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**The Buckley-Coffin Crusade:
Preaching the Gospel of Political Ideology to
Yale and America in the 1960s**

Danielle Leah Kehl
Timothy Dwight College
The History Senior Essay
Due April 5, 2010
Advised by Professor Beverly Gage
Yale University



Figure 1: Rev. William Sloane Coffin, Jr. addressing a Yale Campus group. Printed in the Yale Banner, 1970.
Source: Yale Banner Manuscripts & Archives, Yale University.

“To have been at a place where there was a figure of this sort...a person who made the civil rights movement seem not a distant thing but something we ourselves were morally and mentally engaged in, and the same then for the anti-war movement, was I think one of the great experiences of our time.”

*Richard Brodhead, Yale College Class of 1968,
Dean of Yale College from 1993 to 2004,
Current President of Duke University,
May 31, 2003, at ceremony honoring Coffin as
“Permanent Chaplain to the Yale Class of 1968”*

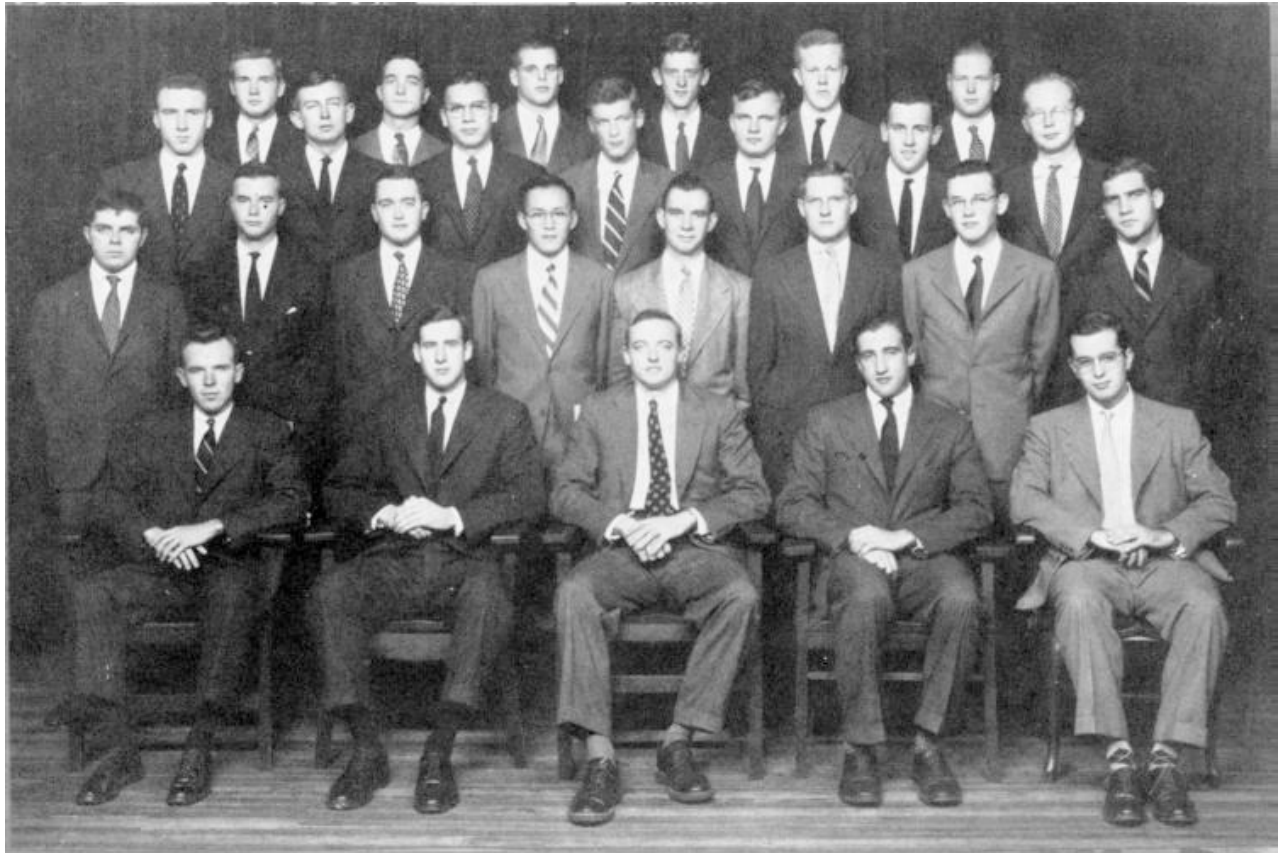


Figure 2: William F. Buckley, Jr. (front row, center) with the Yale Daily News editors and staff. Printed in the Yale Banner, 1950. Source: *Yale Banner Manuscripts & Archives, Yale University*.

“He has the outward and visible sins of the campus radical, and the inward and spiritual qualities of the radical’s wealthy grandfather.”

Dwight MacDonald, “God and Buckley at Yale,” May 1952

“He perceived himself as a bridge between us and the administration and not as someone being in the opposition.”

*M. Stanton Evans, author of the “Sharon Statement,”
to Buckley’s biographer, John B. Judis*

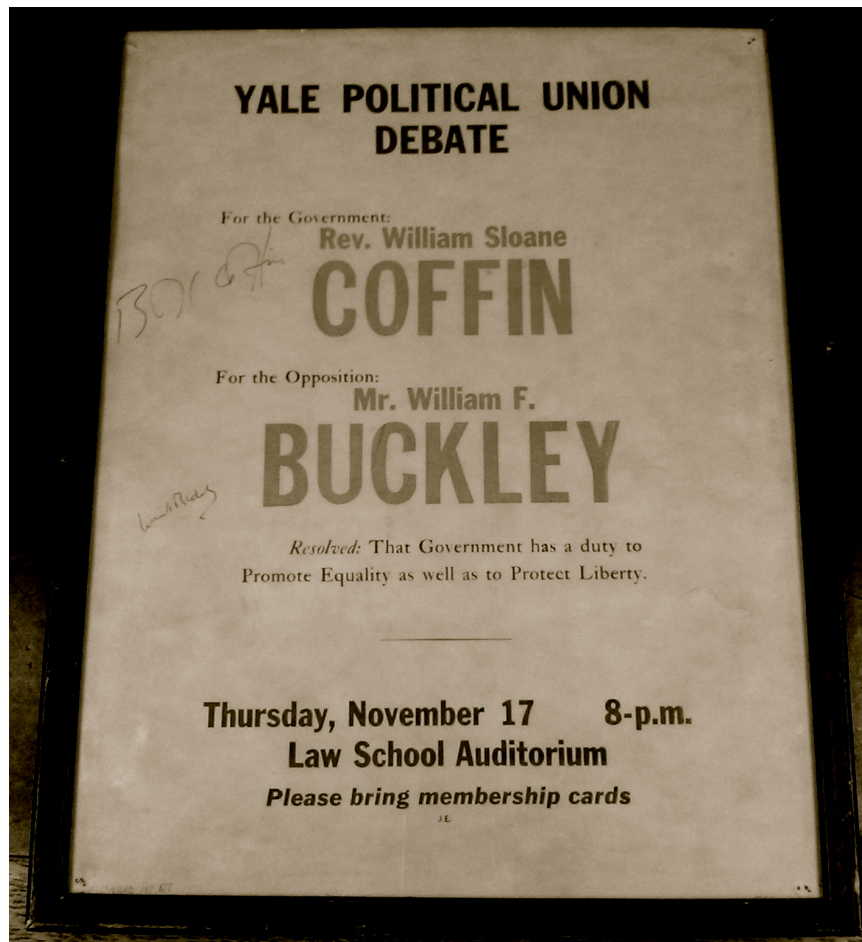


Figure 3: Original poster from the Yale Political Union Debate between William Sloane Coffin Jr. and William F. Buckley Jr., November 17, 1966. Source: Photograph taken of the poster hanging in the Yale Political Union Office by Alexander Martone, YPU President, Fall 2009.

“I could say such nice things about you were you only a good old leftie, things which you might even say about me if I were only a right winger. I imagine, however, the price would be as usual too high.”

William Sloane Coffin Jr., in a letter to William F. Buckley Jr., June 12, 2000

“Our disagreements were heated, and it is through the exercise of much restraint that I forebear doing more than merely to record that they were heated; on my way, heatedly, to record that Bill Coffin was a bird of paradise, and to extend my sympathy to all who, however thoughtlessly, lament his failure to bring the world around to his views.”

William F. Buckley Jr., “Coffin’s Passion Topped Ideology” Yale Daily News, April 14, 2006

I. Introduction

On a crisp evening in November 1966, hundreds of Yalies gathered to watch a fight between representatives of the New Left and the New Right. The spectacle that drew them in, however, was not a street scuffle between student protestors. Rather, the campus buzzed with excitement in anticipation of a debate in the Yale Law School Auditorium. Students lined up in the streets, climbed through windows, and obtained fake press passes, all in order to witness the clash of two ideological titans: the liberal Reverend William Sloane Coffin Jr. and conservative icon William F. Buckley Jr.¹ Trading jabs onstage in front of an audience of Yale Political Union members, faculty, administrators and whoever else had managed to wrangle a space in the room, Coffin and Buckley created quite an unusual scene. They were two Yale alums in their forties, born and bred in similar fashion, pitching their arguments to a group of students half their age with a blend of humor and rhetorical elegance. They had been ideological opponents since their own undergraduate days at Yale and had fired public shots at one another ever since. Now, back in the Yale arena, they faced off in front of an eager crowd on the topic: “Resolved: That Government Has a Duty to Promote Equality As Well as To Protect Liberty.”²

In the Left’s corner stood William Sloane Coffin Jr., a man whose fiery convictions matched the mess of red hair that sat atop his tall, athletic frame. By all accounts, Coffin was a liberal lion. Returning to Yale to fill the chaplain’s post in 1958, less than ten years after he graduated, he had burst onto the national scene in 1961 by organizing the first “freedom ride” that brought white men from the Northeast into the segregated South to protest racial discrimination. Despite numerous calls for his resignation throughout the decade, Coffin found staunch allies in Yale presidents A. Whitney Griswold and later Kingman Brewster, both of

¹ Jeff Greenfield, “Confrontation: The Buckley-Coffin Debate,” *Yale Alumni Magazine*, January 1967: 24-29.

² “Coffin vs. Buckley Tonight: Angry Vassarites to Attend,” *Yale Daily News*, 17 November 1966.

whom rallied behind his right to act even though they frequently disagreed with his tactics. Secure in his post at the university, he showed little hesitation championing controversial moral or ideological issues. He often acted not only as a mentor to the students, but also as an advocate and participant in acts of civil disobedience and other radical tactics.

Weighing in on the Right was William F. Buckley Jr. Charming and smartly dressed, Buckley cut a classic northeastern figure, though his less athletic stance reflected his love for the aristocratic sports of sailing and horseback riding. Like Coffin, he was no stranger to controversy. During his undergraduate days at Yale, one letter to the campus newspaper, the *Yale Daily News*, had called Buckley the “most dangerous undergraduate in the history of Yale” because of the inflammatory editorials he wrote as chairman of the News.³ Barely beyond the shadows of the gothic towers of Yale, he let loose a barrage of criticism at the university with his publication of *God and Man at Yale* in 1951. The book catapulted Buckley into the spotlight as he railed against the liberal faculty at Yale and cemented his position as a proverbial thorn in the side of the Yale administration. He went on to found the *National Review* in 1955, becoming both the face of and one of the most vocal advocates for the modern conservative movement. He facilitated the founding of the Young Americans for Freedom in 1960, and by 1966, he had helped reinvent what it meant to be a conservative in America.

Based on most popular descriptions of the 1960s, the heavy favorite in the debate should have been Coffin. Traditional historical accounts tend to characterize the early 1960s as a distinctive turning point in American history, ushering in a new decade of liberal activism epitomized by the lunch counter sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina in February 1960 and John F. Kennedy’s election the following November. In *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, historian Todd Gitlin writes that in 1960 “suddenly the campus mood seemed to shift...

³ Letter quoted in “Coffin vs. Buckley,” Editorial, *Yale Daily News*, 17 November 1966.

What had been underground flowed to the surface. After all the prologues and precursors, an insurgency materialized, and the climate of opinion began to shift... And then it was as if, all over the country, young people had been waiting for just these signals.”⁴ According to this common narrative, the 1960s were overwhelmingly liberal and on college campuses, the leading centers of political activism and radical protest, the students initiated the cry for change. Indeed, conservatives as well as liberals tended to exaggerate the liberal side of the 1960s, in order to frame their own political efforts throughout the decade as a kind of counter-insurgency to the dominant trends in American political life.⁵ By 1966, therefore, it would be difficult to imagine that any sizable portion of the student population supported the positions of a conservative like William F. Buckley. He represented everything that William Sloane Coffin was not: an unapologetic Old Blue who opposed government intervention on behalf of civil rights, supported the war in Vietnam, argued against nuclear disarmament, and wanted Yale to remain a traditional destination for prep school students and the elite.

However, an overwhelming liberal bias was not, in reality, prevalent among the audience at the Buckley-Coffin debate or in the student population at large in 1966. Rather, the common one-sided characterization of the political landscape during the decade drastically overstates both the influence of liberals and the sympathies of the generation coming of age in the 1960s.

Although Kennedy and then Lyndon Johnson occupied the White House until 1968, liberal Democrats did not hold a sizeable majority in the legislative branch of US government for most of the decade.⁶ Similarly, while student leadership on the left successfully mobilized thousands of supporters to protest unequal civil rights and the war in Vietnam, a large contingent of activist

⁴ Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1987), 81.

⁵ Ben Agger, *The Sixties at 40: Leaders and Activists Remember and Look Forward* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2009), 1-5.

⁶ Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 47-8.

conservative student leaders emerged on college campuses across the country as well. The Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), one of the leading national liberal student organizations in the 1960s, were countered by the presence of the conservative-minded Young Americans for Freedom (YAF), whose chapters spread across the country at a pace that matched SDS. Thousands of young conservatives in the 1960s worshipped Barry Goldwater instead of John F. Kennedy; they read the *National Review*, not the *New Republic*, and they found meaning in the Sharon Statement, the YAF statement of principles produced in 1960, two years prior to the publication of SDS's manifesto, the Port Huron Statement.⁷

These statements reveal a parallel set of concerns and a commitment to promote change among the leaders of the prevailing youth movements. Despite their ideological differences, student leaders on both sides shared a strong sense of optimism that their respective visions for the future would ultimately win out.⁸ For many of the students clamoring to gain access to the Yale Law School Auditorium, conservative and liberals alike offered viable possibilities for the future, and although a majority of the students trended toward the left in the late 1960s, they were generally receptive to the ideas of student and adult leaders on both sides of the ideological spectrum.⁹

Thus the story of William Sloane Coffin Jr. and William F. Buckley Jr. sheds some light on the complexity of student politics in the 1960s, challenging the simplistic historical analysis so often applied to the period. In large measure, liberal and conservative student movements evolved, like Buckley and Coffin, in conversation with one another in the 1960s, with roots that

⁷ Rebecca Klatch, *A Generation Divided: The New Left, the New Right, and the 1960s* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 2-3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 30-1.

⁹ Jay Gitlin, Interview with the Author, March 2010. Gitlin, Yale Class of 1971 and a scholar of the period, remarked that most Yale students in the mid and late 1960s were not particularly ideological or drawn to radical positions. Rather, many had liberal leanings, but were open to the ideas being promoted by both Buckley and Coffin. "The vast majority were normal Yalies—very centrist and a little liberal... We thought that there were things that needed to be changed, and we were listening," he said.

extended back to the beginning of the decade and before. Moreover, these movements did not emerge organically on college campuses, in a sphere free of adult influences.¹⁰ Rather, many of these student visionaries found their mission with the encouragement and support of generational mentors like Coffin and Buckley. The goal of this paper is to use the Buckley-Coffin story—one that has largely been left unexplored—as a framework for examining the interplay between the New Left and the New Right in the 1960s among college students.¹¹ It will show how the campus climate was simultaneously an important part of and shaped by the larger conversation that men like Coffin and Buckley had already been a part of on a national level: a debate over how America would respond to the challenges of the post-war decades and define itself for the future.

II. The Early Years: Growing Up Buckley and Coffin

To understand the Buckley-Coffin story in its entirety, we must first explore the parallels in their backgrounds. Both William Sloane Coffin Jr. and William F. Buckley Jr. were born in New York City in the mid-1920s and raised in prominent families that valued intellectual rigor and broad cultural exposure. Before crossing paths as undergraduates at Yale, each man had lived abroad with his family and done a brief stint in the army in the later years of World War II. Buckley entered Yale as a freshman in the fall of 1946; Coffin, eighteen months his senior, arrived the following year, but with the college credits he had already earned, he was awarded

¹⁰ Isserman and Kazin, *America Divided*, 166-7.

¹¹ This paper will rely on the broad definitions of the New Left and New Right described in Chapters 15 and 16 of Jean-Christophe Agnew and Ray Rosenzweig's *A Companion to Post-1945 America*. As such, I will treat them as complex, fluid movements that developed largely in response to the threat of communism posed by the rise of the Soviet Union in the early 1950s. These represent a break from earlier movements on the left and the right before World War II (often referred to as the Old Left and the Old Right) and encompass a variety of forms of the liberal (in the case of the New Left) and conservative (for the New Right) ideological responses to communism, as well as other overlapping social movements that became prevalent in the 1950s and 1960s.

junior standing.¹² From the fall of 1947 to Coffin's graduation in 1949, Coffin and Buckley, both leaders among their classmates, frequently came into contact with one another in the Yale academic and extracurricular scene. Coffin recalled that they shared a love of the piano that brought them together socially, and Buckley invited him to his family's estate on several occasions during their undergraduate days.¹³ Coffin pursued this passion for music and became president of the Yale Glee Club, while Buckley set his sights on the chairmanship of the *Yale Daily News* early in his freshman year and easily ascended to the coveted position by a unanimous vote in his sophomore year. In their senior years, each man was inducted into Skull and Bones, the elite of Yale's secret societies.

Despite their successes, neither Coffin nor Buckley had a "typical" experience as an undergraduate at Yale. In large measure this was because the university at that time was not the same place it had been a generation earlier. The war had vastly changed the landscape of American life in the 1940s, and Yale was no exception. As undergraduate enrollment steadily dropped during the height of America's involvement in World War II, Yale opened its doors to the military and established the Army Air Force Technical Training School in January 1943. That February, three thousand cadets, officers, and instructors swarmed the campus, permanently altering the fabric of undergraduate life during those years.¹⁴ After the war ended, the civilian undergraduate population spiked once again, forcing a number of rapid changes to accommodate the shift. Consequently, Yale in the late 1940s was in the process of re-establishing itself and adjusting the curriculum and campus to the pace of civilian life once again after the tumult of war. Many veterans, like Coffin and Buckley, were already in their twenties by the time they

¹² Warren Goldstein, *William Sloane Coffin Jr.: A Holy Impatience* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 11, 24-35, 65; John B. Judis, *William F. Buckley Jr.: Patron Saint of the Conservatives* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 25-33, 46-52.

¹³ Garry Wills, "Buckley Buckley Bow Wow Wow," *Esquire*, January 1968: 72-76.

¹⁴ Brooks Mather Kelley, *Yale: A History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974), 397-400.

matriculated. Some were in serious relationships or even married. They approached their undergraduate experience having already witnessed much more than the New England prep school scene.¹⁵ This reality echoed a larger sense of upheaval in the rest of the country. Millions of veterans returned home to discover that a great deal had changed in their absence, both in their personal lives and politically. A far cry from the isolationist country struggling to pull itself out of the Great Depression before the war, America was now a powerful player on the world stage, and at the same time already was reacting to the threat of communism and a polarizing climate of fear and distrust at home.

It was in this setting that these two men of similar background and experience first began to define themselves ideologically. As an undergraduate, Coffin wrestled privately with his own spirituality and with the new phenomenon of liberal anti-communism.¹⁶ Like many Americans, he questioned whether the old ways of dealing with the world adequately addressed the new challenges created by World War II. He primarily confined these thoughts to his own writing, however, while he attracted attention from university elders for his intelligence and future potential.¹⁷ Buckley, on the other hand, made his beliefs more public. He came to Yale intending to become a leader and eager to voice his opinions. Although he achieved many of the hallmarks of success at Yale, he also constantly sought to create conflict, arguing that the university was promoting dangerously liberal values in the post-war climate. Buckley saw himself as a “counterrevolutionary,” and he challenged the dominant brand of moderate Republicanism that supported the existing way of American life in the face of a growing communist threat. During

¹⁵ Kelley, *Yale: A History*, 405-9; Interviews with Yale alumni quoted in Robert Tice Lalka, “Surviving the Death of God: Existentialism, God and Man at Post-WWII Yale” (Senior Essay, Yale University, 2005), 6-7.

¹⁶ Liberal anti-communism was a phenomenon borne primarily in the aftermath of World War II. In the 1920s and 1930s, anti-communism was generally associated with conservative politics, and many members of the Old Left actually had Communist sympathies themselves. After World War II, however, most liberals recognized the threat of communism to the American way of life, and wrestled with ways to prevent its spread. See Christopher Lasch, *The Agony of the American Left* (New York: Vintage Books, 1969).

¹⁷ Goldstein, *A Holy Impatience*, 65-69.

his tenure as chairman of the *Yale Daily News*, he wrote some of the most inflammatory editorials in the history of the student newspaper, openly criticizing the administration, faculty, and his fellow students. He rejected liberal anti-communism and argued that the United States needed a more militant response to the communism threat. Most of his positions were quite unpopular, but he won the respect of his classmates and administrators for his talent as a writer and orator nonetheless.¹⁸

In February 1950, administrators approached Buckley to give the student speech at Yale's Alumni Day celebration, an honor that had gone to Coffin the previous year. Traditionally, the purpose of the speech was to give the alumni a taste of Yale's current undergraduate population.¹⁹ While reassuring the alumni that “the Yale blue is not turning pink”—implying that students were not turning soft on communism—Coffin had discussed the new and often difficult challenges he and his classmates faced as part of the post-war generation. “We are grateful to those at Yale equally concerned with these problems,” he said in his speech, “and particularly to the University policy of what President Seymour has called ‘free and untrammelled inquiry.’”²⁰ His remarks, which reflected Coffin's inner thoughts as well as the broader sentiments of his classmates, were generally well received. He addressed some of the major issues of the day while portraying Yale in 1949 as a place that prepared its students to face these challenges.

Buckley, by contrast, decided he would use the podium the next year to criticize Yale for its shortcomings as an educational institution. Though Coffin had praised Seymour's policy of “free and untrammelled inquiry,” Buckley planned to attack it. He wrote that “Yale imposes little

¹⁸ Judis, *Patron Saint of the Conservatives*, 53-68.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 76.

²⁰ William Sloane Coffin Jr., “A Student's Report,” February 22, 1949, the William Sloane Coffin Papers (henceforth, “Coffin Papers”), Series IV, Box 40, Folder 23, Yale University Manuscripts and Archives, New Haven, CT.

directed discipline, because Yale's mission is not articulate except in so far as an agglomeration of words about enlightened thought and action, freedom and democracy, serve to define [it]."²¹ University administrators were appalled when they found out and asked Buckley to revise his remarks a few days before the event. Unwilling to compromise his main point, Buckley made some small changes, citing time constraints. As a gesture of courtesy, he offered to withdraw as a speaker if there were still objections, assuming that the administration would let him give the speech rather than have to scramble to find a replacement on the eve of the event. To his great surprise, however, Yale President Charles Seymour readily accepted the offer.²²

The contrast between their two experiences speaks to some of the early contrasts between Buckley and Coffin. Before the Alumni Day rebuke, Buckley had been a considerably more provocative student leader than Coffin had been, but neither was radical enough to be considered a serious threat. Each man embraced traditional leadership roles in the student body, even if they used their positions to voice opinions that were not as generally held. The speech that Coffin penned, however, generated little discussion afterward. He remembered himself as "a good deal left of center," but he never displayed the same boldness that Buckley showed as an undergraduate.²³ By contrast, Buckley knew when he wrote his speech that it would anger the administration, though he failed to predict the degree of their anger.²⁴

After graduation, both found the CIA attractive—for each man put his opposition to communism above larger ideological differences, and the CIA at that time appealed to Ivy

²¹ William F. Buckley, Jr., "Undelivered Address Prepared by the Author for the Yale Alumni Day, February 1950," in William F. Buckley, Jr., *God and Man at Yale*, (Chicago: H. Regnery Co., 1951), Appendix F.

²² Judis, *Patron Saint of the Conservatives*, 77-8.

²³ Goldstein, *A Holy Impatience*, 68.

²⁴ In fact, when the secretary of the university, Carl Lohman, asked Buckley to submit the speech before the event, Buckley had initially refused. He later called Coffin to ask him if they had made the same request the previous year. Coffin recalled that it never occurred to him until he received Buckley's phone call a year after his own speech that Lohman's intent might have been to censor him. "[B]ut, considering what happened to Bill, I guess he was right," he said. "They didn't let him give his talk." Quoted in Wills, "Buckley, Buckley, Bow Wow Wow".

League liberals and conservatives alike for its intellectual rigor and promise of adventure.²⁵ They gravitated back toward Yale as well. Coffin would return to the Yale Divinity School from 1953 to 1956 and, shortly thereafter, take up the position of university chaplain in 1958 under Seymour's successor, Griswold. Buckley returned sooner, but as a critic. While working as a Spanish teacher at Yale and living in New Haven in 1951, he penned *God and Man at Yale*, which expanded upon the arguments of his undelivered Alumni Day speech to criticize the doctrine of academic freedom at Yale in particular and modern universities in general.²⁶

III. From *God and Man at Yale* to the Godfather of Modern Conservatism: William F. Buckley Jr. in the 1950s

Though William F. Buckley had spent much of the 1940s trying to succeed at Yale, he made a name for himself in the early 1950s by ripping his alma mater apart in *God and Man at Yale*. The basic premise of the book was the rejection of the laissez-faire theory of education and the doctrine of academic freedom, which had become benchmark standards at American universities in the twentieth century. One of its earlier advocates, Alexander Meiklejohn, the president of Amherst College from 1913 to 1923, explained that academic freedom meant, “the college has no list of dogmas or doctrines which it seeks to teach... The only genuine pedagogic sin I know is that of dragging our students by the nose to preconceived conclusions, blinding their eyes to paths that lead on this side or on that toward truth, and yet pretending that we are leading them into the ways of human thought.”²⁷ Essentially, the doctrine held that scholars could not be told what to study or teach, and that they should be judged on the quality, not substance of their works. It protected professors from being forced to sign loyalty oaths or losing

²⁵ Judis, *Patron Saint of the Conservatives*, 80.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 83.

²⁷ Alexander Meiklejohn, *The Liberal College* (Boston, MA: Marshall Jones Company, 1920), 91.

their jobs for teaching Darwinism over Creationism, for example. In *God and Man at Yale*, Buckley cited several specific examples of what he considered hypocrisy in Yale's application of the theory—including the termination of several communist professors in the 1930s—and broadly rejected its underlying premise.²⁸ He argued that education should teach students previously discovered truths alone. He proposed that universities separate research from teaching completely, to ensure that scientific progress and advances in knowledge would not be impeded by the shift back toward their traditional, theological roots. Buckley gave the authority to determine what should be taught to the alumni, whom he saw as entitled by virtue of their right to elect the Yale Corporation that governed the school.²⁹

When it was published in late October 1951, *God and Man at Yale* propelled Buckley and Yale into the national spotlight. As a Yale insider and student leader, his criticism of the university carried significant weight, and his claims could not be easily dismissed, although many Yale administrators and prominent alumni were quick to try. His critics suggested that he was misguided or childish, and a few even went so far as to attempt to use Buckley's Catholicism to undermine his credibility.³⁰ This backlash, moreover, was not limited to liberals. Numerous conservatives challenged Buckley's radical proposals and disagreed with his definition of what it meant to be a conservative.³¹ Outside of Yale and the northeast, nonetheless, many sympathized with Buckley's criticism of the elite American universities. By the end of November 1951, the book had sold twelve thousand copies and climbed to number sixteen on the *New York Times* bestseller list.³²

²⁸ Buckley, *God and Man at Yale*, 131-4.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 173-7.

³⁰ Judis, *Patron Saint of the Conservatives*, 92-4.

³¹ Geoffrey Kabaservice, *The Guardians: Kingman Brewster, His Circle, and the Rise of the Liberal Establishment* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 2004), 132-3.

³² Judis, *Patron Saint of the Conservatives*, 92.

God and Man at Yale also made Buckley a household name, and he intrigued many Americans who were puzzled by his background and ideological agenda. Dwight Macdonald, a well-known leftist Yale alum, described him as an enigma with “the outward and visible signs of the campus radical, and the inward and spiritual qualities of the radical’s wealthy grandfather.”³³ In 1953, Buckley and L. Brent Bozell, his Yale classmate and brother-in-law, began working on an equally sensational new project: a defense of Wisconsin Senator Joe McCarthy’s anti-communist crusade, titled *McCarthy and His Enemies*.³⁴ The book attempted to address what they believed were the most credible liberal objections to his strategy in a fair and balanced way. “To the extent that McCarthyism, out of ignorance or impetuosity or malice, urges the imposition of sanctions upon persons who are *not* pro-Communist or security risks, we should certainly oppose it,” they wrote, but on the whole defended the embattled politician.³⁵ The book was, in fact, more moderate in tone than most who defended McCarthy.³⁶ Even so, *McCarthy and His Enemies* made a splash, largely because it came out in March of 1954, a month before the Army-McCarthy hearings, which was both the apex of McCarthy’s fame and the beginning of his unceremonious fall from power. Buckley and Bozell suddenly received countless invitations to speak, debate, and appear on radio and television. Moreover, Buckley—who had become a virtual pariah at Yale after *God and Man at Yale*—was invited back with Bozell to debate two law school professors, Vern Countryman and Fowler Harper.³⁷ For Buckley, the debate was another defining moment in his relationship with his alma mater. When he first took the stage,

³³ Dwight Macdonald, “God and Buckley at Yale,” *The Reporter*, 27 May 1952, quoted in Judis, 97.

³⁴ Judis, *Patron Saint of the Conservatives*, 105.

³⁵ William F. Buckley and L. Brent Bozell, *McCarthy and His Enemies* (Chicago: H. Regnery Co., 1954), 335.

³⁶ Robert R. Tomes, *Apocalypse Then: American Intellectuals and the Vietnam War* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 20.

³⁷ Judis, *Patron Saint of the Conservatives*, 109.

his reception was chilly, but the crowd quickly warmed up to the charismatic Buckley. By the end of the debate he had won at the very least the respect of the audience, if not its support.³⁸

While *McCarthy and His Enemies* could not save McCarthy, it did bolster Buckley's fame as a conservative crusader in his own right. At a time when the American conservative movement floundered from lack of support and momentum, he decided to start a publication to voice conservative opinions. With his father's personal and financial support, Buckley began fundraising for and staffing a right-wing political magazine in 1954, to be called the *National Review*.³⁹ A year later, the efforts of Buckley and several dozen others came to fruition in the inaugural issue, published on November 19, 1955. Buckley prefaced the issue with a mission statement that addressed the position of a conservative publication in an era where moderate Republicans and Democrats dominated the political conversation. He wrote that the magazine "stands athwart history, yelling Stop, at a time when no one is inclined to do so... *National Review* is out of place, in the sense that the United Nations and the League of Women Voters and the *New York Times* and Henry Steele Commager are in place."⁴⁰ In its early years, the magazine criticized the Eisenhower administration and the idea of moderate consensus; it condemned communism and the welfare state; and it supported the rights of southerners to ignore the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and resist integration. Like Buckley, the magazine often provoked its opponents while attempting to redefine conservatism as a more radical ideology that challenged, rather than protected, the status quo.⁴¹ Among other things, Buckley is credited with

³⁸ "McCarthy Debate," *Yale Daily News*, 16 April 1954.

³⁹ Judis, *Patron Saint of the Conservatives*, 114-21.

⁴⁰ William F. Buckley, Jr., "Our Mission Statement," *National Review*, 19 November 1955.

⁴¹ Judis, *Patron Saint of the Conservatives*, 132-5.

coining and defining the term “liberal establishment”—which he later used to label Yale President Kingman Brewster and his ilk—in the pages of *National Review*.⁴²

In 1960, with his own career firmly established, Buckley devoted time explicitly to college students for the first time since *God and Man at Yale*, when he helped to found the Young Americans for Freedom. Believing that liberal faculty and administrators increasingly marginalized conservative students on college campuses, he urged members of the Interim Committee for a National Conservative Youth Organization, led by students Doug Caddy and David Francke, to invite conservative college leaders from across the country to his family’s estate in Sharon, Connecticut, for a three-day conference. “America stands at a crossroads today,” they wrote to 120 prominent conservative students in August 1960. “Will our Nation continue to follow the path towards socialism or will we turn towards Conservatism and freedom? The final answer to this question lies with America’s youth... Now is the time for Conservative youth to take action to make their full force and influence felt.”⁴³ Their cry echoed the mission statement that Buckley himself had penned for the *National Review* half a decade earlier. On September 11, 1960, about 90 of them arrived at Buckley’s home, and set to work crafting a statement of conservative principles.⁴⁴ The assembled students came primarily from wealthier backgrounds and belonged to Young Republican organizations at major universities, including Yale.⁴⁵ They eventually became one of the largest conservative student organizations

⁴² Kabaservice, *The Guardians*, 12. Buckley defined the “liberal establishment” as the network of individuals, institutions, and ideas that he was fighting in “his quest to revive conservatism in postwar America.”

⁴³ Letter from Douglas Caddy to Robert Croll, 16 August 1960. Copy in the William F. Buckley Papers (henceforth “Buckley Papers”), Part I, Box 12, YAF Folder, Yale University Manuscripts and Archives, New Haven, CT.

⁴⁴ John M. Andrew, *The Other Side of the Sixties: Young Americans for Freedom and the Rise of Conservative Politics* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 56-7.

⁴⁵ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 41; Andrew, *The Other Side of the Sixties*, 54-6.

in the 1960s, playing an integral role in Barry Goldwater's run for the presidency in 1964, and demonstrating in opposition to liberal student groups like SDS throughout the decade.⁴⁶

Buckley's role in the YAF's founding was different than one might expect. Though he facilitated the gathering, he urged the students to guide the agenda and to make their own decisions. At the end of the weekend, he reviewed the statement that they had written and made a few minor changes. Beyond that, however, he preferred to remain on the periphery once he had set things in motion.⁴⁷ Going forward, Buckley maintained a similar relationship to the YAF. He appeared confident in the strength of the students' conservative principles and their ability to succeed without his help. A few weeks after the conference, he expressed those sentiments in *National Review*, indicating that he saw the YAF's youth and vitality as integral to the future of the conservative movement. "[W]hat is so striking in the students who met at Sharon is their appetite for power...the world continues to go left, but all over the land dumbfounded professors are remarking the extraordinary revival of hard conservative sentiment in the student bodies... They talk about *affecting* history," he wrote.⁴⁸ Yet Buckley's impact on the group was undeniable. Many of the students, like conservative journalist Lee Edwards, admitted that his mentorship lent a sense of purpose to the conference that it otherwise would have lacked.⁴⁹ Each year, Buckley received hundreds of letters from YAF chapters springing up across the country with requests for advice or assistance. One group even proposed to pay homage to the

⁴⁶ Linda Bridges and John R. Coyne Jr., *Strictly Right: William F. Buckley Jr. and the American Conservative Movement* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2007), 71-2.

⁴⁷ Judis, *Patron Saint of the Conservatives*, 190; Andrew, *The Other Side of the Sixties*, 63.

⁴⁸ William F. Buckley, "The Ivory Tower: The Young Americans for Freedom," *The National Review*, 24 September 1960.

⁴⁹ Judis, *Patron Saint of the Conservatives*, 189.

conservative giant by naming their chapter after him.⁵⁰ By 1964, YAF had more than 350 chapters and 30,000 members.⁵¹

Meanwhile, Buckley continued to expand his own influence on the American public at large. In early 1962, the Universal Press Syndicate offered him a column, “On the Right.” It allowed him to reach a much wider national audience than those who subscribed to the *National Review* or actively sought out his opinions.⁵² By the mid-1960s, “On the Right” appeared three times a week in 205 newspapers across the country, making Buckley’s name synonymous with conservative opinion for many Americans.⁵³ He was a key player in the Goldwater campaign in 1964, working closely with the YAF to organize grassroots support for the conservative’s candidacy.⁵⁴ And following his own unsuccessful run as a third-party candidate for the mayor of New York City in 1965, Buckley became the host of a television talk show called *Firing Line with William Buckley*, where he sparred with hundreds of prominent liberal and conservative guests—including William Sloane Coffin—over the next few decades.⁵⁵ He also continued to accept speaking engagements across the country, frequently sought out by college students. Known for his provocative statements and engaging oratory, he became a veritable campus celebrity and regular presence at schools nationwide. In September 1967, for example, three thousand Rutgers students filled the school gymnasium to capacity on a Friday night to hear him speak about “The Responsibility of the Students.”⁵⁶ He had, by that point, firmly established

⁵⁰ Letter from Steven Bergath, March 20, 1965, Buckley Papers, Part I, Box 37, YAF Folder; See Part I, Box 41 and Part I, Box 46 for YAF letters from 1966 and 1967.

⁵¹ Michael Flamm, “The Liberal-Conservative Debates of the 1960s,” in Michael Flamm and David Steigerwald, *Debating the 1960s: Liberal, Conservative, and Radical Perspectives* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2008), 103.

⁵² Bridges, *Strictly Right*, 74.

⁵³ “Columnists: The Sniper,” *Time Magazine*, 3 November 1967.

⁵⁴ Judis, *Patron Saint of the Conservatives*, 221-5.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 259.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 264.

himself as the godfather of the modern conservative movement and a mentor to both students and adults.

IV. The Intellectual and Spiritual Journey of William Sloane Coffin Jr.: From the CIA to the CALCAV

While Buckley's political and ideological beliefs were splashed across the national media in the 1950s, Coffin opted for a much less conspicuous path. After graduating from Yale in 1949, he spent a year at Union Theological Seminary before the United States' escalating role in the Korean War conflict pulled him back into the service of his country. He joined the CIA in 1950 and spent the next two years abroad, recruiting, preparing, and training Soviet émigrés to spy on behalf of the United States in the USSR.⁵⁷ Then, just as he had after World War II, he quietly resumed his studies at the Yale Divinity School. His ability to throw himself into the fast-paced and dangerous lifestyle of the CIA and then turn around and pick up where he had left off in seminary demonstrated the relationship between his personal drive and the causes he believed in. Though he was content with his chosen path toward a religious life, he rarely shied away from a fight, an attitude which colored his experience at the Yale Divinity School and beyond. Studying under intellectuals like Richard Niebuhr, the younger brother of Reinhold Niebuhr and an authority on theology and ethics in his own right, Coffin began to see his faith as a means to make a difference.⁵⁸ In his second year, he focused on chaplaincy and began working under Yale Chaplain A. Sidney Lovett, whose post he would eventually fill.

Coffin graduated in 1956 and accepted a position as the chaplain of Phillips Academy. The year he spent at Andover sparked an involvement in student affairs that would last for some

⁵⁷ Goldstein, *A Holy Impatience*, 76-7.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 86-8.

twenty years. In one memorable moment, Coffin watched a group of students sitting at breakfast who got up and moved away when another student put his tray down with them. During chapel that day, the enraged Coffin lectured them on conformity and nastiness. Years later, another student recalled the incident clearly, saying, “What was remarkable for me was Coffin’s fury...I was amazed that an adult could care so much what we did to each other.”⁵⁹ The following year, he became chaplain of Williams College, where he continued to demonstrate interest in the moral and social affairs that governed the students’ lives. He expressed his concern about the negative aspects of the fraternity scene on campus as well as the institutionalized discrimination against Jewish students.⁶⁰ At the same time, he also sought to make broader issues relevant. The Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., famous after the 1955 Montgomery bus boycotts, piqued Coffin’s interest, and he watched closely as the events in Little Rock, Arkansas, unfolded in 1957. Struck by President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s decision to deploy the U.S. Army to protect the rights of black children to attend Central High School, Coffin looked at the insular Williams community and sought to shake up what he saw as a complacent attitude toward moral and religious issues outside of the college.⁶¹ His major criticism of modern education was that it placed insufficient emphasis on ethics and values.

Frustrated with life in rural, western Massachusetts, Coffin began looking elsewhere just a few months after his arrival in Williamstown.⁶² In the spring of 1958, opportunity presented itself in the retirement of Coffin’s former mentor, A. Sidney Lovett. After pursuing several older candidates for the chaplain’s job, Yale president A. Whitney Griswold, at the urging of several faculty members, including Lovett himself, took another look at the young Coffin for the

⁵⁹ Quoted in Goldstein, *A Holy Impatience*, 98.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 100-2.

⁶¹ William Sloane Coffin, Jr. *Once To Every Man: A Memoir* (New York: Atheneum, 1977), 129-31.

⁶² Goldstein, *A Holy Impatience*, 102.

position.⁶³ In March, he offered the chaplaincy to Coffin, who quickly accepted. “I didn’t go through the ritual self-abasement...I didn’t even ask the salary. Fearful that he might change his mind I said, ‘Yes,’ immediately,” Coffin recalled.⁶⁴ At just 33 years old, he joined the Yale faculty with the intention of reinvigorating the position that Lovett had held for the past 26 years. Under Lovett’s tenure the chaplaincy had been a primarily ceremonial and pastoral position; there had been few religious programs at Yale and the chaplain rarely took a stand on major campus issues. After settling into the job, however, Coffin moved in a much more active direction. Early on, he busied himself by fighting to increase the number of Jewish students and students from poorer nations of the world in the university population.⁶⁵

In addition to lobbying the administration for changes, Coffin began working closely with students themselves. In the summer of 1959, Dr. James Robinson of Crossroads Africa approached him to lead a trip of fifteen students to Guinea, as part of a program that recruited interracial groups of students to travel to newly independent African countries.⁶⁶ In early 1961, he accepted President John F. Kennedy’s offer to join the Peace Corps National Advisory Council; that summer, at the behest of Sargent Shriver, he agreed to lead a group of students to Puerto Rico and establish a training institute there for the Peace Corps.⁶⁷ The experiences reaffirmed Coffin’s belief in the power of the students. He returned from Guinea impressed by the caliber of the students and their ability to act as representatives of the United States in Africa; moreover, he wrote that he was awed by the influence of the American civil rights movement in

⁶³ Letter from A. Sydney Lovett, February 28, 1958, the Alfred Whitney Griswold, President of Yale University, Records, Series I, Box 49, Folder 458, Yale University Manuscripts and Archives, New Haven, CT.

⁶⁴ Coffin, *Once to Every Man*, 133.

⁶⁵ Goldstein, *A Holy Impatience*, 104-6.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 108-9.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 129. See David Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams: America in the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994), 41-2, for more on the founding of the Peace Corps and its goals of promoting economic development throughout the third world and educating young Americans to live and serve in those countries.

places outside the United States.⁶⁸ For Coffin, this was a major turning point. He realized that the rest of the world was watching the civil rights battle going on in America with great interest, and that what individuals did in the struggle over desegregation mattered not only locally, but nationally and sometimes internationally as well.

Not long after, Coffin became one of those national figures himself by throwing himself headfirst into the debate over civil rights and the non-violent non-cooperation movement. When the vicious beatings received by a young, interracial group of freedom riders in Alabama made national headlines in May of 1961, Coffin and Wesleyan professor John Maguire decided to organize their own freedom ride to protest the injustice of segregation in the South.⁶⁹ Because Coffin, Maguire, and the group they recruited would include the first white, northern intellectuals to join a movement that had previously been dominated by students and African-Americans, their trip generated national interest. Coffin emerged as the group's spokesperson, and his privileged background and connections to Yale made him particularly intriguing. The *New York Times* dubbed him the "Bus-Riding Chaplain."⁷⁰ By the time he and the other riders were arrested in Montgomery, Alabama, they were part of a media firestorm. When Coffin returned to Yale, he was greeted by articles and features on the trip, editorials and letters both applauding and denigrating him, and a slew of Yale alumni and administrators to answer.⁷¹ Just as *God and Man at Yale* had done for Buckley in 1951, the freedom ride fundamentally altered Coffin's relationship to Yale and his position in American political and social dialogue.

The freedom ride emboldened Coffin. In a *Life* magazine feature printed after he returned to New Haven, Coffin discussed why he believed it was his responsibility as an American and as

⁶⁸ Coffin, *Once to Every Man*, 141-3.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 150-1.

⁷⁰ "Bus Riding Chaplain," *The New York Times*, 25 May 1961.

⁷¹ For articles and correspondence on Coffin and the freedom rides, see the Coffin papers, Series I, Box 13, Folder 266-269; Box 21, Folder 88.

a Christian to get involved in the civil rights movement.⁷² He argued that racial discrimination was relevant to everyone, whether or not it directly affected them. Coffin returned to the idea that there were no “outsiders” on certain moral issues constantly throughout the 1960s. He also knew that despite numerous calls for his resignation, he had Griswold’s support. Consequently, he sought to facilitate more direct student involvement in the civil rights movement, urging them to travel south to places like Mississippi to participate in the “Freedom Summer” and related voter registration activities. Though some students—and parents—expressed concern that they were putting themselves in danger, Coffin continued to encourage them. He recalled, “My concern was that all Yale graduates make the most of themselves... [T]he time had come to really take on this terrible social problem, this evil [of racial discrimination]... Yale as a place of obvious privilege had a kind of special responsibility. And if Yale does something, that casts a mantle of respectability over the discussion.”⁷³

The freedom ride also turned him into a sought-after public figure and a moral authority to whom many students looked for guidance. In 1962, *Life* magazine featured him as one of the “Red Hot One Hundred: One Hundred of the Most Important Young Men and Women in the U.S.” in a special issue on “The Take-Over Generation.”⁷⁴ His weekly sermons at Yale’s Battell Chapel received greater attention outside of the Yale community, and *The Boston Globe* even published a copy of the letter he wrote to the incoming freshmen class one year because it was so striking.⁷⁵ He appeared before Yale student groups and was a regular on the radio program “Yale

⁷² “Why the Yale Chaplain Rode: Christians Can’t Be Outside,” *Life Magazine*, May 1961, from the Coffin Papers, Accession 2004-M-09, Box 9, Folder 113.

⁷³ Interview with William S. Coffin, 1992, Black and Blue: Yale Volunteers in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement Collection, Accession 1993-A-057, Box 3, Folder 7, Yale University Manuscripts and Archives, New Haven, CT.

⁷⁴ “The Take-Over Generation,” *Life*, 14 September 1964.

⁷⁵ Goldstein, *A Holy Impatience*, 133.

Reports,” discussing issues like civil disobedience and the role of the law in American society.⁷⁶ Moreover, he became one of the best-known chaplains in the country, speaking at both ceremonial and informal gatherings on college campuses nationwide. More so than ever before, he urged students toward activism and preached his own theology of equality and civil rights.

By the mid-1960s, his message had spread to the war in Vietnam. He defended the rights of students to protest in 1964 and early 1965 even while he continued to form his own personal views on the morality of the war. Coffin was initially unsure if the war’s anti-communist aims were enough for him to overlook the mistreatment of the Vietnamese and the rising number of casualties.⁷⁷ In the summer of 1964, standing on the steps of the chaplain’s house, he explained his conflicted feelings to another young member of the Yale faculty. He said that had been willing to break local laws in the name of civil rights because he was confident in the morality of the cause and knew that the Supreme Court and the federal government had already taken measures to end segregation. But he did not yet feel the same way about the Vietnam conflict.⁷⁸ Gradually, however, he became compelled to take a stand. He would reach the height of his fame by placing himself, alongside other prominent antiwar activists, at the center of the controversy over the student resistance and antidraft activities in 1966 and 1967.

V. The War at Home: Buckley and Coffin in the 1960s Political Dialogue

The events of the early 1960s thrust Buckley and Coffin back into conversation with one another. After a brief lull during the late 1950s, when both liberal and conservative movements paused to refine their message, the 1960s had seen an increase in radical activity and renewed political debate. More than a decade older and, one could argue, wiser, than when they parted

⁷⁶ Text of Yale Reports Radio Program, November 1, 1964, the Coffin Papers, Series IV, Box 42, Folder 84.

⁷⁷ Coffin, *Once to Every Man*, 211-2.

⁷⁸ Gaddis Smith, Telephone Interview with the Author, 23 March 2010.

ways after Yale, Buckley and Coffin sat squarely on opposite ends of the ideological spectrum. Coffin had become a key figure the civil rights movement, while Buckley and the *National Review* criticized the tactics of the protestors; Coffin favored government involvement in the promotion of civil rights and equality, while Buckley argued for limited government to prevent the unrestrained expansion of federal power. Coffin sought to encourage student participation in liberal programs like the Peace Corps and political protests, while Buckley supported the political activities of campus conservatives. These positions largely reflected the major branches of liberal and conservative thought in America at the time.⁷⁹ Consequently, by the mid-1960s, they were entangled in a broad series of debates over civil rights, the war in Vietnam, and the future of Yale.

One of their first significant exchanges took place in September 1964. That summer, while travelling as part of a US State Department trip to India, Coffin had criticized Barry Goldwater, the conservative presidential candidate to whom Buckley was a close advisor, making comments about “praying” for his defeat that November.⁸⁰ Buckley lashed out at Coffin both privately and his column, “On the Right,” questioning whether it was appropriate for him to offer political commentary when travelling on a government trip.⁸¹ Though Buckley admonished Coffin seriously, the tone of their private correspondence suggested that the two were on good terms despite their staunch differences. Coffin chided Buckley for failing to distinguish between those “who are sent abroad to represent the State Department and those who are sent abroad by the State Department to represent their own views... Should Goldwater be elected—God spare

⁷⁹ Flamm, “The Liberal-Conservative Debates of the 1960s.”

⁸⁰ Coffin, *Once to Every Man*, 203.

⁸¹ William F. Buckley, “Prayer Mongering for LBJ in India,” released 24 September 1964; Letter to William Sloane Coffin, September 30, 1964, the Buckley Papers, Part I, Box 29, William Sloane Coffin Folder.

us—and the new Ambassador to India should invite you there, I would hardly expect you suddenly to represent other views than your own. Cheers!”⁸²

Their correspondence in 1964 demonstrated both Buckley’s and Coffin’s recognition that they could engage with one another despite significant political differences. Neither man was particularly surprised when Coffin’s prayers came true and Goldwater lost a landslide election to the incumbent president.⁸³ But what happened in the aftermath of Lyndon Johnson’s victory served only to intensify the liberal-conservative debate. Johnson had run for reelection in 1964 with the promise that he would seek to reduce the United States’ participation in the war in Vietnam. When his second term began, however, he did exactly the opposite.⁸⁴ As US intervention overseas escalated, so did the growing voices of dissent on the home front. The first “teach-in” in protest of the war drew a crowd of over 3000 students to the University of Michigan in March 1965, and antiwar activists followed suit on hundreds of campuses across the country in the wake of its success.⁸⁵

Before 1965, Coffin had limited his personal position to one of support for the students who spoke out against the war. He first expressed his own concerns over the morality of the war and the growing number of American troops being sent to Southeast Asia in a sermon in

⁸² Letter from William Sloane Coffin, September 25, 1964, the Buckley Papers, Part I, Box 29, William Sloane Coffin Folder. He had been invited by the State Department to accompany Chester Bowles, the US Ambassador to India, and give a series of lectures at various universities in India.

⁸³ At the national convention of the YAF on September 11, 1964, Buckley famously told the students attending the conference, “A great rainfall has deluged a thirsty earth, but before we had time to properly prepare the ground. I speak of course about the impending defeat of Barry Goldwater.” By early in the fall of 1964, it was fairly clear that though Goldwater had obtained enough grassroots support to win the Republican nomination, there was no chance he could build a broad enough coalition to win the general election. In November, Johnson carried 44 states in the electoral college and won 61 percent of the popular vote to Goldwater’s 39 percent (Bridges, *Strictly Right*, 85).

⁸⁴ In the 1964 election, Goldwater had run as the so-called “war candidate,” while Johnson had proposed waging a “limited” conflict that put pressure on the North Vietnamese leaders to abandon South Vietnam. In early January 1965, however, attempts at pressure included the regular bombing of North Vietnamese bridges, railroads, and other targets, as well as the mining of Haiphong Harbor—actions which intensified the conflict and created significant discontent in the U.S. (Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam, A History: The First Complete Account of Vietnam at War*, 395-8).

⁸⁵ Isserman and Kazin, *America Divided*, 170.

February of 1965.⁸⁶ By the end of the year, his opposition had crystallized. Along with other members of the clergy, he helped found a group called Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam (CALCAV) in early 1966.⁸⁷ The group's formation indicated a shift in the involvement of the clergy from civil rights to broader issues.⁸⁸ Although Coffin and his colleagues became involved in antiwar protests after many students already had, their support cast more legitimacy on the growing movement in certain sectors of the broader American population.

The Vietnam War protests added a new wrinkle to the discussions of civil rights and social justice. One question that stemmed from the formation of organizations like CALCAV was the role of the clergy in the national social and political dialogue. In the summer of 1966, Coffin accepted Buckley's invitation to appear on *Firing Line* to debate "The Role of the Church Militant." It was one of the first times they had appeared together publicly since their undergraduate days. Coffin argued that the church should seek to increase its role in political affairs—alluding to the mission of CALCAV and various other religious groups—even though it sometimes required taking unpopular positions. "Anybody who takes a stand is going to be wrong, sometimes. But he who never takes a stand is always wrong...I think it's much better to err on the side...of boldness and take stands, understanding that you can be wrong," Coffin told Buckley.⁸⁹ Buckley, who took his Catholicism almost as seriously as Coffin took his Protestantism, did not object to Coffin's argument for the relevance of religion. But he challenged it when religion dictated not only how individuals should live but also broader policy. He asked what an individual should do when the message of the church contradicted his or her

⁸⁶ Goldstein, *A Holy Impatience*, 149.

⁸⁷ Tom Wells, *The War Within: America's Battle Over Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 72-74; Coffin, *Once to Every Man*, 216-21. It should be noted that the group was originally called Clergy Concerned About Vietnam (CCA); it was later expanded and renamed Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam.

⁸⁸ Mitchell Hall, *Because of Their Faith: CALCAV and Religious Opposition to the Vietnam War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 1-13.

⁸⁹ "The Role of the Church Militant," *Firing Line with William F. Buckley Jr.*, RKO General Productions, Produced by Robert Kline, 27 June 1966. Published by the Hoover Institution Video Library, Stanford University.

own conscience, and reminded Coffin that perspective was important. “I quite understand...that the churchmen should move in where injustices are explicitly flagrant,” Buckley said. “But I hope you also understand that the question of what is flagrant and what is not flagrant is something that is susceptible to different understandings.”⁹⁰ Though barely addressing the civil rights and anti-Vietnam protests directly, they calmly debated the principles behind liberal activism and the conservative objections to it.

When the two sparred again before the Yale Political Union on November 17, they showed little of the restraint that they had on the set of Buckley’s show a few months earlier. A poll of the freshman class in September 1966 indicated Buckley as the students’ overwhelming first choice for a speaker at Yale—ahead of liberals like Robert F. Kennedy, no less. In the subsequent invitation to Buckley, YPU president John Townsend suggested his appearance take the form of a second debate with Coffin.⁹¹ They eventually settled on the topic of “Resolved: That Government Has A Duty To Promote Liberty As Well As To Protect Equality.” Though many students were eager to attend because they anticipated potential fireworks between the two, Buckley and Coffin approached the confrontation seriously. Both men believed, it seems, that this was more than a simple exercise in front of a student debate organization—it was a rare opportunity to directly confront both sides of the issue with the students and attempt to change their minds.

Coffin took the stage first to defend the resolution. After a lighthearted jab at Buckley, he settled down to the task at hand. He framed his argument in moral terms, imploring the crowd to consider whether the freedom protected by the American constitution had any value if those entitled to it were so crippled by their social circumstances that they could not enjoy it. He

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Letter from John M. Townsend, September 16, 1966, Buckley Papers, Part I, Box 41, 1966 General Correspondence, Speeches M-Z Folder.

asserted that government programs were the best way to provide money and aid to the men and women who needed it most. “The greatness of a nation is measured not only by how far it can advance, but how many it has left behind,” he preached. “And we Americans have left behind millions... It is less important to put a man on the moon than to put these people on their feet.”⁹² Buckley, by contrast, dissected the issue rationally. He concluded matter-of-factly that none of the major arguments for equality required government intervention or assistance. If God created all men equal, Buckley said, that claim could be neither affirmed nor rejected by the United States government. If men were inherently equal on a spiritual level, then what difference would material contributions from the government make? And if men had a duty to help those less fortunate than themselves, could they not do it more directly than by mandating that the federal government act? Later, Buckley noted that redistributing money across the federal government that had been collected from the states was inefficient—and most of it was sent back to the state of origin in any case.⁹³ He reaffirmed his commitment to limited government and the belief that these issues could be dealt with far better on the state and municipal level.

In the cross-examination that followed their opening statements, the two tried to play off the reactions from the crowd, which had clearly expected more of a spectacle than a serious debate.⁹⁴ Coffin discussed the meaning of the word equality. He remarked that Buckley, in rejecting the major arguments for equality, had completely ignored the “human side” of the problem and failed to explain what he would have actually done if, for example, he had been elected mayor of New York in 1965 and entrusted with incoming federal aid money.⁹⁵ Buckley, rising to the bait, called Coffin a “demagogue” and suggested that Coffin was so radical that he

⁹² “Buckley, Coffin Entertain at PU Audience of 650,” *Yale Daily News*, 18 November 1966; Wills, “Buckley, Buckley Bow Wow Wow.”

⁹³ Greenfield, “Confrontation: The Buckley-Coffin Debate.”

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Wills, “Buckley, Buckley Bow Wow Wow.”

was completely out of touch with American values.⁹⁶ As things heated up, the crowd reacted as though they were at a prizefight, cheering and booing the debaters, rising to their feet in a standing ovation at the end of each man's closing remarks. When the dust had settled and the votes were tallied, 143 members of the Union had cast their votes for the resolution—and by extension, for Coffin—and 131 against.⁹⁷

The winner surprised few. As Lanny Davis, the chairman of the *Yale Daily News*, had predicted in an editorial that morning, more Yale students agreed with Coffin's moral stance, even though Buckley was a compelling orator.⁹⁸ But that the vote was so evenly split perhaps sheds some light onto why Buckley and Coffin took the debate more seriously than many students had expected. Though both men clearly entered the room with a sizable contingent of supporters, there was also a large segment of the audience with no hard allegiances. Townsend later wrote to Buckley that he believed "the debate did bring out some of the major problems surrounding both the question of equality and the realm of action of the government, and I think that the very closeness of the vote demonstrates the forcefulness with which both sides were presented."⁹⁹ It got to the heart of some of the major differences between the conservative and liberal approaches in the mid-1960s: the definition of limits of equality and its implications for government involvement.¹⁰⁰

By 1967, however, the conversation that had previously been confined to more abstract ideals of activism and equality could no longer avoid the subject of Vietnam. Early that year, public opinion against the war in Vietnam began to turn dramatically. Criticism of US policies

⁹⁶ Greenfield, "Confrontation: The Buckley-Coffin Debate."

⁹⁷ "Buckley, Coffin, Entertain at PU Audience of 650."

⁹⁸ Editorial, "Buckley-Coffin Debate."

⁹⁹ Letter from John Townsend, November 17, 1966, Buckley Papers, Part I, Box 41, 1966 General Correspondence, Speeches M-Z Folder.

¹⁰⁰ Agnew, *A Companion to Post-1945 America*, Chapter 16.

dominated the media as Americans reacted to the escalation of the war effort.¹⁰¹ Military spending had nearly doubled from \$49.6 billion in 1965 to \$80.5 billion for the year 1968. Roughly 450,000 American soldiers were in Vietnam, with more being called up by the day, and casualties had risen at an alarming rate.¹⁰² Moreover, the government had amended the Selective Service Act to make it significantly more difficult to obtain a deferral, particularly by removing the automatic exemptions that had been granted to students. This made college students, previously shielded from the draft, increasingly eligible to be called to serve. Many of these young men began searching desperately for ways to evade the draft, faking chronic illness or injury, fathering children, fleeing from local draft boards by moving to different states or to Canada, or applying for conscientious objector status.¹⁰³ The threat of being drafted galvanized the anti-war movement on college campuses and for many students the Vietnam question eclipsed all other forms of activism.

Not surprisingly, Coffin, now firmly ensconced in the conflict as a leader of the CALCAV and protest activities on Yale's campus, was swept up in the surge of student antiwar efforts. He began to receive dozens of letters from young men asking him to write conscientious objector letters on their behalf. Though Coffin never encouraged students to apply for it, but he counseled those who approached him about it.¹⁰⁴ He challenged students' reasoning when he found it faulty, demonstrating through his attentiveness to the meaning of conscientious objection that he did not simply see it as a way for students to dodge the draft. What he looked for above all was earnest belief in the principles of conscientious objection. In one letter to the Chairman of a Local Draft Board, for example, he wrote candidly about a student he knew: "I

¹⁰¹ Hall, *Because of Their Faith*, 54.

¹⁰² James Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 629-30.

¹⁰³ Farber, *Age of Great Dreams*, 149.

¹⁰⁴ Coffin, *Once to Every Man*, 231.

also have every reason to believe that his statement on conscientious objection represents a moral commitment based on his individual conscience. While I would not agree with all his views, I certainly believe he qualifies very genuinely as a conscientious objector under our present draft laws.”¹⁰⁵ Coffin even received occasional request for letters from those who had heard him speak or read articles he had written and felt a remote kinship. In May 1967, for example, a student from Pomona College in Claremont, California, wrote to Coffin beseeching him for help.¹⁰⁶ That a student across the country felt such a connection to Coffin demonstrated more than any newspaper article or request for an appearance could that Yale’s chaplain had truly earned himself a place as an advocate on a national level.

While most students simply sought to avoid the draft personally, others joined popular active resistance movements. Though there had been isolated instances since 1965, the number of college students engaging in provocative public demonstrations and turning in or burning draft cards as a statement of protest increased significantly in 1967.¹⁰⁷ This movement not only drew on the support of radical student groups, but also resonated with Coffin and other members of the clergy.¹⁰⁸ One of the most effective strategies for the broader antiwar movement was to target the injustice of the draft, because it impacted the lives of thousands of young men and their families in an immediate way. The thought of their sons dying overseas brought the issue home for many Americans. Thus for older antiwar leaders, the movement to turn in draft cards offered them a means to keep more young men out of an unjust war and made a powerful statement to the public

¹⁰⁵ Letter to the Chairman of a Local Draft Board, April 22, 1969, Coffin Papers, Series II, Box 20, Folder 62.

¹⁰⁶ Letter from Clarke M. Moses, May 1967, Coffin Papers, Series II, Box 20, Folder 62.

¹⁰⁷ Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 630.

¹⁰⁸ Hall, *Because of Their Faith*, 58-9. Coffin’s own public position on the war, in contrast to most radical calls for immediate withdrawal, favored negotiated withdrawal from Vietnam in phases, because he believed that the war undermined American instincts of decency and took resources away from crucial domestic programs that he supported. Nonetheless, by mid-1967 it was increasingly the case that groups from across the ideological spectrum could agree on opposition to the draft.

at large.¹⁰⁹ At the same time, however, the Selective Service Act made advocating that students turn in their draft cards risky. The laws that Coffin and others in the civil rights movement had violated were generally local, not federal. Breaking them did not carry the same pro-Communist and anti-American connotations as evading military service during a Cold War conflict. Moreover, Coffin and his colleagues could participate equally in the freedom rides, sit-ins, or protests of the civil rights movement, but they had no draft cards to turn in.¹¹⁰

That summer, therefore, Coffin and Richard Neuhaus wrote a statement for CALCAV in which they pledged to violate Section 12 of the Selective Service law, which made a criminal of anyone who “knowingly counsels, aids, or abets another to refuse or evade registration or service in the armed forces.”¹¹¹ They wanted to be held accountable alongside those actually resisting the draft, a parallel gesture of solidarity with the students turning in their cards. “If these men are arrested for failing to comply with the law that violates their consciences, we too must be arrested, for in the sight of the law we are now as guilty as they,” they wrote.¹¹² This deliberate declaration of their intentions increased the weight of their support by placing them in jeopardy of the arrest and shielded (or attempted to shield) them from critics who argued that they had no authority to encourage draft resistance. Coffin in some measure reprised his role as a Freedom Rider by aligning himself with the students—he brought in older, established community leaders to add a degree of respectability to the draft protest movement.

As part of this effort, Coffin also joined a broader coalition of protestors loosely called “the Resistance,” who had organized massive antiwar marches in the spring of 1967 in New York City and San Francisco. In October, they planned a series of events nationwide, including

¹⁰⁹ Goldstein, *A Holy Impatience*, 185.

¹¹⁰ Coffin, *Once to Every Man*, 230-1.

¹¹¹ Goldstein, *A Holy Impatience*, 195.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

“Stop the Draft Week” protests in Oakland, California, and a huge rally in Washington DC on October 21.¹¹³ Coffin made plans to speak in Boston on October 16 before going to Washington DC. To generate more widespread support for the movement, its leaders produced a similar statement demonstrating solidarity with the students to the one Coffin and Neuhaus had written for CALCAV. On October 2, Coffin held a press conference in New York to officially release the pledge, “A Call To Resist Illegitimate Authority.” It bore the signature of 320 well-known professors, writers, artists, and clergymen, including Noam Chomsky, Dr. Benjamin Spock, and Dwight Macdonald.¹¹⁴ The statement expressed their disagreement on religious and moral grounds with the war and US goals in Southeast Asia. They emphasized their belief in the legal rights of American citizens to avoid military service if they did not agree with the war. In one of the final passages, they asserted that “the actions we will undertake are as legal as is the war resistance of the young men themselves...[W]e feel that we cannot shrink from fulfilling our responsibilities to the youth whom many of us teach, to the country whose freedom we cherish.”¹¹⁵ At the press conference, Coffin urged participation in the nationwide movement to turn in draft cards and offered Battell Chapel “as sanctuary from police action for any Yale student conscientiously resisting the draft.”¹¹⁶

Coffin recalled that religious leaders chose to offer churches and synagogues as sanctuaries “to allow draft resisters awaiting arrest to do so in places of worship. Our hope was that by forcing the government to arrest people in churches, we would help dramatize what these men were experiencing—the conflict between the demands of law and the demands of

¹¹³ Isserman and Kazin, *America Divided*, 184.

¹¹⁴ Goldstein, *A Holy Impatience*, 195-6.

¹¹⁵ “A Call To Resist Illegitimate Authority,” 1967, Coffin Papers, Series II, Box 26, Folders 181-183.

¹¹⁶ “War Foes Are Promised Churches as Sanctuary,” *New York Times*, 3 October 1967; *Yale Daily News*, 3 October 1967.

conscience.”¹¹⁷ But bringing Yale directly into the fray proved incendiary. Brewster called Coffin up before the Yale Corporation to explain his actions.¹¹⁸ In a letter he wrote a few days after the meeting, Brewster continued to reprimand Coffin, questioning “the propriety of urging or exploiting conscientious objection for political ends... Anyone who is not himself subject to the draft suffers a moral handicap when it comes to urging others to take a course which not only involves a serious legal penalty but... involves putting the burden on someone else to serve in his place.”¹¹⁹ Brewster’s letter indicated that Coffin’s calls for his own arrest had not satisfied those who felt adults had no place in the draft resistance movement. Even as liberals united behind the cause of protesting the Vietnam War, many were divided on this issue.¹²⁰

Coffin, nonetheless, continued undeterred. He travelled to Boston on October 16 for the rally on the Boston Common. Over five thousand people attended the rally, and Coffin collected 214 draft cards, in addition to the 67 that were burned by resisters on the spot.¹²¹ A few days later, he travelled to Washington D.C. to turn in the cards at the Department of Justice. He and eleven other men marched defiantly into an appointment with a Justice Department official, made their statements and left a briefcase filled with nearly 1000 cards. Over the course of the next few days, FBI agents sorted the cards and flooded Yale and other campuses where students resisting the draft were enrolled.¹²² Then, on January 5, 1968, the federal government indicted Coffin and four others signatories of the Call to Resist Illegitimate Authority—Dr. Benjamin

¹¹⁷ Coffin, *Once to Every Man*, 238.

¹¹⁸ Goldstein, *A Holy Impatience*, 196. Previously, Coffin and the Yale administration had deflected much of the criticism directed at him by Yale alumni for his involvement in acts of civil disobedience by arguing that Coffin was acting on his own and not as a representative of the university. Offering the use of Battell Chapel was one of the first times that Coffin had crossed that line, which perhaps explains the prompt response from Brewster and the trustees.

¹¹⁹ Letter from Kingman Brewster, October 7, 1967, Coffin Papers, Series I, Box 2, Folder 25.

¹²⁰ Tomes, *Apocalypse Then*, 163.

¹²¹ Hall, *Because of Their Faith*, 54-8; Goldstein, *A Holy Impatience*, 197. It should be noted that Coffin and other members of the clergy did not encourage burning of draft cards—which under a 1965 law prohibiting the destruction of draft cards was highly illegal—and actually attempted to stop those young men who opted to destroy the cards rather than turning them over to the clergy. Coffin also feared that the burnings would overpower the weight of his sermon and dominate the rally’s television coverage.

¹²² Hall, *Because of Their Faith*, 58; Goldstein, *A Holy Impatience*, 201.

Spock, Mitchell Goodman, Marcus Raskin, and Michael Ferber—on charges of conspiracy to violate the draft law. The indictment cited a number of “overt acts” of conspiracy, including the distribution of the Call to Resist Illegitimate Authority by Coffin and Spock, the press conference on October 2, and their appearance at the Justice Department to turn in draft cards on October 20.¹²³

The trial of the “Boston Five,” as they came to be known, generated a variety of responses. Not surprisingly, some members of the Yale community echoed earlier calls for Coffin to leave Yale, particularly if he were to be imprisoned for his actions. At the same time, 362 Yale faculty members signed a petition in support of Coffin, and many students rallied around him as draft card turn-ins continued at Yale and across the country.¹²⁴ “Walking through the streets of New Haven with William Sloane Coffin, Jr. is like being in a movie about a small town folk hero. People come up to shake his hand, students run after him with urgent questions,” wrote Jessica Mitford in her first-hand account of the Boston Five trial.¹²⁵ Despite his distaste for Coffin’s tactics and his desire to keep Yale out of the press as he faced increasing alumni pressure, Brewster recognized the importance of Coffin to the students. Thus when Coffin’s contract came up for evaluation in the spring of 1968, Brewster urged the trustees to renew it indefinitely. He had explained his decision to support Coffin in a speech at the Parents’ Day Assembly on October 28, 1967, a few weeks after the draft-card turn in. Though he criticized Coffin for urging draft resistance as a political tactic and insinuated that Coffin had offered Battell Chapel as a sanctuary to generate media attention, he reaffirmed the administration’s

¹²³ Jessica Mitford, *The Trial of Dr. Spock, The Rev. William Sloane Coffin, Jr., Michael Ferber, Mitchell Goodman, and Marcus Raskin* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1969), 4-5.

¹²⁴ Goldstein, *A Holy Impatience*, 210-1; “Statement by Yale Faculty Members Concerning the Indictment of William Sloane Coffin,” January 13, 1968, Kingman Brewster Jr., President of Yale University, Records, Box 62, Folder 9.

¹²⁵ Mitford, *The Trial of Dr. Spock*, 35.

support for those students who chose to speak out against the war or resist the draft for personal reasons. He assured the parents:

I have great confidence in your sons' ability to keep their own counsel and to sort out the true from the false if they are allowed to make up their own minds. I would have no confidence in them at all if they were protected from exposure to all argument and sheltered from the risk of error. Even though I disagree with the Chaplain's position on draft resistance, and in this instance deplore his style, I feel that the quality of the Yale educational experience and the Yale atmosphere has gained greatly from his presence.¹²⁶

Though this response may not have satisfied everyone, it did give Brewster the public cover he needed while he allowed Coffin to remain at Yale. Even with Coffin facing indictment by the spring of 1968, Brewster held his ground.¹²⁷

Coffin's on-going legal battle, coupled with the fact that more Yale students had turned in draft cards at the October 16 rally than students from any other school in the country, brought increasing focus on New Haven as a center of anti-war activism. Meanwhile, Buckley brought added interest to Yale's campus as he began his own battle in October 1967 to win a vacant seat on the Yale Corporation. His platform was based on an opposition to the liberal changes brought about by Kingman Brewster's administration and rabble-rousing figures like Coffin. Above all, he objected to the new policies adopted under Dean of Admissions Inslee Clark, who shifted the focus away from the traditional Yale legacy preference toward a more diverse applicant pool.¹²⁸ In the mid-1960s, Yale had begun rejecting the sons of alumni in far greater numbers in order to open up spots for nontraditional candidates, including Jews, minorities, and public school

¹²⁶ Remarks of President Kingman Brewster Jr., Parents Day Assembly, Woolsey Hall, October 28, 1967, Coffin Papers, Series I, Box 2, Folder 25.

¹²⁷ Kabaservice, *The Guardians*, 360. Though the trustees did reappoint Coffin indefinitely, they did reserve the right to reevaluate his contract if he were to go to prison. *Time* magazine reported on Coffin and the trial that "on campus he's A-OK with the younger generation, and the Yale Corp. has given him an indefinite reappointment. Yale President Kingman Brewster did say, however, that 'the corporation might want to review the appointment when the lawsuit is terminated if it seemed that the final judgment or factual basis for it had some bearing on the chaplain's fitness for his duties.' Said Coffin: 'If it's one year in the pokey, I'll respectfully request a sabbatical.'" (*Time Magazine*, May 10, 1968)

¹²⁸ Kabaservice, *The Guardians*, 333.

graduates (women would not be admitted until 1969). Clark also moved towards a “need blind” admissions process, which evaluated students on the basis of merit without any financial consideration. The reaction to these changes was largely negative among the alumni, particularly from older conservatives, many of whom saw the increase in radical activity on Yale’s campus as a direct consequence of Clark’s new policies. Admissions became one battleground through which they debated the future of the university and its purpose.¹²⁹ Buckley vocally advocated keeping the Yale student body the same, and he promised to shift the balance of the board to the right if he were elected, with echoes of his thesis in *God and Man at Yale* as the backdrop.¹³⁰

Buckley’s bid for the Yale Corporation was as an “outside candidate.” He proposed to be added to the slate chosen for the 1968 election without the endorsement of the Corporation’s nominating committee, which required a petition bearing the signature of 250 Yale graduates. He announced his intentions in the *Yale Daily News* on October 21, 1967, and the story was picked up by major publications such as the *New York Times* as well. “Somebody’s got to protest the imbalance at Yale,” he said. “The students simply don’t have access to the conservative point of view.”¹³¹ Buckley’s candidacy was also the first in the history of the university to be based on an open and direct opposition to a policy of the administration. If he had won, he would have been the second petition candidate to get a seat on the corporation and its first Catholic member.¹³² Although this strategy ultimately proved unsuccessful—Buckley lost the election to Cyrus Vance, whom Brewster handpicked and persuaded to run, in June 1968—the reactions to his candidacy and national attention it received spoke volumes. By running for the Corporation,

¹²⁹ Ibid., 259-62.

¹³⁰ “In the Running: Buckley Seeks Trusteeship,” *Yale Daily News*, 20 October 1967.

¹³¹ “Buckley Runs at Yale to Combat Liberals,” *The New York Times*, 21 October 1967

¹³² “People,” *Time Magazine*, 27 October 1967, in the Buckley Papers, Yale Corporation Candidacy folder (December 1967-March 1968).

Buckley was responding in the best way he knew how to the changes sweeping across Yale and American university campuses.

Many Yale students and alumni supported to his call to return to the university's traditional roots, which he had been advocating in various ways since publishing *God and Man at Yale* some sixteen years earlier.¹³³ "Having been schooled in the valued traditions of Yale by my father, Class of 1886, and throughout my own devotion to Yale as a graduate...I have been deeply saddened by the far Liberal trend of the present leadership," wrote William Grehore to Buckley upon hearing his intention to run for the Corporation.¹³⁴ Many older alumni worried that Yale was betraying its conservative past by liberalizing admissions policies and allowing members of the faculty and students to behave as they did. They saw a need for more conservative leadership for the benefit of the student body, whom Buckley had already demonstrated an interest in. As he ran for the Corporation, Buckley was simultaneously working to widen the sphere of conservative influence on campus by seeking financial support for the founding of a conservative undergraduate publication at Yale, the *Alternative*.¹³⁵ The four students who had conceived of the publication echoed Buckley's two major criticisms of Yale in 1967. They sent Buckley their proposal, in which they had written,

The need for a conservative voice on the Yale campus has never been greater than it is now. Sifted by an admissions office so aggressively egalitarian that an exotic racial background is as good as a guarantee of admission as a sound academic one...counseled by a chaplain whose indifference to Christianity is matched only by the zeal with which he embraces whatever political movement currently offers the best opportunities for public exposure, small wonder that the Yale student

¹³³ By that time, Buckley had largely retreated from the most extreme positions he had taken in *God and Man at Yale*. Nonetheless, he still believed that Yale was turning its back on the traditions of its past and that students did not have adequate access to conservative viewpoints—themes that were consistent with parts of his thesis in *God and Man at Yale*.

¹³⁴ Letter from William Grehore to William F. Buckley Jr., October 23, 1967, Buckley Papers, Part I, Box 57, Yale Corporation Candidacy (October-November 1967) Folder.

¹³⁵ Memorandum from Bill Buckley to James L. Buckley, John W. Buckley, Jerry Milbank, Gerrish Milliken, Minot Milliken, Roger Milliken, and Lloyd H. Smith, December 14, 1967, Buckley Papers, Part I, Box 46, Yale University Folder.

stumbles through his four years in an ethical void, and emerges with a deep distrust of traditional values...[*Alternative*] represents an attempt...to demonstrate that conservative principles can be applied to issues of interest to the Yale community.¹³⁶

With Buckley's fundraising help, the *Alternative* successfully published its first issue, a sixteen-page magazine, in March 1968. They credited Buckley as a major source of "moral support."¹³⁷

Students like the founders of the *Alternative* joined alumni in supporting Buckley's Yale Corporation candidacy. In a mock poll taken by the Yale Political Union, 842 out of 2319 students voted for him, or about 36 percent.¹³⁸ The parallel support among students and alumni demonstrates how Buckley delicately bridged the divide between the two generations. Even as he worked to cultivate a new generation of conservative student activists, Buckley still represented a stabilizing force to many older alumni, someone who would roll back the tide of changes being brought about by Brewster and the men of the "liberal establishment."

Although Buckley never went so far as to call for Coffin's removal, the chaplain played a major role in his campaign nonetheless. Brewster and the trustees' decision to renew Coffin's contract indefinitely in the spring of 1968 angered many guardians of the Old Blue, which in turn fueled support for Buckley's insurgent candidacy. Numerous letters on Buckley's behalf cited Coffin as one of the main examples of just how far astray the university had wandered in the 1960s. Although some rose to Coffin's defense, most were highly critical of the chaplain's actions and his influence on the campus atmosphere. To them, Coffin epitomized Yale's liberal attitude in the 1960s, and of its quickly falling status from the most elite of New England

¹³⁶ The *Alternative* Mission Statement, Buckley Papers, Part I, Box 46, Yale University Folder.

¹³⁷ "A Magazine for Conservatives Appears at Yale," *New York Times*, 6 March 1968.

¹³⁸ "Buckley—No," *Yale Daily News*, n.d., Buckley Papers, Part I, Box 57, Yale Corporation (News Clippings and Articles 1967) Folder.

universities to just another liberal institution.¹³⁹ “When we were there, there was no college more conservative than Yale,” wrote another alumnus. “Today it seems the most radical.”¹⁴⁰ Buckley, having always argued that academic freedom had its limits, might be able to reign in Coffin and his followers, and, perhaps, exert a more appropriate influence on the students as he had in supporting publications like the *Alternative*.

In the end, however, although Buckley easily petitioned his way onto the ballot, he could not muster enough votes to win the election. The *Yale Daily News* announced in June of 1968 that Vance was the winner.¹⁴¹ Consistent with the Corporation’s policy, the margin of victory was not released officially, though over 32,000 Yale alumni—nearly half of the total number of living alumni—cast votes in the election.¹⁴² Privately, Buckley learned that Vance had received some 13,200 votes to Buckley’s 10,200. It was the most heavily contested election in the university’s history, with more alumni voting for Buckley, who finished ahead of the other candidate nominated by the Corporation, than they ever had for another candidate.¹⁴³ He succeeded in losing the election while at the same time winning over more supporters than most would have expected. He recalled, “I was told by the Secretary of Yale...that I had more votes than anybody who was a member, who was a trustee... [M]ore people voted for me than had bothered to vote for anyone up until then.”¹⁴⁴

¹³⁹ Letter from Roger Milliken to Roy Chene in support of Buckley’s petition, December 14, 1967, Buckley Papers, Part I, Box 57, Yale Corporation Candidacy (December 1967-March 1968) Folder.

¹⁴⁰ Letter from William P. Bomar in support of Buckley’s petition, December 2, 1967, Buckley Papers, Part I, Box 57, Yale Corporation Candidacy (December 1967-March 1968) Folder.

¹⁴¹ “Vance Tops Buckley in Corporation Race,” *Yale Daily News*, June 1, 1968. It should be noted that the vast majority of the race’s coverage focused on Buckley and his platform—Vance, in large measure, simply ran as the “anti-Buckley” candidate, promising to support the Corporation and its previous policies.

¹⁴² Kabaservice, *The Guardians*, 361.

¹⁴³ Letter from C. Dickerman Williams, August 15, 1968, Buckley Papers, Part I, Box 57, Yale Corporation Candidacy (April-September 1968) Folder.

¹⁴⁴ Interview with William F. Buckley, March 25, 1991, The Griswold-Brewster Oral History Project, Box 2, Folder 23, Yale University Manuscripts and Archives, New Haven, CT.

VI. Conclusion

When asked about Buckley's loss to Vance in the Yale Corporation election in June of 1968, Coffin responded cheerfully, "I'm sure we'll hear from Bill Buckley again. I always like to see Bill get an A for effort."¹⁴⁵ Coffin's jibe, aimed at his adversary after a particularly public defeat, could at another time have gone the other way, coming from Buckley and directed at Coffin himself. Throughout the 1960s, both men led careers marked more by defeat than by any decisive victories. They cared passionately, spoke eloquently, and inspired many. And yet, as in their debate in front of the YPU in 1966, it is difficult to argue that either "won" anything at all. At the same time that Buckley was suffering through his loss to Vance, Coffin was grappling with a conspiracy conviction for violating the draft law in Boston. Yet in spite of these uncertainties, neither man seemed likely to desert the battlefield.

The significance of the Buckley-Coffin story lies almost entirely outside the realm of winners and losers. Political leaders measure their successes in terms of victories and defeats, but men like Coffin and Buckley did not. Because of the roles they chose to play, they had an impact far more significant on Yale and America than the outcomes of any individual battles they fought. Coffin and Buckley both took on the difficult task of bridging the gap between the students in the 1960s and the older, pre-war generation, delicately walking the line between being a spiritual leader and a member of the movement, between mentor and active participant.¹⁴⁶ In the process, Coffin urged thousands of students to participate in draft resistance activities and pushed serious questions about the war's aims to the forefront of the public

¹⁴⁵ "Vance Tops Buckley in Election at Yale," *The New York Times*, 17 June 1968.

¹⁴⁶ For Buckley, see quotations from M. Stanton Evans, the primary author of the Sharon Statement, in Judis, *Patron Saint of the Conservatives*, 261, and personal anecdotes from the authors in Bridges, *Strictly Right*, 109-21; for Coffin, see recollections from students in the documentaries "Faith and Activism: The Legacy of the 60s Generation" (Yale Divinity School Panel, April 28, 2005) and "Splendor and Wisdom: Reverend William Sloane Coffin, Jr. and the Yale Class of 1968," Class of 1968, Yale College, Records, Accession 2008-A-84, Box 1U, Yale University Manuscripts and Archives, New Haven, CT.

dialogue; Buckley gave new voice to a generation of conservative leaders and found vocal support for his candidacy for the Yale Corporation.

At the time, their actions inspired and infuriated many. But as Coffin often argued, taking a stand and risking failure was more important than not speaking out at all. Perhaps that was the greatest bond he shared with Buckley, far deeper than their parallel backgrounds or their love of Yale. Above all else, both men valued substantive debate and how it shaped the views of those who listened to them. Though they differed in their beliefs and the specific nature of their relationships to the students, Buckley and Coffin ultimately shared a common goal: a desire to challenge and criticize the prevailing establishment at Yale and across America, a desire which had originated from their dissatisfaction with the 1950s. Buckley had achieved notoriety in his early career as a strident voice calling for radical conservatism in a period that largely emphasized political consensus, while Coffin was bothered by the blandness of the educational experience in the 1950s, referring to Yale in particular as “Dullsville.”¹⁴⁷ The decade had generated a need to redefine America, whether it was in response to the communist threat or the injustice of discrimination in the south. As political impatience fueled change in the 1960s, both men eagerly inserted themselves in the renewed dialogue both at Yale and across America.

College campuses played a critical part of this dialogue. Coffin and Buckley saw student activism as a necessary component of what happened in the 1960s, and both worked tirelessly to encourage it. Far from being a school with a decidedly liberal student body, Yale, like many other colleges across the country, witnessed robust political debate in the 1960s. Consequently, while Buckley and Coffin targeted sympathetic student activists in groups like the YAF and SDS, they also focused recruiting and inspiring those students in the middle, who were eager for

¹⁴⁷ Speech by Rev. William Sloane Coffin for the dedication of the Coffin Common Room in Rosenfeld Hall, Timothy Dwight College, Yale University, October 20, 1990, Timothy Dwight College Memorabilia, Accession 1992-A-036, Folder 1, Yale University Manuscripts and Archives, New Haven, CT.

change and receptive to ideas coming from the right and the left. Neither man would ever decisively win over the student body, but that was hardly the point. By the end of the decade, Yale had become a place where students could voice their concerns and expect the people to respond.¹⁴⁸ There was no uniform orthodoxy on campus, but students graduating from Yale at that time generally left having been exposed to conservative and liberal ideas alike by their own classmates and generational mentors like Buckley and Coffin. These student leaders of the 1960s became the political leaders of the 1970s and 1980s and beyond.

History has shown us how the political gospels each man preached in the 1960s endured. There perhaps is no better example than the Yale Class of 1968, which witnessed civil rights activism, the Coffin-Buckley debate, and the height of the draft resistance movement during their time at Yale. In 2003, their 35th reunion activities included a ceremony in New Haven honoring William Sloane Coffin, Jr., and a picnic at the White House, hosted by their classmate, President George W. Bush.¹⁴⁹ That the same class which named Coffin the “Permanent Chaplain to the Yale Class of 1968” could also produce and celebrate George Bush, a modern conservative Republican elected by the very conservative movement William F. Buckley helped create, might seem extraordinary. But in retrospect, it is perfectly fitting that Buckley and Coffin would overlap once again. Yale had been a big enough place to entertain both of their ideas in the 1960s, though it had largely denied both of them concrete victories. In the end, nonetheless, they achieved their own brand of immortality through the lessons they taught and their impact on the next generation of political and moral leaders.

Word Count: 12240 words

¹⁴⁸ Interview with William Sloane Coffin Jr., December 9, 1991, The Griswold Brewster Oral History Project, Box 3, Folder 35.

¹⁴⁹ “Splendor and Wisdom: William Sloane Coffin, Jr. and the Yale Class of 1968,” Yale College, Class of 1968, Records.

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BIBLIOGRAPHIC ESSAY

My mother walked into my bedroom sometime in April 2006 and handed me the obituary page of the *New York Times*. Accustomed as I was to being handed various and sundry newspaper articles to read by then, I was nonetheless surprised by the choice of an obituary entitled “Rev. William Sloane Coffin Dies at 81; Fought For Civil Rights and Against a War” (*New York Times*, April 13, 2006). She explained, however, that for someone who had attended college in the 1960s, Coffin had been a giant in the struggle for civil rights and against the Vietnam War; since I would be attending Yale the next fall, she thought I should know something about one of the most influential figures in the history of both the university and the country in that era. From his post as chaplain of Yale, Coffin had danced in and out of the national spotlight throughout the decade, first as one of the earliest northern white intellectuals to participate in the civil rights movement and later as an outspoken opponent of nuclear proliferation and the Vietnam War, and as an advocate of draft resistance.

That was the last I heard of William Sloane Coffin Jr. for over two years, until I was a student in Professor Beverly Gage’s seminar, Liberalism and Conservatism in U.S. Politics, in the fall of 2008. When he came up in our discussion of student protest in the 1960s, his name struck a chord. I returned to the *New York Times* and reread the same obituary, now in the context of a much deeper historical knowledge of the period. I decided that I would write my final paper for the course on Coffin, focusing on his early involvement with the freedom rides in 1961. After I completed that paper, I entertained the possibility of researching Coffin in much greater depth for my senior thesis. However, knowing that Warren Goldstein’s treatment of Coffin’s life in his biography *A Holy Impatience* had left few stones unturned in the Coffin papers at Yale, I shied away from him as a subject when it came time to think seriously about my

topic last spring. I wanted to write about civil disobedience and the protest movements of the 1960s, and I intended to choose a student group or organization as my subject.

I began to search for a specific topic by consulting a number of general secondary sources that covered the 1960s generation and its political protest movements. These sources would eventually form the basis of my background knowledge for the paper. As part of the generation that was raised by parents who were college students themselves in the 1960s, I was intimately familiar with the popularized portrayals of the period: that it was an overwhelmingly liberal decade, propelled forward by bold advocates fighting valiantly for equality, civil rights, and to get America out of Vietnam in the face of an older, conservative generation that clung desperately to the way things were. Superlatives abound in those accounts of the decade; David Farber, for example, calls his history of the 1960s *The Age of Great Dreams*, and one of the most famous chapters in Todd Gitlin's *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* is titled "Leftward Kicking and Screaming." I discussed the historiography of the period with my advisor, Professor Gage, and how historians like Gitlin and Farber often fail to capture the period as a whole. She suggested that I review some of the newer histories of the decade, which address not only the liberal but also the conservative side of student movements the 1960s. These sources included Rebecca Klatch's *A Generation Divided: The New Left, the New Right, and the 1960s* (1999) and Michael Flamm's essay "The Liberal-Conservative Debates of the 1960s," both of which discuss the differences between the older historical approach to the period and newer histories that take into account conservative political activity as well as liberal. They compared the Young Americans for Freedom and the Sharon Statement to the Students for a Democratic Society and the Port Huron Statement.

It was impossible to research the conservative side of the 1960s without reading about William F. Buckley Jr., a man often referred to as the “godfather” of the modern conservative movement. Buckley had spent much of his career fighting valiantly on the losing side of political issues. I consulted John Judis’ biography, *William F. Buckley Jr.: Patron Saint of the Conservatives*, and learned that Buckley had been at Yale immediately after World War II, just as Coffin had. The parallels in their backgrounds were striking—they had been raised in prominent New York City families, fought in World War II, and gone to Yale just a year apart. They knew each other as undergraduates, had been members of Skull and Bones, and maintained a cordial, if slightly aloof, friendship throughout their lives. There seemed to be something exceptional about their story: they had come from such similar backgrounds and ended up on opposite sides of the ideological spectrum by the early 1960s. I decided to probe further and see if their story could offer a window into the liberal-conservative debate on Yale’s campus and to the evolution of the New Left and the New Right in the post-World War II era.

As it turns out, there was much to be found on that topic. Although Buckley was never mentioned in Coffin’s biography, and Coffin just a few times in passing in Buckley’s, I learned from Geoffrey Kabaservice’s *The Guardians: Kingman Brewster, His Circle, and the Rise of the Liberal Establishment* that they had much more substantive contact. I saw in the William Sloane Coffin Papers at Yale that they had written to each other numerous times throughout the years, and, from searching through Buckley’s columns, that Coffin was a frequent subject in his tirades against the “liberal establishment” at Yale—a phrase which Buckley coined to describe Coffin, Brewster, and many of the other prominent Yale figures at the time. I could not find any scholarly books or articles that discussed their relationship in depth (and, to my knowledge, there are none), but with a bit of investigative work I began to piece together a rough picture of their

interactions in the 1960s. Both had been prolific writers, and through the correspondence that survived in the Buckley and Coffin papers, I could see a relationship between two men who vigorously disagreed with one another on political issues but were actually quite fond of one another. Their letters were playful and cordial, and the column that Buckley wrote in the *Yale Daily News* in April 2006 after Coffin's death suggested that both had not only enjoyed but also learned from their mutual sparring throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Far from the open hostility that we often see displayed between liberal and conservative leaders today, these two men were able to separate their political philosophy from their personal relationship.

I chose to begin the paper with the debate between Coffin and Buckley in November 1966, largely because it allowed me to place the two principal figures of my essay at Yale during the time period I wanted to write about. This proved to be one of the most challenging parts of the essay: piecing together what happened at a debate over 45 years ago from the coverage in the YDN, the Yale Alumni Magazine, and Gary Wills' *Esquire* piece, "Buckley, Buckley, Bow Wow Wow" (January 1968). I was lucky enough to get some help from the current president of the Yale Political Union and the YPU Historian, who gave me a chance to read the letters written inviting them to come speak and to see the original poster from the debate. I never succeeded in finding notes from or a full transcript of the debate, though not for lack of effort. I even tried contacting Garry Wills himself (he is currently an emeritus professor at Northwestern University) and asking in vain if the Yale Radio Station had kept the tapes from the event, which they broadcast live at the time. Nonetheless, I believe that the coverage I was able to find gives a fairly accurate picture of what happened that evening.

Meanwhile, as I searched for more sources on the debate, I continued to comb through the various collections at Manuscripts and Archives in Sterling for correspondence and relevant

primary documents. In addition to the Buckley and Coffin papers, I went through parts of the Kingman Brewster and A. Whitney Griswold Records, the Griswold-Brewster Oral History Project, the Papers on Yale Collection, the Student Unrest at Yale Collection, and a few others. I looked not only for Buckley and Coffin in particular, but also for anything related to civil rights or Vietnam demonstrations on campus in the 1960s, and for memories of that era. One of the most surprising items I came across was a 2003 tribute to William Sloane Coffin in the Yale Class of 1968 records, which included a website and a documentary video. The video recounted the 35th reunion activities of the Class of 1968, which began with the picnic at the White House (hosted by classmate and then-President George W. Bush) and ended in New Haven at a ceremony honoring Coffin as the “Permanent Chaplain to the Yale Class of 1968.” The juxtaposition of the picnic hosted by the conservative president and the ceremony lionizing Coffin was quite striking, and the memories of Coffin in the video were also compelling.

Beyond the Yale libraries, I obtained a copy of the transcript and footage of Coffin’s 1966 appearance on *Firing Line* by email request from the Hoover Institution at Stanford. The complete writings of William F. Buckley are available online from Hillsdale College (<http://cumulus.hillsdale.edu/buckley/Standard/index.html>). Buckley, unfortunately, never wrote a complete memoir, but through his columns, articles and books, it was not difficult to get a sense of how he felt at any time. Coffin’s writing was almost entirely contained, not surprisingly, to Yale, and his memoir, *Once to Every Man* supplemented his papers and secondary materials.

In addition to my own research, I had a number of informal conversations with parents and acquaintances who had been at Yale during the 1960s, to get a sense of what life was like on campus at the time. More formally, Professor Gaddis Smith, who is currently working on a history of Yale in the twentieth century, was kind enough to speak with me on the phone in

March to offer his suggestions on my overall thesis and on the choice of Buckley and Coffin as figures for a comparison; and Professor Jay Gitlin, in whose seminar, *Yale and America*, I am currently enrolled, met with me to discuss the climate at Yale at the end of the decade and give context to the presence of both Buckley and Coffin on campus.

Finally, in my secondary literature review, I moved from the general, to the specific, and back to the general again. As I mentioned earlier, I initially began by looking at major secondary sources and the different historical interpretations of the period. Then, while doing my primary research, I turned to Kabaservice, Judis, and Goldstein to flesh out the Buckley-Coffin story and the picture of Yale in the 1960s. Finally, once I had a sense of the general topics I would cover in the paper, I moved to a wider variety of sources on the 1960s, many of which delved into the debate over the Vietnam War and the various strategies of the protestors. These works are listed in full in the bibliography attached to this essay.

The challenge in crafting the paper, of course, was to find a way to weave the primary evidence demonstrating Buckley and Coffin's relationship to one another and to the students into a narrative that encompassed what was going on more broadly and made it relevant. In the end, I decided to maintain as close to a chronological structure as possible, breaking up the sections of the paper in a way that attempted to mirror the changes going on in their lives. I wrote, therefore, about their early lives and careers as Yale undergrads together, because of the similarities and their interactions with one another. The choice of each man as his class' Alumni Day Speaker was the first turning point, for it set Buckley on the path as an outsider and critic of Yale and inspired him to write *God and Man at Yale* (which some, including Professor Smith, argue was his most significant impact on the university). I traced them separately through the 1950s, as each man built a career, trying to discuss the major events that shaped who they were in relation

to each other and the students by the 1960s. Not surprisingly, they had little communication during the 1950s, largely because of Buckley's public, controversial stances in *God and Man at Yale* and *McCarthy and His Enemies*, which Coffin admitted troubled him greatly. I brought them back together in the 1960s, however, when they began to correspond and interact on a more frequent and friendly basis, despite their stark ideological differences by then.

I recognize that their narratives do not match up seamlessly, but I tried to show how they played quite similar roles in the context of Yale in the 1960s. I would not have had the confidence to make some of the assertions that I do—such as suggesting that Buckley's run for the Yale Corporation in 1967 was in many ways a response to Coffin and an echo of his argument in *God and Man at Yale*—if not for primary evidence that links Buckley's candidacy to both. This is certainly not the essay that I thought I would be writing when I began this project almost a year ago. But in the end, I believe I was lucky to choose Buckley and Coffin and to have the available resources both at Yale and online that I did. I thoroughly enjoyed getting to “know” them through their writing and speeches and attempting to reconstruct one largely untold aspect of their relationship to one another and to Yale in the 1960s.