

Remembering William F. Buckley

by Russ Dondero

William F. Buckley, Jr. died at age 82 several weeks ago. As the father of modern U.S. conservatism, Buckley set the intellectual table for Ronald Reagan and the conservative revolution of the '90s. His PBS TV show "Firing Line" was a showcase of erudition with ideological friends and foes.

I met Bill Buckley in 1984 when I invited him to the first "great" debate at Pacific University, which became the Tom McCall Forum that year. I remember greeting him at the airport. He was of course fashionably late, having traveled to Portland from Detroit via Dallas and San Francisco. Typical of New Yorkers, Bill's secretary was geographically challenged. She called me several days ahead of the event and asked me how far Kansas was from Oregon!

But when we walked into the University Center that night — the Forum banquet and event was held on campus in the early days — the crowd almost levitated as Bill swooped in. I didn't think intellectuals could have "charisma." Bill Buckley did. That night he and former U.S. Senator Dick Clark (D, Iowa) — the first casualty of the Moral Majority — lit up the night in the PAC leaving a crowd of 2,500 breathless with their eloquence.

The topic that night was "Is Liberalism Dead?" After the evening I think the answer depended on the ears of the beholders. One way or the other, students left the PAC that night knowing why they were a "lib" or a "con" — there was no middle ground at the end of the debate! In retrospect one could say that "liberalism" was in cardiac arrest. We'll know after November whether it can be "born again" as a political movement.

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