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. 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. 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

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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.”

Referencing an older time in his acceptance of the republican nomination, this statement by Goldwater acts as a mere preface of Goldwater’s 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, taking place mere months before the 1964 presidential election, the passage of the Civil Rights Act and the movement preceding it, made racial tensions a contentious issue across the nation. 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.

Additionally, several politicians from the South, 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

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3 Goldwater’s 1964 Acceptance Speech, Washington Post
4 Out of Many: A History of the American People
federal government. In another instance, Goldwater denounced the bill as an “attempted usurpation of such power” from the states, and characterized the idea of ending segregation as “special welfare” towards African Americans. It is no coincidence that Goldwater won Mississippi, a state with a 90% white electorate, by 74 points over Lyndon B. Johnson, who had been one of the most vocal champions of the Civil Rights Legislations. This overwhelming triumph in Mississippi with the southern White population, notoriously one of the most conservative constituencies in the United States, helps prove how Goldwater’s initial ideological base was centered around the cultural backlash of the civil rights movement. 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. Examples of this include politicians such as North Carolina gubernatorial candidate Beverly Lake, who in a 1960 ad highlighted “anti-school integration” positions. 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 radical social change as a whole.

After establishing his basic platform, Goldwater went on to paint a society in decay as a means of building his basic pillars of conservatism. In his acceptance

5 Firing Line - William F. Buckley, Jr & Barry Goldwater (1966)
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
speech of the Republican nomination Goldwater described an America with “violence in it’s streets, corruption in its highest offices, aimlessness amongst our youth, anxiety among our elders, and a personal despair among many who look beyond material success for the meaning of their lives.” This statement through its description of various populations, that at least 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 nomination, Goldwater would state that “Security from domestic violence, no less than from foreign aggression, is the most elementary, and fundamental purpose of any government.”

Goldwater's rhetoric, outlining law and order as a integral part to combating moral degradation, not only portrays how the idea of “being tough of crime” became an essential part of his ideology, but how he would incorporate general elements of his ideology, as a response to a society in decline.

The strategy of creating a conservative ideology around the idea of saving a society in decline, would be essential in establishing other pillars of his doctrine. In Goldwater's view, unions, and government regulations, are 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 population as under attack from unions and a repressive government, Goldwater sought to establish the idea of a societal threat, and free market capitalism as his solution. Even more than economic regulation,

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11 Washington Post: Barry Goldwater’s 1964 Acceptance Speech
12 Detroit Tribune, September 01, 1962
Goldwater would employ these methods to put the greater 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 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.” 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 the solution to a society supposedly in decline.

Though he would face a landslide defeat in his bid for president, Goldwater found true triumph in the conservative movement when future conservative leaders drew heavily from his ideas. The most notorious example of such a politician 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 in individual freedom consistent with law and order, or down to the ant heap of totalitarianism.” 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 election with

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13 Barry Goldwater; The Conscience of a Conservative pp. 15
14 Ronald Reagan, Time for a Choosing
44 of 50 states, the exact margin that Lyndon B. Johnson achieved over Goldwater sixteen years earlier, and by nine percentage points in the popular vote, demonstrating the ultimate triumph of Goldwater’s conservative ideology decades after it was first introduced. The notion that Reagan was an extension of Goldwater’s conservatism was clear, as in his first inaugural address, Reagan stated, “In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problems; government is the problem.” The anti-government rhetoric of Reagan in his inaugural speech provides a clear continuation of the federalist ideas of Goldwater, and thus conservatism as a whole. The domestic policies of Reagan while in office would equally reflect the extent to which Goldwater’s political ideologies triumphed over the political scene. The Economic Recovery Act of 1981 created massive tax cuts, taking the top bracket from 70% to 50%. The decrease in government funding and involvement in people's lives, through things such as tax cuts, would be an overt homage to the policy ideas laid out by Goldwater. Reagan’s “Economic Bill of Rights” would only further indebt the 40th President to the ideologies of Goldwater, as this particular policy initiative targeted government deregulation of various industries, most notably that of banking and environmental services. In addition, Reagan implemented Goldwater’s anti-union philosophy. During the 1981 Air Traffic Controllers strike, Reagan declared striking illegal, and proceed 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

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15 U.S. Election Atlas
16 C-Span Archives: Reagan’s First Inaugural Address
18 “Reagan’s Economic Bill of Rights.” Los Angeles Times
Goldwater’s 1964 campaign, again demonstrating Goldwater’s ideological triumph via figures like Reagan.\textsuperscript{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 an average approval rating of 63.1\%, which would embody the great triumph of Goldwater and his doctrine.\textsuperscript{20} Conservative political commentator, George F. Will, stated how “We -- 27,178,188 of us -- who voted for [Goldwater] in 1964 believe he won, it just took 16 years to count the votes.”\textsuperscript{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.

Despite the long term triumph of Barry Goldwater and his personal ideology through politicians like Reagan, the policies advocated for by Goldwater would at best, be indifferent to American citizens, and at worst, espouse disastrous results, ultimately culminating in 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 as a result of conservative economic policy. For example, 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 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\%.

\textsuperscript{19} “Reagan Fires 11,00 Striking Air Traffic Controllers Aug. 5, 1981.” Politico
\textsuperscript{20} How Popular is President Trump?: FiveThirtyEight
\textsuperscript{21} “The Cheerful Malcontent.” Washington Post
of industrially imported goods in 1987, rising to a little under 14% in 2007. The related loss of manufacturing jobs at the hands of 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. 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 have caused the American people to suffer with consistently stagnant and sometimes dropping growth rate wages from the early 1980 until modern day.

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22 The China Syndrome: MIT Economics
23 The State of the Unions 2018: Midwestern Economic Policy Institute
24 U.S. Real Wage Growth: Slowing Down With Age: Liberty Street Economics
Finally, conservative, deregulatory economic policy generated increased economic instability that precipitated economic recessions and consequential devastation to the American people. A study performed by the OECD (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 stock market crash and recession. Furthermore the study additionally cites legislation passed by the Reagan administration, such as the Garn–St. Germain Depository Institutions Act, as the first main step in the long legislative process of bank deregulation and the subsequent economic recession. 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 associated with the housing crash. 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.

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. While losing his election, the triumph of Goldwater was witnessed in the later rise of influential politicians such as Reagan who drew heavily from Goldwater’s ideology. Yet the actual policies espoused by Goldwater created harmful ramifications, as they led to attacks on unions, stagnant

25 Systemically Important Banks and Capital Regulation Challenges:
27 Number of Homeless Families Climbing Due To Recession: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities
wages, a decline in the labor class and devastating economic depressions. 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 mind bogglingly complex question, one 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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