William F. Buckley, Jr.: Conservative 'Galahad,' counselor to presidents

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A Man and His Presidents

The Political Odyssey of William F. Buckley Jr.

By Alvin Felzenberg
Yale University Press.

417 pp. $35

Reviewed by Glenn C. Altschuler

Speaking at the National Review’s 30th anniversary dinner in 1985, President Ronald Reagan proclaimed that William F. Buckley Jr., “our clipboard Galahad,” had come “upon the scene in a forest primeval,” when “only the knights of darkness prevailed; when conservatives seemed without a champion in the critical battle of style and content.” In short order, Buckley became the “most influential journalist and intellectual” of his era.

In A Man and His Presidents, Alvin Felzenberg, the principal spokesman for the 9/11 Commission who these days teaches at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, provides a detailed account of Buckley’s life.

More than any other person, Felzenberg reminds us, Buckley brought conservatism into the mainstream of American politics.

The book is at its best when Felzenberg describes Buckley as an enfant terrible, shaking up the Establishment (and his alma mater) at age 29 with the publication of God and Man at Yale and then founding the National Review. This Buckley defended Sen. Joseph McCarthy, flirted
with the John Birch Society, and condoned the violence of Southern segregationists.

Buckley, Felzenberg points out, did not believe that majorities always made informed choices about public policies, and he feared that democracies eventually produced government by the lowest common denominator. Buckley cared more about whether a society is virtuous, he told broadcast journalist Mike Wallace, than about whether it is democratic.

Arguing that it is one of the least explored aspects of his career, Felzenberg devotes two-thirds of his book to Buckley’s advice to and assessments of the presidents of the United States from Eisenhower to George W. Bush. A focus on political strategy, he acknowledges, makes it more difficult to convey Buckley’s “brilliance, wit, [and] love of life.”

He is right. Readers interested in these qualities should turn to Cancel Your Own Goddam Subscription (2007), a compilation of letters to and from the editor of the National Review.

Alas, although Felzenberg demonstrates that Republican presidents sometimes solicited and almost always listened respectfully to Buckley’s advice, it is not at all clear how much influence he exerted. As depicted in A Man and His Presidents, Buckley, for better and worse, got less interesting and more conventional when he became part of the Establishment he had once lambasted.

Felzenberg leaves you yearning, perhaps perversely, for the young man described by William Hitchcock MacLeish: sitting at the piano, playing Bach with his left hand, his right banging out "Toot Toot Tootsie Goodbye," his feet typing an outrageous (and sometimes deplorable) editorial for the Yale Daily News. And for the somewhat older Buckley, the host of Firing Line, his tongue darting from side to side as he debates John Kenneth Galbraith and makes ideas come alive.
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