

“Before Ronald Reagan, there was Barry Goldwater, and before there was Barry Goldwater, there was National Review, and before there was National Review, there was Bill Buckley with a spark in his mind, and the spark . . . has become a conflagration.”

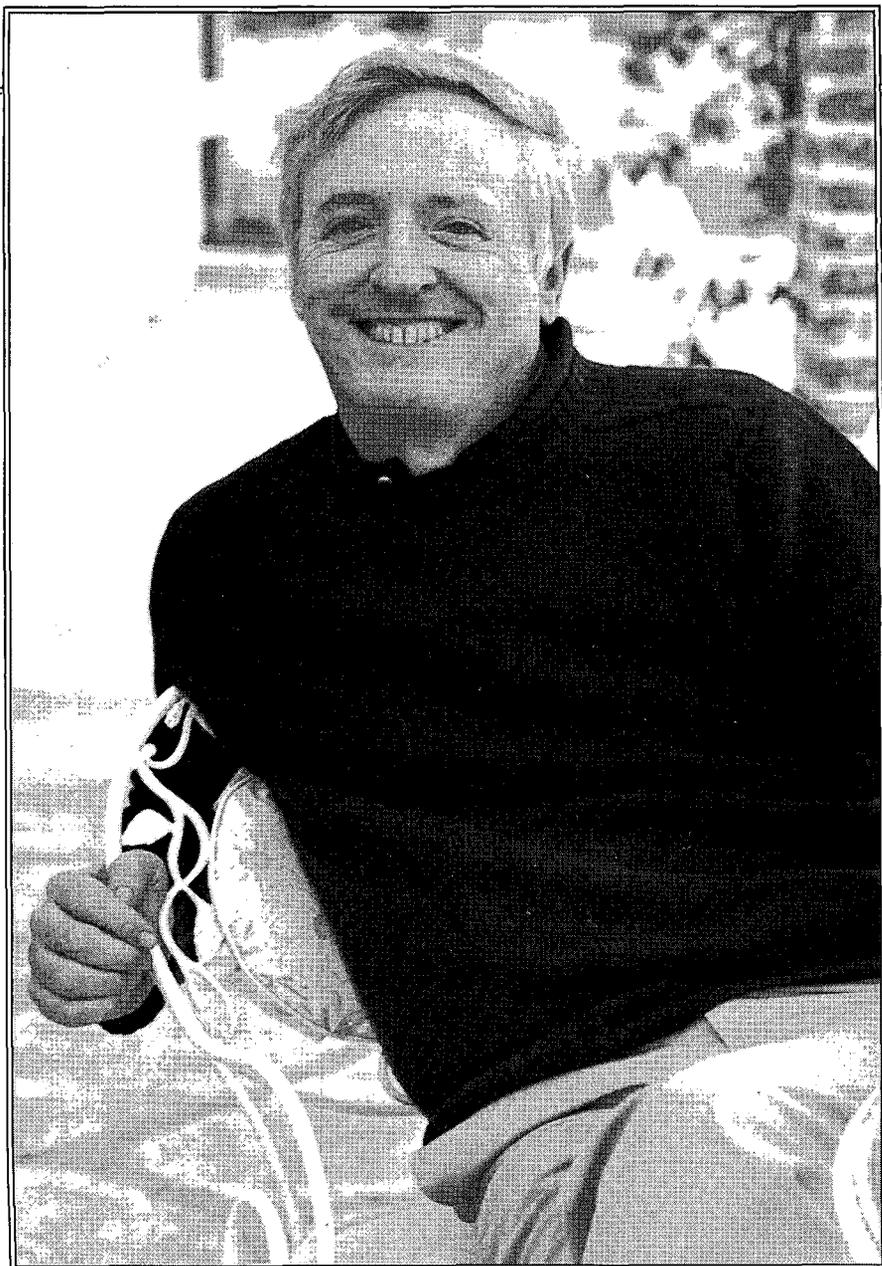
So proclaimed Washington Post columnist George Will two years ago. His point was no exaggeration: if any one person deserves credit or blame for resuscitating conservatism and preparing the intellectual groundwork for the 1980 Reagan victory, it is William F. Buckley, Jr.

The son of a conservative oil magnate, Buckley first attracted national attention with his book *God and Man* at Yale, an attack on atheist and liberal sentiment among the faculty of his alma mater. In the early '50s he lectured extensively and coauthored *McCarthy and His Enemies*, a defense of the Wisconsin senator.

The first issue of *National Review* (founded, edited, and initially published by Buckley) was printed in November 1955. Within the conservative movement, Buckley's choices of editors and writers have been notably catholic: James Burnham, Max Eastman, Murray Rothbard, Garry Wills, David Brudnoy, and George Will, among others.

Buckley shepherded *National Review* through its early days as an obscure journal with a circulation of 16,000. Today it enjoys preeminence in a resurgent conservatism and a circulation of 100,000. In his spare time, he helped organize the New York Conservative Party and ran for mayor of New York City, founded *Young Americans for Freedom*, writes a syndicated column and a stream of books, parries with guests on his TV show, *Firing Line*, and maintains friendships with Sen. Barry Goldwater, socialist John Kenneth Galbraith, and Watergate burglar E. Howard Hunt.

Buckley was recently interviewed by *REASON* Senior Editor Tibor Machan.



REASON INTERVIEW

William F. Buckley

REASON: Let me start with asking you a little bit about how your politics emerged. You're a very strong, effective, and long-time spokesman for a certain political movement in America. How did that come about? Did you grow into it? Was it a family matter? Did you learn about it?

BUCKLEY: Well, my father was a man of emphatic opinion. To what extent one acquires such habits from one's father, I don't know. There were 10 of us, and some of us were dis-

putatious and others were not. I was on the debating team at Yale and the editor of the newspaper there, and if I had a natural gift for anything it's the contradiction, and a place like Yale abounds in contradictions—their professed purposes are often athwart their actual purposes. I saw an awful lot of this going on, so that whatever polemical spirit I had was provoked by that experience. So I wrote my book, and I guess that launched it.

REASON: You are basically a conservative of a certain kind. You and, for example, someone like George Will differ in your conservatism. George is more like a Continental conservative, and you are more like an American conservative.

BUCKLEY: Yes, I think that is correct. George is more willing than I to accept, if you want to put it in the American context, Hamiltonian emphases. I tend to be a little bit more pastoral and antistatist and Jeffersonian.

REASON: Do you think that your kind of conservatism is more defensible than his, or do you just accept eclecticism in the conservative movement?

BUCKLEY: I think everyone tends to reach out and distill, in the effort to defend his own philosophy, that which he finds appealing; and that which he finds appealing often is for him plausible. A combination of that tends to describe the persona of everyone's philosophy. I have resisted efforts to be schematic in the presentation of my own; in fact, I don't think I have done it in any formal sense since I did the introduction to a book on conservative thought [*American Conservative Thought in the Twentieth Century*, 1970]. It isn't laziness; it's that I have no appetite to do it. I would rather continue to be eclectic as required.

REASON: You are, however, fairly strict in your application of, say, logic and reasonableness to your adversaries. I remember reading way back, about 20 years ago, when you chided many on the left for inconsistencies on Cuba. Yet when it comes to your own views, you have more of a flux, as opposed to a rigorous presentation.

BUCKLEY: Well, I don't think that's true. I do allow increasingly for what I would call the artistic dimension. For instance, in the course of struggling with my novels, I have been persuaded that counterintelligence and espionage is a moral art. For instance, if you ask me, "Do you believe in assassination?" I would say no. But if you were to ask, "Do you believe that assassination is the worst crime?" I would say no. "Well, what's worse?" A world war is worse. "Do you believe therefore there ought to be laws against assassination?" Yes. "Does that mean you believe that there ought to be no assassinations?" No. Now, if you can find contradictions in that, go ahead, because I recognize them. I'm simply saying that no statement of my position that fails to permit these artistic exemptions—and I think they are artistic—will do justice to what I want to say.

REASON: Your Roman Catholicism is well known, but you are also quite critical of a good deal of official church policy, at least enunciated church policy emanating from the Vatican. To what extent do you find that disturbing to yourself?

BUCKLEY: The answer is not at all, because nothing that has been said with which I explicitly disagree in any encyclical is in any sense binding on me as a matter of faith. Moreover, much that has been said in encyclicals tends to contradict earlier or even later things said in encyclicals.

REASON: I find amenability to change one of the oddities of religious traditions. Sometimes drastic changes occur between centuries, and I have to wonder, where is the integrity of the

Church? How do you reconcile that with your belief in this as a very valuable human institution?

BUCKLEY: Well, to the extent that the Church is human, integrity is not anything that one can necessarily expect from it. To the extent that it is a divine institution, one finds in it a continuation which I think is absolutely remarkable over a period of 2,000 years. It has never used a statement of authority explicitly to endorse anything that can be seen as contradicting the deposit of fide. Under the circumstances, all I can say is that the pope's the center of the experiment, and social pronouncements are subject to mistake. I think that a Catholic owes presumptive, not reverent, *attention*.

REASON: Taking you away from religion for a moment, I want to ask about you and Ayn Rand—Rand being someone whose work is often lauded in REASON. You and Ayn Rand crossed swords, and there seemed to be a tone to this disputation that was more than intellectual, more than even philosophical. There seemed to be a temperamental element to it. Did I perceive this wrongly or would you . . .

BUCKLEY: No, you're perceiving it absolutely correctly. I think it was unilateral. That is to say, I never engaged in a personal war against her, but she most certainly did against me, to the point of refusing to occupy the same hall, even if it was as wide as a block square, as I. My sin, as far as she was concerned, was to have published in *National Review* a review of her book by Whittaker Chambers. It's surprising to me that a libertarian should have visited the sins of granting libertarian rights to Chambers—to come to his own conclusions about her book—into a sort of general boycott.

REASON: Well, Rand didn't call herself a libertarian and in fact repudiated libertarianism—though it is too shallow and so forth and so on. But as an editor of a magazine, you can certainly be criticized for publishing something. It has nothing to do with libertarianism or freedom of speech or whatever. It's an editorial judgment. If I say that you published a bad poem, therefore you are to be condemned as an editor of a magazine, that surely has nothing to do with whether I believe in free speech.

BUCKLEY: But a 29-year-old editor who decided to censor a review of Whittaker Chambers is—let me put it this way, it would be more presumptuous of me to do that than it would be to be prepared to sustain the outlook of Miss Rand. In any event, if I had personally to stand behind or to disavow Chambers's famous review, I would stand behind 90 percent of it.

REASON: Sometimes your public expressions of your views come quite close to what libertarians would identify with. I have in mind here your Cambridge Union debate with John Kenneth Galbraith, for example. On so many things you stand up for the individual, and you find that the state is encroaching on his or her realm of personal authority or conscience and so on. Why isn't it that you go all the way in this respect with the libertarians and maintain that there should be really a categorical imperative against state interference with the individual's liberty?

BUCKLEY: Because I don't believe in categorical imperatives, except in the matter of saving one's soul. I believe compromise is genuinely necessary in order to sustain social relationships, even at the most intimate level, for instance, between husband and wife. And under the circumstances I would certainly believe in it as regards hostile neighbors who have a fence between them.

REASON: But there is an equivocation that I sense here be-

tween society and state. Society includes friends, communities, professional associations, colleagues, athletic pals, and so on, and it's a far cry from the moral dynamics of relationships among the members of these social groups to the proper moral relationship between something like a coercive state and the members of that state. Yet when you say that society needs to do this and society needs to do that, it seems like you then end up with the state having to do it. Why?

BUCKLEY: I think you're correct in suggesting that the two terms are not synonymous. Albert Jay Nock spent a lifetime making that point. However, the term *personal* is most frequently used to suggest involving more than one person, and that which regulates the behavior of social groups is in part convention and in part law, and I was referring to the latter rather than to the former when I made the point you asked about.

REASON: I always wonder, when confronted with this position, why anyone would have confidence in compulsory measures as a means of improving and making better things that seem at best only probably improvable anyway and, then, why coercion should be employed in the face of these bad odds.

BUCKLEY: Are you making an empirical or a theoretical point?

REASON: I don't think there is that clear a distinction between facts and theories, or facts and values. This is a commonsense point that I am making. It's just knowing about the world a little bit and realizing that it seems not to yield to force very well.

BUCKLEY: Well, let me in that case introduce you to the cleavage. In Switzerland, for instance, every male on reaching the age of 18 must devote a year of his time to the army and must devote two to four weeks to the army over the ensuing 20 years. Now, an empirical case could without any difficulty be made to say that 8 or 10 percent of Swiss young men could be excluded from this obligation for this reason or that. But there is a bond which observably works, which introduces a high morale to the Swiss population precisely in virtue of the unanimity of the sanction. Now, if, for instance, a society feels that its *attachment* to that society is substantially vitiated in virtue of the toleration, let's say, of a movie based on a comedy treatment of Dachau, it tends to lose self-esteem. And to the extent that it loses self-esteem, it stands the danger of reducing that which is its principal resource in matters of emergency. An America that hates itself cannot possibly defend itself against the Soviet Union or anybody else.

REASON: Well, I suppose that the empiricism that lay behind my question is a little broader in the sense that I do not see any evidence for the overall quality of a society being helped by compulsion or coercion, although you might facilitate the arts or militia or something by a little push for a little while.

BUCKLEY: I'm talking about *morale*. A morale is not the kind of stuff you expect to see at a football game. I'm talking about a morale in the sense of urging you or me *voluntarily* to make sacrifices for the survival of something we cherish. Now if we don't cherish it, then we're not disposed to make any sacrifices.

REASON: Well, you know, every one of the concepts that you're employing here just yearns for the additional clarification, "But of course one has to do this voluntarily, otherwise it doesn't accrue virtue to the persons and to the population and they're not a quality society, they're, in some way, failing. . ."

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BUCKLEY: The most important word in my own cosmology is the work *presumption*. I believe in the presumptive right of voluntary action. If I didn't believe that it was presumptive, I would for instance be required to say that I did not believe in conscription in cases of national emergency, but I do. I believe in the presumptive case against the state. I want to be absolutely satisfied it can't otherwise be accomplished.

REASON: You have apparently used marijuana, at least outside the three-mile limit, and you once argued for its decriminalization. You have also urged the legalization of heroin for the terminally ill. Should our drug laws be recognized as as much of a failure as Prohibition was and repealed?

BUCKLEY: I understand and I am sympathetic to the case for the repeal of the marijuana laws. I would distinguish between the licensing of marijuana and the licensing of, say, heroin. I think there is a qualitative difference between the two. One is a habituant; the other is a mortally addictive—in many cases—drug. There, for instance, Thomas Szasz and I disagree most sharply.

REASON: Why shouldn't people be able to undertake a journey that is sort of never-ending?

BUCKLEY: For several reasons. One of them is the principle of quarantine. If I have a communicable disease, I am legitimately confined to my quarters. Now, experience tends to show that the use of heroin is—and I'm using here a metaphor—a communicable disease; that is, if I suffer from it, I'd like other people—and, perversely enough, people I love—to share an experience that I find exhilarating. That's point number one. Point number two—and here even Milton Friedman is a little bit cautious, although he has argued this with me ever since I took my position public in 1965; he does grant that this is not a situation about which it can clearly be said that it is a victimless crime—to the extent that I persuade others to take heroin along with me, I am victimizing them. But also, at another level, at which I as the father of a family desert my business in order to engage in a life of crime if necessary to feed my habit, or in any case a life of neglect, I am

as a result of the availability of this drug victimizing my wife and my children.

REASON: I'm sure you've heard arguments like this before, but surely I can persuade someone of Marxism, which is an awful thing; yet I shouldn't be therefore prohibited from advocating Marxism.

BUCKLEY: I agree with you, and this requires you to engage in an empirical exercise. I once said to [John Kenneth] Galbraith that whatever case could be made against fin-tailed cars or against so many of the cultural accretions that he and you and I might join in deploring, I personally feel that his books have done more damage than the cars. On the other hand, I recognize that there is a chemistry at work here that says to me there is a difference between denying you the right to publish a book called *The Affluent Society* and denying you the right to ready access to heroin.

REASON: But production is production, and if you believe in the regulation of production, then you regulate by the FTC the book flaps of John Kenneth Galbraith's books, and if they say, "This is the best book in economics," and it is not, . . . Truth in advertising . . .

BUCKLEY: Okay, you pull the *reductio ad absurdum* on me, I'll pull it on you. Why should I not be free to produce atom bombs?

REASON: There is a question of clear and present danger, which I do recognize as a category.

BUCKLEY: Well, the clear and present danger in the taking of morphine is very clear and very present. We recognize, do

we not, as a historical matter—I gather it's true—that the British secret service attempted to make Kenyatta a morphine addict during the period that he was in detention, and we know that from time to time the Soviet Union has experimented in this. That is, there is unhappily a great temptation to try to make somebody a junkie, because such is our biological composition that 7 out of 10 people to whom you introduce the habit of morphine tend to invert their whole system of power to giving that precedence.

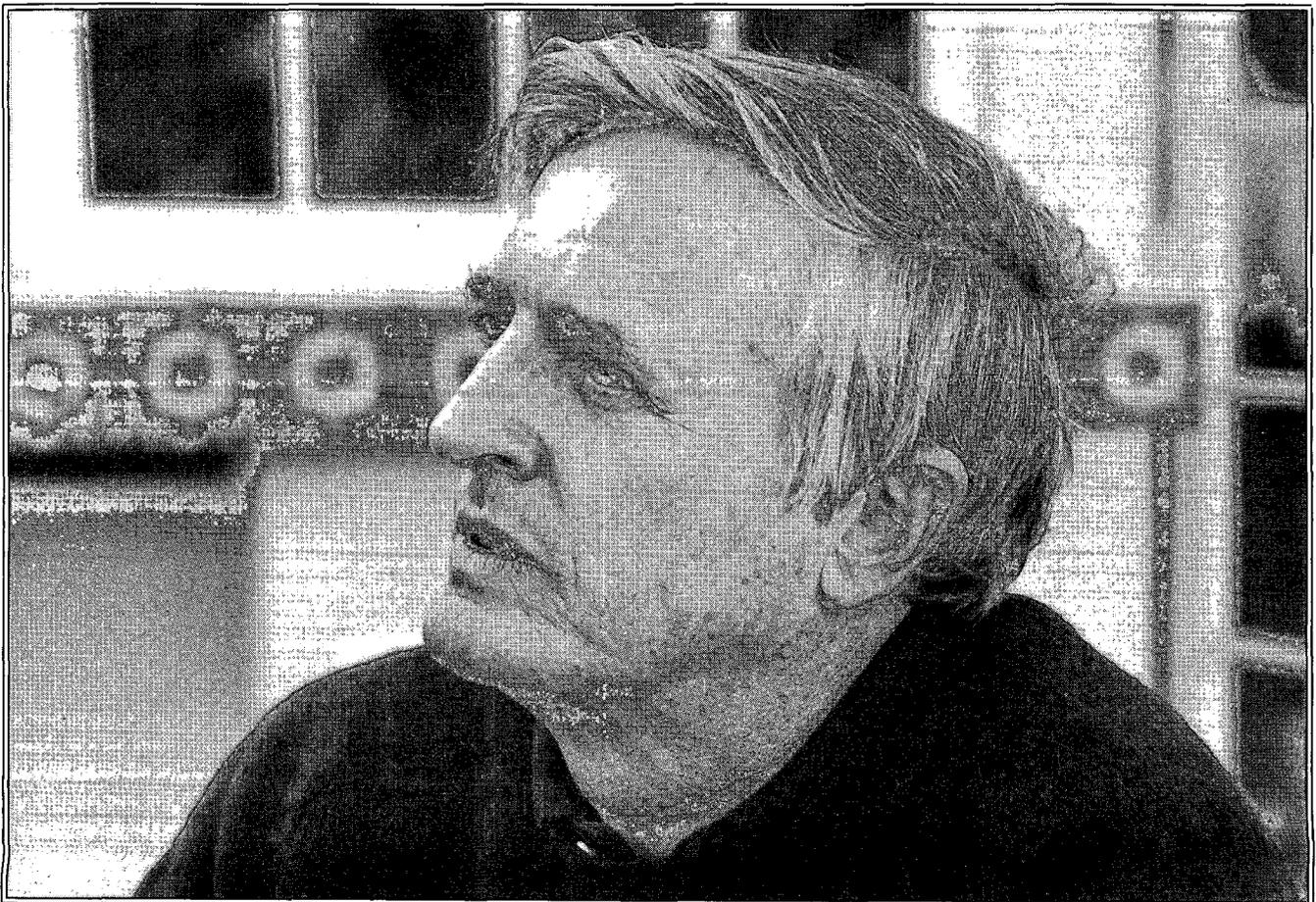
REASON: George Gilder's famous book, *Wealth and Poverty*, became the so-called bible of supply-side economics. What do you make of the fundamental claim in the book that capitalism is somehow an expression of an altruistic morality? Do you think that's a palatable claim, or is George reaching here?

BUCKLEY: I think the latter. I have quarreled with George publicly on that particular point. I appreciate the rhetorical resourcefulness of it, and I absolutely acknowledge that the effects of capitalism are altruistic. I deny that the motivation is necessarily such.

REASON: You had George Gilder on *Firing Line* with Robert Lekachman. What a match!

BUCKLEY: Lekachman was much more glib than George . . .

REASON: It really is unfortunate, by the way—this is just an incidental remark—that the people roughly on the free-market side have, I think, only Thomas Sowell who matches those on the left in wit and repertoire and everything that it takes for the media to make a star out of someone. The left just have too



many of these characters who navigate well.

BUCKLEY: Well, I think Thomas Sowell is terrific, but I don't think he is unique. I think Milton Friedman . . .

REASON: Friedman is very good at explaining things; nobody can get by him. But the kind of sarcastic wit that Lekachman has, which somehow attracts intellectuals, is just missing on the part of the opposition. Sowell is the only one who can sort of really hit them hard.

BUCKLEY: You're talking exclusively about the conversational part.

REASON: That's right—the conversation, one-upmanship, that type of thing. It's very, very rare among people on the free-market side.

BUCKLEY: Well, let me tell you why I think this is. It's in part, of course, because 90 percent of the verbalists are on the other side. But it's also because the other side is much easier to argue emotively. It's much, much, much easier to say, "Let's give Mrs. Jones in the ghetto an annual stipend of \$10,000," than it is to say, "Mrs. Jones in the ghetto will in the long run be better off and be happier if that money comes to her as a result of the free operation of free human beings," because this requires you to go through a soritical process that begins from here and *ends up* with Mrs. Jones, rather than the instant benefaction, which is easier to visualize, especially by an audience. I have seen in so many situations of public confrontation—people like George McGovern, people like Ramsey Clark—bring down the house by a paragraph or two which I could easily compose and which I hope I am never so undignified as to copy.

REASON: Do you write all of your own columns?

BUCKLEY: Oh, *God*, yes.

REASON: You don't have any ghost writers yet?

BUCKLEY: No. If you could find me one, I'd pay him a fortune!

REASON: You've been doing *Firing Line* now for a long time—over 16 years. Is it still a gas or is it . . .

BUCKLEY: Never was a gas—very, very hard work; extremely hard work. In fact, of everything I do, it's probably the most difficult.

REASON: You've had an incredible array of people on there. I do notice that fewer and fewer folks on our side, let's say the libertarian right, show up.

BUCKLEY: Well, it's by design in the sense that I share about 90 percent of the views of most libertarians, and the charter of *Firing Line* requires that it be an exchange of adversaries. So although occasionally I sneak in the Goldwaters and the Milton Friedmans and so on, 90 percent of the people I confront are people with whom I disagree.

REASON: What do you think of President Reagan's treatment of the Central American situation? Or perhaps I should ask what you think of the Reagan foreign policy as it is—or is there a foreign policy there?

BUCKLEY: I think it's uncrystallized in the following sense. I think it is unprepared to use such weapons as are naturally ours, and they are primarily economic and psychological and spiritual. Now, I would like to see Reagan declare a really vivid economic boycott. I'd like to see everything headed in that direction. And I would consider this as sort of paramilitary. Now, in the matter of Central America, I am very much guided, very much influenced, as I have previously confessed, by what I call the Fulbright Codicil. The Fulbright Codicil is that the United States government has no proper concern to oppose any government in the world, no matter how odious its policies, so long as it does not seek to exploit them. When it seeks to exploit them, then we have a potential for a global disarrangement, which as a superpower we have a historical requirement to maintain at an intelligent level—you

know, 6 marines situated in Hanoi might obviate the necessity of 6 million marines in California.

REASON: Suppose we have a situation like this: suppose that in a country like Nicaragua there is, as misguided as it may be, a genuine social Marxist revolution, and the Cubans are invited to assist in establishing this in the face of, say, an oligarchic class, a small band of very powerful rulers. Does the government of the United States now have the moral authority, the political authority, to go in there and save them?

BUCKLEY: My position on that point is spelled out in some detail in an article I published in *Foreign Affairs* a while back. In it I was very much animated by John Quincy Adams's statement that the American people are friends of liberty everywhere, but custodians only of their own. Now, how do you express your friendship for liberty in the modern world? I think you express your friendship for liberty by denominating anti-liberty as such. And how that ought to be done, in my opinion, is platonically. That is to say, I would welcome the cancellation of all of our participation in the human rights agencies in the United Nations, for instance, and the substitution of a commission on human rights whose sole purpose was to instruct the American people on how liberty was faring elsewhere.

REASON: Sort of like a Freedom House.

BUCKLEY: That's exactly it.

REASON: Now I'm beginning to understand why you published John Lukacs in *National Review*. Lukacs is an anomaly in your pages at times.

BUCKLEY: Well, he is also a paradox.

REASON: In conversation with him I've found his view extremely isolationist almost to the point where he resents any kind of American expansionism, even ideological expansionism. He rails against the idea that America has anything morally to teach the world.

BUCKLEY: No, I don't think that's true. I think his point, if I understand it correctly, is that we do not need to worry other than to protect our own chastity, because the reverberations from *it* are all that we really need. He for instance says that the Soviet Union has left no indelible mark anywhere in Eastern Europe. If tomorrow Eastern Europe were liberated, there would be no residual conventions that had been inherited from the Soviet Union because of its natural predisposition toward Western ideals. Therefore he feels that an unnecessary physical interventionism there is on the one hand redundant and on the other hand unworkable.

REASON: I think he forgets about the bureaucracy, which is not a cultural facet but which has infested most of those countries.

BUCKLEY: I agree. I think he underestimates the power of totalitarian artistry to continue to dominate long after consensus has developed against it.

REASON: How important has *National Review* been in the rise of conservatism, the fact of Ronald Reagan's presidency?

BUCKLEY: I think it's been critical. We've published for 26 years, and he started reading *National Review* back when he was a Democrat and confesses to having been heavily influenced by it. Now, I don't say we made him president, but there was an accumulation of arguments, rebuttals, cultural probings, the assimilation of sociological data, which came out issue after issue.

REASON: Now that he's been president for some time, is it gratifying or is it a little disappointing?

BUCKLEY: Well, it's gratifying that we have somebody up there whose ideals are similar, if not replications of our own, and it is simply axiomatic that in a democratic society the person with those ideals isn't necessarily in a position to implement those. In electing Reagan, we didn't elect all the Congress or all the senators. □