

The Greatest President We Never Had

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Barry Goldwater was the first and only Republican Presidential candidate I ever supported. In 1960, the Kennedy-Nixon match-up had moved me to concoct a button that said "Robert Heinlein for President" ... but Goldwater was different.

I attended a Goldwater for President Rally in Washington, DC on the 4th of July, 1963, and was inspired to start a Students for Goldwater chapter at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology that September. Within weeks, it had grown to become the largest organization of its kind in New England. (This was the heart of Kennedy territory!) Throughout the fall of '64 I campaigned tirelessly for Barry, wearing my AuH₂O pin as a badge of honor.

He lost, of course. Big-time. Ganged up on by the East Coast "establishment" media and all but deserted by the big-name politicians in his own Party, Goldwater went down to a crashing defeat in November. He received only 38.5% of the popular vote and carried only six states, including his native Arizona. Among major-party candidates, only George McGovern has fared worse in modern times.

But in a longer-term sense, Goldwater won. The "omnipotent government" ideology represented by Lyndon Johnson was already on its way to the trash bin of history. Its undoing began with the futile war in Vietnam, which led to riots in the streets at the Democratic national convention in '68 and the victory of Richard Nixon that same year. (I firmly believe that a President Goldwater would have heeded the words of Douglas MacArthur, and would not have been drawn into a land war in Asia.)

Nixon, alas, proved to be no better than Johnson. Lacking Goldwater's firm commitment to individualist principles, Nixon made no attempt to rein in the monster that government had become. He became the only President ever to impose wage and price controls in the absence of a declared war. His paranoid style -- enemies lists, wiretaps, break-ins, fancy uniforms for White House guards -- was more suited to a banana republic than to a free society. And while the GOP has continued to drift ever-further from principles of liberty, Barry Goldwater always stood firm.

Goldwater never hesitated to lock horns with those who saw government as the appropriate instrument for imposing their personal beliefs on others. His disdain for the Jerry Falwells of the world was every bit as sincere as his opposition to the nanny-state schemes of Teddy Kennedy and the socialist left. (And in an odd bit of historic irony, it was Barry Goldwater who was chosen by his Republican colleagues in the Senate to go

to Nixon in August, 1974 to urge him to resign the Presidency. This was ten years, almost to the day, after Goldwater received the GOP nomination in 1964.)

Today, Goldwater's spirit lives on in the political arena ... but not in the Republican Party. In 1998, the party that represents Goldwater's ideals is the Libertarian Party, founded in 1971 as a reaction to what the GOP had become under Nixon and still remains today: the party of socially conservative big government. If the Republican party had remained true to the principles of Barry Goldwater, the Libertarian Party probably would not exist, because it would be unnecessary.

Barry Goldwater was my political hero ... and the greatest President we never had.