

# Getting It Wrong

With his latest novel, William F. Buckley continues his effort to rewrite history to his liking, this time targeting the John Birch Society.

by William Norman Grigg

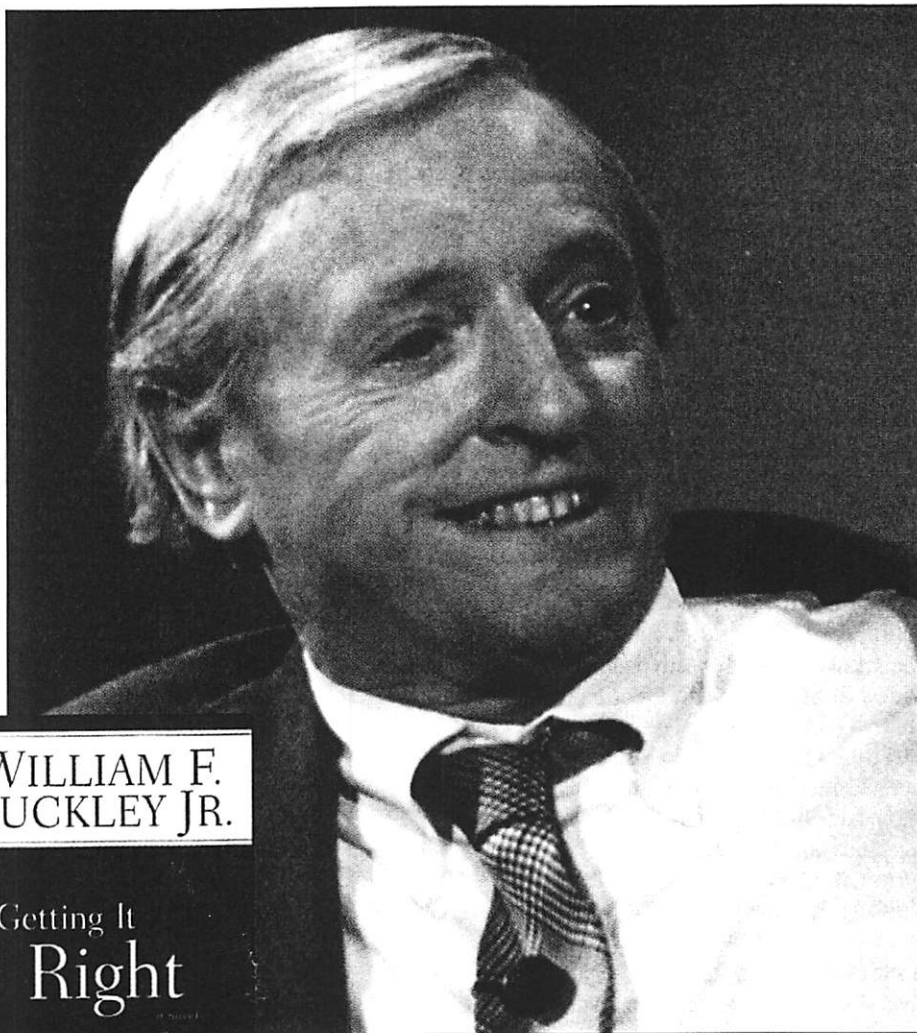
**S**liders, a mid-1990s science fiction TV series, was built on a mildly provocative premise: What if the reality we inhabit branches off into myriad alternative universes? Each would involve a recognizable version of our present world, but as a result of small but critical developments sometime in the past, each alternate reality would differ from the others.

In some cases, the variations were subtle; in others, they were quite dramatic. But in every case the resulting alternate reality shaped up in some way as a caricature of reality as we presently experience it. *Getting It Right*, William F. Buckley's most recent novel, presents a *Sliders*-style depiction of the postwar American conservative movement, particularly that involving the John Birch Society (JBS). In this case, the small but critical distortions of history that created the novel's alternate reality resulted from the author's dishonesty, rather than from some kind of random anomaly in the space-time continuum.

## Faux History

Buckley weaves authentic historical events and characters into a fictional narrative focusing on two young characters — Woodroe Raynor, who joins the JBS shortly after its 1958 founding; and Leonora Goldstein, who enlists in Ayn Rand's Objectivist movement. The personal experiences of Raynor and Goldstein are meant to illustrate the supposedly dangerous trends within the conservative movement during the late 1950s and early 1960s. The novel's climax depicts the "final renunciation of the John Birch Society under Robert Welch," led by Buckley's *National Review* magazine.

Buckley clearly intends his little novel to be read as authentic history. Indeed, he enlisted historian Sam Tanenhaus to provide



WILLIAM F. BUCKLEY JR.

Getting It Right



**Self-serving pseudo-history:** In *Getting It Right*, William F. Buckley casts himself as hero in the effort to "rescue" the 1960s conservative movement. The novel's most significant "villain" is John Birch Society founder Robert Welch.

a cover blurb pronouncing *Getting It Right* "a major contribution to the historiography of postwar American conservatism," particularly the "crisis" triggered by the emergence of "two symmetrical extremist forces depicted vividly here in the characters of Robert Welch and Ayn Rand." According to Tanenhaus, the "unintended interlocking collaboration" between the JBS and Rand-inspired libertarianism "looked for a

time as if it might pitch the Right into permanent oblivion; instead the crisis was met and mastered into a mature, nuanced conservative movement."

The true hero of Buckley's novel, accordingly, is Buckley himself, who makes several brief appearances therein.

*Getting It Right* is the most recent in a series of historical novels by Buckley that began with 1999's *The Redhunter*, a pseudo-

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biography of Senator Joseph McCarthy. The next year Buckley published *Spytime: The Undoing of James Jesus Angleton*, and last year brought *Nuremberg: The Reckoning*. Each of these volumes has added critical details to Buckley’s *Sliders*-style alternate reality.

Although he began his public career defending Senator McCarthy, Buckley used *Redhunter* to defame the senator and misrepresent the historical facts about his investigations.\*

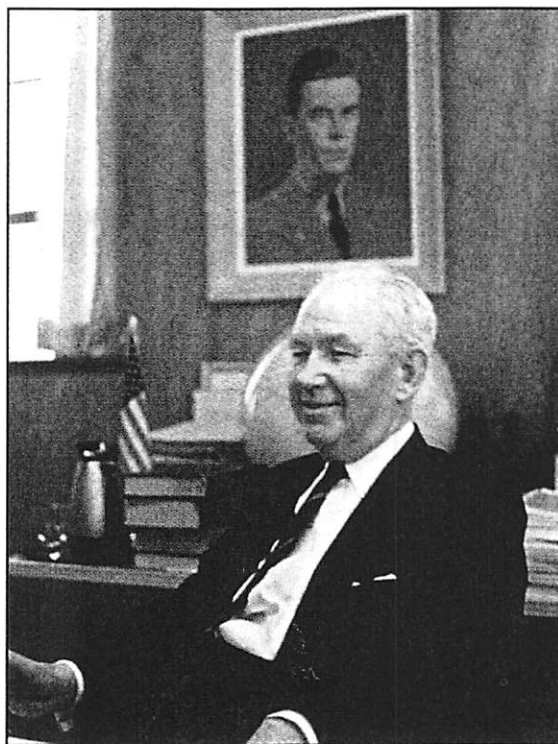
James Angleton, the target in *Spytime*, headed the CIA’s counterintelligence division until he was forced to retire in 1974. Angleton had enraged the Establishment by advocating the views of Soviet KGB defector Anatoliy Golitsyn. After defecting in 1961, Golitsyn warned that the Soviets had insinuated moles into strategic positions in Western intelligence agencies and were engaged in a long-term campaign of “strategic deception” against the West.

In the early 1980s, Golitsyn made a series of uncanny predictions about the advent of Perestroika and subsequent developments in the Soviet Bloc, nearly all of which have come true. The cases of CIA counterintelligence operative Aldrich Ames and FBI counterintelligence agent Robert Hannsen — both of whom were caught spying for the Soviets — further validated Golitsyn’s reliability.

In the mid-1970s, Buckley — a “former” CIA operative trained in “deep cover” operations — was approached by Angleton and asked to ghostwrite a book

on behalf of Golitsyn. Buckley declined the offer, noting that the Soviet defector’s description of the Sino-Soviet split as a strategic ruse “was a sacred principle of the John Birch Society.” In 2000, after Golitsyn’s predictions had come to pass, his warnings about moles in our security organs had been validated, and the Russians and Chinese had become overt collaborators against the U.S., Buckley published *Spytime* in a petty effort to have the last word with the long-dead Angleton.

*Nuremberg* was a defense of the post-World War II Nazi war crimes trials. Sober



**Maligned truth-teller:** In 1965, Robert Welch warned that through the treachery of our leaders, the Vietnam War would become “a larger and longer and more infamous Korea” — a no-win war devouring the irreplaceable lives of our fighting men. Buckley’s novel depicts this accurate prediction as an example of Welch’s supposed extremism.

statesmen and jurists — including Winston Churchill and the liberal Supreme Court Justice William Douglass — condemned the Nuremberg tribunal as an act of “victor’s justice” that would set a troubling precedent. At the time, Ohio Senator Robert A. Taft, recognized as the chief

leader of the pre-*National Review* conservative movement, condemned the tribunal as a reproach to “the Anglo-Saxon heritage” of law. “The trial of the vanquished by the victors cannot be impartial no matter how it is hedged about with the forms of justice,” stated Taft. “I question whether the hanging of those who, however despicable, were the leaders of the German people, will ever discourage the making of aggressive war, for no one makes aggressive war unless he expects to win.”

Claiming global jurisdiction, the UN’s International Criminal Court is a direct outgrowth of the Nuremberg precedent. That the *soi-disant* leader of American conservatism would choose at this time to publish a novel defending Nuremberg is, at the very least, extremely curious.

**Details Small and Large**

In 1965, when *National Review* published its repudiation of the JBS, Buckley reportedly told friends: “I am going to destroy The John Birch Society.” As Justin Raimondo observes in his history *Reclaiming the American Right*, the Society’s most serious offense, from Buckley’s establishmentarian point of view, was “isolationism.” The real issue, writes Raimondo, “was the primacy of conducting the cold war — not at home, as the Birchers would have it, but abroad, in vast armaments and foreign aid programs, as well as in the jungles of Southeast Asia.”

Indeed, Woodroe Raynor, the central character in *Getting It Right*, denounces the JBS after reading a 1965 essay by Welch in the Birch Society *Bulletin* (not, as Buckley erroneously writes, *American Opinion* magazine) warning that our involvement in Vietnam would escalate steadily “into a larger and longer and more infamous Korea” while the power of centralized government would steadily grow at home. “What on earth would you expect?” wrote Welch. “For twenty years we have been taken steadily down the road to Communism by steps supposedly designed, and always sold to the American people, as a means of opposing Communism. Will we never learn anything from experience?”

\* A reliable overview of Senator McCarthy’s record can be found at: [www.thenewamerican.com/focus/people/mccarthy/](http://www.thenewamerican.com/focus/people/mccarthy/)

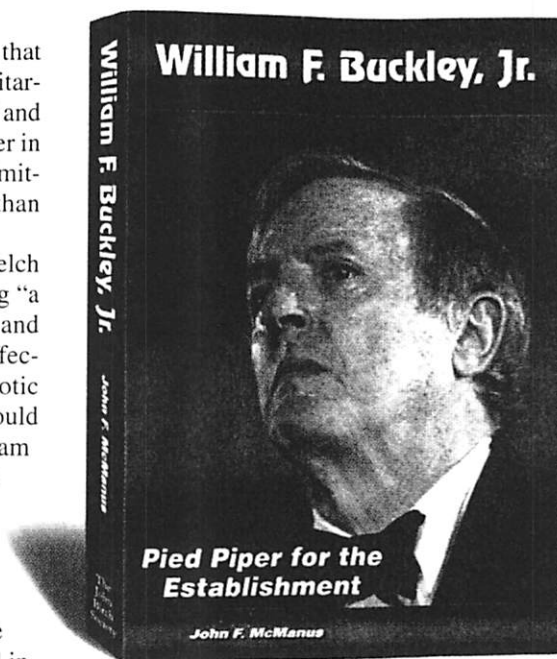
For Buckley, who wrote in 1952 that the Cold War would require “a totalitarian bureaucracy within our shores” and its “attendant centralization of power in Washington,” Welch’s defense of limited government was nothing less than rank heresy.

In the same essay cited above, Welch explained how the radical left, using “a relatively few thousand beatniks and half-baked collegiate brats,” had effectively discredited, with the patriotic public, the notion that the U.S. should extricate itself from the Vietnam morass. It is important to recognize that Welch and the JBS, unlike the pro-Hanoi “peace” movement, favored American victory as an “exit strategy.”

“In this writer’s opinion, we should never have become involved in Vietnam at all,” commented Welch in a 1967 essay, *The Truth About Vietnam*. “But regardless of how we got there, or who put us there, we are too deeply involved today to have any honorable way out except through victory. It should be our determination not to escalate this war, nor to prolong it, nor to muddle through it, but *to win it*.” But Welch was sorrowfully aware that the American Establishment wouldn’t allow such an outcome. In his essay he urged JBS members to ask their elected leaders, “When are we going to win this war in Vietnam — and why not?”

In addition to being tragically vindicated by subsequent events, Welch’s analysis applies perfectly to the ongoing “war on terrorism,” which promises open-ended military adventurism abroad and a rapidly unfolding garrison state at home. But Buckley, hopelessly imprisoned in the smelly little orthodoxy of “respectable” conservatism, presents Welch’s observations as if they were a damning indictment of his “extremism,” as opposed to an abiding testament to his insight.

Later in the novel, Raynor has a telephone conversation with General Edwin Walker in which the general correctly states that “a lot of the people who got together to start up [*National Review*] were Communists.” Raynor replies that some of them were “Trotskyists,” rather than Communists. “What in the hell’s the difference?” asks General Walker. Rejoins



**The rest of the story:** Published last year, this critical biography of Buckley (written by John F. McManus, publisher of this magazine) offers a wealth of documented detail regarding Buckley’s CIA background, his Marxist intellectual mentors, and his long-term efforts to hijack conservatism.

Raynor (expressing the “respectable” conservative position). “The Communists assassinated Trotsky.” True enough. But it’s also true that Hitler liquidated Ernst Roehm’s Brownshirts. Trotsky and his disciples were just as much Communists as Roehm and his followers were Nazis.

Buckley’s insistence on the spurious distinction between “Communists” and “Trotskyists” is worthy of further remark. As John F. McManus (publisher of *THE NEW AMERICAN*) points out in *William F. Buckley: Pied Piper for the Establishment*,<sup>†</sup> Buckley’s mentor at Yale was Willmoore Kendall, an unabashed Trotskyite socialist who served in the OSS (precursor to the CIA) during World War II. After the Korean War erupted, Buckley — seeking to avoid military service — was sent by Kendall to James Burnham, another Trotskyite socialist and OSS/CIA operative. It was through these contacts that Buckley was recruited into the CIA.

Irving Kristol and Norman Podhoretz, the founding fathers of what has come to be called “neoconservatism,” have a very

<sup>†</sup> *THE NEW AMERICAN*’s review of this book is available at: [www.aobs-store.com/reviews/bkwb.htm](http://www.aobs-store.com/reviews/bkwb.htm)

similar pedigree: Both were Trotskyites in the 1930s, and both were drawn into the CIA’s orbit as contributors to the Company-funded journal *Encounter* in the 1950s. And during the mid-1970s, Buckley’s *National Review* served as the avenue for the neoconservative conquest of the Republican Party. Defining the neoconservative creed, Kristol has written: “We accepted the New Deal in principle, and had little affection for the kind of isolationism that then permeated American conservatism.” In other words, socialism at home and heedless adventurism abroad — the direct antithesis of the conservative perspective championed by Robert Welch and other exemplars of the pre-Buckley “Old Right.”

In recent years, Buckley has effectively renounced not only the “Old Right” but conservatism in toto. In a February 2001 interview with *Lingua Franca* magazine about the neoconservative movement, Buckley was asked what his politics would be like if he were “an enfant terrible graduating from college in 2000.” “I’d be a socialist,” replied Buckley. “A Mike Harrington socialist.... I’d even say a communist.”

### Shell of His Former Self

In his mid-’70s, Buckley is several decades removed from his role as *enfant terrible*. The forensic skills that once made him an engaging speaker, debater, and essayist have long since departed. Readers of Buckley’s syndicated column may occasionally feel a twinge of the embarrassed pity that seized spectators during Muhammad Ali’s final fight against Larry Holmes. Once fleet of foot and preternaturally quick of hand, Ali had degenerated into a listless, aimless brawler sustained only by ego and reputation.

Even though it deals with such dramatic events as the 1956 Hungarian uprising, the JFK assassination, the attempted assassination of General Walker, and the Oxford, Mississippi, integration riots, *Getting It Right* is flat, drab, and unengaging. Buckley continues his notorious reliance on gratuitous sex scenes and occasional use of the Anglo-Saxon vulgarity for the human sex act. The one-time *enfant terrible* has morphed into a certifiable dirty old man. Sadly, this is the only lingering impression left by Buckley’s jejune offering. ■