

Remembering (but not channeling) WFB

By Christopher Buckley '75

Christopher Buckley '75, William F. Buckley's only child, has written more than a dozen books, including a memoir about his parents, *Losing Mum and Pup*. He was one of several friends and family members of his father's who spoke at the dinner. His prepared remarks follow.

I find myself often being asked what WFB would make of things these days. My answer is that it's a bit tricky, channeling your father's ghost. Hamlet tried it. And we all know how that turned out.

But I will admit that, in addition to missing Pup, I often find myself asking *myself*: what *would* he make of all that's going on in what he called "our noisy Republic?" And beyond?

What would he have made—*inter alia*, as he used to put it—of: the Obama presidency; Iraq and Afghanistan; the Greek bailout; the Arab Spring; Occupy Wall Street; Herman Cain?

With respect to the Godfather of Pizza, I'm reminded of a joke Pup loved to tell. The setting is Franco's Spain. A stranger approaches a man and says to him, "What do you think of Franco?"

The man looks around, puts his fingers to his lips and indicates that his questioner should follow him. He leads him out the door, down a side alley. Again

he looks around to see if anyone is listening. Whereupon, satisfied that they are alone, he whispers, "I like him."

What would WFB make of Mr. Cain's *fellow* office-seekers? Of the perhaps inevitable Governor Romney? Of the colorful and electrifying Governor Perry? Of the anti-vaccinating Ms. Bachmann? Of the newly Catholic and much-married Newt Gingrich? Of the beguiling but alarming Ron Paul? Of Mandarin-speaking Ambassador Huntsman?

What Would Bill Say?

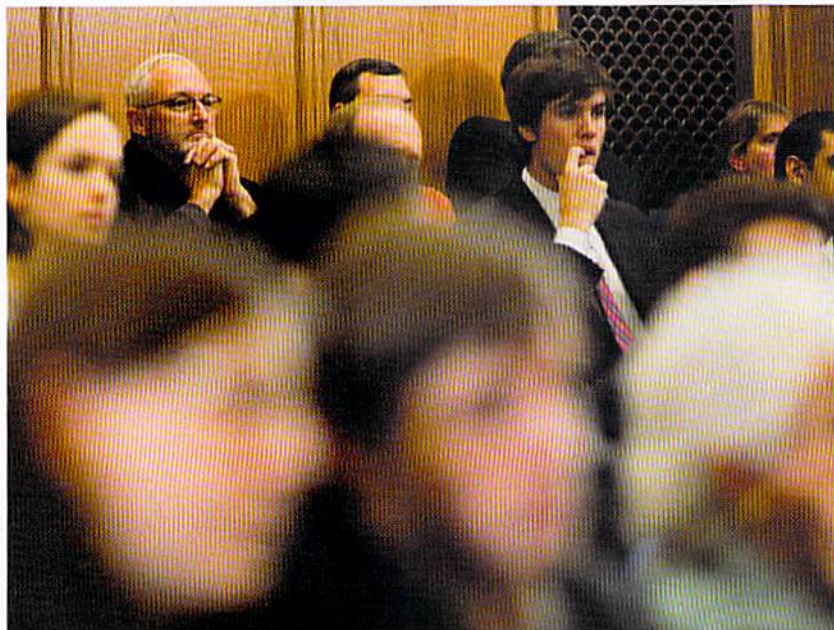
I think I won't go there.

Under WFB, *National Review's* policy was to endorse the most conservative *electable* candidate. I leave it to *NR's* editors to decide who, among this . . . embarrassment of riches, is a) the most conservative, b) the most electable. Or whether c) we should, as Cole Porter ['13] would say, call the whole thing off.

Shortly before he died, Pup was asked what he made of the current state of conservatism. He replied that it was in need of "re-pristination."

Only Pup would have put it quite that way. But it's not just conservatism that needs re-pristinating today. Technology, cable television, the Internet, and the 24/7 news cycle have turned our noisy Republic





Christopher Buckley '75 (at left in photo) listens to panelists at the afternoon event devoted to his father's legacy.

into a cacophonous hive. De Tocqueville accurately predicted 170 years ago that American bureaucracy would ultimately conspire to create a thicket of complexity through which, as he put it, not even the most original mind could penetrate. What voice, today, could penetrate the yap and bark that passes for political discourse? One would not confuse most of the shows on TV today with *Firing Line*.

My father brought many things to the table: intelligence, flair, grace, wit. He respected his opponents and extended every courtesy. But he insisted on intellectual rigor. On coherence. After listening to someone prattle on *incoherently*, he would lean back, smile in that way he had, and say, ever so gently, "There's a lot of undistributed middle in there." One time on *Nightline*, I think it was, after listening to a tortured, and indeed tortuous, explanation of why O. J. Simpson was so obviously innocent, he smiled and said to Ted Koppel in tones of *langueur*, "It seems to me that what the gentleman is—really—seeking to do here is to create a miasma of epistemological chaos."

Pup often brought his opponents to a screeching halt with one of his favorite formulations: "Who says A, must say B."

There are a lot of people today saying A—indeed, shouting it. And very few who go on then to say B. In Pup's hands, Occam's Razor became an *épée*. Other times, I thought I caught a slight echo of his (brief) exposure to the Jesuits, as when he said, "Where there are no alternatives, there are no problems."

It took me a while to figure that one out, but it's quite liberating, really. If, toward the end of his life, William F. Buckley Jr. looked out on a de-pristinated conservative political landscape, he didn't wring his hands or ululate or rend his garments or gnash his teeth. Perhaps it was his deep Catholic faith that sustained him and endowed him with the consolation of the long view. "Despair," he often reminded us, "is a mortal sin." Meanwhile, there was always work to do: a column to write, a book, an article, correspondence. Here's another line I learned from him: "Industry is the enemy of melancholy."

As I was composing these thoughts for you the other day, a book arrived in the mail. It's called *Buckley*. Good title. Its author, Professor Carl Bogus of Roger Williams University, takes pains to say upfront—and I quote—"I am a liberal and thus critical—in some instances, highly critical—of Buckley's ideology. I nevertheless admire William F. Buckley 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."

"In Pup's hands, Occam's Razor became an *épée*."

Yes, he was. And, it seems appropriate to add here tonight as we celebrate the 60th anniversary of *God and Man at Yale*, he was true blue. Even if, as the dedication page of that book shows, he did have his priorities: "For God, for Country, and for Yale—in that order." He loved Yale, and though the relationship was, Lord knows, a complex one, Yale loved him back. I was here with him, not far from where we sit tonight, when President Rick Levin—who has done so very much for Yale—bestowed on Pup a laurel long withheld: an honorary degree. He was proud of that, and proud that dear old Mother Yale had finally managed to say, "All is forgiven."

In its splendid coverage after he died, the *Yale Alumni Magazine* put him on its cover under the headline: "Yale's Prodigal Son."

Prodigal he was. But the bond between the parent and the prodigal is often the more intense. Now, 60 years on, their bond seems stronger than ever.

That indeed *is* cause for celebration. After all, who says A, must say Boola Boola. **Y**