RISE TO THE MOMENT OF TRUTH
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Opinion

Allen Mendenhall: The genie and the gentleman

Allen Mendenhall | 06.28.25

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When exactly William F. Buckley, Jr. reached peak cultural saturation is a matter of debate, but by the year he turned 66, he'd achieved a rare conservative milestone: being famous enough for Robin Williams to mimic him as a cartoon bit. There's something deliciously absurd about the manic improvisational genius

of Williams channeling the patrician drawl and baroque vocabulary of America's premier right-wing intellectual in "Aladdin."

Picture it: The Genie, fresh out of his lamp and ready to grant wishes, suddenly possessed by the spirit of the "National Review" founder, delivering some "quid pro quo" exposition with the theatrical gravitas Buckley brought to dismantling lefties on "Firing Line."

That animated impression offers a caricatured Buckley: witty, larger-than-life, and linguistically acrobatic. A more grounded and contemplative version emerges in Sam Tanenhaus's new authorized biography, a project Buckley greenlit back in 1998.

Tanenhaus offers valuable insights into Buckley's formative years, tracing his intellectual development to his unusual upbringing and summarizing his educational and career foundation with a simple assertion: "Everything he learned, and all he became, began at home."

The story opens with a classic American archetype: the self-made patriarch whose own origins shaped his son's worldview: "It started with his father, William F. Buckley, Sr., a lawyer, real estate investor, and oil speculator who grew up in the brush country, the scrubland frontier, of Duval County in South Texas."

The elder Buckley's career exemplified the boom-and-bust cycle of American industry. He had made a fortune by his mid-30s, then went bankrupt by 40 due to speculative oil ventures in Mexico. Young Buckley Jr., the family's sixth child and third son (born in 1925), grew up in a Catholic household in a Connecticut manor house while his father pursued more successful but equally speculative ventures in Venezuela, commuting to and from an office in New York City.

The domestic environment that enlivened the child Buckley was as expansive as it was chaotic. Tanenhaus captures the scale and energy of the household:

> With servants added, as well as tutors, workmen, groomsmen for the horses, and later a riding instructor and his family, the household numbered more than twenty and was alive with pranks, schemes, hilarity, and strife.

These details illuminate the privileged yet unstable environment that produced Buckley's particular brand of intellectual confidence.

Tanenhaus traces Buckley's political awakening to the charged atmosphere of 1940, when isolationist sentiment collided with mounting pressure for American involvement in the European war. According to Tanenhaus, it was that year's presidential election that first drew Buckley into politics.

Still a teenager, Buckley campaigned for the America First Committee, opposing the United States' intervention on Great Britain's behalf in World War II. The young Buckley's political hero was Charles Lindbergh, whose noninterventionist stance resonated with the family's convictions. When critics questioned Lindbergh's loyalty to America, the Buckleys took it as a personal affront. "All the Buckleys were indignant when Lindbergh was accused of disloyalty," Tanenhaus notes.

Buckley's Yale years solidified both his intellectual framework and his talent for provocative public discourse. A decorated student, he found his most decisive inspiration in the eccentric professor Willmoore Kendall, a conservative luminary in his own right.

Kendall's influence extended beyond political theory to style. He was known for his humor and his ability to employ comedy as a rhetorical tool, traits that would also define Buckley. These Yale experiences culminated in Buckley's first major publication: "God and Man at Yale," a scathing indictment of his alma mater that established his reputation as both a profound conservative voice and a master of suasive combat.

This is a heavy hardback too large to summarize succinctly, but it covers Buckley's marriage, his support for Joe McCarthy, his involvement in politics (plus a run for New York mayor) and sway over the Republican Party, his financial successes and failures, and his ousting of John Birch Society members and Randian Objectivists from the mainstream conservative movement.

Many major figures of the postwar right are featured, including Henry Regnery, Frank Chodorov, James Burnham, Whittaker Chambers, and Russell Kirk, with

varying levels of detail.

What's hard to understand today, when the right has ceded literary culture to the left, is that Buckley was a peer to the most prominent and esteemed writers and artists of his day. He was at Truman Capote's famous Black and White Ball in 1966, feuded virulently with Gore Vidal, trained Garry Wills, mentored Joan Didion, and debated James Baldwin. He was a gregarious, confrontational *homme de lettres*.

Where Tanenhaus excels is in his ability to illuminate historical details that extend beyond his central subject. Some of the most compelling material appears in these sideline anecdotes, such as his account of a banquet where the young Buckley spoke alongside Harold Stassen.

Stassen was then a household name – president of the University of Pennsylvania and a prominent Republican who had served as Minnesota's governor from 1939 to 1943 (later running for the Republican presidential nomination numerous times). His remarks at that dinner now seem remarkably prescient, as he warned against private universities growing dependent on federal dollars.

These peripheral stories, though ancillary to Buckley's narrative, often contain the most fascinating elements for contemporary readers, offering glimpses into a political and cultural landscape that feels both foreign and strangely familiar.

Tanenhaus appears to recognize the limitations of fully capturing a life in print. He closes his history with a reflection on Buckley's legacy and the ambiguity surrounding the movement he helped to cultivate:

> In his time, as in our own, no one really could say what American conservatism was or ought to be. Buckley himself repeatedly tried to and at last gave up. But for almost half a century, millions of Americans could confidently say who had been the country's greatest conservative: William F. Buckley, Jr.

Perhaps what made Buckley such an ideal fodder for Williams was that, like the Genie, he could shift personas without ever losing his essence. Both captivated audiences through their sheer force of personality, blending sophistication with

playful endearment. And both, in their way, were constrained by the very powers that set them apart.

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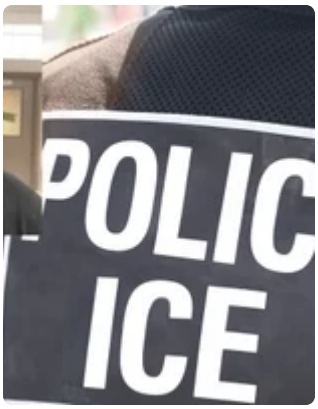

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