

Barry Goldwater:

The American Conservative Triumph, Built on the Tragedy of Millions

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It would be difficult to find an era more influential on the modern American character than the 1960s, both in an immediate social change, and a long term backlash to those transformations. The decade gave the American public the civil rights movement, a series of legislative reforms and public action that would redefine the ways in which African Americans could participate in American society as a whole. The fight for women's liberation would be the first of many ongoing attacks against the sexism rampant in the public domain. Bringing forth devastation and countless wasted lives, the Vietnam War would challenge the status quo of America exceptionalism, as seen in the anti-war protests of the time. Each and every one of these profound social movements that dominated the era can be seen as a great triumph in the name of the causes they advocated for.¹ Yet negative reactions to the radical changes of this era nourished a new philosophy that would not see its full realization until the 1980s. Headed by Barry Goldwater, Republican senator from Arizona, the early beginnings of the conservative movement would create perhaps the most lasting cultural triumph of the 1960s, along with the greatest domestic tragedies of the coming decades.

Barry Goldwater as a cultural and political figure remains a complex character. Goldwater faced one of the most devastating Presidential landslide defeats in modern American political history, losing to Lyndon B. Johnson with 38.47% of the popular vote, and carrying only 6 states.² Yet, in spite of this loss, Goldwater would ultimately find triumph as the founder of modern American conservative thought. Goldwater ushered in conservatism by moulding his ideology out of the cultural backlash to the radical change

¹ Out of Many: A History of the American People

² U.S. Elections Atlas

of the 60s. This ideology would triumph over the American political scene in future years. Yet in his own success, Goldwater would inflict tragedy as his policies implemented by later politicians negatively impacted millions of Americans.

“Now, my fellow Americans, the tide has been running against freedom. Our people have followed false prophets. We must, and we shall, return to proven ways-- not because they are old, but because they are true.”³ Referencing an older time in his acceptance of the republican nomination, this statement by Goldwater prefaces his use of cultural backlash as the basis of his conservative ideology.

Circumstances were ripe for repercussions to the progressive changes of the 1960's. First, the passage of the Civil Rights Act mere months before the 1964 presidential election along with the movement preceding it made racial tensions a contentious issue across the country. Nowhere was the reaction against the Civil Rights movement more pronounced than in the South, as exhibited in the outright refusal of Mississippi Governor, Paul B. Johnson, to comply with the Civil Rights Act.⁴ Additionally, several southern politicians, most notably Strom Thurmond, subsequently switched parties, proving the degree to which the social change of the 60s caused a political backlash and realignment of social groups. In coordination with this societal resistance, Barry Goldwater opposed the Civil Rights Act. In a 1966 television interview on WWOR-TV he said, “I took an oath to defend and uphold the constitution,” arguing that the Civil Rights Act impaired states rights and unfairly empowered the federal government.⁵ In another instance, Goldwater denounced the bill as an “attempted

³ Goldwater's 1964 Acceptance Speech, Washington Post

⁴ Out of Many: A History of the American People

⁵ Firing Line - William F. Buckley, Jr & Barry Goldwater (1966)

usurpation of such power” from the states, and characterized the idea of ending segregation as “special welfare” towards African Americans.⁶ It is no coincidence that Goldwater won Mississippi, a state with a 90% white electorate, by 74 points over Johnson, who had championed the Civil Rights Legislations.^{7 8} This overwhelming triumph in Mississippi with the southern White population, notoriously one of the most conservative constituencies in the United States, shows how Goldwater’s initial ideological base centered around the cultural backlash of the Civil Rights movement.⁹ Even more damning was how Goldwater’s opposition to the Civil Rights bill parroted those of “states rights” politicians who had previously taken aggressive stances against the NAACP and attempts by the federal government to put an end to segregation in schools. For example, North Carolina gubernatorial candidate Beverly Lake endorsed “anti-school integration” positions in his 1960 campaign ads.¹⁰ This mirroring of language and ideas of Civil Rights backlash, conveys how Goldwater’s conservatism, as well as its popular support, was structured out of the rejection of the 60s and the accompanying radical, social change.

After establishing his basic platform, Goldwater went on to paint a portrait of American society in decay as a means of building his basic pillars of conservatism. In his acceptance speech for the Republican presidential nomination, Goldwater described the United States as a country with “violence in it’s streets, corruption in its highest offices, aimlessness amongst our youth, anxiety among our elders, and a personal

⁶ New York Times, June 19 1964

⁷ Bullock, Charles S. and Gaddie, Ronald Keith; *The Triumph of Voting Rights in the South*, pp. 31-33

⁸ U.S. Elections Atlas

⁹ Wyoming, Mississippi, Utah Rank as Most Conservative States, Gallup

¹⁰ Tambor City Tribune, May 15, 1960

despair among many who look beyond material success for the meaning of their lives.” This statement through its description of various populations, that in Goldwater’s view were deeply flawed in their moral purpose, conveyed a greater theme of a society endangered and in decline. Goldwater, at that moment, was able to create the problem, societal degradation, and through this issue he was then able to identify his solutions to each of the problems outlined. Later, in his acceptance speech for the Republican presidential nomination, Goldwater would state “Security from domestic violence, no less than from foreign aggression, is the most elementary, and fundamental purpose of any government.”¹¹ Goldwater’s rhetoric, outlining law and order as an integral part to combating moral degradation, not only portrays how the idea of “being tough on crime” became an essential part of his ideology, but how he would adapt elements of his ideology into a narrative of a society in decline.

The strategy of creating a conservative ideology around the idea of saving an imperilled country, would be essential in establishing other pillars of his doctrine. In Goldwater’s view, unions and government regulations were forces that “invade the privacy of workers.... Depriving them of a legal right enjoyed by all other members of society”. By painting a portion of the population as under attack from unions and a repressive government, Goldwater identified a societal threat, and offered free market capitalism as his solution.¹² Even more than economic regulation, Goldwater would employ these methods to put the idea of “Big Government” under fire, and make the objective of limiting it a key part of his conservative agenda. In his magnum opus, *The*

¹¹ Washington Post: Barry Goldwater’s 1964 Acceptance Speech

¹² Detroit Tribune, September 01, 1962

Conscience of a Conservative, Goldwater stated “I have little interest in streamlining government or in making it more efficient, for I mean to reduce its size. I do not undertake to promote welfare, for I propose to extend freedom. My aim is not to pass laws, but to repeal them.”¹³ Through language directly attacking the reach of the federal government and the implied threat to Americans’ freedoms, Goldwater cemented his conservative ideology as a callback to a better time free from problems and controversies the of the modern day, and subsequently as the solution to a society supposedly in decline.

Though he would face a landslide defeat in his bid for president, Goldwater’s conservative movement found true triumph when future politicians drew heavily from his ideas. The most notorious example remains 40th President, and ardent conservative, Ronald Reagan. Reagan was an early ally of Goldwater; in the 1964 election, he made an impassioned endorsement of Goldwater stating, “There’s only an up or down: [up] man’s old -- old-aged dream, the ultimate individual freedom consistent with law and order, or down to the ant heap of totalitarianism.”¹⁴ The phrases of “law and order” and “individual freedom”, along with endorsements of Goldwater and his policies, foreshadowed how Goldwater’s ideology would triumph through figures such as Reagan in later years. Reagan as a conservative politician would go on to dominate the Republican party, winning his first presidential bid with 44 of 50 states, the exact margin that Johnson achieved over Goldwater sixteen years earlier, and by nine percentage points in the popular vote, demonstrating the ultimate triumph of Goldwater’s

¹³ Barry Goldwater; *The Conscience of a Conservative* pp. 15

¹⁴ Ronald Reagan, *Time for a Choosing*

conservative ideology decades after it was first introduced.¹⁵ Reagan clearly invoked Goldwater's conservatism in his first inaugural address stating, "In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problems; government is the problem."¹⁶

Reagan's domestic policies while in office equally represent a triumph of Goldwater's ideologies. The Economic Recovery Act of 1981 created massive tax cuts, taking the top bracket from 70% to 50%.¹⁷ The decrease in government funding and involvement in people's lives, most famously through tax cuts, would be an overt homage to the policy ideas laid out by Goldwater. Reagan's "Economic Bill of Rights" would only further indebted him to the ideologies of Goldwater, as this particular policy initiative targeted government deregulation of various industries, most notably banking and environmental services.¹⁸ In addition, Reagan implemented Goldwater's anti-union philosophy. During the 1981 Air Traffic Controllers strike, Reagan declared striking illegal, and proceeded to fire all active participants, undermining the bargaining power of unions for generations to come. Both economic deregulation and undermining of Union authority were talking points of Goldwater's 1964 campaign, again demonstrating Goldwater's ideological triumph via figures like Reagan.¹⁹ Interestingly it is not just that Reagan championed Goldwater's policies, but that he ended his time in office as a wildly popular president with a triumphant average approval rating of 63%.²⁰

Conservative political commentator, George F. Will, stated how "We -- 27,178,188 of us

¹⁵ U.S. Election Atlas

¹⁶ C-Span Archives: Reagan's First Inaugural Address

¹⁷ [Economic Recovery Tax Act of 1981](#)

¹⁸ "Reagan's Economic Bill of Rights." Los Angeles Times

¹⁹ "Reagan Fires 11,000 Striking Air Traffic Controllers Aug. 5, 1981." Politico

²⁰ How Popular is President Trump?: FiveThirtyEight

-- who voted for [Goldwater] in 1964 believe he won, it just took 16 years to count the votes."²¹ Without a doubt, the dominance of Goldwater's ideology over future politicians like the revered Reagan, display the triumph of Goldwater, and his brand of conservatism.

While initially looking at conservative deregulatory economic policy, it is tempting to view it as a positive stimulus of short term economic growth. For example, several famous economists, including Adam Smith, the father of deregulatory capitalist economics, touted things like growth in consumer purchasing power and increased business competition as bonuses created by a deregulatory system that would benefit populations at large.²² In terms of short term economic thinking, these economists appear to be right, as reflected by the largely bullish stock markets of the 1980s and 90s when politicians such as Reagan, and Bill Clinton embraced Laissez Faire deregulatory economics.²³

However in the long term, the policies advocated by Goldwater were at best, neutral for American citizens, and at worst, precipitated disastrous results, ultimately culminating in economic repercussions felt by millions of Americans.

Perhaps one of the most effective ways to view the tragedy incited by conservative policies is exhibited in the decline of middle class. For, dedication to minimal market regulation coupled with pro-free trade policies, cornerstones of Goldwater Conservatism, are seen as one of the leading causes for the outsourcing and subsequent decline in labor force jobs. This is exhibited in the steep decline in the

²¹ "The Cheerful Malcontent." Washington Post

²² Wealth of Nations, Adam Smith pp. 96

²³ Dow Jones - 100 Year Historical Chart: Macrotrends

United States factory-employed population, from 4.5% in 1987, to less than 1% in 2007. This heavily coincided with the rise of unregulated trade and a rapidly expanding China, who represented less than 1% of industrially imported goods in 1987, rising to a little under 14% in 2007.²⁴ The related loss of manufacturing jobs concurrent with unregulated expansion of global trade, a key feature of conservative economics, demonstrates the tragic decline of the labor class at the hands of conservatism.

The attack on labor unions, another essential aspect of Goldwater conservatism, also created detrimental impacts on lower classes of society. A recent study by the Midwest Economic Policy Institute on the impact of unions on wage rates found that “labor unions increase individual incomes by lifting hourly wages. In Minnesota, unions raise worker wages by an average of 7.0 percent.” These findings additionally indicate that the neighboring state of Wisconsin has a much lower union membership rate, a state government that is hostile toward unions, and Right to Work laws which require unions to extend their services to non members. As a result of its anti-union stance, the study indicates that Wisconsin boasts much more stagnant wage growth.²⁵ Minnesota, obtaining both a healthy Union participation rate and by extension healthy wage growth, while Wisconsin has decreasing union rates and stagnant wages, demonstrates how unions as a whole are essential to the economic growth of the labor and lower middle classes. As a result of conservative union policies championed by Goldwater and enacted by Reagan and others, the American people have suffered with consistently stagnant and sometimes dropping wages.²⁶

²⁴ The China Syndrome: MIT Economics

²⁵ The State of the Unions 2018: Midwestern Economic Policy Institute

²⁶ U.S. Real Wage Growth: Slowing Down With Age: Liberty Street Economics

In addition, deregulatory policies carried out by conservative politicians have, in reality proven to create unstable markets that bring on crushing economic downturns. A study performed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development suggests that deregulation of banks by the government was a major factor that led to the infamous “housing bubble” and subsequently the 2008 recession. Furthermore the study additionally cites legislation passed by the Reagan administration, such as the Garn–St. Germain Depository Institutions Act, as the first step in the long legislative process of bank deregulation and the subsequent economic recession.²⁷ The 2008 recession saw unemployment spike at 10.1 percent, the highest recorded value ever, along with a record jump in the amount of homelessness and evictions.²⁸ ²⁹ The clear negative impact that the 2008 economic recession, and by extension, conservative deregulatory policies had on the American public proves how the repercussions of the conservative agenda was nothing short of a tragedy, and outweighs potential positive short term gain created by them.

Goldwater was essential in establishing modern American conservatism through utilizing cultural backlash to popularize messages of anti-government rhetoric, deregulatory economic policy and a “tough on crime” mantra that would incarcerate millions, especially among populations of color. While losing his election, the triumph of Goldwater was witnessed in the later rise of influential politicians such as Reagan who

²⁷ Systemically Important Banks and Capital Regulation Challenges:

²⁸ Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey: Bureau of Labor Statistics

²⁹ Number of Homeless Families Climbing Due To Recession: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities

drew heavily from Goldwater's ideology. Yet the actual policies espoused by Goldwater created harmful ramifications, as they led to attacks on unions, stagnant wages, a decline in the labor class and devastating economic downturns. Yet, delving into Goldwater's conservative agenda, it raises an intriguing question of freedom as a whole. What is it? How is it achieved? Who should achieve it? That is the essential question at the heart of the American political debate. To Goldwater, freedom was a government that let people and states exist independent of the influence or opinion of the federal government. To the liberals of his time, such as LBJ, freedom was a country of citizens supported by their government through programs and intervention, enabling its people to live lives free of poverty and despair. With such stark contrasts in the definitions of freedom, leading to such different conclusions, it remains a question of mind-boggling complexity that divides Americans perhaps now more than at any other time. Nevertheless, it is a question that has to be answered if the United States is to have a clear direction and future.

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Millions of people come out to the streets carrying the photographs of their relatives that defended their Motherland and defeated the Nazis. This means that their lives, their ordeals and sacrifices, as well as the Victory that they left to us will never be forgotten. We have a responsibility to our past and our future to do our utmost to prevent those horrible tragedies from happening ever again. The Nazis skillfully played on people's emotions and built their propaganda promising to deliver Germany from the "legacy of Versailles" and restore the country to its former power while essentially pushing German people into war. Paradoxically, the Western states, particularly the United Kingdom and the United States, directly or indirectly contributed to this. An American soldier would never forget encountering the German with an icy smile. He would later discover that the blood of innocent millions dripped from Eichman's manicured hands.

Stephen Shields. December 1989. In Germany we simply knocked loudly on the door of a house, and when someone timidly answered, usually a woman or an elderly man, we would hand that person a piece of paper. On the paper was a typewritten paragraph in German, stating that the occupants had ten minutes to get out, taking with them whatever they could collect in that time. The American Conservative exists to promote a "Main Street" conservatism that opposes unchecked power in government and business; promotes the flourishing. By redefining the human person, we leave behind the moral imagination that built our civilization.

Andrew T. Walker February 24, 2021. Politics. The Lies Aren't Secret. Thanks to friendly courts, the Deep State continues to avoid accountability, triumphant at home and abroad. Jim Bovard February 24, 2021. World. American Prometheus and millions of other books are available for Amazon Kindle. Learn more. Books. Kai Bird is the author of The Chairman: John J. McCloy, The Making of the American Establishment and The Color of Truth: McGeorge Bundy and William Bundy, Brothers in Arms. He coedited with Lawrence Lifschultz Hiroshima's Shadow: Writings on the Denial of History and the Smithsonian Controversy. A contributing editor of The Nation, he lives in Washington, D.C., with his wife and son. Martin J. Sherwin is the Walter S. Dickson Professor of English and American History at Tufts University and author of A World Destroyed: Hiroshima and Its Legacies, which won the Stuart L. Bernath Prize, as well