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## **William F. Buckley the Georgist**

*We bid farewell to a thinker little known for his best thinking*

*by Fred E. Foldvary*

William F. Buckley was a leading American conservative intellectual for half a decade. He died on Feb. 27, 2008 at the age of 82. Buckley founded the National Review magazine, wrote many books and numerous essays, and hosted the television show "Firing Line". Bill Buckley helped bring conservatism into the American mainstream, where it triumphed with the nomination of Barry Goldwater and the election of Ronald Reagan as U.S. president. He helped found the New York State Conservative Party, and in his spare time, Buckley wrote spy novels.

In contrast to many of today's vulgar conservative commentators, Buckley dealt cheerfully yet seriously with ideas and spoke eloquently in debates, using a vocabulary larger than the circumference of the earth.

Few of the news articles on William F. Buckley's life and death mentioned that he was a Georgist, an adherent of the policies espoused by the American economist and social reformer, Henry George. Buckley's intellectual development was influenced strongly by the Georgist libertarians Albert Nock and Frank Chodorov. Buckley's father, William Buckley, Sr., brought scholars to his Connecticut home to privately tutor his children. One of these tutors was Frank Chodorov, who became Buckley's mentor. The father was also a friend of Albert Jay Nock, and encouraged his son to read Nock's works.

Nock and Chodorov were free-marketeters, geolibertarians who recognized and wrote that a truly free market requires public revenue from land rent. Taxes on labor, enterprise, and goods interfere with and hamper the market, whereas tapping land value for public revenue does not burden enterprise and even helps the economy.

Nock and Chodorov were conservative in defending the voluntary market economy from the massive interference of the coercive nanny state, but in

seeking to shift taxation from labor to land, they were radicals. Land-value taxation is conservative, liberal, and radical simultaneously.

In a C-span interview with Brian Lamb in 2000, Buckley quoted Henry George, "The land belongs to those in usufruct." However, Buckley did not actively promote land-value taxation. His right-wing associates opposed taxing land, probably because they recognized that the tapping of land value for public revenue will bring the price of land down to ground-zero, and rich conservatives tend to be big landowners, or they get funded by landed interests.

There are many conservative or free-market thinkers who understand the Georgist rationales for tapping value rather than punishing labor and enterprise and consumption, but are silent. Milton Friedman, for example, understood that the tax on land value was the "least worst," as he put it, but did not speak or write about it. He thought that there was not enough land value to tap.

So ultimately, Georgism was in Buckley's mind but not in his soul. He did not have the Georgist fire that motivates its advocates. The fire in Buckley was anti-communism and an opposition to economic statism. He did not grasp that geolibertarianism was the path that would give the worker his maximum wage and thus wipe out the worker's need to beg favors from the state.

By not promoting what he knew to be the best policy for public finance, Buckley's conservatism became somewhat hollow. If one does not advocate taxing land, one implicitly if not explicitly advocates taxing other things, such as income or goods, and thereby one promotes the statist interference in and destruction of trade and investment. So even though Buckley's conservatism triumphed in politics, it was an empty victory. Conservatism today touts a flat-rate income tax and a national sales tax rather than being grounded in tapping land rent.

Modern statist *liberals* too have this blind spot, seeking to "tax the rich," not differentiating richness from pumped-up land values from the wealth generated by society-enriching entrepreneurship. Liberals and conservatives

both attack the entrepreneur, the worker, and the consumer with their “tax the rich” and “tax the consumer” assaults on the free market.

Had Buckley continued and promoted the legacy of Albert Jay Nock and Frank Chodorov, he would have been one of history’s truly great men. Instead, he is a big man in intellectual thought, just like he was a big man on the Yale campus, but falls short of joining the club of truly great thinkers who shook the world, men like John Locke, Adam Smith, and Henry George.

*This article first appeared in the Progress Report, [www.progress.org](http://www.progress.org). Reprinted with permission. Dr. Fred Foldvary teaches economics at Santa Clara University and is the author of several books: *The Soul of Liberty*, *Public Goods and Private Communities*, and *the Dictionary of Free-Market Economics*.*

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