

William F. Buckley Jr.

Who Was Charles Benson?

THIS IS A STORY — incomplete, hugely ignorant — based on a small clipping that appeared in the Los Angeles Times, which I reproduce:

"A Los Angeles Times carrier was shot and killed early Friday as he made deliveries to apartment buildings in Hollywood.

"Carl Benson of 1933½ Park Drive was found lying on the sidewalk beside his jeep a 1961 N. Cahuenga Blvd. Police said he had been shot three times in the chest. Because his wallet was missing, police believe robbery was the motive."

I NEVER MET "Carl" Benson, but I can tell you this about him.

His name was Charles Benson.

A year or so back, introduced by a distinguished mutual friend who is a top writer and critic of science fiction, Charles Benson sent in a manuscript to National Review, a conservative journal of opinion, of which I am the editor, in which he wrote about the deteriorating strategic situation in the Mediterranean with such profundity, precision, and inventiveness, that the editors immediately published his long article, featuring it on the cover.

Mr. Benson concluded by making a most provocative proposal, namely that United States forces "take over" Libya, effective possession of which would absolutely frustrate the grand Soviet play against Israel and, ultimately, the whole of Western Europe.

And then, a few weeks later, another manuscript, a most detailed, most knowledgeable description of the deterioration of the defensive capabilities of the U.S. military.

At this point, reading the second manuscript, I confess that I entertained several doubts about the mysterious Mr. Charles Benson. Was he a Pentagon employe? Perhaps an agent of the CIA? Assigned the job of leaking futuristic analyses, buttressed by information which is not readily available from the Pentagon, and indiscreetly related to the Pentagon? I asked around.

THE REPLIES were sparse; evasive, you might say. So when "Carl" Benson was killed, I asked our mutual friend, who had been so protective of Carl's privacy, to write a few words about him, as an obituary for National Review. This is what he vouchsafed:

"The Department of Defense asked permission to reprint Benson's article, 'Deterrence Through Defense.' It was widely circulated in Congress and elsewhere.

"Carl was a graduate physicist with a degree in optics. He knew computers and ballistics, rocketry and electronics, and he also knew, and delighted in mythology, philosophy, etymology, and music.

"Carl was an example of a phenomenon which has increased to the status of its own terminology: executive dropout. He was vice president of an important electronics firm when it came to him that what he wanted was to be a writer.

"He got himself a routine job and a little office, and he wrote. He never took charity or relief or unemployment money; he worked every single night for two years without a day off. He wrote part of a book on poli-strategy for the seventies, and the book and many lyrics for a rock opera, and (with George Clayton Johnson) finished a book on revolution.

"He took music lessons until he had enough know-how to write a dozen country-and-western songs. They're pretty good.

"On Christmas Eve, at three in the morning, it was raining and cold in L.A. Carl got out of his truck and some nameless, faceless individual, for no conceivable reason, shot Carl three times and killed him instantly.

"His appearance in these pages (National Review's), and the wide response he received, were, to him, glorious and heartening events. His was one of the very finest minds any of us could have the privilege to encounter. That he should be the victim of a society which he tried to understand, and in his way to protect, is quite past bearing."

I WAS SO VEXED by the phrase "(killed) for no conceivable reason," that I took the editor's liberty, and changed it to read: "for no apparent reason." There ARE conceivable reasons for the elimination of Carl Benson, and I hope that somewhere, outside the obituary concerns of the Los Angeles Times and the National Review, somebody is concerning himself with the unusual life, occupation, and end, of Charles "Carl" Benson.