

# In Memoriam: Barry Goldwater

**B**arry Goldwater was 20th-century America's first libertarian politician.

Had it not been for him, the magazine you are reading—and its parent organization—might not exist. I read Goldwater's book, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, in high school, just as I was becoming politically aware. Its powerful message of individual liberty, economic freedom, and anti-communism struck a chord with me, launching an intellectual journey that went on to Ayn Rand, Milton Friedman, Ludwig von Mises, F. A. Hayek, and many others. Ultimately, this process generated the idea that I would make a career out of defending rationality and liberty.

Over the years I have returned again and again to these lines in Goldwater's book, in which he set forth the credo of a new breed of politician, dedicated to reclaiming liberty: "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. It is not to inaugurate new programs, but to cancel old ones that do violence to the Constitution, or that have failed in their purpose, or that impose on the people an unwarranted financial burden. I will not attempt to discover whether legislation is 'needed' before I have first determined whether it is constitutionally permissible. And if I should later be attacked for neglecting my constituents' 'interests,' I shall reply that I was informed their main interest is liberty and that in that cause, I am doing the very best I can."

To budding libertarian and conservative activists of the early '60s, these words were electrifying. Thousands of us got our first political experience going door to door, staffing literature tables, and even serving as poll watchers in Goldwater's 1964 presidential campaign. Many of us knew he would lose that battle, but we saw it as but the first engagement of a long war. And though he chose not to run for president again, by inspiring Ronald Reagan to run, Goldwater achieved something of a belated victory in 1980.

What Goldwater did was to make it acceptable to question the legitimacy of an all-powerful national government. Though widely denounced as extremist in 1964, his ideas had become almost mainstream by the time of Reagan's election. A proliferation of conservative and libertarian think tanks arose in Goldwater's wake, including the Reason Foundation, to lay the basis for shrinking big government by perfecting the critiques of the status quo and working out the details of decentralist, market-based alternatives. Although our government has in many respects grown larger over the past three decades, its legitimacy as the universal problem solver has been undermined, and its power in many specific areas (economic regulation, marginal tax rates, regulation of lifestyle choices) has been reduced.

Despite the near-universal praise following his death, during his life Goldwater was attacked unfairly by both the left and the right. The left caricatured him as a warmonger for his assertive stance against the Soviet empire—most egregiously in Lyndon Johnson's famous TV commercial of the little girl blown away by a nuclear blast. Yet how radically extremist—in hindsight—are these concluding words from *Conscience of a Conservative*?

"Either the Communists will retain the offensive; will lay down one challenge after another; will invite us in local crisis after local crisis to choose between all-out war and limited retreat [not bad as a forecast of the Jimmy Carter years].... Or we will

summon the will and the means for taking the initiative, and wage a war of attrition against them—and hope, thereby, to bring about the internal disintegration of the Communist empire [more or less the Reagan Doctrine]." It doesn't sound so radical after the fact, but in the '60s that sort of tough-minded policy prescription was beyond the pale in polite society.

The other attacks on Goldwater have come mostly from the religious right during the past decade or so. Responding to his pro-choice views on abortion and homosexuality, and his concern about mixing religion and politics, a gaggle of right-wingers variously charged that Goldwater had lost his way, either to senility or to the manipulations of his second wife, whom he married in 1991, six years after the death of Peggy Goldwater. Those charges are mendacious. Barry Goldwater was always an individualist first. The son of a Jewish father and an Episcopalian mother, he deeply understood the importance of the separation of church and state—and the divisiveness of attempts to make laws that would impose some people's religious beliefs on others. He and Peggy were early and longtime supporters of Planned Parenthood. And he began criticizing the Moral Majority on the Senate floor soon after its rise to prominence in 1981.

Barry Goldwater was an American original. He was not an intellectual; his libertarian individualism stemmed from the commonsense values of ordinary Americans: Work hard, take responsibility for your life, honor your commitments—and mind your own business. If only we had politicians like him today.

—Robert W. Poole Jr.

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■ This is a double issue, as REASON goes on hiatus for a month. The next issue you receive will be dated October.



## Corporate Responsibility

Among other strange things, Nick Gillespie ("Rebel Rousers," May) writes that Bill Bennett's criticism of companies like Time Warner and Seagram is "rooted" in an "embrace of top down authority as the ultimate, rightful source of value and structure in society." Huh? Too much Hayek, perhaps. Bill Bennett is not making a complicated (or fascist) point. It's very simple, in fact: Influential people should act responsibly and decently. Which raises a more interesting issue than the one Gillespie fumbles. What do libertarians make of those two words: *responsibility* and *decency*?

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**Nick Gillespie replies:** Jason Bertsch, who works for the Washington, D.C., think-tank-cum-"grassroots"-political-group co-founded by Bill Bennett, is at least partly right: The former drug czar and education secretary is not given to making complicated points, particularly when it comes to popular culture. Which was part of my critique of left-wing and right-wing cultural critics. Using author Thomas Frank as an example of the former and Bennett as an example of the latter, I noted that both focused exclusively on *producers* of

cultural messages while ignoring *consumers* of such messages. The result, I suggested, is "impoverished analysis" that fails to do justice to how such messages circulate throughout society and what their actual meanings may be. Hence, Bennett's continuing use of an unpopular song by the unpopular band Cannibal Corpse as a leading indicator of cultural ruin.

Although I hesitate to speak for a group as diverse, contentious, and individualistic as "libertarians," I suspect that most of them would agree with the bland injunction that people, whether they are "influential" or members of the mass that makes popular culture popular, "should act responsibly and decently"—at any rate, I know I do.

The real issue, of course, is how such terms get defined. Unlike Bennett, I find nothing particularly objectionable in Burger King's Thoreauvian suggestion that "sometimes you gotta break the rules," or in Time Warner's continued interest in hawking popular music. Indeed, to the extent that such companies are attempting to serve customers, one might conclude that they are acting both responsibly and decently.

## Generous Nature?

As a law review editor (many, many years ago) I had the privilege of editing an article by Tibor Machan. I've been a fan and reader of his work ever since. So I'm surprised that neither he nor Loren Lomasky ("Generous to a Fault?," May) addressed the most obvious explanation for people's decisions to be generous and help others: What goes around comes around. People who generously help others may actually be motivated by the notion of the "magnificent obsession"; what they do for you this time will somehow be done for them by someone else at some other time.

At its heart, this idea is in fact the basis for the Golden Rule. If everyone is decent and kind (and generous) to others, even to strangers, then in the grand scheme of things this decency and generosity will be passed around among us all.

People are led to be generous, at least in part, because they hope (and believe) that in some way this will lead to others being generous to them. Their own self-interest, manifested in their perhaps unconscious belief in the magnificent obsession, motivates them to extend a hand to others—even when there is no obvious or immediate reciprocation.

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In Loren Lomasky's review of Tibor Machan's book *Generosity: Virtue in Civil Society*, we once again encounter the implacable conviction that ethical egoism is incompatible with various forms of benevolence—specifically, in this case, with expressions of generosity.

It appears to be a widely held notion that, to the extent someone pursues his own interests, he must thereby be opposing the interests of someone else; or, at least, that while acting selfishly, he is necessarily unconcerned with the interests of others. Indeed, virtually all of the arguments against egoism include a belief that the basic conditions of human existence inevitably entail conflicts of interests among men, and that constructive social interaction therefore requires, at least occasionally, that individuals act against or beyond the scope of their own interests.

This idea is even implicit in some formulations of individual rights, such as the statement that one's rights end where another's begin, or that one's rights are limited by a duty to respect the rights of

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