TV GUIDE for 8/26 to 9/1 –

Sesquipedalian Sharpshooter

When Bill Buckley takes aim, he seldom misses

By Ross Drake

The rich, one is forewarned, are different from you and me; but crossing the threshold of William F. Buckley Jr.'s Park Avenue town house is like passage to a gilded age. A cool handshake from Mrs. Buckley—tall, bronzed and imperiously slim—and the room impresses itself on the consciousness, wine-red, with spaniels scampering underfoot, champagne, the gleam of silver, a drift of snowy linen, and there on the sofa, like the lingering evanescence of a Fitzgerald novel, the luncheon guests, tranquil as clouds.

Enter Chairman Bill himself, spare, tanned and tousled—looking more a rumpled intruder from Marlboro Country than the polished rhetorical surgeon. His weekly discussion show, *Firing Line*, will be taping within the hour—two programs back-to-back, the 292nd and 293rd of the series—and he is plotting the dash across town. The Cadillac has faltered on the drive back from Stamford, Conn., the family's country retreat, so Buckley checks first with the garage. Automobiles, one gathers, are a gap in his arsenal of erudition ("Tom, does the car work without a front engine? Oh, Gawwwd!"), and one he hasn't any intention of closing.

Crouching over a coffee table, a glass of wine at his elbow, he applies the knife to a shred of rare roast beef, elucidating between bites the keenness of Jeff Greenfield, one of his adversaries of the afternoon and a former *Firing Line* regular. Greenfield, an author and speech-writing gadfly, was the show's rad-lib counter-irritant for nearly two years, tweaking conservative nerve endings and reaping a tantrum of hate mail. But Buckley liked his presumption, and the sting of his wit, and kept him to sharpen the colloquy.

Polishing off his snack, Buckley brandishes a cigar big enough to give pause to a mugger, and sets off in search of his jacket. "You can't go in *that* coat!" insists his wife, Pat. "The dog shed all over you in the car!" He bounds up the curving staircase and out of sight. "Duck-*ie*!" he calls to his wife. "Where's the Greenfield book?" (Greenfield's latest, co-authored with polemicist Jack Newfield, is 'A Populist Manifesto," the inspiration for the forthcoming taping.)

Buckley reappears, dressed—how else?—conservatively, disarmingly camouflaged in a funereal gray suit, a mauled-looking Oxford-cloth shirt, and a tie wrenched askew at the collar. He dodges past his forest-green Honda in the entry and emerges into the glare of afternoon, folding himself into a rented limousine, a sheaf of papers in one hand, a red ball point pen in the other. A photographer jumps in beside him, and as the big car trundles gamely through traffic, Buckley leafs through his notes, amending his typed introductions, hand-polished shafts of acerbity with which he pricks the egos and stirs the unease of his guests.

Buckley's idiosyncrasy, in which he is indulged by *Firing Line* producer Warren Steibel, is that he doesn't like to delay at the studio. He prefers to arrive with only minutes to spare, and go dashing through make-up to taping. Steibel seldom keeps him waiting, and Buckley, as his part of the bargain, is almost religiously prompt. This time, though, prospects look dubious. Traffic is snarled crossing Central Park, and the limousine is trapped in the tangle.

Buckley glances up from his papers, eyes the impasse uneasily, and recalls that only once has a guest missed a show—Bernadette Devlin, crossing the Atlantic from Ireland. It wouldn't do, obviously, for the host to be stymied crossing Manhattan. "I've never been late before," he murmurs; then, with a word to his wife and the driver, flings open the door, jackknifes out of his seat, and plunges headlong across the park, lean and intent, his tie whipping in the breeze.

Hailing a cab at Columbus Circle, he swings in at the studio barely seconds ahead of the limousine. Steibel ushers him to make-up, where cosmetician Sylvia Lawrence stuffs tissues in his collar and begins swabbing him energetically with powder. Mrs. Buckley, whose own flamelike persona is as vivid, in her way, as Buckley's is in his, descends on the scene in his backwash. "Can you *believe* this?" she inquires, loosening her jacket. "An absolutely veritable hotbox!" Then, spotting Steibel: "My angel, it's me—the *shiksa*!"

Buckley, glowing in his make-up like the flag of Japan, falls to musing on life's little vanities. "I read a story about Hubert Humphrey," he says. "It claimed he carries a make-up kit around with him and splashes the stuff on him at all times, whether he's going on television or not. What's the story? Does he look terrible without it?" He holds out his hands for coloring, grabs a coffee from the machine, and heads into the studio for the day's first taping—a session on alcoholism, involving a Benedictine monk who is a reformed alcoholic, and a presumed antagonist from the liquor industry.

Five minutes into the program Buckley shoots the floor director a fleeting look of distress, and drops a wig-wagging hand to his side. "Push in on camera three," commands Steibel in the control room. "He's signaling." The distraction, it turns out, is nothing more than a noisy camera blower, but Buckley's problems are barely beginning. The liquor industry man proves elusive in debate, like a nervous lady crossing a freeway, and even Buckley's needling impatience can't provoke him to blunt confrontation. →

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Afterward, gleaming with perspiration, Buckley coasts in for cosmetic repairs. "Wasn't he something?" he asks disbelievingly. "As if his board of directors were up there in the control room ready to drop the guillotine." Simultaneously, the liquor man looms in the doorway, and Buckley, as scrupulously considerate off-camera as he can be witheringly caustic in front of it, changes gears without dropping a syllable. "*God*," he inquires sympathetically, "wasn't it *hot* in there?"

The second event is more promising. Buckley greets Greenfield affectionately—"Hey, buddy! How are you?"—and Newfield agreeably, but doesn't delay drawing blood. It was Greenfield, he remembers in his introduction, who once predicted, in brazen detail, the triumph of Mayor John Lindsay in the Democratic Presidential primaries. "But all of us make mistakes," Buckley concedes aridly. "Some of us more than others."

In debate, Buckley can be lethal in rejoinder, flashing a hypnotically facile vocabulary, and spinning logic in crisp arabesques. Against a windy opponent—earnest, vulnerable, tangled in explanation—his wit is like a jab in the face. Facing someone like Greenfield—bright and mouthy, his equal in cheeky presumption—he has an impulse to swing from the heels. The authors claim big business is disproportionately powerful in America? "Both of *you*," he advises them coolly, "have more power than H. L. Hunt."

The three of them grapple awkwardly for the upper hand, with Buckley trying to pin the writers to the candidacy of Sen. George McGovern, and Newfield and Greenfield resisting. ("We're here to debate our book," cracks Newfield. "Who are you for—Ashbrook or Nixon this week?") If Buckley wants to attack what they think, they insist, he ought to debate what they've written.

"You've probably got in enough commercials for that book to get us kicked off public television," needles Buckley.

"I haven't mentioned the title once," counters Greenfield, "and the one time you mentioned it you got it wrong."

Actually, Buckley is a conscientious researcher who slogs through five or six hours' backgrounding per program despite a self-proclaimed reading disability—"*mis*-er-ably slow," he describes himself, though experts say his 350 words a minute is slightly better than average—and a host of conflicting activities.

As *Firing Line*'s host, Buckley considers himself doubly disadvantaged, in that (1) he must usually argue on topics on which his guests are, presumably, specialists; and that (2) in the absence of a referee, he feels constrained not to lean on his visitors. "One becomes extremely self-conscious," he explains, "about people thinking you're abusing your authority."

For the same reason, Steibel has never edited a tape—not even when black radical Eldridge Cleaver rebelled at Buckley's prodding and announced, "I don't see why I should sit here and take this ----." The producer did ask poet Allen Ginsberg not to use four-letter words on the air, and, happily, Ginsberg complied. Even if he hadn't, Steibel would have been reluctant to censor him. *Firing Line* is a highly charged competition, he feels, and even the slightest editorial doctoring would have a chilling effect on the guest list.

The program works best, says Steibel, when Buckley has an intelligent antagonist—"someone who's as good as he is, and I'm not going to give you the names." Rancor is desirable, but with a masking veneer of civility. Occasionally, the veneer cracks visibly—usually, says Buckley, under the hardened animosity of radicals like Cleaver and lawyer William Kunstler (Buckley has urged his disbarment), who take a grim-minded view of such discourse. When that happens, he feels, the hostility verges on ugliness.

Even so, says Steibel, Buckley isn't intimidated by anyone, and very few guests are off limits. Buckley still refuses to have an out-and-out Communist on the show but tolerates such a zoological variety of revisionists that he wonders now whether his policy can still be defended. Once he thought it would be irresponsible to invite a black militant on the program—a conviction urged on him, he says, by an official of the NAACP—but later amended his view.

Selection, of course, isn't merely a one-sided exercise. Liberal historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. has spurned *Firing Line*'s advances, and so have several heavy political types—Mayor Lindsay, Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, and Sen. J. William Fulbright, among others. Schlesinger's reason was forthright enough—the program was like typhoid, he implied; he didn't want to contribute to spreading it—but most have refused without comment. Some simply dislike Buckley, he realizes, while others have practical reasons.

"A lot of political people are very matter-of-fact," says Buckley, "and they always ask themselves—in a sense, quite properly—what's in it for them. If they walk away from the studio and I'm left in dust, then they have a scalp on their belts. If they *haven't* done that, the chances are slight that they would have won around my constituency, and there's always the possibility of humiliation. A lot of people who sit very, very high up in public esteem don't want to take that kind of chance."

Although Buckley sometimes socializes with potential *Firing Line* adversaries—he recently spent an amiable evening with Senator Kennedy—he never pleads the cause of the program. Steibel feels it's because he doesn't want to impose, but the truth, Buckley confides, is that, in reality, he'd rather not risk the embarrassment.

Temperamentally, Buckley is tough and assured, with a driving competitive vanity. Most *Firing Line* episodes are cordial and unexplosive, but a few hold the promise of gore. "If people are saying things like 'Oh, boy! Buckley vs. McGovern! This ought to be good!' then, inevitably, you ask yourself certain questions," Buckley concedes. The questions, of course, are not literal—just his manner of priming for combat.

The most rewarding guests, in Buckley's view, are those who follow an argument—academicians, mostly—and the adventurous few, like writer Norman Mailer, who are so uninhibited by television that they drop the defenses of rhetoric. "The opposite extreme," he says, "is people who use boiler plate—usually politicians. Everything reminds them of a stock answer, and they simply come out with it and *r-o-l-l-l* with it awhile."

Buckley tries to discourage such flourishes, but his will power to suppress them is fractional. Some guests are quick to feign umbrage, while others roll on unperturbed. A favorite ploy, Buckley maintains, is for a guest to throw himself on the mercy of the audience, giving an impression of abuse and harassment. "Jesse Jackson is very skillful at this," he contends. "'Your 'Mr. Buckley, can't I finish my answer?' kind of thing."

Hypothetically, Buckley defers to the idea that 99 out of 100 people are interesting, and the 100th has the appeal of variety. Realistically, some guests make a 50-minute dialogue expire at the pace of a telethon, and Buckley is resigned to it, ruefully. "On the other hand," he murmurs with a faint feline leer, "television can afford a dead hour, because people are absolutely attuned to it." The leer flashes for an instant with Cheshire-cat candle power, then fades like a smile in the air. "Makes them feel at home," he purrs. END