

T. Kenneth Cribb, Jr.

IN MEMORIAM: WILLIAM F. BUCKLEY JR. AND E. VICTOR MILIONE

Earlier this year, two former presidents of ISI, William F. Buckley Jr. and E. Victor Milione, passed away within a few weeks of one another. ISI President T. Kenneth Cribb, Jr., delivered remarks on Mr. Buckley at the Council for National Policy's remembrance on March 7, 2008. Mr. Cribb also eulogized Mr. Milione at a memorial service on April 11, 2008, in Arlington, Virginia. —MCH

William F. Buckley Jr.

The father of the American conservative movement, William F. Buckley Jr., died last week at his desk, working to the very end with that same dedication that marked the long decades of his remarkable life.

We are gathered today as members of a highly articulated conservative movement that has become a fixture in the intellectual and political life of our nation. It is easy to forget that in the late 1940s, the Left totally dominated the intellectual and political discourse of America. True, Richard Weaver, Friedrich Hayek, and others were beginning to be read. True, there existed an assortment of right-leaning spokesmen—defenders of business interests, Republican politicians about as distinguished as their latter-day counterparts, ex-communists who had come to

their senses, Southerners who mourned the loss of their way of life, and serious commentators who warned of the growing threat of the modern State. But these interests tended to pull away from each other rather than find common ground.

It was the launch in 1955 of *National Review* that helped American conservatism find its center of gravity. Bill Buckley's *National Review* is justly celebrated for its role as midwife to a movement that has achieved successes unimaginable in 1955. Bill's skill as a polemicist and philosopher is the stuff of legend, but even more important was the decisive role of Buckley and his little magazine in crafting an intellectual consensus which accommodated the warring proponents of freedom on the one hand and those of moral order on the other.

These claims could be reconciled, said Buckley, by insisting upon limits to the authority of the State vis-à-vis individual freedom, while also acknowledging that virtue is the proper object of that freedom: virtue that finds its expression through the religious foundations of Western civilization. Thus, freedom remains indispen-

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sible, but as the central means to achieving moral order. Buckley himself put it this way in the first of his forty books: “The duel between Christianity and atheism is the most important in the world, and the struggle between individualism and collectivism is the same struggle reproduced on another level.” With this philosophical predicate in place, a grand alliance of libertarians, traditionalists, and anticommunists gathered around the standard that Bill Buckley raised at *National Review*. Put another way, Ronald Reagan’s famed electoral coalition was made possible by an antecedent intellectual coalition forged by William F. Buckley Jr.

But of course one cannot really separate Buckley the shaping conservative intelligence from Buckley the polemicist and public figure. He was often described as a Renaissance man, and he was liable to pop up anywhere. I even remember flipping channels in the late 1960s to glimpse Bill Buckley’s familiar visage on, of all shows, “Laugh-In.”

“Mr. Buckley,” he was asked. “I notice that on your own program [*Firing Line*] you’re always sitting down. Is this because you can’t think on your feet?”

Said Buckley: “It is hard...to stand up... under the weight...of all that I know.”

After the laughter subsided, there persisted the faint tincture of self-mockery, Bill poking fun at his own image as a Renaissance man—an image that toastmasters reinforced from coast to coast, with knowing references to the harpsichord, the New York mayoral race, the yachting, the novels.

A Renaissance man. The term conjures notions of intellectual agility, effortless competence, grace, worldly wisdom, and

savoir faire. And Bill Buckley was certainly all of that. But listen to Buckley himself, in a 1986 speech, define the Renaissance man:

He is not the man who, with aplomb, can fault the Béarnaise sauce at Maxim’s before attending a concert at which



In service to those great, unthreatened truths

he detects a musical solecism, returning to write an imperishable sonnet, before preparing a lecture on civics that the next day will enthrall an auditorium. No: the Renaissance man is, I think, someone who bows his head before the great unthreatened truths and, while admitting and even encouraging all advances in science, nevertheless knows enough to know that the computer does not now exist, nor ever shall, that has the power to repeal the basic formulas of civilization.

It is in service to those great unthreatened truths—to the unseen things that do not die—that Bill Buckley strove mightily and well against the paltry preoccupations of his own time.

E. Victor Milione

I have looked up to, and learned from, Vic Milione since the age of twenty-two. He was my first boss, and he set such high standards for what to expect in a boss that



A champion of the Permanent Things

I have been choosy about my bosses ever since. In fact, the only bosses I've ever had have been Vic, Ronald Reagan, Ed Meese, and the ISI Board of Trustees. Even in that company, Vic stood out for his sure and certain expectations, coupled with gentle reassurance and understanding of human failings.

Vic's public impact was in the world of ideas, but that was only one side of Vic. On what he knew to be the more important side, there was Mali, the love of his life, and his devoted son Lou, Lou's family—and Vic's best friend over a lifetime, Charles Hoefflich [an ISI charter trustee and its former chairman]. Vic never let disputes about abstract ideas confuse him about what was most important to the human heart.

Still, it was in the world of ideas that Vic made his career; it was for the world of ideas that he crafted his beloved ISI. Since his passing in February, I have been looking over the essays he published from time to time over the years, and I have

been noting the authors he characteristically quoted. They can be grouped into a few categories that point to the heart of Vic's deepest concerns. First, there is the American experience—such writers as Tocqueville, Lord Bryce, and the authors of the *Federalist Papers*. Then there is the mission of a university—Cardinal Newman, Christopher Dawson, Jacques Barzun, and Mark van Doren. There is also the matter of faith and unbelief—Max Picard and C. S. Lewis pre-eminently. And finally there are writers addressing the crisis of the twentieth century—Sorokin, Ortega y Gasset, and Richard Weaver, among others. Behind the totalitarian threat of Soviet communism that loomed over the century just past, behind the “revolution of nihilism” that convulsed the world in the Second World War, lay a deeper and more pervading problem in modern times that could only be addressed at the level of ideas. It was a problem of forgetting: of *forgetting* the foundations of the achievement that is the West.

As he saw it, the central task of our time was therefore one of *enculturation*—a term he took from the historian Christopher Dawson. Tocqueville had seen that under the conditions of modernity, “every fresh generation is a new people.” In that fact lies the promise of progress—but there is also a great and usually unrecognized peril. The young have always been given to hubris, failing to recognize the debts they owe and so falling into ingratitude. But the progressive tendencies of modern times fan this hubris to a white heat—and at length, the ideologues proclaim that piety toward the received inheritance of Western civilization is a superseded virtue, perhaps even a retrograde vice.

Here, then, was the central insight behind Vic's work. If the great tradition of the West is to continue, there must be a nurturing of the timeless principles that

undergird our civilization among those who will be coming on the scene. In the absence of continuity, “No generation could link with another. Men would become little better than [Burke’s] flies of summer.” Lacking a firm grounding in our heritage, the young would be prey to every fleeting enthusiasm and every totalitarian promise.

This question of enculturation—the transmission of our inherited culture from one generation to the next—is the question which animated Vic’s every tactic. Unlike many organizations with a point of view, ISI eschews the current battles in politics and public policy and instead focuses on securing the allegiance of the new generation to the values of America and the West. Vic quoted Will Herberg to the effect that, “Politics is important, even partisan politics, but beyond politics, there is political philosophy, and beyond that, there is the philosophy that has always preoccupied the best minds of the West and that plumbs the deepest depths of being and of human being in history.” So, as important as politics are, that was never Vic’s ultimate concern.

He was concerned, rather, with encouraging new generations of students to learn, better than their fathers, the lesson that our own great heritage must not be taken for granted. This heritage must be studied, understood, nurtured, and transmitted.

But how to transform this insight into a living, breathing institution, one that could reach significant numbers over long periods? For one thing, Vic was convinced that the early conservative movement’s concentration on economic education had to be broadened to all the humane studies. From such breadth, worldviews are formed which can either affirm or utterly sweep away arguments of economic efficiency.

For another, Vic saw that for every means of doing damage commanded by

the academy, ISI must have a constructive alternative for the student discerning enough to know that something is missing. If ISI was denied schools, it could have summer schools. If the classroom was out of reach, there was the independent lecture and the seminar. If ISI could not assign texts, it could make available alternative libraries of books and journals via the mails. In short, Vic brought to ISI an insistence on intellectual breadth and variety, so that the essential needs of the rising young scholar could be met.

In the plentitude of intellectual resources that Vic made available through ISI, one thing he refused to provide was a creed, a doctrine, or any other ideological party line. Vic has not so much propounded answers as he has urged that the young honestly confront the perennial questions of the human condition:

- What is man’s relation to the Divine?
- What is worthy of duty?
- What do the lives of great men teach us of the noble and of the base?
- How does the sweep of human experience inform the tension between liberty and order?
- What does history teach us about the rise of civilizations and about their decline?

Vic counseled us to seek answers to these enduring questions, not through introspection, but by immersing ourselves in the best that has been thought and written. Through his beloved ISI, he helped the best of the new generations acquire the hard-won wisdom of their fathers and translate that wisdom into the lexicon of

their own time in history. As Whittaker Chambers wrote in the last line of his last letter to Bill Buckley, “Each age finds its own language for an eternal meaning.”

Vic had always wanted ISI to have its own campus, and he lived to see us move in to the handsome Georgian buildings in Wilmington. But when ISI’s bricks and mortar are a rubble, when all of us here

this afternoon have resolved ourselves into a dew, the legacy of Vic Milione will live on. Because one day in 1953 he picked up the gauntlet and became a champion of the Permanent Things. In introducing countless thousands of young people to the Timeless Verities, he has written upon eternity.