

# *The Atlantic*

## **The Conservative 1960s**

From the perspective of the 1990s, it's the big political story of the era

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### **TURNING RIGHT IN THE SIXTIES:**

The Conservative  
Capture of the GOP

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ON July 16, 1964, Senator Barry Goldwater, of Arizona, approached the podium at the San Francisco Cow Palace to accept the Republican presidential nomination. Many moderates in the audience expected a conciliatory speech pledging party unity. But Goldwater gave them something very different. "I would remind you," he thundered, "that extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice. And ... moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue." Liberal Republicans were shocked. The party they had controlled for so long had fallen into the hands of extremists. Political commentators were equally taken aback. After hearing the speech,

one reporter expressed their dismay: "My God, he's going to run as Barry Goldwater."



In the late 1950s and early 1960s conservatives were widely dismissed as "kooks" and "crackpots" with no hope of winning political power. In 1950 the literary critic Lionel Trilling spoke for a generation of scholars and journalists when he wrote that "in the United States at this time liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition.... It is the plain fact [that] there are no conservative or reactionary ideas in general circulation" but only "irritable mental gestures which seem to resemble ideas." The historian Richard Hofstadter echoed Trilling's assessment, arguing that the right was not a serious, long-term political movement but rather a transitory phenomenon led by irrational, paranoid people who were angry at the changes taking place in America.

Journalists were equally contemptuous. In 1962 a writer in the *The Nation* suggested that conservatives were more interested in thinking up "frivolous and simple-minded" slogans than in developing intelligent proposals to meet the complexities of post-Second World War America. *The Washington Post*

described members of one conservative group as people who liked to "complain about the twentieth century." And even a sympathetic commentator in *Commonweal* wondered whether a right-wing student group was a new political voice or "merely a new political organization out to repeal the twentieth century?"

More than three decades later Americans are still struggling to understand the rise of [modern American conservatism](#). Much of this is the fault of scholars and journalists. Very little has been written about the rise of the right in the 1960s. From today's vantage point, this is arguably the most significant development of that decade, yet scholars and journalists have focused almost exclusively on the new left, civil rights, and the decline of [American liberalism](#).

Allen Matusow's *The Unraveling of America* (1984) is a case in point. The author explains that the book is "a history of domestic liberalism in the 1960s," telling "the story of how liberals attained political power and attempted to use it for extending the blessings of American life to excluded citizens." He also examines the "great uprising against liberalism in the decade's waning years by hippies, new leftists, black nationalists, and the antiwar movement--an uprising that convulsed the nation and assured the repudiation of the Democrats in the 1968 election." Matusow writes, "Thus, in a few short years, optimism vanished, fundamental differences in values emerged to divide the country, social cohesion rapidly declined, and the unraveling of America began." John Morton Blum's book on the 1960s, *Years of Discord*, is dedicated to the "liberal spirit" and is essentially "a reexamination of American liberalism." And *The Sixties* (1987), by the sociologist Todd Gitlin (note the definitive title), focuses on the hopes, dreams, and disappointments of the new left and the counterculture. "What," Gitlin asks, "did 'the Sixties'--the movement, the spirit--accomplish?"

These studies have greatly enriched our understanding of America after the Second World War. But by neglecting the rise of the right they have left us with an incomplete and one-sided view of the 1960s.

That view is about to change. Mary Brennan's *Turning Right in the Sixties* is the first on what will most likely be a lengthening and important list of detailed studies of the rise of American conservatism. (In recent years a handful of books have been written about the right, but these have tended to be sweeping accounts offering few insights into the nuts and bolts of the conservative movement.) Brennan, an assistant professor of history at Southwest Texas State University, chronicles the conservative capture of the Republican Party from 1960 to 1968. In doing so, she not only advances our understanding of the rise of the right; she also offers a more balanced and, ultimately, more accurate view than we have had before of the most tumultuous decade of the century.

BRENNAN effectively addresses one of the central questions in modern American politics: how conservatism transformed itself from an obscure fringe movement into one of the most powerful political forces in the country. She argues that the Trilling-Hofstadter analysis of the right was deeply flawed. By the late 1950s conservatives had established a strong base of support in the growing Southwest. For much of the century wealthy easterners had controlled the Republican Party, but in the postwar years a growing number of businessmen and political leaders from the Sunbelt, many of whom had prospered in the postwar industrial boom, began playing a greater role in national politics. Stressing individual initiative, free enterprise, and a militant anti-communism, conservatives formed a variety of single-interest groups to challenge the ideas and programs of the liberal eastern establishment.

In the early 1960s conservatives continued to benefit from large-scale social and demographic changes. In the South the growth of the civil-rights movement, industrial expansion, and the rise of an urban middle class revitalized the Republican party. The policies of the Kennedy Administration also helped the conservative cause. As President, Kennedy courted many eastern business leaders, drawing their support away from liberal Republicans. He also undercut much of the appeal of moderate Republicans: his position on civil rights, for example, was virtually indistinguishable from theirs. As conservatives began to develop positions on key issues which increasingly appealed to voters, liberal Republicans had trouble distinguishing themselves from Kennedy-style liberals.

Much of this is well known, and Brennan recounts it cogently. What she adds to our understanding is how conservatives transformed themselves into successful political organizers.

AT the beginning of the 1960s conservatives were in a better position than at any time since the 1930s to challenge moderate Republicans for control of the party. But large obstacles remained. Not only were conservatives widely viewed as wild-eyed fanatics but they squabbled among themselves, had trouble articulating a positive program of reform, had few grassroots organizations, and lacked the funding to make the movement a serious political force.

The year 1960, though, brought a turning point for the conservative movement. That year Barry Goldwater published *The Conscience of a Conservative*. Generally dismissed in the national media, the book stands today as one of the most important political tracts in modern American history.

As the historian Robert Alan Goldberg demonstrates in *Barry Goldwater*, his

fine new biography, *The Conscience of a Conservative* advanced the conservative cause in several ways. Building on William F. Buckley's pathbreaking work at *National Review*, Goldwater adeptly reconciled the differences between traditionalists and libertarians. The expansion of the welfare state, he wrote, was an unfortunate and dangerous development that undermined individual freedom. Suggesting that New Deal liberalism marked the first step on the road to totalitarianism, Goldwater argued that government should be removed from most areas of American life. Yet he was no strict libertarian. Appealing to those on the right who longed to recapture lost certitudes, he argued that the state had a duty to maintain order and promote virtue. "Politics," Goldwater wrote, is "the art of achieving the maximum amount of freedom for individuals that is consistent with the maintenance of social order."

Goldwater also united disparate conservative factions by focusing their attention on the dangers of Soviet communism. He wrote,

And still the awful truth remains: We can establish the domestic conditions for maximizing freedom, along the lines I have indicated, and yet become slaves. We can do this by losing the Cold War to the Soviet Union.

Goldwater rejected the containment strategies that had guided U.S. foreign policy since the late 1940s, and called for an aggressive strategy of liberation. Conservatives might disagree about the proper role of government in American life, but surely they could unite to defeat the "Soviet menace."

Goldwater also dispelled the notion that conservatives were a privileged elite

out to promote its own economic interests. "Conservatism," he wrote, "is *not* an economic theory." Rather, it "puts material things in their proper place" and sees man as "a spiritual creature with spiritual needs and spiritual desires." According to one right-wing magazine, Goldwater gave conservatives humanitarian reasons for supporting policies usually "associated with a mere lust for gain."

But perhaps the greatest achievement of Goldwater's book--and the reason for its startling success with the right--was that it gave conservatives, for the first time, a blueprint for translating their ideas into political action. In his introduction Goldwater rejected the idea that conservatism was "out of date."

The charge is preposterous and we ought boldly to say so. The laws of God, and of nature, have no dateline. The principles on which the Conservative political position is based ... are derived from the nature of man, and from the truths that God has revealed about His creation. Circumstances do change. So do the problems that are shaped by circumstances. But the principles that govern the solution of the problems do not. To suggest that the Conservative philosophy is out of date is akin to saying that the Golden Rule, or the Ten Commandments or Aristotle's *Politics* are out of date.

Supporting states' rights, lower taxes, voluntary Social Security, and a strengthened military, Goldwater emphasized the positive in his philosophy and demonstrated "the practical relevance of Conservative principles to the needs of the day."

altered the American political landscape, galvanizing the right and turning

Goldwater into the most popular conservative in the country. By 1964, just four years after its release, the book had gone through more than twenty printings, and it eventually sold 3.5 million copies. "Was there ever such a politician as this?" one Republican asked in disbelief. *The Conscience of a Conservative* "was our new testament," Pat Buchanan has said. "It contained the core beliefs of our political faith, it told us why we had failed, what we must do. We read it, memorized it, quoted it.... For those of us wandering in the arid desert of Eisenhower Republicanism, it hit like a rifle shot." The book was especially popular on college campuses. In the early sixties one could find Goldwater badges and clubs at universities across the country. Expressing the sense of rebellion that Goldwater's book helped inspire, one student conservative explained the phenomenon: "You walk around with your Goldwater button, and you feel that thrill of treason."

REPUBLICAN Party leaders, however, ignored the "Goldwater boomlet." Vice President Richard Nixon, the front-runner for the 1960 Republican nomination, believed that the greatest threat to the party came not from the right but from the left. In July, Nixon met with Nelson Rockefeller, the governor of New York, and agreed to change the party platform to win moderate-Republican support. Conservatives were outraged, referring to the pact, in Goldwater's words, as the "Munich of the Republican Party."

A few days later, at the Republican National Convention, an angry Goldwater called on conservatives to "grow up" and take control of the party. And that, according to Brennan, is exactly what they set out to do. At a time when "liberal and moderate Republicans, like the rest of the country at that time and like historians ever since, continued to view conservatives in a one-dimensional mode," conservatives believed that Goldwater's popularity, the rise of a conservative press, and the growing strength of conservative youth



groups boded well for the future.

Increasingly disillusioned with Republican moderates and with the whole tenor of American political debate, the right began to see organization as the key to political power. In the midst of the 1960 presidential campaign, for example, William Buckley, the conservative fundraiser Marvin Liebman, and almost a hundred student activists met at Buckley's estate in Sharon, Connecticut, and formed [Young Americans for Freedom](#). Within six months the organization could claim more than a hundred campus and precinct-level political-action groups and at least 21,000 dues-paying members. Using newsletters, radio broadcasts, and frequent rallies, YAF had almost overnight become a powerful nationwide movement.

Had Young Americans for Freedom and other grassroots organizations remained isolated from one another, their impact would have been weak. But in 1961 the political activist F. Clifton White organized a movement to nominate a conservative for President. Traveling around the country, White exhorted conservatives to seize control of their local party organizations and elect conservative delegates to the national convention. The movement orchestrated by White gave conservatives control over the Republican Party and helped to persuade Goldwater to run for President.

Capturing the presidential nomination was one thing; winning the presidency proved much more difficult. In the early 1960s conservatives tried to distance themselves from the radical right. No group troubled conservatives more than the [John Birch Society](#). With organizations in all fifty states, thousands of members (who, according to Brennan, were "zealous letter writers, demonstrators, and voters"), and a full-time staff, the society wielded significant influence. But Birchers, many of whom believed that Dwight Eisenhower and other government officials were Communist agents, tarnished the reputations of more-rational conservatives. Buckley

understood the problem: conservatism, he explained, had to bring "into our ranks those people who are, at the moment, on our immediate left--the moderate, wishy-washy conservatives. ... I am talking ... about 20 to 30 million people.... If they are being asked to join a movement whose leadership believes the drivel of Robert Welch [the founder of the John Birch Society], they will pass by crackpot alley, and will not pause until they feel the warm embrace of those way over on the other side, the Liberals."

But in 1964 Goldwater could not escape the taint of extremism. Brennan points out that despite their sporadic attacks on the radical right, conservatives were still political neophytes. Goldwater and his supporters believed that all they had to do was expose Americans to conservative ideas. But Goldwater had no positive program, and spent much of the campaign railing against Social Security and threatening to roll back the Communist tide. Moderate Republicans labeled him a racist and a warmonger, and Goldwater seemed to confirm such charges when he threatened to "lob" missiles "into the men's room at the Kremlin." Perhaps most damaging, the media condemned him as a kook who sounded more like Adolf Hitler than like a Republican presidential candidate. Norman Mailer, writing in *Esquire*, compared the Republican National Convention to a Nazi rally. The columnist Drew Pearson described the "smell of fascism" in the air. Roy Wilkins, of the NAACP, told readers of *The New York Times* that "a man came out of the beer halls of Munich, and rallied the forces of Rightism in Germany" and that "all the same elements are there in San Francisco now." When Democrats mocked Goldwater's campaign slogan, "In your heart, you know he's right," by adding, "Yes, extreme Right," Goldwater's candidacy was doomed.

Poor campaign management, Goldwater's image, and the lack of unity in the Republican Party contributed to the Democratic landslide in November of 1964. But whereas liberals saw the election results as the final repudiation of the American right, conservatives took solace in Goldwater's 27 million

votes and vowed not to repeat their mistakes. What appeared to be a defeat for conservatives was actually a dramatic success: Goldwater had paved the way for a generation of Republicans by appealing to the "forgotten" and "silent" Americans "who quietly go about the business of paying and praying, working and saving." He had also raised new social and moral issues that would prove vital to future conservative successes. As early as 1962 he lamented the moral crisis afflicting America, the "meaningless violence and meaningless sex" on TV, and the barbaric quality of modern art. As Robert Alan Goldberg astutely puts it in his biography, "It was only a beginning, but Goldwater had begun to validate the concerns of social conservatives, and in time they would grow bolder in shaping the movement's agenda." Cliff White, meanwhile, had taught conservatives the value of grassroots organization and had given thousands of people their first taste of political action. Out of the ruins of the 1964 campaign emerged a well-organized, experienced movement that was more determined than ever to win political power. In the mid-1960s movement activists severed almost all ties to more-radical groups, organized a tremendous direct-mail fundraising drive, and created a more positive platform that emphasized the benefits of local power. And, as Brennan argues, conservatives put themselves in a position to take advantage of the growing disillusionment over civil rights, student protests, and Vietnam.

By 1968 conservatives dominated the Republican Party. In 1960 Nixon had wooed those on his left; eight years later he employed the conservative speechwriter [Pat Buchanan](#), chose the fiery Spiro Agnew as his running mate, and trumpeted his anti-Communist credentials and his opposition to busing to win southern delegates. Nixon was not an ideological conservative, but to gain the nomination he had to appeal to the party's new conservative majority.

WITH so much attention currently being focused on the [Contract With America](#), the [Republican presidential nomination](#), and right-wing militias, *Turning Right in the Sixties* will appeal to anyone interested in a thoughtful, serious discussion of the origins of modern American conservatism.

Brennan is less successful in her treatment of the larger events of the decade. Her writing is often dry, and one finds missing much of the drama of the sixties. Brennan also fails to explain why so many middle- and lower-middle-class Americans were drawn to conservative causes in the 1960s. Grassroots activism, she makes clear, was instrumental in the rise of the right. But what motivated so many people to contribute money and volunteer time to the conservative movement?

Many observers have cited a white backlash to civil rights. Surely this played an important role, but conservatism seemed to benefit from a complex convergence of forces, only some of which had to do with race.

Unprecedented prosperity, for example, gave rise to a new middle class that was hostile to high taxes and to many of the social programs they financed. Social unrest--most notably urban riots, violent crime, and student protests--also pushed many Americans toward conservative candidates who promised to restore law and order. But perhaps most important was a growing disillusionment with the federal government. Vietnam, deteriorating conditions in the cities, and forced busing affected the lives of working- and middle-class Americans in profound and often unsettling ways, and led them to believe that government no longer served their interests.

Although Brennan's book does not sufficiently address these issues, it is valuable, shedding much-needed light on a key aspect of the conservative revival and giving us a deeper understanding of why conservatism continues to be the most powerful political force in American life.

Illustration by Lisa Adams

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