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Rhetoric & Public Affairs, Volume 13, Number 2, Summer 2010, pp. 43-76 (Article)

Published by Michigan State University Press
DOI: 10.1353/rap.0.0148

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WFB: The Gladiatorial Style and the Politics of Provocation

Michael J. Lee

William F. Buckley afforded conservatives of all stripes a provocative rhetorical style, a gladiatorial style, as I term it. The gladiatorial style is a flashy, combative style whose ultimate aim is the creation of inflammatory drama. I claim that conservatives encountered Buckley’s potent arguments about God, government, and markets and the gladiatorial style simultaneously. The theatrical appeal of Buckley’s gladiatorial style inspired conservative imitators with disparate beliefs and, over several decades, became one of the principal rhetorical templates for the performance of conservatism.

He was WFB to readers and Chairman Bill to admirers. The public knew him as Buckley for short, William F. Buckley Jr. more formally. He was labeled an enfant terrible, a bon vivant with a joie de vivre, a dandy, a dilettante, a theocrat, and a fascist. Buckley labeled himself a conservative, but not all of the time. Buckley was a writer, an editor, a publisher, an orator, a debater, a television host, an interviewer, a
one-off politician, and a political adviser from 1951 until his death in 2008. Buckley’s career, prolific by any measure, included 55 books about politics, sailing, and spies, 800 National Review articles, 4.5 million words in 5,600 biweekly newspaper columns, and 33 years as host of Firing Line, one of the longest-running shows in television history.

A broad survey of conservative writings about Buckley reveals praise only describable as Plutarchian. Many conservative writers thought that Buckley walked on water only to find tall buildings to leap, and both before lunch. National Review editor Rich Lowry expressed the kind of reverence typical of those enchanted by an idol: “As we all know, it is impossible to exaggerate Bill Buckley’s influence in forging a movement that changed the nation.” Buckley was many things to many conservatives, but I claim it was his rhetorical dynamism that made him an identifiable conservative in the first place. In other words, Buckley was a model conservative to a great extent because he became conservatives’ rhetorical model. To make Buckley’s stylized musings more accessible, one editor even compiled an alphabetized inventory of Buckley’s most salacious formulations in a volume whose title, Quotations from Chairman Bill, befitted the man who blended mockery and political commentary. This is but one example of the relationship—sometimes awestruck, sometimes mimicking, always inspired—between Buckley’s words and generations of conservatives.

Since George Nash’s influential The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America, most scholars have agreed that “conservatisms” is a more appropriate descriptor than “conservatism” for a complex political phenomenon that does not proceed from common first principles. Moreover, a bourgeoning literature across the academy offers varied explanations of the rise of the Right. With notable exceptions, the majority of this literature ignores the prominence of rhetoric in the creation of an attractive conservative identity after World War II. Those scholars who have documented the importance of rhetoric in the creation of conservatism as a political identity have approached conservatism as a set of competing economic and cultural “symbolic trajectories,” resonant historical tropes, a political “brand,” a method of political “framing,” and a rhetoric of economic individualism. Nevertheless, as Martin Medhurst wrote in 1985, rhetorical explanations of “the evolution of conservative ideas” require further development. There are few better cases through which the task might be continued than that of William F. Buckley.

Conservatism is a set of doctrines, but it is also a political identity, one that Buckley helped create. To understand Buckley’s influence on conservatives
and conservatism, it is necessary to assess the communal force of his rhetoric. Specifically, Buckley afforded conservatives of all stripes a provocative rhetorical style, a gladiatorial style, as I term it. The gladiatorial style is a flashy, combative style whose ultimate aim is the creation of inflammatory drama. In fact, I argue that conservatives encountered Buckley’s potent arguments about God, government, and markets and the gladiatorial style simultaneously. The theatrical appeal of Buckley’s gladiatorial style inspired conservative imitators with disparate beliefs and, over several decades, became one of the principal rhetorical templates for the performance of conservatism. Buckley became a “beacon” of the militant conservative ‘movement,’” Pat Buchanan wrote when he ran for president in 1988, “and we were the mujahedeen.”

I demonstrate the features and force of Buckley’s gladiatorial style in several sections. Using his most notable books, *God and Man at Yale* (1951) and *Up from Liberalism* (1959), several early *National Review* essays, and conservatives’ reception of *Firing Line*, I analyze three of Buckley’s favored devices: stylistic spectacles, reversal tropes, and fierce antagonism. Each performs an essentially dramatic function in the gladiatorial style. Then, I use Buckley’s admonitions to improve “the conservative demonstration” to argue that the techniques of the gladiatorial style are governed by a strategic *kairotic* sense designed to maximize dramatic conflict. I conclude by exploring the political repercussions of these stylistic choices, arguing that Buckley inspired conservatives, for better and for worse, to abjure doctrinal uniformity and to express their identity provocatively and combatively.

**The Gladiatorial Style**

The brio and bravado of Buckley’s prose exhibited the characteristics of the gladiatorial style. He emboldened conservatives to reflect on their stylistic choices, to seek rhetorical creativity, and most of all, to use their words to create dramatic conflict. Whether in ornamented syntax, odd sentence structure, hyperbole, flamboyant irreverence, forceful tone, or verbal aggressiveness, dramatic action is the hallmark of the gladiatorial style. It conveys a sense of pageantry and interrupts the quotidian world of staid and dry political argument with the fantastic and unusual. It shows off without apology. The gladiatorial style’s excessive, self-consciously ostentatious discursive performativity distinguishes it from pedestrian, plain language, scholastic, or even otherwise dramatic styles of address. The gladiatorial style is not
tethered to any archetypal role—the glorious hero or preening villain, for instance. The style projects a hyperbolized version of the role adopted by the rhetor. Just as ancient gladiators and modern wrestlers understand, the style can be used to turn heel, to play the savior, to heckle a frenzied crowd, or to whip up support so long as dramatic conflict is the result. In other words, only excessiveness is predictable if the gladiatorial style is wielded capably. The style makes no intrinsic connection between, say, aggressive taunts and lewd insults, with enticing rising action, an extended climax, a memorable dénouement, and a mesmeric finale, the ends to which the style is a means. A keen kairotic sense separates the theatrical gladiator from the merely passable. Kairos, “a dynamic principle rather than a static, codified rhetorical technique,” governs the situational deployment of gladiatorial techniques such as stylistic spectacle, reversal, and attack.¹³

The gladiatorial style is not merely a name for a set of dramatic tropes. Instead, I aim to follow the lead of Robert Hariman and chart the relationship between style and politics. To be clear about my claims, the gladiatorial style is not essentially conservative, and all conservatives are not gladiatorial stylists. Instead, this analysis of Buckley allows the gladiatorial style and its reception by one political community to come into full view. Hariman argues that style is a heuristic through which to understand templates for political action. A political style, he explains, “evokes a culture—a coherent set of symbols giving meaning to the manifest activities of common living—yet has no a priori relation with any issue, event, or outcome.”¹⁴ To understand politics, “we can consider how a political action involves acting according to a particular political style.”¹⁵ Politics are stylized, and conservatism is no exception. Buckley’s gladiatorial style was not simply a unique expression of conservatism; to many, Buckley’s style was conservatism. As such, replicating his stylistic conventions, repeating his formulations, and invoking Buckley-esque barbs became a way to perform authentic conservatism.

**Stylistic Spectacles**

Words are weapons in the gladiatorial style, and Buckley was better armed than most. His lingering stylistic influence among conservatives is as the progenitor of an invigorating style of verbal combat. Dwight MacDonald once distinguished between high-utility words and “zoo” words. The latter could be locked away and admired. Buckley, who revered “the wonderful opportunities of the language,” opened the cages.¹⁶ “Zoo” words were essential
to his performance of virtuoso intellectualism. As he saw it, no one would dare
tell Thelonious Monk to cut unfamiliar chords from his music. Buckley wrote
in a rollicking syntax distinguished by its use of obscure, hard-to-pronounce
terms. He was, one conservative mimicked, the “Prince of Polysyllabism,” a
“hapax legomenon” among conservatives. He garnered so much attention
for such usage that he was inclined to pen several essays on language, and
his editor even compiled a 100-page “Buckley Lexicon” consisting of odd
words like “dreadnought,” “dithyrambic,” “oleaginous,” “tergiversation,”
and “voluptuarian.” Not to be outdone, Buckley also published his own
book-length lexicon.

Buckley’s notorious vocabulary, a vocabulary that seemed to brag about
its own capaciousness, showed in his more complex formulations. Buckley’s
was always, unmistakably, popular writing, but it also directed its audience to
stretch to understand its message. A representative passage about capitalism
is instructive:

The American capitalist whose image reifies in the mind of the young is
not even the smug, canny, willful powerbroker of Upton Sinclair. He is the
inarticulate, self-conscious, bumbling mechanic of the private sector, struck
dumb by the least cliché of socialism, fleeing into the protective arms of
government at the least hint of commercial difficulty, delighting secretly in
the convenient power of the labor union to negotiate for an entire industry,
uniformly successful only in his escapist ambition to grow duller and duller
as the years go by, eyes left, beseeching popular favor. Poor Miss Rand sought
to give him a massive dose of testosterone, to make him virile and irresistible,
leader of a triumphant meritocratic revolt against asphyxiative government
. . . but soon it transpired, even as Russell Kirk predicted, that her novels
were being read not because of their jackbooted individualism, but because
of the fornicating bits.

This passage is one of many in which Buckley employed a dizzying array of
difficult words and compound sentences and seemingly thumbed his nose at
brevity and parsimony. As Buckley framed the controversy, over ten tropes
competed to represent the American capitalist. In the first two sentences,
Buckley set three adjectives, “smug,” “canny,” and “willful,” against three more
adjectives, “inarticulate,” “self-conscious,” and “bumbling,” all of which signified
the capitalist to one audience or another. The multiline, multiclause second
sentence included five additional images of the weak, boring capitalist. The
controversy had no resolution, though; Rand’s efforts to give the capitalist an image overhaul, complete with three final images of the capitalist, fell short because audiences enjoyed her novels for their ribaldry, not their ideology.

To simplify Buckley’s argument and write “Capitalists had a weak image that Ayn Rand failed to reverse” would, ostensibly, communicate the same idea. The simplest explanation, however, is not grandly performative; in the sense that the single sentence unadorned with curious words is predictable and understandable, the sentence is not gladiatorial. Buckley swaggered rhetorically through protracted prose; such writing attracted attention not only because of its length, which required a patient reader to progress from image to image, line after line, but also because of its density, which required effort to comprehend. It was prose that suggested a powerful rhetor, one who commanded the spotlight and placed demands on audiences.

The polysyllabic word was a novel weapon brandished in battle to achieve effect with conservative audiences. Buckley disavowed the rhetorical combatant whose barebones, sword-and-shield style was capable but dull and predictable. Buckley chose words whose meanings few were likely to know in order to amplify the spectacle of rhetorical combat. Just as important, he appeared to take pleasure in doing so. When a Firing Line guest asked him why he used “irenic” rather than “peaceful,” Buckley replied with a playful guile: “I desired that extra syllable.” Audiences may have felt puzzled by the choice of “desideratum” when “goal” would have worked in the same way that a peculiar weapon, a trident for instance, might have looked quixotic in a swordfight. They were more likely to remember the gladiator with the morningstar, or the sesquipedalian rhetorical gladiator.

Buckley’s stylistic spectacles were not universally appealing. His critics said he overused parecon, the “addition of superfluous words.” He violated nearly all of George Orwell’s rules for unpretentious writers. Some audiences found Buckley’s frequent use of technical jargon, foreign phrases, and irregular metaphors confusing; others found the experience as engaging as listening to a braggart endlessly recount triumphs. Sometimes his “collage” writing technique could be “diffuse and unfocused,” and he misused big words, once confusing mendacity and mendicancy, for instance, in his efforts to dazzle.

To those who enjoyed the show, however, Buckley’s conservatism was to be experienced both emotionally and intellectually as literature. For conservatives, he possessed the versatility of a literary giant: “He is thought of as a fancy writer, a user of big words. But he also knew what Shakespeare knew: There is a time to write fancy, or sophisticated; and there’s a time to write plain, low.
You simply go by ear—if you have the ear.” Buckley wrote in anticipation of such a reaction: “There is nothing better, or more amusing,” he told Morley Safer, “than a theatrical pomposity.” The conservatism Buckley modeled was difficult and delectable, serious and sportive, and imagistic and imaginative. Buckley’s intellectual exhibitions were also acts of rhetorical enjoinment in which conservative readers sensed that Buckley winked at them collusively as he performed his popular style. Many readers wanted to be let in on the secret and share in the fun.

“Winning arguments required a debater and a performer,” Buckley’s one-time protégé Richard Brookhiser explained, and building a political movement “required someone who was very cool.” Rush Limbaugh was one of many young conservatives that found Buckley cool and tried to imitate him, “to talk like him, dress like him, write like him—and, of course, think like him.” Limbaugh’s memories of his infatuation with Buckley demonstrate the emotional work done by Buckley’s stylistic grandstanding:

I was reading Buckley when I was 15, 16 years old, and I said, “Boy, I wish I could be that. I wish I could be this. How does he know all these words?” I’d sit there with the dictionary looking up words that he used, and points that he made. . . . If you know what an idol is, multiply it times two or three. I thought him unreachable, untouchable.

In his radio show Limbaugh appropriated a version of the spectacles that mesmerized him in his youth. R. Emmett Tyrrell, Jr. noted the significance of both conservatives’ stylistic spectacles: “We [conservatives] need to have people who can dramatize ideas. . . . Buckley has it. And, though he’s a great talker rather than a great writer, Rush has it too.”

Reversal

Buckley energized readers and inspired confidence in the conservative mind through more than vocabulary. One persistent dramatic trope in his prose was reversal. Reversal is a master term that denotes other tropes, such as sarcasm and irony, which turn on violations of social power, meaning, and audience expectation. Sarcasm and irony influence audiences because the intended meaning of a statement defies the conventional meaning of its constituent terms. Sarcasm and irony assumed the power to generate humor at the expense of others and to play with conventional meaning.
Irony is a transactional process because it “requires interpretation in order to do its intended work, such that the recipient of the message plays an active role” in its creation.\textsuperscript{33} Irony is, as Wayne Booth summarizes, an “astonishing communal achievement.”\textsuperscript{34} One of the chief effects of irony is “a reversal of expectations,” “A” returning as “non-A” as Kenneth Burke noted.\textsuperscript{35} As such, irony is a potentially disruptive political tool. The ironist questions the world as it is presented, plays with the justifications of the powerful, and reiterates “ordinary terms from a position outside of their usual discourses and meanings.”\textsuperscript{36} Irony’s powerful subversive capability stems from its stipulation that the opposite of what is commonly believed is true and its solicitation of company in that conclusion.

Irony has the potential to upend tacit social hierarchies and popular assumptions about authority figures. Buckley’s \textit{God and Man at Yale}, whose full title was \textit{The Superstitions of “Academic Freedom,”} was not controversial because it criticized an Ivy League institution but because a 25-year-old recent graduate, practically a student, presumed to teach Yale’s teachers something about teaching. Academic freedom, Buckley clarified, was not a hallowed value of freethinking; it was a “hoax.” “I believe it to be an indisputable fact,” he declared, “that most colleges and universities, and certainly Yale, the protests and pretensions of their educators and theorists notwithstanding, do not practice, cannot practice, and cannot even believe what they say about education and academic freedom.” They may “utilize the rationale” of academic freedom when advantageous, but their decisions about who to hire, what to teach, and what to publish were governed by an expedient orthodoxy of acceptable opinion.\textsuperscript{37} Those who tolerated opposing viewpoints were guilty of “sonorous pretensions” that were intended either to hide a biased orthodoxy or to resist critics like Buckley who insisted that Yale teach a Christian individualist orthodoxy.\textsuperscript{38} Buckley, the student, became the teacher; the teachers needed an education.

As with the upended student/teacher dichotomy, the dramatic movement of Buckley’s reversals drew power from their play with several binaries. In \textit{God and Man}, Yale’s professors were not the academic elite imparting knowledge to immature students. The students were wise to resist the lecturing professors. An age reversal accompanied this student/teacher move. No enlightenment accompanied the professors’ advanced years. The young were wise and the old were naïve. Buckley’s reversals did not stop there. Liberals and Communists who insisted that they promoted freedom did exactly the opposite. Titans of academia, Yale’s professors, were not learned and logical;
they were “superstitious.” It was not reactionary of Buckley to worry of the fate of Christian individualism at Yale but, instead, reactionary of Yale’s professors to reject religion and preach empiricism.

Buckley’s next single-authored book, *Up from Liberalism* in 1959, began predictably with an ironic reversal. “Fashionable observers,” Buckley alleged coyly, posited that the United States “is a non-ideological nation.” These “observers,” the barely camouflaged liberal consensus historians like Richard Hofstadter, supposed that “American political conflicts are not generally fought on the battleground of ideas.” That was for the best, Buckley said with tongue in cheek, because “everyone knows that ideological totalism can bring whole societies down, as it did Hitler’s, and permanently terrorize others, as Communism has done.” Buckley had labeled the intellectual leaders and identified their fixed ideas. The trap was about to spring on a man of straw. To Buckley, there was no liberal consensus; the United States failed “to nourish any orthodoxy at all.” As a direct result of the “attenuation of the early principles of this country,” the nation was “vulnerable to the most opportunistic ideology of the day, the strange and complex ideology of modern liberalism.” The persuasive power of the reversal trope was generated by the device’s unmasking function. Liberalism, contrary to popular opinion, was nefarious. Liberals, purportedly defenders of individual liberties, were totalitarians. Buckley portrayed the success of liberal notions like empiricism and welfare statism as functions of trickery rather than the result of their rational force.

Liberals had help in tricking the nation. Leaders tasked with defending the nation in the ideological struggle of the Cold War were, in fact, incapable of such expressions. When President Eisenhower admitted the difficulty of rebutting Marshal Zhukov’s Communist claims, Buckley pounced. The president “clearly did not know what he was defending, how to defend what he defended, or even whether what he defended was defensible.” The criticism was unfair; the nation was not at risk because Eisenhower did not recite Friedrich Hayek’s free-market teachings. Buckley, however, had ideal ammunition with which to complete the reversal of power. Eisenhower had failed in “the distinctive challenge of our time,” stemming “the philosophical infiltration of the West by Communism.” Buckley thought rhetoric was essential to meeting the challenge. Accomodationist, weak-kneed liberalism “cannot teach Mr. Eisenhower to talk back effectively to Mr. Khrushchev; but conservatism can, and hence the very urgent need to make the conservative demonstration.” Conservatism was powerful; political leaders were impotent. Only the conservative political language could play the savior.
Sarcasm was another reversal trope Buckley used unsparingly. In *National Review*’s second year, Buckley devoted six pages, long by the magazine’s standards, to the acerbically titled “Reflections on the Failure of ‘National Review’ to Live Up to Liberal Expectations.” The article trounced critics like Dwight Macdonald and *Harper’s* editor John Fischer and was typical of the sarcasm Buckley consistently used to deride opponents. *Commentary* and several midcentury journals of opinion, Buckley told his readers, had charged *National Review* with “all manner of offenses against the light and the truth.” *National Review* would be a welcome addition to U.S. political discourse, these journals argued, if it was a real conservative magazine. Buckley’s sarcasm reversed their reversal. He replied, “Nothing, absolutely nothing, is more urgently needed than a real conservative magazine; but, alas, ours is not such a thing, and they must, accordingly, continue to scan the heavens for it.” As this example illustrates, sarcasm is a wounding rhetorical device that removes the social authority of the object of address. Direct insults can also function to remove status. Insults, nevertheless, acknowledge an interlocutor and take direct aim at their authority. Sarcasm finds authority unworthy of such direct aim. Sarcasm is more creatively dismissive because it involves only the audience in the act.

Buckley also deployed a gentler sarcasm that relied more on enthymeme and less on absurdist allegations for its effect. In his answer to Macdonald’s assessment of *National Review*’s quality, Buckley highlighted the critic’s most severe criticisms of *National Review* with insincere set-up questions. Buckley wrote: “Well, then, they [*National Review* writers] are surely normal, healthy, well-adjusted folk? Decidedly not, they are ‘anxious, embittered, resentful.’ . . . Editorials any good?—‘as elegant as a poke in the nose, as cultivated as a camp meeting, as witty as a pratfall.’” Buckley’s interrogatives were phrased so innocently, and his wit was usually so injurious, that their sarcasm was plain; his opponents deserved none of the respect presumably afforded the generous, thoughtful, and fair-minded. They were hacks and deserved to be treated as such.

Reversal strategies were a vital characteristic of the gladiatorial style because their use created a doubly dramatic move. Reversal not only signified social power and political authority but also mocked those adhering to outmoded hierarchy. Reversal, in the first place, assumed a power that conservatism, barely a toddler as a political identity when Buckley started *National Review*, had not earned. Reversal presumed the authority to speak, to engage in debate, and to contradict. Moreover, Buckley’s rebuttals were armed with
all the indignation of the unjustly challenged. Sarcasm and irony moved further than other acts of reversal because each presumed the prestige to evaluate the social and political establishment and to do so flippantly while parading around the arena.

To conservatives, what was so riling about Buckley was that he seized the territory of the secure and castigated elites. This move inspired many imitators. Conservative pundit and polemicist Ann Coulter trades on the reversals of Buckley’s rhetorical legacy frequently. A clear connection exists between this feature of the gladiatorial style, exemplified in Buckley’s 1963 *National Review* cover article, “How to Attack a Liberal,” and, to take only one of many possible examples, Ann Coulter’s 2004 *How to Talk to a Liberal (If You Must).* Although Coulter replaced some of his syntactical showiness and argumentative nuance with discourteous bombast, this difference of degree is negligible. When she wrote sneeringly about liberals that “there is some good in everyone,” she invoked the sarcasm of Buckley’s conservative punditry. Coulter continued by featuring Buckley’s usual enemies, Communists and liberals: “Hitler didn’t smoke, for example. . . . Even among the staunchest members of the Communist Party, there turned out to be a few good ones. Similarly, the vast majority of liberals are not intentionally sabotaging the nation.” Communists’ and liberals’ peculiar combination of dumb malice repeatedly alleged by Buckley persisted in Coulter’s scornful commentary.

**Spoiling for a Fight**

Buckley’s books in the 1950s were, as Garry Wills described, “extended dossiers on the Enemy.” Beyond their stylistic spectacles and reversal tropes, Buckley’s books also provided a unique model by which liberals’ policies could be mocked and international communism could be derided. Edward Appel labeled Buckley’s attacks “hudibrastic ridicule” and considered them a part of a burlesque drama. Buckley, playing the righteous outsider, ridiculed prominent politicians and intellectuals in *God and Man at Yale, McCarthy and His Enemies, Up from Liberalism,* and numerous *National Review* entries. In fact, lampooning, mocking, and jeering enemies composes almost all of *God and Man,* and Buckley devoted 180 of *Up from Liberalism*’s 215 pages to decrying liberalism. In the latter book he lambasted the redistributionism of John Maynard Keynes, the “sophism” of John Kenneth Galbraith, the weakness of Republican senators, the dimwittedness of Dwight Eisenhower, and the villainy of Communists before quickly outlining a “conservative alternative.”
The drama of Buckley’s writing stemmed not only from insults of liberals’ character directly or answers to their arguments. The drama was interactional; Buckley needed an oppositional claim to destroy on its own terms. Rebuttal not only answers an opposing view but, in many instances, reverses its symbolic prominence in the argumentative exchange. Buckley’s rebuttals frequently blended antistrephon, “reasoning from the premises of one’s opponent,” and reductio ad absurdum, reasoning self-contradictory conclusions to disprove a proposition. It became difficult to note where his concession of opponents’ stated values ended and his exaggeration of the logical consequences of their positions began.⁵⁰ Although numerous conservative writers in the Cold War berated liberal and Communist enemies, Buckley showed the faithful how to fight. Buckley refined a gladiatorial style of rhetorical combat among conservatives distinct from the mere identification and disparagement of enemies.

For all his wit in generating political material, Buckley’s most striking maneuver took at face value his opponents’ statements and either accused them of hypocrisy, as with “academic freedom,” or claimed conservatism to be their proper defender, as with free markets and individual equality. These strategies required that Buckley allocate substantial space to re-create his opponents’ arguments. Buckley was willing to dedicate so much space in so many of his important writings to liberals’ arguments because they were necessary to the drama he sought; without re-creating a liberal voice in his writing, Buckley had no opponent to reverse, no enemy to use. The rhetorical battle was abstract minus a John Kenneth Galbraith quotation to strike down. The rhetorical gladiator minus an enemy was the matador minus the bull; conflict and animosity were the basics of gladiatorial theater.

Buckley realized the dramatic potential of combat and made sport of it. Liberal pundits’ hyperbolic criticisms warning that Buckley’s books would make goose-steppers of the masses assisted him immeasurably in attracting new followers who delighted in joining a controversial cause. Put simply, calling Buckley a “fascist” did more to aid his case than to disprove it. In an extended introduction to the fiftieth anniversary edition of God and Man, Buckley still profited from the reviews that greeted his first book. Reviewers commented on his Roman Catholic upbringing and upbraided him for deliberately concealing his religion. These “acidulous” reviews, Buckley wrote, were nothing more than religious persecution by liberals.⁵¹ One New Republic review likened his proposals for Yale to those “employed in Italy, Germany, and Russia.” One Saturday Review commentary noted that Buckley wanted
Yale’s administration to “turn themselves into a politburo.” Reproducing these reviews gave Buckley punches to counter. He literally staged the fight for readers to witness. To mark the fiftieth anniversary of the book, Buckley showed that he had a serious fight on his hands, but he, and conservatism, was winning. Combat, not dialogue or reform, held the political fortunes of conservatism.

Beyond *God and Man at Yale* and *Up from Liberalism*, conservatives have celebrated two aspects of Buckley’s rhetorical career as exemplars of ideological combat. First, *Firing Line*, his television interview program, typically featured Buckley and a guest seated in plain office chairs on an unadorned stage. Buckley questioned, cross-examined, and even poked fun at guests as wide ranging as Noam Chomsky, Muhammad Ali, and Ronald Reagan. *Firing Line* entertained because, as one viewer noted, of all “the beating up.” More than any particular exchange on the program, though, conservatives have recounted Buckley’s signature posture, leaning back, eyebrow raised, pencil in hand, clipboard in lap, waiting to pounce. In particular, Buckley’s clipboard acquired synecdochic power as the symbol of effective intellectual exchange. George Will’s assessment demonstrates this trope: “The fun began when Bill picked up his clipboard, and conservatives’ spirits, by bringing his distinctive brio and élan to political skirmishing.”

Second, the “Notes & Asides” section of *National Review* also showcased Buckley’s combative shrewdness for conservative readers. Buckley designed the section as his “own personal page in the magazine,” and it featured well-wishing letters to *National Review* from celebrities and national leaders. Buckley used the section to reprint the less flattering letters followed by his terse, acerbic retort. Hence, “Notes & Asides” became a “polemicist’s batting practice,” a vehicle for Buckley to deliver laugh lines at his detractors’ expense. Ron Kelly, for instance, lead with his chin by claiming, “Your syntax is horrible.” “Dear Mr. Kelly,” Buckley retorted, “If you had my syntax, you’d be rich. Cordially, WFB.” Another amateur writer, Earl J. Beck, erred in thinking he could beat Buckley in a word game. “Sedulously avoid all polysyllabical profundity,” Beck exhorted. Buckley teased: “Me Bill. Me no like-um Beck. Bad Beck.—WFB.” Such exchanges, published scores of times in *National Review*, were even collected and published in a book whose title was taken from another “Notes & Asides” interaction: *Cancel Your Own Goddam Subscription*.

“Notes & Asides,” like *Firing Line*, strategically deployed uneven matches. The section allowed readers to take pleasure in the quick work Buckley made of liberal “pseudo-intellectuals” who dared match wits. Buckley’s attacks, when
directed at a named critic or public figure, were akin to the body blows that make hometown fight crowds salivate. His readers could revel in his debates as they might a bloodsport. Audiences were invited to imagine the frustrated, sputtering rage that their battling hero created through epigrammatic aptitude.

If his detractors thought that Buckley’s conservative style was only pose and pomp, they missed the importance of his strategic agonism in the creation of conservatism. Buckley stirred writers and politicians to practice a conservative language signified by its sharp tones and fierce argumentativeness. The gladiatorial style was not for the unimaginative, the battle weary, or the euphemistic. Ann Coulter, parroting Buckley’s baroque syntax, preferred to think of his legacy as primarily combative: “William F. Buckley was the original enfant terrible. . . . I prefer to remember the Buckley who scandalized to the bien-pensant. . . . I shall revel in the ‘terrible’ aspects of the enfant terrible.” The American Conservative Union Foundation’s magazine, the appropriately titled Conservative Battleline, exhorted its readers after Buckley’s death: “It is now up to us to continue his struggle up from liberalism.”

Most emblematic, however, of the kind of praise that Buckley received for his gladiatorial role was an epic tale told by Ronald Reagan in 1985. In addition to anointing Buckley “the most influential journalist and intellectual in our era,” Reagan proclaimed that he “changed our country, indeed our century.” Grand though that praise was, Reagan offered praise far more illustrative of the gladiatorial relationship between Buckley’s rhetoric and conservatives. In mythic terms, the president recalled the time of “the forest primeval,” a period “when nightmare and danger reigned” and conservatives lacked a “champion in the critical battle of style and content.” Buckley answered the call. Blending generic heroic images and symbols, such as Buckley’s notorious clipboard, from the conservative rhetorical environment, Reagan extolled: He was “our clipboard-bearing Galahad: ready to take on any challengers in the critical battle of point and counterpoint.” In Reagan’s mythic re-creation, Buckley as Galahad taught the techniques of ideological battle in the Cold War. But their conservative knight, “setting loose so much good in the world,” barked no onerous orders at followers. As Reagan concluded, “Bill—thanks, too, for all the fun.”

**Teaching Style**

Brute force and barbed attack are the standout features of the gladiatorial style, yet *kairos*, meaning both the “right timing and proper measure” of symbol
usage, is its fulcrum. The imposing gladiator may discharge a series of kill shots just as the gladiatorial stylist may fire scores of ad hominem attacks at an interlocutor. Neither attacker, however, activates the fullest kairotic dimensions of the gladiatorial style that, instead of hastily resorting to decisive blows, uses the novelty of an unexpected technique to squeeze all available drama and surprise from a given context. A well-timed personal attack can be even more cutting if it follows an exchange over policy details. In other words, the continued effectiveness of the gladiatorial style rests on its ability to be continually surprising. The style operates by a logic of innovation rather than repetition. For the gladiatorial stylist, the excitement generated by the finishing move wanes as its use becomes repetitive.

Buckley’s rhetorical directions were ultimately concerned with inculcating conservatives with the dramatic kairotic sense of the gladiatorial style. Buckley’s writings throughout the 1950s focused on “the conservative demonstration” almost as much as communism, Korea, or Eisenhower. As Buckley argued in Up from Liberalism, “Conservatives, as a minority, must learn to agonize more meticulously.” In high-profile features in National Review and most thoroughly in Up from Liberalism, Buckley appointed himself the movement’s chief rhetorician and dispensed direct stylistic advice. Shortly after God and Man at Yale was published in 1951, Buckley’s fellow writer at American Mercury, Max Eastman, heard of Buckley’s plans for a new magazine and cautioned him to be a careful editor. Buckley’s reply demonstrated the extent to which cultivating a dramatic style, as well as developing doctrinal topoi, were his chief editorial priorities: “All I can say to satisfy you is that I want discretion in the sense that I want intelligence, and no crackpottery. But I want some positively unsettling vigor, a sense of abandon, and joy, and cocksureness that may, indeed, be interpreted by some as indiscretion.” Buckley wanted a magazine about political ideas; however, he also sought a magazine that set itself apart from the dull droning of policy wonks and radiated with rhetorical energy.

In Up from Liberalism Buckley isolated several stylistic challenges faced by conservatives. The most pressing challenge was how the dangers of collectivism might be proclaimed without conservatives appearing paranoid. For conservatives to be a political force independent of Republican leadership, moderate liberals, and many others, conservatism needed a distinct mode of political argument. “A libertarian theorist,” Buckley lamented, can quickly call up a concise case against the welfare state. Conservatives needed such standardized maneuvers, “highly explicit postulates” as he called them.
Additionally, political success required a unique voice, one that broke through the shouting and drew listeners. The difference between, as he put it, “the rightness, *sub specie aeternitatis*, of the conservative position, and the cogency of its appeal to a presumptively right-minded body politic” was pivotal in the creation of conservatism as a political force.67

Buckley linked the conservative demonstrative failure to a multitude of factors that concern *kairotic* sensibilities. Its enemies successfully portrayed conservatism as “a crassly materialist position, unconcerned except with the world of getting and spending.”68 Moreover, self-identified conservatives had failed as well. They had “failed to make distinctions,” for instance, by forgetting to separate their economic from their philosophical objections to Social Security.69 Conservatives neglected, he posited, to make the case for “the interconnection between economic freedom and—freedom.” Many conservatives, he parodied, rhetorically gambled on impossible predictions: “Our insistence that the economic comeuppance is just around the corner (not this corner, that one. No, not that one, that one over there . . . ) has lost to conservatism public confidence in its economic expertise.”70 To make promises about the timing of catastrophe was to risk argumentative credibility. If conservatism became associated with dire economic predictions about government spending, Buckley argued, “we will, like the Seventh Day Adventists who close down the curtain of the world every season or so, lose our credit at the bar of public opinion, or be dismissed as cultists of a terrestrial mystique.”71 Instead of issuing calamitous prophecies, Buckley encouraged conservatives to become versatile performers schooled in varied modes of critique. They needed not only to add nuance but also to improve their technical argumentative skill, complete with opening arguments, leading arguments, and point-by-point refutation. Conservatives’ use of diverse rhetorical figures displayed political competency and social knowledge as well as built anticipation for the more dramatic elements of the conservative demonstration: spectacle, reversal, and attack.

**The Creation of a Community: Conservatism “Athwart History”**

Many conservatives have made a similar case, but George Will put it most dramatically: “All great biblical stories begin with Genesis.” Before Reagan came Goldwater; before Goldwater’s conservative ascendancy came National
Review, but Buckley came first “with a spark in his mind.”  But how did Buckley make conservatism, to use Thomas Farrell’s term, “matter?” “It is ‘worth’ asking,” Farrell argues, “how our largely unstudied conceptions of ‘worth’ are themselves created, enhanced, and reaffirmed.” With the typical tropes of the gladiatorial style established, it is worth asking how Buckley wielded the gladiatorial style to create conservatism as a political community. I suggest that the political passion generated by the gladiatorial style allowed Buckley to attract a constellation of ostracized midcentury ideologies to conservatism. Moreover, with the gladiatorial style as their most salient rhetorical model, conservatives in the United States contradicted classical conservatism’s emphasis on stability and tradition and became provocative and contrarian.

Although Buckley used gladiatorial tactics to cut an ideological image, his role within a burgeoning post–World War II conservatism was that of a peacekeeper and coalition builder. Under his editorial control, National Review, which he founded in 1955, became a big tent in which disparate and disaffected groups experienced revival. The magazine featured libertarians, borderline anarchists, monarchists, anti-Communists, Christians, Burkeans, traditionalists, and hybrid conservatives in regular columns, and Buckley managed to focus these writers’ energies on external enemies rather than on one another. As E. J. Dionne concluded, “Absent Buckley’s charm and magnetism, conservatism and the National Review might well have collapsed somewhere around 1959.” Similarly, Buckley’s own writings, a kind of ideological adhesive for would-be conservative combatants, contributed to the “fusion” of traditionalist, libertarian, and anti-Communist perspectives within conservatism. But his writings also reflected the fissures that have divided conservatives since the midcentury. On the one hand, Buckley expressed an “aristocratic conservatism” that was reverent of social tradition, suspicious of political change, and fearful of mass politics. On the other hand, Buckley linked his conservatism to social disruption when he identified as a “revolutionary.” He pondered writing an extension of José Ortega y Gasset’s Revolt of the Masses at one turn and, playing the populist the next turn, joked that he would prefer to be governed by the first two thousand names in the Boston phone book than the Harvard faculty. Buckley embodied, as one analyst put it, “most of the apparent contradictions and incoherence of American conservatism.”

The appeal, nevertheless, of Buckley’s explicit political commitments insufficiently explains his rhetorical power among conservatives. After
all, Russell Kirk and Richard Weaver also became influential traditionalist conservatives after World War II. In the same period, Frank Meyer penned tracts whose politics mirrored Buckley’s. None of these writers have been lionized as grandly as Buckley. Buckley’s contemporaries, to illustrate by comparison, are fondly remembered for teaching principled lessons; Kirk emphasized social tradition in *The Conservative Mind*, and Hayek linked economic freedom to political freedom in *The Road to Serfdom*. Encomiums to Buckley, however, demonstrate the passionate, rebellious response of an identity produced by the gladiatorial style; conservatism became something worth fighting for. The American Enterprise Institute and the National Review Institute commissioned a panel after the 2008 election appropriately titled “On the Ropes: What William F. Buckley Can Teach Today’s Conservatives.” Conservatives have described being “under his spell,” that reading Buckley was like watching, as Michael Uhlmann said, “Henry at Agincourt, instructing and inspiring through noble speech and leading by courageous example.” The Buckley experience was, Uhlmann confessed, “utterly intoxicating.” Buckley’s muscular vocabulary and barbed sentences evinced that, as conservatives repeated and *Time* proclaimed on a 1967 cover, “Conservatism Can Be Fun.” What distinguished Buckley from other conservatives was that he was not merely defending a political program, he was crafting an attractive and strategically flexible outsider identity that invited several alienated groups to call their politics conservative.

Conservatism as a political identity came a long way in the first two decades after World War II. In the mid-1940s, “no articulate, coordinated, self-consciously conservative intellectual force existed in the United States.” Conservatism was then an idiosyncratic political term signifying a confusing range of meanings. Influential analysts of the era called “new” conservatives intellectually suspect, mislabeled, and potentially malicious. Liberal writers recycled John Stuart Mill’s durable insult that Tories were “the stupid party.” In *The Liberal Tradition in America*, Louis Hartz argued that conservatism could not exist because the nation lacked a feudal past. If conservatism did exist, Lionel Trilling allowed, it did so in the “irritable mental gestures” of the unenlightened. Channeling Trilling’s conclusion and borrowing heavily from Theodor Adorno’s *The Authoritarian Personality*, Richard Hofstadter considered midcentury conservatives to be “pseudo-conservatives,” and he feared that their “unconscious hatred” of American traditions and institutions could result in violence.

Conservatives rallied around Buckley because he equipped them with a
self-consciously formidable style to perform intellectual sophistication during a period in which conservatism was both out of favor and under attack. Conservatives have argued that the complexity of Buckley’s rhetorical style, far from Hofstadter’s “paranoid style,” legitimized conservatism as an intellectual enterprise and exposed liberalism as the facile recitation of dogmata. As a result of Buckley’s “prolific pen,” “sharp tongue,” and “charming wit,” as one conservative writer praised in 2008, intellectual display was “the hallmark of the postwar conservative movement.” Buckley’s stylistic spectacles gave conservatives more than a set of beliefs; he afforded membership in an undaunted community that had a claim to profundity.

When Buckley addressed conservatives in his “Publisher’s Statement” in National Review’s first issue in 1955, he cast them romantically as a righteous band of rebels eschewing cooperation for gate-crashing. Whereas liberals were censorious, Buckley, using a dramatic alliteration, called new conservatives “non-licensed nonconformists” in a conformist age. They were “out of place” and under siege; being conservative was “dangerous business in a Liberal world.” As new arrivals to a political scene populated by dogmatic liberals and the “irresponsible Right,” conservatives enjoyed none of the benefits of entrenched power, but “unattenuated by a thousand vulgar promises to a thousand different pressure groups,” conservatism could be, as he hoped, “the hottest thing in town.” Buckley framed conservatives as new and brash despite his own leanings toward aristocracy and a stable social order.

Before Buckley, conservatism meant many things: the defense of civility and hierarchy, the defense of the aristocracy, and the defense of tradition. After Buckley, there was nothing defensive about conservatism. Buckley’s conservatives viewed the political world dramatically; being conservative meant clearing away the old political order, attacking the status quo, and standing, as he urged, “athwart History” yelling “Stop!”

As seemingly contradictory as a band of revolutionary conservatives was, his characterization of the conservative identity also exuded romantic appeal. He empowered readers to understand their politics not as antiquated or irrelevant, but as conservative ideals under attack because of their vital relevance. The community that experienced conservatism through the gladiatorial style was not stodgy or typical, but instead, they were righteous, merry warriors and members of a special community. For instance, Buckley’s conservatism would broker no partnership with Dwight Eisenhower and the Eastern Establishment Republicans, the decadent, “well-fed Right” as he portrayed them. Buckley’s goal of using National Review to read “Eisenhower out of the conservative
movement” was an audacious dissociation of stalwart conservatives from those he framed as weak New Deal knock-off Republicans.\(^98\)

Conservatism in the midcentury became a kind of exclusive identity politics in which various groups seized and defended the moniker against all enemies. In addition to helping conservatism cohere by popularizing the gladiatorial style as a common pattern of rhetorical expression, Buckley’s style also generated an ironic interpretive pattern, an insider hermeneutic, among readers. The style asked readers to understand the ironic reversals that were employed, to decode the sarcasm, to follow Buckley’s meandering sentences, to comprehend the big words, and to decipher the slang. Buckley’s style offered a corrective to a political order that was upside-down, where what was right was dismissed. The reversal tropes of the gladiatorial style instructed conservatives to reject the political common sense of the day, to speak no-holds-barred truths to New Dealers, socialists, Trotskyists, “enlightened” atheists, and liberal Republicans. The righteousness of the conservative cause was signified not by how many political observers agreed with them but by how many aligned against them. If Hofstadter, Arthur Schlesinger, or the New York Times’s editorialists were not worried, conservatives must have erred. Buckley, a conservative wrote in 2009, was their source of “psychological armor.” Being targeted as “cranks and menaces” was a “badge of honor and a source of great, iconoclastic fun.”\(^99\) Buckley encouraged conservatives to view iconoclasm as energizing; the tropes of the gladiatorial style became, in Louis Menand’s terms, “badges of identity.”\(^100\) To be a part of “the hottest” political group in town, readers, quite simply, had to get it. Decoding particular syntaxes signified specialized knowledge and authoritative status.

Weekly Standard founder and Washington Post columnist William Kristol, for instance, proudly displayed his badge, a political button, in his high school yearbook photo. Its big letters read “Don’t let THEM immanentize the Eschaton.” The phrase, coined by Eric Voegelin in 1952 and reworked into a combative slogan by Buckley, was cumbersome shorthand for the notion that liberal plans to create heaven on earth actually created hell on earth.\(^101\) Jonah Goldberg, a prominent conservative still fond of the formulation 50 years after Voegelin wrote it, explained its power for conservative readers, many of whom “really want to know what that phrase means.”\(^102\) The slogan was a “conservative dork trap,” as he put it, a “hard-core conservative insider-thing” equivalent to “‘TK-421, where are you?’ to a Star Wars freak.” But Kristol, a presumably precocious high-school kid, knew the phrase’s meaning and wore the button as a badge of authenticity. Understanding the dense vocabulary
of the “dork trap” allowed readers like Kristol a sense of being let in on a conservative secret. As Kristol remembered, Buckley’s words, “immanentize” and “Eschaton” and others, so thrilled him that he felt compelled to adorn them: “To read Buckley growing up in the 1960s was bracing. Buckley and his colleagues—some merrily, some mordantly—mercilessly eviscerated the idiocies of the New Left.” Kristol experienced Buckley’s conservatism as many have experienced gladiatorial contests since antiquity: as a witness so taken by the conflict that he sought to learn the means of the gladiator.

**THE GLADIATORIAL STYLE: BETWEEN ORTHODOX AND HETERODOX CONSERVATISM**

I have argued that William F. Buckley crafted a conservatism known for its intellectual, exuberant, and take-no-prisoners gladiatorial style. His influence on conservatism derived as much from his emotional defense of an embattled political identity as it was a logical appeal for a particular political program. In closing, I isolate the costs and benefits of the provocative contrarianism enabled by the gladiatorial style. In short, the gladiatorial style engenders the expression of an adjustable conservatism, but it constrains its users within the tumultuous framework of opposition politics. As functional as the gladiatorial style was in the creation of the conservative coalition, a community of contrarians is difficult to sustain, both in communal fidelity and in doctrinal loyalty.

The gladiatorial style aims at drama, and discord is often a means to that end. The rhetorical gladiator is a controversialist for whom doctrinal inconsistency is a tool to be selectively deployed, not a taboo to be avoided. Instead of passing down consistent political principles, Buckley’s rhetorical legacy is nearly the opposite: he encouraged heterodoxy, even a joyful defiance, in conservatism. I am not suggesting that all conservatives follow Buckley’s ecumenical conservatism. Indeed, many conservatives, contra Buckley, are doctrinally rigid and insist on closing ranks and protecting “real” conservatism from pretenders. I am suggesting, however, that strict doctrinal adherence is inconsistent with the gladiatorial style. Buckley was a flexible stylist, not a dogmatic catechist, and that difference separates the conservatism he inspired from the conservatism he resisted. He tired of “house theologians” looking for any sign of deviation and believed that “a little creative heresy is good for the system.”
Buckley could be inconveniently doctrinaire when he thought the herd encroached on independent minds. He turned on the war in Iraq, a “conservative” war begun by a “conservative” president, with a terse admonishment: “It didn’t work.”\(^{106}\) He supported the legalization of drugs, “hardly a conservative position.”\(^{107}\) Students “openly wept” when Buckley told their Young Americans for Freedom convention of Barry Goldwater’s “impending defeat” just prior to the 1964 election.\(^{108}\) “We do not believe,” Buckley enjoined them characteristically, “in the Platonic affirmation of our own little purities.”\(^{109}\)

Buckley even defended Ronald Reagan against conservative critics for, of all things, increasing government spending. When then Governor Reagan’s first budget proposal did not fulfill his budget-slashing campaign promises, Buckley answered critics as any good student of language would: words are deeds. He argued, “They say that his [Reagan’s] accomplishments are few, that it is only the rhetoric that is conservative. But the rhetoric is the principal thing. It precedes all action. All thoughtful action.”\(^{110}\) Although it may not have made sense to doctrinaire libertarians, Buckley’s rebuttal was strictly in line with the competitive instinct of conservative contrarians and his rhetorical approach to political life. Buckley wanted conservatives to weigh the power of Reagan’s performance of limited government conservatism against the delicate choices Reagan made given California’s budgetary realities. To Buckley, political principles were vital in defining the broad range of a belief system, but they were not necessarily restrictive. It was far better to engage principles artfully than to encourage principled automatons. Principles need not direct the political actor with exacting specificity; they function best as does a rudder on a large ship, useful for directional steering rather than sharp turns.

The relationship, nevertheless, between the gladiatorial style and the growth of conservatism is somewhat of a paradox. The style, so effective in conservatism’s growth from political eccentricity to national prominence, can also be a hindrance. The elasticity of gladiatorial argument can be confused with wanton doctrinal promiscuity. A controversy over the meaning of Buckley’s 1955 “Publisher’s Statement” is illustrative. In *The Last Best Hope*, conservative pundit Joe Scarborough reached back for Buckley’s pragmatic legacy as the antidote to conservative dogmatism. Buckley, he praised, knew that “standing athwart history and yelling ‘Stop!’” was “a guiding light rather than a rigid ideology.”\(^{111}\) The same “Publisher’s Statement” that Scarborough lauded for its flexibility, *National Review* writer Ramesh Ponnuru celebrated
for its attacks on “relativism” and its language of “fixed postulates.” Both Scarborough and Ponnuru read Buckley accurately, and their disagreement highlights a drawback of the gladiatorial style. As fits the style, Buckley could write about conservatism in dramatic, if inconsistent, terms.

The problem of consistency suggests a related disadvantage: the gladiatorial style is useful for opposition politics, but its value in governing, carefully negotiating, or settling principles to guide a community is limited. The style is capable of mobilizing diverse coalitions against an extant enemy, and it is a formidable debate tactic to score points against opponents and elicit crowd support. Quick wit and a gift for one-liners generate drama in mass-mediated politics but are not nearly as helpful when laying out a broad governing philosophy or hammering out the details of complex legislation. Latter-day conservative firebrands, authors of popular books like *Liberalism is a Mental Disorder*, *Godless: The Church of Liberalism*, and *Deliver Us from Evil: Defeating Terrorism, Despotism, and Liberalism*, swing hard with gladiatorial cudgels and make contentious spectacles of political disputes. The style they wield is designed to dramatize, to show off; in short, to gain attention. It is a style, as the gladiatorial metaphor suggests, to best a threatening opponent and to entertain a wanting crowd. Such displays may produce dazzling spectacles but do not enjoin an audience in careful deliberation. This opposition style benefits the gadfly who gains much from bold moves in a dramatic political argument but little from finely tuned compromises. The gladiatorial style is great for provoking debates, not for deliberative resolution.

Difficult ideological choices are required of those who seek either consistency in their politics or predictability in their governors. The gladiatorial style affords flexibility, but absent reflective guidance, it can stretch conservatism to incoherence. When the chance to define the essence of conservatism came, and it came many thousands of times, Buckley refused, and delighted in doing so. In *Did You Ever See a Dream Walking?*, a collection of excerpts from American conservatism’s founding texts, he wrote:

I confess that I know who is a conservative less surely than I know who is a liberal. Blindfold me, spin me about like a top, and I will walk up to the single liberal in the room without zig or zag and find him even if he is hiding behind the flower pot. I am tempted to try to develop an equally sure nose for the conservative, but I am deterred by the knowledge that conservatives, under the stress of our times, have had to invite all kinds of people into their ranks to help with the job at hand.
Buckley claimed that “What is conservatism?” was the question he faced most frequently from lecture audiences. To the most insistent, those who seemed to need a definition or just needed to see Buckley provide one, Buckley obliged by offering Richard Weaver’s torturous “the paradigm of essences towards which the phenomenology of the world is in continuing approximation.” Weaver’s cagey line was delivered best, as Buckley put it, “with a straight face.” In the moments when a complex but quotable synthesis would have been welcomed, Buckley delivered the opposite. Buckley did not merely evade the definitional query, he announced its impossibility and mocked those who required such certainty.

That conservatism’s chief spokesman would refuse to define conservatism was a galling irony, but it also did not provide an answer to a challenge Whittaker Chambers put to Buckley shortly before the founding of National Review: “Those who remain in the world, if they will not surrender on its terms, must maneuver within its terms. That is what conservatives must decide: how much to give in order to survive at all; how much to give in order not to give up the basic principles.” The gladiatorial style is not useful in providing a method for “dancing along the precipice” separating conservative belief and engaged political activity. Buckley was more, as Wills explains, “a quick responder” than a systematic thinker. His “gifts were facility, flash, and charm, not depth or prolonged wrestling with a problem.” Although the gladiatorial style can be reduced to a kind of sophistry in the pejorative sense, I do not mean to suggest that Buckley was only a sophistic hype man; nonetheless, he was not a theorist who showed where the philosophical bedrock was, the threshold separating conservative conviction and capitulation.

The conservatism Buckley shaped through the gladiatorial style was, in sum, cavalier, not conformist. As entertaining as this conservatism may be, contrarian controversy does not necessarily lend prudence to a political program. Just as the gladiatorial style may popularize conservative principles, it may also attract devotees to the controversial, provocateurs bent on deviance and individuality. Yet even as some conservatives might speak in baser, more Philistine tones than Buckley did, those with economic, nationalist, or culture war messages still follow Buckley’s template. Whether bloviating or bookish, many conservatives have clearly in mind how Buckley might have made the case. Buckley wanted to win the argument and to entertain the crowd, and he was certain that there was a close relationship between the two.
NOTES


2. Buckley first identified as an “individualist” in God and Man at Yale. Much later, he published a book entitled Happy Days Are Here Again: Reflections of a Libertarian Journalist.


27. William F. Buckley interview with Morley Safer, *60 Minutes*, first broadcast January 18, 1981, by CBS.
40. Buckley, *Up from Liberalism*, xxii.
50. Lanham, *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*, 192, 195. Conducting ideological and rhetorical warfare was the signature function of much of the conservative print culture. Books such as *The Road to Serfdom*, *Witness*, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, and *In Defense of Freedom* espoused an eschatological vision of the conflict between East and West and were received as ammunition in that struggle.
54. Will, _One Man’s America_, 12.
58. Conservatives had taken notice of Buckley’s stylistic warnings and followed his stylistic lead. While explaining the reasons for liberal dominance in Washington, Barry Goldwater (through Brent Bozell) opened _The Conscience of a Conservative_ with a similarly phrased concern: “I blame Conservatives—ourselves—myself. Our failure, as one conservative writer has put it, is the failure of the Conservative demonstration.” Buckley, of course, was the unnamed writer. Barry M. Goldwater, _The Conscience of a Conservative_, 30th Anniversary Edition (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 1988), xxiv.
64. Buckley, _Up from Liberalism_, 188.
67. Buckley, _Up from Liberalism_, 205.
68. Buckley, _Up from Liberalism_, 189.
69. Buckley, _Up from Liberalism_, 196.
70. Buckley, _Up from Liberalism_, 209.
71. Buckley, _Up from Liberalism_, 189.
72. Quoted in Linda Bridges and John R. Coyne Jr., _Strictly Right: William F. Buckley Jr. and_
74. Perlstein, Before the Storm, 74. See also Nash, The Conservative Intellectual Movement, 135.
83. Quoted in Judis, William F. Buckley, Jr., 189.
87. When Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy first ran for Congress in 1946, “the former ran as a ‘practical liberal,’ the latter as a ‘fighting conservative.’” Perlstein, Before the Storm, 74. Henry Regnery, the influential publisher of Whittaker Chamber's Witness, Buckley's God and Man at Yale and other canonical conservative books, said that he began publishing in 1947 not "with the idea of publishing conservative books, but
books which didn’t necessarily fit the liberal ideology.” Henry Regnery, Perfect Sowing: Reflections of a Bookman (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 1999), 383–84.


96. Buckley, “Our Mission Statement.” “History” and “Stop” were capitalized in original.


117. Wills, “Daredevil.”