

FALSE LEADERS AND POPULAR DELUSIONS

Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus

Rick Perlstein

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Reviewed by Curt Roberts

The postwar American right and the original New York Mets had much in common. They were both denigrated in the media and trounced by their opponents. The one-sided electoral defeats experienced by Robert Taft, Douglas MacArthur, and Barry Goldwater evoke comparisons with the 5.04 collective ERA of 1962 Mets' pitchers. Similarly, the 120 losses suffered by those Mets were the baseball equivalent of the 44 states carried by LBJ in the 1964 presidential election. The ignominy and ridicule that today accompanies the name of "Marvelous" Marv Throneberry is not quite equal to that attached to Senator Joseph McCarthy, but the deeds of both men will long live in public infamy—undeservedly so in the case of at least one of them.

But the comparison can be pushed only so far. A mere seven years after their founding and immediate floundering, the New York Mets won the World Series. The postwar American right, on the other hand, never won anything.

Of course, a large, self-congratulatory literature has grown up over the years among conservatives, positing that the Goldwater presidential campaign of 1964 was really the first step of a right-wing "revolution" that culminated to some degree in the victory of Richard Nixon and finally achieved total triumph when Ronald Reagan became president.

This is the perspective advanced by Rick Perlstein in *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus*. The "storm" is conservatism victorious, and "consensus" refers to the liberal hegemony that preceded it. Surprisingly, the book ends abruptly after relating the story of Goldwater's electoral disaster. It tells us repeatedly that the cause of this defeat was that, even in the Republican Party, an overwhelming majority opposed the Arizonan. Perlstein argues that Goldwater's nomination was the result of primary campaign manager F. Clifton White's strategy of taking control of the Republican Party apparatus in those states where delegate selection was not based on popular votes. This strategy allowed the unpopular Goldwater's capture of a majority of the delegates but did little to change the fact that most Americans rejected him.

In the end, these two analyses seem inherently contradictory. If the Goldwaterites won the nomination without popular support and were thus appropriately thrashed in the general election, then why or how did this yield the “unmaking of the American consensus”? In *Before the Storm* we are never told.

GOLDWATER AND THE “MOVEMENT” FRENZY

In the past half century the American right has launched several attempts to halt and, hopefully, reverse the leftist tidal wave that has covered America since 1932. Of these, perhaps the greatest frenzy was generated by the 1964 Goldwater campaign for president.

It is difficult to convey to those who weren't there the fervor that launched and maintained the Goldwater campaign. This was a truly grass roots movement. Perlstein documents the quasi-religious passion of the devoted army of little people across the country who consistently donated small amounts and volunteered long hours for the Draft Goldwater and Goldwater for President efforts. In the end, though, his words don't do justice to the compelling grandeur of the crusade and its apocalyptic sense that this was a movement to save the nation.

A hint of that fervor may be found in Perlstein's description of the rage that Goldwater delegates and supporters unleashed on their prime nemesis in 1964, Nelson Rockefeller, when he attempted to speak at the Republican convention. The New York governor rose to defend an amendment to the party platform condemning “extremism,” citing as examples the Communist Party and the John Birch Society. Rockefeller's talk, scheduled for five minutes, lasted close to half an hour, as the Goldwaterites booed and chanted, “We want Barry!” To those supporting Goldwater, his liberal opponents weren't like-minded, good citizens engaging in the pleasant diversion of politics. They were enemies intent on evil. (We will identify the nature of this evil a bit later on.)

In researching the sources of the Goldwater movement, Perlstein has made an interesting contribution to the history of postwar conservatism by locating one of its streams in the efforts of Clarence Manion, former dean of Notre Dame Law School, to draft, first Governor Orvall Faubus of Arkansas (who earned national fame by his perfunctory opposition to the bayonet-led enrollment of blacks at Little Rock High School) and later Barry Goldwater as presidential candidates. On the other hand, he plays down the role of the intellectual rightists associated with *National Review*. The likes of James Burnham, Richard Weaver, Russell Kirk, and, of course, their patron and follower, William F. Buckley Jr., are given little importance. Similarly, scant attention is paid to the so-called “radical right” of the John Birch Society, the Conservative Society of America, the Christian Crusade, and kindred groups.

Although it seems that Perlstein is on to something with his research into Manion's efforts, it was, in fact, the *NR* and Birch Society crowds that supplied the theoretical framework and the foot soldier commitment that allowed Goldwaterism to carry the day at the San Francisco Cow Palace in July of '64. It was a movement of deep commitment, both to ideas and practical action.

Although in many ways different from its prewar ancestor (primarily in its acceptance of a crusading internationalism in order to defeat “World Communism”), the postwar right had largely inherited the support base of that movement. Actually, as Perlstein carefully documents, it enlarged the old Middle America/America Firsters ranks by adding to them the Dixiecrat South and some segments of the anti-communist Catholic ethnics of the North. What did this coalition have in common?

Perlstein offers no understanding of the real intellectual and cultural sources that fueled Goldwaterism, but, as the book makes abundantly clear, neither did Goldwater himself nor those with whom he chose to associate grasp the yearnings of those they “led.” We will return to those sources eventually. For the moment let us examine the reality of Goldwater and his campaign as uncovered by Perlstein.

Among the constant themes of *Before the Storm* are that Barry Goldwater had no interest in running for president, that he believed from the start that he would lose, and that he had little affection for those committed conservatives who laid the intellectual and practical groundwork for his nomination. He ran a lackluster, defensive, and vague campaign that never attempted to articulate any alternative vision to that of liberal orthodoxy.

Indeed, in the immediate aftermath of his nomination in San Francisco, he quickly fired F. Clifton White and cold-shouldered the movement’s intellectuals, including *National Review’s* editor, Buckley, and his brother-in-law, L. Brent Bozell. The latter decision was particularly galling since Bozell was the real author of Goldwater’s *The Conscience of a Conservative*, the book (initially financed by Manion) that really launched Goldwaterism as a national movement.

What emerges from Perlstein with dismal regularity is how little enthusiasm Goldwater had for both the very notion of launching a primary campaign and the grim business of seeing it through to presidential victory. He was given to frequent, off-the-cuff, public musings which, when the press questioned him about them, would always lead to confused modifications and outright retractions. The candidate seemed incapable of coherently expressing what were purportedly his most deeply held beliefs. Thus, a singular opportunity to present the 1950s conservative vision to America was lost. Perlstein makes clear that Barry Goldwater was emotionally and intellectually unsuited to lead a rightist counter-revolution or even so much as the Republican Party presidential bid.

Nevertheless, there is an even more disquieting truth that runs throughout *Before the Storm*. Goldwater himself had little grasp of the basic principles of the movement he supposedly led. The main themes of ’50s conservatism—dismantling the welfare state, restoring the Constitution, pursuing victory over communism—were never seriously proposed, described, or defended in the campaign.

In fact, the fear of expressing conservatism was almost a leitmotif from beginning to end of the Goldwater presidential bid. Yet, as watered down as the campaign became, it was never enough for the left. Leftist Republicans throughout the primary campaign and even after the nomination vilified the Arizonan and refused to endorse him. The Democrats subjected him to more demonization than any presidential candidate before or since. Their joint efforts, supported as usual by the major media and

Hollywood stars, were all dedicated to casting Goldwater and his supporters beyond the pale. Once again we must ask, why the passion? Why did the left hate Goldwaterism so?

Thus, our previously asked question now intensifies: How did '50s conservatism, so despised by the media and masses, and left unarticulated by Goldwater, come to triumph four years later under Nixon and later Reagan?

The answer is that, in fact, Goldwaterism, the politics advocated in Bozell's *Conscience* and the early *National Review* and *American Opinion*, never triumphed at all. It was simply forgotten.

By the time the Republican Party had finished its convention, Goldwater as the real leader of an alternative politics was long since gone. Unfortunately for him, his enemies were only dimly aware of this. Thus, they continued his vilification.

Tragically, the grassroots Goldwaterites never grasped this truth either. Their hero had feet of clay. Unlike the "Jim Bowie" of '50s television, he was neither "bold, courageous," nor "a mighty adventuresome man." He was not their great counter-revolutionary general.

The conservatism of Nixon and Reagan no longer made any pretense of advocating the old *National Review* vision. Their victories made no impact on the welfare state, constitutional abuse, the restoration of state's rights, or the implementation of a foreign policy intent on rolling back the Iron Curtain. (Of course, communism in Eastern Europe did collapse shortly after Reagan but assuredly not as the result of any "victory over Communism" that his administration designed.)

The thesis that the conservatism of *The Conscience* and *NR* somehow won can be substantiated only if one has no idea what the rightism of the fifties actually stood for. It is parroted by those who simply support the "conservative" name regardless of what it might stand for in any given moment. It has more to do with loose semantics and team advocacy than with anything of substance.

By 1966, Bozell himself had tired of the farce. He left the world of truncated *NR* conservatism to found *Triumph*, a lucid, hard-hitting, Catholic, and counter-revolutionary journal that eventually found its theoretical roots outside the parameters of Enlightenment social and political thought. In its ten years of existence the Bozell-edited periodical took from *National Review* most of its talented and serious Catholic writers.

Triumph's view of the "conservative mainstream" was best spelled out in a landmark article that Bozell wrote in 1969, "Letter to Yourselves."

He asked that the American right do what it has always been unwilling to do—take a long look in mirror. "On every front that your program has confronted secular liberalism's you have been beaten. Consider (against the background of one of Nixon's press conferences) your campaigns against big government, against Keynesian economics, against compulsory welfare; your defense of state's rights and the constitutional prerogatives of Congress; your struggle for a vigorous anti-Soviet foreign policy; your once passionate stand for the nation's flag and its honor. Is there a single issue that secular liberals have had to yield to secular conservatives?"

Bozell posited that conservatives and their movement had lost “energy, which is a function of will, which is a function of conviction.”

In fact, the only enthusiasm that *National Review* showed during the 1968 campaign was devoted to the excommunication of Governor George Wallace from “movement” ranks. This was a task at which the journal labored long and hard throughout the year, enlisting the likes of Congressman John Ashbrook and finally Goldwater himself as the authors of articles condemning the Alabaman. In the former’s view, Wallace was, due to his advocacy of “enforced segregation,” to be regarded as “separated decisively from the conservative position.” Goldwater declared that a vote for Wallace was not “going anywhere but right down a rat-hole.”

We will return to the snarling ferocity of *NR*’s and Goldwater’s rejection of Wallace later. Suffice it to say that in the fifties the journal had found “enforced segregation” a reasonable approach and had now not only jettisoned but demonized its own former position. This was yet another proof of Bozell’s thesis that ’50s conservatism had ceased to exist on the American political scene (and even among those who originally espoused it).

If *Triumph* absorbed the religious soul of *National Review*, then the journal’s patriotic soul went to Belmont, Massachusetts, and the John Birch Society. The minds and skills of the likes of E. Merrill Root, Medford Evans, and Revilo Oliver would now be relegated to the pages of *American Opinion*.

It was from those circles that thoughts similar to Bozell’s emerged in Oliver’s *American Mercury* 1969 essay, “After Fifty Years.”

“For half a century, generation after generation, large numbers of Americans have worked hard and sometimes desperately to avert the subversion and capture of their nation. And they have failed—utterly The net result is total failure.”

The failure of ’50s conservatism to restore the Old Republic had to be acknowledged. “It is, I know, sad and painful that we have lost so much that we cherished and loved. But we cannot undo the past by wishing and pretending.”

THE TRUE SOUL OF POST-WAR CONSERVATISM

The theoretical wellsprings of ’50s conservatism were diverse. There was much talk in the movement’s reflective arenas of Christianity, Western civilization, and limited, republican government as envisioned by America’s founders.

On matters of race, there was little said explicitly. The general claim was that the federal government’s involvement in the “civil rights” turbulence was “unconstitutional and impractical.” Birchers saw it all as a communist or “Insider” conspiracy. The question of whether school and “public accommodations” integration, universal voting rights, and the like were good or not was generally ignored. The real threats were “big government” and “communism.”

Yet the notion of a “Decline of the West” was also a prominent part of the old *NR* rightism. Generally, discussion of this concept centered on the gradual defeat of traditional religion and racial and cultural identity and the concurrent destruction of the assorted institutions that incarnated these loyalties. Thus, both the essences (religions,

racess, cultures) and their incarnated political and social forms were defeated and the civilization died.

Given the diversity of Western lands and their assorted political and historical traditions, the institutional incarnations of Western loyalties may vary widely. Thus, the right in one country may stand for monarchy, while in others, it supports republican forms. As the struggles of the centuries unfold, there are those who, unable to extricate themselves from the limitations of time and place, come to idealize the institutional forms of Western man to a degree that is self-defeating.

Thus, in America we find constitutionalists and in Great Britain monarchists who see the preservation and defense of certain political forms as of greater significance than the survival of their own people or their deepest religious commitments or both. Yet in America, the Constitution now functions—and several of its amendments were specifically framed—so as to destroy the identity of the nation and render its ancestral religious faiths irrelevant. In the “mother country” it is precisely the monarchy that has embraced religious pluralism (perhaps the reigning sovereign should now be titled “Defender of the Faiths”?) and multi-racialism, abandoned its own people around the world (Kenya, Rhodesia, South Africa, etc.), and supported whatever trendy perversion is currently in vogue.

Yet, despite these evident truths, many well-meaning people, whose core instincts proclaim that faith and identity are the most important of loyalties, will nonetheless provide crucial support for political movements that cast political forms as the highest of human values.

At times, political movements that are truly devoted to faith or peoplehood will express themselves in language that conceals their real aspirations but is properly understood by supporters. For example, the George Wallace presidential campaigns spoke about state’s rights, the Constitution, anti-communism, freedom of association, law and order, and the like. Yet, the movement’s supporters and opponents saw Wallaceism as essentially an attempt by American whites to assert and protect their existence as a distinct people. In the case of the Wallace campaign and (despite the ailing governor’s later apologies), it is probable that Wallace and his supporters correctly understood each other.

Reliance on such oblique language was not necessarily a conscious desire to escape detection by Big Brother’s radar system. Often people are so locked into forms that they are unaware they are really battling over larger issues and can be mobilized only through appeals to the forms. For example, right-wing opposition to the New Deal and the Roosevelt revolution was often expressed in constitutional or economic terms, while the struggle against FDR’s interventionist internationalism was phrased as a desire to steer free of foreign wars.

Yet at root the struggle was between the old American elite and its replacement by a coalition of a different segment of the population. Of course, those of older American stock, free of cosmopolitan influences, were more apt to value, for example, the Constitution as it was intended, but this was not the root of the struggle. It was indeed the intense emotions that on both sides attended that struggle—for power as well as for

deep cultural, religious, and racial expression—that animated the passions of the Goldwaterites at the Cow Palace in 1964 against the evil Rockefeller and his allies and the hatred that the new elite and its spokesmen in the media spat at Goldwater and his followers throughout the campaign.

It is not that political ideas do not or should not matter. They are often the symbolic clothing in which the simple question of which people is to triumph is hidden.

Moreover, a movement motivated by faith or blood identity is apt to fight longer and harder than a mere commitment to political forms. For example, African and American blacks, possessing a powerful and primary racial loyalty, have learned to express themselves in terms of political and economic justice. This helps to defeat their white opponents while allowing them to seize power and control.

A particularly good illustration of the use of forms to protect group identity is Jewish advocacy of pluralism and diversity in European lands coupled with vigorous defense of Israel's right to be a faith/identity-based state. Clearly, the former advocacy is simply a means to advance and protect Jewish group interests in gentile societies rather than a sincere embrace of liberal philosophy.

For those committed first and foremost to faith or identity there is always a need to examine the reality of political enthusiasms. Are the mass followings of a passionate political movement reading the symbols of its leaders correctly? Or, is there some strange disconnect? Are the people inspired by what they perceive as a movement's identity or essence only to be disappointed after having lent money, time, and energy to misunderstood leaders and causes? The most recent example of this was the repeated candidacies of Pat Buchanan. These failed escapades were fueled by a grassroots sentiment that white, Christian America was being replaced by a multi-racial, crusading secularism. In the end it became depressingly clear that Buchanan had reversed the priorities of what really inspired his supporters. In place of white racial identity, traditional Christianity, and populist economics, he offered a great deal of the last mentioned, a bit of the second, and virtually nothing of the first.

A LESSON FROM THE PAST

Barry Goldwater, as becomes clear from reading Perlstein, was little concerned with the religious, racial, or cultural underpinnings of the “rugged individualism” that led him to espouse (and, generally, when questioned, disavow) radical libertarianism in *The Conscience of a Conservative*. The notion that a given religion, culture, or race was the ultimate and perhaps only source and soil receptive to individualism and republicanism seems never to have crossed his mind. In later years, this barren, secular, identity-less politics became vividly clear in Goldwater's embrace of homosexual “rights” and legalized abortion and his feverish denunciations of the Christian Right.

In the area of “civil rights,” Goldwater always stated that he was personally in favor of integrated schools, public facilities, and employment. Even in *The Conscience* he (or rather Bozell speaking for him) had written, “I happen to believe that it *is* both wise and just for Negro children to attend the same schools as whites and that to deny this right carries with it strong implications of inferiority.” What he opposed was the

government's unconstitutional efforts to enforce these morally desirable ends. Thus, we now understand that the Arizonan's feverish attacks on Wallace in 1968 were completely consistent.

Yet despite these sentiments, which the senator never hid from the public, he became the darling of white Americans who feared "the rising tide of color."

Is this an effective strategy for those who seek to defend white people? Are white or Christian interests best served by supporting those who have no real sympathy with those causes but by coincidence happen to have views that support those interests on some issues?

Reading Perlstein, this old Goldwater enthusiast had one recurring sentiment: What a foolish waste of time and effort that was! The campaign that William Loeb of the *Manchester Union Leader* described in early 1964 as a "holy crusade against those who have stolen the birthright of America" was anything but.

It is irrelevant for our purposes whether one's primary cause is faith or identity, Bozell or Oliver. American conservatism of the fifties was a principled movement that sought to protect the traditional faiths and identities of white Christian Americans by summoning the citizens to a defense of a particular set of political and economic forms. If it had a real flaw, it was that it eventually came to confuse the forms with the faiths and identities themselves, committed itself to the defense of the former, and conveniently forgot the latter.

Today three things are clear: (1) Barry Goldwater was never the proper leader for that movement; (2) the movement has been dead for decades; and (3) because of its failure and the success of its enemies, Christian civilization and the white race are today in deep peril.

In Revilo Oliver's words—more than 30 years ago—"American Conservatism is finished, and its remaining adherents are, whether they like it or not, merely ghosts wandering, mazed, in the daylight."

Yet, it is not only a political movement that has died. It is America. Again Oliver: "The American tradition was a fair and indeed noble one, and it still has the power to awaken nostalgia for a world that no living man has himself experienced, but for practical purposes, it now has only a literary and historical significance."

The particular forms of constitutional republicanism are dead. Whether the faith and race that gave birth to them will survive remains to be seen. The Goldwater caper was the last, flawed gasp of American whites and Christians to reassert themselves via the symbols of their old order. It had as much impact against the forces arrayed against it as did Rocky and Bullwinkle on Borris and Natasha—with one significant difference: at least Moose and Squirrel were serious combatants.

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