

The New Criterion

Reconsiderations

November 2005

Buckley at the beginning

by [Jeffrey Hart](#)

A look back at fifty years of *National Review*.

National Review is now celebrating its fiftieth year of publication. It has been central to and helped shape the American conservative movement. It has also been a home to an astonishing array of talent, not all of it conservative—from Whittaker Chambers and Russell Kirk to Garry Wills and Joan Didion.

Remarkably, the United States has been the only nation in the world to have had a conservative movement. England has had Margaret Thatcher, and her success changed even the Labour Party, but not even England has developed the infrastructure of magazines, newspapers, television networks, commentators, columnists, foundations, think tanks, voluntary associations, and so forth that have emerged as part of a self-aware movement since World War II. In 1984, Ronald Reagan, winning a second term in a landslide, resembled Thatcher in making conservatism central to politics. He was a reader and friend of *National Review*, and while President he attended both its thirtieth anniversary banquet at the Plaza hotel and the opening of its Washington office.

From its beginning in November 1955, *National Review* carried the work of writers expressing various strands of conservative thought, indeed, often from contending positions. What made this possible was the intellectual magnanimity and pleasure in intellectual drama of *National Review*'s founding editor, William F. Buckley Jr., and the guidance of his “indispensable” colleague, James Burnham. From the start, Burnham was absolutely central to *National Review* and remained increasingly so until he retired in 1978 after a serious stroke. His political focus throughout was on strategy in what is generally called the Cold War, though hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions died in it. He himself, accurately as usual, called this prolonged event the Third World War.

In its early years, *National Review*, alone among serious weekly journals, reflected on the strong currents of thought, feeling, and opinion that were in opposition to the old New Deal synthesis that had begun to crumble. *National Review* spoke knowledgeably about the threat of international Communism, which had become manifest. It soon was a leader in commenting with good sense on the black, the countercultural, and the youth upheavals that convulsed the body politic at home.

National Review helped give coherence and shape to the conservative position. Most important, it defined and disciplined the conservative mind by excluding crackpots, some of them briefly dangerous. If the John Birch Society is now almost forgotten, it is largely because of *National Review*.

Along the way, *National Review* brought aboard a galaxy of colorful characters, some of them little known, some Dickensian and even Dostoyevskian. I have been a Senior Editor since 1969 and have just completed a history of this remarkable venture.^[1] The forty-nine big red bound volumes of the

magazine can be read in order as a single great conservative work, its errors and their corrections equally valuable, teaching how to think as well as articulating positions in relation to unfolding events. Handling those heavy volumes has also done wonders for my upper body.

When the first number of *National Review* appeared, I picked up my copy at that large newsstand outside the subway entrance in Harvard Square. I had graduated from Columbia in 1952, and spent the time since as a Naval Intelligence officer in the First Naval District, Boston, living in an apartment on Boylston Street. I was trying to decide whether to stay in Cambridge and at Harvard for a Ph.D. in literature, which was an open option, or return to Columbia, my alma mater, or *dura mater* as Lionel Trilling called it.

I had been a conservative from birth and then an anti-Communist. My anti-Communism deepened with the academic years and was made operational at the Naval Intelligence School in Anacostia and during my later duty as a Naval intelligence officer in Boston.

Not long before the first issue of *National Review* appeared, I had a chance to see William Buckley, already famous for *God and Man at Yale* (1951), in action. A debate had been announced, to take place in Harvard's Lamont Library, between Buckley and James Wechsler, the diamond-pure liberal editor of *The New York Post*. Later Buckley would aptly write that Wechsler was so pure a liberal that he ought to be on exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution, for tourists and schoolchildren to gawk at, as they did at Piltdown Man. He or someone else said that Wechsler was like a bronze bust of The Liberal that one might strike matches upon.

What happened on the appointed night in an auditorium at Lamont Library gave a preliminary indication of at least one of the many qualities that would render Buckley famous and *National Review* successful: Buckley's bravura. The auditorium was jammed, his entrance buzzily awaited. Then down the aisle he proceeded with his wife Pat, she very tall, wearing an enormous leopard hat and large bag, also leopard. Buzz from the audience. At the podium, after thanking the host for his introduction, Buckley observed, with an elfin grin (soon a signature feature), that he was very pleased to see Professor Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., there in the audience. Then he added, "His many books would be dangerous if they weren't so boring." In his bow tie, Arthur looked Arthurish. Laughter. Not hostile. And the Harvard students loved it. Buckley's entire performance was Byronic, rakish, and marvelous. His intonations were unique, though today familiar. They seemed something gorgeous, maybe out of the English *fin de siècle*, Beerbohm, Beardsley.

Whatever sober points Wechsler might have made, he was obliterated by the stylistic contrast and, ink-stained wretch that he obviously was, slunk back to the then-liberal *New York Post*. Right there, I saw the conservative movement being born, and liberalism made otiose. Right there was the esprit that caught the attention of early *National Review* readers—especially the young.

This was no stuffed-shirt or classroom policy wonk. This had nothing to do with the dismal science and its green eye-shades. This was great theater.

I did not meet Buckley until 1962. By then I had been teaching at Columbia since 1956, when I got out of the Navy, and was finishing up my Ph.D. During the summer program, open not only to Columbia students, I was teaching a course in the Victorian Novel. A pretty young woman had enrolled in the course, and one day she came into my office for the usual conference. On my desk, she noticed a copy of *The Fabric of Society: An Introduction to the Social Sciences* by Ernest van den Haag and Ralph Ross. This book sets forth vast professional knowledge about sociology, psychology, philosophy, and economics with remarkable lucidity. I think its modest sales were due to the fact that it proved to be too good for classroom assignment, wrapping up its subjects and leaving the professor little to add, a dire threat to the profession. I was also aware of van den Haag as a contributor to *National Review*, where his knowledge and combination of logic and common sense

made him also, I later found, a valued advisor to the young magazine.

My student spotted the volume and asked if I wanted to meet van den Haag. I said sure, and she invited me to a cocktail party at her apartment in Greenwich Village. It became evident that she was an intimate friend of Ernest, as I then began to call him—not “Ernie Pooh,” as she did. He struck me as very European, smoking a thin European cigar, wearing tight European trousers and thin European shoes covered with the hide of some reptile. He had with him an alert, swarthy man about Pooh’s age named Anatole Broyard, a figure famous in the Village. Friends soon informed me that he and Pooh together cut wide swathes through the local female population, and were very far from being discreet about it. Broyard, a hard-headed literary critic, later was outed by the thought police: He was part black, and had concealed it. Unforgivable.

Ernest and I became good friends. Much later I several times brought him to Dartmouth as a speaker, and he charmed the students with his intellect and his continental *éclat*. During the 1930s, before coming to America, he had been active in the anti-Mussolini underground, and, while running away after delivering a forbidden newspaper, had been shot by Mussolini’s police and imprisoned. He said being shot had felt like being struck sharply in the back with a stick; it did not begin to hurt until the next day. He said that this was why he favored execution by firing squad: The next day did not matter.

At the party, van den Haag asked me if I would be willing to write book reviews for *National Review*. He was an informal recruiter for Bill Buckley, he said, and his use of the term “willing” signaled his reasonable awareness of my academic environment. I said sure.

Jack Cuddihy was also a good friend of mine, and also lived in the Village. An imaginative sociologist who taught at Hunter College, he later wrote the minor classic *The Ordeal of Civility: Marx, Freud, and Levi-Strauss and the Jewish Struggle with Modernity*. This book became a kind of underground scandal, though also prestigious. Jack had a good sense of humor. For example one day I asked him how come van den Haag was so successful with women. The correct answer, I supposed, was his continental charm, and his André Malraux combination of man-of-thought and man-of-action. But Jack said, “The women are just curious. They want to see if he’s as funny-looking with his clothes off as he is with them on.”

Not much time went by before Buckley’s secretary called and I made a date to meet him at the famously rabbit-warren-like offices of *National Review* on East Thirty-fifth Street. It did not surprise me to learn later that an expert efficiency analysis had concluded that it was impossible to put out a magazine in premises like this, consisting of several former apartments now jury-rigged together—one office, that of the publisher Bill Rusher, still contained an unusable bathtub. No would-be assassin could ever find the editor-in-chief in such a maze. This was the right unslick sort of office for a small-budget outlaw magazine.

Buckley was supremely cordial and charming, his own best recruiter, while intermittently bending over a table on some magazine chore. He was in shirtsleeves, well attired in what looked like a J. Press striped shirt, but also casual to the extent that his shirt-tail hung out and his regimental tie-knot drooped near his collar bone. It is not surprising that while Pat Buckley has sometimes been among the Ten Best-Dressed Women, Bill at least once made the Ten Worst among men. The day’s editorial task completed, we had dinner at a Chinese restaurant. I affirmed the fact that I would indeed review books for *National Review*. At length, the books editor Frank Meyer, an amazing character, phoned, and I agreed to review Aldous Huxley’s paean to hallucinogens, *The Doors of Perception*. Huxley died soon after, on the same day as C. S. Lewis and Jack Kennedy. The passing of Huxley and Lewis went virtually unnoticed.

By 1969 I had metamorphosed into a Senior Editor at *National Review*, commuting from

Dartmouth, occupying the tiny office once used by Whittaker Chambers and wondering how the plump fellow had fitted into it.

Throughout Buckley's adult life there persisted a tension in his politics. First was an aristocratic conservatism, influenced by his early admiration for his family friend, the 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 hundred names in the Boston telephone directory than by the faculty at Harvard University. He contradictorily admired Ortega y Gasset's Nietzschean- aristocratic *Revolt of the Masses* and contemplated a book to be entitled *Revolt Against the Masses*.

In 1954, Buckley met William Schlam, who provided the catalyst for a new conservative journal of opinion. Schlam 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 agreed to join with Buckley 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 Schlam 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.

One of Buckley's strengths as an editor was a remarkable magnanimity. He enjoyed disputations involving principle, as between libertarian and traditionalist, 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, or beyond the pale altogether.

National Review proved the foundation for a career that made 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 about which he would also be the principal interpreter.

Of the history of *National Review* during its first half-century, the first thing to say is that you will read a success story. The first number of *National Review*, November 22, 1955, had a print run of 7,500. By its tenth anniversary, the magazine reached 100,000. At its fifty-year mark, it has reached 170,000 and has become publishing, and political, history.

Notes

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1. *The Making of the American Conservative Mind: National Review and Its Times*, by Jeffrey Hart; Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 380 pages, \$28. [Go back to the text.](#)

Jeffrey Hart's most recent book is *The Making of the American Conservative Mind* (ISI).

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This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 24 November 2005, on page 29

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