

Book Review: 'Gleanings From an Unplanned Life'

by Fred J. Eckert

"Gleanings from an Unplanned Life: An Annotated Oral History" by James L. Buckley; Wilmington, Del.: Intercollegiate Studies Institute; 308 pages; \$25.

First a disclaimer: I know the author of this book. We are longtime friends. I consider him to be one of the two finest elected officials I have ever known, Ronald Reagan being the other. We have campaigned for one another. I once asked another friend, an influential member of Congress, to urge President Nixon to select him rather than Gerald Ford to be vice president. I also on more than one occasion personally urged Ronald Reagan, who also admired him deeply, to select him to be his vice president. I have long felt - still do, now more so than ever - that he would have made a great president of the United States.

That said, I think anyone who is concerned about the sad state of political discourse in America these days who reads this book will easily understand why I and so many others see in James L. Buckley the very best.

The point of this book's unusual title is that Jim Buckley's life did not go according to the plans he had envisioned. He wanted to be a Connecticut country lawyer in the small town in which he grew up and today lives, but he took a job in a large New Haven law firm to first gain experience, then ended up reluctantly agreeing to help in his father's business where for nearly two decades he traveled the world working on oil and gas exploration issues.

A PUBLIC LIFE - 'Gleanings From an Unplanned Life' is an annotated oral history of James L. Buckley, possibly the only living American who has served at a very high level in each of the three branches of the federal government. CNS Photo.

He explains his entry into the political world this way: "You may have heard I have an exotic brother." When William F. Buckley Jr. yielded to the urgings of the then still fairly new New York State Conservative Party to be its candidate for Mayor of New York, Jim in turn yielded to brother Bill's request that he manage that campaign. It was a wonderfully entertaining campaign, best remembered by the candidate's response to the question of what he would do if elected: "Demand a recount."

Bill's views about holding public office were Jim's as well back then. But when the Conservatives needed to file a candidate for U.S. Senate in 1968, brother Bill again leaned on Jim, who, on a shoestring budget, ran amazingly well as a third party candidate. Then in 1970 Jim was persuaded to try another Senate race - and this time stunned the state and the nation by being elected on the Conservative Party ticket in New York State of all places. Widely considered among the Senate's best and brightest, he quickly emerged as Congress' premier conservative philosopher and leader across a wide spectrum of issues.

Though this did not become law until after he left the Senate, it is generally viewed that it was his persistent efforts that ended the old sneaky stealth way the federal government was able to increase taxes without a vote of Congress and signature of the president by simply taking advantage of inflation-driven creep into higher brackets. Parents with children in any school that receives federal money did not obtain the right to see the education records of their children until an amendment he authored brought this about. His fine mind affected - and improved - much that came before the Senate. It is the country's loss that the Congress did not heed Jim Buckley's persistent pleas for reform and improvement through implementation of the sort of federalism the Founders envisioned.

Many in Congress have fine minds, but Jim had one of the finest and so much more, including qualities that so many others in public office lack - impeccable character and integrity, rare true humility, a genuine craving for truth and the courage to always - always - do what he believed was right and best for America, no matter the cost to himself.

When New York City's self-inflicted wounds brought it to the brink of bankruptcy, Jim, nearly alone among the state's political leaders, shunned demagoguery and dealt only in facts. When he became convinced, long before most others, that the Watergate scandal made President Nixon incapable of continuing to lead the country he held a news conference and publicly urged the president to resign. For his vision and courage in both of these matters he was roundly vilified - but he stood strong and faced it with his trademark warm grin delighting friends and disarming foes.

His loss in his re-election effort was a great loss to the country as was his later failed attempt to be elected to the Senate from Connecticut. An admirer named Ronald Reagan brought Jim back into public life by naming him Under Secretary of State for Security Assistance, then president of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and then later named him to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit. He excelled at all. Of his service on the bench, a magazine that does not share his conservative views said that Jim "emerged by consensus of liberals and conservatives alike as the finest appellate judge" on a court known for exceptional judges and producing Supreme Court nominees. He was a judge who followed the law and the constitution not his own whims.

It turns out that Jim Buckley, who recently marked his 84th birthday and is looking forward to soon getting back to the arctic to view polar bears, may be the only living American who has served at a very high level in each of the three branches of the federal government.

This second book by him - he wrote "If Men Were Angels," quoting James Madison's famous remark, while still in the Senate - is the result of a program of the Historical Society of D.C. in which an outstanding attorney conducts an oral history of a judge of that appellate court. It's a transcript of those interviews, with Judge-Senator Buckley's notes added to clarify and expound upon points raised.

His thoughtful observations on each branch are uncommonly insightful, keenly intelligent, marked by a delightful sense of humor, and also, in my view, dead-on. Agree with Jim Buckley or not, the reader will certainly come away better for having been exposed to his thinking and, regardless of political persuasion, the reader will likely come away both appreciative of the fact that we once had such a quality figure in public office and wishing that we would soon see his likes again.

(Eckert is a former U.S. ambassador, member of Congress and senator of the State of New York.)

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