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***Best of Enemies* Premieres on *Independent Lens*
Monday, October 3, 2016 on PBS**

Part of PBS Election 2016 Programming, Film Revisits the Game-Changing William F. Buckley/Gore Vidal Debates of the 1968 Presidential Campaign



Credit: ABC Photo Archives/ABC via Getty Images

(San Francisco, CA) — In the summer of 1968, television news changed forever. Dead last in the ratings, ABC News hired two towering public intellectuals to debate each other during the Democratic and Republican national conventions. William F. Buckley Jr. was a leading light of the new conservative movement. Gore Vidal, a Democrat and cousin to Jackie Onassis, was a leftist novelist and polemicist. Armed with deep-seated distrust and enmity, Vidal and Buckley believed each other's political ideologies were dangerous for America. Like rounds in a heavyweight battle, they pummeled out policy and personal insult, their explosive exchanges devolving into vitriolic name-calling. Live and unscripted, they kept viewers riveted as Nixon became the Republican nominee in Miami and violence rocked the

Democratic convention in Chicago. Ratings for ABC News skyrocketed and a new era in contentious public discourse was born. Directed by Robert Gordon and Academy Award-winning Sundance Film Festival alum Morgan Neville (*Twenty Feet from Stardom*), ***Best of Enemies*** spotlights the birth of the highbrow blood sport practiced by today's ever-present pundit television. The film premieres on *Independent Lens* Monday, October 3, 2016, 9:00-10:30 PM ET ([check local listings](#)) on PBS.

"In the focused light of the 1968 national television camera, the seeds were planted for our present media landscape, when the spectacle trumps the content of argument," says director Robert Gordon. "Each side today, like these two men, sees the other as malignant, promulgating views catastrophic for America; strident partisanship is understood as virile patriotism and compromise is castration. These Vidal-Buckley debates forecast the present state of civic discourse, heated by camera lights and abbreviated by corporate sponsors."

"Ultimately, this is a story about something I care about deeply; how the way we now 'talk' and 'listen' to each other through media is in fact corrosive to our society," says director Morgan Neville. "Sometimes I look around and wonder, 'What happened to the adults in our culture?' This film, I hope, offers some clues."

Visit the *Best of Enemies* page on Independent Lens, which features more information about the film. *Best of Enemies* will be available for online viewing on the site from October 4-November 2, 2016.

About the Subjects

William F. Buckley, Jr. was a pillar of the modern conservative movement. He founded *National Review* magazine in 1955 and, under his editorial direction, it quickly became the brain trust of the political right. His newspaper column, "On the Right," was widely syndicated for four decades. William F. Buckley's style of conservatism reached its greatest expression with the Reagan presidency.

Buckley was an early appreciator of television's reach and hosted his own popular interview program, *Firing Line*, for over 30 years. He was both magnetic and provocative, with guests from across the arts and political spectrum. He reached a broad audience, and his quirky mannerisms were as celebrated as his sesquipedalian vocabulary.

He coalesced a conservative movement based on traditional Christian thought, a social tendency toward the Libertarian, and laissez-faire economic theory. He was, however, an early "big government conservative," recognizing the need for a large military during the Cold War, and accepting its ramifications. In his personal life, Buckley was a practicing Roman Catholic who rejected Vatican II and attended a Latin mass. Throughout his life, Buckley was not afraid to rethink his ideas, welcoming integration after initially arguing against it and, later in life, opposing the Iraq War after supporting it.

Buckley came to national renown with his first book, *God and Man at Yale*, published in 1951 when he was 25. He criticized the liberal bent at his alma mater, arguing for a stronger basis in Christianity. He wrote over 50 books, including a series of popular espionage novels. He died in 2008 at age 82.

Gore Vidal was an iconoclast, smashing gender and political preconceptions in books, theater, essays, movies and political campaigns. Always outside society's mainstream, in 1948 he shocked even the literati with his third novel, *The City and the Pillar*, which featured an unapologetic homosexual relationship. Two decades later, his *Myra Breckinridge*, a paean to pansexuality, shocked the nation and sold millions of copies. On Broadway, in his 1960 play *The Best Man*, he wrote with biting insight about the deception of America's political conventions. The play was made into an Academy Award-nominated movie and revived on Broadway in 2001 and 2012, winning major awards both times.

In his childhood, Vidal read to his blind grandfather T. P. Gore, who was serving in Washington DC as the first senator from Oklahoma. Gore ran for political office in 1960 and 1982, an underdog in both races and losing each time. His seven-book US history novel series, including *Burr* and *Lincoln*, has been called the biography of our nation. He was a step-brother to Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy and a White House regular until a row with Bobby Kennedy limited his access.

Traditionally associated with Democrat liberals, Vidal was vociferous in his criticism of both

parties, in later years finding little to differentiate the two. A longtime political commentator, Vidal died in 2012 at age 86, saying not long before his death, "If you cut me open, there is ice water in my veins."

The Participants (in alphabetical order)

Eric Alterman is a Distinguished Professor of English and Journalism at Brooklyn College and CUNY Graduate School of Journalism, "The Liberal Media" columnist for *The Nation*, and a Senior Fellow at the Center for American Progress, the Nation Institute, and the World Policy Institute.

Ginia Bellafante is a long-time reporter at *The New York Times*

Linda Bridges is former executive assistant to William F. Buckley.

Reid Buckley (deceased), brother of William F. Buckley Jr., is a writer and founder of The Buckley School of Public Speaking.

Dick Cavett is an author and former TV talk show host.

Lee Edwards is a distinguished fellow in conservative thought at the B. Kenneth Simon Center for American Studies at The Heritage Foundation and the author of a biography of Buckley.

Todd Gitlin is the author of 15 books, a professor of journalism and sociology, and chair of the Ph.D. program in Communications at Columbia University.

Brooke Gladstone is host of the NPR show "On the Media."

Christopher Hitchens (deceased) was an author, columnist, essayist, orator, religious and literary critic, social critic and journalist who contributed to *New Statesman*, *The Nation*, *The Atlantic*, *London Review of Books*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, *Slate*, and *Vanity Fair*.

Fred Kaplan is distinguished Professor Emeritus of English at Queens College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York and author of *Gore Vidal: A Biography*.

Christopher Lehmann-Haupt is a critic, novelist, and journalist recently retired from *The New York Times*.

John McWhorter is a political commentator, critic, linguist, and professor at Columbia University.

George Merlis was an ABC publicist at the 1968 conventions.

Frank Rich is writer-at-large for *New York Magazine*.

William Sheehan is the former President of ABC News.

Andrew Sullivan is an author, editor and blogger at *The Dish*.

Sam Tanenhaus is a historian, biographer, and writer-at-large for *The New York Times* who is writing a biography of William F. Buckley, Jr.

Matt Tyrnauer is a filmmaker and award-winning journalist, who was editor-at-large, special correspondent and now contributing editor for *Vanity Fair*, where he served as Gore Vidal's editor.

Richard Wald is former head of NBC News and former Vice President at ABC News.

James Wolcott is a columnist for *Vanity Fair*.

About the Filmmakers

Morgan Neville (Director/Producer) is a documentary filmmaker whose films focus on culture. His acclaimed film *20 Feet From Stardom* won the 2014 Academy Award for Best Documentary as well as a Grammy Award for Best Music Film in 2015. His documentary, *Best of Enemies*, was shortlisted for the 2016 Academy Award and nominated for an Independent Spirit Award for Best Documentary. Neville has been nominated for three additional Grammys for his films: *Respect Yourself: The Stax Records Story*, *Muddy Waters Can't Be Satisfied* and *Johnny Cash's America*; and won an Emmy Award for his film *Hank Williams: Honky Tonk Blues*. Neville's non-music films include *The Cool School* and *Beauty Is Embarrassing*. Recent projects include *Chelsea Does*, a four-part documentary series, and *Keith Richards: Under the Influence*, both for Netflix. His latest film, *The Music of Strangers: Yo-Yo Ma and The Silk Road Ensemble*, was released by The Orchard and HBO in June 2016.

Robert Gordon (Director/Producer) is a Grammy Award-winning writer and filmmaker. His work has focused on the music, art, and politics of the American south. His films include William Eggleston's *Stranded in Canton*, *Respect Yourself: The Stax Records Story*, and the verité shocker, *Very Extremely Dangerous*. His work has been broadcast on PBS, A&E, and numerous international networks, and has been exhibited at the Whitney, LACMA, Haus Der Kunst (Munich) and many other international museums. His first book was *It Came From Memphis* and his latest is *Respect Yourself: Stax Records and the Soul Explosion*.

CREDITS

Produced and Directed By

Morgan Neville

Robert Gordon

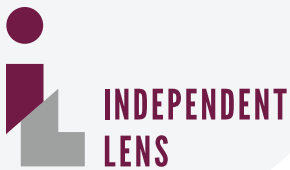
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This program was produced by Sandbar, LLC which is solely responsible for its content.

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About *Independent Lens*

Independent Lens is an Emmy® Award-winning weekly series airing on PBS Monday nights at 10:00 PM. The acclaimed series, with Lois Vossen as executive producer, features documentaries united by the creative freedom, artistic achievement, and unflinching visions of independent filmmakers. Presented by ITVS, the series is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American people, with additional funding from PBS, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Wyncote Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts. For more visit pbs.org/independentlens. Join the conversation: facebook.com/independentlens and on Twitter [@IndependentLens](https://twitter.com/IndependentLens).

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