



WILLIAM F BUCKLEY'S DANGEROUS MOMENT AT OU

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In the early 1970's, when Vietnam was still raging, as were most of the students, William Buckley, then at the height of the first flush of his fame, came to Oakland University and spoke to a large assemblage in the old Sports and Rec Building. His topic was "Thoughts on The Current Crisis." He explained that this was his all-purpose title because there is *always* a crisis.

He was irresistible: he was dazzling, unique—even to someone like me, a life-long liberal and Democrat. His love of words and music seemed deep and genuine and made his comments all the more arresting—especially if you disagreed with them—because nobody else was saying anything like this, so anti-socialist, pro-tradition and religion. He was the ultimate Yalie—almost absurdly patrician (where *did* that accent come from?)—a suit-and-tie man in the age of bare feet and dungarees. His message of individual freedom was nearly a siren song in the age of Liberalism Triumphant.

He was in the British tradition of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition. He began the *National Review* in the early 1950s so he could stand "athwart History yelling Stop!" In the early years of the Viet Nam War, when a majority of U.S. citizens followed LBJ into that generation's debacle, Buckley expressed bemusement to find himself in a majority. He challenged an unspoken elitism, saying that he would rather be governed by

the first five hundred names in the Manhattan Telephone Directory than by the faculty of Harvard University.

On his long-running television program, Buckley could be quite wonderful interviewing, say, James Dickey (the author of a “stunning” novel—*Deliverance*—that Buckley had obviously and actually read) or arguing with Anthony Burgess about the correct pronunciation of Nausica, the character in the *Odyssey*, or interviewing Stephen Spender, the great English poet.

So, when he died last winter, many of us thought, Oh yes! William Buckley. How *did* we get from Buckley and his fellow “dissident intellectuals” (as David Brooks called them) like Russell Kirk, “the Sage of Piety Hill,” to the anti-intellectual, hate-filled attacks on “enemies,” the term embracing all of the despised Liberals?

Oh, there always *were* some worries. One interviewee said, “Oh, he’s very charming and all that, but if you disagree with him, he practically calls you a traitor.” (40 years later, his cohorts have removed that “practically.”)

Or, when the early gatherings of war-protesters came within his field of vision, he fantasized about a platoon of paratroopers flying into these “epicene” youngsters. We smiled at the “epicene” and maybe didn’t notice the barely-veiled viciousness of the comment.

Still, it must have been strange, being Buckley, toward the end (as it does, thank God, seem to be) of the Conservative era he helped launched. On the one hand, he saw the movement that he began, more or less single-handedly, turn into Rush-rants and mindless militarism. After all, he thought the War in Iraq was “anything but Conservative.” He even thought the legalization of marijuana an excellent idea—and the thought of (not, one assumes, the real thing) marijuana seems to drive most conservatives absolutely crazy.

What changed? When did the endless hate-radio attacks, the slime, the win-at-all-costs mentality begin? After all, Buckley once ran for Mayor of New York because he thought John Lindsey no true Republican. When asked what his first act as Mayor would be, he replied, “Demand a recount.”

And this was the man who came to OU to offer his thoughts on The Current Crisis. Though an unrepentant JFK-enthusiast myself, I would not have missed the opportunity to see the Master in person.

He was introduced by one of the two or three students with short hair on the OU campus, members of the tiny College Republicans. One of these students I knew: he was amazed that I, a very palpable Liberal, would encourage him to research so “conservative” a fellow as Paul Elmer More. Indeed, I walked with this student to the Sports and Rec Building on the great day.

Mr. Buckley was quickly introduced by a young student with short hair—indeed, hair combed over in that Buckley manner.

The lecture was of a piece with what we had seen on television: the aristocratic (though slightly reptilian) charm was all there, as was the thoughtful, provocative, and sesquipedalian assertions about the decline of America in mindless conformity and spineless appeasement of enemies.

He had spoken for about 20 minutes or so, when the young short-haired, be-suited student who had introduced him suddenly re-appeared on the platform and whispered something into Mr. Buckley’s right ear.

Then the student took the microphone.

“OK, OK,” he began in a shout startling in its strong contrast to Mr. Buckley’s mellifluous tones. “Where are all our famous campus Liberals?”

Like Mark Antony, he paused for a reply.

He went on. “I thought so. Safe in their classrooms, they spout Liberal garbage, but they haven’t got the guts to dare to confront Mr. Buckley.”

Another dramatic pause. My student and I look at each other, amazed, even in shock. What *was* going on? Neither of us had ever heard anything like this.

The student became even more strident, more contemptuous as he named names—it seemed to me—nearly at ran-

dom. For the faculty members he named that I knew did not seem particularly political.

“I thought so! None of our campus Liberals dares to stand in front of Mr. Buckley.” And with a flourish of contempt he abandoned the podium, stalked off, and Mr. Buckley resumed his lecture to an amazed and chastened crowd.

When the lecture was over, my student said that he would see me later as he had the opportunity to speak with Mr. Buckley *in person*.

“I’ll see you later,” I said. And, indeed, we met later that afternoon in my office (to discuss Paul Elmer More, in fact).

I asked how he had enjoyed the lecture and the actual meeting with Mr. Buckley.

He was positively misty-eyed. “Oh, it was wonderful. *He* is wonderful. I can’t tell you!”

I asked about his fellow Young Republican’s rant.

He looked embarrassed.

“What?” I asked. “What was it?”

“Well, the truth of the matter is that David [let’s call him], after he introduced Mr. Buckley, noticed that, well, his fly was wide open. So he took the stage and made all that fuss so that, well, Mr. Buckley could adjust himself.”

And there we have it: the first savage attacks on Liberals commenced so that Mr. Buckley would, very precisely, *not* let it all hang out.

On such small matters, history can turn.