Brent Bozell's Anti-Fusionism

Born 100 years ago, he helped start *National Review*—then embraced integralism.

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L. Brent Bozell Jr. (Wikimedia Commons)

If the American founding, coming now upon its 250th anniversary, has a motley assortment of “forgotten founders”—the likes of Charles Carroll and Elbridge Gerry—then the American conservative movement of the twentieth century likewise has a band often brushed aside in the typical narratives

of today's right. L. Brent "Red" Bozell Jr., brother-in-law of William F. Buckley Jr., National Review and Triumph founder, champion debater, political candidate, and zealous convert to Catholicism, is one of those men.

Much of the substance of today's "New Right" critique of establishment conservatism finds parallels in Bozell's withering criticisms of fellow NR editor Frank Meyer's "fusionist" philosophy. Bozell not only made a pointed intellectual assault on "liberal conservatism" but also, like today's New Right, emphasized authority, order, and virtue, not individual freedom, as the proper ends of political society. He led his post-NR magazine, Triumph, towards an embrace of Catholic integralism. Bozell's discontent with the social liberalism of the 1960s even led him to espouse Francisco Franco's Spain as the model of conservative governance.

Bozell was born on January 15, 1926 in Omaha, Nebraska to Leo and Lois Bozell. His father was the city editor of the Omaha Daily News and the founder of a public relations firm, Bozell

International. Unlike the cradle Catholic and conservative Buckley, his future brother-in-law grew up a Midwestern labor Democrat who attended the Episcopal church. In high school, Bozell was a top athlete in football and basketball as well as a champion debater. In 1943, he took the top spot for the state in the American Legion's nationwide competition for best high-school orator.

Before attending Yale, Bozell spent a little more than a year in the Merchant Marine before transferring to the Navy and an assault vessel in the Pacific during World War II. Ahead of his discharge in July 1946, Bozell had already spoken to his father about converting to Catholicism, just before Leo tragically died of a heart attack. Brent thus arrived in New Haven in the midst of great personal change. His passion for politics and debate quickly brought him into Yale's Political Union, a forum based on the Oxford University's debating societies, and into the orbit of Buckley, his new debate partner.

As Daniel Kelly puts it in Living on Fire: The Life of L. Brent Bozell Jr., the duo were “partners, to devastating effect,” with Brent the “Roman orator, a man of gravitas” and Buckley the “stage aristocrat with high-bridged nose and chiseled chin, a blender of wit and hauteur.” They beat an Oxford team that had bested every American team it had faced. The two soon came under the mentorship of Yale’s greatest conservative mind, Willmoore Kendall. By the fall of his junior year, Bozell had become president of the Political Union and started his own conservative student newspaper, the Conservative View. Through his friendship with Bill, Brent met and fell in love with the love of his life: Bill’s favorite sister, Trish, whom Bozell married in 1949. The couple would go on to have ten children between 1950 and 1966—Christopher, Michael, Kathy, Maureen, John, Brent III, Aloise, Michael, William, and James.

After graduating in 1950, Bozell attended Yale Law School through 1953 and briefly practiced law in San Francisco, until his relationship with Bill once more changed his life. In 1951 Bill’s

first book, God and Man at Yale, had proved to be a sensation, and his publisher, Henry Regnery, pushed for a follow-up. Buckley asked Bozell to join him for the meticulous research and writing of McCarthy and His Enemies: The Record and Its Meaning.

The two men were fervent supporters of Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy and his efforts to root out communist sympathizers, agents, and spies in government service. Their book took a year and a half to complete and aimed to apply Kendall's criticisms of the "open society" to the defense of McCarthyism. Kendall argued that communists in the U.S. were a "clear and present danger" because their doctrines were wrong and immoral, corrosive to the public orthodoxy on which America was founded. Buckley and Bozell's goal was to first and foremost defend McCarthyism rather than McCarthy himself; they believed "on McCarthyism hang the hopes of America for effective resistance to Communist infiltration."

Bozell joined McCarthy's staff to help defend him against censure in the Senate, drafting McCarthy's defiant speech against the resolution. Bozell became close to McCarthy and remained a speechwriter after his censure, as the senator's health declined from the alcoholism that would kill him in May 1957. In the meantime, Bozell also collaborated with Buckley on the founding of National Review in 1955.

After moving to Franco's Spain for a time—along with Kendall and Frederick Wilhelmsen, a Catholic philosopher and NR contributor—Bozell came to reject the classical liberalism on display in the landmark 1960 book he ghostwrote

for Barry Goldwater, The Conscience of a Conservative. Bozell's embrace of a conservatism grounded in order and authority brought him into ideological conflict with his close friend, erstwhile ally, and fellow senior editor at NR Frank Meyer. Once a Stalinist, Meyer had become the intellectual lodestar of "fusionism," which sought to unite the opposing libertarian and traditionalist emphases within movement conservatism. In 1962, the two presented dueling long-form essays in the magazine. Meyer's essay "The Twisted Tree of Liberty" made the case for fusionism, which in Meyer's formulation regarded the "untrammeled state as the greatest of political evils." Freedom, he argued, was the highest political end, and it was necessary for the greatest human end, virtue.

Bozell's essay "Freedom or Virtue?" offered a profound contrast to Meyer's political teleology, arguing for a "Christian civilization." Bozell starkly disagreed with Meyer about the state's role in aiding the quest for virtue—he believed that given human nature and the corruption of original sin, the state

should pass laws that produce order, stability, and prudent regulation of man's actions. Bozell concluded that the drive to make freedom the highest political end was "a rebellion against nature" and "the story of how the free society has come to take priority over the good society is the story of the decline of the West."

During the early years of NR, Bozell was active in conservative politics, starting with a run for the Maryland lower house in 1958. In 1964, he ran for Congress in Maryland's sixth district against Charles Mathias, an "Eastern Establishment" Republican. The "true Republicanism" that Bozell ran on sought victory over communism, restoration of school prayer, and an end to the government's "stranglehold" over the economy. As his biographer Kelly notes, Bozell's 1964 campaign largely resembled his campaign for the Maryland House, with his more recent, traditionalist views seldom expressed. His campaign manager was the young NR staffer Neal Freeman, who praised Bozell's political skill and who would later recall that when Bozell

was “in good form,” he was the greatest natural campaigner he had ever seen—even better than Ronald Reagan. But the race, which Bozell lost, would be the conclusion of his embryonic political career as his life shifted towards defense of the Catholic faith.

The year 1966 was pivotal for Bozell. First, he finally finished his yearslong effort to complete a book on the Constitution and the Supreme Court, which he entitled The Warren Revolution: Reflections on the Consensus Society. The book presented the Warren Court as fomenting a constitutional crisis on account of an improper understanding of the constitutional order and the court’s proper authority. Supreme Court decisions had become “equivalent to a provision of the fixed constitution,” converting the court into a roving constitutional convention and a judicial dictatorship.

That same year, having already left NR, Bozell founded his own magazine for the defense of Christendom—Triumph. Bozell’s managing editor was his wife, Trish. Triumph’s senior editors

included his good friend Frederick Wilhelmson, with contributors ranging from Christopher Dawson to Russell Kirk. The function of the magazine, Bozell told Kirk, was to act as a "cutting edge into the great heresies of our age," with the enemy being the "technocratic, materialist, self-seeking, thoroughly un-Christian culture of the West."

With Triumph, Bozell brought forth a proto-integralist vision that rejected Americanism and the political primacy of the Constitution in favor of a politics which put the faith first. It marked a split with Buckley and NR's brand of conservatism: Bozell in his fundraising efforts for the magazine told supporters that Triumph would not just advance a conservative Catholic view but would indict modern, secular society and envision the "configurations of a religiously conceived and motivated social order, including proposals for its achievement."

Warren Carroll, who worked for Triumph and later founded Christendom College with Bozell's help, reflected in 2001 that Bozell had created Triumph in order to take the position that

“every nation is shaped by its religion (or lack thereof); that a religion that has nothing to say in the public arena is not worthy of the name; and that what it has to say must be, first of all, religious; that since America was abandoning the Christian Faith, then religious truth and moral principle could be preserved only by that Faith, not by America.”

The split with the American conservatism in which he had once placed so much stock was evident when Bozell and Triumph even rejected the theories of his mentor, Willmoore Kendall. Bozell announced he would never write a sequel to the Warren Revolution, and in an essay titled “Death of the Constitution,” he argued that the broadly liberal Founding opened the door to the very elements that had destroyed Christendom in America. Searching for the causes of the country’s spiritual and moral rot, Bozell concluded that the Constitution itself was to blame because there was an irreconcilable divide between its assertion that just powers derived from the consent of the governed and the Christian

principle that all power descends from God. Divine authority must be “kept in view as a limitation on the sovereignty of ‘the governed,’ on their claim to authority.” A constitutional morality which made self-interest the key to holding the powers of a sovereign people within bounds in fact set the stage for secular-liberal “demands to turn the American republic into an official agnostic state. . . . the architects of our constitutional order built a house in which secular liberalism could live, and given the dominant urges of the age, would live.”

For Bozell, the conservative movement was dead. Triumph and its founder had come to see America as headed towards destruction, though Bozell was clear he still loved his country and his people. Triumph lasted for a decade, until January 1976, when mounting debt forced Bozell to close the magazine. His activism had shifted to social causes, mainly militant opposition to abortion. In May 1970, after a D.C. Court legalized abortion in the district, Bozell led a small contingent of like-minded Catholics to protest the George Washington University

Hospital's clinic, joined by a group of young Catholic activists known as the "Sons of Thunder." The protest ended in a clash with police that led to Bozell's arrest. As he later put it, "If disorder is necessary to stop this murdering of babies, I'm in favor of disorder."

Soon after the magazine shuttered, Bozell and his family became aware that he had a condition from which he may have suffered from for years—bipolar disorder. For the next decade, Bozell's regular writing would cease until he put out a collection entitled Mustard Seeds: A Conservative Becomes a Catholic in 1986. Included in the collection was his first article published in National Review in more than two decades, an essay from 1984 entitled "Poland's Cross—And America's."

After decades of ill health, Bozell died of pneumonia on April 15, 1997. His funeral mass was led by his son Michael, who had become a Catholic priest in 1994. Another son, his namesake L. Brent Bozell III, remarked of his pious and long-suffering father, "It is said that a saint never aspires to that status except by

abandoning himself completely to Christ and his suffering; if so, then Pop was saintly. Ask his friends, his brother and sister, his nephews and nieces, his extended family, so many of them here today, how that man could pierce the soul with such beauty, such warmth, such dignity, such friendship."

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