

# William F. Buckley Once Trolled Arthur Schlesinger Jr.

William F. Buckley Jr. was one of those once-in-a-generation thinkers.

Whatever one thought of his conservative politics, it was difficult to overlook his many talents: a rapier-like intellect; impeccably refined taste; and a patrician charm that was unequaled (by any other conservative, at least).

I never met Buckley, but of his many talents, it was his biting wit that most impressed me. It flowed like an electric current in every medium he used, whether it was the television program he hosted (*Firing Line*), his books and essays, or the many letters he wrote in *National Review*.

As it happens, I came across a collection of Buckley's letters while browsing in a used book store. The book—[\*Cancel Your Own Goddam Subscription\*](#)—detailed an amusing exchange between Buckley and Arthur Schlesinger Jr., the liberal historian and social critic who served in the Kennedy administration, which took place early in 1970.

At the time, *Firing Line*, a TV show focused on public affairs that would run for 33 years, was still young. And Buckley was apparently slightly perturbed that Schlesinger declined to appear on the program.

So he wrote a letter to Schlesinger telling him such:

*Dear Arthur: I hope that Mr. Steibel [the producer of Firing Line] inaccurately reported a conversation with you concerning a proposed appearance on Firing Line. He told me that you declined to appear on the program because do no not*

want to “help” my program, and you do not want to increase my influence, although to be sure you hope that the program survives. It seems to me that the latter desire is by definition vitiated by the initial commitment. If all the liberals who have appear on *Firing Line* reasoned similarly, it would necessarily follow that the program would cease to exist—or is it your position that other liberals should appear on the program, but you should not. And I should have thought it would follow that a public exchange with me would diminish, rather than increase, my influence. And anyway, the general public aside, shouldn't you search out opportunities to expose yourself to my rhetoric and wit? How else will you fulfill your lifelong dream of emulating them.\* — Yours, Wm F. Buckley Jr.

Schlesinger wrote a cheeky response implying that Buckley was “becoming a little tetchy” in his declining years. But the historian's humor vanished when he discovered that Buckley had published his letter to Schlesinger in *National Review*.

*Dear Bill:*

*I do not see The National Enquirer or National Review or whatever it is called; but I understand that you ran your sill letter of January 15 to me in your issue of February 10. I gather also that in neither this nor the succeeding issue did you run my reply of January 30, though it had obviously been in your hands in plenty of time. In a better world I might have hoped that you would have had the elementary fairness, or guts, to provide equal time; but, alas, wrong again.*

Buckley of course did publish Schlesinger's letter in a subsequent issue, and explained to Schlesinger that he did not originally do so because he did not have Schlesinger's permission. (Perhaps this explanation was genuine, perhaps not. I suspect WFB was winding up his counterpart.)

The two men enjoyed a good-natured sparring in a few subsequent exchanges, with Buckley chiding Schlesinger over his poor joke-making skills, and the historian once again feigning to confuse Buckley's flagship magazine with the *National Enquirer* "because they have comparable standards of wit, taste, intelligence, and reliability."

Unsurprisingly, it was Buckley who scored the last hit.

"Dear Arthur," Buckley wrote. "It is obvious to me only someone who had difficulty in distinguishing between *The National Enquirer* and *National Review* could have written such works of history as you have written."

My takeaways?

First, unless I'm mistaken, it appears these two men actually *liked* one another despite their ideological differences. (A lesson for us today, perhaps?)

Second, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., a man of many talents, clearly was no match for WFB.

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