



The Passing of Joseph Sobran

A more elegant wielder of the pen than Joe Sobran was always hard to find. After devouring something he had written, most of his readers would summarize, “How nicely that was phrased,” or “I wish I could write like that.”

M. Joseph Sobran, Jr. passed away peacefully at age 64 on September 30. The diabetes he had fought for many years won out. Born in Ypsilanti, Michigan, on February 23, 1946, he earned a bachelor’s degree in English from Eastern Michigan University where he specialized in Shakespearean studies and later taught English and lectured on Shakespeare. Always a great lover of the bard’s works (he could recite from memory many passages from the plays and sonnets), he later wrote *Alias Shakespeare: Solving the Greatest Literary Mystery of All Time* in which he claimed that Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford, was the real Shakespeare.



While busy with graduate work at Eastern Michigan in 1971, Joe attracted the attention of William F. Buckley, Jr., as a result of a letter he’d written to the school newspaper defending the *National Review* editor’s campus speaking appearance. Buckley saw the letter, invited Joe to New York for an interview, and hired him in 1972. There began 21 years of close association with the man many still consider conservatism’s intellectual leader. That the relationship of the two friends and colleagues ended contentiously has to be considered a defining moment in Sobran’s career.

In addition to his regular contributions to *National Review*, Joe wrote columns syndicated nationally by Universal Press Syndicate. His thoughts appeared regularly in *Chronicles* and *Catholic Family News*. Many will recall hearing some of his radio commentaries on the CBS “Spectrum” series. In later years, his columns were published monthly in *Sobran’s* newsletter. Always a Catholic, he was a regular columnist for many years in *The Wanderer*, a Catholic newsweekly. Joe also wrote for *The New American*, the magazine affiliated with The John Birch Society.

Other than his book about Shakespeare’s identity, Joe authored *Single Issues: Essays on the Crucial Social Questions* (Human Life Press, 1983) and *Hustler: The Clinton Legacy* (Griffin Communications, 2000). Many of his articles and speech texts appeared in *The Church Today: Less Catholic Than the Pope?* (1979), *Power and Betrayal* (1998), and *Anything Called a Program is Unconstitutional* (2001). His last major writing effort, never completed, was a book about Abraham Lincoln’s presidency and its relation to the United States Constitution.

After years of being William Buckley’s valued associate and close friend, Joe’s fallout with his boss



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started in the mid-1980s when he questioned the Reagan-authorized attack on Libya, an incident roundly championed by *National Review*. The gulf between the two grew when Joe criticized the *New York Times* and the leaders of Israel for downplaying the harm done by Jonathan Pollard, the U.S. intelligence specialist sent to prison after pleading guilty in 1985 to spying for Israel. Joe didn't realize it at the time, but Buckley had become extremely friendly with the pro-Israel New Yorkers who published the American Jewish Committee's *Commentary* magazine. Leading promoters of socialist and internationalist neoconservatism, *Commentary's* leaders were also members of the Council on Foreign Relations, the world-government-promoting group Buckley had joyously affiliated with as far back as 1974.

Then, in the December 30, 1991 issue of *National Review*, Buckley wrote a five-part essay entitled *In Search of Anti-Semitism* that featured attacks on Joe Sobran, Pat Buchanan, and several others. Never explicitly aiming the actual charge at any of his subjects, Buckley cleverly stated that it had become increasingly difficult to defend them from the suspicion that it was merited. For many, the mention of a man's name in an article about anti-Semitism constituted sufficient proof that he was guilty of harboring the odious view. What Buckley had done proved harmful to Joe down the road.

Even more, Sobran's consistent objections to George H. W. Bush's building of an imperial presidency rankled his former friend. The matter came to a head when Sobran opposed the Bush-initiated 1990 plan to attack Iraq known as Desert Storm (later to become Desert Shield). Joe entitled his disagreement with Buckley, "Why *National Review* is Wrong." The magazine had claimed that America absolutely had to send forces into Iraq to protect three vital interests: oil, peace and stability, and allies. Sobran responded:

Arab oil? We don't need it. "Peace and stability"? Nobody in the Gulf region threatens us. "Allies"? Such as — Turkey! Oh, brother.

Joe also saw a grand design behind the plans for war that President Bush (the elder) kept stating had to be waged because it would lead to the "new world order" and enhanced power for the United Nations. Joe advised, "Let's just remind ourselves that war always results in a bigger, stronger, more consolidated state." After the January 1991 invasion that ousted Saddam Hussein's forces from Kuwait, he stated his inability to fathom the logic that said "you may oppose a bad war only until it begins." And he added that President Bush was "the sort of politician our Founding Fathers were trying to prevent." An increasingly perturbed Buckley later revealed, after these comments from Sobran, he composed a letter asking Joe to resign but never sent it.

The final break with Buckley did come when Joe, in a very revealing and unflattering portrayal of his boss, responded to the charge that he was a latent anti-Semite in a column in *The Wanderer*. Buckley suggested in his defense published in the next issue of the newsweekly that Joe might even have "medical" problems. A few days later, Joe was fired in a way that amounted to a final insult: the deed was carried out not by Buckley but by his anointed successor, John O'Sullivan. Joe subsequently observed that "being fired isn't nearly as bad as being betrayed."

In an unpublished essay Joe gave to me in 2001 after I had supplied him with a copy of the manuscript to my 2002 book, *William F. Buckley, Jr.: Pied Piper for the Establishment*, Joe wrote of his embarrassment in having to admit that my indictment of his former boss was on target. He summarized, "It took me many years to see what John McManus makes overwhelmingly obvious: Bill Buckley, American conservatism's longtime intellectual leader, has been a calamity for conservatism." Years later during a very enjoyable visit I had with Joe in February 2010, he expressed great enthusiasm for



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what I had written, even remarking that the published book I had recently supplied led him to “read it twice and make notations on dozens of pages.”

Soon after Bill Buckley died in February 2008, this ever kindly gentleman who never hated anyone acknowledged that he and his former boss had shared a pleasant reconciliation. Joe stated, “My employment ended unhappily, much to my regret now, but I rejoice to say we patched things up a year or so ago.”

Joe Sobran, a man who exemplified the term class was as fine a writer and thinker as America has produced in many decades. While he will be sorely missed, he should be remembered as one who had many friends and admirers, none of whom he ever betrayed. It was both a pleasure and an honor to know him. May he rest in peace.



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