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The man who ignited a revolution

By Lee Edwards
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Who was Barry Goldwater, universally known as "Mr. Conservative," and how did his '64 presidential campaign ignite a conservative revolution?

He was an unlikely revolutionary.

He was a college dropout whose 1960 book, "The Conscience of a Conservative," sold more than 3.5 million copies. It was once required reading for History 169b at Harvard.

He was a man of contradictions:

He was inspiring and infuriating. He said of his '64 presidential race: "I know I am going to lose, but I am going to lose my way."

He was courageous and cantankerous, saying, "I did not come to Washington to pass laws but to repeal them."

He was profane and profound. A classic axiom of his was: "Any government big enough to give you everything you want is big enough to take away everything you have."

He delighted in saying the unexpected. "Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice." He was vilified for saying it, but let us reflect: Was Patrick Henry an extremist because he declared "Give me liberty or give me death"? Were the brave Americans who fought and died in World War II to defeat Nazism and Imperial Japan extremists? Was Christ an extremist because he chose to die on the cross?

Barry Goldwater challenged conventional wisdom, asking: Why can't we have a voluntary option for our Social Security system, which is headed for bankruptcy?

He declared that welfare ought to be "a private concern promoted by individuals and families, by churches, private hospitals, religious service organizations, community charities and other institutions."

The Constitution was his guide, the Declaration of Independence his inspiration.

He was a man of enormous charm and self-deprecating humor, especially about his supposedly "old-fashioned" conservatism. He once called a press conference to announce that a Hollywood movie would be made about his life — by 18th Century Fox.

He affected American politics more than any other losing presidential candidate in modern times.

1. He raised, for the first time in a national campaign, basic issues such as Social Security, government subsidies, welfare reform, privatization and victory over communism.
2. He inspired thousands of young people to get into politics and public policy. Among those entering the fray on the policy side were Ed Feulner of the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute's Ed Crane, commentator and presidential candidate Pat Buchanan, direct mail guru Richard Viguerie, publisher Al Regnery, Fund for American Studies Chairman Randal Teague — even Washington Times Editorial Page Editor David Keene, who previously headed both the American Conservative Union and the National Rifle Association. Politicians who took up the conservative torch included the late Phil Crane, as well as many other members of Congress.
3. He was the first to use direct mail and TV in national political fundraising.
4. He broke the Democrats' iron grip on the Solid South, enabling the GOP to become a national party.
5. He persuaded 27.5 million Americans to vote conservative despite an unprecedented anti-campaign run for President Johnson and the Democrats. The dirty tricks played included having the FBI bug Goldwater's campaign plane and the CIA planting a spy in Goldwater's campaign headquarters. Those 27.5 million voters became the cornerstone for Reagan's 1980 and 1984 landslide victories.
6. He allowed Ronald Reagan to give his famous TV address, "A Time for Choosing" — a speech, by the way, that Goldwater's top advisers tried to kill. Because of the phenomenal public response to "A Time for Choosing," a group of prominent Republicans approached Reagan and literally begged him to run for governor of California.

Barry Goldwater laid the foundation for a political revolution and led a generation of conservatives to understand that theirs was a winning cause as well as a just cause.