

Buckley brought wit, charm to U.S. politics

by *The Detroit News*

The style and wit of William F. Buckley Jr. will be sorely missed in U.S. politics.

The founder of modern American conservatism, Buckley also was a novelist, columnist, editor, television talk show host, trans-ocean sailor, Central Intelligence Agency operative, Army officer and half-serious candidate for public office. Buckley died Wednesday at age 82.

National Review, the magazine he founded in 1955, grew into conservatism's intellectual center and later translated to political success with election of Ronald Reagan as president in 1980.

Buckley molded various strains of conservative thought - including small government, fiscal restraint, anti-communism, constitutionalism and capitalism - into a cohesive whole to counter growing liberalism after World War II.

It worked largely due to Buckley's brainpower, style and humor. Unashamedly patrician, he didn't downplay his intellectual powers, once writing: "I asked myself the other day, 'Who else, on so many issues, has been so right so much of the time?' I couldn't think of anyone."

And he could be downright surprising, like the time he called for decriminalizing marijuana.

In the 1950s and 1960s, he challenged the far-right kook side of conservatism and its anti-Semitism.

Media-savvy, Buckley appeared to treat politics as a grand game - a serious game, but something to be played nonetheless. For example, he ran for mayor of New York City in 1965. When asked how many votes he expected, he said, "Conservatively speaking, one."

Historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. derided Buckley as "the scourge of liberalism." And for years, the latter wore the badge with great pride.

Buckley's measured public persona was famously broken when he and novelist Gore Vidal stooped to nasty name calling on live national TV in 1968. But in fairness to Buckley, Vidal started it by calling Buckley a crypto-Nazi.

Vidal aside, Buckley's legacy includes the absence of rancor. He skewered opponents with rapier wit and words of many syllables. But his attacks were typically on a high intellectual plane, not the sort of gutter sniping that now often passes for political commentary.

Overall, he was an American original, and conservatism is going to miss its founding father.

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