Can Goldwater Win in 64?

The race issue, "Happy," his personal charm make him the GOP's surprise front-runner.

By Stewart Alsop

Let us try to imagine a politician with no chance whatever of becoming President of the United States.

First, let us suppose that our man is a junior senator from a small state with a mere five electoral votes, and that he is half-Jewish. No such politician has ever been nominated for the Presidency, much less elected.

Then, just to make sure that our man hasn't a prayer, let us suppose that he has consistently taken positions nicely calculated to alienate all the major voting blocs in the country—labor, the aged, the teachers, the Negroes, the subsidized farmers, all the beneficiaries of the welfare state, the liberal-minded independent voters, and finally, just to make doubly sure, the inhabitants of the entire East Coast.

It is not easy to come upon a description of a less likely presidential candidate. Yet the above description precisely fits the current front-runner for the Republican presidential nomination—Sen. Barry Goldwater of Arizona.

The fact that Goldwater is the front-runner is thus, on the face of it, an almost incredible fact. Talking to Goldwater, it is easy to sense that he himself is amazed, and a bit appalled, by what he calls "this President thing." Yet however incredible, the fact is a fact—Barry Goldwater now is unquestionably the man to beat for the Republican nomination. Moreover, among the political professionals there is beginning to be a feeling that Goldwater just might make it all the way to the White House, in 1968 if not in 1964. The Goldwater phenomenon is plainly a most peculiar phenomenon, which needs explaining.

Part of the explanation lies, of course, with the charming "Happy" Rockefeller. Before his marriage, New York's Gov. Nelson Rockefeller had the nomination just about
An unstuffed shirt, Barry is crazy about jet planes, Indians and mechanical doodads. The idea of waking up as President,
he says, “Frankly scares the hell out of me.”

sewed up. Another part of the explanation lies with Goldwater himself. “Barry’s a damned hard man to dislike,” says a liberal senator, “though some of us have tried pretty hard.”

Likability is not surprising in a politician—it is a necessary tool of the trade. But it is surprising to find an extremely conservative politician extremely likable—to find, instead of a purposed mouthed ancient in a high collar, a pleasant man with boyish enthusiasm for jet planes, ham radios, Indian tribes and corny jokes about himself.

Because of a bad back—he shares President Kennedy’s lady doctor—Goldwater walks like an old man, head bent forward, steps short and stiff. Otherwise he is, at 54, in a remarkable state of preservation. With his bronzed and rugged face, he is visibly what the Latins call muy macho—very much a man—and this is doubtless one secret of the Goldwater charm.

A more important secret is the fact that Goldwater’s shirt is astonishingly unstiffed. During a long plane ride from Washington to Arizona, and again at intervals between Goldwater-piloted flights in an elderly plane to remote Arizona outposts, this reporter interviewed Goldwater at length. Here are a few Goldwaterisms, culled from my notebook, which suggest why Goldwater is a “damned hard man to dislike”:

On the possibility that he might actually wake up to be President one day: “Frankly, it scares the hell out of me.”

On his own intelligence quotient: “You know, I haven’t got a really first-class brain.”

On his leaving college in freshman year to become a salesman in the family store: “Worst mistake I ever made. But then I guess a peddler doesn’t need a higher education.”

On the possibility that he might emulate Lyndon Johnson, and safeguard his Senate seat by running both for the Senate and the presidency in 1964: “No, I can’t do that after what I said about Lyndon in 1960—they’d run me out of the country. But if I hadn’t opened my big mouth so loud, I might do it.”

On how he achieves his vast literary output—he has produced three best-selling books and innumerable magazine articles, and he signs a thrice-a-week column that goes to about 175 papers: “Oh, hell, I’ve got ghosts all over the place. I pick up a lot of Fletcher Knebel’s stuff too. I sent him an item about Bobby Kennedy’s pool, and he sent me two bucks. I sent it right back—I won’t if he paid me too much, for each other off, I’d owe him $2,000 right off the bat.”

On a draft he had written for a humorous speech: “I took it back to the apartment and read it to my wife Peggy and a couple of her girl friends. I thought they’d be rolling on the floor, but they never cracked a smile. So I said, what the hell’s the matter and Peggy said, look, this is a sophisticated audience, they’re not a lot of lamo-brains like you, they don’t spend their time looking at TV Westerns. You can’t give them that corn.”

Goldwater says this sort of thing with a small, lop-sided smile, which is as disarming as his unpertentiousness. Moreover, however superficial or reactionary many of his political views may seem to the liberal-minded, nobody can accuse Goldwater of pussyfooting—except, perhaps, on one vital subject. Before interviewing him, this reporter made a selection of his more extreme political sentiments. Having interviewed other politicians who heard the beating of distant presidential drums, the reporter waited confidently for the hedge and the weasel. They never came. Here are a few more jottings from the notebook:

REPORTER: “You have been quoted as saying that you oppose the progressive income tax, that everyone should pay the same rate.”

GOLDWATER: “Yes, yes, I do.”

REPORTER: “But do you really think it’s fair that a man with five million a year should pay the same rate as a man with five thousand?”

GOLDWATER: “Yes, yes, I do.”

(Goldwater explains that the poor man would benefit from the rich man’s investments, while in his mind’s ear the reporter hears liberal orators make mincemeat of candidate Goldwater as “the rich man’s candidate” in 1964.)

GOLDWATER (volunteering): “You know, I think we ought to sell TVA.”

REPORTER (scribbling busily): “You really do?”

GOLDWATER: “Yes, yes, I do.”

(Oops, thinks the reporter, there goes the whole Tennessee Valley.)

REPORTER: “You were quoted some time ago as favoring the prompt and final termination of all farm subsidies. Do you still believe that?”

GOLDWATER: “Yes, I believe that. Might take three years, might take five. But it’s not right to force an inefficient farmer to stay on the farm when he’d be much better off in industry.”

(Oops again, there go the farm states.)

Goldwater’s other views, on subjects ranging from Medicare and Walter Reuther to Castro and the welfare state—he’s against them all—are similarly simple and refreshingly forthright. And aside from private charm, Goldwater also has public charisma—star quality, call it what you will. Although he is no great shakes as an orator, this quality has helped to make him, after the President, the most sought-after public speaker in the United States.

Goldwater’s star quality obviously has a lot to do with the Goldwater phenomenon. To understand more about the phenomenon, it is necessary to visit Goldwater on his native health.

Flying into Phoenix, his hometown, Goldwater looked down affectionately on the arid, sunlit land below. “If you’d dropped a five-dollar bill down there before the war,” he said, “it would be worth a couple of hundred now.” After a short colloquy with his younger brother Bob at the airport (“Straighten your tie, Barry, it’s all crooked”—the potential President obediently straightened his tie), Goldwater drove eagerly to his house, which he obviously adores.

Like just about everything else in Arizona, the house is new—it was built in 1957, on a small dusty hill outside of Phoenix. Aside from books,
The Negro vote, the "effete" East appear lost. So why not hunt where the ducks are?

Pat aims at a non-voter makes contact with a voter as Goldwater shows charm on home-state stumping tour.
which Arizona enjoys a lot more than its per capita share, is at the heart of the current Arizona boom. But to the beneficiaries of the boom, as to Goldwater, the Federal Government, with its nasty interfering habits, is The Enemy.

One key to the Goldwater phenomenon, in short, is money—new money, boom money. Wherever there is a lot of new money in the United States—in the West and Southwest, in Texas, in the newly industrialized South—there is fanatical Goldwater support. In such areas, for the first time, an actual majority of the voters belong to what Prof. J. Kenneth Galbraith—one of Goldwater’s pet hates—has dubbed “the affluent society.” The newly affluent provide Goldwater with the broad base of his support.

Another key to the Goldwater phenomenon is what sociologists have called the “revolt of the South and West.” That revolt is now complete. The era when the South and West were semi-colonial dependencies of New York-dominated capital is over, but in these areas “the East” is still regarded with a mixture of suspicion, dislike and envy. Goldwater perfectly expresses this attitude—to an extent hardly recognized in the East, he is the anti-Eastern candidate. He once remarked—perhaps only half jokingly—that the East Coast ought to be “sliced off and set adrift.”

On the second day of whistle-stopping-by-airplane, Goldwater and his attendant reporter came to the little town of Oracle, high on a naked mountain, and at a dude ranch there Goldwater addressed a Republican gathering. The assembly—the floppy-hatted ladies especially—had the country-club look of gatherings of Republican faithful anywhere. But to Goldwater they were a different breed from the “effete Easterners”; and perhaps he was right.

Who’s afraid of Khrushchev?

“I wish the President would take a tour,” he said, “and get out where the people of this country live, out where people live without the constant fear of what would happen if we got Khrushchev mad. What’s happened to us? Why must the United States fear a little island like Cuba that’s not as big as some counties in Arizona? We growl, we back off, we seem to be afraid. I’ve never known Americans to be afraid of anything. Out here in the West and Midwest we’re not constantly harassed by the fear of what might happen. Sure there are risks, but we’ve always taken risks.”

There was a big burst of applause. And indeed, on that sunny mountain it did seem rather silly to worry about Nikita Khrushchev and his bombs. Perhaps if Goldwater had lived his life in a place of mists and rains and vagrant weather, his thinking might lack some of the simple absolutes which are its chief hallmark. But there are plenty of people who like to think in similar absolutes. Goldwater’s trumpet call for “total victory over Communism” may sound like shallow and dangerous semantics in the “effete East.” But out where the skies are not cloudy all day, it strikes a responsive chord. Goldwater’s remarkable talent for the unsubtle and the unqualified is a third key to the Goldwater phenomenon.

The fourth key to the Goldwater phenomenon is the ugly racial crisis which now confronts the United States. If there were no racial crisis, it is most unlikely that Goldwater would be a serious presidential contender. For the Goldwater candidacy is squarely based on the assumption that he could carry the South and, in so doing, defeat John F. Kennedy. And Goldwater’s views on the racial issue in turn underlie that assumption.

The Goldwaterites argue with passion that only Barry Goldwater could defeat Kennedy. Their reasoning is simple.

The industrial East is lost anyway, sure to support Kennedy. So is the northern Negro vote, overwhelmingly Democratic. Therefore, in Goldwater’s words, the Republicans should “stop trying to outbid the Democrats for the Negro vote.” Again in his words, the Republicans should “go
ALSO ON GOLDWATER'S CHANCES FOR THE NOMINATION

Sen. Barry Goldwater's nomination at the Republican convention is probable, as long as his election is considered impossible. But if it begins to seem that he might actually win in November, his elevation will be a less probable and may even be impossible. To understand the sense behind this paradox, consider the words of Walter Lippmann: "If they wanted to make American politics logical and clear . . . I'd be just as well . . . to let Kennedy and Goldwater, who is supposed to be a true Republican, fight it out and see what the country wants.

Until recently this Lipmann theory has been widely shared within that amorphous but powerful body, the Eastern Establishment — on the other complacent assumption that John F. Kennedy would murder Barry Goldwater at the polls. In this event, the notion that the Republican Party is the minority party because it is not conservative enough would be exposed as a myth. And after the Eastern Establishment, the moderate-internationalist, old-money wing of the party, would be left to pick up the pieces. But lately the Establishment, which twice vetoed the nomination of Sen. Robert A. Taft, has been having second thoughts: Is the assumption that Kennedy would murder Goldwater necessarily valid? A Goldwater victory would require the combination of circumstances — say a sudden economic downturn combined with Communist triumphs in Latin America or elsewhere. But there would have to be an X factor as well. The X factor might be the racial issue, now the dominant issue all over the United States.

It is not only in the South that President Kennedy's forthright stand on civil rights is unpopular. In this situation it is not inconceivable that such Negro extremists as the Black Muslims might make Goldwater President. "A few race riots in the North," remarked an old pro on Capitol Hill, "and Barry might make it.

The mere idea that "Barry might make it" is enough to give the Establishment the galloping collywobbles. Even if Goldwater polled no more than 45 per cent of the votes, make his own formula, would be enough to give the right-wing-nationalist-new-money-anti-Eastern wing control of the Republican Party. Lately Goldwater has been at pains to dissociate himself from such figures of the radical right as Robert Welch, head of the John Birch society. But certain of his own positions are radical in the exact sense of that word. His view that the "Jackassian" decisions of the Supreme Court are "not necessarily the law of the land" is genuinely radical in that it clearly implies a constitutional upheaval.

Goldwater, if elected, would have to back away from his judicial prescription for "total victory over Communism" or accept a grave risk of nuclear war. The men who have hitherto had the last word at Republican conventions want no such risks. Nor do they want a bitter partisan conflict on the racial issue.

This is why, if it begins to seem that Goldwater might not be sunk without trace by Kennedy, the Establishment will marshal all its power to block his nomination. In the past that would have been enough — given the other factors against him — to stop Goldwater cold. But there is no new candidate to fit the middleman role of Willkie in 1940 and Eisenhower in 1952. Goldwater's supporters are fanatical and well heeled. It is already clear that next year's convention may be far more than a meaningless exercise to select a sacrificial lamb.