Schlamm, who provided the catalyst for a new conservative journal of opinion. Schlamm was an intelligent and stereotypical European intellectual and former Communist who had fled the Nazis and ended up with Henry Luce at Time-Life. Now fifty, swarthy, and with black hair combed straight back, he was a virtuoso conversationalist who could talk a hole in a cement wall—about politics, culture, or almost anything else. He also envisioned a new conservative journal with an educated audience, and meeting Buckley, agreed to join with him in such an enterprise.

Aware of the political feuding between Taft and Eisenhower backers that in 1952 had brought about the meltdown of the *Freeman*, Buckley and Schlamm decided to establish a more stable corporate structure, with two kinds of stock. Stock A would be put on the market, but have no voting rights; one hundred percent of Stock B would belong to the editor-in-chief, Buckley himself, and would possess all the voting rights. In practice, this was

a strategic and stabilizing arrangement, allowing Buckley to settle differences of opinion that sometimes became extreme. And Buckley turned out to be quite talented at this, usually effecting a truce without using his plenary powers, though sometimes individuals self-destructed. Very likely, with his age and professional experience, Schlamm believed that he might prevail at the magazine intellectually, with Buckley in the background. As it happens, the ingenious stock mechanism that Schlamm had helped devise eventually jumped up and bit him. Before that crisis, however, he contributed valuably, especially on cultural subjects. And over the years, the stock arrangement held the magazine together amid several fractious disagreements that conceivably could have wrecked it.

Despite the efforts of Buckley and Schlamm to raise the substantial funds needed to go to press, the amount on hand fell well short of their goal. Still, Schlamm argued that the existence of the magazine would itself raise the necessary money, and they decided to push ahead. *National Review's* first number appeared during the second week of November 1955, with a print run of 7,500 copies and a readership no doubt considerably less. During these perilous days of dubious financial viability, a small group of backers came forward to sustain *NR*, their generosity probably saving the shaky venture. Ten years later, by 1965, the magazine had 100,000 subscribers. At its fifty-year mark, it would reach 170,000. An accepted way of calculating readership for this and comparable magazines is to multiply by 2.5. Clearly there had been an opening for a new conservative magazine. Considered only in terms of the history of publishing, *National Review* was a phenomenon.

THE IMMEDIATE RESPONSE to *NR* was probably predictable. The magazine did have its shortcomings, including matters of tone, and it also displayed some amateurishness. In the January 1956 issue of *Harper's*, the editor John Fischer devoted his "Easy Chair"—that is, the entire editorial section—to *National Review*. He warned his readers that the magazine "exhibits all the stigmata of extremist journalism" and was "dedicated to the Conspiracy Theory of politics." Mr. Fischer concluded, more in sorrow than in anger, that *National Review* was "the very opposite of conservative."

There might have been a bit of truth in that. Republican Senate majority

leader William Knowland and Joe McCarthy, both of whom appeared on early covers, were hardly conservatives. Dwight Macdonald boiled over with rage and contempt in the April issue of *Commentary*, charging *National Review* with being a refuge for “the lumpen bourgeoisie, the half-educated, half-successful, provincials.” Macdonald seemed to be losing control, this characterization inaccurate and even wild.

In the *Progressive*, Murray Kempton argued that the very idea of trying to publish a conservative magazine was absurd, since the conservative position exists only in a ghostly sense. It was his opinion that “The New American Right is most conspicuous these days for its advanced state of wither,” the implication being that *National Review* was at best a hopeless endeavor; what’s more, feeling “no compulsion to re-write,” the magazine was an “affront to literary sensibilities”; what’s still more, *NR* erred morally by refusing to “look into the faces” of those it attacked. The language used in all this, surely excessive, expressed a deep desire that the magazine not exist at all. Yet Burnham also knew from a professional point of view that the magazine needed some polish and maturity of style or it would not reach the kind of audience Buckley desired. He pushed, with some success, to change the manners of the magazine—its style, appearance, tone—all to seek the mainstream. Burnham had the British *Economist* in mind as a model.

What early critics failed to recognize was the fact that a considerable body of knowledge underpinned the new magazine. For example, by 1955 there existed the Austrian and Chicago schools of free-market economists, associated with such names as Hayek, Mises, and Friedman. Also prominent in the *National Review* mind was an awareness of the special threat of communism: that although “materialist” in its basis, it had a powerful quasi-religious appeal in promising a transformed human future, something to live and die (and kill) for. This Communist vision had been inspiring to many, including many sensitive intellectuals—had given meaning to their lives and kept back an enclosing nihilism, as with Whittaker Chambers. Because of the power of the Communist ideal, Chambers had believed that in joining the anticommunists he was joining History’s losing side. But there had also emerged, under assault by communism, a renewed sense of the West and its central components. Chambers, Burnham, Kendall, Russell Kirk, Leo Strauss,

Richard Weaver, and many others had written important books on these matters, and these were, as much as the work of the free-market economists, part of *National Review's* patrimony. *National Review* would have an important elite and cerebral aspect, always pulling in that direction amid the political coverage.

In November 1955, when the first issue of *National Review* appeared, President Dwight Eisenhower, recently ill from a heart attack but a revered figure with global prestige, faced the decision of whether to run for reelection. *National Review* had to settle the question of its position on this world-hero, who was closely connected to the liberal Eastern Establishment. Discussions ensued about whether the magazine should go ahead and endorse for president the California senator William Knowland, Republican leader in the Senate. Knowland was well known for strongly supporting the Republic of China on Taiwan and was otherwise reliably right-wing. For *National Review* to endorse Knowland now would make a sharp, self-defining statement in its first appearance. A Knowland endorsement would be a slap both at Eisenhower and at Vice President Richard Nixon, with whose apparent policy of accommodation with New Deal liberalism at home and the Soviet Union abroad *National Review* had serious quarrels.

James Burnham liked the idea of endorsing Knowland. This seems surprising in light of the way Burnham subsequently defined himself at *National Review*: he disliked right-wing provincialism. But now, given his experience with marginal magazines, he probably was enticed by the attention such an endorsement would receive.

But in September 1955 Buckley and Schlamm paid a visit to Whittaker Chambers at his Maryland farm and received a dose of emphatic skepticism. Readers of *Witness* are likely to think of Chambers as morose and pessimistic—sitting, he tells the reader, while a Columbia undergraduate, on a campus bench and pondering whether he should commit suicide or join the Communist Party. Here, Chambers was an extremist figure out of Dostoyevsky, overwhelmed by nihilism. But *Witness* is the autobiography of Chambers's soul; the portly daylight Chambers had a jolly and also a practical side. His discussion with Buckley and Schlamm provided an example of his political thinking, which usually would ally him with Burnham at *National Review*.

The magazine would steer overall, with occasional lurches toward purist ideology, in the “strategic” direction favored by Chambers and Burnham: toward the conservative side of mainstream American politics.

Naturally, Chambers had a favorable opinion of Vice President Nixon, deriving from their cooperation on the Hiss case. On that occasion, the defenders of Hiss had been the usual liberal suspects, while Chambers and Nixon won the grinding battle. Chambers had a low opinion of Knowland’s intelligence and, more fundamentally, of the idea of endorsing him. Chambers sensed a whiff of right-wing Jacobinism, an unwillingness to accept the situation for what it was: Knowland was not, repeat *not*, going to move into the White House. Advocating his nomination amounted to right-wing escapism, as Chambers called it, and this separated him from *National Review* as it seemed at that moment to be tending. Chambers delayed signing up for the masthead.

The issue raised by Chambers would be central to the evolution of *National Review*, and it would deeply engage Burnham. It might be framed as the choice between ideal right-wing Paradigm and realistic Possibility. But at this time, did Knowland represent even a paradigm? He was hardly distinguished for intellectual powers or any other notable qualities.

So, while Burnham continued to favor an endorsement of Knowland, Buckley and Schlamm backed away and settled for a lead article by the senator in the maiden issue: it would be called “Peace with Honor” and was critical of arms reduction negotiations.

To the surprise of everyone at *National Review*, Burnham attended the Republican Convention and then voted for Eisenhower, even though he considered Ike’s version of Truman and George Kennan’s “containment” policy too passive. In *National Review*, Buckley made the case for boycotting the election, and he followed his own advice.

Reflecting on the Knowland episode, we see some important points for the future of the magazine. Chambers would say that his own politics was “dialectical.” This meant that he would assess a political situation as accurately as he could, and react to it in a corrective direction. He could not play with cards that were not on the table. His action thus would form one part of the dialectic, with the result a synthesis, more conservative than it otherwise would

have been. That result might represent only a small gain, and if so emotionally unsatisfying: yet still a gain compared with nothing. Over the years, Burnham would embody that strategy, gradually prevailing over Buckley's "ideal" impulses. Both Chambers and Burnham had a sense of the intractability of actual circumstances, and neither took pleasure in idealist acts of political self-expression.

As we look down the years at the development of *National Review*, Burnham's cumulative effect was to move his friend Buckley, his superior at the magazine, toward this kind of realism—and the magazine toward greater effectiveness. Over the years, however, the appeal of idealism and political illusion would persist, surfacing at intervals with predictable results. For example, in one of the first issues (December 28, 1955) there appeared none other than Joseph McCarthy, who by then had all but been ruined by Senate censure. As if by way of deliberate insult, he reviewed a new book by the elegant Dean Acheson, *A Democrat Looks at His Party*. Acheson, in fact, had been a principal architect of the systems put in place to block postwar Soviet expansion: NATO, the Marshall Plan, the Truman Doctrine in Greece and Turkey, German rearmament. At *National Review*, prudential conservatism was not yet in charge.

A CONTRADICTION, HOWEVER, is emerging. Did Buckley want to *reform* the Eastern Establishment, or did he want to *destroy and displace* it? In *God and Man at Yale* he had identified and attacked the inculcation of what he saw was destroying the old Eastern elite from within—its liberalism, secularism, quasi-socialism. Would the destruction of the old Yale elite involve Pareto's classic "circulation of the elites" (such circulation an important analytical idea for Burnham)? If so, with what results? A circulation of that sort cannot be an innocent thing; even if without violence, its results are seldom pretty.

In his words to the fortieth reunion of the Yale Class of 1950 titled "A Distinctive Gentility: Four Decades Later" (June, 1, 1990), Buckley recalled "a genetic attribute of Yale, and this was a distinctive sense of gentility. . . . [I]t is an ineffaceable part of the memory of four years at Yale: the very idea of institutional courtesy. We have never been quite the same after those four years."⁵ Buckley himself in every respect—taste, prose style, manners, yacht-

ing, wines, piano, and harpsichord—never ceased to embody such distinctive gentility, and there was not a shred of populist kitsch in his being.

To reach out toward an educated elite was the goal of *National Review*. Its “Books, Arts and Manners” section would pursue that direction, though in tone and a certain raggedness the magazine still had improvements to make. The covers of the first issues of *National Review*, featuring Knowland and McCarthy, offered an unmistakable pointer in the direction of populist defiance.

Revolving around this elite/populist contradiction, but united in anti-communism, a commitment to Western civilization, and a presumption for the free market, *National Review* sailed forward toward the election of 1956, congratulating its political foe Eisenhower on his recovery from his heart attack:

By a coincidence that is unqualifiedly happy for us, our first issue leaves the printshop on the day that the President, his health fully recovering, quits the Denver hospital. In days to come, and even in this first issue, we shall be critical, sometimes sharply so, of those Administration policies with which we disagree—that, after all, will be part of our business. But no disagreement will lessen our whole-hearted wish for the personal well-being and happiness of the man who is the elected head of our country and its government.

The author of that graceful paragraph was James Burnham. It exhibits his characteristic good manners, the manners, in fact, of the Eastern Establishment. But the destructive hand of history would leave little unchanged, including Burnham’s Cold War liberation strategy against a Soviet Union just recently gone nuclear.