

A spokesman for American militarism and reaction: Barry Goldwater dead at 89

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The death May 30 of former Senator Barry Goldwater, the defeated Republican presidential candidate in 1964, has been marked by the usual hollow tributes from Democratic and Republican politicians and the corporate-controlled media. In these outpourings there is no analysis of Goldwater's political significance or the social forces he represented.

The heir to an Arizona department store fortune, Goldwater was first elected to the US Senate in 1952. In his campaign he denounced outgoing President Truman as “that architect of socialism” who was pursuing a “no-win policy” in the Korean War.

Ignorant anti-communism was Goldwater's political axis, along with the demand that the social reforms enacted under the New Deal of the 1930s be dismantled. He was one of 22 senators who voted against the censure of Joseph McCarthy in 1954 after the red-baiting demagogue sought to extend his witch-hunt to the Pentagon. He later played a significant role passing the antiunion Landrum-Griffin Act and advocated the privatization of Social Security.

Goldwater's 1964 campaign for the presidential nomination produced a bitter split within the Republican Party between the Eastern-based establishment, which backed New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller, and an insurgent right wing, based largely in the West and South. After Rockefeller lost the California primary and withdrew from the race, there was a last-ditch and equally unsuccessful “stop Goldwater” movement centered on Pennsylvania Governor William Scranton.

After the acrimonious Republican convention at which Goldwater delegates loudly booed Rockefeller, much of corporate America swung behind Lyndon Johnson. The Democrat postured as the candidate of

peace, prosperity and civil rights, while portraying the Republican as a reckless advocate of nuclear confrontation.

In this Johnson had considerable assistance from Goldwater himself. In his (ghostwritten) book, *Conscience of a Conservative*, Goldwater had criticized those who considered nuclear war with the Soviet Union “unthinkable.” In a 1963 television interview he had called for the defoliation of forests covering National Liberation Front supply lines in Vietnam through the use of “low-yield atomic weapons.”

The presidential campaign ended in a landslide defeat. Goldwater carried only his home state of Arizona and the five states of the deep South—Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina—where his opposition to the 1964 Civil Rights Act and defense of “states' rights” won widespread support among white racists. These five states had voted Democratic in every presidential election since the Civil War, but the 1964 presidential campaign was to mark a turning point in the shift of southern states from the Democratic to the Republican camp.

The Goldwater campaign prefigured later trends in American politics, above all the emergence of a radical right-wing element dominating the Republican Party and appealing to sections of the middle class and working class on the basis of chauvinism, racism, anticommunism, and attacks on the poor and welfare recipients.

Still in the heyday of the post-World War II economic boom, the 1964 campaign marked only the initial stages of the crisis of liberalism: a mere 25,000 US troops were in Vietnam, American corporations still enjoyed virtually unchallenged domination of the world market and the Democratic administration of Lyndon

Johnson was preparing a significant expansion of the welfare state.

But already the storm signals could be felt. The assassination of Kennedy the previous year was an ominous sign that the mounting social contradictions in America were taking a violent turn. In 1964 the civil rights struggles were escalating and the first of the ghetto eruptions in the North occurred—in Harlem.

It was somewhat ironic that in the latter phase of his political career, after he returned to the Senate in 1968, and especially after the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan, Goldwater seemed increasingly out of step with his own party. It was a measure of how far to the right the whole spectrum of big business politics had shifted that the arch-reactionary of 1964 now appeared to be a moderate.

Although his 1964 presidential campaign had rallied the support of Southern racists, Goldwater was not, to all appearances, a bigot in his personal life, having desegregated his family's department store chain in the 1950s and supported similar actions in the Arizona National Guard and other state institutions. Moreover, as the grandson of a Jewish immigrant from Poland, he was uncomfortable with the Christian Coalition and other religious fundamentalist groups—and they with him. His most-publicized clash with these elements came in 1993 when he declared his support for the right of homosexuals to serve openly in the military.

Over the weekend Goldwater was hailed as a “unique individual” by President Clinton, while the *New York Times* described him as the man who “founded the modern conservative political movement in America.” But Goldwater, nearly as much as Ronald Reagan, was an intellectual cipher. He inspired, not by the profundity of his political insights, but by the apparent sincerity with which he delivered the banal nostrums of American laissez-faire capitalism.

Goldwater's political ideas amounted to a stale rehash of the dominant ideology of pre-1929 America, based on a glorification of the capitalist market, which had been utterly discredited by the social catastrophe of the Great Depression. Ultimately it would not be the strength of the ideas of conservatism, but the bankruptcy of American liberalism, that would bring Goldwater's former speechmaker Ronald Reagan into the White House 16 years later.



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