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Lessons for halting the right's descent into madness

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One of the modern conservative movement's greatest leaders, the late William F. Buckley Jr., retold a fascinating story from the run-up to the 1964 presidential election. As he explained in the *Wall Street Journal* in 2008, Buckley and his allies convinced Barry Goldwater to distance himself from the John Birch Society — a conspiracy-minded group that touted his candidacy.

Buckley noted that the society's president, Robert Welch, had at the time a “near-hypnotic” influence on the right, despite his “wild” ideas: “(Welch) said Dwight D. Eisenhower was a ‘dedicated, conscious agent of the communist conspiracy,’ and that the government of the United States was ‘under operational control of the Communist Party.’”

Buckley realized that Welch's fixations did a disservice to the anti-communist cause. So he convinced Goldwater to reject the core fallacy — “the assumption that you can infer subjective intention from objective consequence: we lost China to the communists, therefore the president of the United States and the secretary of state wished China to go to the communists.”

Goldwater, of course, gained the GOP nomination, and lost the general election vote by 23 percentage points. Thanks to Buckley's efforts, however, the GOP vanquished various fringe groups. The Goldwater candidacy built the foundation for the GOP's future, and set the stage for a movement that helped topple the Evil Empire. Sometimes, losing is better than winning.

In recent years, conspiracy-mongers and kooks have gained a similar foothold in the GOP. It's a huge problem on the left, but as a non-leftist that's not my battle. My goal is to support a functioning right-of-center movement that has the credibility to thwart the utopian dreams of the progressive movement. At this time, the right needs more self-analysis and less whataboutism.

The explanations are complex and subject to debate, but it's impossible to ignore that a portion of the right has descended, quite frankly, into madness. I partly blame a president who has advocated “birtherism” and given a pass to supporters of QAnon, who embrace some inchoate theory involving Satan, politicians and pedophiles.

Trump will soon exit the White House, unless he chains himself to his desk. But the conservative movement will need to chart a path forward — and decide whether it is primarily about airing a list of Festivus-like grievances, or whether it is tethered to important and mostly good ideas centered on promoting markets and limited government. So far, the prognosis isn't good.

My view is that if Trump had actually won the election, he would have been able to prove systemic voter fraud in one of the 58 lawsuits that his supporters have lost. I believe in the rule of law, and the legal system has rendered its verdict. It's crazy to go deeper into this rabbit hole, yet the conservative movement has yet to find bottom.

Nothing has been as loopy as the Jericho March, where religious supporters of the president gathered in Washington, D.C., last week to hold a prayer rally to protest the election results. Prominent conservative activists spoke, along with Alex Jones, the radio broadcaster who, among other things, once claimed that the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings were a hoax. Buckley must have turned over in his grave.

As penance, Christian writer Rod Dreher watched the entire march — named after the biblical story of how the Israelites marched around Jericho blowing shofars until the city's walls collapsed. (Unless the media hid it, I'm pretty sure the Capitol is still standing.) As Dreher noted, speakers insisted that the election was stolen — as “an article of faith. ... If you doubt, you are a traitor, a coward, in league with the Devil. I'm not exaggerating at all.”

Such, er, uncritical thinking is no longer confined to the outer reaches, but has entered the conservative mainstream. “I am willing to die for this fight,” a “Stop the Steal” activist tweeted. Nonsense flows freely on social media, but the Arizona Republican Party actually retweeted it with the words: “He is. Are you?” (Uh, no, but thanks for asking.)

A Virginia state senator posted that “President Trump should declare martial law as recommended by General Flynn.” Former Gen. Michael Flynn, who spoke at the Jericho fiasco, has argued that Trump should “temporarily suspend the Constitution” and call for a revote. Conservatives say that ideas have consequences, yet only a few have spoken out against those who peddle flagrantly authoritarian ideas.

The Cato Institute's David Boaz last year wrote about the “no enemies on the left” approach that liberals had long taken, as they refused to drive out socialists and communists. Pointing to Buckley's legacy, Boaz called for modern conservatives to eschew a similar “no enemies on the right” stance and stay far from “fever swamps.”

That's good advice. Conservatives might not agree on policies in a post-Trump world, but they should agree that some Buckley-style limits are critical for the movement's future.

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