VIEWPOINTS: HAPPY BIRTHDAY, BILL BUCKLEY by Bill Murchison

Contributed by Scott Bennett
Tue, Nov 22, 2005, 07:20 PM

William F. Buckley Jr.Maybe we could just, you know, take a break from the Murtha mess and the rivalries that underlie it -- large as they are -- and note a notable birthday, that of William F. Buckley, Jr. which date occurs this Thanskgiving.

Appropriately enough. As our brother becomes an octogenarian, some of us rosy-cheeked sexagenarians would offer thanks for the blessing of such a life and career as Bill Buckley’s.

The most flagrant offense likely to be charged to Bill Buckley, on his 80th, is that of helping generate a conservatism capable of entering into the kinds of disputes that now rage over Iraq, the Supreme Court, federal spending, federal power, etc.

. Life would unquestionably be quieter, absent our brother Bill. Also more fraught with peril and/or pure tedium. Without Buckley, without his wit and grace and brains, the dominant liberalism of post -World War II America might have washed all dissent out to sea. There would have been no conservative comeback; no Goldwater, no Reagan. The present menace to life and limb would be the Soviet intercontinental ballistic missile, instead of the jihadist suicide bomb. Our taxes would certainly be steeper, our lives more bureaucratized, our hands less free to improvise and invent.

That is because the essence of conservatism, as Bill Buckley understood and began advertising it, half a century ago, was Christian freedom as shaped by tradition. It was a proposition at odds with all the ends of human manipulation.

Manipulation, by those who understood themselves to be wise and generous at heart, was the style of the times: the product mostly of Depression times and vain, boastful science. Buckley and fellow believers in the higher freedom began as a scattered lot. Gradually they came together under his leadership and inspiration, to preach the gospel of human freedom as mediated by the spirit of Christianity.

Buckley founded National Review in 1955. In 1960, a then-18-year-old Texan with whom I am on intimate terms discovered the publication and its learned, impassioned writers; swooned dead away with passion; subscribed; read every issue at a single sitting.

National Review wasn’t just a journal -- a mass cogitation. It was an ongoing, often hilarious, argument with society’s most facile assumptions. Out in front of its readership NR shoved the expostulating, bickering, needling, wise-cracking likes of Willmoore Kendall, Russell Kirk, James Burnham, Frank Meyer, Whittaker Chambers, and the editor himself, William F. Buckley, Jr.

Some of those once-esteemed names occasion head-scratching in modern conservative purlieus. Well, they didn’t always. They inspired and invigorated. To be in those days young -- and conservative -- under such auspices and influences was very heaven. It seemed there was something after all to work for, something to fight for.

Life wasn’t a square, linoleum-floored, thermostatically controlled room with a single light bulb. It was a banqueting hall - a place, as NR showed us, for Stradivariuses, Stratocasters, or both at the same time, playing merry accompaniment for each other. It grooved. I believe that might be it: National Review grooved, after the manner of all enterprises organized around the purposes of human freedom. In the 21st century many have come to think of conservatism as a political blunt instrument: something for beating liberals over the head with on Fox News. And the variety of conservatives -- bewildering! Free-marketers, pro-lifers, "intelligent designers," "strict constructionists," Reaganites, even "W." fans! Something for everybody! Come one come all!

Well, don’t you see, that’s why they did come and still do -- because a creed of freedom lived out in gratitude to the God whose service is perfect freedom was about the richness of all life. You could speak with a modified prep school accent, like Bill Buckley; or with a Texas twang; or in a language with no resemblance to English. Still, you were conservative. And probably are now -- that is, if you prize the nobly ordered freedom depicted for so long, so ably, so engagingly by Bill Buckley.

For whose sterling gifts, O Lord, make us truly thankful.