

Steve Allen

*vs.*

William F. Buckley Jr.

*The Presidency*

"Resolved: The foreign policy of  
John F. Kennedy has been successful."

# William F. Buckley Jr.

## *Opening Statement:*

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STEVE ALLEN told me last spring when we met to consider this invitation that he had never before in his entire life debated with anyone. That was of course a joke; probably the only poor one he has ever made. The remark, needless to say, was intended sincerely. The worst thing about Steve Allen is that he sincerely believes what he says. He meant to make a gesture of respect for my allegedly superior experience. But consider whence the compliment came: from a master verbalist, a born showman, a fabulous extemporizer who, almost every night, dating back to when I was a schoolboy being trained to make the world safe for democracy, has faced vast audiences, making them laugh or cry, feel happy or feel sad, by the use of his great art. It is I who am destined to play the fool for my cause, who have stepped in where angels fear to tread.

In remarking his innocence of the science of debate he meant, I suppose, to disarm me. Heaven only knows how many weapons this great showman has neatly hidden in that disarmingly unruffled suit (which I learned from a recent advertisement in *Esquire* is "all wool"), how many

rabbits, pumpkins, balloons, lizards, dolls, saws, incenses, stink bombs are neatly tucked away there. One by one he will bring them out and hurl them against the impregnable virtue of my position.

I say impregnable because in the end I doubt that the magician lives who can make the case for the foreign policy of John F. Kennedy before an American audience. It takes a different audience to appreciate that case, from a different vantage point. Like a Russian audience.

Now, now, now, let me first of all make plain that I do not consider that Mr. Steve Allen is pro-Communist. Let me go further and say that I consider that any man who suspects him of being pro-Communist is evil or witless. Let me concede (for I know that the subject weighs heavily on Mr. Allen) that he has been treated outrageously by individual members of the so-called right. Let me concede that there are members of what goes by the name of "the right wing" who cherish a great ignorance of the realities. And let me say that some of these men and women, in pursuit of their fantasies, do damage to persons who are subjectively innocent of the offenses they are charged with. Such persons—some of them malicious, some of them misinformed—exist on the right; but so do they exist on the left.

It was a half century ago that Chesterton complained of the allure that so-called "progressive" movements have for (as he put it) "every fruit juice drinker, nudist, sandal wearer, sex maniac, Quaker, pacifist, and feminist in England." He could have retained the list intact to describe many of the current admirers of Mr. Allen's position. There is, as I say, a lot of loose talk going on and California, is no doubt the world's principal exporter of it. I remember Mr. Stanley Mosk, California's Attorney General, saying a couple of years ago that the John

Birch Society was a collection of "little old ladies in tennis shoes." And now Mr. Mosk has informed a convention of California Democrats that the Republican party is in danger of being taken over by the John Birch Society—raising the question whether he got hit on the head by a tennis shoe or whether he is just scared of little old ladies. But we are not here tonight to talk about eccentrics, we are here to talk about the foreign policy of Mr. Kennedy, and never mind why it appeals to eccentrics. We wish to know, what is worse still, why it appeals to non-eccentrics.

In assessing the foreign policy of *any* administration, it is always possible to dwell on a single success or on a single failure and go on to construct an apology or an indictment on the basis of it. Much of what passes for objective evaluation is based on selectivity of this kind. In meditating on liberalism, its foreign policy and the shambles thereof, I am reminded of the man who, having heard a direful sermon on the subject of the Ten Commandments, walked out of the Church alongside his wife, with head bowed, looking neither to right nor to left. Suddenly, approaching his car, his eyes lit up. He turned to his wife jubilantly: "I just remembered—I've never made any graven images!" So a defender of Mr. Kennedy might say that after all, he has not yet turned Washington over to the Communists—at least not *all* of Washington. (Having read last week about the twentieth or so Communist spy caught within the past nine months, I recall morosely Bob Hope's statement on returning this summer from abroad, that "in England there is the best secret service in the world. The trouble is the Russians own it.")

Under the circumstances, in an attempt to avoid polemical selectivity, I shall permit an official spokesman for liberalism no less authoritative than Mr. Lyndon Johnson to select three areas for discussion. "During the

campaign of 1964," Mr. Johnson said last October, "this administration will go to the people and defend its foreign policy on the basis of its record in Berlin, Laos, and Cuba."

1—Whence the triumph of Berlin? Because West Berliners are still free? But it does not prove success merely to prove that all is not yet lost. West Berliners are still relatively free, true; but Berlin is a sundered city because President Kennedy, who alone could have prevented it, permitted its division. He had no idea, he told the press early in 1962, that the Soviet Union had been preparing during the preceding July to build a wall through the city. I believe him. (Although as I remarked at the time, it is extraordinary that such large reserves of standby brick and mortar could have escaped the attention even of our CIA.) Even so, the deed was done. Subsequently, the West has stood firm in denying the balance of the city to Mr. Khrushchev, whose appetite for it has sharpened precisely because of the ease with which he had succeeded in planting down the wall.

But whose fortitude is today responsible for the maintenance of a free West Berlin? It is widely known that Mr. Kennedy and his aides sought to discuss with the Russians (under the pressure of the Soviet ultimatum) alternatives to the present arrangements more satisfactory to them. But it is known that Charles de Gaulle flatly refused, for so long as Berlin was being illegally threatened, to participate in any discussion whatsoever over its future. It is generally accepted, in other words, that it was the granitic de Gaulle who provided the stamina on which West Berlin survives. And indeed it is conjectured—and one has no alternative to conjecture when discussing an administration which has developed so effectively the science of

news management—that one of the reasons why Mr. de Gaulle has shown an increasing reluctance to rely on American foreign policy, is because American foreign policy is not reliable. One is never quite sure whether, at a critical moment in Western affairs, the chiefs-of-staff will make the operative decisions or Mr. Norman Cousins will. Others have leaned on American foreign policy over the years—Poles, Czechs, Chinese and Tibetans; Cubans and Laotians; and Vietnamese. The crowning pity is that *Americans* have to rely on American foreign policy.

2—The claim that Mr. Johnson can point to *Cuba* as a victory for his foreign policy is a venture in utter audacity. It is as though Mr. Hoover had run for re-election in 1932 on the basis of the raging national prosperity. I have written a great deal about the Cuban disaster and tried to analyze it at some length; and I have spent my rhetoric on the subject. I do not have the stomach to restate the case, any more than some of you have the stomach to hear it. I can only reassert, in the simplest terms, my conviction that our failure to move decisively against Castro continues as the most conspicuous symptom of our degeneracy.

What will bring this administration to save Cuba? Nothing, presumably; unless Castro finds a few Buddhists to persecute. It appears to be safe to say that we *have* no policy as regards Cuba. Our policy towards Cuba is to behave towards it peevishly. We address her, from within our fastness, with the petulance of the prudent man who has been bested in an encounter, dares not risk another, but for vanity's sake needs to keep his tongue stuck out at his adversary. Mr. Kennedy's solemn retaliation against Cuba's importation of the thermonuclear intermediate

range missiles was to forbid American tourists to visit Cuba. It was the Cuban admittance of the missiles that was apparently the unfriendly act—not the Russian-manufactured transportation and installation of same, we are to gather from the workings of Mr. Kennedy's foreign policy. After all, we *do* allow American tourists to go to the Soviet Union (in fact, encourage them to go there); and we do allow our wheat to go to the Soviet Union; but not to Cuba—no sir, no señor, not Mr. Kennedy.

And then, to drive home the dead seriousness of our Cuba policy, Mr. Kennedy devoted a whole speech to the subject of the forthcoming liberation of Cuba before survivors of the Bay of Pigs invasion assembled at the Orange Bowl in Miami, one paragraph of which Mrs. Kennedy spoke in Spanish. Why he was not torn limb from limb by that company of soldiers betrayed, I'll never know. I finally understand the meaning of the *mañana* attitude.

Our policy as regards Cuba will, then, presumably bear fruit (like our so-called policy toward Hungary) on the day when we will have resumed diplomatic relations; as we have for all intents and purposes done under Mr. Kennedy with Hungary. Do not ask what American foreign policy has accomplished in Hungary, or what it is accomplishing in Cuba; to do so would be to disconcert non-debaters. In fact, Hungary yielded nothing. Not freedom for the students of Budapest. Not even freedom for the mortal remains of Imre Nagy, whose bones the government refuses to return to his family. When Mr. Kennedy's present policy toward Cuba reaches its radiant fruition, i.e. when we agree to give Cuba not only our drugs but *also* our tourists and our wheat, Cuba will still be free to conspire against us, against our people, and against our truths everywhere in the hemisphere by the continued use of

guile, subversion, treachery, blasphemy, torture. Ask not what Cuba can do for us, ask what we can do for Cuba.

3—In Laos we triumphed under Mr. Kennedy by refusing to give aid to the anti-Communist forces who were resisting a coalition government with the neutralists and the pro-Communists.

Here is the background of *that* triumph! In Moscow, Mr. Khrushchev told Mr. Harriman that if he would bring pressure to bear on President Kennedy to consent to the coalition government, he, Khrushchev, would promise to see to it that the Communist and pro-Communist members of the coalition behave; would see to it, presumably, that they cease to be Communists, since nothing short of that would cause them to behave. Intoxicated by that news, Mr. Harriman rushed back to Washington and in a matter of weeks the triumph was consummated.

So taken was the New Frontier by this new mode in diplomacy that in due course Mr. Harriman was bounced back to Moscow, where he got a still further promise from the Soviet government to behave in respect to nuclear testing, whence the derivative triumph of the Treaty of Moscow, the test-ban treaty. Just eight years ago, surveying the Spirit of Geneva proclaimed by President Eisenhower, Mr. Harriman had publicly proclaimed, "Unhappily, at the conference of the Summit, President Eisenhower was quoted as crediting the Russians with no less a desire for peace than that of the West. As a consequence, there occurred a psychological disarmament throughout the free world. It is a tragedy," he concluded, "that the President didn't do something *else*. He did mention, but he did not keep insisting, that Stalin should carry out his wartime agreements, to permit free elections in Poland and Eastern Europe."

But when psychological disarmament is administered by Mr. Harriman himself, in behalf of the Democratic Party, it is something else, is it not? It is a triumph. Ask Lyndon Johnson. Ask Steve Allen. Ask a cuckoo clock.

We are living, ladies and gentlemen, in an age when direct communication becomes increasingly difficult. We need to rely increasingly, those of us in any case who care, on a kind of Aesopian prose which at the ordinary level says one thing, but if you listen very very hard, and if you are truly disposed to hear, is saying something very different. We all know that a political party must defend its record, for such are the iron requirements of partisan politics. But the present administration seeks to defend its record by paying the conventional obeisances to traditional policy, at the same time suggesting, sometimes explicitly, more often subliminally, the necessity for "new approaches;" the common factor of which is appeasement.

The policy suggested by George Kennan when he wrote in *Foreign Affairs* on the necessity for containment we practiced intermittently as for instance at Iran and South Korea under Mr. Truman; and under Mr. Eisenhower at Lebanon and Quemoy. But even under the rubric of Kennan's policy Czechoslovakia fell; as did China; as did Tibet and Cuba; as, for all intents and purposes, did Indonesia and British Guiana. But the policy of containment remained, nevertheless, as the official paradigm: the policy that under no circumstances whatever will the Soviet Union be permitted to advance its imperialism over any area not already subjugated in 1947.

The policy was never inherently sound for the reason that it was dogmatically *defensive*, and failed to reckon with the advantages that go to the side that monopolizes the initiative. The policy of containment is based on repres-

ing the enemy's salients rather than striking our own. Trotsky told his generals, when on one occasion they asked him how most profitably to pursue the war against the capitalist world, that the Soviet high command must constantly gyrate a finger around the perimeter of the enemy world. "And where it probes a weakness, *there*," said Trotsky, "is our salient."

And so the Communists over the years have been operating. They have not looked alone for military weaknesses in contiguous geographical areas, though they probed these too; they looked for weaknesses of *every* kind: weaknesses in our economy; weaknesses in our race relations; weakness in our system of alliances; weakness in our internal security; weakness in our military technology; weakness, above all, in our soul. And it is these weaknesses, above all others, that they have feasted upon; for at the moments of truth in great battlefronts merely suggested by the place-names Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin, Peking, it was not a lack of Western power that proved decisive, but a lack of Western will. Our policy postulated no salients of our own, even on ascertaining gaping weaknesses in the enemy:

When she is militarily weak as after the last war, we stand by and let her acquire nuclear weapons. When she is guilty of a fresh act of aggression as at Berlin, we close ranks against Tshombe in Katanga and censure South Africa. When she staggers from a moral wound as after Budapest, we initiate cultural exchanges. When she desires a temporary cessation of certain types of nuclear testing, we go to Moscow and sign the dotted line. When her agricultural program collapses, we send her wheat.

We permit ourselves only counter-salient expressions of life: They fight us in Korea, we fight back in Korea. They fight us in Viet Nam, we fight them in Viet Nam. They

threaten Lebanon, we land troops in Lebanon. They bomb Quemoy, we fortify Quemoy. But now, even that policy of containment seems to be requiring an effort beyond the will of the American government to generate. In the past three years, we tried, because of the forward inertia still left in the old idea, to generate the counter-salient in Cuba; but we could not arouse ourself off the beach. In Laos, instead of countering the offensive decisively, we retreated behind the skirts of neutralism. In Berlin, we did not tear down the wall, but learned instead to live under its humiliating shadow. Again in Cuba, we retreated on our demand to inspect the Russian missile bases.

But meanwhile, the *rhetoric* of defiance, even of liberation, continues as a basso sostenuto throughout our strategic variations. I could not myself, in my most abandoned moments of hope, compose a speech more inspiring to direct action against Castro than Mr. Kennedy's, delivered to the ransomed Cuban prisoners in Miami about three weeks before he cracked down on every Cuban who was subsequently engaged in trying to do something about the liberation of his homeland, i.e. every Cuban who at Miami took Mr. Kennedy at his word. Who would guess that the speech delivered at American University in Washington last June, calling for an end even to *philosophical* differences with the Soviet Union, and that given in August in Berlin calling for victory over the Soviet Union at any cost, had been delivered by the same man?

There is at work against us an assault on the meaning of words, those instruments of civilization by which we communicate with one another and correspond with our governors. Would that we could have a treaty suspending the abuse of rhetoric! The worst enemy of America is the debauchery of language, the loss of whose meaning would

deprive us even of the power to express our fear of the abomination of desolation.

"I have sometimes thought," Albert J. Nock wrote in his last years, "that it would be interesting to write an essay on the subject of 'How One Can Tell One Is Living in a Dark Age.'" I have never doubted that George Orwell, writing 10 years later, gave Nock the answer when he wrote his incandescent novel about the society whose tab-lets proclaim that War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery, Ignorance is Strength. The trouble with our foreign policy is less its intrinsic defects than that men of intelligence and good will actually rise to defend it.