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Uncommon Knowledge: Uncommon Knowledge classic: "The Sixties" with Hitchens and William F. Buckley

with guests Christopher Hitchens and William F. Buckley Jr.



In this rereleased interview from 1998, Christopher Hitchens, a contributing editor of *Vanity Fair* magazine, is a self-proclaimed radical. William F. Buckley, Jr., editor-at-large of *National Review* magazine, is one of the most noted conservatives in the country. During the 1960's, Hitchens enjoyed the counter-culture, whereas Buckley was one of the founders of the politically conservative counter counter-culture. Thirty years later (1998), and Hitchens and Buckley are still wrangling over the Revolution. (24:52)

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- start video from beginning In this rereleased interview from 1998, Hoover media fellow Christopher Hitchens and William F. Buckley Jr. offer alternative views of the Vietnam War protest movement.
- start segment 2 at 7:22 Hoover media fellow Christopher Hitchens and William F. Buckley Jr. debate the justness of the Vietnam War.
- start segment 3 at 11:09 Hoover media fellow Christopher Hitchens and William F. Buckley Jr. reveal their personal regrets about the 1960s.
- start segment 4 at 15:33 Hoover media fellow Christopher Hitchens and William F. Buckley Jr. outline their positions toward the civil rights movement.
- start segment 5 at 20:15 Hoover media fellow Christopher Hitchens and William F. Buckley Jr. discuss how the Vietnam War might be viewed a century from now.

ROBINSON Welcome to Uncommon Knowledge. I'm Peter Robinson. Our show today: The Revolution. Or rather, the two revolutions of the 1960's. Sex, drugs and rock and roll marked a youthful revolt against traditional American mores. Those were turbulent times, and some believed that something genuinely new was coming into being. But the counter-culture wasn't the only new movement of the time. There was also a counter counter-culture. Straight arrow, well- dressed, and politically conservative. Indeed, it was this counter counter-culture that gave rise to the presidential candidacy in 1964 of Barry Goldwater, which in turn helped to launch the political career of Ronald Reagan. With us today, two guests. Christopher Hitchens, a contributing editor of *Vanity Fair* magazine, is a self-proclaimed radical. William F. Buckley, Jr., editor-at-large of *National Review* magazine, is one of the most noted conservatives in the country. During the 1960's, Hitchens enjoyed the counter-culture, whereas Buckley was one of the founders of the politically conservative counter counter-culture. Thirty years later, and Hitchens and Buckley are still wrangling over the Revolution.

WE ALL WANT TO CHANGE THE WORLD

ROBINSON Christopher, you write on the year 1968 in Vanity Fair, "In my cohort (your cohort) in my cohort: sex, yes; rock and roll, by all means; drugs, no." Why not drugs?

HITCHENS Well, two reasons. One, in my cohort, we were slightly counter-hedonistic. We thought this was self-indulgence.

ROBINSON This is the Trotskyite cohort?

HITCHENS Yes. The political hardline. We didn't grow our hair long, either. I think that was under the, probably, the illusion—

BUCKLEY Was that self-imposed discipline or was that corporate discipline?

HITCHENS Self-imposed, and encouraged by the cohort, I think under the illusion that it would be easier to talk to the working class, I have to admit. If you went down to leaflet the factory gates, if you had hair down your back, it was thought that might put them off.

ROBINSON Did you work on your accent as well?

HITCHENS I paraphrase very slightly No.

ROBINSON You did not work on your accent?

HITCHENS No. There was no self-abnegation. But there was a feeling that one should look as if one were serious, really. So, the other reason was, of course, it made it very much easier for police provocation to occur, because the planting of drugs was something that happened to almost everyone one knew.

ROBINSON I see. All right. So, for specific Trotskyite purposes, your cohort said no to drugs, but yes to sex and rock and roll.

HITCHENS Sex and drugs don't go half as well as some people believe. It's very often you're forced to choose.

ROBINSON I see. All right. But my question is, when you were saying yes to sex and rock and roll, were you thinking thoughts? Was this a kind of conscious rebellion to the established order, or was it just purely gratification?

HITCHENS No, it was sort of the background music, if you like, to it all. I mean, I remember "Sgt. Pepper" very well in '67, for example. And it was sort of, it was part of the, as well, very, particularly for me, at any rate, the early songs of Bob Dylan, part of the background music to it all, part of the theme or mood to the decade, without question, yes.

ROBINSON So it was mood. It was gratification, it was pleasure, it was a big party. You weren't actually

thinking ideological thoughts.

HITCHENS I don't think I'd quite say that. No. If your background music is Bob Dylan, singing "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carrol", that's not hedonism.

ROBINSON All right. Bill, you were in your forties in the sixties when sex, drugs and rock and roll was breaking out all around you. So far as I can think, it was the most dramatic shift in morals, the most dramatic loosening of morals, if you will, since the English Restoration, and even three hundred years earlier. As you were experiencing it, what were you able to identify as the causes?

BUCKLEY The causes were the widely heralded pursuit of pleasure. It was thought not only of something that you did for natural organic reasons. The hormones were running around, just as, the stuff that was running around when you hadn't had anything to eat. But what was missing was those elements that said, "Look, the fact that one can have sex every day or twice a day for the rest of your life isn't a reason to have it, i.e., there are other factors to take into account. And those factors tend to disappear in a situation in which you are invited coming through the portholes of Woodstock, to simply ask what is the pleasure that you would like between eleven and eleven-thirty? And that answer is given. You don't have to ask any inhibiting questions like, "Ought I do it?," "Ought I to care about the girl?," "What do I do if the girl gets pregnant?"

ROBINSON Part of what's taking place is that the Pill is now widely available.

BUCKLEY Yes.

ROBINSON So she wouldn't become pregnant if you exercise a minimal precaution.

HITCHENS Well I think, that was, to coin a phrase, the material precondition.

ROBINSON A technological break-through.

HITCHENS No question about it.

BUCKLEY It's terribly hard to speak simultaneously about the arrival of a Pill and the increase of illegitimate babies and the increase of abortions.

ROBINSON Good point. We have a divorce rate of 50% today, illegitimacy rate of 30% or higher, and rising very fast. One in three pregnancies ends in abortion. Did the sixties do that to us? Fun then, but the dues of the party may have come in.

HITCHENS No, I would say, because those figures--which sound a little extreme to me, but I haven't got the means to unpack them right with me, but those are what we would callously call underclass figures, basically, aren't they? And these are the people actually over whom, I'm sorry to say, the sixties probably passed without leaving much impression, otherwise . . . the losing classes.

ROBINSON Illegitimacy, yes. Divorces, certainly no. That's certainly up and down the social strata in this country. And abortion--it's hard to get very accurate figures, but it's very high up and down.

HITCHENS I think it's always been hard to get accurate figures on that. I mean, anyway, many people would date it to the

ROBINSON You won't grant that there's a price to pay for the

HITCHENS By all means, I will. I'm afraid they have to take responsibility for that, as for their abortions, wouldn't you say? Shouldn't that be the line? People who do these things must take personal responsibility?

ROBINSON Well look, you look at

ROBINSON Personal responsibility, yes. But what has personal responsibility got to do with the alarming social trends that emerged during those years?

FROM HERE TO MATERNITY

ROBINSON Right up through the 1950's, divorce rates are low. Argue about what exactly what they were, but they were low.

HITCHENS Yes.

ROBINSON Abortion rates, again figures are hard to get, but they were low. Drug use was extremely limited. Illegitimacy was very low. The sixties take place, and there is an explosion of all these pathologies. Now, it strikes me that it's at least plausible to say that something happened right there which is to blame.

BUCKLEY It's certainly at least plausible, because it did happen, and it's counter-intuitive in the sense that you would expect that as the economic returns of people who have been suppressed but grew better, so would their behavior become more conventional. But it didn't, and it's not very widely encouraged. Pick up the front part of Playboy, and by the time you got to page 13, 14, there would have been a half dozen sexual engagements re-enacted for you, and there's never in it a sense of, "Should I do it, or should I not do it for other reasons, like, she's married?" By and large, it's simply the question, "Would it be fun?" and the idea that there are no other criteria to consult is very definitely a trademark of this age as it was

ROBINSON Let me come back to you again.

HITCHENS It almost makes me want to revise my earlier statement, stick up a bit for fun for it's own sake. You know, as I say, I feel I'm here to defend the positions taken by the sixties left politically. But something can be said about sex other, I think, than that it's a very good machinery for procreation.

ROBINSON How do you explain, as Bill put it a moment ago, the simultaneous arrival of the Pill and explosion of illegitimate births?

HITCHENS Insufficient pills. I mean, insufficient contraceptive knowledge.

ROBINSON Other than mechanically, how do you explain it.

HITCHENS No, I'm sorry. But that's actually a consistent finding, if you take, say, a third world country. Once you can raise women to the plateau where they realize that family limitation is in their interest, then a whole number of social pathologies become a great deal easier.

ROBINSON Take a first world country, take this country

HITCHENS It takes a lot of time to inform and instruct and make available, always with the iron opposition where available of Holy Mother Church and its allies. To get people to the level of what we would now call empowerment where that's possible. It's a battle worth fighting.

ROBINSON Now, let me try another one on you. You said a moment ago that these patholog—

HITCHENS The traditional route, I might say, under those circumstances, leads to overcrowding, misery, illiteracy and disease, and titanic infant mortality, which I don't think is in that case much more morally defensible than an abortion.

ROBINSON Let me put it to you another way. Right up to the 1960's, the underclass as the overclass-- everybody had a certain traditional morality imparted to them by the culture, the ambient culture. It was in the air. And then, beginning with the sixties, a different set of lessons began to be imparted. Now perhaps, the underclass, less educated, more economically vulnerable, was somewhat more susceptible to picking up these signals from the 1960's. Do you grant that?

HITCHENS Look, ever since Durkheim, there's been a big argument about what leads to social dislocation, whether it's urbanization, for example, and the dislocation of traditional rural ties. Why is the crime rate in America suddenly slumping, especially violent crime? Nobody seems to know why that is. We've got to suddenly say the nineties were so wonderful, a moral example set by authority, by the culture, was so great, the people decided not to use force on each other anymore. I think we should be very careful. I thought at the time that there were sordid elements to things like the Woodstock business, four days in the mud, the attempt to go back to nature and all that kind of thing. I find a lot of that actually quite depressing and squalid, sure, but I don't know that it leads in the direction you are trying to point me.

BUCKLEY It occurred to me it's terribly hard to go to a public school and expect to hear somebody say, "This is wrong." They might say, it's wrong if you arrive after nine fifteen because the class starts at nine, but to say something is wrong because it's something you shouldn't do, I can't find anything in the curriculum or in the practices that are acknowledged by the Supreme Court that permits a student to say this.

ROBINSON The strongest possible statement now is to say it's inappropriate.

HITCHENS I think you find that skipping Earth Day would be considered a moral delinquency.

BUCKLEY Yeah, there are taboos. And those taboos, however, have to do, I think, with allegiances, that don't really have very much to do with the governing of one's own behavior.

ROBINSON From taboos to politics. What came out of all the political turmoil of the sixties?

THE NEW LEFT OUT

ROBINSON If you name the leading figures of the political left of the time, you come up with, say, Eugene McCarthy, Robert Kennedy, George McGovern. And the leading political figures on the right, you come up with Barry Goldwater, Ronald Reagan. Now as a matter of effect, which side had the more enduring legacy?

HITCHENS The people who you mentioned--actually, Mr. Buckley was one of them--who were in the losing team of Mr. Goldwater's campaign, Senator Goldwater's campaign of '64, have benefitted from ironies of history almost more than anybody else, because by deciding that this would not teach them that they should dilute their ideology, that rather it should teach them to guard it and conserve it more [ROBINSON Is that what you were engaged in, Bill?] bravely and to say that the consensus is something not to be bowed to but to be shaped. They won a very, and I think deserved, political victory.

ROBINSON You were engaged in benefitting from the ironies of history?

BUCKLEY Well, I think Mr. Hitchens is correct when he says that these forces had inexplicable effect on the other side. It's true that we Republicans carry probably the most dramatic victories of our time, and it's true that you don't celebrate formal Socialism, as they did say in 1945, but it's unfortunately true that the other side has planted very successfully its folk- waves. And what we used to think of as open questions--for instance, should the local bookstore carry deSade?--are entirely closed questions. The answer is, yes, it should carry deSade. Questions about "blue" laws. Questions about abortion, in many cases. So all those creepy victories it's like giving up the welfare state, quote unquote, that the incumbent gallant did two years ago. Only every five minutes, he suggests ways of adding to the federal welfare bill. Now about over 21% of all GDP, even in an expansive economy, is now orchestrated by the federal government.

ROBINSON The era of big government is over but replaced with lots and lots of little government.

BUCKLEY Well, that wouldn't be so bad if it were lots and lots of little governments, but in many cases, it isn't, it's just more regulations and more

HITCHENS I think to stay with the ironic for a second

ROBINSON Right, go ahead.

HITCHENS I think quite a lot of your viewers will be surprised to learn that both Mr. Buckley and I are

favorable to decriminalization of narcotics.

BUCKLEY I'm in favor of legalization of marijuana not because I'm in favor of people being allowed to do what they want to do but because I think that the war against marijuana is not worth it, that more people are suffering on account of that war than would suffer without it.

ROBINSON William F. Buckley, Jr. against the war on drugs. Let's explore the issues that these two seem to agree upon.

JOINT AGREEMENT

ROBINSON I know of two issues on which the two of you agree, and I'd like to probe it just for fun, that is the legalization of drugs. Bill, why? Is it sheer fatigue? Is it purely a utilitarian point, that we can't hope to win the war on drugs so to speak?

BUCKLEY Suppose we started de novo. Shall we not legalize marijuana? First question. Do people want to use it? Answer is: Some people do. So that's one element that goes into your final decision. Second, what happens if we don't? Well, answer is that it will sell anyway, and that it will cause things like a black market, and then it will cause people to profiteer from the black market. They will engage in crime. Now we know there's 750,000 people who were arrested last year for marijuana. That's extraordinary diversion of effort that might have been put into keeping Mrs. So-and-so from being raped, or Mrs. So-and-so from being murdered. You have to wait six years in New York City to have a civil action come up because the calendar's so clogged by marijuana stuff.

ROBINSON Only marijuana?

BUCKLEY I would certainly, I think—

ROBINSON Marijuana's the easiest.

BUCKLEY The arguments that apply to marijuana apply theoretically to the harder drugs. I would probably be reluctant even acknowledging this to extend it to the other drugs until we had seen in operation how it worked with marijuana.

ROBINSON You grant his grounds, for legalizing drugs?

HITCHENS Yes, I think they're carefully, minimally stated. I would've put all of them more strongly, but yes

ROBINSON Now, you are squeamish on abortion? Can we call you pro-life, or no, just squeamish?

HITCHENS Well, look, I think there's such a thing as an unborn child. I think that's a moral category as well as, so to speak, a biological one. It's a real thing

ROBINSON You're parting company with the other inheritors of the sixties, though, are you not?

HITCHENS No, not with all of them, by any means. It's a division of opinion. I take with you that it's a conflict of rights. The unborn child idea is not a propaganda term. So in another words, the right to choose.

ROBINSON What are those who disagree with you missing?

HITCHENS Excuse me?

ROBINSON What are those who disagree with you missing? They simply refuse to accept that it's an unborn child?

HITCHENS Well, actually no, there's been progress on that front. You almost never hear now, which I can remember hearing from some ultra-feminists, that the occupant of the womb is simply an outgrowth or extrusion of the mother's body such as an appendix might be, or even worse, a tumor. Now I've heard it compared to that. That, I notice, they don't say anymore. There's a good deal more reflection on that point. And I think another technological innovation, namely the sonogram, has given an enormous number of people recourse for thought because the idea of viability is being pushed back further and further and further. I don't think—

ROBINSON The picture of the child on the refrigerator long before it's born—

HITCHENS It will never get as far with me as deciding that an IUD implanted in the uterus is an abortifacient, is a murder.

BUCKLEY But I can't point to any well-known feminist who is in favor of a ban on partial- birth abortion. And here we have a situation in which the viability is almost pathetically asserting itself.

HITCHENS Yes.

BUCKLEY So do you think there's been a retreat in that perspective?

HITCHENS I think that the partial-birth abortion case at one end is sort of equivalent of the IUD on the other. It's the limiting case, the one that everyone wishes sort of wouldn't come up, if you like, and I think what people are trying to do is avoid the question.

ROBINSON But what causes you to part company from the other inheritors of the sixties on this issue? What makes your thinking different?

HITCHENS Well no, I don't part company, in the sense that I don't think women should have—

ROBINSON What causes you to make common cause with Mr. Buckley on this one?

BUCKLEY Well because he acknowledges that there's an entity there . . .

ROBINSON Right.

BUCKLEY . . . a human entity.

ROBINSON Right.

ROBINSON Because you have your eyes

HITCHENS But there's a division on the left and among feminists about this, and indeed I remember Mr. Buckley himself writing a column saying that, and I think quoting Clare Boothe Luce, if I'm not wrong, saying that the decision to say that contraception should be forbidden by church teaching, and often mentioned in the same breath abortion, needed another look, because for one thing it degraded the moral authority of the abortion argument. Second, those who were campaigning against contraception are asking for the conception of a large number of unwanted and at-risk babies.

BUCKLEY Correct.

ROBINSON For the most part, Christopher Hitchens and William F. Buckley agree on abortion and on the war on drugs. Will they also agree on the legacy of the 1960's?

TAKING (WOOD) STOCK

ROBINSON William F. Buckley in his book, *On the Firing Line*: "The experience of the sixties has not been assimilated. I suspect the reason is that no one knows quite what to make of it." May I have a stab at it--at making something of the sixties?

BUCKLEY Sure.

ROBINSON We talked about the counter-culture, and then we talked about the counter counter- culture, and it occurs to me that both won. That is to say, the counter-culture won on the cultural front, and the counter counter-culture carried the day, in politics and economics. So we have the Reagan Revolution, the Soviet Union is dead, Trotskyism is a glimmer only in Christopher Hitchens' mind, and we have young people here in Silicon Valley who work extremely hard, eager to make as much money as they can Monday through Friday, and then on Saturday and Sunday they indulge themselves in weekend pleasures shaped by the culture of the 1960's, and both revolutions are now effectively institutionalized. They both exist and are relatively permanent. Good formulation?

BUCKLEY Yeah, I don't feel completely at home with your nomenclature, but by the counter counter-revolution—

ROBINSON I mean the right. I mean you, Barry Goldwater, and Ronald Reagan. That's what I mean.

BUCKLEY Yeah, we've got a lot to complain about. But I think it's true that one would not have known 30 or 40 years ago that the kind of attention would have been given to them, especially when the academic elite were highly mobilized to make this difficult.

ROBINSON So, sorry, go ahead, Christopher.

HITCHENS You've left someone out of your equation. I don't know if I've got time for the second person you've left out. But the first one is Václav Havel, it seems to me. Doesn't it strike you as interesting that—

ROBINSON He played a supporting role.

HITCHENS He mentions as his cultural icons, a term I don't like, but, that seems unavoidable. Even Frank Zappa and the Velvet Underground, particularly, who was in an interview with me once said, I consider myself a man of the sixties and of '68. There were innumerable symptoms in the 1989 Revolution of a sort of delayed element of the '68 one.

ROBINSON But you're not going to assert that the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia, as it then was, could have taken place without Ronald Reagan beefing up American military might.

HITCHENS I would certainly assert that. I think that—

ROBINSON You would assert that?

HITCHENS I think that was perfectly clear as early as 1968, with which I have some knowledge in Czechoslovakia, yes. I think that can be asserted pretty confidently.

ROBINSON You're saying the Soviet Union would have fallen because Václav Havel liked Frank Zappa . . .

HITCHENS No. I'm saying that the movements of democracy and revolution in Eastern Europe were endogenous, yes and would have prevailed.

ROBINSON Let me ask you this: Do you retain your animus against free markets, capitalism, all the things that Ronald Reagan stood for and the arenas in which he triumphed?

HITCHENS The argument of Marxism has always been that free enterprise and capitalism are not the same thing, as you know.

ROBINSON Ah, you Trotskyite. You know, they spend the whole show with terminology!

HITCHENS If it was free enterprise, Marx was a great admirer of Adam Smith, for example. There were changes in capitalism towards monopoly and the destruction of free enterprise, or so towards empire and to over-production.

ROBINSON Are you happy with the United States of America, which is you've made your home for the last 16 years, are you happy with the United States as regards--broadly happy--as regards its political and economic consensus?

HITCHENS No. One of the reasons I wanted to come to the United States was exactly because of 1968. It

seemed to me so impressive that a country, society like this, could have a citizen's movement, one of the first in history, to block the waging of an unjust rule by a government overseas. One of the benchmarks. And at the same time, to have a civil rights revolution, the beginnings of what's become a world-wide movement, challenging the previously subordinate status of women, and playing some quite good music and have a little bit of fun on the side, all at the same time, was impressive. That's when I decided . . . I began to feel American. I think that might be one of the things that marks me off from the consensus that you wanted me to endorse sort of as the price of the ticket. For one thing, the word "consensus" doesn't appeal to me very much.

ROBINSON To what extent, Christopher, are you still interested in hurling forward the agenda of the sixties?

HITCHENS I would like to socialize medicine. I would like to abolish the war on drugs, call off the war on drugs, which I think is an authoritarian war. So to that extent, there are things that are sixties about me. But actually no, I think that probably the impetus of that period is fading now. I'm mainly concerned—

ROBINSON It's over and done.

HITCHENS Mainly concerned to defend it, either from defamation or banalization, in the common memory.

ROBINSON Bill?

BUCKLEY Well, I think when people think back on the sixties, they're going to think of a society whose most conspicuous memories were of very young people, who sought out pleasure, and that in seeking out pleasure, they were occupying perspectives, which meant a lack of consideration of other things, living and non-living. The counsel of their parents. The counsel of God. And that was a very, very dangerous season. We need, I think, a re-crystallization of what it is that makes people live together amicably and, in a sense, that pays huge attention to the presumptions in favor of freedom. And that was not encouraged by such phenomena as Woodstock.

ROBINSON William F. Buckley, Jr., Christopher Hitchens, thank you very much.

ROBINSON Both revolutions of the 1960's are arguably still with us. Conservatism remains a potent if not indeed the dominant political force in the country today. Sex, drugs and rock and roll? We have a war on drugs. Drugs are still with us. We're fighting family breakdown and illegitimate births. Sex of all kinds is still with us. Rock and roll? Rock and roll is here to stay.

I'm Peter Robinson. Thanks for joining us.

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