



## **Barry Goldwater's 1964 convention speech defined conservatism for a generation**

By Rick Sincere  
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“Extremism in defense of liberty is no vice” was the biggest applause line of Barry Goldwater’s speech accepting his party’s nomination as a presidential candidate.

It is probably also the most misunderstood, ripped-out-of-context line in a speech that stands, even today, as a succinct definition of conservatism.

Surprisingly, in 3,186 words, Goldwater never used any form of the word “conservative” in this famous speech. This stood in contrast to four years earlier, when he scolded supporters who threatened the cohesion of the Republican Party by saying, “Let’s grow up, conservatives.”

Fifty years ago today, on July 16, 1964, grown-up conservative Barry Goldwater spoke to the GOP convention in San Francisco.\*

Most Bearing Drift contributors – and, I’d wager, a greater fraction of Bearing Drift readers – are too young to remember Goldwater’s 1964 presidential campaign, yet it is almost universally credited with launching both the modern conservative and the modern libertarian movements. The principal founders of the Cato Institute and the Heritage Foundation worked on Goldwater’s campaign. The founding members of the Libertarian Party were Goldwater campaign volunteers, and Virginia’s current Republican National Committeeman, Morton Blackwell, was the youngest Goldwater delegate at the 1964 convention.

The campaign set the stage for a transformation of the Republican party and Ronald Reagan’s election in 1980. As George F. Will has put it, Goldwater won the 1964 election but it took 16 years to count the votes.

Something of a précis of his 1960 book, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, Goldwater’s convention speech endeavored to explain conservatism – or what he called

“Republicanism” on that occasion, eschewing specific references to the C-word – to listeners who had not yet learned much about it and who unfairly feared it.

In the same speech, Goldwater displayed a certain amount of prescience regarding the course of human history and offered advice to his fellow Republicans who, then as now, often found themselves among bickering factions.

In one, brief paragraph about halfway through the speech, the Arizona Senator summarized the conservative view of individual liberty and the proper role of government.

“We see, in private property and in economy based upon and fostering private property, the one way to make government a durable ally of the whole man, rather than his determined enemy. We see in the sanctity of private property the only durable foundation for constitutional government in a free society. And beyond that, we see, in cherished diversity of ways, diversity of thoughts, of motives and accomplishments. We do not seek to lead anyone’s life for him – we seek only to secure his rights and to guarantee him opportunity to strive, with government performing only those needed and constitutionally sanctioned tasks which cannot otherwise be performed.”

Goldwater also drew a contrast explicitly to the communist, totalitarian vision and, implicitly, to big-government liberalism then in vogue, and recognized the tensions inherent in simultaneous pursuits of liberty and equality.

“Those who seek absolute power, even though they seek it to do what they regard as good are simply demanding the right to enforce their own version of heaven on earth. And let me remind you, they are the very ones who always create the most hellish tyrannies. Absolute power does corrupt, and those who seek it must be suspect and must be opposed. Their mistaken course stems from false notions of equality, ladies and gentlemen. Equality, rightly understood, as our founding fathers understood it, leads to liberty and to the emancipation of creative differences. Wrongly understood, as it has been so tragically in our time, it leads first to conformity and then to despotism.”

In a line that could be welcomed equally today by the Tea Party and by the Occupy movement, Goldwater said that conservatives must “resist concentrations of power, private or public, which enforce such conformity and inflict such despotism. It is the cause of Republicanism to ensure that power remains in the hands of the people.”

And, as if envisioning the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Empire a quarter-century later, Goldwater made remarkably accurate predictions in this paragraph:

“I believe that we must look beyond the defense of freedom today to its extension tomorrow. I believe that the communism which boasts it will bury us will, instead, give way to the forces of freedom. And I can see in the distant and yet recognizable future the outlines of a world worthy our dedication, our every risk, our every effort, our every sacrifice along the way. Yes, a world that will redeem the suffering of those who will be liberated from tyranny. I can see and I suggest that all thoughtful men must contemplate the flowering of an Atlantic civilization, the whole world of Europe unified and free, trading openly across its borders, communicating openly across the world.”

Toward the end of his speech, just before the famous line about “extremism,” Goldwater pointed out the factionalism in the Republican party was not necessarily new, but also was not necessarily bad.

The GOP, he said, is “a Party for free men, not for blind followers, and not for conformists.”

Then he quoted Abraham Lincoln in 1858 “because he probably could have said it during the last week or so: “[The Republican Party] was composed of strained, discordant, and even hostile elements.”

As if warning the Tea Party and “establishment” branches of the conservative movement of the 21st century, or the social conservative and the libertarian factions, Goldwater admonished: “Let our Republicanism, so focused and so dedicated, not be made fuzzy and futile by unthinking and stupid labels.”

Explaining that the Republican Party should require no litmus tests, Goldwater explained:

“the beauty of this Federal system of ours is in its reconciliation of diversity with unity. We must not see malice in honest differences of opinion, and no matter how great, so long as they are not inconsistent with the pledges we have given to each other in and through our Constitution. Our Republican cause is not to level out the world or make its people conform in computer regimented sameness. Our Republican cause is to free our people and light the way for liberty throughout the world.”

It was in that context – between “stupid labels” and the beauty of the American system – that Goldwater added:

“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” — the second part being so often forgotten while the first part so often misinterpreted.

He concluded with the modest thought that conservatives have “a very human cause for very humane goals.”

Perhaps suggesting that he knew victory in November was unlikely, Goldwater went on to note that his 1964 campaign was a first step in a long journey.

“This Party, its good people, and its unquestionable devotion to freedom, will not fulfill the purposes of this campaign which we launch here now until our cause has won the day, inspired the world, and shown the way to a tomorrow worthy of all our yesteryears.”

Barry Goldwater’s nomination acceptance speech of July 16, 1964, can be viewed in its entirety on the C-SPAN web site, where you can see people smoking openly on the convention floor.

\*Twenty years later, when the Democrats chose the same city for their nominating convention, then-UN Ambassador Jeane J. Kirkpatrick repeatedly dripped with contempt the phrase “San Francisco Democrats” in her own GOP convention speech.