



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Barry Goldwater and 1964: A Beginning and an End

David Farber

Journal of Arizona History, Volume 61, Number 1, Spring 2020, pp. 3-9 (Article)

Published by Arizona Historical Society



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/751622>

# Barry Goldwater and 1964: A Beginning and an End

By David Farber

The presidential election of 1964 occurred against a confounding political backdrop. On the one hand, the American economy was booming. On the other hand, so was crime and disorder. President Lyndon Johnson would do everything he could to highlight the good news. Senator Barry Goldwater would, in the words of a future president, talk about the carnage.

For President Johnson, there was plenty about which to brag. By every measure, the American economy was paying major dividends to the American people across income levels. The gross domestic product recorded an extraordinary nominal growth rate of 6.2 percent in the first quarter of 1964; the good times continued throughout the year. Inflation was inching along at 1 percent, home mortgages were cheap, and Americans celebrated their good fortune by making the brand-new Ford Mustang an instant classic. In 1964 a lot of Americans were celebrating a profound sense of financial well-being, and Lyndon Johnson did his best to take credit for their economic satisfaction.

Still, Barry Goldwater could and did point out that all was not well in American society. Crime rates had begun a decades-long climb; reported aggravated assaults had risen sharply from 154,320 in 1960 to 203,050 in 1964. “Crime in the Streets,” a term

---

DAVID FARBER is the Roy A. Roberts Distinguished Professor in the History Department at the University of Kansas. He is the author or editor of more than a dozen books on modern U.S. history, including *The Rise and Fall of Modern American Conservatism* (Princeton University Press, 2010) and, most recently, *Crack: Rock Cocaine, Street Capitalism, and the Decade of Greed* (Cambridge University Press, 2019).

that could incorporate everything from violent muggings to urban riots or uprisings to confrontational civil rights protests and acts of civil disobedience, was a palpable fear in many parts of the United States. Goldwater made sure that voters understood that his liberal opponent was responsible for that, too, and that if he were their president they could count on a return to a more well-ordered and safer society.

The major political issues of the day also ran in sometimes-contradictory directions. Most obviously, black Americans' demands for racial justice divided white America. According to pollsters a large majority of whites had an unfavorable view of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, and in September 1964 a large plurality told pollsters that the civil rights movement was dominated by "communist trouble makers." A month earlier, however, a majority of Americans said that they approved of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. That did not mean that whites wanted to see wholesale integration in the United States: in 1963, 78 percent of whites said they would move if more than a few black families bought homes in their neighborhoods.<sup>1</sup> Racial justice was treacherous territory for national politicians, as both President Lyndon Johnson and his 1964 presidential challenger Senator Barry Goldwater knew well.

Likewise, the Cold War and questions about America's broader role in the world roiled the political waters. Even as the United States was, technically, at peace, Senator Goldwater knew that a broad swath of Americans feared the atheistic and totalitarian Soviet Union and its increasing number of communist allies. During the 1964 presidential campaign, Goldwater relentlessly attacked Johnson and the Democratic Party for being too accommodating to the communists and too unwilling to take the offensive against the Soviets and their pawns. In August 1964, President Johnson—feeling the heat from Goldwater—felt compelled to respond to that threat; he told the people of the United States that communist forces in Vietnam had attacked "United States ships on the high seas" and were an imminent danger to the safety and security of American allies throughout Southeast Asia. Johnson knew he could not be soft on communism if he wanted to win the election. In 1964,

<sup>1</sup> "Public Opinion on Civil Rights: Reflections on the Civil Rights Act of 1964" Blog, July 2, 2014, Roper Center, <https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/blog/public-opinion-civil-rights-reflections-civil-rights-act-1964-blog> (accessed October 25, 2019).

Barry Goldwater and Lyndon Johnson fenced over the strengths and weaknesses of American society and the role the federal government should play in the life of the American people. And while both pledged to defend the United States and its allies against the threat of communism, they did so with different rhetoric and with a very different sense of that threat's immediacy.<sup>2</sup>

In mid-1964, Lyndon Johnson could not know for certain which way the political winds were blowing, whether his brand of progressive liberalism would triumph over Goldwater's stern conservative message. He watched Goldwater's ascent warily and he was anxious to understand the power and appeal of Goldwater's conservatism. As their political battle took shape, Johnson was generally confident of the outcome, but in the summer of 1964 he still wondered if his right-wing challenger had the means to drive a conservative political message home to a majority of the electorate.

A few hours before Barry Goldwater gave his acceptance speech to the Republican nominating convention at the Cow Palace in San Francisco, President Lyndon Johnson was feeling particularly antsy. He wanted to talk to somebody about his conservative opponent. How had Goldwater gotten so far? What kind of political threat did he present? So, he phoned Ernest "Mac" McFarland. McFarland had lost his Senate seat to Goldwater in 1952. That loss had been a bit of a shocker. In all of Arizona's electoral history Republicans had, up until then, won only one Senate seat and for only one term before Goldwater took down McFarland with a narrow victory. McFarland had lost to Goldwater again in 1958, taking a thumping in an off-year election in which the Democrats, nationally, had done very well.

"Gosh, this fellow you sent up here has caused us a lot of problems," Johnson said to McFarland. "Well I know what you're taking about," McFarland replied, referencing his two losses to Goldwater. "He caused me some." Johnson did not, then, ask the obvious question that seemingly had moved the president to call McFarland: what enabled Goldwater to beat McFarland twice in a state that had long elected Democrats. Instead, Johnson being Johnson just rambled on: "He'll call me a faker and he called me a phony and a lot of ugly names. But I don't have anything to say about him

<sup>2</sup> For more on this theme, see David Farber, *The Rise and Fall of Modern American Conservatism* (Princeton, N.J., 2010).

... I'm just going to let him go and we're going to give him lots of rope."<sup>3</sup> Over the next four months of the campaign, Johnson did not directly attack Goldwater. He did give him "lots of rope," and the Johnson campaign was more than willing to give that rope a yank, whenever and however it could.

Johnson believed that Goldwater, despite his Arizona victories, did not understand the national electorate in 1964. Goldwater, as Johnson saw it, was a burr-under-the-saddle ideologue whose constant provocations were much more likely to irritate voters than convert them to the conservative cause. Johnson had explained his approach to campaigning to one of his speechwriters in the spring of 1964: "What the man on the streets wants is not a big debate on fundamental issues. He wants a little medical care, a rug on the floor, a picture on the wall, a little music in the house, and a place to take Molly and the grandchildren when he retires."<sup>4</sup> In 1964, Johnson believed he could run on the post-World War II New Deal consensus, a basic political comity that ruled not only the majority of the Democratic Party but the "modern" wing of the Republican Party, as well. Johnson was not one to mull over first principles. On basic issues of political economy and social welfare, he intended to simply offer more—much more, actually—of the same.

The 1964 election proved Johnson to be right—or, at least, right enough. Goldwater could not, in his run for the presidency, repackage for a national audience the formula that had enabled him to become the first two-term Republican senator from Arizona. Goldwater did understand that Johnson's March 1964 unveiling of the expansive—and expensive—War on Poverty; May 1964 call for a government-enabled, government-funded Great Society; and June 1964 signing of the most effective and intrusive civil rights act in American history presented an opening for a conservative attack on liberals' grand, even grandiose, political aspirations. But Goldwater was wrong to believe that, in 1964, most Americans disliked those particular liberal causes enough to embrace fully principles he presented so baldly, his conservative social and economic beliefs.

During the campaign, Goldwater had trimmed some of his broadest attacks on liberalism, but it was too little, too late.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Michael W. Flamm, *In the Heat of the Summer: The New York Riots of 1964 and the War on Crime* (Philadelphia, 2016), 27.

<sup>4</sup> Jon Margolis, *The Last Innocent Year: America in 1964—The Beginning of the "Sixties"* (New York, 1999), 166.

Operating at a time of spectacular and relatively equitable economic growth and prosperity, the Johnson campaign feasted on Goldwater's long record of anti-New Deal economic libertarianism. As a newly elected senator, Goldwater had decried President Dwight Eisenhower's refusal to roll back the major policy legacies of the New Deal. In the polemic that had helped to propel him to national leadership of the conservative movement, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, Goldwater had lambasted all of the social welfare programs of the New Deal and in the opening days of his presidential campaign, he had reiterated those views. He told a gaggle of reporters that he believed that no one should be forced to participate in the Social Security system; participation should be voluntary.

The Johnson campaign would be best known to posterity for the anti-Goldwater commercial it paid to broadcast just one time. That ad showed a little girl pulling the petals from a daisy until she is interrupted by a nuclear holocaust caused, it is implied, by Senator Goldwater. More effective, in all likelihood, was the commercial that showed a Social Security card being ripped to shreds while a voiceover warned that Senator Goldwater wanted to take away workers' Social Security benefits. Goldwater tried to walk back his anti-social welfare comments, but he failed to convince voters with his half-hearted flip-flop.<sup>5</sup> Even after more than a quarter of a century had passed since the Great Depression, American voters, by and large, thought fondly of major aspects of the New Deal.

Johnson banked on a generally satisfied national electorate. At the tail end of 1964, as the election approached, unemployment in the United States was sliding down to a rate of 4 percent and GDP continued to soar (Johnson still holds the record, by far, for highest average annual GDP growth under any president). Johnson knew he had a lot of happy constituents.

In the end, of course, Johnson had nothing to worry about. The American people gave Johnson a landslide victory. In terms of policy and rhetoric, Senator Goldwater did genuinely represent

<sup>5</sup> I borrow here from an informative essay by Mark Nevin, "Rick Perry, Social Security, and the Ghost of Barry Goldwater," *Origins: Current Events in Historical Perspective*, History Departments at the Ohio State University and Miami University, September 18, 2011, <https://origins.osu.edu/history-news/rick-perry-social-security-and-ghost-barry-goldwater> (accessed October 25, 2019).

a “choice and not an echo,” and in 1964 the American people rejected that “choice” and at least some of the conservative principles the Republican presidential nominee so clearly articulated. The conservative movement in the United States would be forced to reckon with the walloping defeat Goldwater and his message took in November 1964.

The Republican Party, much to the chagrin and resentment of its most conservative stalwarts, then backed away (at the national level) from principled, full-throated conservatism. Richard Nixon, while loyal to the Goldwater campaign in 1964, ran a hybrid campaign in 1968 and again in 1972. On the fraught social issues that Barry Goldwater had so determinedly tackled, Nixon too touched people’s first nerves—on race, on law and order, on all the protesters and rebels. He took a page from Barry Goldwater (and from a certain California governor), but he had a lot more material with which to work. However, on economic issues—on the material comforts that Johnson had taken credit for successfully delivering—Nixon took a page from his old boss, Dwight Eisenhower. Nixon was much more “modern Republican” than he was conservative firebrand. He rocked no boats when it came to the political economy of the liberal New Deal state. Despite continued robust economic growth in 1968—just under 5 percent GDP growth and unemployment of around 3.4 percent—Nixon knocked off the liberal Hubert Humphrey. In American politics it is not always, as Bill Clinton’s 1992 campaign insisted, “the economy, stupid.”

The next time a proudly avowed conservative ran as the nominee of the Republican Party, he would choose a different mix of conservative principles—rejecting some, but by no means all of the policies Goldwater espoused so fervently in 1964. Goldwater had proved that a principled conservatism, combined with a willingness to appeal to a reactionary populist sentiment on issues of race, had a powerful resonance with white Americans. But after Goldwater’s defeat, conservative strategists would have to engage more carefully with American voters’ attachment to well-established New Deal liberal programs, especially Social Security but even the National Labor Relations Act. Goldwater proved that tens of millions of white Americans had an affinity for conservatism, broadly labeled, but it would take a more careful and limited articulation of that conservatism by a more charismatic champion

*Goldwater and 1964: A Beginning and an End*

in a different economic and cultural climate to bring national victory to the cause.

In 1980, Goldwater cheered on that conservative triumph and the man who produced it. But one can only wonder what Barry Goldwater would have made of the man who sold a new iteration of conservatism to enough American voters in 2016 to take back the White House for the Republican Party.