

National Review at 50

How the country's oldest conservative magazine succumbed to the lure of politics.

By Chilton Williamson Jr.

ON NOVEMBER 19, William F. Buckley Jr.'s *National Review* turns 50 years old. Fifty years is nearly an eternity for any modern institution—a magazine in particular—to survive, but *National Review* is not any institution. While hardly the *fons et origo* of American conservatism, as it has often been portrayed, *NR* was, unquestionably, both the focus and the rallying point of intellectual conservatism in the postwar era. Similarly, though the magazine did not long remain the sole architect and arbiter of American conservatism, it does represent the grandfather elm whose scions, grafted to new wood, produced a line of successive conservative publications.

Still respected, and read, after 50 years, *National Review* has not gone unchallenged by other magazines claiming to represent conservative thought and politics, despite, or rather as a result of, its having taken a port tack, 20 or so years ago, toward the neoconservatives that delivered the magazine into the safe, comfortable, highly respectable, and politically unassailable harbor of Beltway conservatism. For these reasons, the title of Jeffrey Hart's *The Making of the American Conservative Mind: National Review and its Times* (the volume's release from ISI Books was timed to coincide with the anniversary celebrations) fails to suggest the subject in its entirety, historically or intellectually.

National Review has played an indispensable role in the shaping of contem-

porary American conservatism. Just as surely, the *National Review* mind is not synonymous with the American conservative mind, of which it is part, not synecdoche. Proof of this assertion is demonstrable in many ways, as a comparison of *NR* with other conservative publications in respect of content, the identities of the writers printed in the magazine, and the professional connections and social associations of its present staff would attest. Even so, it is sufficient here to note that, for a great many people who call themselves conservative, *National Review* has been—as far back, perhaps, as the late 1960s—a disappointment, not only for what it has had to say, but for what it has left unsaid; not alone for the issues it has addressed, but for those it has chosen to ignore and at times seemed to pretend are nonexistent. In this regard, of course, *NR* is no different from any other magazine of opinion. A publication loved by all who come in contact with it—even those self-selected from a particular band of the social, political, and metaphysical spectrum—would be one so lacking in identity, character, and personality as to be scarcely worth reading at all.

On the other hand, *National Review*, considered—as Professor Hart, a senior editor at the magazine from the late 1960s down to the present day, considers it—in the context of its half-century of existence, appears progressively marked by a certain narrowness that in the magazine's golden age (*c.* 1955-68) was less a reflection of the collective

intellect of its editorial board than the result of deliberate strategy. I expect Hart would take issue with this assessment of the magazine on whose board he remains the sole holdover from the *ancien régime*. In point of fact, he and I are saying at bottom, I believe, the same thing. "Throughout its history," Professor Hart explains,

National Review has been tempted by a politics of wishing, or utopianism. Its mistakes have been instructive. That is, even the magazine's mistakes have assisted in the achievement of a nominative conservatism, described by Buckley as the 'politics of reality.' It has been the process of trying to achieve a 'politics of reality' that made *National Review* over the years the most interesting magazine of its kind in the United States.

At the same time, as Hart makes explicit, *National Review* was founded as a magazine of ideas, not of politics alone, in "an attempt to change the mind of the American intellectual elite in a conservative direction."

Politics and ideas are hardly incompatible between the same covers; they are, rather, self-reflexive and mutually supportive, so long as the politics do not attempt to play politics with the ideas—so long, that is, as the intellectual enterprise maintains a critical distance from public affairs and rejects the temptation to insert itself as a collective political operative into the world of partisan pol-

itics as a player whose chief influence is direct and political in preference to indirect and cultural. In an ideal world, it would be possible to have it both ways; but, as *National Review* has always been foremost in insisting, the world we have inherited and are compelled to live in is not an ideal one.

Probably the journal that has come closest in American history to realizing that ideal was *The New Republic* in its heyday nearly a century ago; and indeed, it seems to have been a conservative

Hart and Buckley as “the dominant intellectual presence” at *NR*—gradually prevailed over his friend and masthead superior, guiding Buckley away from his ideal impulses toward a strategic realism intended to move the magazine toward a greater political effectiveness and in that way rescuing *National Review*—with help initially from Whitaker Chambers—from “dogmatism and utopianism.” (A former Trotskyite, Burnham succeeded in rescuing himself to the extent that he could favor Nelson

part coldly conscious of their ways, means, and ends,” served to divide the Right. Following McCarthy’s death in 1957, however, a lead editorial seemed to qualify the magazine’s earlier enthusiasm, sounding a cautious note and observing that the senator, after all, had failed to draw necessary distinctions between communism and liberalism.

In 1956, Eisenhower was running for election to a second term. Unsurprisingly, *National Review’s* treatment of the president was wholly negative—before Burnham returned from the Republican convention in San Francisco to report that only right-wing nuts had opposed his nomination. Burnham, having assessed the interests brought together by Stevenson and Eisenhower, concluded that the Democratic coalition was considerably to the left of the Republican one. Moreover, Dean Acheson, Chip Bohlen, and George Kennan were hard anti-Communists, certainly not men given to appeasement, let alone capitulation. And so Burnham, according to Hart, exerted himself to bring Buckley around to a strategic or “realistic” position with regard to the GOP, albeit one seasoned by a “principled” opposition to political expediency. For Hart, this is an example of the changing direction of Burnham’s thought, “away from alienation and toward engagement and centrality,” and also of his slow-working but often, in the long run, decisive influence at *NR*.

Even Burnham, however, the cool geopolitical realist, was subject on occasion to bursts of fierce idealism, as in his response to Eisenhower’s refusal to support the Hungarian uprising in 1956. In an editorial appearing in the Nov. 10 number the same year, he proposed that “after specifying escalating kinds of pressure, and as a last step, an ultimatum should be given to the Soviets to withdraw their troops from East Europe.” This editorial, Hart insists,

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version of *TNR* that Buckley, Willi Schlamm, and James Burnham sought to create in 1955. But *The New Republic* was (and is) contemporary in its politics and its culture, while *National Review*, even as it grew increasingly eager to accept the reality of modern political life with all its limitations and frustrations, was culturally traditional—and traditionally religious to boot. Thus, what had always been a cakewalk for *The New Republic* amounted to a tightrope for the newcomer on the opposite side of the political and civilizational divide. According to Hart, Buckley “wanted the magazine, from the beginning, to appeal to an audience with an educated taste. But he also wanted to ally the magazine with potential power, and to challenge the liberal Establishment.” Bill Buckley was biting off a great deal. There is no reason to believe that a man as brilliant as he didn’t know this.

The central thesis of Hart’s book, thus, is that the history of *National Review* may be read as a protracted struggle “between wish and reality, what it would like to be true and what in fact was true.” According to this reading, James Burnham—recognized by both

Rockefeller as the Republican presidential nominee in 1964, write admiringly of Gerald Ford when he became president in August of 1974, and become an advocate for the center-right GOP, more eager to re-educate the Eastern Elite than to destroy it.) In the early years of the magazine’s history, however, Hart admits, “prudential conservatism was not yet in charge.”

According to Hart, *National Review’s* treatment of Joseph McCarthy was an early example of this tension between wish and reality. The magazine supported McCarthy from its very first number and continued to support him after his censure by the Senate. In 1955, most of the senior people at *NR* were pro-McCarthy—including Burnham, who considered the senator to be correct in some at least of his allegations and a valuable barking-dog. Buckley, his distaste for populism notwithstanding, was a partisan, and so were Frank Meyer, Brent Bozell, and Schlamm. The most skeptical of the editors seems to have been, of all people, Chambers, who warned Buckley that McCarthy, “a man fighting almost wholly by instinct and intuition, against forces for the most

expressed the corporate judgment of *National Review*.

On the domestic front, the magazine stood, from the start, in opposition to *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, in part from the constitutionally principled argument that the decision represented the judicial usurpation of “rights reserved to the states respectively” and a visceral objection to the “centralizing, totalist obsession shared by the Court and the federal executive”; for the rest, on the Burkean ground that, whereas in June 1954 relations between whites and blacks in the United States had been more amicable and promising than at any other time in national history, following *Brown*, race relations in the South and North had “catastrophically worsened.” In 1960, an unsigned editorial summed up the deteriorating racial situation in America with brutal candor:

We offer the following on the crisis in the Senate and the South: 1) In the deep South the Negroes are by comparison with the Whites, retarded (‘unadvanced,’ the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People might put it). Any effort to ignore the fact is sentimentalism or demagoguery. Leadership in the South, then, quite properly, rests in White hands. Upon the White population this fact imposes moral obligations of paternalism, patience, protection, devotion, sacrifice.

As for filibustering at the time by senators from the Southern states, far from being the regressive horror depicted by liberals, the filibuster itself is “a living remnant of the great doctrine of the concurrent majority defined by John C. Calhoun. It survived the Civil War. One hopes that it will survive the displeasure of *The New York Times*.”

Four years after those uncompromising words were written, Sen. Barry

Goldwater of Arizona received the Republican nomination for president at the Cow Palace in San Francisco. Initially, Goldwater’s emergence into presidential politics divided *National Review*. Bill Rusher had been among the leaders of the Draft Goldwater movement. A populist son of the Middle West, Rusher rejoiced in the prospect of the Republican Party base shifting to the South and West. Burnham, predictably skeptical of a Goldwater candidacy, leaned toward Rockefeller; his skepticism was shared by Buckley himself. In the end, of course, Rusher’s man won—won, and then lost, apparently calamitously. Rusher himself understood the landslide away from Goldwater differently. “On any serious accounting,” he wrote in his book *The Rise of the Right*,

1964 was the most important and truly seminal year for American conservatism since the founding of *National Review* in 1955. It laid the foundations for everything that followed. Before 1964, conservatism was at best a political theory in the process of becoming a political movement; after 1964, and directly as a result of it, conservatism increasingly became the acknowledged political alternative to the regnant liberalism—almost fated, in fact, to replace it sooner or later.

As much of a watershed year as 1964 was for the Republican Party and American conservatism generally, it was to prove equally as significant—in some ways, still more so—for the magazine that had good claim to having set in motion the process that produced its landmark events.

By 1968, the editorial board at *National Review* had reached consensus on Willmoore Kendall’s understanding of the U.S. Constitution as being, in Hart’s words, “a permanent agreement on the orthodox American theory of rep-

resentative government,” the expression of a “virtuous”—meaning a prudent—people. According to Hart, a slow change had been effected over the years from “paradigm conservative politics” to a “consensus, strategic politics” that eschewed theoretical absolutism and utopianism. Henceforth, the editors committed themselves to electing, in Buckley’s formula, “the most rightward electable candidate”—Buckley’s considered definition of “mainstream.” It seems entirely appropriate, therefore, that Richard Nixon’s nomination that same year should have been accredited, at the time and since, to William F. Buckley Jr.

The thing made sense, so far as *National Review*’s commitment to practical politics went. But what of its self-imposed mission as upholder and promoter of metaphysical principle, high intellect, and Western civilization? Buckley himself had always insisted that politics is not an end in itself but a means toward sustaining civilization, with its aesthetic and intellectual achievements. To repeat, *NR* had been founded, first and foremost, as a magazine of ideas, aimed at educating the American intellectual elite and converting it to the magazine’s view of the world. In other words, *National Review* was dedicated to acknowledging Truth uncompromisingly, from principle first but also from the conviction that, in Richard Weaver’s phrase, “ideas have consequences.” The great question therefore is: to what degree is paying reality its intellectual and moral due compatible with accommodating the frequently differing or even conflicting reality of politics, with getting the “most rightward electable candidate elected,” while keeping sufficiently in the winner’s good graces following Election Day as to be allowed to play the role of trusted friend and political advisor after his attainment to office? The history of *National Review* since 1968 suggests

that succeeding in both of these ambitions at once is difficult at best. Also that, when one or the other has to give, political expediency too often prevails over intellectual integrity.

Undoubtedly, it is a heady experience to find oneself on the telephone weekly with the president of the United States and the secretary of state almost daily, to compose speeches delivered by famous candidates, and to be invited to the best Washington parties. Yet a careful accounting of the gains and losses incurred by *National Review* from its closeness to the Nixon and, even more, the Reagan administrations would be instructive. Even were Hart correct in his implied claim that the magazine was, for a time, a major influence at “the centers of power in the government of the most powerful nation on earth” (which seems an overstatement, to say the least), it remains in question whether that influence was really worth having. Nixon, as Hart pretty much admits, was a fiasco. Reagan was more successful as president, yet he was at bottom a right-wing liberal and no true conservative at all, whose achievements owed as much to historical coincidence as to anything else.

Rusher has enthused that Reagan “led the conservative movement to victory.” But what kind of victory was this? Not a lasting one, obviously. In 2005, the country stands further to the left than it did when the conservative hero departed the White House in 1989. Much worse, it has become even more the object of an invasion by tens of millions from south of the border that President Reagan did little, if anything, to resist. In 1968, Buckley observed in his syndicated column that the nations of Western Europe saw no benefit but only danger from Third World immigration; why should immigrants have anything better to offer the United States? After that column, to the best of my knowledge, Buckley didn’t touch the

subject again for nearly 30 years. It is true that, in the early ’90s, *National Review* under the editorship of John O’Sullivan, adopting the restrictionist position, hit the immigration issue hard and that his successor, Richard Lowry, has called for immigration reform. But O’Sullivan didn’t last as editor, while the magazine’s present position on the issue gives the impression of being more strategic than heartfelt. The reasons for this reluctance are obvious, and also quite in line with strategic conservatism. Mainstream Republicanism as represented by Nixon, Reagan, and both Bushes, and reflecting in part its business constituency, is at best tolerant of, at worst enthusiastic for, immigration, whether of the legal or the illegal variety; so are the neoliberals—better known as

ward constitute one of the great works of conservative thought and experience.” In substantial degree, he is speaking the truth. On the other hand, too many of the more recent volumes evince not so much a disengagement from what Russell Kirk called “the permanent things” as forgetfulness that one of conservatism’s essential functions may be to keep alive lost causes in the knowledge that no cause, as T.S. Eliot said, is ever really lost. The task entails seeking to understand where a civilization has taken the wrong road, regardless of whether the possibility exists for it to retrace its steps to the critical junction and choose the other one. And this is not utopianism but Wisdom—a fact of which Jeffrey Hart, a truly learned man, can scarcely be unaware. Indeed, he

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neoconservatives—with whom *National Review* conservatives formed a (strategic!) alliance during the Reagan administration.

And the immigration issue is by way of example only. Keeping Jimmy Carter, Walter Mondale, Bill Clinton, Al Gore, and John Kerry out of the White House may, or may not, be of final importance. One way or another, it is a staggering price to pay for keeping your mouth shut concerning what is by far the greatest threat to its present integrity and future existence the United States has encountered in the entirety of its history as a nation.

Professor Hart concludes his book with the suggestion that “*National Review* has been a great model, vigorous always, through mistakes and self-corrections, from November 1955 forward. If read as a single book, all of those bound volumes from 1955 for-

regrets especially, among the many changes inflicted upon *National Review* by the Lowry administration, the relegation of what he calls “[a]ttention to serious conservative thought of high quality” to the books section—“pushed to the back of the bus, like Birmingham blacks during the Fifties”—and the related shortchanging of the permanent things. These high matters, he complains, have been sacrificed to “[t]he simplicities of topicality [which] become a parody of liberal simplifying dogmatism.”

Hart finds the renovated *National Review* of the present day deserving of criticism on other grounds as well. He is critical of its support for untrammelled free-market economics, its blind faith in the Republican Party as the party of conservatism, and its continued enthusiastic support of George W. Bush. Like the historian John Lukacs, Hart views the

GOP as captive to the new American Populists, led by their commander in chief: a hard Wilsonian and moral authoritarian determined to drag the United States away from conservative principle and experience. Finally, he deplores the fact that, under Lowry, *National Review* has become notably less Christian in its focus and interests—no matter the magazine's refusal to acknowledge as a conservative anyone who supports abortion rights and advocates the cause of stem-cell research.

Hart's highest and most inclusive claim on behalf of *National Review* is that, for the last half-century, the magazine has taught conservatives how to think. That is a lesson that Professor Hart, a convert to the Catholic Faith, should be able not only to recognize but teach to superb effect. It is the more puzzling, therefore, that he should find himself in opposition to Richard Lowry *et al.* on the basic human life issues. Referring the reader to *National Review* editorials published over the years criticizing Catholic moral teaching in our day, Professor Hart argues that the Church's prohibition of birth control is widely ignored and philosophically weak, while *Roe v. Wade* is politically irreversible. "Too many powerful political forces are aligned against [overturning] it, and it is therefore a utopian notion." In defense of this position Hart cites Burke for his "sense of the complexity of society and, concomitantly, of the great power and complexity of forces driving important social processes and social change."

For once, alas, quoting the great Burke availeth not. Men tamper with political principle at their risk; metaphysical reality at their peril. ■

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Recent press revelations about CIA secret detention centers might have been based on information leaked by disgruntled agency officials

who were incensed by White House attempts to authorize the CIA to torture terrorist detainees. At the end of October, CIA Director Porter Goss and Vice President Dick Cheney visited Senator John McCain to seek CIA exemption from his anti-torture amendment to the defense appropriations bill. McCain, who was tortured by the North Vietnamese, would not agree. Many CIA operations personnel were angered at Goss and Cheney's attempt, saying it further stigmatized an already demoralized agency, and a retired CIA official who had been critical of Goss reportedly provided the *Washington Post* with at least some of the information regarding the detention centers, hoping publicity would kill White House moves to put the torture onus on the CIA. The impending investigation of the leak will focus on the Operations Directorate, likely resulting in a new wave of resignations and further damaging already low morale, but it will also send the signal that Porter Goss is cleaning house and no leaks will be tolerated. The issue of the prisons and what intelligence purpose they serve will be lost in the shuffle. Nearly all al-Qaeda detainees have been squeezed dry and have nothing more to provide. Some CIA officers argue that prisoners like Abu Zubayda and Khalid Shaykh Muhammad should not become permanent wards of the agency and should instead be turned over to the Justice Department for prosecution. Khalid Shaykh Muhammad, for example, ordered the beheading of journalist Daniel Pearl and could be tried for murder.



One of the more intriguing aspects of the federal investigation into the activities of Washington lobbyist Jack Abramoff is his Israeli connections.

His large \$2.2 million bail is reported to be due to fears that he would flee to Israel, as some of his business associates have already done, to avoid prosecution. Abramoff, an Orthodox Jew and ardent Zionist, set up a charity called Capital Athletic Foundation, which illegally provided \$140,000 worth of weapons and security equipment to hard-line Israeli settlers. Abramoff also allegedly convinced Congressman Robert Ney, House Administrative Committee chairman, to award a contract worth \$3 million to a start-up Israeli telecommunications firm called Foxcom Wireless. The contract was for the installation of antennas in House of Representatives buildings to improve cell-phone reception. Not surprisingly, such equipment can be designed to have what is known as a "back door" to enable a third party, in this case Mossad, to listen in. That an Israeli firm should be given such a contract through a selection process that was described as "deeply flawed and unfair" is inexplicable, particularly as there were American suppliers of the same equipment, and it suggests that the private conversations of some of our congressmen might not be so private after all. In a previous scandal in 2001, FBI investigators strongly suspected that two Israeli companies, AMDOCS and Comverse Infosys, which had been allowed to obtain U.S. government telecommunications contracts, were able to use back-door technology to compromise the security of DEA, Pentagon, and White House phones.

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