

## The Washington merry-go-round

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WASHINGTON — We find ourselves unhappy objects of the displeasure of Mr. William F. Buckley. For many years, we have coexisted on editorial pages — he the witty propounder of epigrams and ponderer of grand themes, we the truculent burrowers into the pigstys of the Republic.

This is not to say that colleague Buckley shuns the newsman's chore of grappling with public abuses. Recently, he did a definitive expose of the indifference displayed by the stewardesses and luggagemen of Spain's Iberia Air Line, raising a standard to which long abused jetsetters the world over rallied.

And before that, he inveighed forcefully against the purging of Latin and Greek from the American Catholic liturgy, and against the playing at Sunday Mass of the vulgar guitar. But, while he has thus paid his dues, the expose is not his preferred metier.

Except when it comes to us. Searching for the reason, we find that Buckley has materialized in our lives only when we have chanced to blackguard some particular hero of his — Sen. Joe McCarthy, Roy Cohn, Sen. Tom Dodd, E. Howard Hunt.

When such worthies are under attack, our nemesis dons his Sherlock Holmes cap and springs into action as sleuth for the defense. His investigative technique is unique. He does not call the writers of the story he is debunking to assess their proof. He does not call upon the witnesses for their testimony, or to test their bona fides.

He cuts through such preliminaries by phoning the targets of the story he is debunking and asking them straight out if they are guilty. They say no. Buckley then condemns the story as false, produces the denials as though truths etched in stone and looses a homily or two about the corrosive danger of falsehood. Case closed.

We last took note of this eccentric routine when Buckley's client was the late Tom Dodd. One of the lesser charges against the censured senator was that he promoted petty gifts from companies doing business with the government.

Ignoring the larger charges, Buckley pounced upon this one and quickly laid it to rest by interviewing spokesmen in Dodd's office and officers of some of the offending companies. All promptly denied any impropriety, whereupon Buckley branded the charges as the fabrications of a sex ring that had infiltrated itself into the senator's office.

Had Buckley called us, we could have acquainted him not only with eyewitnesses to the favor taking, but with receipts and ledgers to back them up. But being so surely in possession of truth, he had no need of facts.

Among the victims thus befriended by Buckley is an occasional military junta and here we come to the cause of our present perturbation.

Recently, we published two reports on the abuse and torture of American citizens by henchmen of the Chilean junta. We reported first that the American consul in Santiago, Fred Purdy, had taken a do-nothing attitude toward the abduction and even the murder of our nationals, rather than muddy relations with the new junta.

Second, we presented a graphic account of the ordeal suffered by one torture victim, Amy Conger, a 31-year-old teacher from Chicago.

Enter Buckley, nose sniffing, eyes flashing, teeth sharp and gleaming. In

rapid fire, he solicited denials from our targets. Both solemnly obliged. Consul Purdy said he had heard nothing about torture from Conger.

Functionaries of the junta clinched the matter. They did not torture her. Besides, Amy Conger was a spy who "moved from residence to residence, apparently for the purpose of providing safe houses for young militant Miristas."

Another case closed, except for Buckley's parting homily: "Those who give currency to accounts of tortures of this kind are friends not of the tortured but of the torturers."

We were left to ponder this by a Buckley who courted the friendship and accepted the word of the accused torturers, without bothering to check the other side. He did not call or visit Amy Conger to hear her story before branding this naive, retiring, frightened young woman as a likely international spy. He did not call us or seek access to the range of informants from whom we built these accounts.

Instead, he accepted the charges of the Chilean jailers based on a "confession" extorted from this American girl after 13 days in their hands.

Buckley was impressed with the Chilean ambassador's invitation to "independent corroboration" of the junta's version of the torture story. We had an experience with the Chilean embassy we would like to have passed on to him.

We called the embassy early in our investigation (as we had called the State Department and as we have called Buckley). A Chilean delegation came to our office flaunting folders full of papers. Here was the proof, they said. They would be delighted to give us an English summary.

That's all right, we said, just leave the papers and we'll get our own translation. They flatly refused; so much for "inviting independent corroboration."

Well, we don't like to continue at odds with so elegant an ornament to our profession as William F. Buckley and we admit to some small fault in the feud. Our column has twitted Buckley once or twice.

But in the interests of amity within the profession, we hereby offer him a deal. We'll try to be less prickly if he'll promise to call us next time before questioning our facts.