

On Reading Buckley's Journal

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William Buckley's fantasies about his approaching appointments to the United Nations were Walter Mittyesque. He would flush out the flagrant forces of moral untruth, tilt with the lurking hypocrisy and cant, plunge his poignard into the ballooning bombast, and, first and last, show up the Reds for the rascals they indisputably are.

But when this acidulous, snake-like Quixote arrived at the U.N. in September, 1973, with his Sancho Panza (his astute, discreet, and serviceable aide, Dino Pionzio) riding a few paces behind; he found himself hobbled by the timidity of a U.S. delegation mesmerized by the siren song of "détente." He was to be a paper delegate. The mighty tongue was (almost) immobilized. But, happily enough, his pen was not. The result is perhaps the first entertaining book about the U.N., *United Nations Journal: A Delegate's Odyssey* (Putnam; 280 pp.; \$7.95).

Bill Buckley and the UNO are notoriously ill suited but, herein, hilariously well met. For Buckley's defining characteristic as a public figure is not that he is conservative, nor that he is incisively intelligent, but that he is outrageous; and the U.N., in his view, abounds correspondingly in outrage—against language, truth, and law, but particularly against the honor of the United States. The silence in the U.N. halls about the transgressions of the totalitarian Communists was his major explicit grievance. But what was most galling for him, one suspects, was having to sit still and listen to all those speeches with almost no right of reply.

The epitome of U.N.-inflicted pain for Buckley centered in the person of the amazing orator Ambassador Jamil Baroodi of Saudi Arabia, whose sarcasm and occasional flashes of candor the equally trenchant U.S. delegate admired, but whose endless perorations he dreaded and whose murky obfuscations he despised. One hundred days at the U.N., Buckley assures us, meant sitting through one hundred speeches by Baroodi, and the tedium, he says, was excruciating. For the reader, however, Baroodi comes across as an (admittedly long-winded) Arab Groucho Marx.

Buckley is also fascinated by the Africans and the Cubans. Riveted on the bizarre, he gives only a passing glance to General Gowon, the mild-mannered and reasonable head of state of Nigeria, who, as chairman of the Organization of African Unity, was

unofficial leader of the Africans at the U.N. during Buckley's term. Rather he concentrates his attention on the rabble-rousing speech given by General Mobutu, chief of state of Zaire (in his leopard-skin "U.S.-army style overseas cap") and on the long-distance antics of General Amin of Uganda, who threatened to attend the session but finally didn't show up. (Amin did, however, we learn, give a U.N. Day speech in Kampala in which he revealed "that he had had a fresh communication from God at 9 A.M. . . . Greenwich Mean Time [0600].")

The high point in terms of local color during Buckley's tour was the attack by the Cuban Minister on the Chilean representative. Buckley makes the most of it, describing the approach of the Cuban, Raul Roa, toward the podium, "screaming '*hijo de puta!*' (son of a whore), and '*maricón!*' (fag)—two all-purpose but very high-velocity Spanish swear words," with four Cuban bodyguards trotting behind him, pistols pointed. "By a master-stroke of irony," Buckley reports, "at that very moment, a few chambers away, the Sixth Committee was discussing a 'Draft Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Crimes Against Diplomatic Agents and Other Internationally Protected Persons.' None of the speakers," he notes, "pointed out that the General Assembly of the United Nations was that afternoon apparently as dangerous a place as any for internationally protected persons."

Clearly, Buckley refuses to take a large part of the world—and most of what happens at the U.N.—very seriously. Yet this is not, in sum, a frivolous book. His conclusions—about the U.N. and about the world—are mostly either wrong-headed or just wrong, but many of his observations, particularly about the U.S. position at the U.N., are keen.

Whereas Buckley inhabits the fringes of the American political spectrum, his reactions to the rest of the world are rather congruent with those of the U.S. at the U.N., where we are often actually as beleaguered and politically isolated as most Conservatives generally seem to feel. He thought the staff of the U.S. Mission (which he viewed as highly competent) had been emasculated, turned into a bunch of Prufrocks by the chimera of "détente," and indeed they almost never allowed him to deliver the speeches he wrote zinging the Soviets and East Europeans. But one senses, and some of the U.S. delegates occasionally as much as admit, that they would deeply enjoy stripping off the white gloves and letting fly with a few themselves.

Buckley's crusade for human rights, on which he spent most of his time at the U.N., was skewed sharply to the right—focusing almost exclusively on the Soviets, the Cubans, and "the Bloc" (the Chinese, at least in this account, seemed to have behaved so suavely compared with just about everyone else in the place that they get off with a few distracted sidswipes). The U.S. Delegation, as Congressman

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Donald Fraser pointed out in the *Nation* of September 21, is also selective in pushing the investigation of human rights violations, preferring to cool it where allies such as the British (in Northern Ireland) or new friends such as the Chileans are concerned.

Both Buckley and the U.S. Delegation achieve a high pitch of concern for the clarity and inviolability of international law, concentrating attention on issues related to holding the line in Southern Africa or on U.S. capitalism.

The U.S. Delegation, as Buckley perceives, does not exert a great deal of leadership in the U.N. these days, and, as he points out, we have few dependable allies there. He does not explore the reasons for this—it may just be the way he expects things to work. In fact the causes are numerous and interconnected. We are on the wrong side of virtually every political issue vis-à-vis most of the Third World (which is most of the U.N.): on the Middle East; on Indochina; on South Africa; on Portugal (before the coup); on Chile (since the coup). We are the chief upholders of international capitalism and as such the chief symbol of Western exploitation and Third World dependence. (The Communist countries, on the other hand, almost invariably vote with the Third World, while the other advanced industrialized nations often straddle the fence.)

How far is our isolation symbolic and psychological and how far is it a result of actual divergence of interests? In terms of imagery, we are the fallen mighty: morally defeated and militarily shaken in Vietnam, with our grip on Europe and Latin America slipping away, powerless in the General Assembly we controlled a decade ago. For many at the U.N. we thus offer a particularly gratifying target.

We can further expect to suffer some whiplash from the unfulfilled expectations we helped to accelerate. Our promise was implicit in our largesse and invincibility (more than in the rising aid levels, which never went very far). We would help to make everyone as rich as we were (the Soviets promised only revolution). Now we are contracting into ourselves; our response to Third World financial crises in the face of the energy squeeze has lagged behind that of Europe, and even where our strong suit—agriculture—is concerned, our government's anxiety about the immediate prosperity of the American farmer and the temper of the American consumer easily outdistances its concern for the security of future world food supplies. Some disappointment, even disillusion, is inevitable. It always was inevitable—only the U.S. withdrawal of leadership was not.

Beyond this, we do in fact plump for regimes which could be called antirevolutionary, reactionary, revisionist—which, at any rate, usually favor

free enterprise and hospitality to foreign investment. And we resist systemic changes as a rule, except those which will organize the system more efficiently (as in demarcating economic and political zones in the sea or in curbing international pollution) to preserve what we have.

So the differences are substantial. Until changes in the Third World force changes in the U.S. approach—the oil producers are doing that already, though the shape of things to come is in no way clear—U.N. politics will continue to annoy (and sometimes enrage) many of those Americans who are aware of them, and particularly the men of International Organization Affairs, who have to care about them.

Although he fools himself about human rights, Buckley states the economic differences very succinctly, with a bluntness that the U.S. Delegation would never hazard, even as they are trying to defend essentially the same position. His provisions for a "Universal Declaration of the Human Rights of Mankind to Economic Progress" (which is currently in gestation) include: "(1) guaranteed political stability; (2) guaranteed economic freedom; (3) elimination of monopolies and cartels; (4) guaranteed maximum tax of 15 per cent; and (5) guaranteed insurance against the expropriation of foreign investments." To eliminate the frustrations of life in the General Assembly he proposes that we cease to vote there.

Why not? The next major issue in the Assembly may be a painful and distasteful struggle over the status of Israel in the organization. What does it profit the U.S. or Israel, to struggle over this? Here Buckley's perspective offers him a real advantage in terms of style. It is well-nigh impossible to defend the U.N. without waxing earnest and tedious—utopian, world federalist, all that sort of thing. Incremental change doesn't make very good copy.

However, though it may be difficult to live with the United Nations, it would not be easier to live without it. As the recent spate of—very unsatisfactory—conferences on international economic issues has shown, we are groping to concert our efforts in new ways. Although the advanced industrial Western nations have felt, with some justification, that things can be organized much more effectively by smaller groups of like-minded nations with significant economic power and parallel economic interests ("OECD works better than UNESCO"), all these messy global discussions have been held under U.N. auspices. And it seems likely that the efforts begun there will continue loosely within the U.N. aegis. Nothing concrete will take place, of course, until individual nations make up their minds that it shall. In the meantime, the mutual frustrations arising from this process will continue to vibrate in the wide-open spaces on the East River.