The Legacy of Barry Goldwater

June 10, 1998

Google Ads are provided by Google and are not selected or endorsed by Eagle Forum

It is unlikely that any nominee for President who was not elected ever had the lasting influence on American politics that Barry Goldwater did. Unlike other defeated presidential candidates, he will never be just a footnote in the history books.

That's because Barry Goldwater was the undisputed original leader of the modern conservative movement. And that movement has been the dominant political reality since 1980.

It is hard to overestimate the importance of Barry Goldwater to the conservative movement. If there hadn't been a Barry Goldwater, there wouldn't have been a Ronald Reagan.

In 1964, the liberal establishment ridiculed Goldwater as a reactionary behind the times. We can now recognize that he was a man ahead of the times. He started the relay race against all odds in the 1960s, and Ronald Reagan carried the flag over the finish line to victory in the 1980s.

When Goldwater walked onto the political stage, most politicians sought the label liberal. Conservative was a sort of an epithet that took political courage to accept.

By the time Michael Dukakis ran for President in 1988, the L word had become a Scarlet Letter. Today, most politicians of all parties and persuasions proclaim that they are conservative (whether they are or not).

Today, a dozen presidential aspirants are waiting in the wings, hoping they will feel a draft. Barry Goldwater is one of the very few men ever really drafted. He did not seek the heavy mantle of leadership. He was drafted by a movement seeking a leader who would never compromise with or accommodate the liberals.

Goldwater was authentic, and what you saw was what you got. His political positions and agenda came from his personal convictions, not from reading the polls. He was willing to stand alone against the good ol' boys club known as the U.S. Senate.

Goldwater was so refreshingly honest. Bill Clinton's first comment, on learning of Goldwater's passing, summed it up. "He was truly an American original. I never knew anybody like him." No doubt Clinton thinks an honest politician is a curiosity, perhaps something to be encased for display in the Smithsonian.

To calculate how far we've descended from Goldwater's honesty, ask yourself, Where are the Republicans today who have the candor to say about Clinton, as Goldwater said about Richard Nixon, "He was the most dishonest man I ever met" and "Nixon can go to China and stay there."

Goldwater was not a complex man, but his legacy is complex. First, his book "The Conscience of a Conservative" defined the conservative agenda as limited, constitutional government, lower taxes, a superior national defense, individual freedom and responsibility. He plotted the route to get there by reducing the size of government, promoting freedom not welfare, and repealing laws, not passing new ones.

Second, he attracted Mainstreet Americans by the millions into the conservative movement. Commentators may not have recognized his ideology as populist, but his movement definitely was. His supporters believed that their participation in politics could actually make public policy and elect candidates.

Third, by proclaiming from the start that he offered "a choice not an echo," Goldwater made his supporters understand who their enemy was. That enemy was the liberal, eastern Rockefeller Republicans who, every four years from 1936 through 1960, had inflicted the Republican Party with a presidential candidate who "me-too-ed" the Democrats on the fundamental issues of big federal spending and an interventionist foreign policy.

It was the second and third elements of his movement that brought down on his head the orchestrated wrath and venom of the liberal establishment and their friends in the media, as well as of the Lyndon B. Johnson campaign.

At the 1964 Republican National Convention in San Francisco, Nelson Rockefeller launched the word missiles against Goldwater that have remained explosive to this day. Rockefeller labelled Goldwater an "extremist" and taunted his delegates as outside the "mainstream" of politics. Goldwater fielded the smear with dignity: "Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice."

It was truly remarkable that, despite the intensity of the 1964 anti-Goldwater invective, 27 million Americans voted for him anyway. That trial by fire transformed conservatives from Americans who just read books about what's wrong with America into politically active warriors.

The 27 million who withstood Big Media's vitriol in 1964 kept the faith, and they grew into the 54 million mighty majority that validated the Reagan Revolution in 1984. Conservative Republicans today are looking for a leader who will pickup where Ronald Reagan left off and assure the permanence of the Goldwater legacy.