

FEATURE ESSAY

The Great Debate: James Baldwin, William F. Buckley, Jr., and the Civil Rights Revolution

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Abstract

Born in New York City only fifteen months apart, the Harlem-raised James Baldwin and the privileged William F. Buckley, Jr. could not have been more different, but they both rose to the height of American intellectual life during the civil rights movement. By the time they met in February 1965 to debate race and the American Dream at the Cambridge Union, Buckley—a founding father of the American conservative movement—was determined to sound the alarm about a man he considered an “eloquent menace.” For his part, Baldwin viewed Buckley as a deluded reactionary whose popularity revealed the sickness of the American soul. The stage was set for an epic confrontation that pitted Baldwin’s call for a moral revolution in race relations against Buckley’s unabashed elitism and implicit commitment to white supremacy. In this article I introduce readers to the story at the heart of my new book about Baldwin and Buckley, *The Fire Is Upon Us*.

Keywords: James Baldwin, William F. Buckley, Jr., the American Dream, Cambridge Debate

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On the evening of 18 February 1965, the Cambridge Union—the world’s oldest and most prestigious debating society—was abuzz with excitement. More than 700 students and guests of the Union packed into the debating hall, which was modeled after the British House of Commons. Attendees filled every spot on the benches and in the galleries and still more sat in the aisles and on floors throughout the space. More than 500 additional people crammed into other rooms on the Union premises, to which the proceedings would be broadcast by the B.B.C. on closed circuit televisions.

Why were all of these people packed into the 150-year-old debating society that night? The primary reason they were there was to see James Baldwin, the world-famous writer who was aptly described by Malcolm X as “the poet of the civil rights revolution.”¹ By this, Malcolm meant that Baldwin was the leading writer associated with the movement that was—at that very moment—in the midst of transforming the country. In his novels, plays, essays, and speeches, Baldwin plumbed the depths of the human soul and strived to give his readers a sense of what it might be like to view the world through the eyes of others. In order to make sense of the struggle for civil rights and the backlash against it, Baldwin insisted, we must come to terms with fundamental questions about identity, morality, and power.

Baldwin’s presence alone might have been enough to pack the Union that night, but attendees were also intrigued by the prospect of seeing Baldwin participate in a debate. The motion before the House that night was “The American Dream is at the expense of the American Negro,” and Union officials had arranged for Baldwin to square off with an opponent tailor-made for the role: William F. Buckley, Jr. The mostly British audience was not as familiar with Buckley, but rumor had it that he was a founding father of the American conservative movement, a skilled debater, and one of the country’s leading opponents of civil rights. The stage was set for an intellectual prizefight for the ages.

On the same night Baldwin and Buckley would square off in Cambridge, a group of civil rights protesters gathered at their church in Marion, Alabama, just outside of Selma. These protesters were among the thousands of Americans who had mobilized in an effort to secure voting rights in the South. On 18 February, the activists in Marion had planned to march from their church to the jail where one of their leaders was incarcerated for civil rights agitation. They knew that Alabama law enforcement officers would not allow them to complete their march that night, so they formulated a plan to kneel and pray when they were confronted by police, after which they would return to their church. Upon kneeling to pray, though, the activists were assaulted by the police—who also attacked journalists there to cover the march—and one of their number, a 26-year-old church deacon named Jimmie Lee Jackson, was mortally wounded by officers.

The fact that the epic Baldwin–Buckley debate occurred on the same night as the Marion protest captures what my new book, *The Fire Is Upon Us*, is about.² The debate itself constitutes two climactic chapters in the story, but the book is about far more than what happened on that fateful night in February. Baldwin (b. 1924) and Buckley (b. 1925) were almost exact contemporaries and *The Fire Is Upon Us* weaves the stories of their lives against the backdrop of the rise of the civil rights and conservative movements they did so much, respectively, to shape. Baldwin and Buckley turn out to be the perfect vehicles to tell the story of the struggle to achieve racial justice in the United States. As the civil rights and conservative movements rose, Baldwin and Buckley were at the eye of the storm, and their prolific writings—both published works and unpublished correspondence—give us a glimpse into their minds on practically every day of this dramatic history. The story is enriched by the fact that both Baldwin and Buckley lived active and

interesting lives; this is not a story of two men at their respective typewriters. Instead, it is a story filled with their dramatic encounters with a wide array of characters who dominated the political and cultural landscape, including the Kennedy brothers, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Lorraine Hansberry, George Wallace, Barry Goldwater, Medgar Evers, Elijah Muhammad, and the leaders of extremist groups such as the White Citizens' Council and the John Birch Society. Through their writings, we are there with them as they think through the major events of the era, including the Montgomery bus boycott, massive resistance to school desegregation, the Little Rock crisis, the rise of the Nation of Islam, the sit-in protests, the Freedom Rides, the Battle at Ole Miss, the rise of the John Birch Society, the election of John F. Kennedy, the Birmingham campaign, the March on Washington, the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Johnson–Goldwater campaign, and the assassinations of Medgar Evers, John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr. In sum, this is an epic story of the clash of two of the most important movements of the twentieth century, told by way of two of the champions of each movement. *The Fire Is Upon Us* tells a story worth telling for its own sake, but it is also a story that is as urgent as ever. Today, I would like to give you a sense of that story and why I think it is so relevant to our times.

The Ghetto and the Mansion: Baldwin and Buckley Growing Up

James Baldwin and William F. Buckley, Jr. were born in the same city only fifteen months apart from each other, but they may as well have been born on different planets. Baldwin describes his childhood in the Harlem of the 1920s and 1930s as one marked by claustrophobia, domination, and despair. In order to capture a sense of the sort of claustrophobia he felt inside his family's home he asks his readers to imagine what it might feel like to sleep in a bed occupied by up to six of your siblings. Life on "the Avenue" in Harlem was also marked by a sense of claustrophobia because the world told Baldwin in no uncertain terms that he had better not venture out beyond the borders of "the ghetto." Within that space, Baldwin said that his life was dominated by "the millions of details of every day that communicated to him that he was a worthless human being."³ Some of these experiences of domination could be linked to a human face—the police officers, the landlords, the shopkeepers, and so on—but he also described the feeling of being dominated by the faceless, deeply cruel structures of power that limited the freedom and opportunity of himself and his neighbors. Baldwin said that in this context the defining fact of the lives of his parents was that they struggled to keep their children alive.

It is not surprising that this context led Baldwin's stepfather, David, to be consumed by despair. From his son's perspective, David had come to believe what the white world said about him and this led him to hate himself and treat all of those around him with great cruelty. David would eventually succumb to this despair and die in a mental institution in 1943. As a young man, Baldwin set out to avoid the fate of his father. The "lever" or the "handle" he would hold onto in order to avoid falling

into the pit of despair was language.⁴ Through words—through reading, writing, and preaching in Harlem’s storefront churches—Baldwin would make sense of his experience and think through how he might find freedom and fulfillment in the world.

It is difficult to imagine a childhood more different from Baldwin’s than the one lived by William F. Buckley, Jr. Buckley was born to immense wealth and privilege. His mother came from “old money” in New Orleans and his Texan father was awash in “new money” as a result of his real estate and oil investments. With this wealth, Buckley’s parents acquired a 47-acre estate in Sharon, Connecticut, and provided their ten children with lives filled with servants, in-home tutors, world travel, and other luxuries that are the stuff of dreams for most people. While Baldwin identified claustrophobia as a defining feature of his childhood, Buckley identified seemingly limitless space as a defining feature of his. Whether it be exploring the many rooms of his family’s mansion or frolicking in the grounds of one of his family’s estates, Buckley felt a great sense of freedom and opportunity to do just about anything under the sun.

With their immense wealth, Buckley’s parents provided their children with a robust education right there in the family home. The children studied every conceivable subject with the goal, in the words of one of Buckley’s sisters, of making them “absolutely perfect in every way.”⁵ Most importantly, the Buckley children were taught a distinctive worldview. One pillar of that worldview was a conservative brand of Catholicism and the other pillar was a political doctrine the family called “individualism,” a catch-all term meant to capture their hostility to any form of “collectivism,” such as communism, socialism, and the New Deal policies of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The Buckley children were also taught to be suspicious of democracy. Some people are fit *to rule*, the children were taught, and others were fit *to be ruled*. This belief in hierarchy was thoroughly racialized in the Buckley household, where the children were taught to believe in a philosophy of white supremacy that was infused with a sense of *noblesse oblige*. White people are superior, they were taught, but this superiority came with a sense of obligation to take care of their inferiors, especially those who were loyal.

Disturbing the Peace: Buckley and Baldwin Arrive on the Intellectual Scene

Buckley did not set out to *become* his father, but he did set as his mission in life to use his gifts as a writer and speaker to defend his father’s worldview. Buckley set out to do that first at Millbrook Prep School, then during a brief stint in the U.S. Army, and finally as an undergraduate at Yale, where he was a formal debater and editor-in-chief—or chairman—of the *Yale Daily News*. In his public speeches and editorials, Buckley expressed his conservative views on international, national, and campus politics. Most provocatively, Buckley editorialized against the views of Yale professors, who he thought brought a liberal bias into their classrooms. Soon after graduating from Yale, Buckley published a book-length indictment of his alma mater. In *God and Man at Yale* (1951), Buckley called for an end to the

“superstition” of academic freedom by way of alumni and boards of trustees exerting power over the faculty whom universities hired and fired and what was being taught.⁶ If that wasn’t controversial enough, Buckley devoted his second book, *McCarthy and His Enemies* (1954), co-authored with his brother-in-law L. Brent Bozell, to defending Senator Joseph McCarthy, who was spearheading the latest “Red scare.” Buckley conceded that McCarthy was an imperfect instrument in the anticommunist fight, but he insisted that his cause was just. McCarthy was engaged in the all-important work of enforcing a “public orthodoxy,” which, for Buckley, most definitely did not include toleration of communism.⁷

While Buckley was making waves on the American scene with his calls for greater orthodoxy on college campuses and in the society writ large, Baldwin was establishing himself as an estimable literary provocateur. In his literary criticism, fiction, and essays, he was setting out to determine what it meant to be “an honest man and a good writer.”⁸ By 1948, Baldwin was so fed up with American racism that he decided he must leave the country for Paris in order to survive. Baldwin also realized that leaving the United States would be necessary in order for him to write about the country. In 1953, Baldwin published *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, an autobiographical novel about a family attempting to survive the American racial nightmare and find meaning in their lives and relationships. A few years later, Baldwin completed his second novel, *Giovanni’s Room*, which was the story of a love affair between a wayward white American, David, and an Italian bartender named Giovanni. Many of the same people who worked with Baldwin on *Go Tell It* refused to work with him on *Giovanni’s Room* because of the fact that the second novel told the story of a gay love affair.

Baldwin insisted that these skeptics were missing the point. There was little doubt that *Go Tell It* and *Giovanni’s Room* contained deep insights into the roots of racism and homophobia, but these books were not—at their core—*about* race and sex. Instead, Baldwin said these novels and most of the nonfiction writing he was doing in this period were focused on something deeper. That something was “the question of identity.” Who do we take ourselves to be and how does our conception of identity lead us to treat other people? As Baldwin reflected on these questions through his characters and his nonfiction subjects, he concluded that we are usually in a state of identity crisis because we lack the courage to come to terms with who we really are. We avoid this confrontation with our true selves because we are scared. Our fear leads us to delude ourselves and wrap ourselves in false identities that we think might make us feel safe. Alas, this strategy only deepens our trouble as we get caught in a web of “social paranoia”—we rely on status to make ourselves feel superior to others, but we are always haunted by the fact that someone, somewhere has reason to feel superior to us.

“The Claims of Civilization”: Buckley Confronts Black Liberation

In the mid-1950s, Buckley played a crucial role in the creation of the conservative movement in the United States by founding *National Review* magazine. Buckley

recognized that magazines such as *The Nation* and *The New Republic* had played crucial roles in the creation and flourishing of the progressive movement in the first half of the twentieth century and he was hopeful that *National Review* might play a similar role for the American right in the second half of the century. His hope was that the magazine could serve as a vehicle to build a coalition of libertarians and traditionalists who disagreed on a number of issues but were united in their disdain for communism and liberalism. Buckley hoped to play the role of “editor of conservatism,” deciding which intellectuals and politicians would be part of the new conservative movement and who would be left out in the ideological wilds.⁹ And so he did.

Buckley played an outsized role in the shaping of the conservative movement, and given the timing of *National Review*'s founding—with the build-up occurring in 1954 and the launch occurring in late 1955—his role was especially important in shaping how the American right would respond to the civil rights movement. In 1954, the Supreme Court handed down its landmark *Brown v. Board* school desegregation decision, which was met with an intense white backlash from segregationist elites as well as white supremacist terrorist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan and the White Citizens' Councils. The following year witnessed the lynching of Emmett Till, the arrest of Rosa Parks, the rise to national prominence of a 26-year-old Baptist minister named Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Montgomery bus boycott. In the face of this changing landscape, Buckley made a fateful decision that has reverberations down to us today. *National Review*, which would establish itself in short order as the most important conservative journal of opinion in the country, was deeply opposed to any federal intervention to challenge segregation, was consistently skeptical of King and other nonviolent protesters, was explicitly opposed to any meaningful civil rights legislation (including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965), and was supportive of numerous segregationist politicians, organizations, and policies. Buckley and his colleagues sometimes disagreed at the margins about how Black liberation ought to be resisted, but they were in near-uniform agreement that it must be resisted in one way or another.

Ten years after the founding of *National Review*, Buckley said that his goal for the magazine on the question of civil rights had been for it to be “extremely articulate” and “non-racist,” but not “attempting a dogmatic racial egalitarianism either.”¹⁰ Buckley relied on a stable of segregationist writers—including James Jackson Kilpatrick, Richard Weaver, Anthony Harrigan, Forrest Davis, and Sam M. Jones—to rationalize resistance to Black liberation in the pages of the magazine. Weaver, a Southerner who taught rhetoric at the University of Chicago, provided a philosophical defense of everything Buckley's mother ever taught him about race. Yes, Weaver conceded, the “regime of the South” was premised on racial hierarchy, but it was a benevolent hierarchy that provided all people—high and low—with a sense of their place and a sense of their obligations to each other.¹¹ Figures like Jones and Davis celebrated the “statesmen” in the South who were interposing themselves between the federal law and the segregationist way of life. Jones went so far as to call the Buckley family friend Strom Thurmond “a latter-day Patrick Henry” in the

pages of *National Review*. And Kilpatrick was really Buckley's "go-to-guy" on race and civil rights. Wherever the hottest battle was in the war over racial equality—from Little Rock in 1957 to the debate over the Voting Rights Act in 1965—Buckley relied on Kilpatrick to offer *National Review*'s signature response, which was usually a mixture of Weaver-like "traditionalism" and quasi-sophisticated jurisprudential defenses of "states' rights" ideology.

Buckley mostly relied on this stable of writers to offer "nonracist" but not dogmatically racially egalitarian arguments against civil rights, but he also made his own thinking clear in a series of pieces on the subject, most infamously in a 1957 essay called "Why the South Must Prevail."¹² The proximate cause for the piece was the debate over the Civil Rights Act of 1957, a piece of legislation that was principally concerned with securing Black voting rights in the South. It is a piece of legislation we seldom talk about anymore because it was hollowed out of just about any meaning by Southern segregationists like Thurmond and their allies. One of the primary ways the legislation was effectively stripped was through the inclusion of a clause that said any claims of civil rights violations under the Act would be considered by juries, not by federal judges. Thurmond and his allies knew full well that no Southern jury would ever convict any official of violating the rights of an African American. The clause was, in effect, an endorsement of jury nullification: juries would be empowered to interpose themselves between the federal law and Southern officials who flagrantly violated it.

Buckley wrote "Why the South Must Prevail" in order to defend this jury nullification clause. In his defense, he rehashed many of the arguments that had been made by his stable of segregationist writers, but he also provided an explanation of what he took to be the heart of the matter. The white South, Buckley concluded, was entitled to do whatever it deemed necessary to resist Black liberation because it was, "for the time being, the advanced race." As the "advanced race," it had one duty that was superior to all others: it must act to protect "civilization" from those who would destroy it. Buckley explicitly rejected the idea that the matter ought to be resolved by way of consulting the "catalogue of the rights of American citizens, born Equal." Damn your "rights," Buckley seemed to be saying, "civilization" trumps all.¹³

In the next issue of *National Review*, associate editor L. Brent Bozell took Buckley to task for "Why the South Must Prevail." Bozell, it should be noted, was no friend of civil rights. He was deeply opposed to the *Brown v. Board* school desegregation decision and he was supportive of "massive resistance" to it. But Bozell was also a lawyer and he called Buckley out for being so quick to disregard the rule of law. We conservatives, Bozell argued, are supposed to care about the rule of law and there was a law at stake in this instance: the Fifteenth Amendment, which protects the right to vote. Buckley might not like the Civil Rights Act of 1957, Bozell concluded, but he should care enough about the Constitution to oppose any attempt to undermine it through jury nullification.¹⁴

Buckley's response to Bozell—in the same issue in which he was criticized—is telling. In addition to rehashing many of the arguments he made previously, Buckley wrote two things that are especially noteworthy. First, he cast doubt on whether

the Fifteenth Amendment—as a “Civil War Amendment”—really had the same legitimacy as the rest of the Constitution. These amendments, he said, were viewed by much of the South as “inorganic accretions” on the original document that were “grafted” on by “victors-at-war.”¹⁵ One has to wonder, then, where this leaves the legitimacy of the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery. Buckley did not say, but his logic points in a troubling direction. Second, Buckley suggested that the South might free itself from the charge of racism not by enfranchising Black people, but rather by disenfranchising more white people. Perhaps the South ought to adopt more “color-blind” policies of disenfranchisement that would have the effect of keeping many Black people from voting but would also have the effect of keeping uneducated whites from the polls.¹⁶

What Had These Eyes Seen Lately? Baldwin as a Witness to Black Liberation

Right at the very moment when Buckley and his colleagues were working out the finer points of how civil rights ought to be resisted, Baldwin was staring into the eyes of a 15-year-old boy, who was the first African-American student to attend a previously all-white school in Charlotte, North Carolina. Baldwin wanted to know what the world looked like through this young man’s eyes, which “not only spoke, but registered volumes.”¹⁷ What had this boy’s eyes seen lately? He had seen a barricade of white students assembled to keep him out of school. He had seen classmates intent on physically assaulting him. He had seen the twisted faces of peers hurling insults his way. He had seen his parents threatened with physical violence and economic ruin because they dared apply for the school integration program. Baldwin wanted to know what it was like for this young man to confront “what must surely have been the worst moment of his day—the morning, when he opened his eyes and realized that it was all to be gone through again.”¹⁸

Baldwin was also curious about what the world looked like through the eyes of this young man’s mother. As the oldest of nine siblings, Baldwin often felt himself to be in a quasi-parental role and he was intrigued—and haunted—by what the world looked like through the eyes of a parent at the margins of society. This young man’s mother was one of only a few dozen Black parents—in a city with 50,000 Black people—who even dared apply for this school integration program. Baldwin wanted to know what gave her the courage and the audacity to take this step. As one thinks about Baldwin’s engagement with this mother, one cannot help but recall Baldwin’s powerful reflections on his father’s funeral in Harlem in 1943. In that moment, which he described so vividly in “Notes of a Native Son,” Baldwin found himself looking around the church at the Black parents, wondering how they confronted “the impossibility”: “how to prepare the child for the day when the child would be despised and how to *create* for the child—by what means?—a stronger antidote to this poison than one had found for oneself.”¹⁹ Baldwin concluded that this was just what this mother was trying to do: to provide her son with a quality education, which she hoped might be an antidote to the poison of white supremacy.²⁰

After speaking with this young man and his mother, Baldwin made his way to the young man's school so he could speak with the white principal. Baldwin found the young principal to be a "gentle" and even "honorable" human being, but he was also struck by the fact that the man was still trapped in the delusion of white supremacy. He did not seem to have any hatred in his heart for the young man, but he was unable—really—to appreciate his full humanity. As Baldwin went back and forth with the principal, he found himself far less interested in what the man thought of *Brown v. Board* or the local school integration program. Instead, Baldwin found himself wanting to try to get a sense of what the world looked like through his eyes. "I should think that the trouble in this situation," Baldwin said to the principal, "is that it's very hard for *you* to face a child and treat him unjustly because of something for which he is no more responsible than—than *you* are."²¹ Baldwin said that with these words, the principal's "eyes came to life" and they were filled with "anguish" and "bewilderment." This, Baldwin concluded, was "the impossibility which he faced every day."²² Baldwin's use of "the impossibility"—the phrase he had used when he reflected on what confronted those Harlem parents in 1943—is remarkable. There was something about the situation before those parents and the situation before this principal that seemed beyond the capacity of human beings to overcome. And yet one must persist. One is reminded of the ideas Baldwin used to conclude "Notes of a Native Son": "injustice is a commonplace" and is likely to remain so, but "one must never, in one's own life, accept these injustices as commonplace but must fight them with all one's strength."²³

The Clash Before the Clash: Baldwin and Buckley at the Eye of the Storm

In the early 1960s, Baldwin and Buckley were firmly entrenched on the American intellectual and political scene. In addition to *National Review*, Buckley began publishing a syndicated newspaper column thrice weekly, appearing as a guest on radio and television programs as a conservative talking head, and touring the country to lecture and debate any liberal or radical who came into his path. Baldwin, for his part, was a fixture in the New York intellectual community and his works were appearing in increasingly high-profile publications such as the *New York Times* and *Esquire*. But Baldwin's biggest splash came in late 1962, when he published a 20,000-word essay called "Letter from a Region in My Mind" in *The New Yorker*. The essay proved to be a literary event of the highest order and it shot Baldwin's already rising star to international fame. In early 1963, the essay would be published along with one other piece as the book *The Fire Next Time*, which was on the bestseller charts for 41 weeks. He embarked on a lecture tour on behalf of civil rights organizations, and by mid-1963, he was second only to King as "the face" associated with the movement.

In the years leading up to their Cambridge debate, Baldwin and Buckley were engaged in both implicit and explicit intellectual combat. In late 1962, for example, Baldwin appeared opposite Buckley's go-to writer on civil rights, James Jackson

Kilpatrick, in a televised debate on segregation. This encounter occurred just after “the Battle at Ole Miss,” when segregationist mobs killed and injured people in an attempt to keep a Black Air Force veteran named James Meredith from enrolling in the University of Mississippi. When face-to-face with Kilpatrick, Baldwin accused him of bearing far more responsibility for such violence than those who actually perpetrated it. Many of the people in these racist mobs, he insisted, were caught in webs of delusion they did not really understand. Kilpatrick and his allies, Baldwin declared, were responsible for weaving these webs and they did so for one reason and one reason only: they were concerned with conserving their own power.

Baldwin said Kilpatrick and his ilk were guilty of two betrayals. First, he was betraying those whites who had been seduced by the idea of white supremacy. Kilpatrick had convinced them to construct identities that completely undermined their moral lives. Second, Baldwin accused Kilpatrick of betraying Western civilization. Kilpatrick had claimed during the course of their conversation that his devotion to white supremacy and apartheid were rooted in his desire to conserve Western civilization, something he believed white people were best positioned to do. But in fact, Baldwin insisted, Kilpatrick was undermining everything that was good in Western civilization. Kilpatrick was claiming to care about the Judeo-Christian tradition, but how could he square his positions with the idea that each human being was created in the image of God? Kilpatrick claimed to care about the Constitution of the United States, but what had he done lately to secure the “blessings of liberty” or the “equal protection of the laws” for his fellow citizens?²⁴

It was also in these years that Baldwin found himself occasionally doing battle with those closer to him politically. In mid-1963, for example, Baldwin, Lorraine Hansberry, and several other artists, intellectuals, and activists met with Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy in order to push the administration to take more decisive action on civil rights. In these exchanges, Baldwin and Hansberry called on the Kennedy brothers to declare the civil rights struggle to be a *moral* one and to communicate to the country that anyone willing to spit on a Black child walking to school was also spitting on the President and the Constitution of the United States. Baldwin’s clash with Kennedy was a dramatic manifestation of his misgivings about the role of many “white liberals” in the civil rights struggle. Although many liberals had some of the right attitudes about race matters, they failed all too often to demonstrate the sort of moral commitment necessary to bring about justice.

While Baldwin was squaring off in person and in print with Kilpatrick and others who were impeding the liberation of the country, Buckley was keeping a close eye on Baldwin and doing all he could to warn the country to resist the ideas of this “eloquent menace” and everything he represented. In addition to criticizing Baldwin’s ideas, Buckley opposed many of the civil rights actions Baldwin supported, including the Birmingham campaign and the March on Washington. In these years, we see Buckley’s racial politics adapting to new circumstances. As he lost many battles—over the Civil Rights Act of 1964, for example—he realized that the key to conservative ascendancy would be to harness the “political energy” of “the white backlash” to Black liberation.²⁵ This slightly more subtle racial politics

scrapped outright defenses of segregation and white supremacy in favor of more targeted attacks on policies that even moderates believed were a step too far, such as busing to achieve greater racial balance in schools and fair housing laws that might integrate the suburbs.²⁶

The Clash at Cambridge

Thanks to the ingenuity and persistence of a British publicist with Corgi Books, Bill Kolins, and a small group of undergraduates, the Baldwin–Buckley clash at Cambridge was arranged for 18 February 1965. As the civil rights movement reached its apex, Baldwin had reached the peak of his literary fame and Buckley had established himself as the chief polemicist of the American right. On the night in question, the motion before the House was: “The American Dream is at the expense of the American Negro.” Two student debaters—one on each side—spoke, before Baldwin was invited to address the House. It was Baldwin’s first time participating in formal debate and he delivered a speech unlike anything the students had ever heard. Rather than delivering a traditional Union speech, which is some combination of intellectual exercise and jocular performance art, Baldwin—forever the preacher—delivered a sermon about the perils of white supremacy for both “the subjugated” and “the subjugators.” For the subjugated, the doctrine of white supremacy leads to “the millions of details of every day” that communicate to you that your life does not quite matter as much as the lives of others, and you are haunted by the fact that you cannot feel much confidence that the lives of the next generation will be better than your own. For the subjugators—the would-be beneficiaries of white supremacy—the picture is no more promising. Many people who imagine themselves to be white are in thrall to the delusion that their value and role in the world is inextricably bound to the color of their skin. The “moral lives” of these people, Baldwin told the students, have been “destroyed by the plague called color.”

After Baldwin delivered his speech, he received a standing ovation, a very rare thing in the Union, and Buckley was called to speak. Buckley said he recognized that it was not going to be “his night,” but he refused to concede much of anything to Baldwin’s side. Baldwin, he warned the elite British students, was hellbent on overthrowing Western civilization and he was offering them a philosophy of despair that was dangerous to those he claimed to want to help. Buckley called on Baldwin to stop complaining and start using his platform to encourage “the Negro community” to take advantage of the opportunities that already existed. After Buckley sat down and a few students delivered short speeches on each side, the members of the Union voted. Baldwin’s side was triumphant by a vote of 544 to 164.²⁷

The Aftermath

The day after his triumph in Cambridge, Baldwin heard about the violence in Marion, Alabama, that would lead to the death of Jimmie Lee Jackson. Two days

after that, he received word that his friend Malcolm X had been assassinated. And two weeks further on, the U.S. would witness “Bloody Sunday,” a vicious attack on civil rights marchers fighting for voting rights in Alabama. Meanwhile, Buckley was busy explaining away his loss in Cambridge as an “orgy of anti-Americanism,” rather than a meaningful exchange of ideas. Buckley would say later that he had never lost a debate by such a wide margin, but it was the debate about which he had the most pride because he refused to “give them one goddam inch.”²⁸ A few weeks later, Buckley would get his chance to avenge his defeat at Baldwin’s hands. One of the kings of American television, David Susskind, invited Baldwin and Buckley onto his show, *Open End*, to engage each other once more. When they did, Buckley got the better of Baldwin by getting under his skin in a way that led Baldwin (“to my eternal dishonor,” he would say later) to “tune out.” The *Open End* exchange led Baldwin to conclude that Buckley was a bully who was unwilling to listen and, if he had it to do all over again, he would have hit Buckley over the head with his coffee cup.²⁹ This joke contained a deadly serious point at its core. In Cambridge, Baldwin had said that what “concerns me most” is that we will become so unwilling to listen to each other that the very authority of reasoned discourse will break down. Where reason ends, war begins.³⁰

Just a few days after their *Open End* encounter, Buckley would launch a third-party bid for the mayoralty of New York. His bid was never serious in electoral terms, but it could not have been more serious in ideological terms. In one of the great ironies of American political history, Buckley—one of the most *elitist* figures on the scene—ran a *populist* campaign that was fueled by racial resentment at every turn. In the end, what was most interesting about Buckley’s bid was not how many votes he received, but rather *who* cast their vote in his favor. Buckley did not receive support from upper-crust elites like himself. Instead, he received the support of working-class whites from New York’s outer boroughs.

Buckley’s mayoral campaign brings into relief the enduring relevance of this story. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Buckley worked hard to promote an intellectually serious conservative case against civil rights. Although he lost many battles in this period, his political instincts helped the right win an ideological war that would contribute to conservative ascendancy in the decades that followed. Racial resentment was an invaluable political resource and Buckley encouraged conservatives to take advantage of it at every turn. The consequences of the politics of racial resentment are felt in the millions of details of every day that communicate to so many of our fellows that their lives do not matter quite as much.

The story of Buckley’s role in the promotion of the politics of racial resentment is worth telling in itself, but telling it through the lens of Baldwin is all the more powerful. Baldwin’s point of view is unlike any other in American political thought. He helps us see—from the inside—what the world might look through the eyes of those at the margins and he displays an almost superhuman empathy for those caught in the grip of delusions like white supremacy. Baldwin was, at his core, an existential detective, who masterfully used his fictional characters and the subjects of his nonfiction writing to help us make sense of fundamental questions

of identity and how we ought to live. Through Baldwin's eyes, we are able to see that the price of power for Buckley and the American right has been a deal with devil of white supremacy. By the end of this story, Baldwin is there to ask Buckley: was it worth it? You may have acquired power, but you have sacrificed the dignity of so many—including yourself—in the process.

But Baldwin's role in this story amounts to more than simply a powerful lens through which to think about Buckley and the rise of the American right. Baldwin also provides us with the beginnings of an answer to the question: what are we to do? In the face of the human conundrum at the root of our trouble—that nexus of identity, morality, and power I described earlier—Baldwin prescribed love. The sort of love Baldwin prescribed, though, was not much like love as it is usually understood. His was not an understanding of love that was sentimental, infantile, or necessarily comforting. Instead, Baldwin insisted that “love is a battle, love is a war. Love is a growing up.”³¹ Baldwin called on all of us to love ourselves enough to engage in ruthless inspection of our own identities. And he also called on us to love one another enough to be willing to confront each other about the delusions under which we live. When we are willing to do this, Baldwin concluded, we do “what lovers do, which is to reveal the beloved to himself, and with that revelation, make freedom real.”³²

Notes

- 1 As quoted in Magdalena J. Zaborowska, *James Baldwin's Turkish Decade: The Erotics of Exile* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2008), p. 260.
- 2 Nicholas Buccola, *The Fire Is Upon Us* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2019).
- 3 Transcript of the Baldwin–Buckley debate at the Cambridge Union, 18 February 1965, in Buccola, *Fire*, p. 381.
- 4 James Baldwin, “The Fire Next Time,” in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1998), p. 299.
- 5 Priscilla L. Buckley and William F. Buckley Jr., *WFB: An Appreciation* (privately published, 1959).
- 6 William F. Buckley, Jr., *God and Man at Yale* (1951) (Washington, D.C., Regenery Publishing, 2001), p. 123.
- 7 The concept of public orthodoxy is explained in Buccola, *Fire*, p. 63.
- 8 James Baldwin, “Autobiographical Notes,” in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, p. 9.
- 9 Susan Currie Sivek, “Editing Conservatism: How *National Review* Magazine Framed and Mobilized a Political Movement,” *Mass Communication and Society*, 11:3 (2008), pp. 247–74.
- 10 As quoted in Buccola, *Fire*, p. 83.
- 11 Richard M. Weaver, “The Regime of the South,” *National Review*, 14 March 1959, pp. 587–9.
- 12 William F. Buckley, Jr., “Why the South Must Prevail,” *National Review*, 24 August 1957, pp. 148–9.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 L. Brent Bozell, “The Open Question,” *National Review*, 7 September 1957, p. 209.
- 15 William F. Buckley, Jr., “A Clarification,” *National Review*, 7 September 1957, p. 199.

- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 James Baldwin, "A Fly in Buttermilk," in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, p. 188.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 James Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son," in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, p. 78.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 192.
- 21 Baldwin, "A Fly in Buttermilk," p. 195.
- 22 *Ibid.*, pp. 195–6.
- 23 Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son," p. 84.
- 24 I discuss Baldwin's encounter with Kilpatrick at greater length in "Don't Do It, Jimmy: James Baldwin and the Duty to Confront Racism," *The Common Reader*, 23 September 2019, <https://commonreader.wustl.edu/c/dont-do-it-jimmy/> (accessed 15 June 2020).
- 25 William F. Buckley, Jr., "The Mess in Mississippi," *National Review*, 23 October 1962, p. 305.
- 26 See extensive discussion of the shifting racial politics of *National Review* in Buccola, *Fire*, pp. 220–3.
- 27 All citations from the Cambridge debate are from the transcript included as an Appendix to Buccola, *Fire*.
- 28 Garry Wills, "Buckley, Buckley, Bow Wow Wow," *Esquire*, January 1968, <http://classic.esquire.com/article/1968/1/1/buckley-buckley-bow-wow-wow> (accessed 12 June 2020).
- 29 C. Robert Jennings, "A Warning for Mr. Charlie," *Los Angeles Times West Magazine*, 7 July 1968, pp. 18–23.
- 30 Buccola, *Fire*, p. 385.
- 31 James Baldwin, "In Search of a Majority," in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, p. 220.
- 32 James Baldwin, "The Creative Process," in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, p. 672.

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