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# Reflections on Current Contentions

William F. Buckley Jr.

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An author, adviser, columnist, politician, adventurer, editor, philosopher, television personality, and lecturer, William F. Buckley is one of the most decisively important conservative leaders of our times. He founded *National Review* in 1955; forty-five years later, it may be the most widely read journal of opinion in the United States. His syndicated column, "On the Right," which he began in 1962, continues to appear regularly in more than 300 newspapers across the country and around the world. In 1966, he started *Firing Line*, a weekly television show that ended only recently, making it the longest-running program, featuring the same host, in the history of American television.

The following observations on Republicans, Democrats, Minnesota, taxes, private property, and the separation of church and state are excerpted and adapted from Buckley's speech at a special Center of the American Experiment dinner forum in March 2000, shortly before he announced that he was retiring from public speaking.

## On Minnesota

My relations with Minneapolis are venerable and long-standing. Around 1962, I think it was, a redoubtable woman here founded what she called the CCC, the Cities Conservative Council. She was a wonderful woman and very ardent in pursuit of her political and indeed her other faith. I ended up coming here about once a month to talk to people. One time, she got so car-

ried away that she imported the entire senior staff of *National Review*, three or four editors and the publisher. We became intimate, Minneapolis and I.

Minnesota does have certain historical problems. I remember watching the 1984 presidential election returns, my television scrolling down all the states that had voted for Ronald Reagan's reelection. He lost Massachusetts, but Massachusetts doesn't really count,

does it? A little later, he lost Minnesota—the only other state that didn't endorse Ronald Reagan in 1984.

I thought back then to an episode here in 1956. Very few of you are old enough to remember that Adlai Stevenson was a famous quipster. He said funny things all the time. On this occasion, there was a sudden upset in the presidential primary election. Stevenson, who had been favored to win the Minnesota Democratic primary, lost. I remember Adlai Stevenson once saying, "You know what comes after a Saturday-night speech by Hubert Humphrey?" Pause. "Sunday."

#### On conservative pride

The conservative movement, as one views it through the GOP, has lost something important: a sense of pride. I think that's because it seems to be frightened of its own imperatives.

When George W. Bush said that he wanted to be a compassionate conservative, he seemed to be saying two things: that compassionate conservatism is different from the kind of conservatism to which we are accustomed, and that compassionate conservatism is different from the pedigree of conservatism, which tends to be other than compassionate.

It seems to me that conservatism stands for some tough-minded things, and that we ought not shrink from the implications of that tough-mindedness. For instance, we think that in order to learn, one has to study; it isn't as easy as voting \$21 billion more for education. If one wants to cut down on the problem of single parenthood, one has

to conform one's habits to the goal.

The whole notion of American economic ascendancy is an aspect of one hundred years of Americans who were willing to work hard and to save, to be diligent, and to be ambitious. This isn't the kind of cozy ideology that one associates with the far reaches of the welfare state or with reiterations of the Democratic platform. But isn't it something that we ought to be proud of? And wouldn't exhibiting our pride communicate to the American people what, historically, the GOP stands for?

In an exchange between Professor John Kenneth Galbraith and me a few years ago, he talked about the need for politics to be more concerned for more people, and I suggested that one way to act out this concern is to learn from history. In the year 1900, applying current standards, 90 percent of the American people were poor. At the time of our exchange, only 11 percent of Americans were living in poverty. That number oscillates one or two percentage points, but the major fight was undertaken, and success achieved, before the welfare state was thought of. We had made progress based on savings, hard work, and diligence.

This did more for more people than the New Deal did. The exertions of individuals working for themselves and for their families results in a surplus that is invested in education, philanthropy, and capital. The whole world benefits from it. It seemed to me that there was a manifest failure to incorporate that idea in GOP rhetoric in the 2000 campaign. John McCain did so well in part because he was hard-bitten about a lot

of things while Mr. Bush was saying smoochy things about compassionate conservatism.

I hope that some of you will agree with me when I say that a sense of pride is sometimes missing in current emanations of GOP enthusiasm. That pride belongs to a culture that says, "You've got to do something for the country, you've got to do something for yourself and your family, rather than merely simply sit back and expect that the government will do it for you. You've got to look after your immortal soul."

#### On Democratic pleasant thoughts

The Democrats specialize in having pleasant thoughts and constructing their politics around them. Nobody should be illiterate. That's a very pleasant thought. Therefore, they say, let's simply eliminate illiteracy.

One of President Clinton's final desires was to raise the minimum wage, which is a pleasant thought; it would be a superpleasant thought if people earned three times the minimum wage. Another was free prescription drugs, which is certainly a pleasant thought.

Some people in California have a very pleasant thought, which is that, beginning in 2008, no internal combustion engine can be lit in California; that would certainly do away with the noxious fumes of a gas engine. It's a terribly pleasant thought.

It is the responsibility of conservatives to say that self-indulgence has to be resisted. We say this not only for empirical economic reasons—everyone will benefit from resisting these temptations—but also for philosophical rea-

sons. The notion that one can construct around pleasant thoughts a philosophy in which problems simply are removed is an affront to realism. It is the job of politicians to incorporate realism and hope. This is what Ronald Reagan succeeded in doing everywhere except Massachusetts and Minnesota.

#### On private property

Private property isn't about being pro-rich. Private property is the root postulate of human freedom. One exercises one's property rights many times every day. People can talk about freedom of speech—which is important—but some people live their entire lives without writing a letter to a newspaper or calling up a congressman. But the right of property is intrinsic.

#### On taxes

The odd notion that to call for a reduction in taxes is to call for a subsidy of the rich has grown up in the past generation or two. This shows the extent to which there has been an inversion of reality.

It's quite true that if you reduce taxes uniformly, rich people are going to benefit to a greater extent than poor people. By definition, any even-handed tax reduction will result in benefit to the rich.

But the philosophical principle can't get lost. You can't accost tax policy by saying that reducing taxes by 1 percent will give Bill Gates another \$100 million. This is not relevant. The point is the extent to which the Sixteenth Amendment is an invitation to a class warfare analysis of all economic

or fiscal activity. The Fourteenth Amendment guarantees everybody equal treatment under the law; the Sixteenth Amendment authorizes unequal treatment under the law. The notion that to come out for an even tax cut is to favor the rich is the kind of thinking that commends itself only to the Carleton College history department.

On the separation of church and state

About twenty years ago, having listened to the hundredth American Civil Liberties Union lecture on the separation of church and state, I wondered if I could find even one American who wants an established church. If ever I do, I'm going to send that person to the Smithsonian Institution.

The entire political arrangement based on the First Amendment has to do with the suspicion that unless you prevent a judge from displaying the Ten Commandments in his courtroom, you're going to have an established religion. This has now become an issue of whether people are free to pray at football games in Texas. The notion that this should be a responsibility of the Supreme Court violates the axiomatic understanding of the separation of powers and the axiomatic understanding of the difference between an established religion and freedom of religion.

In Milwaukee in 1999, a sixteen-year-old girl, after reading the figures on single-parent births, decided to circulate a petition titled "Let's Just Wait" and asked other girls to sign it. It was a personal pledge to defer sexual activity

until marriage. Sixty or seventy girls had signed when the principal discovered that a little Protestant prayer group had forced the idea of making such pledges, whereupon the principal declared that the movement was a violation of the separation of church and state.

Meanwhile, a judge in Alabama who has the Ten Commandments hanging behind him said he's not going to move them, period. Send the Marines, if you want to. This is climbing its way up to the Supreme Court.

We are driven to these lengths as a result of distortions that lodge deep in a generation that has been cultivated by thirty or forty years of liberal tendentiousness in the interpretation of the Constitution and in the interpretation of the responsibilities of the Supreme Court.

I would love to hear a candidate for public office say that the Supreme Court's interpretation of the separation of church and state is a bunch of baloney. It would be nice to hear that candidate say, "The Supreme Court has arrogated to itself legislative authority that contaminates the original notion of the separation of powers. We are going to try to communicate these fundamental distinctions and understandings to the American voter, notwithstanding the fact that we anticipate resistance that reflects prejudices that have been carefully, assiduously, and ingeniously cultivated over the past twenty or thirty years." n