

ISSUE BRIEF

No. 4337 | JANUARY 28, 2015

Lessons for Conservatives: From Goldwater to the Tea Party

Heath Hansen

In 2014, the conservative movement marked the 50th anniversary of Barry Goldwater's presidential campaign, the 30th anniversary of Ronald Reagan's presidential re-election, the 20th anniversary of Newt Gingrich's Contract with America and the consequent Republican Revolution, and the fifth anniversary of the modern Tea Party movement. To commemorate these milestones, The Heritage Foundation hosted a four-part series of lectures and discussion panels entitled "Lessons for Conservatives: From Goldwater to the Tea Party." Each event focused on one of the four major anniversaries.

While conservatives can glean much from the series, three principal lessons stand out: (1) ideas matter; (2) core conservative principles should not be compromised; and (3) cheerful persistence is critical to success.

Ideas Matter

In 1964, Barry Goldwater campaigned on a platform of limited constitutional government, individual freedom, and personal responsibility. In his Heritage lecture on the Goldwater campaign, *Washington Post* columnist George Will noted that such ideas were heterodox in national politics at the time, and as a result, Goldwater was widely considered an

extremist.¹ This ultimately led to one of the most lopsided presidential elections in American history in which Goldwater received just 38.5 percent of the popular vote and won only six states.

However, the significance of Goldwater's campaign extended far beyond his landslide loss. Even in defeat, Will stated, "Goldwater had forced the country to understand that there was another argument to be had." More significantly, Goldwater's ideas inspired a new generation of American conservatives and laid the groundwork for the modern conservative movement.

Among those inspired by Goldwater's ideas was Ronald Reagan. By the time Reagan ran for president in 1980, America was ready for Goldwater's brand of conservatism. Campaigning on a similar platform of liberty and limited government, Reagan marched to two landslide victories. Referring to Reagan's 1980 victory, Will quipped, "Goldwater didn't lose. It just took 16 years to count the votes."

Reagan's ideas were not just good for winning elections. In his remarks during the Reagan event at Heritage, *Weekly Standard* editor William Kristol recalled that Reagan's unorthodox commitment to supply-side economics and tax cuts ultimately helped bring the economy out of a deep recession and produced extraordinary economic growth.² Over the course of Reagan's presidency, the economy added nearly 17 million jobs, the unemployment rate fell from 9.7 percent to 5.5 percent, and stock market averages more than doubled.³

Despite Reagan's popularity and a booming economy throughout the 1980s, conservatives had been unable to gain control of Congress for 40 years. That all changed in 1994 when Republican congressman Newt Gingrich unveiled an innovative approach to implementing conservative ideas in the Contract with America.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib4337>

The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002
(202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

The ideas embodied in the Contract, such as restoring fiscal discipline in the federal government, promoting personal responsibility, and advancing economic freedom, all resonated with the American people. As a consequence, the Contract ushered in the Republican Revolution of 1994, as Republicans gained 54 seats in the House and took control of both chambers of Congress for the first time since 1953.

In his Heritage lecture, Gingrich implored conservatives to continue to articulate clear ideas and develop innovative solutions. He warned that conservatism cannot succeed by simply opposing progressivism. “The key is not right versus left, it is future versus past,” he stated. “We have an opportunity to be the movement that offers a dramatically better future by offering better ideas.”⁴

Taking a Stand

“It is said that American politics must rest on compromise,” observed University of Virginia professor of politics James Ceaser during Heritage’s Tea Party event.⁵ However, he continued, “compromise is not the only virtue. One should say something in favor of the virtue of obstinacy from time to time.”

In fact, according to Ceaser, obstinacy is one of the modern Tea Party’s greatest attributes. Whereas some Republicans prefer to compromise so as to avoid messy partisan fights with the left, the Tea Party has stood on principle.

As a direct result of the Tea Party’s obstinacy, Ceaser stated, the nature of national political debates has changed. Specifically, he credited the Tea Party with “bringing the national debt onto the front burner” of the debate. Most importantly, Ceaser noted, this debate has led state governments to take bold steps to rein in public-sector unions.

Of course, the Tea Party has taken its cues from earlier conservatives. Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan both refused to compromise their conser-

vative principles. Despite knowing that his unyielding conservatism would surely lead to defeat, Goldwater refused to moderate his message just to score political points.

Kristol noted that Reagan also was not afraid to take political risks to uphold his conservative principles. In fact, Reagan frequently rebuffed the consultant class that urged him to temper his conservative views for political gain. As Kristol stated, “Reagan succeeded because, at the end of the day, he knew what he believed.”

Cheerful Persistence

It may appear that the conservative movement is fraught with defeat, frustration, and unfair treatment. Indeed, Barry Goldwater endured harsh criticism and patently false attacks on his character. Will recalled that Goldwater was accused of being a racist by Martin Luther King; was depicted as a “dangerous lunatic” by 1,189 licensed psychiatrists; and was compared to Hitler on a national CBS News broadcast prior to the 1964 election.

Even Reagan endured setbacks, failing to unseat moderate, establishment-backed candidates before finally winning the Republican presidential nomination. Gingrich recalled losing two elections prior to winning in 1978, and then enduring 15 years of being in the minority party in the House of Representatives until finally becoming Speaker of the House in 1995.

Through the adversity, however, Goldwater, Reagan, and Gingrich all maintained a positive demeanor. Will noted that Goldwater was once referred to as the “happy malcontent.” Similarly, Reagan was often called a “happy warrior” because of his optimistic attitude and constant smile. Gingrich credited his own success to “cheerful persistence.”

In his Heritage lecture, Gingrich sternly warned that modern conservatives must not allow negativity to derail the movement. Rather than engaging in unconstructive, angry rhetorical battles with their

-
1. George F. Will, “Goldwater: The Most Consequential Loser in American Politics,” remarks delivered at The Heritage Foundation, May 21, 2014, <http://www.heritage.org/events/2014/05/goldwater?ac=1>.
 2. William Kristol, “Do We Need Another Reagan?” remarks delivered at The Heritage Foundation, July 9, 2014, <http://www.heritage.org/events/2014/07/another-reagan?ac=1>.
 3. Lee Edwards, *The Essential Ronald Reagan: A Profile in Courage, Justice, and Wisdom* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), p. 93.
 4. Newt Gingrich, “Gingrich’s Contract with America: The Power of Conservative Ideas,” remarks delivered at The Heritage Foundation, July 23, 2014, <http://www.heritage.org/events/2014/07/contract-with-america?ac=1>.
 5. James W. Ceaser, “The Tea Party Turns Five: A Lasting Movement or Reactionary Politics?” remarks delivered at The Heritage Foundation, December 4, 2014, <http://www.heritage.org/events/2014/12/tea-party-turns-five?ac=1>.
-

detractors, conservatives should instead focus on promoting a positive agenda. “It is maniacally stupid and unprofessional,” Gingrich stated, “to think you can get away with a purely negative campaign.” He continued, “If a Republican wins on a negative campaign, they have no political capital and no consensus by which to govern.”

Gingrich went on to advise conservatives not to get discouraged by the intense opposition and frustrating election losses. “Historic change requires historic effort,” he remarked. “The only way to sustain historic effort is cheerful persistence.”

Conclusion

While it is important for modern conservatives, particularly those in the Tea Party movement, to continue to apply these lessons, modern conservatives cannot rely solely on their predecessors to sustain the movement. Conservatives must build on the lessons of the past by articulating new ideas that are based on conservative principles with which to meet the challenges of the day. And they should do so cheerfully.

—*Heath Hansen is a Research Assistant in the B. Kenneth Simon Center for Principles and Politics, of the Institute for Family, Community, and Opportunity, at The Heritage Foundation.*