

NATIONAL REVIEW ONLINE

When We Knocked Our Gods

By Jay Nordlinger – October 30, 2013

In a post last night, I spoke of the grief that WFB used to catch from the right, for not being pure enough, or steadfast enough — for abandoning the conservative cause in order to have the approval of the Trilateral Commission, or what have you. I want to say a little bit more in another post.

On his TV show, *Firing Line*, he regularly invited liberals to question him. This happened about once a year, I think. In all the other episodes, *he* did the questioning — but in this special one, liberals questioned *him*. The tables were turned, and these episodes were always interesting.

Over the years, conservative or right-wing dissatisfaction with WFB grew. These critics wanted to do the questioning, on a special episode, and he invited them to do it. They proceeded to tell him what a sellout and disappointment he was.

One of those questioners was Howard Phillips, the chairman of a group called the Conservative Caucus. Phillips, by the way, called Ronald Reagan “a useful idiot for Soviet propaganda.” He was a *real* conservative, Phillips was, no squish. Reagan? Strictly “establishment.”

These days, the three gods of conservatism, I suppose, are Reagan, WFB, and Goldwater. But, man, they caught a lot of grief from the right when they were alive and kicking. Reagan raised taxes, and provided amnesty to illegals, and played footsie with Gorby, and drowned America in debt. Conservatives used to crack, “None of this would be happening if Ronald Reagan were still alive.”

And Goldwater! In his last years, he sounded like Faye Wattleton (a beautiful lady who led an ugly cause — she was the head of Planned Parenthood). (She was also a guest of WFB’s on *Firing Line*, and they had a fine time together, which bothered me some.)

If the Corner had existed in Reagan days, it would have been filled with anger at the president, I assure you. And a good deal of that anger would have been justified (and I would have been one of the angry ones, now and then).

I’ll give you another memory of WFB: Some years ago, one of these right-wingers who hated him wrote a book called “The Tergiversations of William F. Buckley Jr.” I believe I have the title right. The author was trying to kick WFB with a classic WFB word. Bill did not read the book, he told me, but I could see that he was irked by it. “Anti-me,” is how he described the book.

One of the interesting and important things about National Review is that many of us readers feel we have a stake in it. (I call myself a reader because I do far more reading of NR, of course, than I do writing for it. The same goes for the website, needless to say.) We all have our frustrations with this institution from time to time. If it weren’t important, we wouldn’t give a rip.

I'll "share" something with you, as we say in the Oprah culture: I've sometimes muttered about "the creeping libertarianization of National Review." I've also muttered, "Fifteen years ago, I joined NR, and now I find that I'm working for the Cato Institute." I keep reading valentines to Justin Amash. (By the way, it seems that he is being "primaried" by a conservative, and that's a happy development.) I keep hearing soft, semi-admiring things about Edward Snowden, that traitor. In my muttering mode, I say, "The *old* NR would have called for his *execution!*"

Probably, all human beings are subject to nostalgia, and conservatives are probably more subject than most. We remember, or think we remember, an Edenic time — a pure, uncontaminated era, before sin and politics. But it ain't necessarily so (to quote from the greatest of all American operas).

If anyone agrees with a politician — or any other human being — 100 percent of the time, that's a little screwy. Here on the Corner, we often treat John McCain and Mitt Romney worse than we do Barack Obama, Nancy Pelosi, and Karl Marx. That's a little screwy. Our god Goldwater said, "Grow up, conservatives!" A lot of people on our side didn't like that very much, and who could blame them? But the craggy old Westerner had a point. (He wasn't very old at the time — I just remember him that way.)

One thing was written in stone: After WFB's death, our founder would be wielded against those of us working for NR. The Left would say, "Today's NR is extreme and obnoxious. The elegant, erudite WFB must be rolling over in his grave." The Right would say, "Today's NR is soft and establishment. The true-blue, aggressive WFB must be rolling over in his grave." It was written in stone, but it's still bunk.