Samuel Johnson declared that “men more frequently require to be reminded than informed.” Perhaps Barry Goldwater had this injunction in mind in his famous nomination acceptance speech 50 years ago at the Republican National Convention in San Francisco. Like a liturgical litany, seven times in his speech Goldwater said either “I needn’t remind you” or “let me remind you,” but it was the final two reminders that sealed the speech as the most memorable convention oration since William Jennings Bryan denounced the “Cross of Gold” in 1896: “I would remind you that extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice. And let me remind you also that moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue.”

For a candidate whose chief vulnerability was his supposed extremism, embracing extremism seemed the height of, well, extremism—not to mention imprudence. It did not matter that the statement’s intellectual pedigree stretched back to Aristotle and Cicero. Theodore White recorded the shock of a fellow reporter: “My God, he’s going to run as Barry Goldwater.” There was going to be no “tacking to the center,” the candidate’s usual tactic once he had clinched the nomination. Goldwater’s defense of “extremism” opened the floodgates for his critics to engage in the reductio ad Hitlerum. Samples include:

- Martin Luther King, Jr.: “We see dangerous signs of Hitlerism in the Goldwater campaign.”
- Civil rights activist Roy Wilkins: Goldwater’s election “would bring about a police state.”
- Senator J. William Fulbright: “Goldwater Republicanism is the closest thing in American politics to an equivalent of Russian Stalinism.”
- California Governor Pat Brown: Goldwater’s acceptance speech “had the stench of fascism…. All we needed to hear was ‘Heil Hitler.’”
- Jackie Robinson: “I would say that I now believe I know how it felt to be a Jew in Hitler’s Germany.”
- San Francisco Mayor John Shelley: The Republicans “had Mein Kampf as their political bible.”

Many in the press happily joined the chorus. Columnist Drew Pearson, for example, wrote that “the smell of fascism has been in the air at this convention.” The Chicago Defender ran the headline: “GOP Convention, 1964 Recalls Germany, 1933.” Not to be outdone, Daniel Schorr of CBS News simply made up a story—or passed along a rumor too good to check—that Goldwater was in touch with the right wing in Germany. The London Observer, usually a sober publication, found “disquieting similarities” between Hitler and Goldwater. The media made much of a trumped up “poll” of 1,189 psychiatrists who thought Goldwater was “psychologically unfit” to be president. (Goldwater later won a libel suit against the magazine publisher behind this stunt.)

This unhinged reaction from liberals, 20 years after President Franklin D. Roosevelt had ascribed fascism to opponents of his Second Bill of Rights, should not have come as a surprise. But the reaction from many Republicans was nearly as bad. Watching from the convention gallery after having introduced Goldwater, Richard Nixon—not a man thought to have a weak stomach—said he felt “almost physically sick” when he heard the infamous aphorism. Even Pat Buchanan, then an editorial writer for the St. Louis Globe-Democrat, thought the statement “dealt the ace of trumps to a Democratic campaign that already had a fistful of trumps to play.”

Nostalgia

Many of his detractors interpreted Goldwater’s subsequent landslide defeat to Lyndon Johnson as proof that conservatism was dead, or still-
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— Harvey Mansfield
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— Diana Schaub
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While Morgenstau thought Goldwater’s conservatism amounted to ‘political romanticism,’ a closely related theme was that it represented the politics of ‘nostalgia.’ Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote that Goldwaterism “could be more simply defined as an expression of national nostalgia, as a yearning for the good old days of uncomplicated domestic and foreign issues.... It is still one of the mysteries of the American political process that a man so far to the Right should have become the nominee of a major party.” Political scientist Samuel Lubell wrote: “the Republicans remain what the Southern Democrats were after the Civil War—essentially a party of nostalgia. There is one instinctive Republican program, in whose favor all doubts are resolved—to turn the clock back to an earlier era.”

Fifty years later, many liberals have become nostalgic, regarding Goldwater as a ‘national treasure’ useful for attacking today’s ‘extremist’ Tea Party Republicans. To be sure, Goldwater in his later years sympathized with some positions of the cultural Left. He was pro-abortion and for gays in the military, for example, though these views arose from his overarching dislike of centralized liberal governance. Nothing said today against the ‘extremism’ of the Tea Party—and Republicans generally—wasn’t said about Goldwater and the conservatism he championed. Modern liberal nostalgia’s deeper basis is the lament for liberalism’s lost hegemony over American intellectual and political life. In fact, keeping in mind that many attacks on Goldwater came from within the Republican establishment itself, just as today’s Beltway Republicans deploy the Tea Party, criticism of today’s conservative populism looks almost restrained.

In 1964 Phyllis Schlafly first gained national attention with her best-selling pro-Goldwater book, A Choice, Not an Echo. Today’s Tea Party conservatism represents an echo of the choice Goldwater offered. The examples of coarse Tea Party rhetoric, imprudent strategies, and faulty candidates all have analogues in the Goldwater movement of 1964. Nor was the Tea Party the first insurgency to take out establishment Republicans.

The deeply flawed Max Rafterty defeated incumbent liberal Republican Senator Thomas Kuchel in the 1968 California primary, for example. Our anti-Tea Party alarmists overlook two important points: how well Goldwater’s message has held up; and the ways the Tea Party insurgency has helped Republicans gain ground.

A Modest Manifesto

Goldwater’s nomination is seen today as the turning point for the postwar conservative movement, which many liberal writers have come to portray as a meticulously planned juggernaut. Under the spell of retrospective determinism, many today have forgotten that Goldwater’s 1964 nomination was a surprise. Despite the erudition of the National Review circle, conservatism in the early 1960s appeared to be a marginal political force with limited popular appeal. There remained a dwindling constituency for McCarthyism, a worldview rendered still more obscurantist by the cranky conspiratorial stylings of the John Birch Society, at the time the nation’s most prominent right-wing organization. Many political figures close to Goldwater and his campaign were either Birchers or sympathizers, creating a practical difficulty for Goldwater in 1964, as it did briefly for Ronald Reagan’s California gubernatorial campaign in 1966. William F. Buckley, Jr., chided the Birch Society founder Robert Welch in 1962 for his outré claim that President Dwight Eisenhower might have been a “conscientious agent” of the Soviet Union, but had little effect on the Society’s popularity. (Neither did Russell Kirk’s similar critique in the Catholic journal America.) It was not until 1965 that a more sweeping attack on the Society in National Review proved the turning point in its fortunes among conservatives. “[It would never again come close to the potential level of influence—and notoriety—it had in the years 1963 and 1964,” historian D.J. Mulloy writes in The World of the John Birch Society (2014). “Once the official and more ‘responsible’ faces of American conservatism turned away from Birchism, they never looked back.”

At its peak the John Birch Society’s membership was probably no greater than 50,000, with the readership of its magazine, American Opinion, perhaps twice that number. The Society’s clout owed more to liberal paranoia than genuine political strength. In 1961, for example, when California Attorney General Stanley Mosk warned that the John Birch Society was secretly maneuvering to take over the Republican Party, the media were...
only too happy to echo this theme. Hence, few seemed to notice the runaway success of Goldwater’s modest manifesto, Conscience of a Conservative. Though its publishers originally fretted over distributing an initial press run of 5,000 copies when it first appeared in 1960, Conscience would go through 20 printings by November 1964, selling 3.5 million copies and landing on the New York Times bestseller list. Taken together with Schlafly’s equally best-selling Choice, the book’s success should have been a sign something was happening beyond the Hudson River. Moreover, Goldwater’s twice-weekly newspaper column, syndicated by the Los Angeles Times, was appearing in over 150 papers.

It was widely known at the time that Conscience was ghostwritten for Goldwater by L. Brent Bozell, Jr., Buckley’s brother-in-law. (Goldwater’s newspaper columns were written chiefly by Stephen Shadegg.) The myth persists that Goldwater never read the manuscript, which legend Goldwater occasionally fueled with diffident comments such as, “Well, I read the book. I even agreed with parts of it.” In fact, Bozell worked from old speeches and statements of Goldwater, who reviewed each chapter before returning it to Bozell with notes for changes.

Conscience of a Conservative holds up so well across half a century—its argument so fresh and direct—that with only minor changes it could serve today as a Tea Party manifesto. "The root difference between the Conservatives and the Liberals of today is that Conservatives take account of the whole man, while the Liberals tend to look only at the material side of man’s nature," Goldwater declared. "Liberals, on the other hand—in the name of a concern for ‘human beings’—regard the satisfaction of economic wants as the dominant mission of society. They are, moreover, in a hurry.”

Like today’s Tea Party, Conscience deplores not just the liberal opposition, but the GOP’s weak sisters, both of whom “propound the first principle of totalitarianism: that the State is competent to do all things and is limited in what it actually does only by the will of those who control the State.” The Constitution, Goldwater reminds us, is a “system of restraints against the natural tendency of government to expand in the direction of absolutism.” (Emphasis in original.)

Even though many of the worst expressions of the modern administrative state lay ahead in 1964, Goldwater warned that our government was tending toward “Leviathan, a vast national authority out of touch with the people, and out of their control. This monolith of power is bounded only by the will of those who sit in high places.”

Conscience of a Conservative culminates in a rallying cry that has come back into fashion among conservatives recently:

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.

The left-leaning historian Rick Perlstein noted in his book Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus (2001) the different tone between Goldwater and the McCarthy-Birch rhetoric: “Conscience of a Conservative didn’t blame invisible Communists for America’s problems. It blamed all-too-visible liberals. It’s anti-communism was not about raising nameless dreads but about fighting—hard and in the open.”

Petulant Provocations

In light of Goldwater’s rhetoric in Conscience, the “extremism” aphorism shouldn’t have shocked. Examining the speech’s development, however, reveals that the phrase owed its origin to an act of restraint and conciliation by Goldwater. On the eve of the GOP convention, Governor William Scranton of Pennsylvania mounted an eleventh-hour bid to wrest the nomination from Goldwater, issuing an ill-conceived broadside that contended “Goldwaterism has come to stand for a whole crazy-quilt collection of absurd and dangerous positions.” Although Scranton took full responsibility for it, his operatives supposedly wrote the letter without his knowledge or approval. In any case, it reinforced the charge that Goldwater was an “extremist.” More importantly, it ruled out any possible reconciliation between Goldwater and the Republican establishment wing, or of a Goldwater-Scranton ticket (which may have been the letter’s purpose).
Goldwater was furious, according to Lee Edwards's account of the episode in his biography, Goldwater: The Man Who Made a Revolution (1995). Clif White, one of Goldwater's key strategists, intimated that the letter would backfire and assure Goldwater the nomination in a first-ballot landslide. But it was political scientist Harry V. Jaffa who suggested using the letter to Goldwater's advantage. Jaffa, now a Distinguished Fellow of the Claremont Institute and professor emeritus at Claremont McKenna College, had abandoned the Democratic for the Republican Party after the Bay of Pigs debacle in 1961, then been invited to work in the Goldwater presidential campaign. He argued for sending the Scranton letter to every GOP delegate, along with a magnanimous statement from the Goldwater campaign that quoted Lincoln's response to an editorial attack from Horace Greeley: "If there be perceptible in [the editorial] an impatient and dictatorial tone, I waive it in deference to an old friend, whose heart I have always supposed to be right."

But the Republican anti-conservatives persisted, with Nelson Rockefeller charging in his convention speech that the John Birch Society was attempting the "infiltration and takeover of established political organizations by Communist and Nazi methods." Goldwater's delegates on the convention floor held their disapproval, but the audience in the galleries, who were not under the campaign's control (Clif White suspected they might have been Rockefeller plants intended to embarrass Goldwater), booed loudly.

These and other petulant provocations from the GOP's liberal wing led Goldwater to remark to an aide, "Christ, we ought to be writing a speech telling them to go to hell." He was not inclined to affect a conciliatory tone with Rockefeller, Scranton, and the rest of the immoderate GOP moderates whose accusations were as intemperate as liberal Democrats'. In a more serious mood, Goldwater signaled that he thought his acceptance speech should indicate that his nomination and campaign marked a "historic break" for the Republican Party. It is also likely that Goldwater wanted to keep faith with "the ones who brung him," as the old country slogan goes.

Goldwater had been much impressed with Jaffa's suggestion about the Scranton letter along with other material Jaffa had provided to the platform committee, which included a version of the "extremism" couplet. As Jaffa explained in a 1980 interview:

I wrote that statement, in part, as a repudiation of the critique of extremism that was made by Rockefeller and Scranton witnesses before the [platform] committee. Sometimes these things get out of hand. They are like letters you do not intend to send. But they blow out the window and somebody picks them up and they are delivered. And this one was delivered to the Senator, who fell in love with it and ordered that it be incorporated in his Acceptance Speech, which in turn led to my becoming the principal drifter of the speech. And, there it was. It was not my political judgment that the thing be used in the speech at all, although I must say that I was flattered at the time and didn't think too much of what the consequences would be....

The Senator liked it because he had been goaded by mean-spirited attacks through the long months of the primaries. Nothing in the political history of the country surpasses in fundamental indecency the kind of attacks that were made on Goldwater by Nelson Rockefeller and his followers.... But I was not asked for the extremism statement; I had written it as an in-house memorandum, and it was appropriated. I'm not making an excuse for myself in saying I wasn't responsible for it. I was certainly enthusiastically in favor of it at the time.

Now the Republican cause demands that we brand Communism as the principal disturber of peace in the world today. Indeed, we should brand it as the only significant disturber of the peace. And we must make clear that until its goals of conquest are absolutely renounced, and its relations with all nations tempered, Communism and the governments it now controls are enemies of every man on earth who is or wants to be free.

And the prelude to the "extremism" passage is vintage Jaffa:

"It was composed of strange, discordant, and even hostile elements." End of the quote.

Yet all of these elements agreed on one paramount objective: to arrest the progress of slavery, and place it in the course of ultimate extinction....

Anyone who joins us in all sincerity we welcome. Those who do not care for our cause, we don't expect to enter our ranks in any case. And let our Republicanism so focused and so dedicated not be made fuzzy and futile by unthinking and stupid labels.

I would remind you that extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice.

And let me remind you also that moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue.

In the full context we can make out how Goldwater's speech connected his supposed "extremism" with the historical cause and disposition of the Republican Party going back to its roots. He might well have added that the Republican Party was branded as an "extremist" party in 1857 when the Supreme Court, in the Dred Scott decision, held that the new party's central purpose, preventing the westward expansion of slavery in the United States, was unconstitutional. The decay in the proper understanding of the founding principle of equality—and the corruption of the Constitution that followed from it in Dred Scott—virtually required that principled opposition would have to stake out an "extreme" position against it. The paradox of the 1850s is that preserving the moderation of the regime required "extremism." Goldwater was onto something important—that successfully opposing the advance of the administrative
The later record of the Reagan years showed that most conservative policy victories owed to a spirit of “extremism” (as the media would have it, as was seen in the split between “Reaganites” and “pragmatisms” in the administration) rather than a spirit of accommodation and compromise.

Goldwater differed from acceptance speeches of recent decades, Democratic or Republican, by offering a history lesson of the party’s core principles, with references to private property, federalism and decentralized control, the separation of powers, and above them all, the Constitution. Notably absent are the personal and autobiographical details that have come to dominate acceptance speeches (“a man from ‘Hope’”), still less a laundry list of promises about new ways government will make your life better. In sharp contrast (“a man from ‘Hope’”), still less a laundry list of promises about new ways government will make your life better. In sharp contrast to the cradle-to-grave government solicitude extolled in the 2012 Obama campaign’s “Life of Julia,” Goldwater declared:

“We don’t seek to live anyone’s life for him. We only seek to secure his rights, guarantee him opportunity, guarantee him opportunity to strive with government performing only those needed and constitutionally sanctioned tasks which cannot otherwise be performed…. Our Republican cause is not to level out the world or make its people conform in computer-regimented sameness.

The More Significant Deed

It is commonplace among liberals today to say that the Republican Party has shifted to the right over the last two decades, but there is little in today’s supposed “extremist” party not evident from the beginning in Goldwater’s speech. The significance of the Goldwater campaign is that, as Lee Edwards wrote, “for the first time in thirty years, a presidential candidate was challenging the basic assumptions of the welfare state.” Liberals were used to dismissing conservatism as the lunatic conspiracy ravings of the John Birch Society, and simply wouldn’t take Goldwater’s substantive challenge seriously. The premises of the welfare state were so axiomatic among liberals as to require neither explication nor justification. “Whether government should or should not tamper with the private economy,” economist Robert Lekachman wrote during the campaign, is an “obsoleter question”—a formulation that recalls Carl Becker’s famous verdict in his 1922 classic, The Declaration of Independence: A Study in the History of Political Ideas: “To ask whether the natural rights philosophy of the Declaration of Independence is true or false is essentially a meaningless question.”

Columnist Richard Rovere wrote one of the most caustic and dismissive summaries after LBJ’s general election victory:

One question posed—in my mind, anyway—by the repudiation of Goldwater was whether we could shake, once and for all, the notion that there was an important political dialogue taking place in this country between, on the one hand, the writers of the National Review school, and, on the other hand, just about everyone else…. Goldwaterism and Buckley conservatism simply do not contain any ideas that can be given institutional form…. From the rightist intellectuals we have had almost nothing but insults to the intelligence.

Rovere did smugly allow that “if Buckley and his men keep at it, Goldwaterism may triumph by 1996 or thereabouts.”

Harry Jaffa would later remark that his chief contribution to future Republican presidential campaigns would be to refrain from writing any more speeches. But was the “extremism” line, in retrospect, a grievous mistake? Goldwater was not alone in knowing that his chances of defeating Lyndon Johnson, less than twelve months after John Kennedy’s assassination, were negligible. The most provocative sentences from his acceptance speech surely made no difference to the outcome of the election.

Not until after the election did a few reporters allow that the media had performed shamefully. The Washington Post’s David Broder admitted that reporters concealed Goldwater’s “essential decency” and had presented a “fundamentally distorted picture of who Goldwater was.” Even Goldwater remarked, “If I had to go by the media reports alone, I’d have voted against the sonofabitch, too.” It is not much of a stretch to see Goldwater as the first victim of what would later become known as “political correctness.”

The real question is whether the entire Goldwater candidacy was a mistake, not just the single line for which he is best remembered. David Frum has written that the Goldwater nomination should be regarded as a catastrophe for Republicans and conservatism, because “Goldwater’s overwhelming defeat invited a tsunami of liberal activism.” If a different nominee had suffered a narrower defeat, in other words, leaving Democrats with congressional majorities smaller than the two-to-one advantage they enjoyed in both the House and Senate, “the legislation of 1965 might have looked a lot more like the more moderate legislation of 1964.”

Well, perhaps. Counterfactuals can be neither proven nor refuted. Winston Churchill once remarked that what is, is singular, but what might have been is legion. The book-end of the Goldwater extremism address was Ronald Reagan’s “Time for Choosing” speech in the closing hours of the doomed campaign, which propelled Reagan’s subsequent political career. Without Goldwater, Reagan’s presidency might never have happened.

The Gipper aside, would “moderating” LBJ’s Great Society legislation have made any policy difference, preventing, say, rather than merely delaying the growth of Big Government? And, politically, would the crusade to enact careful seven-point programs instead of heedless ten-point ones have galvanized a Republican majority? It’s hard to see.

Minnesota Senator Gene McCarthy once remarked that the chief purpose of moderate Republicans is to shoot the wounded after the battle is over. Absent Goldwater, it’s doubtful Republicans would have ventured near the battlefield at all. The rhetoric may have been imprudent, but the new fighting spirit it inculcated to the next generation of Republicans was essential. The historical record argues moderation in the pursuit of electoral viability is no virtue. Just ask Bob Dole, John McCain, and Mitt Romney.

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