

Chapter One:

Connecticut Yanquis

William F. Buckley, Jr., the intellectual leader of the modern conservative movement, rightly saw himself less as founder than heir. Everything he learned, and all he became, began at home.

It started with his father, William F. Buckley, Sr., a lawyer, real estate investor, and oil speculator who grew up in the brush country, the scrubland frontier, of Duval County in South Texas. He was thirty-five and had made his first fortune when, on a visit to New Orleans, he met twenty-two-year-old Aloise Steiner, the eldest of three sisters of Swiss and German background—"the very essence of old New Orleans charm," said one of the many men smitten by her. She had a year or two of college, played Mozart on the piano, and told captivating if not always quite credible stories—for instance, of the fourteen marriage proposals she claimed to have turned down before W.F. Buckley began courting her in the spring of 1917.

The physical attraction was immediate, almost electric. Many years later the couple's children remembered the "frisson" that connected their parents. The couple also shared a deep and abiding Catholic faith. After the wedding ceremony at the Steiner family's parish church, Mater Dolorosa on South Carrollton Avenue, on December 29, 1917, the Buckleys began their married life in Mexico. W.F. Buckley had been living there since 1908. He had apartments and law offices in Mexico City as well as in Tampico—the oil boomtown on the Gulf where, after building a prosperous law practice writing oil leases, he had gone into real estate and then into oil, borrowing substantial sums to sink five wells on the banks of the Panuco River.

Oil speculation was always a high-risk venture, but especially in Mexico. It was in the throes of the twentieth century's first great revolution, its ten-year-long "bloody fiesta," which ended in 1920 with the rout of the right-wing faction Buckley had supported and the election of a new president he despised. It was a stinging defeat, and he would never get over it. Yet he also could say, and often did—to his children most emphatically—that although he had lost, he had done so on his terms, without giving an inch to the opposition. Other oilmen, including some far wealthier and more powerful than he, had submitted to the new order and made lucrative deals with each fresh regime. W.F. Buckley refused to do it. He left Mexico—in fact was expelled by order of its government—with debts totaling one million dollars. In later years he showed his children a treasured souvenir from those times, an architect's sketch of the grand palacio, with private chapel, which W.F. Buckley had planned to build on substantial property he had purchased in Coyoacan.

Bankrupt at age forty, Buckley would have to start all over. He had a family to support, his wife and three small children, now living with his mother and two sisters in Austin, Texas. But there was a new opportunity.

In fact, having to put Mexico behind him might be for the best. The oil fields in its Golden Lane were nearly tapped out. The great new oil patch was in Venezuela. Once again there were large profits to be made but also many hazards—in this case "hostile Indian tribes," as well as malaria and fatal "liver and intestinal disorders." Visitors were advised to stay no longer than a few weeks.

For W.F. Buckley admonitions were a goad. He went to Venezuela, stayed a full six months, and came back in 1924 with leasing rights to three million acres surrounding Lake Maracaibo, spreading east and west, a complexly organized checker-board whose squares "in practically every instance adjoin properties that are being actively developed by major American oil companies," it was reported at the time. The concession was "rated among the most valuable in Venezuela."

Buckley, now based in New York, formed a new company, Pantepec (named for a river in Mexico), and with the sponsorship of the Wall Street broker Edward A. Pierce floated stock shares and secured investments from two California majors: Union Oil and California Petroleum. Matching wits against some of the finest legal minds in the United States, W.F. Buckley worked out the terms for an innovative "farm-out." In return for gaining temporary control of a third of the holdings, the two behemoths would cover the costs of exploration and drilling and reap most of the profits once oil was struck. W.F. Buckley would be allotted a tiny fraction of those profits, and he now had funds to send teams of engineers and geologists to explore the remaining two million acres.

Remade as a Wall Street speculator, W.F. Buckley bought a suite of offices on lower Park Avenue and furnished them sumptuously, the better to impress investors. He also bought an apartment building nearby where he stayed alone during the week. Jazz Age Manhattan, with its speakeasies and fleshpots and lurking criminal element, was no place for his wife and growing family. They lived on his third shrewd purchase, a large estate in the rural northwest corner of Connecticut.

On Fridays, the work week finished, W.F. Buckley walked a few blocks uptown from his office to Grand Central and rode the train home to his family, three full hours through exurban New York—Westchester, Putnam, and Dutchess counties—all the way to Amenia, where a Buick sat idling with the Black "houseboy," James Cole of New Orleans, behind the wheel in a chauffeur's cap. Together they drove three miles along a country road and, if daylight remained, enjoyed the vista—the wooded Litchfield Hills and the dipping valley, the bright quilt of dairy farms—and then crossed the Connecticut state line at Sharon, a picturesque village of fifteen hundred, incorporated in 1739 and named for the fertile Biblical plain. A favorite weekend and summer getaway for wealthy New Yorkers, Sharon was famous for its narrow elongated green, originally grazing land, which gracefully stretched for more than a mile from its north end—with storefronts and wooden walkways

where in summer elms arched overhead, the branches on either side touching to form a canopy—to South Main Street. There, near the town hall and the Hotchkiss Library, stood what is still today Sharon's chief landmark: a granite-and-brownstone clock tower, forty feet high with a pyramid roof, built in the 1880s by the same firm that designed Theodore Roosevelt's Sagamore Hill estate on Oyster Bay, Long Island.

On either side of South Main, set back from the street, were large and imposing manor houses. The Buckleys lived in one of them, Number 32, called the Ansel Sterling House after its first owner, a lawyer and judge twice elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in the 1820s. Sterling had purchased the property in 1808 and then torn down the original brick, replacing it with a Georgian frame structure. Over time the ten-acre property had tripled to thirty acres, beautiful and lush, with thick stands of oaks and sugar maples, outbuildings including barn, stables, and icehouse, and horse trails that wound through the rolling pastures and up into the gentle hills beyond. Today Ansel Sterling's house still stands, though much enlarged by W.F. Buckley. Its handsome entrance with pediment and pillars stares across Main Street at Sharon's two historic churches: little Christ Church Episcopal, with its witch-hat spire, and the Congregational church, the town's oldest.

In 1923, when W.F. Buckley first toured the property and rented it for the summer, its most striking feature was the elm that towered up from its front lawn. It had been planted in colonial times by Sharon's most illustrious forefather, the Congregational minister Reverend Cotton Mather Smith, a descendant of Cotton Mather. It was now the largest elm in the entire state, its immense trunk measuring eighteen feet around. In 1924, the same year Main Street was paved for motor traffic, Buckley bought the estate outright and renamed it Great Elm.

This was the new life Buckley had conjured in a few short years, seemingly pulled out of thinnest air, for his wife and growing family. So promising did the future look that when a sixth child was born on November 24, 1925, husband and wife agreed that this son, their third, should be his father's namesake: William F. Buckley, Jr.

It was always an event when "Father" came home. The children who were not away at school or upstairs in the nursery crowded in front of the house to greet him. "We'd wait there for his car to come," one of his six daughters remembered, "and make bets on which car would be Father's." He was delighted to see them, but even happier to see his wife. "He'd kiss us all and he'd say, 'Where's your mother?' Mother would come and say, 'Darling,' and the two of them would walk out together."

No one felt these currents more keenly than Billy Buckley, who had the middle child's fear of being

overlooked, lost in the crowd. And the Buckley siblings really were a crowd: ten in all, many of them very close in age, five born ahead of Billy and four after. With servants added, as well as tutors, workmen, groomsmen for the horses, and later a riding instructor and his family, the household numbered more than twenty and was alive with pranks, schemes, hilarity, and strife.

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