The Baldwin/Buckley Debate Of 1965, And How Baldwin Won It

In this account, **Joss Harrison** *looks back at one of the most powerful yet overlooked victories of the American civil rights movement. On Thursday 30 January 2020 at 6:30pm, the LSE US Centre is hosting the event* ***James Baldwin vs. William F. Buckley: The Great Debate Over Race in America****, which is free and open to all.*

Cambridge, 1965. James Baldwin, the renowned African American social critic, meets William Buckley, a leading conservative whose silver tongue and social class had for years masked the vile racism at the core of his philosophy. It was a seminal debate. I, for one, can think of no better way to celebrate Black History Month than a reliving of this occasion, when Baldwin dismantled his racist opponent through cool reason and unimpeachable sincerity, earning an unprecedented ovation from the practically all-white audience at the Cambridge Union in the process.

But first, we must properly introduce our protagonist. James Baldwin, born into poverty in Harlem, was by 1965 one of America's most eloquent social critics. He wrote about race and class and sexuality and morality. He participated actively in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s while also, a gay man himself, standing up to homophobic attitudes in that movement.

And then, our antagonist. William F. Buckley Jr, born into wealth and privilege. He founded National Review, a conservative publication, in 1955, and from this pulpit helped to lay the groundworks for the American political shift rightwards that began with Barry Goldwater's candidacy for the presidency in 1964, and peaked with the successful election and then re-election of Ronald Reagan during the 1980s. A significant man, then, clearly, but also a vile defender of segregation and white supremacy, thinly-disguised by his gentility.

And so, to the debate. Baldwin stands to speak. The motion: "The American Dream is at the Expense of the American Negro." There are around seven hundred people in the chamber, and just two of them are black. One is Baldwin himself, another is a friend come to support him. Come twenty minutes later, that entire audience will be on its feet in an ovation unprecedented in the history of the Cambridge Union.

He sets the tone with a brilliant opener. "I find myself, not for the first time, in the position of a kind of Jeremiah." He looks and sounds solemn, but perfectly calm.

He movingly describes the moment in a black American's childhood when they realise that "the flag to which you have pledged allegiance, along with everybody else, has not pledged allegiance to you." Black boys and girls, men and women, he says, are constantly reminded that there is no place for them in American society. They do not appear in the history books. It is as though they are "worthless" and lacking in any history or culture. The most tragic thing: they believe it, because, as Baldwin says, "I didn't have much choice."

Baldwin's tone becomes withering, though, when responding to Robert Kennedy's suggestion that it might be possible for America to have a black president in forty years. (Although that remark proved to be prescient.) Baldwin was consistently critical of John F. Kennedy's record on civil rights while in office. This was the general attitude within the civil rights movement at the time, yet history has nonetheless remembered the Kennedy Administration has a great promoter of civil rights. Anyway, to Baldwin's response. There is an edge to his voice now, a kind of controlled anger. "He tells us that *maybe*, in forty years, *if you're good*, we *may* let you become president." Baldwin, clearly, does not intend to be patronised.

However, as moving and emotive and sharp as the preceding critiques undoubtedly are, there is a clear pinnacle of his brilliant remarks. He says, with absolute sincerity and solemnity, and another hint of that contained anger: "*I* picked the cotton, and *I* carried it to the market, and *I* built the railroads, under someone else's whip. For nothing. For nothing." With each "*I*" he sharply raises his voice and you can hear his words echo around the chamber, which is, by now, completely hushed. This is the beating heart of his argument. He urges us to look below the surface layer, to challenge assumptions so deeply entrenched within ourselves that we aren't even aware of their assistance. He removes the lens through which we look at the world and offers us his own, and through his lens there is breath-taking clarity.

Date originally posted: 2020-01-30

Permalink: https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2020/01/30/the-baldwin-buckley-debate-of-1965-and-how-baldwin-won-it/

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When Baldwin is finished, and he has received his ovation, Buckley stands, and the difference between the two men is immediately apparent. Buckley is dressed in a full dinner suit and bow tie, as was required by the Cambridge Union. Baldwin had ignored this requirement. His mannerisms display a manifest sense of superiority, from the smirk on his face to the pointed finger he waves in the air. He speaks in a lazy drawl, as though such a facile debate requires him only to use a fraction of his capabilities.
This article will not go into depth on his arguments. They are too poisonous to merit the publicity. There are a few remarks, however, that usefully display the bankruptcy of his position. To start, he says to Baldwin that he will speak "without any reference whatever to these surrounding protections which you are used to in virtue of the fact you are a Negro." The accusation is as clear as it is ignorant: that far from being discriminated against on account of the colour of their skin, African Americans use it to make themselves immune to reproach.

It is perhaps a sign of his desperation that Buckley resorts to personal attacks on his opponent. He calls Baldwin a "posturing hero", worthy of "contempt". Bizarrely, he even accuses Baldwin of adopting an English accent to ingratiate himself to the audience. (This is demonstrably false, and is a particularly ironic accusation given that Buckley himself was well-known for speaking in a transatlantic tone.)

He moves on to demonstrate his complete ignorance of the problems faced by black Americans in society. Bristling at Baldwin's claim that the American economy was built by the unremunerated labour of black people, Buckley cries: "My great grandparents worked too!" Contemptible. He also claims that African Americans should be grateful for the society in which they live, because they are better off than the vast majority of the world's population just by dint of being Americans. He cannot believe the cheek, the nerve! of black Americans to complain about injustice when they should, in fact, be grateful for the privilege of living in 'the greatest country in the world'.

Throughout Buckley's remarks, the camera regularly switches to Baldwin. His eyebrows are raised and his eyes wide. He is a picture of calm. As Buckley swings at him, again and again, and each time fails to land a blow, Baldwin's face displays not anger, not distaste, but pity.

The Union voted by a margin of 544 to 164 in favour of Baldwin, a vast majority of 380 votes. But in truth, this is irrelevant. Baldwin didn't beat his opponent because the Cambridge Union decreed it so. He won by the power of his argument. Against such an intellect, such a debater, such a deliverer of moral clarity, the vile segregationist never stood a chance.

- *This article originally appeared at The Beaver in 2018.*
- *Featured image: The Cambridge Union Chamber by ExecElect [CC BY-SA]*

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