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***The Rearguard of Freedom:
The John Birch Society and the Development of Modern
Conservatism in the United States,
1958-1968***

by

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Abstract

This thesis aims to investigate the role of the anti-communist John Birch Society within the greater American conservative field. More specifically, it focuses on the period from the Society's inception in 1958 to the beginning of its relative decline in significance, which can be situated after the first election of Richard M. Nixon as president in 1968. The main focus of the thesis lies on challenging more traditional classifications of the JBS as an extremist outcast divorced from the American political mainstream, and argues that through their innovative organizational methods, national presence, and capacity to link up a variety of domestic and international affairs to an overarching conspiratorial narrative, the Birchers were able to tap into a new and powerful force of largely white suburban conservatives and contribute significantly to the growth and development of the post-war New Right. For this purpose, the research interrogates the established scholarship and draws upon key primary source material, including official publications, internal communications and the private correspondence of founder and chairman Robert Welch as well as other prominent members.

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The process of writing a PhD dissertation seems none too dissimilar from a loving marriage. It is a continuous and emotionally taxing struggle that leaves the individual's ego in constant peril, subjugates mind and soul to an incessant interplay between intense passion and grinding routine, and in most cases should not drag on for over four years. At the same time, let me emphasize how the pursuit of this path has given me much gratification and fulfillment. Whilst gazing back upon my trajectory, I feel a sense of accomplishment and relief, though both are clearly dwarfed by an overarching gratitude towards the people who have helped me along the way. They are many.

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Introduction

“I just don’t have time for anything,” a suburban Texas housewife told reporters from *Time Magazine*, “I’m fighting Communism three nights a week.” In late 1961, the popular magazine ran a story on swelling numbers of “ultraconservative” citizen activists appearing all over the United States. They convened at least once per week in local “chapters” of up to twenty and sometimes thirty members each, organized film screenings and letter writing campaigns to their political representatives, disseminated vast amounts of literature and constituted a revolutionary form of social protest. They were members of the John Birch Society (JBS). No social movement or political organization left the same mark on the development of modern American conservatism as the “Birchers” did. The tenacity and fanaticism of the Society’s national leadership and members have fascinated observers right from its initial discovery by the greater public at the onset of the 1960s, a decade usually remembered and celebrated for the high tide of Cold War liberalism, milestone achievements for the African American civil rights movement and the advent of the New Left. At the same time, the Sixties witnessed the crystallization of a modern conservative stream of thought and activism that became increasingly adept at challenging a dominant liberalism that had reshaped American politics since the New Deal.¹

To understand the dynamics, properties, successes and failures of this emerging conservative force, it is vital to map the nature and accomplishments of an organization as influential as the JBS. The key question to be considered thus lies exactly within this interaction: How did the John Birch Society fit within the burgeoning post-war conservative movement and what influence did it exercise over the latter’s consolidation and rise to

¹ “Organizations: The Ultras,” *Time*, December 8, 1961, 22.

power? This thesis will investigate that mutual relationship from the Society's inception in late 1958 to the election of Richard Nixon ten years later, which marked the beginning of its relative decline as a nationally determining factor. Besides establishing the specific context from which the JBS arose, it will present the Birchers as a complex movement that simultaneously accelerated the development of the New Right by providing a platform for anti-communist activism on a local and national level, and threatened its cohesion and survival through unyielding conspiratorial views and a fundamental distrust of the political establishment. At the same time, the Society channeled the views and frustrations of a class of right-wing "business nationalists" who forged an alliance with thousands of suburban "super-patriots" to counter the threat of international Communism, and by extension liberalism, on issues such as race and civil rights, foreign affairs and economic policy. While attracting around 100,000 members at its absolute peak, the JBS played an important role in the right-wing capture of the Republican Party convention in 1964, which opened the floodgates for future successful conservative challenges and eventually, the presidency of Ronald Reagan and the end of an era dominated by modern liberalism.

Within a few years' time, the fanaticism and reliance on elaborate conspiracy theories of the JBS and its founder Robert Welch earned the Birchers tremendous attention, as well as the controversial reputation of leading what many contemporaneous observers referred to as the "radical right," a disconnected, extremist fringe on the margins of the political landscape that allegedly had no legitimacy in a liberal democracy such as the United States. As a result, the status of the Birchers in the historical scholarship on the rise of modern conservatism has remained problematic, both in terms of categorization and significance. From the first scholars and political commentators that analyzed the Society and its achievements, the organization has not received the attention it deserves as a force within the New Right. Given the obvious connection between the Birchers' preoccupation with collectivist subversion,

international as well as domestic, with Cold War anti-communist paranoia, the JBS has traditionally been mischaracterized as a neo-McCarthyite anomaly bearing the outdated views of the isolationist Old Right that were fundamentally incompatible with a radically polarized post-war global order.

The reality is much more complex. Firstly, while important intellectual networks had been developing around pockets of classical liberal thinkers, social or traditionalist conservatives and anti-communists – the basis of so-called fusionism – it was the John Birch Society that established a well-organized, action-oriented popular movement that could unite conservatives on a national scale and around a variety of issues. To be sure, the early Cold War years saw a number of activist organizations emerge that sought to achieve similar objectives, particularly the fundamentalist Christian initiatives of Billy James Hargis’s Cristian Crusade, Fred Schwarz’s Christian Anti-Communist Crusade or Edgar Bundy’s Church League of America. None of these, however, could match the prominence and prowess of the JBS, either within the conservative universe or in the American imagination of the rising right. With a membership peak between 60,000 and 100,000 by the mid-1960s and a diverse range of “front groups” that targeted various political issues simultaneously, the Society occupied a crucial and unique place in the development of the New Right.

It is precisely this *community factor* that was crucially overlooked by dismissive observers who considered the Birchers an isolated fringe and predicted they were in no position to make any significant contributions to the political process. For instance, the “consensus” scholars around sociologist Daniel Bell and historian Richard Hofstadter drew heavily on Theodor Adorno’s *The Authoritarian Personality*, which in the wake of World War II explored the phenomenon of the “fascist personality” and developed the model of the “authoritarian” type, a personality pre-disposed to adopt right-wing extremist, fascist and

anti-Semitic predispositions. As a result, Bell and his co-authors described adherence to the “radical right” or “pseudo-conservative” column in pathological terms, and relegated the JBS to a mere incarnation of a “paranoid style” that turned to hyper-conformism and quasi-fascist beliefs.² Seymour Martin Lipset, who also contributed to Bell’s edited collection, suggested the “radical right” should be “characterized as radical because it desires to make far-reaching changes in American institutions, and because it seeks to eliminate from American political life those persons and institutions which threaten either its values or its economic interests.”³ The writers concluded their objects of study suffered from “status anxiety,” as many of them had made significant social advances over a brief period of time through increased social mobility and found themselves ill at ease, having to defend their newly acquired and vulnerable status in society. According to David Riesman and Nathan Glazer, this anxiety boiled down to a “discontent which arises from the *mental discomforts* [...] founded less on economic than on intellectual uncertainty.”⁴

Clearly, the consensus scholars refused to take the Birch phenomenon seriously on an intellectual level, and saw little more than a popular extension of dysfunctional, McCarthyite paranoia. In reality, the Birchers were representative of a growing breed of conservative activists and, as a well-structured national organization, they pioneered mass-scale mobilization and educational techniques. More importantly, the JBS provided isolated citizens with a community of likeminded groups and individuals, which helped create a national visibility and common consciousness for thousands. A number of historians, including Michael Kazin, Sarah Diamond and Matthew Lyons, have rightfully pointed

² Daniel Bell (ed.), *The New American Right* (New York: Criterion Books, 1955); Theodor Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswick, et al., *The Authoritarian Personality: Studies in Prejudice* (New York: Harper & Row, 1950).

³ Seymour Martin Lipset, “The Sources of the ‘Radical Right,’ in Daniel Bell (ed.): *The Radical Right: The New American Right Expanded and Updated* (New York: Doubleday, 1963), 307.

⁴ David Riesman and Nathan Glazer, “The Intellectuals and the Discontented Classes,” in Bell (1963), 110.

towards the power of right-wing populism and the importance of a “movement culture” that emerged alongside modern conservatism, but a clear reading of the Birchers’ local and national impact arguably goes back to the *history from below* approach that characterizes Nancy MacLean’s influential work on the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s. With regard to post-war conservatism, Lisa McGirr’s *Suburban Warriors* has been particularly innovative in this respect. McGirr’s work offers an analysis of post-war Orange County, California and uncovers a true hotbed of laissez-faire anti-statism infused with a strong traditionalist conservatism, imported by Southern and Midwestern newcomers who populated the vast sprawling suburban areas in the Southwest. Focusing on a time and place in which the JBS fared particularly well and exercised a significant influence over the greater conservative movement, McGirr has illustrated how these Southwestern conservatives were often high-earning, socially well-connected professionals, typically employed in aerospace, electronics, consultancy or high-end military industries and thus far from the “anti-modern” segments or “lunatic fringes” they were previously dismissed as. In doing so, McGirr has paved the way for a more in-depth study of grassroots conservatism and its intersections with gender, race and partisan politics.⁵ As Julian Zelizer observed in 2012, “[t]he pulse of conservatism was mainstream America, not those on the fringes.”⁶

Indeed, the power of the JBS as a grassroots force exposes a strict *mainstream* versus *marginal* classification or “extremist” lens as problematic for the understanding of the development of post-war conservatism. The John Birch Society became much more than a personal outlet for its founder Robert Welch’s political frustrations and conspiracy narratives.

⁵ Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁶ Julian Zelizer, *Governing America: The Revival of Political History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 72; see Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

Rather, it grew into a vocal protest movement that offered thousands of distressed and disillusioned conservative citizens a platform to challenge and expose what they saw as a sinister, collectivist attack on the U.S. constitution, American national sovereignty, states' rights, Judeo-Christian values, individualism and free enterprise. Also, invaluable work performed by sociologists and investigative journalists studying the Society over the years and mapping its evolution have painted a picture of its typical membership that is largely consistent with McGirr's image of middle class, generally highly-educated "suburban warriors," which severely undermines the notion of a marginal, reactionary class of paranoid and mentally unstable citizens anxious about their decreasing societal status.⁷

Besides an analysis of its popular composition, a look at the JBS's "origins" and guiding influences reveals a deeper complexity, rooted in a long, conservative tradition. Robert Welch's own background, professional career in the confectionery manufacturing industry and political development intersects with the frustrations of conservative Republicans who were outraged by New Deal liberal reform and felt betrayed by Eisenhower's "modern" Republicanism. Welch, originally a Taft Republican and traditional "Old Guard" conservative, had established himself within a network of right-wing thinkers convinced that both major parties had fallen prey to the "international Communist conspiracy" that had allegedly engulfed the Democratic Party and thus spawned a collectivist blueprint for America under the guise of New Deal and Fair Deal programs. Eisenhower's tepid embrace of the activist welfare state, his appointment of Chief Justice Earl Warren,

⁷ Gene Grove, *Inside the John Birch Society* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Publications, 1961); J. Allen Broyles, *The John Birch Society: Anatomy of a Protest* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964); Fred W. Grupp, Jr., "Personal Satisfaction Derived From Membership in the John Birch Society," *The Western Political Quarterly* 24.1 (March 1971), 79-83; Barbara Stone, "The John Birch Society: A Profile," *The Journal of Politics* 36.1 (February 1974), 184-97; Clyde Wilcox, "Sources of Support for the Old Right: A Comparison of the John Birch Society and the Christian Anti-Communist Crusade," *Social Science History* 12.4 (Winter 1988), 429-49.

lukewarm support for civil rights legislation and perceived failure to achieve the rollback of international Communism, had driven Welch to the conclusion that a genuine conservative counterrevolution had to be launched from *outside* formal party politics.

Although the official line of the JBS as a tax-exempt, educational organization consistently ruled out political endorsements of any kind, ties with partisan politics became equally important, especially around Barry Goldwater's capture of the Republican Party convention in 1964. As Rick Perlstein, Mary Brennan, Kurt Schuparra and others have observed, the Senator's ill-fated attempt to unseat Lyndon Johnson was not just a triumph for liberalism. The successful nomination fight dealt a crucial blow to the GOP's moderate and liberal wings, mostly concentrated on the East Coast. At the same time, the issue of extremism and the John Birch Society tarnished the Republican candidate and ruined his chances for election. However, by looking at the run-up to the nomination, it becomes clear the infighting over the role of the Birchers within the party – especially in volunteer organizations in California – as well as the actual efforts of members and sympathetic ultraconservatives to rid the party of their political opponents, actually helped Goldwater win the California primary and gain enough momentum to defeat Nelson Rockefeller and challenge the party establishment. From the 1962 gubernatorial race in the same state, up to the national convention in July 1964, the JBS became a clear target for Goldwater's opponents, who tried to tarnish the candidate as a political extremist. As a result, the Birchers' marginalization only motivated the Senator's backers to infiltrate the party infrastructure at the grassroots level and mobilize popular support for the conservative cause and its representation within the Republican Party, at the expense of liberal and moderate factions. The result of the election may well have triggered the eventual marginalization of the JBS within the conservative field, but by assisting the pro-Goldwater forces in wresting away the party control, the Birchers made an irrevocable contribution to the overall partisan

realignment that emerged from the mid-1960s and helped carve out an electoral power base for the right.⁸

Welch's uncompromising views still offended and embarrassed many who considered themselves conservatives, most notably William F. Buckley, Jr. and the influential *National Review* intellectuals. Concerned that the Birchers might facilitate the vilification of "serious" conservatives and thus imperil their prospects at the ballot box, Buckley engineered two major condemnations of the JBS and its leader in a cautious attempt to reconvert its members to either defy Welch as leader of the Society or leave altogether. With regard to such internal discord, Julian Zelizer has identified a newly emerging wave of historiography on the right, which puts a stronger focus on "the divisions, opposition, struggles, and compromises" and "numerous internal and external obstacles" faced by post-war conservatives in their attempt to formulate a cohesive credo and create a unified movement.⁹ Jonathan Schoenwald's work in particular has done much in dissecting the internal strife of the emerging conservative order. In *A Time for Choosing*, which focuses on the various political alliances active behind Barry Goldwater's 1964 campaign and the right-wing capture of the GOP, Schoenwald has reconsidered the Society's extremist label and suggested Birchers and non-conspiratorial conservatives shared sufficient overlap in values and objectives to temporarily rally behind the Arizonan's banner, as well as a number of other electoral and symbolic campaigns. In addition, Schoenwald has suggested the JBS forced conservatives to redefine themselves and readjust their rhetoric to a national electorate, thus enabling politicians like Ronald Reagan,

⁸ Mary Brennan, *Turning Right in the Sixties: The Conservative Capture of the GOP* (Chapel Hill & London: University of Carolina Press, 1995), 141; Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001).

⁹ Zelizer, 87.

John Tower and even Richard Nixon to reinvent a pragmatic, more electable yet populist message that rallied conservatives while appealing to disenchanted moderates and liberals.¹⁰

It has become increasingly clear how a strict “extremist” reading of the JBS fails to accurately assess its impact and significance. The work of McGirr and Schoenwald has led scholars to begin to plumb how the John Birch Society complicates the rise of the modern American right. Schoenwald’s analysis has found support from Samuel Brenner and Darren J. Mulloy, who support the view that the Birchers’ ambiguous relationship with “respectable” conservatives often included pragmatic collaboration as much as conflict and dissent.¹¹ The latter’s most recently published work, *The World of the John Birch Society*, illustrates a strong renewed interest in critical revision of the JBS as a political agent of change. Clearly inspired by the events surrounding the sudden rise of the Tea Party phenomenon and its anti-government populism, Mulloy sketches a history of the JBS as an understudied organization that could, if only for a brief period of time, “pioneer innovative models of political activity or communication” and “embody - and give voice to - some of the central tensions or conflicts of the time.”¹²

Mulloy’s work puts forward a necessary reappraisal of the Birchers’ ambiguous value to the conservative cause, and offers a detailed analysis of how their conspiracist alarmism shares much common ground with the more moderate right in a time dominated by Cold War perspectives. Nevertheless, Mulloy illustrates the affinity between Birchism and non-

¹⁰ Jonathan Schoenwald, *A Time for Choosing: The Rise of Modern American Conservatism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 70, 125; see also Zelizer, “Rethinking the History of American Conservatism,” *Reviews in American History* 38.2 (June 2010), 367-92.

¹¹ Samuel Brenner, “Fellow Travelers: Overlap between ‘Mainstream’ and ‘Extremist’ Conservatives in the Early 1960s,” in Laura Jane Gifford & Daniel K. Williams, *The Right Side of the Sixties: Reexamining Conservatism’s Decade of Transformation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 83-100.

¹² D.J. Mulloy, *The World of the John Birch Society: Conspiracy, Conservatism, and the Cold War* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2014), 2.

conspiracist conservative thought without equating the two, and rightfully emphasizes the stress Welch and his followers traditionally placed on the danger of *internal* subversion within the United States, rather than merely the external threat of international Communism. In this respect, Mulloy is well complemented by Claire Conner, whose memoir *Wrapped in the Flag* (2013) offers a moving and intimate view of the author growing up as the daughter of two prominent Birch members, Stillwell Jay and Laurene Conner. Throughout the book, Conner sketches her life-long struggles and idle efforts to satisfy her parents' exacting demands and conspiracist anxieties. Father Jay was a reasonably successful Chicago businessman and a personal friend of Welch, while mother Laurene channeled her Roman Catholic zeal into an unbending anti-communist and social conservative dedication to the entire Bircher program. The Conners, whose home "buzzed with John Birch activity," remain a striking illustration of the fervor, commitment and inability to compromise that has defined the Society' activism throughout the decades.¹³

It seems both Conner and Mulloy have heeded the call of historian Kim Phillips-Fein when she concluded in her 2011 overview of the historiography on the right that "more work is needed on conservatives who are seen as extremists, especially the John Birch Society."¹⁴ Still, there are more matters to be addressed when it comes to dissecting the role and impact of the JBS. Conner's work has made an invaluable contribution as a personal account of the social and psychological dimensions of Birch activism, though it offers no academic reading of the Society as a national and historical phenomenon. Mulloy too, admits to the limitations of his study and emphasizes he is not offering an "organizational history" of the JBS, while

¹³ Claire Conner, *Wrapped in the Flag: What I Learned Growing Up in America's Radical Right, How I Escaped, and Why My Story Matters Today* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013), 45.

¹⁴ Kim Phillips-Fein, "Conservatism: A State of the Field," *Journal of American History* 98.3 (December 2011), 736.

highlighting the importance of future research tackling this question, which this thesis aims to address.¹⁵

At the same time, there remains more room to connect the JBS to a number of crucial developments within the history of modern conservatism. For instance, it is imperative to trace back the common lineage of Welch and his followers and the broader conservative revival of the 1950s and 1960s, including business networks, partisan factions and even military and intelligence officials. With one exception, the first individual members Welch invited into the JBS were business leaders, usually heads of small to medium-sized family enterprises, like Fred Koch, Augereau Heinsohn or William Grede. Welch knew many of these men from the National Confectioners' Association and the National Association of Manufacturers, where he had gained invaluable organizational experience disseminating right-wing propaganda and established a broad network of business contacts. In this respect, the thesis further interrogates the connections between grassroots conservatism and business sponsorship, a focus that has sparked significant interest in recent years, and seeks to connect the grassroots conservative dynamic with the so-called "grasstops" or elite backers of right-wing causes.

Also, the Birchers' evolution on civil rights and the race question, Cold War international relations and influence on key right-wing populist electoral campaigns throughout the 1960s deserves more attention to create a full picture of the Society's impact on the conservative movement. Much has been written on how the emergence of the New Left, radicalized civil rights and Black Power groups, as well as growing urban unrest and frustration with compensatory measures crucially eroded public support for civil rights and the Johnson Administration's Great Society programs from 1965 onward. Scholarship on

¹⁵ Mulloy, 14; see also Rick Perlstein "Who Owns the Sixties? The Opening of a Scholarly Generation Gap," *Lingua Franca* 6 (May-June 1996), 30-37.

conservatism and race has by and large confirmed these suspicions, but scholars like Thomas Sugrue and Joseph Crespino have reconstructed historical narratives of powerful conservative challenges to civil rights and racial equality well before the late 1960s.¹⁶ Also, below the surface of massive resistance and white supremacy, historians like Thomas and Mary Edsall and Joseph Lowndes have uncovered the strength of “colorblind” challenges to civil rights and racial equality (of outcome).¹⁷

What made the Birchers’ place in this development significant is not merely the crucial timing of their emergence as a major movement, but the fact that as a national organization, they could connect Southern white resentment with a broader conservative response to civil rights, which evolved from constitutionalism and anti-communist techniques to a greater focus on social and economic issues. Uncovering the “Communist hands” behind the civil rights movement quickly became one of the primary objectives of its various front groups, with *TACT* (Truth About Civil Turmoil) at the forefront. Welch was a native Southerner, and stressed the 1954 *Brown* decision as the first successful Communist attempt to exploit racial tensions in the South in order to gradually provoke unrest and install a collectivist dictatorship. However, the Society in its official writings never promoted white supremacy and actually defended equality of opportunity and even spontaneous desegregation, but instead emphasized state sovereignty and the free market as providers of social and racial justice. The JBS occupied a distinctive position with regard to race. On the one hand, it followed racial conservatives and segregationists in vehemently opposing civil

¹⁶ Thomas Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008); Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

¹⁷ Joseph E. Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right: Race and the Southern Origins of Modern Conservatism* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2008); Thomas B. Edsall and Mary D. Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights and Taxes on American Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1992).

rights legislation – and gained strong support in the South as a result. On the other hand, it went to great lengths to publicize its own alleged racial moderation - through a circuit of black anti-communist speakers and even an annual scholarship offered to African American students - and perhaps stood closer to the libertarian position occupied by Goldwater in his opposition to the 1964 Civil Rights Act. What is important though, is how the Society as a national force helped anti-civil rights rhetoric evolve from constitutionalist and even racist reservations towards issues of law and order, federalism, property rights and other “colorblind” lenses through which the right would eventually liberal reform and economic redistribution.

A close analysis of the Birchers’ initial projects and internal communication also reveals a strong emphasis on foreign affairs. One of the first major initiatives launched by Welch under the Society’s banner was the *Committee Against Summit Entanglements*, a front group that placed ads in local and national newspapers and gathered signatures and the support of prominent conservatives – including Barry Goldwater and Bill Buckley – against Nikita Khrushchev’s visit to the United States in 1959. Historians have traditionally considered Welch’s Old Right roots and the Society’s opposition to U.S. membership in the United Nations as evidence of a firmly isolationist credo. More accurately, the Society joined emerging voices on the New Right in calling for aggressive rollback of international Communism, but on a *unilateralist* basis, i.e. avoiding foreign entanglements and internationalist policies. However, Welch’s ambiguous stance on U.S. involvement in Vietnam did eventually cause a breaking point where the Birchers’ failure to express unequivocal support for the objective of the war heralded a definitive expulsion from the wider conservative field.

Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that even Welch's far-reaching conspiracy theories could act as a motivating force to those that were willing to join his cause. Thus, the Society's strengths and weaknesses partially overlapped. The controversial drive to impeach Earl Warren and to achieve American withdrawal from United Nations revealed that a vocal "minority" could be easily mobilized by a clear if simplified program. Birchers' refusal to compromise with liberal or moderate forces within partisan politics eventually drove them out of the Republican Party and into the arms of George Wallace's populist third-party runs of 1968 and 1972, where they provided much of the manpower on the ground. In the end, the alarmist conspiracism with which they approached the political process left them isolated, especially after the election of a Republican president in 1968, whom some still consider the "last liberal" president.

Jonathan Schoenwald has observed how the defeat triggered a definitive rift between established conservatives, from the editors of the *National Review* to Goldwater himself, and the JBS. However, it remains equally important to stress how this rift remained relatively superficial at least until the 1968 election. Republican politicians like Ronald Reagan learned to accommodate the JBS and its fervent nationalism and alarmist rhetoric while keeping them sufficiently out of sight, but the Society's grassroots troops and intra-partisan supporters remained crucial in achieving electoral victories, including Reagan's in 1966. The Society also enjoyed a significant impact on the police review boards referendum in New York City during the same year, which conservative opponents handily won. The factors for the Society's eventual decline were more complicated than the Goldwater debacle. Welch's conspiratorial views on Vietnam bordered on a protest against the war, which collided heavily with anti-Communist sentiment and triggered the *National Review's* definitive condemnation of the Society. Disillusioned with Republican efforts to keep the JBS out of the party, thousands of Birchers flocked to George Wallace's 1968 campaign and provided the

life blood and organization skills to get the Governor's campaign up and running. This brought the Society in an awkward position between the more racially inclusive principles of Welch and explicitly racist groups such as Willis Carto's Liberty Lobby.¹⁸

In the end, the Birchers' achievements proved to be paradoxical. The subsequent election years of 1966 and 1968 showed a significant shift to the right in U.S. politics, both within the Republican Party and national voting patterns. This was not merely due to an increasingly divided left and dissent over Vietnam, but it proved conservatives had become more successful in undermining the once solid New Deal coalition through populist condemnations of lawlessness and economic redistribution. The Birchers played a part in that evolution. At the same time, dwindling membership numbers and an abysmal attempt to repeat Wallace's strong 1968 performance four years later through two Birch-backed candidates, suggests that the Society's effectiveness had started to fade. The JBS continued to oppose the Nixon Administration with conviction, but found itself increasingly trapped and superfluous between an emerging neoconservative wing and militant hate groups on the far right.

Though the JBS never quite disappeared from the political radar, the part it played in the subsequent successes and achievements of conservatives – such as the election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency – remained relatively modest. Recent political developments including the Tea Party phenomenon have rekindled interest in the Society's variety of conservatism, which explains their rediscovery by academics and political pundits in recent years. Though the thesis focuses on their part within the modern conservative movement

¹⁸ See Jody Carlson, *George C. Wallace and the Politics of Powerlessness: The Wallace Campaigns for the Presidency, 1964-1976* (New York: Transaction Publishers, 1981); Dan Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich: Race in the Conservative Counterrevolution, 1963-1994* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999).

from 1958 to 1968, it is clear the implications of this question stretch far beyond that timeframe. A study of the John Birch Society offers a fresh perspective on the gradual disintegration of the New Deal coalition, but also sets the stage for the persistence of conspiracism, scapegoating, political fundamentalism and polarization in the post-9/11 world and Obama's America. From an organizational point of view, Robert Welch created a successful model for collusion between right-wing business interests and grassroots activism that at present seems to provide much of the energy and resources to conservative strategies looking to undermine liberal reform and roll back the welfare state.

Finally, a word of explanation with regard to the physical structure of the thesis is in order. The chapters are generally organized thematically as well as chronologically, in order to illustrate the growth and development of the Birch group alongside crucial angles such as business support, race and foreign relations. They are also divided into two overarching sections, namely a first part which focuses on the establishment of the Society as a protest group, and a second part which traces the organization's odyssey into the arena of electoral influence and ultimate expulsion or decline toward the end of the 1960s.

The first section consists specifically of three chapters dealing with a more ideological approach to the value system uniting the Birchers as they became an important force. Chapter 1 especially focuses on Welch's background and ties with likeminded conservative businessmen, as well as the relevance of these connections for a proper understanding of the JBS as an ideological faction, while chapter 2 traces the Society's early growth and initial projects. While both chapters clearly illustrate the centrality of Cold War politics to the agenda of Welch and his followers, they emphasize a strong kinship between Bircher alarmism and non-conspiracist conservatism. Similarly, chapter 3, which focuses on the JBS and civil rights, establishes the Birchers as a surprisingly pragmatic and complex brand of

conservative opposition to the civil rights movement and subsequent legislative action during the 1950s and 1960s. While the centrality of conspiracism runs predictably throughout the entire first section as a key characteristic of Birchist activism, these chapters seek to *connect* the Society to wider currents of conservative thought in the period and properly contextualize its early growth and strength as a response to the realities of Cold War developments, both international and domestic.

The final two chapters constitute the second section of the thesis and both focus on the clash between the JBS as an established educational organization and electoral politics. In chapter 4, the presidential campaign of Barry Goldwater, essential for the development of a national conservative movement and the capture of the Republican Party, is used as an illustration of both the potential and limitations of the Society as a political recruitment pool and scapegoat simultaneously. In helping Goldwater secure the nomination, the Birchers contributed significantly to the coming of age of post-war conservatism, but found themselves ostracized in the process. This evolution continues throughout chapter 5, where the gubernatorial campaign of Ronald Reagan in California illustrates the birth of a new, respectable conservatism that had learned to draw from Bircher alarmism, but presented a safer, polished and more respectable version of the same suburban politics that had become so typical of JBS populist resentment. Finally, though the Birchers still demonstrated their usefulness in single-issue politics or in anti-establishmentarian campaigns such as George Wallace's 1968 run for the presidency, the election of Richard Nixon condemned the Society to the margins, stuck between racist and fundamentalist groups devoid of any significant clout.

SECTION 1

THE JOHN BIRCH SOCIETY AS PROTEST GROUP

Chapter 1: The Education of an Americanist: Robert Welch, Business Nationalism and the Founding of the John Birch Society

“Gentlemen,” a tallish, graying man in his late fifties addressed his audience huddled together in a suburban living room a few miles outside of Indianapolis, “you are taking part ... in the beginning of a movement of historical importance.” The date was December 8, 1958. Robert Henry Winborne Welch, Jr., a retired fifty-nine year-old candy manufacturer and salesman from the affluent Boston suburb of Belmont, delivered his two-day straight private lecture virtually from memory, only stopping for occasional coffee breaks, dinner and sleep. “Our immediate and most urgent anxiety,” he warned his listeners, “is the threat of the Communist conspiracy.” Little over a month before, Welch had written twelve of his trusted friends and business associates, “all men of well recognized stature, unshakable integrity, proved ability, and fervent patriotism.” In his letter, he had invited them to the home of a Miss Marguerite Dice, then-Vice-Chairwoman of the American Minute Women, at 3650 Washington Boulevard, Indianapolis, to discuss the “collectivist conspiracy” threatening the United States and the free world. “Both internationally, and within the United States,” the retired businessman claimed, “the Communists are much further advanced and more deeply entrenched than is realized by even most of the serious students of the danger among the anti-Communists.” As a counter initiative, Welch proposed the immediate founding of an “educational” and “monolithic body” under his own “personal, charismatic leadership” and pleaded his guests to join him in an all-out crusade against the evils of collectivism, at home and abroad. Out of the two-day meeting the John Birch Society was born and the transcript of

Welch's extensive speech would eventually be published and distributed as the Society's *Blue Book* and serve as the organization's "basic bible."¹

Although the study of the John Birch Society and the rise of modern conservatism in the United States contributes to an understanding of the evolution of crucial *popular* movements and demographic developments behind the rise of the New Right, the story of the Society's founding uncovers another factor: the influence of right-wing business networks on conservative activism and amalgamation. First of all, it is important to map the personal evolution of Welch himself, especially given his pivotal role in establishing the JBS. At the same time, Welch's political background is inextricably connected to the story of conservative business opposition to New Deal liberalism, which the retired salesman and many of his associates had come to reject as camouflaged Communism and radical subversion of American constitutional and republican values. It is this connection between the John Birch Society and what will be called *business nationalism* that defined the organization's inception and character from the beginning.

¹ Letter to T. Coleman Andrews, October 27, 1958, John Birch Society Records, John Hay Library, Brown University, Box 1 "Correspondence"; Robert Welch, *The Blue Book of The John Birch Society* (Belmont: Western Islands, 1959), 27th printing, 1999, xxi-xxii; the eleven men who joined Welch in Indianapolis were: T. Coleman Andrews, insurance and Former Commissioner of Internal Revenue of the United States; Col. Laurence E. Bunker, who served as personal aide to Douglas MacArthur, during Korean War and upon return to US; William J. Grede, former NAM President and CEO of Grede Foundries, Inc.; William R. Kent; Fred C. Koch, head of Rock Island Oil and Refining Company, father of libertarian billionaires Charles and David Koch; William B. McMillan, the first JBS member after Welch, President of Hussmann Refrigerator Company in St Louis, MO; Dr. Revilo Oliver, Professor of Classical Languages and Literatures at the University of Illinois; Louis Ruthenberg, Indiana State Chamber of Commerce President; Fitzhugh Scott; Robert W. Stoddard, First National Bank of Boston board of directors and President of Associated Industries of Massachusetts, and Ernest Swigert, founder of the Hyster Company, manufacturers of heavy equipment, and also a former president of the National Association of Manufacturers. All but Kent and Scott eventually joined Welch's Society and assumed advisory positions on its National Council.

Though the JBS would develop into a successful popular movement, the leadership operating from Massachusetts, including Welch himself and a number of close business contacts, continued to shape its agenda, direct its program and monitor its progress. Therefore, an analysis of the Society both as a powerful popular organization on the one hand and as a well-financed conservative business interest group on the other underlines the importance of this “grass tops” intersection for the development of modern conservatism as a growing political force. Also, it complicates the interpretation of the Birchers as an anomaly within the post-war right-wing landscape. Welch’s history as a frustrated “Old Guard” Taft Republican and anti-communist business leader restores the origins of the JBS to a broader, established American conservative genealogy, closely affiliated with inter-bellum nationalism, McCarthyite anti-radicalism and the classical liberal tenets of Leonard Read and Alfred Jay Nock. As a result, the Birch phenomenon can and should be understood as ideologically diverse and rooted firmly within the American conservative tradition. The anti-communism promoted by the Society’s program transcended the alarmist conspiracism that would render its position within the New Right problematic, and tapped into more familiar opposition to the regulatory state, organized labor and internationalism. Fueled by Cold War paranoia, the Birchers continued the trend set by business conservatives of rejecting New Deal liberalism as a radical conspiracy aimed at strangling free enterprise and installing a collectivist dictatorship. In combination with his heavy reliance on conspiracy theories, Welch infused constitutionalist and classical liberal ideas into his organization, essentially aligning his agenda with what was simultaneously developing into fusionism and modern conservative thought.

Notwithstanding the importance of Cold War anti-communism to the inception and development of the JBS, a fresh look at the role of Welch’s business nationalist network helps to extricate the Birchers from a too narrow reading. Even after the consensus school

lost much of its credibility in categorizing right-wing activism, historians have traditionally emphasized the connection between the Birchers and McCarthyite paranoia, or at least an essentially post-war political landscape. Eckard Toy, for instance, writes that the Society's "ideological center reflected the primary influence of the Cold War."² In his *Culture of the Cold War*, Stephen Whitfield observes that "entrenching itself on the margins, the woolly logic of McCarthyism reached its terminus in the John Birch Society." Undoubtedly, with his alarmist conspiracism Welch intended to continue the trend of McCarthy's witch hunts and subscribed to the same Manichean worldview as the late senator. Then again, as will be shown, much of what defined the business nationalist critique of left-wing radicalism, and by extension liberalism, that influenced Welch substantially, predated McCarthyism and Cold War anti-communist politics.³

The term "business nationalism" was coined by investigative journalist Chip Berlet and historian Matthew Lyons in their co-authored study on right-wing populist movements in U.S. history. Berlet and Lyons actually identify business nationalism as a strong influence on the JBS' founding principles, alongside "economic libertarianism, anticommunism, Eurocentrism and Christian fundamentalism," but offer little explanation as to how it operates ideologically beyond a strong reliance on producerism, opposition to

² Eckard V. Toy, Jr., "The Right Side of the 1960s: The Origins of the John Birch Society in the Pacific Northwest," *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, 105.2 (Summer 2004), 283.

³ Stephen Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 41. Admittedly, other scholars have approached the Birch phenomenon through a more diverse lens. Brian Farmer has categorized the Bircher creed as "a combination of McCarthyism and Libertarian individualism" and authors like Michael Rogin and Sheilah Koeppen have established connections to Old Guard Republicanism and antebellum partisan politics; Brian Farmer, *American Conservatism: History, Theory and Practice* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2005), 275; Michael Rogin, *The Intellectuals and McCarthy: The Radical Specter* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1969); Sheilah Koeppen, "The Republican Radical Right," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 382.1 (March 1969), 73-82; see also Peter Viereck, "The Revolt Against the Elite," in Daniel Bell (ed.), *The Radical Right: The New American Right* (New York: Ayer, 1964), 161-83.

internationalism and a strong suspicion of international finance. Still, the term is interesting and useful, considering its connection between Welch's professional background and the conspiratorial rejection of internationalism that the JBS propagated. Business nationalists were primarily concentrated within labor-intensive industries, from oil refining to textile manufacturing. By default, they harbored strong anti-unionist and protectionist attitudes, favoring high tariffs to protect their markets from foreign competitors, which in turn put them at odds with international free trade policy, or as Berlet and Lyons observe, these conservatives "tended to be more sympathetic to the economic nationalism of fascist Germany and Italy than to free-trading England." Being stuck between working classes and political elites, they were often suspicious of government intervention in the economy – unless it favors their immediate purposes – and regarded the federal government with strong suspicion, especially when it granted more rights to organized labor, which they considered a usurpation of their paternal authority within the workplace.⁴

In the *Journal of American History*'s 2011 roundtable on American conservatism, historian Kim Phillips-Fein highlighted an equally important trend in scholarship, i.e. the study of the influence of business on right-wing causes, or "the role of businesspeople and the economic elite in building conservative institutions and developing anti-union strategies." According to Phillips-Fein, "[b]usiness opposition to labor and liberalism helped generate financial support for many of the movement's institutions and organizations in its early years while business campaigns in defense of market ideas helped shift the terms of public debate."⁵ Her own book, *Invisible Hands*, elegantly traces back the backroom influence wielded by family tycoons as the DuPonts, to General Electric's Lemuel Boulware and beer

⁴ Chip Berlet and Matthew Lyons, *Too Close for Comfort: Right-Wing Populism in America* (New York: Guilford Press, 2000), 176, 275, 163.

⁵ Kim Phillips-Fein, "A State of the Field," *Journal of American History*, 98.3 (December 2011), 732.

giant Adolph Coors over the conservative cause.⁶ In dealing with the rise of Barry Goldwater in the free market-friendly Southwest, Elizabeth Tandy Shermer has revealed crucial “grasstops” – i.e. connecting the high-profile business backers with the grassroots – support behind the discrediting of trade unions and gradual infiltration of government by libertarian ideals and policy.⁷ By re-appreciating older key studies like Robert Collins’ analysis of business opposition to the rise of Keynesianism in American governance, or Elizabeth Fones-Wolf’s chronicling of pro-market corporate propaganda programs aimed at swaying workers, this burgeoning scholarship has helped take under greater scrutiny not just the figureheads of modern conservatism – William F. Buckley, Jr., Barry Goldwater, Ronald Reagan – but the business interests that financed the rise of the right behind the scenes.⁸

I. What is Good for Business: The Story of Robert Welch

Robert Welch was born in Woodville, Chowan County, North Carolina on December 1, 1899 to Southern Baptist farmer Robert Henry Winborne Welch, Sr. and Lina Verona James Welch, a schoolteacher. After a brief stint as shopkeepers, the Welches moved to a farm in adjacent Perquimans County named Stockton, where young Robert, first-born out of six children, was raised. Profiting from her own professional experience as a teacher, Mrs. Welch started tutoring her son early on, submersing him in elementary algebra at the age of

⁶ Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co.), 2009.

⁷ Elizabeth Tandy Shermer, “Origins of the Conservative Ascendancy: Barry Goldwater’s Early Senate Career and the De-legitimization of Organized Labor,” *Journal of American History*, 95.3 (December 2008), 678–709.

⁸ See also David Witwer, “Westbrook Pegler and the Anti-union Movement,” *Journal of American History*, 92.2 (September 2005), 527–52;; Lawrence Richards, *Union-Free America: Workers and Antiunion Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008); and Nelson Lichtenstein and Elizabeth Tandy Shermer, eds., *The Right and Labor in America: Politics, Ideology, and Imagination* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), 2012.

four, and in Latin at age seven. The boy turned out to be a veritable wunderkind, graduating from high school with ease in his early teens and making his way into the local newspapers by winning a prestigious essay competition on North Carolina pioneer George Durant. At the tender age of twelve, the child prodigy gained admission to the University of North Carolina, where he would pursue his nascent interests in poetry, math and chess.⁹

Three years later, the young Welch completed his studies and decided against further graduate study in favor of entering the job market. After brief employment as in-voice auditor with a local company, Welch gravitated towards a military career, as the United States rapidly stepped up its involvement in World War I. Joining the Navy at Annapolis with help from his well-connected father, he quickly rose to the rank of Midshipman, only to obtain leave in 1919 after the promise of military action overseas ceased to beckon. Subsequently, Welch turned to what would become one of his most passionate pastimes, the art of writing. Blessed with a keen mind and a propensity for entrepreneurship, he tried his hand at a short-lived periodical named *The Smile*, featuring poems, articles and advertising space for local businesses. The magazine flopped and Welch spent some time writing as a syndicated columnist for *The Raleigh News* and *The Observer*.

Eager for a fresh intellectual challenge, Welch moved to Massachusetts and enrolled at Harvard Law School, where he would be taught by Felix Frankfurter, the Harvard-educated attorney who would go on to advise Roosevelt during his early presidency and be appointed to the Supreme Court in 1939. In the fall of 1921, Welch had started his third year at law school when he was taught a course in labor law by Frankfurter. The future Justice, in

⁹ Much of Welch's biographical background was publicized through sympathetic or at least uncritical writings, especially through the work of Birch organizer and independent media entrepreneur George Edward Griffin, who was authorized by Welch to write and publish his biography *The Life and Words of Robert Welch, Founder of the John Birch Society* (Thousand Oaks, CA: American Media, 1975).

favor of progressive labor legislation and recognition of the Soviet Union as early as 1919, and a defender, at least on legal grounds, of condemned anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti, had reassumed teaching at Harvard after the war – he had taught criminal and administrative law before his interruption – and had earned himself increasing hostility from moderate and conservative colleagues, who perceived his siding with the working classes as subversive radicalism and Soviet sympathies. In his laudatory biography of Welch, Griffin paints a picture of the young man's resistance to Frankfurter's teachings:

One of the fundamental points of disagreement was that Frankfurter was teaching the Marxist class concept of labor. He based all of his lectures on the premise that labor and management belonged to two unalterably opposing classes; that they were virtually at war with each other always; and that what was beneficial for one class was by and large detrimental for the other. But Robert knew enough about history by then to believe the whole theory to be a lie and a fraud; and clearly so in the United States of the 1920s.¹⁰

Frustrated with the liberal leanings of his teachers and many of his peers, Welch, in Griffin's biography, recounts falling incrementally behind on the course reading and eventually dropping out six months before graduation.¹¹

Anxious to try his hand at a business career, Welch considered his options and settled on the confectionary industry. He founded the Oxford Candy Company in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and married Marian Probert in late 1922 after she finished her degree. They would have two sons, Hillard and Robert. Welch came up with a number of successful recipes, including Avalon Fudge and the well-known Sugar Daddy caramel popsicle, and saw his business grow substantially into the mid-1920s, making a profit "of over a thousand

¹⁰ Griffin, 67-68.

¹¹ Gunther Gerald, *Learned Hand: The Man and the Judge* (New York: Knopf, 1994); Michael Parrish, "Felix Frankfurter, the Progressive Tradition and the Warren Court," in Mark Tushnet, *The Warren Court: In Historical and Political Perspective* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press), 1993, 51-63.

dollars per week,” before adversity struck.¹² In an attempt to branch out towards the Midwest, Welch’s investments backfired and, exacerbated by the ensuing Great Depression and rising prices of sugar, Welch was forced to look for outside capital and would eventually lose control of his own business by the turn of the decade. Determined to become a self-made millionaire, Welch repeated the endeavor, starting up two candy manufactories in Massachusetts and New York respectively, again with no success. In 1935, after a short stint working for an outside firm, Welch cut his losses and joined his younger brother James’ candy franchise, the James O. Welch Company, where he would rise to sales manager and vice president for sales. Unlike Robert’s own repeated misfortunes, James’s company flourished and reached an impressive sales volume, grossing over twenty million dollars a year. Demonstrating a greater talent for public relations, advertising and marketing strategies, Welch stayed at the company for over nearly twenty years, honing his public relations skills and broadening his social networks, only to quit in January 1957 “to put his whole life into the fight against Communism.”¹³

Welch was an avid reader of history books and allegedly devoured John Clark Ridpath’s eight-volume *History of the World* (1894) at age seven. Strongly influenced by Oswald Spengler’s “cyclical theory of civilizations,” he applied his own aversion towards “the cancer of collectivism” to Spengler’s view of history and gradually developed an increasingly elaborate web of conspiracy theories, stretching back to the Bavarian Illuminati and the French Revolution in 18th century Europe, or even the establishment of the National Bank of England in 1694. Civilizations, Welch believed, rose to prominence and prosperity through individual initiative and moral responsibility, only to succumb to demagoguery and

¹² Griffin, 83.

¹³ op. cit., 80.

mob rule under the guise of democracy, instigated more often than not, by a select cabal of conspiring plutocrats eager to exploit the ignorance of the masses.¹⁴

Welch concluded the Communist conspiracy had begun to infiltrate the United States during the Progressive Era. Republicans Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft had led the executive branch to assume unprecedented powers, in combating child labor, pursuing and enforcing anti-trust legislation and taking revolutionary steps in regulating the booming free-market system that had shaped the Gilded Age. Under Taft, the federal income tax was established, a perpetual thorn in the side of laissez-faire conservatives. The Wilson Administration, risen to power due to the bitter division between the Republican ticket led by Taft and Theodore Roosevelt's "Bull Moose" candidacy, oversaw the establishment of the Federal Reserve, perceived by conservative opponents as a "banking cartel" or subsidized private banking system that squeezed American businesses by dictating monetary policy and thus perturbing the financial markets. To make matters worse, Wilson's entry into World War I and later attempts at internationalization under the umbrella of the doomed League of Nations further incensed isolationists and, in the wake of war and the first Red Scare of 1919-1920, supplied frustrated opponents with a neat conspiratorial narrative, aptly illustrated in Welch's Indianapolis presentation:

When Woodrow Wilson, cajoled and guided even then by the collectivists of Europe, took us into the first World War, while solemnly swearing he would never do so, he did much more than end America's great period of happy and wholesome independence of Europe. He put his healthy young country in the same house, and for a while in the same bed, with this parent who was already yielding to the collectivist cancer. We never got out of that house again. We were once more even put back in the same bed by Franklin D. Roosevelt, also while lying in his teeth about his intentions, and we have never been able to get out of that bed since.¹⁵

¹⁴ Gary Allen, "The Life and Character of Robert Welch," *American Opinion*, 28.3 (March 1985), 10.

¹⁵ Welch, *Blue Book*, 44; on right-wing opposition to the Federal Reserve, see Elmus Wicker, *The Great Debate on Banking Reform: Nelson Aldrich and the Origins of the Fed* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press), 2005.

The subsequent decade oversaw a relative rebuttal of progressive reform. The election of conservative Republican Warren G. Harding heralded “a return to normalcy,” i.e. a rededication to laissez-faire economics and isolationist protectionism, symbolized by America’s refusal to join the ill-fated League of Nations until the founding of its mid-century successor, the United Nations. Meanwhile, the first Red Scare had lent conservatives crucial firepower in quelling labor conflicts. Businesses pursued the so-called “American Plan” approach to unions, enforcing a strictly open shop policy and, aided by the conservative “Lochner Era” Supreme Court, drove back nationwide union membership from over five to under four million by the end of the 1920s. Harding, Coolidge and Hoover, the last of the “System of 1896” Republican presidents, returned to low taxes and spending while adhering primarily to traditional laissez-faire values.¹⁶

The 1929 Wall Street Crash and ensuing Great Depression shook the political establishment and election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt heralded the advent of New Deal liberalism. Southern and Midwestern isolationist manufacturers especially distrusted Roosevelt’s cosmopolitan, anglophile and aristocratic background. Public works programs like the Tennessee Valley Authority competed with local employers for unskilled workers, many of whom African Americans formerly employed as cheap domestic workers and sharecroppers in the South. Liberal support for collective bargaining rights for labor unions under the National Labor Relations or Wagner Act alienated business nationalists as they found the federal government assumed an unprecedented presence in their lives and had usurped their “paternal” authority over workers. As Nelson Lichtenstein has shown, organized labor under Roosevelt progressed from an isolated interest group to a vocal power bloc within the Democratic constellation. This temporarily opened the door to far leftist ideologies as under the leadership of Earl Browder, the American Communist Party

¹⁶ See Niall Palmer, *The Twenties in America: Politics and History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Press), 2006.

(CPUSA) pursued its “Popular Front” strategy of cooperating with liberal and socialist organizers to establish a foothold in the unions, primarily the Congress of Industrial Organizations, which had in turn effectively built an alliance with the Democratic Party by 1940 and only heightened the perception among conspiratorial conservatives that Roosevelt himself stood under direct control from the Kremlin. These conspiracy theorists often refused to recognize the growing anticommunist segments within the solidifying New Deal coalition. With labor organizers like UAW’s Walter Reuther rising to national prominence and leading the merger of the CIO and AFL in 1955 and unsuccessfully pushing for a seat at the companies’ board table for workers and the guarantee of full employment after the War, inimical business nationalists increasingly perceived the New Deal as a total, socialist attempted takeover of the American economy.¹⁷

As Thomas Ferguson has argued, conservative businessmen felt threatened not just by the increased clout of organized labor, but by the Roosevelt Administration’s internationalist, pro-cartel and multinational corporatist policies as well. FDR favored free trade with Europe and capital-intensive industries found Roosevelt’s labor reforms easier to swallow as the government opened up new, lucrative markets abroad and raised investments. More labor-intensive industries, like oil, steel and textile, were more dependent on protective tariffs and viewed the administration’s internationalism with deep distrust. Smaller to middle-sized industries, the core constituency of business nationalism, felt vulnerable and left out in the

¹⁷ See Nelson Lichtenstein, *Labor’s War at Home: The CIO in World War II* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), 33; Mike Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics and Economy in the History of the U.S. Working Class* (New York: Verso, 2000); Richard Tedlow, *Keeping the Corporate Image: Public Relations and Business, 1900-1950* (Greenwich, CT: JAI Publishers, 1979); Howell Harris, *The Right to Manage: Industrial Relations Policies of American Business in the 1940s* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982).

rain.¹⁸ “But, if there was a world crisis of 1929-45 consisting of world depression and world war and if in the United States this crisis created a new democratic hegemony,” Michael Miles poses in *The Odyssey of the American Right*, “what became of the political *losers* in this process? Indeed, frustrated business nationalists didn’t wait to counteract. Like “players in a power game, with a lot to lose,” they concluded the American people had been deceived by an opportunistic clique around, or worse behind, the President and what was needed was “an active campaign of education.”¹⁹

Perhaps the most important of earlier “re-education” campaigns was the American Liberty League, founded in 1934, partially out of the successful Association Against the Prohibition Amendment. The League was funded by a handful of businessmen, among which the business nationalist DuPont brothers, and headed by business “educators” like Jouett Shouse and Joseph Howard Pew, the Sun Oil billionaire who would fund a plethora of right-wing causes through his Pew Charitable Trust and become a key advisor and financial backer to Welch. Founded as a “nonpartisan organization founded to defend the Constitution and defend the rights and liberties guaranteed by that Constitution,” the League distributed thousands of pamphlets, usually radio transcripts, accusing the administration of “socialist subversion” and attempting a “near fascist takeover” of agriculture, education, and the economy at large. Its official “mission” was:

to teach the necessity of respect for the rights of persons and property as fundamental to every form of government...to teach the duty of government, to encourage and protect individual and group initiative and enterprise, to foster the right to work, earn,

¹⁸ Thomas Ferguson, “Industrial Conflict and the Coming of the New Deal: The Triumph of Multinational Liberalism in America,” in Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle (ed.), *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989, 3-31; see also Ferguson, “From Normalcy to New Deal: Industrial Structure, Party Competition, and American Public Policy in the Great Depression,” *International Organization*, 38.1 (Winter 1984), 41-94.

¹⁹ Michael Miles, *The Odyssey of the American Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), viii.

save and acquire property, and to preserve the ownership and lawful use of property when acquired.²⁰

The problem with the League however lay in the public perception that it was an exclusively business class operation. Though it reached a membership of over 100,000 by 1936, two-thirds of its contributions came from a small group of thirty wealthy businessmen. By the election of that year, the Roosevelt campaign for reelection had successfully depicted the League as an elitist band of reactionary capitalists, keen merely on rolling back the New Deal reforms. Nicknamed the “Millionaires’ Club” among opponents, the League was quickly turned into the whipping-boy of the right and Roosevelt’s populist denunciations of the “economic royalists” that threatened the nation’s prosperity, implicitly linked the Republican nominee Alf Landon’s campaign with the League. Roosevelt won reelection in a landslide and by 1940, the League had all but dissolved.²¹

At the same time, the conservative rebellion was gaining momentum, as well as resources and mobilization capacity. A deep recession in 1937-38 stalled recovery and the New Deal was losing traction. At the 1938 midterm election, the Republican Party gained no less than eighty-one seats in the House of Representatives and six in the Senate. Though still a minority, conservative Republicans were now strong enough to forge a congressional coalition with conservative – and often Southern - Democrats to block much of the administration’s legislation. Some of the conservatives’ victories in the 76th Congress were the watering down of the proposed Full Employment Bill to the Employment Act, as well as the politically restrictive Hatch and Smith Acts. One of the freshmen was future Senate

²⁰ Frederick Rudolph, “The American Liberty League,” *The American Historical Review*, 56.1 (October 1950), 19-33; see also George Wolfskill, *The Revolt of the Conservatives: A History of the American Liberty League, 1934-1940* (Wesport: Greenwood, 1974).

²¹ “Partisan Aim Denied by Liberty League,” *New York Times*, April 20, 1936, 13; see also Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands*, 50; Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism, 1945-60* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1995), especially chapters 1 and 2.

Majority Leader Robert Alonso Taft, son of former President and Chief Justice William Howard Taft and would-be champion of the conservative Republican faction. Dubbed “Mr. Republican,” Taft famously dismissed Roosevelt’s legislative pursuits as “New Deal Socialism” and became one of Robert Welch’s sources of political inspirations.²²

One of the strongest business nationalist organizations in opposition to the New Deal and influential to Welch, was beyond any doubt the National Association of Manufacturers, a nationwide organization of mostly medium-sized, labor-intensive business directors mobilizing resources and lobbying against liberal reforms. Dubbed the “shock troop brigade” of the American business community, the NAM had been inimical towards the Roosevelt Administration’s gradual embrace of Keynesian economics translated into his New Deal legislation from the start, especially the National Industrial Recovery Administration and pro-labor policies. In cooperation with numerous executives, including Howard J. Pew of Sun Oil and the American Liberty League, the NAM produced and distributed thousands of anti-communist pamphlets, linking Roosevelt’s “anti-capitalist” policies with Leninism and accusing the administration of guiding America down the road to socialism.²³

Consisting mostly of domestic-oriented, labor-intensive producers of primary goods, the NAM’s leadership steered the organization well to the right of other business lobby groups like the moderate Committee for Economic Development and the Chamber of Commerce. More than anything, the NAM proved an excellent training ground for hard-nosed business nationalists, building networks through media campaigns and fundraisers across the nation. From 1934 to 1937, its public relations budget skyrocketed from \$36,000 to a staggering \$800,000. It campaigned hard against war-time price controls, spending over \$3

²² Miles, 3; see also James Patterson, *Mr. Republican: A Biography of Robert A. Taft* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972).

²³ Rudolph, 19-33.

million. J. Howard Pew, one of Welch's future backers, used the NAM to found and infiltrate a series of organizations, from the Harding College to Junior Achievement and Spiritual Mobilization. The NAM financially supported Leonard Read's libertarian Foundation for Economic Education and the Mont P  lerin Society, which bridged the gap between American and European individualists and helped publicize Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek in the United States. After Roosevelt's death, the NAM continued its opposition to Harry Truman's Fair Deal programs and lobbied extensively for the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, which made profound amendments to the New Deal-era Wagner Act and curbed organized labor's collective bargaining powers.²⁴

Isolationists and business nationalists both in and beyond Congress had fiercely resisted America's entry into World War II, not in the least to keep the U.S. out of entangling alliances and keep the government from opening new markets abroad and expanding its regulatory apparatus at home. One such mechanism was the Office of Price Administration, on which Welch would serve briefly, as well as on the War Production Board, as a representative of the candy manufacturing industry. By that time, Welch had become an influential spokesman for the National Confectioners' Association, and had publicly appeared at an NCA event pleading the president to drop price controls on sugar and stop the cartelization of the industry. In 1947, the NCA's Candy Industry magazine would award Welch its annual Kettle award or "candy Oscar" for his war-time political lobbying efforts.²⁵

²⁴ Fones-Wolf, 34, Jonathan Soffer, "The Militarization of American Conservatism," *The Business History Review*, 75.4 (Winter 2001), 781-2; Robert Collins, *The Business Response to Keynes, 1929-1964* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981): 47-9; see also James Patterson, "A Conservative Coalition Forms in Congress, 1933-1939," *The Journal of American History*, 52.4 (March 1966), 757-72.

²⁵ Gary Allen, 123; "Candy Men Seek U.S. Aid on Sugar: Government Asked to Assure Ample Supply, Price Suitable for Industry, Consumer," *New York Times*, June 23, 1948.

In December of 1950, sales manager Welch joined the board of directors of the National Association of Manufacturers, on which he would serve for seven years, plus three years as Regional Vice President and chairman of the Educational Advisory Committee. Under his auspices, the committee lobbied against tax-funded public education, a position enshrined in a brochure titled *This We Believe About Education*, in which Welch had had a major hand. As G. Edward Griffin observes; “[i]t was this concern for education which served later as part of his motivation for the founding of The [sic] John Birch Society; and it was this NAM service which provided the personal associations which gave that fledgling organization an early prestige it otherwise would not have had.” Not only would his service with the NAM assist Welch in constructing a web of influential likeminded businessmen, like then-NAM President Bill Grede and J. Howard Pew, it also helped him solidify his notions of individual responsibility and laissez-faire economics.²⁶

Thanks to his growing business nationalist network, Welch grew increasingly vocal and adept at expressing his libertarian views. In 1941, having led his brother’s company’s sales department for a half decade, he authored *The Road To Salesmanship*, a free market manifesto, warning against underproduction in a collectivist system instead of a system of abundance in a consumer-driven free economy. Invoking Edward Bellamy’s famous 1887 utopian novel *Looking Backward: 2000-1887*, Welch turned the book’s synopsis against itself, arguing Americans might one day wake up to find themselves in a dystopian socialist society bereft of capitalist incentive and individual enterprise. In order to overcome these threats, Welch insisted true individualist Americans needed to “re-educate” their duped liberal counterparts and so wage a war against paramount ignorance “or against the *schemes*

²⁶ Griffin, 111-2.

of spellbinders who know that they are feeding the people chimeras in exchange for power.”²⁷

Over time, Welch was becoming a well-known and much sought-after public speaker, and started delivering a number of speeches on the subject. Arguing fiercely against price controls, subsidies and other government-sponsored initiatives, he began to coat his libertarian views into an increasingly conspiratorial framework, warning against “the cancer of state socialism firmly and permanently into our economic system. This old-age disease of collectivism was spreading in America, *not* because of natural processes,” Welch argued, “but because it was being injected artificially into the young body by people whose very purpose was to weaken and destroy.” In 1949, speaking before Industry Leaders’ Conference sponsored by Cambridge Chamber of Commerce, he thundered:

It is no secret that there is a war going on, nor that this one is a world-wide war. It is between collectivism and individualism. It is being waged on a great many fronts. In the field of commerce and industry the battle is between free-enterprise and state socialism. In religion it is between freedom of worship and suppression. In politics it is between the people’s ownership of the government and the government’s ownership of the people. In sociology it is between self-reliance and dependence on a welfare state. In international relations it is between a brutally aggressive tyranny and the remains of an independent civilization.²⁸

More than ever, Welch reasoned, the time had come to act. As an Old Right Republican, Welch decided to throw his towel into the ring. As early as 1946, he volunteered to support Republican Robert Bradford in his bid for Governor of Massachusetts. Though Bradford was no hard-line conservative like Welch – he advocated and implemented federal housing scheme for veterans and would go on to lead Planned Parenthood after his tenure – Welch was anxious enough to unseat Democratic incumbent Maurice Tobin, future Secretary of Labor under Truman and a proponent of New Deal and Fair Deal programs. Bradford secured

²⁷ Robert Welch, *The Road to Salesmanship* (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1941); quoted in Griffin, 114; my emphasis.

²⁸ Op.cit., 135-9.

his election and Welch was rewarded with the vice-chairmanship of the Massachusetts Republican Financial Committee two years later. In 1950, he decided to pursue his own path into public office by running for Lieutenant Governor. “The Republican Party,” he was convinced, “is the one practical and possible instrumentality to accomplish this return to more honesty in government and more common sense in our economic thinking.”²⁹ He found himself railing against Truman’s proposed healthcare reforms, comparing them to Stalin’s tactics of oppression, and wrote in his fundraising letter that “[t]he forces on the socialist side amount to a vast conspiracy to change our political and economic system.”³⁰ Welch ran an impressive primary campaign, finishing second out of six contestants, losing eventually by 100,000 votes to shoo-in candidate Laurence Curtis, a Boston lawyer who would eventually lose the general election but win a seat in the House of Representatives in 1952. The fight was not over, Welch decided: “So far as I’m concerned this crusade has just started.”³¹

On February 9, 1950, Joseph McCarthy, famously claimed to hold in his possession a list of “members of the Communist Party and members of a spy ring” active within the federal government, and especially the State Department. McCarthy’s immaculate timing launched America into a full-blown Communist witch hunt from Hollywood to the U.S. military. The execution of alleged nuclear spies Julius and Ethel Rosenberg and the exposure of State Department official Alger Hiss by former radical Whittaker Chambers, which would propel junior Senator Richard Nixon of California into the vice presidency, definitely fueled the period’s paranoid zeitgeist. McCarthy and his allies turned the hysteria onto Truman’s administration, accusing state officials of high treason. In his *America’s Retreat From*

²⁹ Griffin, 151.

³⁰ Op. cit., 155.

³¹ Op. cit., 160; see also “Laurence Curtis, 95, Former House Member Dies,” *New York Times*, July 13, 1989, 8; see Vincent A. Lapomarda, *The Boston Mayor Who Became Truman’s Secretary of Labor: Maurice J. Tobin and the Democratic Party* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1995).

Victory, McCarthy pointed the finger at George Marshall for letting China fall into the hands of the Maoists in what seemed “a conspiracy so immense and an infamy so black as to dwarf any previous venture in the history of man.”³²

Welch, who agreed with McCarthy's witch hunt tactics, followed suit and embarked upon a number of visits abroad to test his suspicions of international subversion. In 1946 he made a brief visit to the United Kingdom in order to analyze the new Labour government that had ousted the Conservative Party of Winston Churchill. It would become the basic inspiration for one of his best known speeches, “A Businessman Looks At England” and confirmed his view that Western Europe had gone irrevocably down the road to socialism, which made the Marshall Plan all the more absurd for him. On Eastern Europe, he echoed accusations of “Western Betrayal” towards US State Department officials and even full-fledged treason in “surrendering” the East to Moscow. While in West Germany in 1956, Welch won a brief audience with Konrad Adenauer, to whom he claimed to have found proof of these allegations as the Soviets had only just violently crushed the Hungarian revolution just 600 miles away.³³ The year before, Welch had traveled to East Asia, in support of Korean strongman Syngman Rhee and obtaining from him a letter – pre-written by Welch and signed by Rhee – to congratulate him on his Americanist course. An actual letter from Rhee dated March 6, 1956 followed with repeated encouragements. In Taiwan and Hong Kong, he met with generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, whose wife had gone to the same college as Mrs. Welch. In 1965, they would meet again and when Mrs. Kai-shek asked Welch to talk

³² Joseph McCarthy, *Major Speeches and Debates of Senator Joe McCarthy Delivered in the United States Senate, 1950–1951* (New York: Gordon Press, 1951), 215; Richard Fried, *Nightmare in Red: The McCarthy Era in Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Ellen Schrecker, *Many are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1998); Martin J. Heale, *American Anti-Communism: Combating the Enemy Within: 1830-1970* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1990); Thomas Reeves, *The Life and Times of Joe McCarthy: A Biography* (Madison: Madison Books, 1982), 116–119.

³³ Griffin, 124, 186.

to her two nephews who were on vacation from Berkeley, he reportedly concluded to his dismay that, like so many “victimized young Americans”, the nephews had swallowed “lethal doses of socialist-communist propaganda” at the institution.³⁴

Becoming increasingly convinced through his travels that the United States government and the State Department in particular, had intentionally refrained from stopping the Communists overseas, Welch started writing his first major political work, echoing Arthur Bliss Lane’s *I Saw Poland Betrayed* (1948) and Joe McCarthy’s *America’s Retreat From Victory* (1951), two works that have been high up on Birch reading lists and bookstore shelves since the organization’s inception. Turning towards the Korean War and Truman’s stand-off with General Douglas MacArthur, Welch echoed the Republican right in that Truman’s decision to call back MacArthur proved the pusillanimous and flawed approach of containment. In addition, he accused State Secretary Dean Acheson of willfully keeping Americans from pushing back the Chinese and North Koreans armies in compliance with orders handed down from Moscow. The book was titled *May God Forgive Us*, and distributed by conservative publisher Henry Regnery in 1952.

Determined to expose and stop the “conspiratorial hands behind the unnatural push toward collectivism in America,” Welch turned to conservative champion Taft, who had announced his candidacy for the Republican presidential nomination to the 1952 election. Future Bircher and then-president of the NAM, Bill Grede, publicly endorsed Taft as early as December 1951, citing inflation, price and wage controls, and balancing the budget as the organization’s main concerns and commending both Taft and Wisconsin Senator and alarmist redbaiter Joseph McCarthy for making “a great contribution to the American idea” by aggressively cracking down on domestic Communists. Welch enthusiastically founded a local

³⁴ Op. cit., 187.

Campaign Committee on March 20, 1951 and endeavored to be a Republican convention delegate pledged to Taft, while being elected to the Belmont School Committee in the meantime. Though Welch disagreed with Taft on issues like foreign aid and federal aid to housing, he campaigned ardently for the Ohio senator, buying airtime on local radio stations and denouncing liberals and moderates in both parties on domestic spending as well as foreign mishaps.³⁵

The year 1952 proved a disappointment for Welch. Not only did he lose his convention delegate bid, but the conservative Republican camp saw its champion vanquished at one of the most controversial national conventions in the party's history. The Eisenhower camp's "Fair Play" scheme cost Taft crucial southern delegates and once more it seemed the "modern" Republicans or Eastern Establishment "kingmakers" had tilted the tables in their favor. In the *Blue Book*, Welch would point out this moment as the turning point when America could no longer be saved by the mainstream parties, since "the nomination was stolen from Bob Taft."³⁶ As a reconciliatory gesture, Dwight Eisenhower invited Taft to Morningside Heights and spoke on the promises his administration would keep to the conservative base, pledging to roll back the Soviet gains abroad and cutting taxes domestically. He would, in his own words, continue to "fight creeping domestic socialism in every field." However, when Eisenhower rose to power, he invariably angered conservatives by falling short on his rollback strategies and continuing, even expanding, the New Deal-era welfare state whilst embracing commercial Keynesianism and an activist fiscal policy.³⁷

Anti-internationalists like Welch were further alienated when a series of constitutional amendments to curb the executive branch's power to form treaties with foreign powers,

³⁵ "Manufacturers' New President Favors Taft," *Washington Post*, December 8, 1951, A18; Griffin, 161-5.

³⁶ Welch, *Blue Book*, 110.

³⁷ Collins, 152-3; see also Patterson, 575-8.

collectively referred to as the Bricker Amendment, were ultimately defeated. Welch was incensed by a seeming threat to national sovereignty in the form of multilateral treaties and organizations such as United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration and foreign relief programs enacted under the Marshall Plan. He believed the United Nations to be a Soviet scheme for one-world-government and on the defeated Bricker Amendment, he claimed: “An association for the Bricker Amendment is, in reality, an association against the socialist forces in the control of our daily lives.”³⁸

In 1954, Welch found further “proof” of betrayal of the conservative cause within the GOP. When the Supreme Court, headed by Eisenhower appointee and modern Republican Earl Warren, handed down its landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and outlawed racial school segregation, conservatives and southern segregationists felt intruded upon by the federal government. At the same time, it sparked an ongoing civil rights struggle for equal rights and desegregation, causing turmoil nationwide and fierce backlash in the South. Welch, a native Southerner and fierce proponent of states’ rights, again was convinced the Communists were behind the scheme. In February 1956, he started his own monthly journal, *One Man’s Opinion: An Informal Review*, which would be renamed *American Opinion* in 1957 and eventually become the JBS flagship journal. In September 1956, Welch wrote in *OMO*:

For rising racial bitterness is the finest grist the Communists have yet been able to obtain for their American mill [...] The increasing schisms within Protestant sects, the growing doubts of each other’s good will between Catholics and Protestants, the rising intolerance by Christians of Jews and animosity of Jews toward Christians, and now the darkening storm of activated hatred between white people and colored people – these things aren’t *just happening by chance* and they didn’t, like Topsy, *just grow*

³⁸ Griffin, 165; see also Frank E. Holman, *The Story of the "Bricker Amendment"* (New York City: Fund for Constitutional Government, 1954); Yong-nok Koo, *Politics of Dissent in U.S. Foreign Policy: A Political Analysis of the Movement for the Bricker Amendment* (Seoul: American Studies Institute at Seoul National University, 1978); Welch, *Blue Book*, 113.

up. They have been carefully planned, subtly fomented, cleverly nourished, and raised to tremendous forces of disruption by the Communist conspirators and the misguided dupes and allies who have been cued and egged on by them.³⁹

Welch argued that Communists weren't after desegregation, but disorder and chaos: "We should never forget that the Hegelian philosophical base of Communism is conflict. Communists believe that without conflict there can be no progress. Conflict is essential to their plan, and that goes for conflicts within their ranks as well." In addition, in his "A Letter to the South on Segregation," Welch accused the liberal sociologists and psychologists who influenced the court's reasoning, Gunnar Myrdal and Franklin Frazer, of communist associations.⁴⁰

During a 1954 road trip returning the annual NAM Congress of Industry in New York City to have lunch with FEE founder Leonard Read, Welch and J. Howard Pew, Nelson Shepherd and John Brown discussed Eisenhower's policies, when Welch insisted he was a Communist stooge. His companions were so taken aback that they asked him to write down his thoughts into a private, more elaborate letter, which he did. In it, he would conclude "[t]he expansion of Social Security under Eisenhower [...] has been as rapid as Norman Thomas or even Earl Browder could possibly have asked."⁴¹ The unpublished letter gained widespread notoriety in the early 1960s when its most infamous quote was reproduced all over the media landscape: "My firm belief that Dwight Eisenhower is a dedicated, conscious agent of the Communist conspiracy is based on an accumulation of detailed evidence so extensive and so palpable that it seems to me to put this conviction beyond any reasonable doubt."⁴² Edited and published in 1964 to clear up the controversy, Welch carefully rephrased his allegation in

³⁹ Quoted in Griffin, 207; original emphasis.

⁴⁰ Quoted from Jonathan Schoenwald, *A Time For Choosing: The Rise of Modern American Conservatism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 89; Griffin, 201.

⁴¹ "Birch leader calls Eisenhower a Red," *Christian Science Monitor*, April 1, 1961, 1.

⁴² Griffin, 239.

The Politician: “Could Eisenhower really be simply a smart politician, entirely without principles and hungry for glory, who is only the tool of Communists? The answer is yes. With the benefit of comments from friends who have read earlier versions of this document, I have made this revision of the manuscript from that point of view.”⁴³

With the deaths of Senators Taft and McCarthy in the mid-50s, Welch found himself at a loss in the (modern) Republican realm and started advocating radical alternatives: “Unless the actual battle is thrust on us before we can reach it, if there is still time left for saving the country or strengthening our core of resistance by political processes, we are going to come to, must have, and can have, a third party,” he announced in late 1954.⁴⁴ Failing to acquire enough sufficient support, he turned away from mainstream politics and decided the system had been too penetrated by Communists to be of any use to his purposes. Again, Welch dug into the archives, seeking to expose the overarching conspiracy threatening the American way. California Senator William Knowland, a fellow conservative, had granted Welch access to the files of a Congressional investigating committee. There he stumbled upon a fellow Southern Baptist named John Birch, an army Captain and missionary to China from Macon, Georgia. After the end of World War II, Birch had been killed by Communists and the U.S. government had not disclosed the nature of Birch’s demise to the public. Sufficient proof of illicit government activities and the first symbolic victim of the Cold War, Welch decided to publish his story, *The Life of John Birch* in 1954. In Birch, Welch had found his martyr and a symbolic victim of the giant conspiracy that had engineered the Communist takeover of mainland China.⁴⁵

⁴³ Robert Welch, *The Politician* (Belmont: Belmont Publishing Company, 1964); quoted in Griffin, 239.

⁴⁴ “3rd Party Is Urged By Welch,” *Boston Sunday Post*, September 16, 1956, 3.

⁴⁵ Griffin: 189; see also Martin E. Marty, “Mr. Welch’s Messianic Consciousness: A Review of the John Birch Society’s Blue Book,” *The Christian Century*, May 31, 1961, 683-684.

II. Laying the Foundations: The John Birch Society Established

By the late 1950s, Welch was well respected as a conservative speaker, author and fundraiser. In October 1959, a Right-to-Work rally featuring William Buckley was partially dedicated in his honor. Many business nationalists affiliated with the NAM or the FEE knew him personally and subscribed to his writings. Celebrated anti-communist Willi Schlamm and celebrated libertarian intellectual Ludwig von Mises wrote for his *One Man's Opinion*. The ubiquitous J. Howard Pew sat on *American Opinion* Editorial Advisory Committee, as did former Navy Secretary and New Jersey Governor Charles Edison, former Utah Governor J. Bracken Lee and initially, von Mises himself. He had met Barry Goldwater on several occasions and contributed to the Arizona Senator's war chest by raising over \$2,000 in archliberal Massachusetts in 1958:

Prior to 1960 Barry [Goldwater] had been a pretty good friend of mine. The first biographical article, so far as I know, ever to appear about him in any national publication had been in our very-small-circulation *One Man's Opinion* in 1957. All readers of the *Blue Book*, written in 1958, know how strongly I praised him there. In his 1958 Senatorial campaign in Arizona I had actually raised money for him, on my own initiative, in far-off Massachusetts.⁴⁶

Welch was initially on good terms with the young, ambitious Buckley, who had impressed with his bestselling *God and Man at Yale*. As a result, Welch decided to make two \$5,000 contributions towards Buckley's nascent *National Review* project in 1955, the flagship

⁴⁶ Robert Welch and Medford Evans, *False Leadership: Wm. F. Buckley, Jr. & The New World Order* (undated manuscript), JBS Papers, Box 36 "Manuscripts," 74; see also John Judis, *William F. Buckley, Jr.: Patron Saint of the Conservatives* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001).

conservative journal that would on several occasions during the 1960s, castigate Welch for his Manichean worldviews and attempt to expulse him from the conservative mainstream.⁴⁷

Also, before the story of his calling President Eisenhower a “Communist agent” was leaked to the media, Welch’s conspiracy theories were more or less consistent with other respected anti-communists, like Australian physician Fred Schwarz, whose Christian Anti-Communist Crusade received donations from common sponsors, like Pew and Texas oil billionaire H.L. Hunt, whose son Nelson Bunker Hunt today sits on the JBS Council. Not unlike Welch’s ominous “scoreboards” indicating how far the United States had gone down the road to totalitarianism, Schwarz had predicted a Communist coup by 1973 and though Welch publicly denied any tactical overlap between the two, he acknowledged a close ideological affinity with Schwarz. In his *Blue Book*, Welch praised other right-wing anti-communist organizers, for instance Revs. Billy James Hargis and Carl McIntire who had, in their capacity as educators, given a strong, conspiratorial, Christian fundamentalist slant to their attack on liberalism and modern Republicanism.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Benjamin Epstein and Arnold Forster, *The Radical Right: Report on the John Birch Society and Its Allies* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967, 108.

⁴⁸ Kurt Schuparra, *Triumph of the Right: The Rise of the California Conservative Movement, 1945-1966* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), 72; Robert Welch, “Statement on Fred Schwarz,” September 18, 1962, JBS Papers, Box 7 “Members’ Monthly Message”; Welch, *Blue Book*, 97.

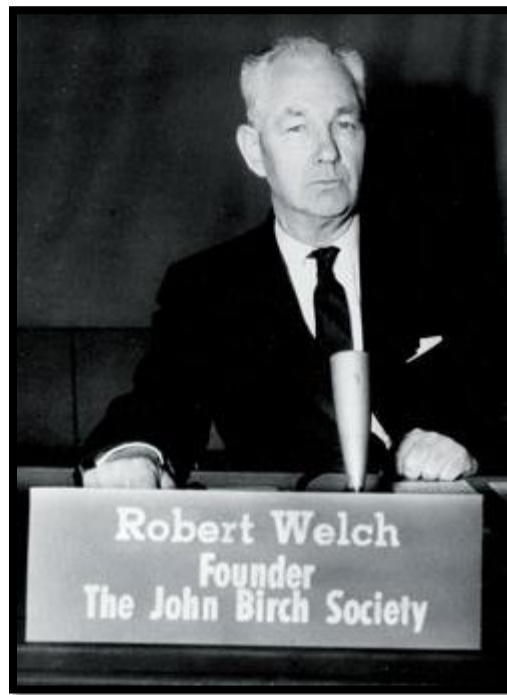


Fig.1: Robert Welch at a fundraising dinner for the JBS in the early 1960s. AP IMAGES

Whilst explaining the seriousness of the situation to his guests in Indianapolis, Welch made no bones about the relevance – and apparent authority – derived from his own professional background with regard to the subject of Communism and collectivism: “a lifetime of business experience should have made it easier for me to see the falsity of the economic theories on which Communism is supposedly based,” Welch boasted, “more readily, than might some scholar coming into that study from the academic cloisters.” Of the eleven men who joined Welch in Indiana, nine were businessmen, either active or retired, but all with significant executive experience and a strong résumé on anticommunist activism or at least financial backing of such causes.⁴⁹

Immediately after concluding the two-day seminar in Indianapolis, Welch formed the John Birch Society as a nonpolitical, educational organization under Chapter 180 of the

⁴⁹ Welch, *Blue Book*, xxiii.

Massachusetts Commonwealth laws and established its headquarters at 395 Concord Avenue in Belmont, a prosperous suburb to the northeast of Boston where Welch had settled about three decades before. Starting only with twelve members, himself included, Welch knew it would take an extended membership, reaching beyond the organized business community, to make an impact: “[W]ith a million men and the resources consistent with the dedication of those men which we are presupposing, we could move in on the elections thereafter with both more manpower and more resources than [Walter] Reuther will be able to marshal by that time.” Though Welch readily acknowledged his objectives were astronomical and somewhat unrealistic, he added zealously: “We are in circumstances where it is *realistic* to be *fantastic*.”⁵⁰

What *was* new about the Birch Society, is that Welch managed to attract a quickly expanding middle-class membership – possibly the fastest growing national right-wing organization in the United States between 1959 and 1965. Unlike the Liberty League and the National Association of Manufacturers, the Society recruited heavily amongst the growing suburban middle classes in the Southwest and Deep South, as well as in the Northern Midwestern and Mountain states in the West. Various sociological studies, especially conducted in the 1960s and 70s, concluded that the “average Bircher” was typically white, suburban, well-educated and high-earning, usually self-employed, housewives or holding white collar jobs. In 1966, sociologist Fred Grupp published his survey findings based on 1,860 questionnaires mailed out to self-identified Birch members, from which he received 650 responses including those of 138 chapter leaders. From his research, Grupp concluded that the “average Bircher” was 41 years old, likely to live in communities with between

⁵⁰ Ibid., 96.

10,000 and 300,000 inhabitants, fundamentalist protestant or Catholic, and a lower-level college graduate.⁵¹

In a February 1960 memorandum sent to his advisors, little over a year after founding the Society, Welch boasted a rapid growth in the Society's membership:

In a brief report of progress, your Founder was glad to be able to tell the Council that the Society had just about exactly doubled in size since the first meeting of the Council on January 9. This was in chapters, which had moved from approximately 75 in number to approximately 150; in members, from approximately 1,400 to approximately 2,800; and in the daily average of direct income. Such income received during the three months ending March 31, 1960 was approximately \$51,500. This is against a total of \$71,225.80 for the twelve months of 1959. Bank balance at the end of March 1960 was \$14,804.50; undeposited cash on hand, approximately \$1,500 and value of 40 shares of Sunbeam Stock which had been received as a donation, approximately \$2,200. Your Society now has one full-time salaried Coordinator each in New England, Michigan, Tennessee, Louisiana, Texas, Oregon, and two in California. It has Volunteer Coordinators each devoting an important part of his energy and time to the Society, in Wisconsin, Florida, Texas (4), California, and Washington.⁵²

Five months later, Welch announced the Society had already formed about 270 chapters, each typically comprising ten to twenty members, with an overall membership of over 4,300. The chapter structure, Welch admitted, was ironically inspired by communist "cells" and equally rigidly monitored, with chapter leaders taking down attendance, collecting contributions, sending reports to headquarters and required to follow meeting regulations laid down by Belmont. Areas in the Southwest like suburban Phoenix and Orange County, CA, Southern agglomerations like Atlanta and New Orleans, Northwestern rural areas and the upper Midwest proved fertile Birch country and saw chapters spring up at a remarkable pace. Birch

⁵¹ Fred W. Grupp, Jr., "The Political Perspectives of Birch Society Members," in Robert Schoenberger (ed.), *The American Right Wing: Readings in Political Behavior* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), 86-102.

⁵² "A Confidential Report To Members Of The COUNCIL of The John Birch Society," February 4, 1960, JBS Papers, Box 3, "Correspondence"; see Alan Westin, "The John Birch Society: 'Radical Right' and 'Extreme Left' in the Political Context of Post World War II," in Bell (1963); Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab, *The Politics of Unreason: Right Wing Extremism in America, 1790-1970* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), Chapter 7; Barbara Stone, "The John Birch Society: A Profile."

members (temporarily) unable to team up with other locals to form basic chapters, were added to the “Home Chapter.”⁵³

In order to deal with the rapidly expanding membership and meet ever-growing outreach opportunities, Welch used his business acumen and established and structured the Society as an essentially *top-down*, hierarchical body, with himself firmly at the helm. To preemptively combat potential subversion from within, Welch reasoned, it was desirable for him to maintain full authority himself, whether to dictate policy or remove members at his discretion. To assist Welch, both an *Executive Committee* of five to eight advisors and a *National Council* of over thirty were added. To handle the paperwork, a network of office operators, based in Belmont and later in San Marino, California as well, was installed to deal with research, marketing, accounting, *Ad Hoc Committees* – or front group coordination – printing, advertising, public relations and publishing. On the ground, the Society employed a Director of Field Activities, District Governors, major and regular coordinators, assisted at the grassroots by unpaid section leaders, chapter leaders and of course, the base membership. In March 1961 Welch claimed to have “a staff of twenty-eight people in the Home Office; about thirty Coordinators (or Major Coordinators) in the field, who are fully paid as to salary and expenses, and about one hundred Coordinators (or Section Leaders as they are called in some areas), who work on a volunteer basis as to all or a part of their salary, or expenses, or both.”⁵⁴ By 1964, around the apex of Birch influence, the Society employed about 150 full-time members of staff, with a weekly payroll amounting to over \$22,000 and printing bills around \$12,000 on average.⁵⁵

⁵³ “To Members of the Council,” July 5, 1960, JBS Papers, Box 3, “Correspondence”.

⁵⁴ G. Edward Griffin, *This is the John Birch Society: An Invitation to Membership* (Thousand Oaks: American Media, 1972); quoted in Berlet and Lyons, 179.

⁵⁵ Epstein and Forster, 209.

In terms of financing, the Society relied heavily on its regular membership, with \$24 for annual membership for men and \$12 for women. Life membership packages in exchange for a single contribution of at least \$2,000 were offered as well. Through its various circulations, Welch's Western Islands publishing company, *American Opinion* Bookstore network, weekly *Bulletin* and *The Review of the News*, the Society attracted additional key funds through advertising. A close look at the average advert in Birch publications reveals an underlying family capitalist alliance, with most advertisers promoting small to medium-sized family businesses. Ads paid for by local jewelers, investment bankers, real estate agents, electrical equipment and engineering companies reflected Birchers' quintessentially upper middle class entrepreneurial backgrounds. Perhaps one of the Birchers' most iconic sponsors was Walter Knott, whose Strawberry Farm and Freedom Center in Southern California attracted thousands of customers every year. Knott, a fierce conservative whose adverts regularly appeared in Birch publications, contributed heavily to anti-communist activists like Schwarz, Hargis and helped bankroll Barry Goldwater's 1964 primary effort in California. Dallas Bedford Lewis, a California manufacturer of pet foods, financially supported far right outlets like the *Dan Smoot Report* and the *Manion Forum* – both of which had strong Birch ties - and bequeathed \$1 million to the Society upon his death in 1965.⁵⁶

An analysis of the Society's financial reports and internal communication leads to similar findings. In a 1970 "Message of the Month" communication to its membership, the eleven-year old Society evaluated its membership base and concluded it relied heavily on middle-class, usually self-employed or white collar citizens. Especially "doctors," Welch concluded, "had been great," whereas the Society was struggling more in attracting "presidents of colleges, heads of big corporations, well-known Protestant ministers," thus reflecting its antithetical attitude towards big business and major institutions. And yet, the

⁵⁶ See Walter Knott, "The Enterprises of Walter Knott," Oral History Project, UCLA, Special Collections, 1965.

Society relied heavily on high earners. In the same communication, Welch announced cumulated revenue of over \$1 million in Life Membership contributions alone, and roughly the same income from its Continuing Support Club, both schemes usually targeting family businessmen and close associates of Welch.⁵⁷

Apart from attracting a growing middle-class membership, Welch was primarily successful in channeling key business nationalist support into his endeavors. The role of family capitalist, medium-sized businessmen in the founding and maintaining of Welch's Americanist network proved indispensable. In 2011, Birch contributor Charles Scaliger wrote a number of laudatory "American Entrepreneur" articles on Birch founders and businessmen, including Welch himself, William Grede, Augereau Heinsohn and Frederick Koch for *The New American*, *American Opinion*'s successor and current JBS newsletter. Writing on Welch, Scaliger emphasized "he brought with him all the lessons learned from decades as a risk-taker and businessman." Having structured the Society like a corporation – Welch preferred the term "body" – he surrounded himself with many of his business acquaintances not just for the sake of raising funds, but sound policy advice. His closest and most influential advisers, Welch invited to serve on the Executive Committee of the National Council to meet with him "regularly" and from 1961 onwards, given the growing controversy surrounding Welch's publicized allegations towards President Eisenhower, to review Welch's weekly *Bulletin* message and "Agenda for the Month". The first five men to serve on the Committee were Grede, Heinsohn, Koch, Robert Stoddard and Clarence Manion.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ "Message of the Month," February 1970, JBS Papers, Box 5, "MoM," 33-5.

⁵⁸ Charles Scaliger, "Robert Welch: an Americanist Entrepreneur," *The New American*, May 13, 2011, available at <http://www.thenewamerican.com/history/american/7444-robert-welch-an-americanist-entrepreneur> [accessed March 5, 2012]; J. Allen Broyles, *The John Birch Society*, 61; Griffin, *This is the John Birch Society*, 63.

The serving director of the Committee was Bill Grede. A native of Wisconsin, Grede quickly developed a keen business mind, became Assistant Director of an Illinois foundry at age twenty and three years later, in 1920, acquired the Liberty Foundry in Wauwatosa, a Milwaukee suburb. Serving as Director for over half a century, Grede led the company, renamed Grede Foundries, Inc., to become one of the nation's most successful independent ductile iron and steel producers. Opposed to the New Deal from the start, Grede expressed his rugged individualism through staunch anti-labor stances, which he spread through activism in nationwide organizations. In the 1940s, he became a board member of the YMCA and, in 1952, served as national president. While President of the Wisconsin Manufacturers' Association in 1945, he received and accepted an invitation to serve on the NAM board, in which capacity he debated Walter Reuther on a guaranteed annual wage in 1947. In 1952, the year he met Robert Welch, Grede became President of the NAM, a symbol of its business nationalist apex in the immediate post-war period. Addressing its membership and delivering speeches all over the country, Grede made no bones about his politics, referring to the progressive taxation system as "the very foundation of all socialistic programs, the most socializing agency in the country." Addressing the NAM assembly before becoming President, he declared: "I want you to know that I am anti-labor." Tying his own position to that of the NAM leadership, Grede quipped: "We are opposed to monopolistic control of labor through large labor unions which would attempt, with their powerful organizations, to gain control of the management of our property."⁵⁹ Ironically, later that year, on the same day Reuther was elected President of the CIO, Grede assumed the national chairmanship. As head of Grede Foundries, Grede had a unequivocal record of suppressing labor strikes and resisting

⁵⁹ Scaliger, "'Y' He Inspired: William J. Grede," *The New American*, September 9, 2011 [accessed March 5, 2012].

CIO organizing, accusing labor bosses of abusing employees for their own purposes and interfering with productivity.⁶⁰

With the exception of Clarence Manion, who served as Dean of the Notre Dame Law School and whose ultraconservative Birch-sponsored Manion Forum radio show reached millions of Americans from 1954 to 1979, all other men on the Committee were businessmen. A.J. Heinsohn, a self-made industrialist like Grede, became head of the struggling Cherokee Mill, a flailing textile facility in Knoxville, Tennessee and turned its red figures black by fiercely resisting minimum wage drives and defeating unionist initiatives. In his memoir, titled *One Man's Fight for Freedom*, Heinsohn accused the "power-hungry public officials" imposing "wartime regimentation [...] upon almost every phase of American life" and condemned public works in the South like the Tennessee Valley Authority, with which the mill was forced to compete for cheap labor as "Socialism's Sacred Cow."⁶¹ In the fall of 1942, as part of the doomed Operation Dixie, the Textile Workers Union of America branch of the CIO, protected by the Fair Labor Standards and Wagner Acts, held an election amongst the mill's workers for exclusive bargaining rights. The CIO would lose the first vote by 376-337 and a second attempt by 435-210 in January 1943. The TWUA's representative Paul Christopher in the wake of the CIO defeat accused Heinsohn of staging a campaign against the CIO, spreading right-to-work pamphlets and even threatening workers with mass layoffs should the unions prevail: "Mr. Heinsohn is fully aware of the company's intimidatory [sic] acts (because they were his own acts) prior to the election ... which precluded a free choice."⁶² Writing for Bircher publications, Heinsohn would habitually

⁶⁰ "Negotiations Started in Strike at Case Co.," *Milwaukee Journal*, April 22, 1960; On William Grede's role in the NAM, see Jonathan Soffer, 775-805; Craig Miner, *Grede of Milwaukee* (Wichita: Watermark Press, 1989), 158-9. See also Philip H. Burch, Jr., "The NAM as an Interest Group," *Politics and Society*, 4.1 (Fall 1973), 120-5.

⁶¹ A.G. Heinsohn, Jr., *One Man's Fight for Freedom* (Caldwell, Caxton Press, 1957), 15-22.

⁶² Heinsohn, 87-9.

revisit his alarmist right-to-work positions and condemn government intervention and protection of unionism as class warfare: “Politicians aren’t ‘archangels’ or Santa Clauses or good fairies. If one is to judge by the current crop, they are demagogues financing their public binge with our money and at the expense of American liberty.” Spindale Mills, a North Carolina textile manufacturer, with Heinsohn as acting principal, was a frequent advertiser in Birchist literature.⁶³

Another prominent contributor and advertiser in Birch publications was the Rock Island Oil & Refining Company headed by Fred Koch. A son of a Dutch immigrant and a Wichita native, Koch made it big in the petroleum business and had turned increasingly hostile towards liberalism after working a short stint in the Soviet Union and witnessing the deportation of dissenters of the regime. Like many right-wing anticommunists at the time, Koch recognized in American liberalism the same falsely egalitarian, conspiratorial and totalitarian impulses. In a self-published memoir chronicling the experience, Koch claimed that “the Communists have infiltrated both the Democrat and Republican Parties.”⁶⁴ He quickly came to regard civil rights, welfare schemes and pro-labor legislation as Communist plots to undermine American unity and economic resilience, believing the Communists were set to “infiltrate the highest offices of government in the U.S. until the President is a

⁶³ Heinsohn, “Free Lunch and Boobus Americanus,” *American Opinion*, 9.6 (June 1966), 28-33; see also Epstein and Forster, 208; see also Timothy J. Minchin, *What Do We Need a Union For?: The TWUA in the South, 1945-1955* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Douglas Flamming, *Creating the modern South: Millhands and Managers in Dalton, Georgia, 1884-1984* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); John A. Salmond, *Gastonia, 1929: The Story of the Loray Mill Strike* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Daniel J. Clark, *Light Night and Day: Unionization in a Southern Mill Town* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

⁶⁴ Jane Mayer, “Covert Operations: The Billionaire Brothers who are Waging a War against Obama,” *The New Yorker*, August 30, 2010 available at <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/08/30/covert-operations> [accessed March 9, 2012].

Communist, unknown to the rest of us.”⁶⁵ Alongside his Birch sponsorship, Koch served on Billy James Hargis's National Advisory Committee and helped streamline relations between the leadership of both organizations.⁶⁶

Many of the National Council members, like Robert Stoddard, who also served on the Committee, owned the anti-labor Massachusetts *Worcester Gazette* and was a retired NAM spokesman, were essentially businessmen of the same stripe, e.g. Edward Hamilton (Hamilton Manufacturing Company and Wisconsin Manufacturers' Association), Cola G. Parker (Kimberly-Clark Corporation and President of the NAM), or Frank E. Masland (C.H. Masland & Sons, Rugs & Carpets). Retired high-ranking military officers like Col. Laurence Bunker and Gen. Charles Stone lent Welch credibility as well on foreign policy, as did anticommunist émigrés as Slobodan Draskovich. The presence of educators like Dean Manion, Professors Reילו Oliver, E. Merrill Root and Medford Bryan Evans reflected Welch's preoccupation with education of the general public and his frustration with the rise of liberalism in higher education and Protestant churches. In fact, the firing of Evans from Northwestern State University in Louisiana spurred the first Birch “front” proposed by Welch at the founding meeting, the imaginatively titled Committee to Protest the Firing of Medford Evans. One remarkable Council members was Alfred Kohlberg aka Mr. China Lobby, an influential isolationist intellectual who might have played a more prominent role in the Society had he not passed away in 1960.

⁶⁵ Scaliger, “Fred Koch: Oil Man Against Communism,” *The New American*, June 10, 2011, available at <http://www.thenewamerican.com/history/american/7771-fred-koch-oil-man-against-communism> [accessed March 6, 2012].

⁶⁶ In his book, Koch also lashed out at organized labor, as an arm of the Communist plot to overthrow the United States: “Labor Unions have long been a Communist goal [...] The effort is frequently made to have the worker do as little as possible for the money he receives. This practice alone can destroy our country,” quoted from Fred Koch, *A Businessman Looks at Communism* (Farmville, VA: Farmville Herald, 1960), 14.

A quick look at the Society's first "front groups" or *Ad Hoc Committees*, directed by Belmont in sizable instruction tomes and executed at the ground level, reflects the business nationalist legacy clearly induced at the top. The *Committee Against Summit Entanglements* or *CASE* was started in July 1959 to protest Eisenhower's intention to meet with Khrushchev at the Summit Conference – which would eventually take place in 1960 in Paris. The anti-internationalist drive quickly gained momentum as it was agreed Khrushchev was to visit the United States first. Though the Committee was unable to effectively interfere with either event, the Society in its first year raised \$58,000 through the Committee alone and around \$200,000 in total through membership fees, additional contributions, etc. Over half a million CASE postcards were produced and sent to editors of newspapers with a circulation of about three million. Additional front groups included *Women Against Labor Hoodlumism*, a letter-writing campaign to decry union intimidation of workers especially after the Kohler Strike, the *Committee to Investigate Communist Influences at Vassar College*, and the controversial, much publicized drive to *Impeach Earl Warren*.⁶⁷ Although the Society's individual campaigns rarely amounted to tangible success, they helped mobilize and ferment its early stirrings into what social scientists by the mid-1960s would recognize as "the major membership apparatus of the Radical Right." Its wide array of activities bound motivated members to its various concerns with education, foreign policy, progressive influences in the religious community and naturally, helped infuse a clear business nationalist agenda into its activism.⁶⁸

Welch's business nationalist credentials and associations were crucial to the development of the Society and the far right in the way its elite membership intersected and cooperated with other independent organizations. As an educational organization, the Society

⁶⁷ Robert Welch, "To All Members of the COUNCIL," May 17, 1960, JBS Papers, Box 3, "Correspondence".

⁶⁸ Epstein and Forster, 83.

hardly ever proclaimed kinship with other groups. And yet, through sponsoring nationwide speaking tours, republishing and distributing right-wing literature and encouraging local members to cooperate with conservatives outside the JBS, it forged tenuous alliances on the right and helped mobilize resentment against liberalism and modern Republicanism nationwide. One such illustration was the JBS's consistent support of the Liberty Amendment, a project launched by far right leader Willis Carto to abolish the federal income tax. Over the years, Welch would hail the proposed amendment as a monument to the Americanist cause. By 1963, the Society had established *Action Now* committees to support the Liberty Amendment in 34 states. In addition, Welch would urge his follower to get behind similar projects, including the Liberty Belles and Californian D. B. Lewis' *Organization for Repeal of the Income Tax* (ORFIT), before eventually establishing its own *Tax Reform Immediately* (TRIM) committees in the late 1970s.⁶⁹

Another example of Birchers' organizational "overlap" appeared in the shape of the Society's involvement in the independent Right-to-Work Committees. Formed in 1955 to protect the Taft-Hartley Act and especially its Section 14(b) guaranteeing the individual states' right to enforce right-to-work legislation, the National Committee was widely supported and endorsed on the Right, by prominent conservatives such as Bill Buckley and Barry Goldwater. As a *Washington Post* journalist reported in 1961, "The leadership of the Birch Society overlaps heavily with the leadership of the organizations that successfully campaigned in 1958 for a right-to-work amendment to the State [Kansas] Constitution."⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Isaac Martin, *Rich People's Movements: Grassroots Campaigns to Untax the One Percent* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 156-7; "Meeting Held by John Birch Society: Committee Works for Tax Reform," *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, August 1, 1979, 16; Epstein and Forster, 16, 196-7; Welch, *The White Book of the John Birch Society* (Boston: Western Islands, 1963), 16-8, 116.

⁷⁰ James E. Clayton, "John Birch 'Antis' Point Unwelcome Spotlight," *Washington Post*, March 26, 1961, E1.

At the national level, both the NRTWC's first Chairman, Edwin Dillard and its Director of Information and Vice-President in the early 1960s, Glenn Green, were avowed Birch members in their local areas. Attorney Leonard Banowetz, a prominent Birch Field Coordinator and industrialist Robert Love, a Council member, were prominent speakers at the 1960 NRTWC's National Seminar in Chicago. Banowetz had strong ties with the Kansas State Chamber of Commerce and served on its Labor Relations Committee, whereas Love had been, like Welch, a Director at the NAM. Again in Kansas, Fred Koch, representing the Wichita branch of the Society and influential Executive Committee member, was active in driving local open shop campaigns, and prominent Birchers like Grede, Stoddard, Parker and Ernest Swigert illustrated the strong right-to work NAM-Birch kinship. Outside of the NAM orbit, high-profile Birchers like F. Gano Chance of Missouri, Louis Ruthenberg of Indiana and Professor Root contributed to NRTWC literature speaking tours. Kent and Phoebe Courtney, a New Orleans Bircher couple with their own *The Independent American* outlet and who ran the Conservative Society of America, published frequently on right-to-work legislation as a key strategy against communist infiltration of workers' movements and invited NRTWC leadership to their annual meetings in 1959 and 1961.⁷¹

III. Conclusion

The John Birch Society emerged at a crucial time, between the height of McCarthyism and the 1964 presidential campaign of Barry Goldwater. It arose as a result of the political evolution of Robert Welch, a disaffected Taft Republican, and his experiences within a business nationalist environment that refused to accept the legitimacy of the New

⁷¹ "Birch Society in Wichita Draws All Walks of Life," *Washington Post*, April 2, 1961; "NRTWC Newsletter," November, 11, 1961, JBS Papers, Box 43, "Right-To-Work;" "NRTWC Newsletter," March, 16, 1961, JBS Papers; see also *The Independent American*, November 1959 issue.

Deal internationalist and liberal order. As such, the Society tapped into long-standing conservative frustrations with foreign and economic policy, and could count on the organizational acumen of a seasoned educator and salesman, as well as on the support of his business nationalist entourage. The political agenda of this connection was apparent, as the Birchers formed alliances with right-to-work organizations, anti-tax groups and fierce opponents of organized labor.

The organization that arose was much more complex than a neo-McCarthyite propaganda outlet. Through the diversity of its concerns, the JBS became a fitting illustration of the ongoing “fusion” of various currents that would lay the foundations for modern conservatism. The JBS combined Old Guard anti-internationalism, libertarian individualism, traditional Christian conservatism and staunch anti-communism into an efficient grassroots machine that mobilized thousands of Americans and fought tangible battles on a local and national level. Its roots lay in partisan politics, conservative business networks, populist resentment against the Eastern Establishment within the Republican Party, resistance to civil rights reform and the strong, conspiracist belief that U.S. sovereignty and constitutional integrity had been under threat by a vast, diabolic conspiracy since the Progressive Era.

Chapter 2: Up from Isolation: Growth, Controversy and the Development of a Grassroots Protest Movement, 1958-1962

At the turn of the decade, the blueprint that Robert Welch and his business nationalist advisers had prepared was ready to expand into a successful grassroots conservative force and take the American political landscape by storm. Within a year of its establishment, the John Birch Society started to attract suburban crusaders by the thousands, and all over the country. A combination of internally directed publicity drives and investigative journalist coverage quickly launched the Birchers and their activities into the national headlines. The sudden outburst in attention devoted to Welch and his followers only dramatically increased after Welch's "letter" linking former President Eisenhower to an international Communist conspiracy became public knowledge, an episode that embarrassed a number of prominent conservatives and seemingly supported the conclusion advanced by the consensus scholars that the emerging right wing was intellectually bankrupt and posed a grave threat to American liberal democracy.¹

¹ Before long, the public "discovery" of the Birchers helped to trigger an impressive wave of literature on the phenomenon of "right-wing extremism," the so-called "Radical Right." This restless, militant and vilified cohort eventually came to haunt the still fragile conservative movement and that, the bulk of such studies concluded, had no place within the dominant post-war liberal consensus politics that had emerged from the New Deal; see William S. White, "The New Irresponsibles," *Harper's Magazine*, November 1961, 98-108; Barbara Bundschu "Even Senator Joe McCarthy Never Went So Far," *The Louisville Times*, March 13, 1961, 17; James E. Clayton, "Outlook: John Birch 'Antis' Point Unwelcome Spotlight," *Washington Post*, March 26, 1961, E1; Irwin Suall, *The American Ultras: The Extreme Right and the Military-Industrial Complex* (Ann Arbor: New America, 1962); "The Americanists," *Time*, October 3, 1961, 21; Irving Brant, "The anti-Communist Hoax," *The New Republic*, May 28, 1962, 15-18; Bernard Eismann and David Jansen, *The Far Right* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963); Harry and Bonaro Overstreet, *The Strange Tactics of Extremism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1964); Mark

A Gallup poll conducted in April 1961, less than three years after the Society's founding, revealed that an estimated thirty-nine million Americans were aware of the organization's existence and basic tenets, but that only nine percent of them expressed a favorable opinion of the JBS, compared to a whopping forty-four percent that held an unfavorable view. A similar poll published ten months later concluded that an estimated fifty-six million had by then heard of the Society, with eight percent favorably impressed versus a disapproving forty-three. Despite the relative lack of widespread support, the Birchers achieved and maintained a high level of exposure, and enjoyed consistent growth throughout most of the 1960s. By 1962, estimates were placed at a national membership of up to 60,000, with large concentrations around Houston, Los Angeles, Wichita, Nashville and Boston. Evidently, the harsh polling numbers indicating limited popularity and public approval reflected how the Birchers were often portrayed as an anomalous and illegitimate fringe by contemporaneous observers. At the same time, Welch's alarmist and conspiratorial views alienated many, including self-avowed conservatives and staunch anti-communists.²

Then again, a closer look at some of the Society's early mobilization efforts and re-education campaigns, such as *The Movement To Impeach Earl Warren* and the *Committee Against Summit Entanglements*, reveals how Welch's "grass tops" alliance quickly contributed an essential *community factor* to the conservative movement. To understand how the emerging JBS fits into the wider, developing modern conservative field in this period – and how both impacted each other's respective evolutions – is impossible without recognizing how Welch succeeded in creating a well-financed and minutely structured network, populated by tireless conservatives who could implement a national program into

Sherwin, *The Extremists* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1963); J. Allen Broyles, *The John Birch Society: An Anatomy of Protest* (Boston: Beacon Press), 1964.

² Alan F. Westin, "The John Birch Society," in Daniel Bell, ed., *The Radical Right: The New American Right Expanded and Updated* (New York: Anchor Books, 1964), pp. 239-40.

their local day-to-day political process and environment. Rather than leading an aloof, isolated and deranged extremist faction divorced from reality, Welch from the very beginning carefully coordinated a professional organization that ostentatiously relied on a conspiratorial and homogenous worldview, but that provided the burgeoning conservative cause with a cohesive and nationally visible core of motivated and well-organized right-wing citizen activists.

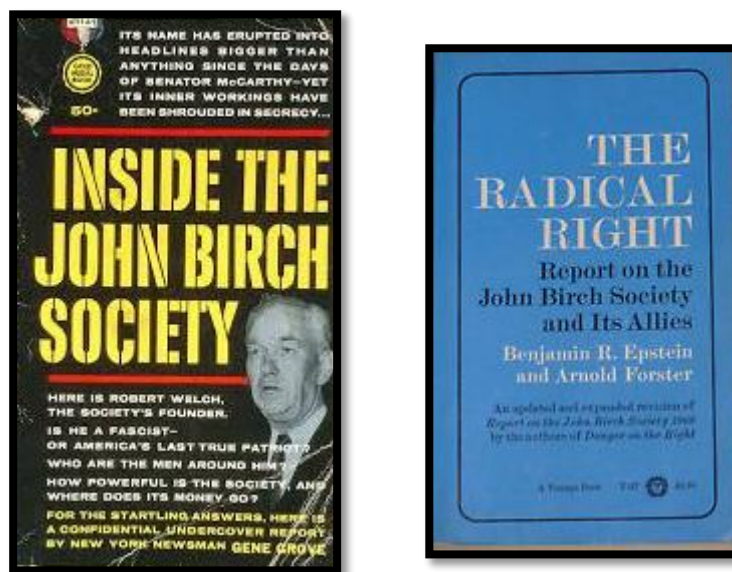


Fig. 2: Two examples of investigate literature on the John Birch Society, an illustration of the magnitude of the Birchers' controversial reputation from the early to mid-1960s.

In response to the consensus literature, historians have questioned the rigid “extremism versus mainstream” approach that typified much of the intellectual response to the Birchers’ appearance at the time. Lisa McGirr, Jonathan Schoenwald and Michelle Nickerson for instance have argued that the Society was not representative of a conservatism that was categorically backward and obsolete. On the contrary, it reflected the reality of modern, suburban American life and offered frustrated citizens a clear path to counter threatening domestic and global developments in the nuclear age. At a time when the intellectual fusion between traditionalist and libertarian thought relied heavily on a shared

anti-communism, the JBS offered its members an efficient platform that simultaneously allowed them to channel their grassroots zeal into local projects and take shelter under a reassuring umbrella that lined them up alongside countless likeminded citizens in a battle to fight back the collectivist danger.³

Of course, conservatives were not always unified in that struggle and often disagreed about how to confront the New Deal's liberal, internationalist legacy and about how this order had risen in the first place. In the consensus literature, the main criterion to identify extremism was its reliance on conspiracy theories. Another was the radicalism of the measures proposed to counter these sinister forces. Robert Welch and the JBS certainly fit both criteria. After all, Welch believed that since the Wilson Administration, the United States government had been infiltrated by the same hidden forces that had engineered the Soviet and French Revolutions. Such cabal narratives continued to find fertile soil in the Manichean worldview that the Cold War produced amid the general fear of internal Communist subversion. Nevertheless, Joseph McCarthy's fall had signaled a shift by the mid-1950s and by the time Welch launched his signature project, his far-reaching conspiracism embarrassed conservative leaders like William Buckley, Barry Goldwater and Richard Nixon. In turn, these conservatives felt compelled to take a stand against the Birchers or risk a loss of credibility with the broader electorate.

Nevertheless, before conservatives could successfully rally Republicans behind Barry Goldwater's nomination in 1964, the supposedly "toxic" extremism that the JBS embodied had an important contribution to make. Despite the conspiratorial, Spenglerian conception of history that Welch imposed upon his organization, at the grassroots Birchers often found common targets and concerns with other, non-conspiratorial right-wingers. They could, and

³ See McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, 54-110, Schoenwald, *A Time for Choosing*, 62-99, Michelle Nickerson, *Mothers of Conservatism: Women and the Postwar Right* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2012), 32-68.

often did, work together on a myriad of issues, such as criticizing the United Nations or lamenting the Supreme Court's decisions on criminals' rights and school prayer. When Welch called on his followers to demand the Chief Justice's impeachment, even pundits at the *National Review* responded with a degree of sympathy. Thus, many conservatives who expressed their uneasiness with Birchite conspiracism initially refrained from coming out too harshly against the Society for fear of alienating motivated voters. By doing so, they acknowledged the valuable electoral resources and ground troops that the organization offered conservatives in many key areas across the nation.⁴

What is more, the same conspiracism that would eventually threaten conservative unity and isolate the Society gave emotional energy to the Right's popular base. Not only did it provide simple explanations as to how and why deplorable international and domestic developments had materialized, but it provided the disaffected with a clear and urgent mission, helping to mobilize a powerful populist challenge to the liberal establishment conservatives sought to defeat. Also, it would be a mistake to dismiss the Society as an isolationist relic of the Old Right because of its conspiratorial rejection of U.S. foreign policy and internationalism. The problem with internationalism for the Birchers was not that it required direct action from the United States against the rise of international Communism, but that they believed it stood for a multilateralism that had been designed to stifle the effectiveness of their anti-communist efforts at home and abroad. The JBS did not call for a retreat into Fortress America, but on the contrary demanded more vigorous efforts to defeat global Communism, as did a majority of dissenting voices on the Right. Simply formulated, the Birchers concluded America's established foreign policy sought to achieve – or was

⁴ Especially the Court's decision to ban school prayer in public schools rallied the Christian fundamentalist wing of the burgeoning right wing, and cemented further ties between the JBS and fanatical church groups; see Daniel Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

forced to pursue – mutual co-existence with the Communists, which boiled down to a self-defeating accommodation with evil.

I. “All Growth is a Leap in the Dark”: Building a National Organization

Within two months of establishing the JBS at Indianapolis, he boasted to his friend and future Council member Thomas Coleman Andrews that five chapters were operational in Greater Boston. Eight weeks later, they had doubled, while three had appeared in Florida and one in Michigan.⁵ The August 1959 *Bulletin* – the personal monthly report in which Welch listed the Society’s achievements and set out an “Agenda for the Month” for its members announced triumphantly: “The John Birch Society is growing – in numbers, in strength, and in effectiveness [...] Even during July new subscriptions to the magazine [*American Opinion*] have been averaging about thirty per day – which is new ground for us; and the sale of *Blue Books* and forwarding of brochures has been equally encouraging.”⁶

The first full year left Welch emboldened. In November, he wrote to his friend and future Council member Alfred Kohlberg saying:

On December 9 The John Birch Society will be one year old. [...] We are growing rapidly in many states. We have seven full-time salaried field men, known as Coordinators, five Volunteer Coordinators, and are forming several new working chapters every week. [...] We even have some rather fortunate arrangements made which will help materially in the financing of this growth.⁷

⁵ Letter from Robert Welch to T. Coleman Andrews, January 23, 1959 (dictated January 20), T. Coleman Andrews Papers, Box 1, “General Correspondence: John Birch Society, 1,” Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries.

⁶ Robert Welch, *Bulletin*, March 30, 1, 4.

⁷ Letter from Robert Welch to Alfred Kohlberg, November 25, 1959, Alfred Kohlberg Papers, Box 17, “John Birch Society, Inc.,” Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University.

Invaluable financial support was raised through Welch's savvy life membership schemes as well as the "Continuing Support Club," which saw many of his business associates and conservative sympathizers pledge generous donations of up to thousands of dollars at a time. To keep this inner circle closely attached to the project, he announced "the time has come to set up the COUNCIL of The John Birch Society." Along with the Executive Committee, the Council would form the Society's "top governing body" and strive to enhance its prestige and networking scope. Also, it provided Welch with editorial and policy advice and had the responsibility "to select, with complete and final authority, the SUCCESSOR to [Welch] as head". The first Council included the vast majority of the men Welch had invited to Indianapolis and its first meeting took place at the Union League Club at 65 West Jackson Boulevard in Chicago on January 9, 1960. Besides a lengthy discussion of the progress of the various re-education projects that had already been organized, it produced an extra pledge of financial support to strengthen Welch's efforts and help him hire Ellen Lovett (later Sproul), a Cambridge native and the Society's first full-time secretary.⁸

⁸ After the first Council meeting, William "Ben" McMillan, the Society's first official member, sent out requests to the other Council members for donations towards an assistant for Welch: letter from William B. McMillan to Alfred Kohlberg, January 13, 1960; and letter from Alfred Kohlberg to William B. McMillan, January 15, 1960, Kohlberg Papers, *ibid*.



Fig. 3: JBS members perform a pledge of allegiance before starting their weekly chapter meeting.
FRANCIS MILLER/TIME LIFE PICTURES/GETTY IMAGES

The election year of 1960 saw national membership shoot up significantly. By mid-January, Welch reported the Society had eighty chapters nationwide, and in the March *Bulletin* he announced that chapters were already registered in nineteen states – though some were established as “shells” and remained inactive for months – being Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, Virginia, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Louisiana, Tennessee, Texas, Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa, California, Oregon and Washington. The Society now had paid and volunteering coordinators in all those states as well as one Major Coordinator, and showed especially promising growth in the Southwest, Northwest and a handful of Southern pockets⁹ By fall, Welch counted approximately 5,300 members nationwide, distributed over 324 chapters, noting a net gain of

⁹ Letter from Robert Welch to Alfred Kohlberg, January 16, 1960, Alfred Kohlberg Papers, Box 17, “John Birch Society, Inc.”; *Bulletin*, March 1960, 1, 7-8.

around 1,500 members and 84 chapters since mid-June.¹⁰ By December, Belmont headquarters received “about five hundred letters per day (and the quantity is climbing).”¹¹

A great deal of the Society’s initial strength lay in its ability to interact with new and established movements on the right. Through Clarence “Pat” Manion, the Society was connected to the Notre Dame Law School Dean’s Manion Forum, which Welch recommended to his followers and which in turn had strong ties to Fred Schwarz’s popular Christian Anti-Communist Crusade. Glenn Green, the tireless National Right-to-Work Committee coordinator, promptly wrote Welch to report for duty upon hearing about the Society’s program and reading its *Blue Book*: “The John Birch Society is a God-send. Your plan is Divinely inspired.” Green concluded by requesting dozens of cartons of recommended literature for his NRTWC network and by offering to start up a chapter in Arkansas, which he did. Similarly, Merwin K. Hart, founder of the New York-based National Economic Council, a far-right wing lobby group which dabbled with anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, joined the Society and started up the first fully operative chapter in New York City.¹²

Such collaborations often produced an overlap in membership and mutual endorsements. The Catholic Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation, founded in 1958 to honor the Hungarian cleric who was imprisoned and exiled for his anti-communist views, endorsed Welch’s ideas and recommended its publications, especially *American Opinion*: “This is one of the finest sources of current information on the international Communist conspiracy ... It

¹⁰ “To All Members of The Council,” September 14, 1960, Granville Knight Papers, Box 2, “Correspondence: 1959, March - 1961, April 12,” Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries.

¹¹ “To My Friends,” December 27, 1960, T. Coleman Andrews Papers, Box 1, “General Correspondence: John Birch Society.”

¹² Letter from Glenn Green to Robert Welch, November 11, 1959, T. Coleman Andrews Papers, Box 1, “General Correspondence: John Birch Society 1”.

should be a ‘must’ on the reading rack of every college, high school and public library.”¹³ Welch himself urged his members to launch arduous letter writing campaigns to dozens of domestic airline and railroad companies to demand copies of *Human Events* and the *National Review* be made available on board, which ultimately failed. Nevertheless, the overlap between the Society and other right-wing organizations and individuals became so conspicuous that it triggered increased vigilance on the part of the government, FBI and various other organizations, including organized labor and liberal church groups. In a 100-page memo to President Kennedy, Deputy Special Counsel Myer Feldman mapped what he saw as an intricately connected and well-funded network of reactionary activity. Feldman noted especially the Birch Society as a focal point, highlighting its close affinity with fundamentalist preacher Billy James Hargis and his own Christian Crusade. Hargis officially endorsed the JBS and appeared on its educational speaker circuit around the country. Feldman also remarked that by 1961, the Society had raised an annual income of over \$530,000, which subsequently shot up to nearly \$750,000 the following year. The alarmed White House aide could only conclude by warning the Administration that radical right-wing movements, with the Birchers at the helm, already formed “a formidable force in American life.”¹⁴

As Feldman realized, not all conservatives stood with Welch and his conspiratorial beliefs. After the summer of 1960, Fred Schwarz criticized the Society for damaging the anti-

¹³ “Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation”, undated pamphlet (presumably 1961), T. Coleman Andrews Papers, Box 1, “General Correspondence: John Birch Society, 1”.

¹⁴ *Bulletin*, December 1960, 13. Feldman described what he found as “a close relationship has developed between the [Christian] Crusade and the John Birch Society,” in Myer Feldman, “Memorandum for the President. Subject: Right-Wing Groups,” August 15, 1963, President’s Office Files, Box 106 “Right Wing Movement Part II,” John Fitzgerald Kennedy Presidential Library, Boston, 40, 44.

communist cause. Interestingly, Welch remained careful not to isolate himself and stressed ideological unity over methodological differences:

But despite our disagreement with Dr. Schwarz on some questions of how best to fight the Communists, we have no hesitation in recommending any lecture he gives or 'school' he sponsors as an opportunity to learn sound facts about our Communist enemies. He has done a great deal towards awakening the American people to our danger and we hope he will be able to do even more in the future.¹⁵

From the very beginning, he urged members to attend and promote the anti-Communist schools headed by Schwarz, but also Fred Schlafly, Dr. Gerhart Niemeyer, E. Merrill Root and Herbert Philbrick, but added that "naturally, we do not agree with all of them about everything".¹⁶ By means of illustration, Donald A. Rueher, leader of one of the first chapters in the Milwaukee area, wrote Alfred Kohlberg to thank him personally for making copies available of *Communist Blueprint for World Conquest* and *Speeches and Debates of Senator Joe McCarthy* for Birch members. In his letter, he announced he and his wife, who had been appointed volunteer coordinator for Wisconsin, would be taking their drive to the CACC's visiting School for Anti-Communists: "This, I am certain, will be an invaluable aid to us in the gaining of new members." A month later, Mr. and Mrs. Rueher earned an "honorable mention" in the Society's Bulletin for their successful recruitment efforts. In its early days, the Society attracted a decent following within Young Americans for Freedom, which Buckley had taken under his wing from its very inception. Scott Stanley, Jr., a young conservative organizer for YAF, even joined the Society's payroll as editor of *American Opinion*. On YAF's National Advisory Council, along with dignitaries such as William Buckley, Barry Goldwater, Russell Kirk and Frank Meyer, even served a handful of (future)

¹⁵ *Bulletin*, December 1960, 13.

¹⁶ *Bulletin*, August 1959, 12-3.

Birch Council members, namely Charles Edison, E. Merrill Root, George Schuyler and J. Bracken Lee.¹⁷

II. “In Dire Need of Creative Extremists”: The Power of Conspiracy

On International Workers’ Day 1961, the Freedom House, a progressive think tank that had come out critically against McCarthy’s civil liberties record, issued a statement condemning the John Birch Society on similar grounds: “The John Birch Society is not conservative; it is not even reactionary.” George Field, the organization’s director, pointed out that the Birchers’ fundamentalist distrust of government amounted to anarchism. Not only would it fail to apprehend or divert a single communist, he charged, its dissemination of “doubt, suspicion, and prejudice” was no different from actual communist agitation: “Note some of its domestic targets: civil rights, collective bargaining, the social gospel of religion. Then ask whether the John Birch Society does not seek to destroy those same human rights which are suppressed in every nation under Communist rule.” This was but one of several critical responses aimed at Birch activism. More significantly, Field refused to recognize the Society as “conservative.” The Birchers’ precarious position within the conservative field naturally had much to do with its reliance on conspiracy theories, which in turn heavily undermined its willingness to compromise over its target issues.¹⁸

¹⁷ Letter from Donald Rueher to Alfred Kohlberg, February 8, 1960; Alfred Kohlberg Papers, Box 17, “John Birch Society, Inc.”; on Birchers and YAF, see John A. Andrew III, *The Other Side of the Sixties: Young Americans for Freedom and the Rise of Conservative Politics* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 109, 113.

¹⁸ George Field, “Statement on the John Birch Society by the Board of Directors of Freedom House,” May 1, 1961, Clark F. Norton Collection of Right Wing Publications, 1942-1975, Box 5 “Miscellaneous,” Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library; the statement was signed by all board members, including Senator Jacob Javits, future New York mayor John Lindsay and NAACP chief Roy Wilkins.

Influential historian Richard Hofstadter, who was included in Daniel Bell's iconic, anthology on the "Radical Right," drew a similar conclusion. Neither the Birch Society, nor the modern right-wing crop of Republicans rallying behind rising star Barry Goldwater could claim, he argued, legitimacy as true conservatives. Instead, Hofstadter reasoned, they were frustrated radicals who irrationally fretted over their status in society and had turned to a "paranoid style" in politics completely isolated from the mainstream. As such, they were "pseudo-conservatives" at best: "They have little in common with the temperate and compromising spirit of true conservatism in the classical sense of the word, and they are far from pleased with the dominant practical conservatism of the moment as it is represented by the Eisenhower administration," he concluded. "Their political reactions express rather a profound if largely unconscious hatred of our society and its ways."¹⁹ Hofstadter regarded Welch's conspiracism in particular as a sign that Birchers had no place in the American conservative tradition, and described his tendencies in clinical and psychoanalytical terms: "History *is* a conspiracy, set in motion by demonic forces of almost transcendent power, and what is felt to be needed to defeat it is not the usual methods of political give-and-take, but an all-out crusade. The paranoid spokesman [...] is always manning the barricades of civilization."²⁰

¹⁹ Richard Hofstadter, "The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt," in Daniel Bell (ed.): *The Radical Right: The New American Right Expanded and Updated* (New York: Doubleday), 1963, 76.

²⁰ Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*. 1965. New York: Vintage Books, 2008, 29-30. See also Peter Viereck, "The Revolt Against the Elite" in *Bell (ed.)*, 164: "'Conservative' is no proper label for western Old Guard Republicans, nor for their incongruous allies among the status-craving, increasingly prosperous, but socially insecure immigrants in South Boston and the non-elite part of the east." Some scholars, including George Marsden and Angela Lahr, have drawn strong parallels with the prevalence of Cold War conspiracy theories and Christian fundamentalist traditions. While Welch himself did not attend church on a regular basis, or impose any denominational preferences upon his members, he considered fundamentalists, be they Catholic, Protestant, or even Jewish or Muslim, the "moral salt of the earth," and warned in 1958 their numbers were waning at an alarming rate. See George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and*

For Welch, the totality of the threat clearly went beyond the history of Communism, which is why he often referred to alleged conspirators as simply “insiders.” He concluded that the nature of the insiders’ – or Comsymps’ – menace to the foundations of American culture and freedom took on quasi-pathological proportions, which was not entirely out of place in a Cold War-dominated context where Communism was habitually associated with immoral or amoral behavior, sexual perversion and a dysfunctional, deceptive personality. Rather than an ideology, Communism was often considered the exact opposite, a valueless system of greed and coercion, which sought to efface moral codes, religion, the family and traditional societal roles altogether. In a contribution to *American Mercury* written months before founding his Society, Welch explained why he believed people might be attracted to – or duped into – Communism. If not coerced, he reckoned, Communists usually succumbed to a “basic loneliness” or “intellectual snobbishness” or worse yet, “an energizing hatred” for their fellow man and the natural order of things around them.²¹

Samuel Brenner has echoed Jonathan Schoenwald’s findings that notwithstanding the nature of Welch’s conspiracism, much of the Society’s conservative tenets nevertheless remained remarkably consistent with the greater right wing. In fact, Brenner argues, Americanists like Welch and his followers “closely tracked and resembled ‘mainstream’

American Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 153-163, 206-211, 221; Angela Lahr, *Millennial Dreams and Apocalyptic Nightmares: The Cold War Origins of Political Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 41-43; Erlin Jorstad, *The Politics of Doomsday: Fundamentalists of the Far Right* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970), 44-9; Gary Clabaugh, *Thunder on the Right: The Protestant Fundamentalists* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1974), 164-73, 208-9. For the significance of conspiracism in U.S. culture, see David Bennett, *The Party of Fear: From Nativist Movements to the New Right in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Nation: The Politics of Paranoia in Postwar America* (New York: New York University Press, 2002); David Brion Davis, *Fear of Conspiracy: Fears of Un-American Subversion from the Revolution to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008); Matha F. Lee, *Conspiracy Rising: Conspiracy Thinking and American Public Life* (Santa Barbara; Praeger, 2011).

²¹ Robert Welch, “Why People Become Communists,” in *American Mercury*, May 1958, 125-127.

conservative ideology [...] albeit with an added focus on conspiracism.” This conspiracism, he demonstrates, Welch and his members could flexibly latch onto anti-communism, traditional constitutionalism, libertarian individualism and religion, thus forming a broad base for mutual concern with the path liberals had taken the nation down on. Brenner is correct, but it seems an important factor remains missing. Whereas the Society’s belief in a vast, evil conspiracy besieging America from both within and without, indeed limited its appeal to a restricted target audience, it simultaneously created a fertile soil for a *populist* conservative backlash amongst those that shared these suspicions. To them, Welch’s conspiratorial view of history tapped into the image of a liberal ruling class secretly conspiring with fellow travelers and Communist schemers alike. The threat of international Communism, which after the Cuban revolution, ended up right at Americans’ doorstep, to many prompted the terrifying explanation that America’s leaders had not just been incompetent or unfortunate in their dealings with the Red Menace, but could be willfully tricking the common people into gradually surrendering their sovereignty and liberty. This assumption not only rendered American foreign policy profoundly suspect, but implied that liberal domestic initiatives as well as conservatives’ willingness to negotiate on them, were nothing short of treason.²²

Ironically, the populist Welch harbored profound distrust of mass movements and based his defense of the American citizen squarely on individualism and a celebration of the republican tradition. He maintained the United States had been conceived of as a constitutional republic, and that the *insiders* had been gradually converting it to “that footstool of tyrants known as a democracy.” Democracies, he felt, relied on mob rule and could too easily be swung towards collectivism and ultimately, the enslavement of the people, all through manipulation of public opinion. Rather than Communist agitators or

²² Samuel Brenner, “Fellow Travellers Overlap between ‘Mainstream’ and ‘Extremist’ Conservatives in the Early 1960s,” in Gifford & Williams (eds.), 96, 85; see also Schoenwald, 68-70.

liberal reformers, Welch looked to the Constitution as the true voice of the people, and saw it as his own duty to re-educate Americans on its prudent wisdom and protective value for the republic. As head of the Society, he even had members disseminate the slogan “This is a *republic*, not a *democracy*. Let’s keep it that way!” on thousands of billboards, bumper stickers and in newspapers to drive his point home.²³ As such, Welch’s “populism” centered on the individual, whose unwavering faith in God, liberty and the American system of government as enshrined by the Framers, clashed with an illegitimate authority that kept him from enjoying the fruits of his labor and would ultimately enslave him. As Brenner correctly points out, Welch combined his defense of American values first and foremost with a libertarian individualism. His was therefore a populism that equated true Americanism with the idea and structure of minimal republican government – “the government that governs least, governs best” – as well as classical liberal preoccupations with the right to private property, deregulation of free enterprise and more radically the abolition of the federal income tax.²⁴

While Welch’s radical positions and conspiratorial interpretation of history frightened some observers, it is important to stress that neither he, nor the Society promoted a violent overthrow of the American federal government – or any state or local government for that matter. Violence and anarchy were deemed Communist tactics and Birchers saw a basic form of civil government as necessary to keep order and protect individual liberty. In her work on right-wing movements, Sara Diamond distinguishes between “oppositional” and “system-supportive” movements, to indicate where various groups stand in terms of acceptance or rejection of state power. With regard to the Birchers, her findings are mixed: “The Birch Society represents a classic case of a movement organization that was tactically oppositional

²³ “Birch Society is Nationwide in Extent,” *Bonham Daily Favorite*, April 3, 1961, 2.

²⁴ “The People Speak: This Is A Republic,” *Palm Beach Post*, June 30, 1961, 7.

to, but nevertheless system-supportive of the overall parameters of U.S. anticommunist policy.” Indeed, Welch was not opposed to the idea of a strong state when it came to suppressing Communist “infiltration” and maintaining a strong moral code. He passionately supported HUAC’s monitoring and propaganda activities and invited Martin Dies to write for *American Opinion*. FBI director J. Edgar Hoover and Joseph McCarthy were among the few heroes he promoted “on the inside” of government. In 1960, he even started a Connecticut-based Birch front called *College Graduates against Education Traitors at Government Expense*, a student lobby group installed to demand loyalty oaths for students borrowing government money to pursue their studies.²⁵

With regard to violent resistance, Welch distanced himself and his organization from militia movements like the Minutemen, and stripped its national leader Robert DePugh of his Birch membership. A degree of overlap remained, but Welch made it clear he did not endorse militia tactics: “And we are much concerned about those equally good patriots who believe it is time to 'hold up' in the hills with groceries and rifles [...] All patriotic effort and resources should be put into the real fight, and not shunted off into hopeless or innocuous tangents.”²⁶ Whenever members inquired as to where the Society stood on retaliatory white supremacist organizations like the Klan or the American Nazi Party, he drew a clear line in the sand and forbade such activities to coincide with Birch activism: “We do not advocate the use of force of arms in this country, because we are fighting still an ideological battle,” he replied to a

²⁵ Sara Diamond, *Roads to Dominion: Right-Wing Movements and Political Power in the United States* (New York: Guilford Press, 1995), 6, 13; see also Barbara Green, Kathryn Turner and Dante Germino, “Responsible and Irresponsible Right-Wing Groups: A Problem in Analysis,” *Journal of Social Issues* 19.2 (April 1963), 3-17; on loyalty oaths, see Welch, *John Birch Society Bulletin*, December 1960, 9.

²⁶ *Bulletin*, November 1961, 5.

member from Laurel, Mississippi.²⁷ As for his position on the KKK, Welch was equally clear: “We oppose the Ku Klux Klan with everything possible, and feel that it is a subversive force which cannot help us in our battle - only the enemy.”²⁸

Welch explained the paradox between his far-reaching conspiracist beliefs and the support of the *idea* of the American republic through his “principle of inversion.” Simply put, Welch believed that the Communists, both within the American government and beyond it, realized that ordinary Americans would never willingly accept their collectivist agenda. Therefore, he assumed, they would go to great lengths to disguise their subversive activities with token anti-communist gestures aimed at duping Americans into believing their government was *actually* pursuing an aggressive policy on Communism at home and abroad. With a few notable exceptions – such as Dies, Hoover and McCarthy – Welch distrusted those in power even when they openly pursued anti-communist policies. When asked about Welch and the Society’s exploits, William Buckley at one point gleefully recalled how even Boris Paternak’s *Dr. Zhivago* to the Birch leader was nothing but a Communist smokescreen aimed at deluding Americans into believing the Soviet Union could be undermined from within.²⁹

Most importantly, however, Welch’s endless conspiracy theories, called for immediate action. The alarmism with which he approached the dangers for ordinary Americans, who were according his principle of inversion under siege from all angles and

²⁷ Letter from D.A. Waite to Ingrid U. Cowan, December 13, 1963 (dictated December 9), JBS Papers, Box 7, “63”.

²⁸ Letter from D.A. Waite to Carl May, July 24, 1963 (dictated July 22), *ibid*; see also “Guns Seized at Lecture on Guerrilla War,” *Los Angeles Times*, Oct 22, 1961; pg. C2; “Birch Group, Minutemen Called Perils,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 17, 1961, 21; “‘Guerrillas’ Leader Defends Training Plan: Founder of Minutemen Denies Political Implications in National Organization,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 10, 1961, 22.

²⁹ William Buckley, “The Uproar,” *National Review*, April 21, 1961, 242-243; on Welch and Pasternak, see Eugene Lyons, “The Folklore of the Right,” *National Review*, April 11, 1959, 645-646.

constantly lied to, stimulated dedicated members to link up local issues with a sense of national urgency. In *American Opinion*, Welch annually updated and published the communists' "Scoreboard", a "composite of careful estimates made independently on six continents by the most highly qualified experts, has provided an accurate measure of the International Communist Conspiracy's progress." In 1958, when Welch first revealed his "Scoreboard," he estimated the U.S. government to be 20-40 percent under Communist control. By 1959 the number had increased to 30-50 percent and by 1960, to 40-60 percent. Unless the John Birch Society succeeded in educating the American people, whom Welch believed were inherently conservative, the takeover would be complete by as early as 1973. For those citizens sympathetic to the Birch program, the call for action was clear and energizing.³⁰

III. "Better to be Alone than in Bad Company": The Case Against Isolationism

Scholars attempting to classify the JBS within the right-wing field tend to consider the Society an isolationist group. Considering the severe criticism Birchers expressed regarding their own government's foreign policy and involvement in internationalist diplomacy, there are certainly arguments that point towards an isolationist reading of Birch activism. Niels Bjerre-Poulsen, whose work usefully maps the Right's transition from anti-interventionism to a more militant anti-communism, argues that Welch, who opposed foreign aid, high military spending and emphasized the *internal* threat of Communism, never quite made the transition himself and remained "an ardent isolationist."³¹ In *Eyes Right!: Challenging the Right Wing*

³⁰ Robert Welch, "Scoreboard," *American Opinion* 8.7 (July-August 1965), 57; See also Alan F. Westin, "The John Birch Society: Fundamentalism on the Right," 93.

³¹ Niels Bjerre-Poulsen, *Right Face: Organizing the American Conservative Movement* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2003), 195.

Backlash, Jean Hardisty similarly concludes that the Society “is not properly categorized as a New Right organization, but is best seen as ‘old right’ [...] as an isolationist, anti-communist organization.”³²

These conclusions are certainly not without evidence, but they ignore what the Birchers shared with prominent New Right voices. As Michael Miles illustrates in *The Odyssey of the American Right*, postwar conservatives responded to the new reality of the Cold War by moving away from their Old Guard equivalents, and though they remained profoundly skeptical of internationalist policy, saw it as America’s moral duty to lead the global fight against Communism, roll back its advances rather than contain them, and not to shy away from supporting or leading military intervention where it was necessary to protect democracy. As this section will illustrate, beneath the Birchers’ own conspiracist agenda, they actually agreed on the importance of American intervention, and rather than pursuing a truly, isolationist agenda, instead anticipated a unilateralist vision and regarded internationalist “entanglements” as an obstacle to American dominance in its global fight for freedom.

In early 1959, one of the first operations Welch launched through the infrastructure of the John Birch Society was the *Committee Against Summit Entanglements* (CASE), a front organized to protest the United States’ participation in international summits with the Soviet Union, and specifically Khrushchev’s visit to the United States in September 1959, as well as Eisenhower’s intended trip to Moscow later in June 1960, alongside the scheduled May 1960 Paris summit. Through CASE, the Birch Society disseminated an impressive amount of

³² Jean Hardisty, “Constructing Homophobia: Colorado’s Right-Wing Attack on Homosexuals,” in Chip Berlet (ed.), *Eyes Right: Challenging the Right Wing Backlash* (Boston: South End Press, 1995), 98-99; also see Justus Doenecke, *Not to the Swift: The Old Isolationists in the Cold War Era* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press), 1979.

propaganda against the summits, reiterating widespread conservative frustrations with the outcomes of the wartime meetings at Yalta, Teheran and Potsdam, which Welch could only see as proof of either a weak, stultified American attitude towards Stalin, or worse, a deliberate betrayal of the West. In order to gain widespread sympathies, Welch downplayed the conspiratorial element and argued Eisenhower's proposed meeting with the Soviets would "further increase Soviet prestige," and leave the United States with "all to lose and nothing to gain." Furthermore, he argued the President's initiative to ease tensions with Khrushchev was a miscalculation and an "unconstitutional" abuse of executive power, lamenting that "to negotiate is to surrender."³³

Welch called upon many of his close associates as well as other conservative luminaries to kick start a series of petitions to influence the President and to "put a brake on some of the worst concessions and compromises" or perhaps even secure a "postponement" of the meeting altogether.³⁴ Having selected himself as *CASE* Chairman, he appointed Council members Charles Edison, Alfred Kohlberg and Clarence "Pat" Manion as his immediate lieutenants. He also formed an Executive Committee, charged with promotion and top-level recruitment duties, consisting of Birch Council members Tom Anderson, Spruille Braden as well as cautious sympathizers such as General Albert Wedemeyer and Archibald Roosevelt, President Theodore Roosevelt's son.³⁵ Realizing the front needed "the moral backing of a large and strong committee," he reached beyond the Society's Council and cast a wide net, successfully inviting dozens of renowned conservatives and libertarians, such as Elizabeth Churchill Brown, Taylor Caldwell, P.A. Del Valle, Ludwig von Mises, J. Howard

³³ "Committee Against Summit Entanglements" pamphlet (undated), T. Coleman Andrews Papers, Box 1, "General Correspondence: John Birch Society, 1".

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ "Goldwater Aided Birch Unit, Rousselot Says: Senator Named as Member of Committee to Oppose Eisenhower-Khrushchev Parley," *Los Angeles Times*, October 10, 1964, 4.

Pew and even Barry Goldwater. Other prominent anti-communists, like Eugene Lyons, did not formally join Welch's project, but commended him on his work and pledged varying sums of money to support the endeavor.³⁶

Through *CASE* alone, Welch had ads printed in over 2,500 daily newspapers, including the *Manchester Union Leader*, *Cincinnati Inquirer*, *Indianapolis Star and News*, *Dallas News*, *Oakland Tribune*, *Chicago Tribune*, *New York Herald Tribune*, *Houston Chronicle* and over a dozen more. Independently, local Birch chapters paid for *CASE* ads in their local papers, and over the remainder of August, Welch tried to raise an additional \$175,000 to have ads printed in the country's fifty largest newspapers, but failed.³⁷ In anticipation of Eisenhower's visit to Moscow, he sent a formal letter directly to the President, titled "Please Mr. President, Don't Go!", a line suggested by Alfred Kohlberg, which he also forwarded to a staggering amount of newspapers. In his letter, Welch "respectfully urg[ed]" Eisenhower "not to give the butchers of the Kremlin the undeserved prestige and tremendous propaganda advantage of associating on equal terms with the President of the United States."³⁸ With the letter, he enclosed 128 petitions bearing a total of 1,634 signatures. In addition, he wrote – in name of the committee – House Representatives and Senators lamenting that they had let the executive branch usurp congressional powers regulating foreign affairs, and urged them to intervene.³⁹

³⁶ Letter from Robert Welch to Eugene Lyons, August 27, 1959, Eugene Lyons Papers, Box 2, "Correspondence: Welch, Robert, 1959."

³⁷ "To Those Interested", August 19, 1959, T. Coleman Andrews Papers, Box 1, "General Correspondence: John Birch Society, 1"; see also "To Present Members And Prospective Members", August 7, 1959, *ibid*.

³⁸ Letter from Robert Welch to T. Coleman Andrews, June 29, 1959, T. Coleman Andrews Papers, Box 1, "General Correspondence: John Birch Society, 1".

³⁹ "To Members Of The House Of Representatives, Selected Newspaper Editors, And A Number Of Outstanding Patriots", September 7, 1959; on Kohlberg's idea for the *CASE* slogan, see Robert Welch, *The Blue Book of The John Birch Society*. Belmont: Western Islands, 1959, 27th printing, 1999, 79.

Khrushchev visited the United States in September 1959, notwithstanding the barrage of hostile propaganda disseminated by the Birchers and allied conservatives such as the Daughters of the American Revolution, *Human Events* and even the *National Review*. Nevertheless, Welch was eager to claim some credit. Looking back in 1970, he concluded in the Society's *Bulletin*: "We couldn't stop it. There wasn't time. But we did create enough public understanding of the man [i.e. Khrushchev], and disgust at the spectacle, so that as a propaganda play his trip was almost a total flop *within the United States*."⁴⁰ As for Eisenhower's cancelled visit to Moscow the following year, which would fall through after US-Soviet relations sunk to a low at the Paris summit following the U-2 incident, Welch claimed victory: "This is exactly what we have been demanding." The humiliation of the United States, he found, was "still immeasurably less disastrous than would have been the sellout of Berlin, the betrayal of West Germany, the 'agreements' for disarmament to be implemented by Soviet troops on United States soil..." In any case, through *CASE*, Welch and the Society had distributed about six hundred thousand postcards "Stay Away – U.S.A.", "Please Mr. President, Don't Go" and "If You Go – Don't Come Back!"⁴¹

The Birchers' drive behind *CASE* sheds an interesting light on the Society's alleged isolationism. To be sure, the Birchers' anti-summit propaganda and unwavering distrust towards any diplomatic commitment towards an easing of Cold War tensions can be traced back to Old Right isolationist – and even nativist – anxieties reminiscent of the failed Bricker Amendment and opposition to the League of Nations. However, their fears of unilateral disarmament and heightened Soviet prestige derived from such summits suggested the US should not shy away from an international stage, but rather *dominate* it, without bargaining

⁴⁰ *Bulletin*, February 1970, 16.

⁴¹ Robert Welch, "To All Members Of The COUNCIL", May 17, 1960, T. Coleman Andrews Papers, Box 1, "General Correspondence: John Birch Society, 2".

with the “illegitimate” leadership of the Kremlin. Welch truly believed the proposed Summit Conference in Moscow would herald the “surrender of the West” at which the “appeasement-minded leaders of the remaining free world will be pushed over the edge.” The problem for him was not that Americans were drawn into foreign matters of both a diplomatic and militaristic nature, but that they were tricked into fighting the *wrong* wars, and surrendering their power and influence through agreeing to the *wrong* demands, which Welch increasingly believed could have only happened through internal treason.⁴²

On looking back to the Korean War, the “loss of China” and “Western betrayal” of Eastern Europe after World War II, the Birchers resuscitated the frustrations of established anti-communist leaders such as Douglas MacArthur, Joe McCarthy, James Burnham, Barry Goldwater or even Dwight Eisenhower as presidential candidate, with Truman’s containment policies in the face of the advance of international communism. Physician and California JBS coordinator Granville Knight asked rhetorically in defense of the Society’s agenda: “Why do we permit ourselves to be trapped into ‘summit’ meetings?” and “Why do we talk of the insanity of unilateral disarmament when facing a foe that has sworn to destroy us?” In the same breath he inquired: “Why did we withhold arms from Chiang Kai-Shek in 1946, after Congress had specifically authorized delivery?” and “Why were Chiang Kai-Shek’s forces not unleashed [sic] in 1950 for the invasion and liberation of the Mainland of China, when the Red Chinese armies were murdering our sons in Korea?” On Korea, Knight speculated: “Why were we not permitted to win the Korean War by bombing beyond the Yalu river?”, echoing Welch’s defense of MacArthur in his *May God Forgive Us*. If the Society’s views on

⁴² *Bulletin*, December 1959, 11; on Welch and disarmament see *Bulletin*, October 1961, 10.

military interventionism and foreign aid were at times conflicting, they were still hardly isolationist and instead supported an aggressive roll-back position.⁴³

To dismiss Welch and his organization as an isolationist relic of the Old Right becomes all the more problematic, considering his obsessive preoccupation with the advance of international communism. As early as 1958, Welch speculated the Communists had completed two-thirds of their global conquest. At Council meetings, he would walk his advisors through reports on how the Red Menace was spreading around the world, with almost equal attention to Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America. He would draw on the “expertise” of associates like Hilaire du Berrier (France and Western Europe), Spruille Braden (Latin America), Alfred Kohlberg (China and Far East Asia), Slobodan Draskovich (Yugoslavia and Eastern Europe), and George Schuyler (Africa), who would contribute heavily to *One Man’s Opinion* and later *American Opinion*, as well as feature on the JBS-sponsored speaking tours. Castro’s successful coup on New Year’s Eve of 1959 especially confirmed Welch’s suspicions: “The American people have been so brainwashed by now that they were far less disturbed in 1959 by the establishment of a Communist dictatorship right on our doorstep than they had been in 1949 by the establishment of one ten thousand miles away.” Applying a “domino theory” of his own, he considered Cuba the third block to fall after Bolivia with Paz Estenssoro, and Venezuela with Juan Lechín and Romulo Betancourt.

⁴³ Granville Knight, “‘In Defense of the John Birch Society’: Statement for the News-Press – December 23, 1960”, Granville Knight Papers, Box 2, “Correspondence: 1960, October – December”, 3-4. On foreign aid, Knight added: “Why did we not promptly recognize and aid the new government of free Hungary in 1956 after a successful revolution and thus prevent the slaughter of many thousands of freedom fighters by the Mongolian hordes from Russia who invaded Hungary one week later”, to compare with “Why do we continue to spend ourselves into bankruptcy by giving away billions of dollars abroad, much of which has gone to support Communist countries such as Poland and Czechoslovakia?”, “In Defense of the John Birch Society,” 5; again on foreign aid, Robert Welch: “the very idea of foreign aid was dreamed up by Stalin, or by his agents for him,” Alan F. Westin, “The John Birch Society: Fundamentalism on the Right,” *Commentary*, 32.2 (August 1961), 95.

He flatly denied allegations of the Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo's involvement in an assassination attempt on Betancourt and blamed the American government for wrongfully isolating him: "And our State Department has already been instituting and supporting such other pressures against Trujillo's government as to make it extremely unlikely that this one remaining strong bulwark of anti-Communism in the whole Caribbean area can survive more than a few months longer." Again, Welch did not criticize the federal government for exerting any significant influence over other sovereign nations, but for punishing and weakening "true anti-Communist" leaders and instead helping the Communists.⁴⁴

As illustrated by his comments on Bolivia, Cuba and Venezuela, Welch showered his members and advisors with lengthy analyses of Communist subversion in myriad locations around the world. The entire September 1962 *American Opinion*, for instance, was dedicated to Algeria, which had only gained its independence from France two months earlier. In his signature column "If You Want it Straight", Welch claimed Charles De Gaulle – whom he believed to be a covert Communist – had pushed for Algeria's secession from the French so it could be more easily penetrated by the Kremlin. He was convinced that Ahmed Ben Bella, the country's first president, was a Communist agitator, and his Nasserist sympathies and support from other countries seeking independence, such as Pakistan, only heightened those suspicions.⁴⁵ As a response, Welch ordered his members to read and distribute reprints of

⁴⁴ "A Part Of The Comments Made to MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL At Their Meeting In Boston On September 10, 1960," September 11, 1960, Albert Wedemeyer Papers, Box 115, "John Birch Society 1959-1961," Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University.

⁴⁵ Robert Welch, "If You Want it Straight", *American Opinion* 5.8 (September 1962), 34; *Bulletin* April 1960, 10-13.

Sisley Hudleston's *France: The Tragic Years, 1939-1947*, a pamphlet against De Gaulle, and to write letters of support to anti-independence stalwart Jacques Soustelle.⁴⁶

Algeria too was but part of a larger problem. Being the last European colony in North Africa to gain autonomy, the territory symbolized the Dark Continent's gradual independence from its former European colonial masters. The decolonization movement that gained traction at the close of the Second World War posed a dilemma for many Americans, not all conservative. Whereas the Roosevelt administration had requested its allies to liberate their colonies in the Atlantic Charter, the sudden change in post-war power relations forced the Truman and Eisenhower administrations to reconsider. As Frank Furedi has demonstrated in his work on nationalistic movements and self-determination in colonial empires, the U.S. State Department "was inclined to view virtually every manifestation of colonial protest from a Cold War perspective." Hence, it became distrustful of unrest in colonies as it calculated a "second Scramble for Africa" would enhance Soviet influence. American conservatives were especially wary of emancipation movements *tout court* and feared violent revolution and a fertile soil for collectivist dogma. When on December 10, 1960 the United Nations General Assembly voted to approve the "Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples", a resolution proposed by the Soviet Union, the United States delegation meaningfully abstained. As the "Year of Africa" drew to a close, several voices on the Right instead called for a "year of realism".⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Letter from D. A. Waite to Robert S. Allen, December 10, 1963 (dictated December 4), John Birch Society Records, Box 7, "63".

⁴⁷ Frank Furedi, *Colonial Wars and the Politics of Third World Nationalism* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co., 1994), 104; "Year for realism" quoted from Henry S. Hayward, "Belgium Gives Bitter Lesson," in *Christian Science Monitor*, December 28, 1960, 1; See James Hubbard, *The United States and the End of British Colonial Rule in Africa, 1941 – 1968* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2011).

The colonial conflict that perhaps received the most attention from the American Right in the early 1960s, was the Congo Crisis, which had erupted after the Belgian Congo obtained its long-awaited independence from Brussels, and Moise Tshombe, sympathizer of the Belgian former patriarchal umbrella – and its wealthy mining interests – led the rich province of Katanga into a secession from Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba. The latter in turn called for the United Nations to intervene, quell the civil war that had broken out, and all but end the Katanga secession. Threatening to call upon Soviet assistance if the U.N. failed to deliver, and acting upon his threat when they did, Lumumba angered the Belgian and American governments, setting in motion his own demise. When the United Nations eventually did intervene, and overstepped its mandate to bring an end to civil turmoil and actively pursued an end to the Katanga secession – complete by January 1963 – American anti-communists, including the Birchers, cried foul.

Subsequently, pro-Tshombe interests formally organized Katanga Information Services (KIS), a New York-based lobby group headed by Michel Struelens, a former administrator in the Belgian Congo with ties to the powerful mining industry. At the end of 1961, KIS mobilized resources to fund the *American Committee for Aid to Katanga Freedom Fighters*. Max Yergan, an African-American ex-Communist, presided over the organization, and received key support from prominent conservatives like Bill Buckley and the Young Americans for Freedom, Barry Goldwater, Everett Dirksen, James Eastland, Strom Thurmond, Richard Nixon, Herbert Hoover, and even liberal Democrat Christopher Dodd, who was allegedly linked to Struelens and the Belgian mining lobby.⁴⁸

Alongside YAF, grassroots support for *Aid to Katanga* became a spontaneous Birch side-project. Though it was never an actual JBS front, Welch enthusiastically encouraged his

⁴⁸ David N. Gibbs, *The Political Economy of Third World Intervention: Mines, Money and U.S. Policy in the Congo Crisis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 121-3.

members to support and participate.⁴⁹ Local chapters organized and sponsored speaking tours, distributed leaflets, placed ads in newspapers, started letter writing campaigns to elected officials and promoted the Katanga cause to such an extent, the Committee was often mistaken for a Birch front. As a memorandum to President Kennedy put it:

Is the Aid to Katanga Committee a Birch front or a *National Review* front? Probably it's both, an example in which the goals of both groups coincide. While the *National Review* seems to dominate the New York based Committee which has attracted the most important support, in the local committees the Birchers seem to predominate due to their grassroots organization.⁵⁰

In other words, the campaign set up by non-Birch conservatives profited heavily from the unique grassroots strength that the JBS could muster. In late 1961, as the right-wing defamation campaign against the actions of the U.N. gained traction, a local Birch coordinator called John Gay actually invited Michel Struelens to come to the San Fernando Valley area on a speaking tour on behalf of a local Birch-sponsored front "Fair Play for Katanga Committee", an organization that claimed the United Nations were executing a Soviet-controlled invasion. Struelens, who was held back in New York due to visa problems, was eventually replaced by former CPUSA activist Bella Dodd, who predictably confirmed the allegations mounted against the U.N. From Belmont, reprints of *46 Angry Men: The 46 Civilian Doctors of Elisabethville Denounce U.N.O. Violations in Katanga* were distributed to Birch members, a propaganda "report" sponsored by Union Minière, which accused U.N. forces of committing genocide.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Robert Welch, "To All Chapter Leaders and Home Chapter," December 15, 1961, T. Coleman Andrews Papers, Box 1, "Correspondence: John Birch Society, 1".

⁵⁰ "Statements from the Center: Confidential Report #1", February 19, 1962; Lee White Papers, Box 12, "Radical Right, 11/61 – 6/62," John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library, 2-4.

⁵¹ "Official Flays Pro-Katanga Propagandist," *Los Angeles Times*, December 28, 1961, 5; "New U.S. Group Backs Katanga Against U.N.: Sen. Dirksen Among 81 Initial Sponsors Seeking to Mobilize Support of Public, *Los Angeles Times*, December 14, 1961, 7; "Fair Play for Katanga Committee" speaking schedule (undated) ,

As David Gibbs points out, the Katanga campaign “dovetailed nicely with anti-UN sentiment, which has long characterized the American far right.” Indeed, many on the Right struggled to consider the United Nations as a legitimate authority, and instead saw its physical presence in New York as a symbol of both East Coast internationalism and subversion of American sovereignty and global influence, or worse, Communist infiltration. Participation and veto power of the Soviet Union heightened those suspicions and as a result, Old Guard Republicans responded by introducing the failed Bricker Amendment and defending the Connally reservation, which would have limited the International Court of Justice’s authority over American domestic issues.⁵²

Whereas conservative leaders such as James Burnham and Bill Buckley distrusted the U.N., but advocated American active participation in it to maintain a measure of control, the Birch Society lobbied heavily for withdrawal and removal of its headquarters – “the house that Hiss built” – from American soil. The Society launched its “Get US Out (of the UN)!” campaign and signs bearing the slogan quickly appeared across the country, from suburban front lawns to eye-catching billboards alongside interstate highways. Welch made no bones about his suspicions: “This organization was conceived by Communists, founded by Communists, has always been controlled by Communists, and has been used increasingly—

Margaret Meier Collection of Extreme Right Ephemeral Materials, 1930-1980, Box 23, “Katanga”, Dept. of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford University; see Roger Hilsman, *To Move a Nation: The Politics of Foreign Policy in the Administration of John F. Kennedy* (New York: Doubleday, 1967); Stephen R. Weissman, *American Foreign Policy in the Congo 1960-1964* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974); Lawrence R. Devlin, *Chief of Station, Congo, Fighting the Cold War in a Hot Zone* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2007).

⁵² David Gibbs, 122; see also Stephen Ryan, *The United Nations and International Politics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000); Barry Goldwater, “The U.N. Has ‘Mercenaries’, Too,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 2, 1962, B4; “Two Views of UNICEF,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 18, 1961, B4.

and ever more brazenly – to carry out Communist purposes.”⁵³ Through the U.N. he saw leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru of India and Sukarno of Indonesia take to the international stage and profess a virulent anti-imperialism that shared ties with Soviet anti-Western propaganda. On the local level, Birchers organized tireless campaigns, from having U.N. insignia removed from schools and department stores, to picketing fundraising fairs for UNESCO. Through collaboration with organizations as diverse as the National Defense Committee, National Economic Council, American United Council and Daughters of the American Revolution, the Birchers could extend their influence and presence on the Right significantly.⁵⁴

In his defense of Welch and the Society, Granville Knight demanded to know: “Why did Eisenhower oppose the Bricker Amendment and urge repeal of the Connolly reservation which authorities consider vital in order to protect the United States from interference by the International Court of Justice in important matters which are solely the concern of the United States?” The problem for Knight was not that the United States was being forced to play an active role on the international stage, but that it was being shackled to a suspect internationalism that undermined Americans’ capacity to run their own nation as they saw fit and act with unilateral resolution against those who threatened the cause of liberty abroad. The problem with the United Nations was not that the United States sat at the table with other national representatives to work towards a more peaceful world, but that it was forced to undergo the humiliation of negotiating with the enemy on their terms.⁵⁵ To Birchers and likeminded conspiracists, the apparent strength of international Communism and American

⁵³ Quoted in Lindsay Porter, *Who Are the Illuminati: Exploring the Myth of the Secret Society* (London: Collins & Brown, 2005), 165.

⁵⁴ “U.N. Fair Picketed at Santa Barbara,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 27, 1963, J10; Paul Coates, “Little Children and the Red Plot,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 28, 1962, J7.

⁵⁵ Granville Knight, “In Defense of the John Birch Society,” 5.

reluctance or inability to challenge it, could only be explained by reassessing the U.N. as a beachhead for a collectivist One World Government hiding under the umbrella of internationalism. Welch himself in his opening presentation in Indianapolis had made no bones about its danger to American sovereignty: “Internationalism, as it is conceived and promoted today, is an attempt to impose more government and a more centralized one-world government on all of us everywhere. For that reason it is automatically contrary to everything we stand for and one of the movements we shall oppose with all the strength we can.”⁵⁶

Rather than strictly subscribing to the Old Guard isolationism of the antebellum, the Birchers in their resistance to the role of the United Nations stood much closer to the interventionist line of the New Right. Through *CASE* and *Get Us Out*, they expressed a rejection of multilateralist diplomacy, fueled by conspiracist suspicions rather than a desire to isolate the United States. What is more, their conspiracist suspicions were stimulated by a desire to crush international Communism and the frustrations with the United States’ inability – or reluctance – to do so. At the same time, campaigns like *Aid to Katanga* illustrated a fusion across the right, with a place for the Birch activists, who often provided the manpower and infrastructure to disseminate propaganda, organize educational speaking tours and petition elected representatives.

⁵⁶ Welch, *Blue Book*, 162-3; see also Michael Miles, *The Odyssey of the American Right*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1980, 120, 242; on Human Events, see *Right Face*, 99 and Murray N. Rothbard and Thomas E. Woods, Jr. (ed.), *The Betrayal of the American Right* (Auburn, AL: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2007; for Bircher positions on Connally, Bricker et al., see *Bulletin*, February 1960, 15; March 1960, 8-9; April 1960, 9-11; September 1960, 29.



Fig. 4: A typical JBS-sponsored billboard advocating U.S. withdrawal from the United Nations, and vice versa.
AP IMAGES

IV. “Enough to Make Every Statue Leap from its Pedestal”: The Movement to Impeach Earl Warren

If Welch’s conspiracism stimulated grassroots activism on international matters, then the same can be said of countering internal subversion. One of the Society’s first domestic programs, launched in 1959, was the *Movement to Impeach Earl Warren*. Welch, a native southerner, opposed forced integration in the South as federal overreach and violation of states’ rights and suspected Communist manipulation behind the *Brown v. Board of Education* rulings. In addition, the rulings in *Yates vs. United States* and *Watkins v. United States* on June 17, 1957 – or as many critics of the decision dubbed it “Red Monday” – which limited the enforceability of conspiracy provisions in *Dennis v. United States* and the Smith Act, had convinced Welch that Warren was consciously shielding Communist conspirators

active in the United States. Inspired by the Georgia legislature's call for impeachment of six Justices, Welch decided to weigh in on the struggle and go after Warren himself.⁵⁷

As with "Get US Out!", "Impeach Earl Warren" signs started dotting landscapes all over the country. Birch chapters paid for ads in their local newspapers, distributed pamphlets, sponsored speaking tours, sent postcards and often teamed up with conservatives outside the Society. Some prominent officials even openly expressed enthusiasm for the project. Segregationist Democrat Jim Eastland, U.S. Senator for Mississippi even growled: "I think all of them ought to be impeached", alleging the Warren Court had overseen more pro-Communist decisions "than any judicial tribunal outside the Iron Curtain." Others on the Right were less impressed. Anti-communist journalist George Sokolsky, who was acquainted with Welch through the National Association of Manufacturers and wrote for a number of conservative-leaning Hearst newspapers, complained to Herbert Krauch of the *Los Angeles Evening Herald Press*, ridiculing the project's alleged effectiveness: "These folks apparently believe that all problems can be solved by impeaching Earl Warren. It reminds me of the ads for Sloanes Linament when I was a boy – it could cure most of the ails of man and horse."⁵⁸

Sokolsky's skepticism was shared by many, both within and outside the Society. Some members even found the idea of going directly after Warren so ill-advised they promptly turned in their membership cards. Herbert Seidler of Santa Barbara wrote the Belmont headquarters in late 1961 to offer his resignation and refusal to head a newly found chapter: "While I am in accord with many of the precepts and principles covered in the

⁵⁷ Letter from Robert Welch to T. Coleman Andrews, January 7, 1959, T. Coleman Andrews Papers, Box 1, "Correspondence: John Birch Society, 1"; Welch explains *Impeach Warren* further in *Bulletin* September 1963, 29-45.

⁵⁸ "Eastland and Welch, Inc.," *New York Post*, April 12, 1961, 21; letter from George Sokolsky to Herbert H. Krauch, February 27, 1961, George Sokolsky Papers, Box 256, "John Birch Society," Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University.

BLUE BOOK, on which basis I originally joined, I disagree entirely with the current main objective of the Society, the campaign to impeach the Chief Justice.”⁵⁹ Others were more diplomatic and merely questioned the effectiveness of the program. After Hugh Bosworth of Memphis, Tennessee had expressed his sympathies for the endeavor as well as doubts pertaining the likelihood of success, Welch responded via his personal assistant D.A. Waite saying: "Due to our educational efforts in this regard, over 100,000 copies of Rosalie Gordon's Nine Men Against America, have been sold by our own AMERICAN OPINION reprint facilities." The book's original publisher Devin-Adair had only managed to sell a few thousand copies before Welch's publicity skills helped raise the book's profile through the Society's national bookstore network.⁶⁰

It seems unlikely that Welch actually believed his scheme could cause the impeachment of Warren. In fact, right after announcing the project, he conceded: "I am not deceiving myself that we have very much chance of really bringing about the impeachment of Earl Warren. Although we might." Rather than ending Warren's career, Welch believed the actual objective was to get his troops motivated and spread awareness about the Court's alleged unconstitutional incursions to plant the seeds for a deeper understanding of the vast conspiracy he had vowed to fight: "But I don't think that is really as important as dramatizing to the whole country where he stands," he continued, "and how important it is to face the facts about the road we are now travelling so fast." In other words, the retired salesman saw the Warren impeachment drive as a way to touch a popular nerve, get his constitutionalist

⁵⁹ Letter from Herbert H. Seidler to Robert Welch, November 18, 1961, Granville Knight Papers, Box 3, "Correspondence: 1961, November".

⁶⁰ Letter from D.A. Waite to Hugh H. Bosworth, July 1, 1963, JBS Records, Box 7, "63".

critique of the Warren Court on the radar and provide zealous and motivated followers with an ambitious, yet tangible target.⁶¹

The scheme attracted a great deal of skepticism and opposition from within the conservative field. The same Sokolsky lampooned the Society's attempts at removing Warren and wrote other conservatives tying their names to the project urging them to desist:

I do not believe that your movement to impeach Earl Warren is well conceived. I do not believe that it is strategically or tactically sound. I am sure that I have had a wider and longer experience in anti-Communist movements than either your [sic] or Robert Welch have had and I believe you both need to be competently advised as to how to fight.⁶²

He maintained the project was pointless and even received a formal commendation of U.S. Senator Tom Kuchel of California, who lamented: "The extremism represented by the Birch Society and such on the lunatic fringe can do nothing but harm the progressive efforts of conservative and moderate political leaders in our nation." Kuchel, a moderate Republican who felt intimidated by the Birchers' gains in his home state, jumped at the opportunity to marginalize Welch and his followers. Like Sokolsky, Kuchel reasoned conservatives would have nothing to do with an ill-advised national campaign of the sort, but both would be surprised by the Birchers' resilience and determination.⁶³

Sokolsky found himself quickly buried under a barrage of dissent. George Birch, the martyred missionary's father and ardent supporter of Welch's efforts, wrote the columnist a scathing letter accusing him of ignorance on the subject of battling communism: "I do not

⁶¹ Letter from Robert Welch to T. Coleman Andrews, January 7, 1959, T. Coleman Andrews Papers, Box 1, "Correspondence: John Birch Society, 1".

⁶² Letter from George Sokolsky to Brig. Gen. USAF William L. Lee, February 28, 1961, George Sokolsky Papers, Box 256, "John Birch Society".

⁶³ Letter from Senator Thomas Kuchel to George Sokolsky, January 31, 1962, *ibid.*

expect you to spend the energy and expenses investigating of what you write.”⁶⁴ Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Jacobs of Green Bay, Wisconsin identified themselves as Society members and criticized Sokolsky for his pessimism: “We believe the impeachment of Mr. Warren would be one of the greatest blows we could deal to the communist enemy.”⁶⁵ Mrs. Gertrude Bale, a chapter leader from Pasadena, California complained directly to Sokolsky’s superior George Randolph Hearst, and assured him that the impeachment drive was energizing grassroots conservatives: “There are over 200 Chapters in the Los Angeles area and the society is growing by leaps and bounds.” She also suggested Hearst should intervene and pen an encouraging editorial “stressing the fact that the people can impeach the Chief Justice presiding on a court that [...] has given aid to the enemy.”⁶⁶

Many who disagreed with Welch or at least held reservations about his judgments still recognized the Society’s organizational strengths and hands-on approach. A Mrs. Jerry Brown of Playa del Rey, California responded to Sokolsky saying she was not a member but had many friends in the Society. “We need every sincere dedicated person we can get right now,” she pleaded. “Most informed people are aware that our country has been drifting steadily to the left for the last thirty years [...] At any rate, there has been very little organized effort to counter this trend [...] So long as the John Birch Society continues to do the important job that needs to be done, let's give them every benefit of the doubt.”⁶⁷ Mrs. R.W. Foster of Pecos, Texas, a 37-year old housewife and member of the Society, went even further, admitting she agreed with Sokolsky’s stance on Warren: “I quite often disagree with Mr. Robert Welch. Even our constitutionalist Dr. Dunn, who is in great favor of impeaching Mr. Warren, does not believe this is the time or that we have the evidence to warrant such. So

⁶⁴ Letter from George S. Birch to George Sokolsky, February 6, 1961.

⁶⁵ Letter from Mr. and Mrs. Thomas T. Jacobs to George Sokolsky, June 5, 1961.

⁶⁶ Letter from Mrs. Gertrude Derby Bale to George Hearst, January 15, 1961; George Sokolsky Papers, *ibid*.

⁶⁷ Letter from Mrs. Jerry Brown to George Sokolsky, February 5, 1961, Sokolsky Papers, *ibid*.

many of us are not writing our letters this month as we should.” Still, she felt, the pros of membership outweighed the cons as the framework Welch had established provided a meaningful platform for activism:

In this small town of 13,000 population (over half of which are Latin American) we have about 40 members in our organization. Many others are awakening on the subject of Americanism, though they are not members... for myself, I can say that the J.B. Society has made me aware of world affairs, has made me very interested in reading all I can on both sides of the fence, and then discussing these things and doing the best I know how with other housewives and friends who only live in their tiny world.⁶⁸

The membership ratio of Pecos (about 0.3 percent) seems low – though it was much higher than the national membership (about 0.21 percent if we assume there were about 40,000 Birchers by 1962). Still, as Foster emphasized, they were not as isolated as the numbers suggest and collaborated with many non-members as well. Besides, a vocal, well-organized minority is precisely what Welch preferred. Not only small groups more easily controllable and less likely to be infiltrated, they would also be more cohesive, quick to act and dedicated to fulfilling their duties. Even when Welch suggested an unrealistic target of one million members, he maintained it was not necessary – or even preferable – to win over a majority of Americans to the JBS: “We need disciplined pullers at the oars, and not passengers in the boat,” he stressed.⁶⁹

Most importantly, they were a small army of well-coordinated citizen activists. As Stephen Whitfield points out, anti-communism thrived not solely through institutional support – HUAC, the FBI, McCarthyism – but through a participatory “hyper-patriotism” from the bottom up, which the JBS epitomized and provided: “Citizens were expected to enlist in the Cold War. Neutrality was suspect, and so was a lack of enthusiasm for defining American society as beleaguered.” The campaign behind *Impeach Warren* accomplished just

⁶⁸ Letter from Mrs. R.W. Foster to George Sokolsky, January 18, 1961; Sokolsky Papers, *ibid*.

⁶⁹ Welch, *Blue Book*, 159.

that. It gave sympathetic citizens a national crusade with a powerful target, whose judicial activism and modern Republican brand proved an ideal antagonist for Welch's populist conspiracism. A radical project like the impeachment drive alienated many potential activists, but it filtered out the hesitant and assured Welch of a consolidated bloc of uncompromising patriots with a strong visibility and the will to achieve political victories.⁷⁰

Whereas Welch preached against the constitutional overreach of the federal government at practically every turn, it's also important to emphasize how, contrary to the Birchers' extremist reputation, he advocated methods well within the democratic sphere, from letter writing to peaceful picketing. In fact, Welch deplored violent expressions of protest, and saw in them nothing but "mob rule" – mass democracy as opposed to tempered republicanism – and Communist subversion. Inevitably, some on the far Right expressed messages of hatred towards the Chief Justice during the impeachment drive. Radio broadcaster Fulton Lewis, Jr. was quoted as saying: "I would lynch Earl Warren". General P.A. Del Valle, vice president of the National Economic Council under Merwin Hart, suggested that if the public failed to awaken to the treason of the Supreme Court and to "vote the traitors out", there was "yet another course of action left: the organization of a powerful armed resistance force to defeat the aims of the usurpers and bring about a return to constitutional government." At a National Indignation Convention protest in Texas, right-wing historian and Birch sympathizer J. Evetts Haley, when asked about his friend and Birch Council member Tom Anderson said: "All he wants to do is impeach Warren – I'm for hanging him."⁷¹ Seeking to restore constitutional restrictions on Warren's judicial activism, it made perfect sense to Welch to call upon exactly that republican framework for redress: "The logical and traditional redress in our governmental system for such violations of the oath of

⁷⁰ Stephen Whitfield, *Culture of the Cold War*, 10.

⁷¹ "Wronging a Right," *Washington Post*, November 24, 1961, A18.

office is impeachment.”⁷² Eager not to alienate sympathetic conservatives across the board, he emphasized a peaceful tone from the very start: “The approach should be dignified, as well reasoned, and as carefully based on constitutional grounds and the principles of Anglo-American jurisprudence, and as completely devoid of any apparent tinge of emotionalism, as possible.”⁷³

Conservatives, though skeptical, understood the enthusiasm the impeachment drive could instill, and most were more cautious than Sokolsky in expressing their disapproval. L. Mendel Rivers, a staunch segregationist Democratic Congressman from South Carolina, in March 1961 opposed a congressional investigation, calling the Society a “Nation-wide organization of patriotic Americans” and added Earl Warren was “one of the most inept poseurs who has ever worn the robes of Chief Justice.” More erudite conservatives like Buckley, dismissed the effort as “futile and wrongheaded,” but lunged right back at Welch’s opponents, noting that “the nervousness of the critics of the John Birch Society is a more interesting phenomenon than the aberrations of Mr. Welch.”⁷⁴ His brother-in-law Brent Bozell went a step further, criticizing Welch for merely choosing the wrong path of redress: “The answer is not that such a campaign is futile. The answer, rather, is this: that the punishment they propose does not fit Warren’s crime.” What Buckley understood is that even if the JBS’s projects created controversy and embarrassment for the conservative cause, and made it more difficult to sway moderates to their cause, it was simultaneously becoming a powerful and consistently expanding movement that should be approached with caution.

⁷² “Thunder from the Right,” *Newsweek*, December 4, 1961, 18.

⁷³ Letter from Robert Welch to T. Coleman Andrews, January 7, 1959, T. Coleman Andrews Papers, Box 1, “Correspondence: John Birch Society, 1”.

⁷⁴ Buckley, “This Week,” in *National Review*, August 19, 1961, 4-5.

Also, the thousands of motivated activists that implemented Welch's agenda around the country were a valuable asset, and Buckley was reluctant to alienate them.⁷⁵



Fig. 5: Former US Congressman and Western Region Director for the JBS John H. Rousselot posing in front of an “Impeach Warren” sign in San Gabriel, California - FRANCIS MILLER/TIME LIFE PICTURES/GETTY IMAGES

V. “*Even Amongst Powerful Princes*”: The Politician Controversy

“If conservatives in general expressed a strong belief in the power of ideas, then most ‘radical right’ [sic] put their faith in the power of exposure,” wrote reporter Jack Mabley in the *Chicago Daily News* for July 25, 1960. In a series of articles, Mabley brought the Society to light by linking its alarmist activism to an unpublished letter written and privately distributed by its Founder only six years before. He had become aware of the Society’s existence in his own area only weeks before: “I have seen the appeal of this society in my own suburban community of 18,000. There are four active units in the village. At a meeting two weeks ago tonight, more than 200 persons turned out.” Having read the Society’s *Blue Book* and interviewed a handful of Birch members in his area, the journalist went on to describe the

⁷⁵ L. Brent Bozell, “Should We Impeach Earl Warren?” in *National Review*, September 9, 1961, 153; on Rivers, see James E. Clayton, “Outlook: John Birch ‘Antis’ Point Unwelcome Spotlight.”

Society's structure as "monolithic" and "dictatorial", before zeroing in on Welch's letter, a 302-page black paperbound book "reproduced by the photo-offset process, with loose-leaf binders" and its infamous quote:

While I too think that Milton Eisenhower is a Communist and has been for thirty years, this opinion is based largely on the general circumstances of his conduct. But my firm belief that Dwight Eisenhower is a dedicated, conscious agent of the Communist conspiracy is based on an accumulation of evidence so extensive and so palpable that it seems to put this conviction beyond any reasonable doubt.

When Mabley phoned Welch at the Belmont office to confront him with the allegations, Welch allegedly responded: "I have absolutely no comment."⁷⁶

Reports of Welch's allegations against Eisenhower – as well as those aimed at the President's brother Milton, as well as Allen and John Foster Dulles, General George Marshall and the late Franklin Roosevelt – made it to a handful of newspapers over the years, notably the *Milwaukee Journal*, *Wisconsin Capital Times*, and, by February of the next year, the communist San Francisco-based *People's World*, which convinced Welch of Kremlin-directed conspiracy staged to discredit his work. A furious Welch initially accused CACC chief Fred Schwarz of forwarding a copy of the letter – the privacy of which he had guarded carefully – to Mabley: "During the last few months, however, we now know that you personally have repeatedly been making extremely derogatory remarks about myself and the John Birch Society, to various groups and audiences; and that you have been reading from my private manuscript, called *The Politician* to support your disparaging remarks."⁷⁷

The first journalist to bring *The Politician* and the Society to a national audience was Thomas Storke, owner and editor of the *Santa Barbara News-Press* and a registered

⁷⁶ Jack Mabley, "Bares Secrets of Red-Haters: They Think Ike Is a Communist," *Chicago Daily News*, July 25, 1960, 3.

⁷⁷ Letter from Robert Welch to Fred Schwarz, September 6, 1960, Granville Knight Papers, Box 3, "Correspondence: 1960, September".

Democrat. Storke had found out about the Society's activities in the Santa Barbara area and had started digging for materials. Baffled by what he found, he brought *The Politician* to public attention: "This book should be reviewed by a psychiatrist, not a newspaperman," Storke wrote, "Alice's trip through Wonderland was no less fantastic than Welch's trip through the history of the last two decades."⁷⁸ As a response, he ran editorials quoting from *The Politician* and denouncing Welch's attacks on Eisenhower: "Such slanders often called for a visit from a courageous and irate group which brought with them a barrel of tar and a few feathers."⁷⁹ The newspaper took a solid stand on the Birch Society, denouncing its methods flatly: "'We Believe ... That Democracy suffers when fear of Communism leads to irresponsible, unsubstantiated charges of treason.'"⁸⁰

The impact was immediate. As the national media started picking up on the Birch phenomenon, Storke's office was flooded with letters, usually requests for materials on the Society. A woman from Shreveport, Louisiana reported that the Birchers were very strong in her area and that they, in collaboration with the local Daughters of the American Revolution, had successfully lobbied the mayor to remove the United Nations flag from the municipal hall.⁸¹ The mayor of Fremont, Ohio confided to Storke that he had heard disconcerting things about the Birchers and commended him for his "guts". A minority of messages were less supportive of Storke's denunciations.⁸² A man from Orcutt in Southern California came to the Birchers' defense: "I have quit taking your paper due to your strong left wing stand."

⁷⁸ Thomas Storke, "Review: The Politician" (unpublished clipping), Thomas M. Storke Papers, Carton 2 "John Birch Society," Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley.

⁷⁹ Thomas Storke, "The News-Press Stand on John Birch Society," *Santa Barbara News-Press*, February 26, 1961, A1.

⁸⁰ Hans Engh, "John Birch Society: What Is It, Why?," *Santa Barbara News-Press*, January 22, 1961, C4.

⁸¹ Letter from Mrs L. Abrams to Thomas Storke, December 14, 1961, Thomas Storke Papers, Carton 2, "'John Birch Society: Requests for Materials A-B'".

⁸² Letter from C.W. Auxter to Thomas Storke, December 29, 1961, *ibid.*

Accusing Storke of being soft on communism, he continued: “It is about time we started back on the road to being the most powerful nation in the world dedicated to total victory over Communism.”⁸³

For his efforts in bringing the Society to light, Storke received the Pulitzer Prize in Journalism the following year, as well as the Elijah Parish Lovejoy Award, and an honorary Doctor of Laws from Colby College in Maine. One by one, major media outlets ran stories covering the Bircher phenomenon, interviewing members in local chapters, digging into Welch’s personal background and that of the entire National Council. Though much of the coverage carried a strong degree of sensationalism – the “ultras” or “extremists” – and even facetiousness – “Welchism” and “superpatriots” – most serious observers conveyed an uneasiness as to the nature and potential strength of this new force.⁸⁴ Journalist Alan Barth warned of a right-wing front eager to give up an absurd degree of civil liberty for the sake of security from Communism. *Life Magazine*, in May, ran an article posing the question whether the Birchers were “patriotic or irresponsible,” alongside a wary editorial comparing their tactics with those of far-left radicals.⁸⁵ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. attributed the rise of a “Radical right” to the election of a progressive administration, i.e. Kennedy’s, and downplayed its potential for upheaval, stressing it “lacks the impressive leadership it enjoyed during the days

⁸³ Letter from G.E. Austerfield to Thomas Storke, April 2, 1962, *ibid*.

⁸⁴ “John Birch Society: Patriotic or Irresponsible, it is Subject of Controversy – Birchers’ Friends, Foes,” *Life Magazine*, May 12, 1961, 124-130; “Editorial: The Unhelpful Fringes: the Present-Day Radicals, Left or Right, Bring Us Neither Hope nor Realism,” *Life Magazine*, May 12, 1961, 32.

⁸⁵ A. Barth, “Report on the Rampageous Right,” *New York Times Magazine*, April 29, 1961.1-4.

of Roosevelt and Truman.”⁸⁶ Others, like Fred J. Cook, warned of its financial strength and unwavering support from wealthy businessmen like Haroldson L. Hunt and J. Howard Pew.⁸⁷

The controversy would eventually be debated in Congress. Mirroring the Senators’ attack on Welch in the House Democratic Representative Henry S. Reuss of Wisconsin demanded the Un-American Activities Committee open an investigation into the origins of Welch’s allegations and the operations of the Birch Society at large.⁸⁸ And though the committee chairman, Francis E. Walter (D-Pa) expressed doubts on whether the HUAC actually had jurisdiction over the issue, with an underlying concern such an intrusive investigation might result in a “McCarthyism-in-reverse”, the Birch issue had become prime debate material on the political stage as well as a sensational feast in the national media.⁸⁹ Republican Senator Kenneth Keating (NY) and Democratic Congressman John Shelley (CA) demanded a proper investigation into the workings of the Society.⁹⁰ Senator Jacob Javits, the famous liberal Republican civil rights advocate from New York, had done the same, complaining the Birchers “undermine the very foundations of the Republic because they jeopardize the confidence of the people in their tried and proven leaders.”⁹¹ These calls for an investigation were due to the reluctance of the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee to properly investigate, let alone condemn the Society in March. The subcommittee’s report,

⁸⁶ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., “The Threat of the Radical Right: Mr. Schlesinger Questions how Significant it is Today, Compared with Times in the Past,” *New York Times Magazine*, June 17, 1962, 10, 55, 58.

⁸⁷ Fred J. Cook, “The Ultras: Aims, Affiliations, and Finances of the Radical Right,” *The Nation*, June 30, 1962; 565-608.

⁸⁸ “John Birch Society Accused: Charge That Eisenhower Is a Red Roils Congress”, see note 1.

⁸⁹ John D. Morris, “Inquiry is Sought on Birch Society: Congressman Reveals He Is Member – Denies Body is ‘Dictatorial’ or ‘Fascist’”, *New York Times*, March 31, 1961, 10.

⁹⁰ William Theis, “Keating, Shelley Ask Birch Society Probe,” *Washington Post*, April 24, 1961, A4.

⁹¹ “Javits Urges Birch Society Investigation,” *New York Herald Tribune*, April 10, 1961, 10.

signed by no other than Mississippi Democrat Jim Eastland read: “We are happy to state that it seems to be, from our records, a patriotic organization.”⁹²

California Attorney General Stanley Mosk and his assistant Howard Jewel issued a report of their own, ridiculing the Birchers’ conspiratorial attitudes and McCarthyite methods. Mosk famously dismissed the Society as mainly consisting of “wealthy businessmen, retired military officers, and little old ladies in tennis shoes.”⁹³ While the report likened the structure of the Society to the same totalitarian regimes it professed to combat, the overall tone was dismissive rather than alarming. Welch was described as “an embittered candy maker,” and his audience little more than an isolated, deranged relic of an isolationist past: “For the paranoid, life is a nightmare. Only he can see The Enemy [...] The more he acts upon his systematized delusions, the more he is cast out by his fellow man for his oddness. This only serves to feed or confirm his dark suspicions.”⁹⁴ The report drew heavily from the clinical language of the “radical right” studies performed by Daniel Bell, Richard Hofstadter and others, and revealed a similar dismissive urge to downplay the Society’s strengths.⁹⁵

At the same time, the Birchers found allies coming to their defense. Conservative author Richard Weaver for instance, had noticed an article in his local paper which, from a liberal perspective, took odds with Mosk’s report: “The only thing is, we think he’s wrong. We’d like to dismiss the Birchites as an insignificant group of cultists who are temporarily

⁹² “John Birch Society Is Held Patriotic,” *New York Times*, March 21, 1961, 8.

⁹³ Lawrence E. Davies, “California Likens Birch Society to Communist Party in Set-Up,” *New York Times*, August 3, 1961, 3.

⁹⁴ Stanley Mosk and Howard H. Jewel, “The Birch Phenomenon Analyzed: A Report by the California Attorney General’s Office Examines the Methods and Speculates on the Motives of the Controversial John Birch Society,” *New York Times*, August 20, 1961, SM12.

⁹⁵ “The Harmless Ones,” *Time*, August 11, 1961.

enamored, mildly crackpot, and better ignored. But we don't think that's warranted." Instead, the article argued, "[t]hey are, of course, wrong; stubbornly wrong [...] But we doubt the Birchites can be ridiculed into obscurity [...] And that is what troubles us." Weaver in turn wrote his friend and conservative publisher Henry Regnery, dismissing the article as "liberal hogwash" but pointing out its significance for the right: "What the editorial indicates is that when the right sort of people begin to organize, under whatever name, it throws a great fright into the liberals. This is something that conservatives need to realize."⁹⁶

In the face of increasing controversy, Robert Welch understood he could not keep his typical distance from the major media outlets, and in May 1961 agreed to appear on *Meet the Press* with Lawrence Spivak. Throughout the entire interview, Welch remained remarkably coy and defensive, stressing the lack of association between *The Politician* – a "private letter" meant for personal friends in all confidentiality – and the program of the JBS. He assured his audience he had never called Eisenhower a "card carrying Communist" and had even included a note with every copy of his manuscript saying: "This is not a book. It is not intended for publication, this is a private letter on loan to you in confidence for your eyes only and will you please tell us what's wrong with it and what the errors are." When Robert McCormick of NBC News asked Welch if the controversy had cost the Society members, the JBS leader replied that, on the contrary, financial support had "materially increased" since February and that more people were expressing sympathy and interest: "We find some less willing to join. We find some who have resigned, but they are very few in numbers. We have found far more who took more interest and were willing to come in. We have had quite a number of contributions coming in from people who say, 'I don't know enough about the

⁹⁶ The article Weaver referred to was "Ridicule May Not End The Birchite Crusade," *The Asheville Citizen*, August 19, 1961, 1; letter from Richard M. Weaver to Henry Regnery, August 19, 1961, Henry Regnery Papers, Box 78, "Correspondence: Welch, Robert H.W., Jr.," Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University.

Society to join, but from what I have heard we would like to help you, and here is a check for a hundred dollars.”⁹⁷

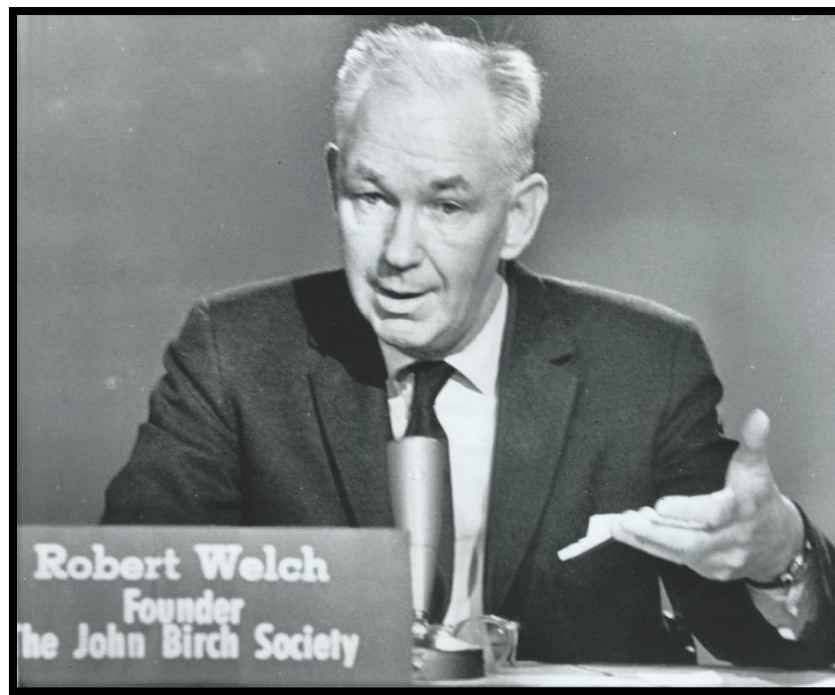


Fig. 6: Robert Welch making his case on *Meet the Press* - AP IMAGES

At the height of the controversy, two Republican California congressmen from Los Angeles County admitted to being avowed Birch members. Edgar Hiestand, a soft-spoken self-described constitutional conservative, was elected to Congress in 1952. Countering the increasing anxiety over Bircher influence in politics, he released a statement to the *Washington Evening Star* saying “I’m sure there are others members of Congress who are

⁹⁷ Transcript retrieved from <http://www.scribd.com/doc/54700041/Robert-Welch-on-NBC-Meet-the-Press-19610521> [last accessed August 14, 2013].

also members of the Society.”⁹⁸ John Harbin Rousselot, a young, charismatic Southern Californian legislator affirmed not long after he had joined the Society as well. Rousselot even took his Bircher message actively around the country and in a speech at the National Student Association 14th Annual Congress at the University of Wisconsin, sponsored by the Intercollegiate Society of Individualists, Rousselot complained the Society had been “vastly distorted by the American press.” He had joined the Society, he declared, “after long and careful deliberation” and felt he “would be able to prove that my membership in the John Birch Society would not hurt [my political career].”⁹⁹

Some voices within the Society’s ranks started to express doubts concerning Welch’s tactics. Adolphe Menjou, the anti-communist actor who had agreed to join the Council, by late March had withdrawn from the Society altogether, remarking merely that he and Welch had disagreements “on certain points.”¹⁰⁰ By the end of the year, Father Richard Ginder, a Catholic priest from Pittsburgh, had come under too much pressure from Bishop John Wright to sever his ties with Welch and formally resigned from the Council on January 1, 1962.¹⁰¹ Other conservatives were equally unforgiving. Otis Chandler, editor of the conservative *Los Angeles Times*, denounced the Society in a March 12 editorial. “The Birchers are very destructive,” opined Chandler. “They create a climate of suspicion, fear and distrust of our leaders, institutions, churches and schools [which] frightens and alarms viewers and has no documentation or sources given for its conclusions.”¹⁰² As a result, Welch would recede further into his conviction that the “domination of the press, television and radio by

⁹⁸ “Charge That Eisenhower Is a Red Roils Congress”.

⁹⁹ “Birch Group Gets Praise,” *Milwaukee Journal*, August 28, 1961, 8.

¹⁰⁰ Barbara Bundschu, “Birch Society Founder Calls Kennedy Amoral, Nixon Slippery,” *The Louisville Times*, March 31, 1961, 9.

¹⁰¹ Robert Welch and Medford Evans, *False Leadership: Wm. F. Buckley, Jr. & The New World Order* (unpublished manuscript), JBS Papers, Box 36 “Manuscripts”, 78.

¹⁰² Otis Chandler, “Peril to Conservatives” (editorial), *Los Angeles Times*, March 12, 1961, g1.

communist influences is now so great that you are simply not allowed to learn or be reminded of the real nature of the beasts to whom we are losing.”¹⁰³ J. Edgar Hoover himself, whose work received vocal support from Birch quarters, came out against the Society, warning that communists stood to gain from “fear, hysteria, and confusion” created by “certain people across the country who engage in reckless charges against one another.”¹⁰⁴ Earlier in the year, pro-nationalist China lobbyist Walter Judd aired similar doubts: “But I think they defeat themselves and injure our common cause by some of their overstatements. To accuse President Eisenhower of treason and to call him a Communist serves to drive people away and discredit all of us who are fighting Communism. Such actions help rather than hurt the Communists.”¹⁰⁵

Most significantly, Barry Goldwater, the right’s new champion by 1960, kept an uncomfortable distance from the entire episode, expressing cautious admiration for the Society’s membership, but refusing to comment on Welch’s conspiracy theories:

I don’t know why this society is called ultra-conservative, when its sole purpose is to fight communism. I know liberal Democrats as well as conservative Republicans who belong. Its purpose is to study communism and disseminate news about communists. Of course in every organization you’ll find some who slip. But I have been very impressed with the high quality of these people.¹⁰⁶

Even a half year later, with the mid-term primaries in sight, Goldwater refused to repudiate the Society, while agreeing to condemn the Minutemen, who, he felt, “comprise[d] a danger”. The Birchers, he thought, were still much less dangerous than the “leftist radicals swarming around President Kennedy.” Like Buckley, Goldwater understood that the Birchers had to

¹⁰³ *Blue Book*, 25

¹⁰⁴ “Revival of McCarthyism Aids Only Reds,” *Washington Daily News*, April 13, 1961, 3.

¹⁰⁵ letter Robert Welch to Walter Judd, January 24, 1961, Walter Judd Papers, Box 234, “John Birch Society: 1961-1970,” Hoover Institute Archives, Stanford University.

¹⁰⁶ “Goldwater Cautions Congress On Probe Of Birch Society,” *Nashville Banner*, April 5, 1961, 13; “Goldwater Sees No Danger in Society,” *Washington Post*, November 20, 1961, A2.

treated with a degree of caution. They already had a visible presence in his home state and the Arizonan recognized the potential value the JBS presented to conservatives.

It did not take long before the John Birch Society lit up on the radar of the Kennedy Administration. Attorney-General Robert F. Kennedy was especially concerned about the rise of right-wing activism, and had several reports and memoranda commissioned to monitor its growth and activities, usually noting a strong backlash against Kennedy's election and policies. Welch initially respected Kennedy's old Massachusetts stock anti-communist credentials and friendship with Joseph McCarthy, though he was worried the Senator would turn out to be Walter Reuther's "stooge" once elected president. But in light of Kennedy's support for international recognition of communist China, decolonization, and federal intervention to protect the Freedom Riders and later James Meredith at Ole Miss, the Birch founder became convinced Kennedy was either inexplicably soft on communism or simply an "amoral man" and "ball-carrying on behalf of the Communist aims here in the United States."¹⁰⁷

The Birchers, who saw no middle ground between conservative anti-communism and the collectivist evil concentrated in the Kremlin, were especially enraged by the administration's continuation of cordial relations with Josip Broz "Tito", the Yugoslavian president who had broken away from Stalin and pursued a course of neutrality with the West. Welch refused to believe Tito was actually independent from Moscow and instead considered him Stalin's "hatchet man" put it position to dupe the West into aiding its Communist regime.¹⁰⁸ On October 14, 1961, a spontaneous protest, which became known as the *National Indignation Convention*, Dallas Bircher Frank McGehee, "a self-admitted member of the John Birch Society," erupted in Dallas after the federal government had arranged to sell a

¹⁰⁷ *Bulletin*, August 1960, 10; Barbara Bundschu, "Birch Society Founder Calls Kennedy Amoral, Nixon Slippery".

¹⁰⁸ *Blue Book*, 5.

number of obsolete Sabre Jet fighters to Yugoslavia and allow some of its pilots to train on nearby Perrin airbase. On the first day, 300 people reportedly attended, followed by 1,200 the next day and 2,500 on the third, with many protestors wrapped in Confederate flags listening to speakers calling for the incarceration or even execution of Kennedy on grounds of treason.¹⁰⁹

In an effort to respond to this embarrassing incident and assure voters he was able to defeat international Communism in the wake of the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion and Berlin Crisis, the President embarked on a speaking tour on the West Coast, appearing at the centennial of the University of Washington in Seattle and at a \$100 per plate fundraiser dinner at the Hollywood Bowl, in front of 3,000 Democrats. Kennedy did not explicitly name the Birch Society but criticized “the discordant voice of extremism”; those “who are unwilling to face up to the danger from without are convinced that the real danger comes from within,” those who tried to confront their fellow citizens with the false choices of “appeasement or war, suicide or surrender, humiliation or holocaust, to be either Red or dead.” In sum, Kennedy emphasized the Birchers’ aloofness and ideological isolation: “There have always been those fringes of our society who have sought to escape their own responsibility by finding a simple solution, an appealing slogan or a convenient scapegoat”, he mused. “They find treason in our finest churches, in our highest court, and even in the treatment of our water.”¹¹⁰ According to a *New York Times* report, about 2,000 “Indignant Citizens” protested outside the Hollywood Bowl brandishing signs which read “No Jack for

¹⁰⁹ “Statements from the Center,” 4; see note 35.

¹¹⁰ “Kennedy Shuns Extremes on Negotiations”, *Denver Post*, November 19, 1961, 7; see also Edward T. Folliard, “Kennedy Lashes Out At Birchites, Other Rightist ‘Fanatics’: 3000 Democrats Hear President in Hollywood”, *Washington Post*, November 19, 1961, A1.

Jagan”, “Where is the Spirit of ‘76”, “We Are Not Afraid Of Fallout – We Are Afraid Of Sellout”, “Veto Tito”, “General Walker for President” and “Out with Adlai.”¹¹¹

As with the controversial Gen. Edwin Walker case that unfolded around the same time, conservative leaders like Buckley and Goldwater disagreed with the conspiratorial explanations offered by the Birchers, but understood they would lose an invaluable, motivated base for support. Walker, who had resigned from his duties – after being reprimanded for distributing right-wing literature to his troops in West-Germany, quickly became a Birch hero and a symbol for resistance through re-education. The criticisms the Texan received from the Kennedy Administration and Senator William Fulbright only confirmed to them that Walker had been trying to expose the truth. At this point, Buckley and the *National Review* approached the Society with caution. Though the conservative author publicly disagreed with Welch on Eisenhower and the nature of the Communist conspiracy, he stressed that he “admired his personal courage and devotion to his cause.” Instead of writing off the Birchers, he again turned to their liberal critics and reasoned the interest in the Society had become so vast because “there is so much interest in the quickening tempo of conservative activity. The Liberals,” he argued, “and to the extent their programs coincide, the Communists, feel threatened by the revived opposition.”¹¹²

A memo written to President Kennedy on the subject of right-wing activism captured Buckley’s ambiguous position succinctly: “From the point of view of electing candidates,

¹¹¹ Apart from criticizing US support for Tito, activists targeted British Guyana Prime Minister Cheddi Jagan, whose Marxist-Leninist sympathies angered conservatives, and Adlai Stevenson, US Ambassador to the United Nations; Tom Wicker, “Kennedy Asserts Far-Right Groups Provoke Disunity: Attacks Birch Society and ‘Minutemen’ at a Party Dinner in Los Angeles,” *New York Times*, November 19, 1961, A1; see also Wicker, “Kennedy Stresses Liberal Program: Also Condemns Rightists in Swing Through the West”, *New York Times*, November 20, 1961, 34; on Edwin Walker and the John Birch Society, see Schoenwald, 100-123.

¹¹² Buckley, “The Uproar,” 241-242.

Welch is a millstone around the neck of the conservatives; his organization, however, is not.” On the contrary, the memo argued, “it is an ideal instrument for mobilizing grass roots support for conservative candidates in 1962 on a nationwide basis.” Whereas conventional wisdom placed the JBS at the margins and outside the sphere of genuine conservatism and realist politics, its actual place in the dynamics of ideological change was far more significant. Political opponents were eager to demonize the Society, but established conservatives remained – for the time being – cautious not to alienate its thousands of highly motivated members and sympathizers. Also, while unrealistic targets from withdrawal from the United Nations to the impeachment of the Supreme Court Chief Justice distressed prominent conservatives like Buckley, they were equally rejoiced by the fervor and grassroots energy that the JBS provided to the right.¹¹³

VI. “Stumbling is Not Falling”: The John Birch Society Established

In the foreword to the *Blue Book*’s fourth edition, written in February 1961, Welch looked back on the Society’s first two years. He reminisced: “The first few working chapters of the John Birch Society were formed in February 1959, exactly two years ago. They have been a long two years.” By the end of 1961, the impressive media attention had made the John Birch Society a household name in American politics. The springtime “exposures” initiated by Tom Storke and the subsequent media avalanche it unleashed, merely drew attention to an increasingly organized right wing, and while the controversy around *The Politician* and Welch’s conspiracy theories had undoubtedly hurt the Society’s credibility, the vast publicity in local and national news outlets actually boosted the Society’s membership, as it made the

¹¹³ “Statements from the Center”, 3.

organization more visible and seemingly effective to eager and often isolated citizens looking to roll back the “collectivization” of their society.¹¹⁴

The JBS also continued to grow in terms of infrastructure. In 1961, determined to counter the increasingly hostile media coverage, Welch established the Society’s own Research Department, headed by Francis X. Gannon and full-time dedicated to anticipating, exposing and discrediting Communist tactics employed against the Society and the wider cause of anti-communism. Gannon would eventually publish his “findings” in his *Biographical Dictionary of the Left*, a 667-page long compendium published by the Society’s outlet in 1973.¹¹⁵ According to Boston-based journalist Cornelius Hurley, Belmont headquarters employed 57 people in 1961, a number which would go up to 109 by mid-1963. Within those two years, Welch would acquire the basement of the adjoining building and nearly double the size of the Society’s office and storage space. By 1963, he estimated the circulation of *American Opinion* at over 27,000 – as compared to nearly 60,000 for the *National Review* at around the time of Goldwater’s nomination one year later.¹¹⁶

Publication output did not stop with *American Opinion* and the monthly *Bulletin*. Welch ensured his members had a steady diet of right-wing literature to feed on. In 1961, he announced the introduction of “this uniform dollar reprint series, of books which have made outstanding contributions to the true history of the past twenty years.” By October, he had bought the rights to reprint Rosalie Gordon’s *Nine Men Against America*, Arthur Bliss Lane’s *I Saw Poland Betrayed*, James Burnham’s *The Web of Subversion*, George Racey Jordan’s

¹¹⁴ *Blue Book*, xv.

¹¹⁵ *Bulletin*, December 1960, 6.

¹¹⁶ Cornelius F. Hurley, “Birch Society BJT”, unpublished Associate Press article, 1963, Thomas Storke Papers, Carton 2, “Related John Birch Society Material Filed with Clippings”; see also John Andrew, op cit., 211; Ronald Lora and William Henry Longton, *The Conservative Press in Twentieth-Century America* (Wesport, CT: Greenwood, 1999).

From Major Jordan's Diaries, Joseph McCarthy's *America's Retreat from Victory*, John T. Flynn's *While You Slept*, Garet Garrett's *The People's Pottage*, and Victor J. Fox's *The Pentagon Case*, all ready to be shipped to chapter leaders around the country. Announcing the idea for the reprint series to conservative publisher Henry Regnery, who published Welch's *Life of John Birch* and *May God Forgive Us*, he boasted: "The channel of distribution is becoming sizable, as you can gather from the fact that our printing bills are now running about thirty thousand dollars per month."¹¹⁷ Shortly after, he established the Society's very own publishing house, Western Islands – named after Keats' sonnet "On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer" – and announced its first three books - *How to Read the Federalist Papers* by Holmes Alexander; his own *Life of John Birch*; and *Bullets and Confetti from American Opinion* – to arrive by Christmas.¹¹⁸

By April 1961, amidst the barrage of scathing articles and fiery congressional debates, active chapters were listed in 34 states, with a strong presence in the Southwest and leaving only Alabama, Alaska, Colorado, Delaware, Idaho, Maine, Maryland, Minnesota, Nebraska, Nevada, New Jersey, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Utah and Vermont unorganized.¹¹⁹ Feeding heavily on specifically suburban demographics, participation gave citizens an ennobling mission, a chance to get on the right side of history. Expressions of derision and outrage by prominent moderates and liberals like Tom Kuchel, Jacob Javits, or President Kennedy himself, confirmed Birchers' suspicions they were making an impact, as their activism tapped into a deep-rooted distrust of the New Deal, internationalism and an elite ruling class they had come to identify with a sense of moral decline and a fall in

¹¹⁷ Letters from Robert Welch to Henry Regnery, July 14, 1961 and August 14, 1961, Henry Regnery Papers, Box 78, "Welch, Robert H.W., Jr.", Hoover Institution.

¹¹⁸ *Bulletin*, November 1961, 5.

¹¹⁹ "Birch Group Lists Unit in 34 States: Society Says It Has One to 100 Chapters in Each Area – Members' Total Secret", *New York Times*, April 2, 1961, 62.

American standing in the world. Eager to strike back, Birchers started, joined and supported “spontaneous” movements such as the National Indignation Convention, Crusade for Americanism, We the People!, Aid for Katanga and many others.¹²⁰ Through its publications and speaking tours, the Society harnessed the momentum and support of allied rightists such as Dan Smoot, Clarence Manion, Kent and Phoebe Courtney, Billy James Hargis, W. Cleon Skousen, Edgar Bundy, H.L. Hunt, etc. and helped forge an increasingly mobilized attack on liberal consensus politics. As one newspaper put it, “the Birch Society has yielded top rank among the 1,000 or so pseudo-conservative groups that are calculated to be operating on the ultra right”¹²¹

As keen observers of the organization’s progress quickly saw, citizens’ activism was crucial. The 1963 California Legislature Twelfth Report of the Senate Factfinding Subcommittee on Un-American Activities, headed by Democratic State Senator Hugh Burns, which focused, at the request of Governor Pat Brown, on the Birch Society in California, interviewed or received affidavits from over a hundred Birch members and organizers. One such testimonial, delivered by Southern Californian Robert Blake, retired US Marine Corps Maj. General, offers a succinct insight: “Several years ago I became a member of the John Birch Society ... because I saw in it the first opinion group to come to my attention which possessed the potentialities for organizing scattered voices of conservatism into an effective influence on the political environment of our country.”¹²²

¹²⁰ “Politics and People: Danger on the Right,” *Baltimore Sun*, February 14, 1962, 13.

¹²¹ “Glendale Shows How to Tackle Communism,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 20, 1961, B4; see also Douglas K. Stewart and Ted C. Smith, “Celebrity Structure of the Far Right,” *Political Research Quarterly*, 17.2 (June 1964), 349-55.

¹²² Senate of the State of California, “The California Legislature Twelfth Report of the Senate Factfinding Subcommittee on Un-American Activities,” 13.

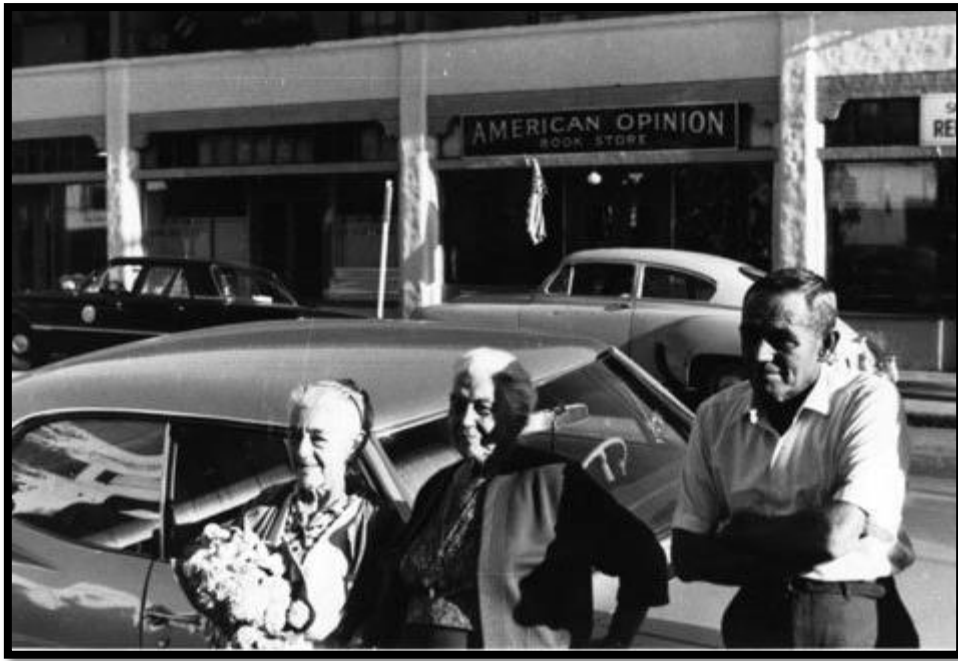


Fig. 7: A typical American Opinion Book Store in Santa Barbara, CA – SANTA BARBARA HISTORICAL MUSEUM

And indeed, aside from members' suburban homes, the Society encouraged individuals to start up commercial outlets for rightist literature, often called American Opinion Book Stores, about 200 of which the Society claimed to be affiliated with by mid-decade. There were even a handful of *American Opinion* "bookmobiles" touring around Southern California alone, offering original copies or Birch-sponsored reprints of a wide range of conservative materials, like Goldwater's *Conscience of a Conservative*, Arthur Bliss Lane's *I Saw Poland Betrayed*, and of course Welch's own *The Politician*. The 1963 California report listed a number of affiliated bookstores in the area, e.g. the Patriot Book Shop in Arcadia, the Orange County Freedom Book Store in Fullerton, the Heritage Book Shop in Van Nuys, Betsy Ross Book Shop, in W. Los Angeles, the Anti-Communist Center in Garden Grove, the Freedom Book Store in Whittier and Freedom Forum Book Store in Costa Mesa. Venues like the Citrus Americanism Center in Covina frequently housed Birch-sponsored speakers like Tom Anderson or W. Cleon Skousen. Occasionally, a number of

chapters in the same area would raise money to lure speakers through the American Opinion Speakers Bureau network. All the way from Belmont, the Society would even sponsor student essay contests, like a book review of Rosalie Gordon's scathing critique of the Warren Court, *Nine Men Against America*. The contest, concluded in the summer of 1962, was won by a young Californian.¹²³

Though Birchers were increasingly mobilized along the Sun Belt and the Midwest, Southern California quickly became the undisputed center of their activism. In December 1962 for instance, librarians in Los Angeles and Orange Counties were overwhelmed with complaint letters from local Birchers on the acquisition of copies of Nikos Kazantzakis' *The Last Temptation of Christ*, on the grounds of its purported blasphemy and godless subversion. In Long Beach, Santa Ana and Newport Beach coordinated letter campaigns were staged. Administrative staff at both Los Angeles City Library and Los Angeles County Library drowned in Birchers' letters. Miss Irma K. Bethune of Arcadia staged her own local campaign and showered the local library board with complaints of discovering the book on a "grocery store shelf" and demanded its immediate withdrawal. After the board ignored her pleas, she began spreading the word amongst her chapter members and beyond, by conversation and letter, and she drew support from both the Roman Catholic and Protestant clergy in Arcadia, as well as the local Americanism Committee of Watchdogs of Freedom. At least in Arcadia, the book was eventually taken off the shelves."¹²⁴

Later that month, the Lakewood Triangle Businessmen's Association representative "received numerous phone calls" from members of the community identifying themselves as

¹²³ See "Our Council Speaks," June 30, 1962, at the Flick-Reedy Corporation auditorium in Bensenville, Illinois, T. Coleman Andrews Papers, Box 1, Folder 3; "An Essay Contest for the American Undergraduate," Ibid., Margaret Meier Papers, Box 14, Folder 14.

¹²⁴ "Librarians Fight Effort to Ban Book on Christ: 'Temptation' Novel Termed 'Blasphemous'; Defended as 'Reflective, Philosophical'", *Los Angeles Times*, December 2, 1962.

Birchers, PTA members or both. The LTBA had hired visual artist Allan Noonan, leader of a local cult called “The Universal Millennium Group” to provide fifty Christmas decorations for the local shopping mall. The angry callers demanded the decorations be taken down, as they not only felt they had nothing to with the birth of Christ. They were convinced Noonan was a Red and sought to destroy the local community through subversive imagery. They threatened to boycott the LTBA’s businesses and picket stores, and though the Association stalled the decision to find a compromise, “[s]trangely-worded captions for the modernistic art works already [had] been removed”¹²⁵

Such local yet tangible victories fueled JBS activism, commitment and fanaticism. Members had the sense of belonging to a community that legitimized their views and felt they were making a real impact. Though the bulk of Bircher activism may seem to have focused on local and rather petty causes, it needs emphasizing how these minor projects cemented community relationships, established Americanist networks and provided bottom-up resources to both the Society as radicalized right-wing forces within the local political landscape. While local Birchers organized against “godless” and “collectivist” influences in their churches, libraries, schools, and government, their enthusiasm nurtured the political steamrollers out to defeat liberalism, moderation and compromise within the GOP and beyond. As highways across the nation were increasingly dotted with “Impeach Earl Warren” and “Get U.S. Out of the U.N.” signs, local Birch-sponsored campaigns forged alliances on the Right and supplied the life blood for a veritable “purge” in local, state and ultimately national politics.

¹²⁵ “Decision Due on Lakewood’s Christmas Art,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 14, 1962.

VII. Conclusion

For all the controversy the Society managed to create in the immediate years after its founding, it grew well beyond the expectations of many. Alan Westin, writing alongside Daniel Bell in 1962, claimed “the Society’s most successful efforts to date [...] have been on the ‘soft underbelly’ of American democracy – those places where a minimum of pressure can often produce maximum terror and restrictive responses.”¹²⁶ Although there is a degree of truth in Westin’s observation, many of the its contemporary critics fatally underestimated the prominent role that the Society and what they called the “lunatic fringes of the right” would play in harnessing grassroots resources, ensuring the conservative capture of the Republican Party and enabling Barry Goldwater to seize the party’s nomination in 1964. “It is extremely doubtful,” Seymour Martin Lipset had written in the wake of McCarthy’s censure, “that the radical right will grow beyond the peak of 1953-1954. It has reached its optimum strength in a period of prosperity, and a recession will probably cripple its political power. It cannot build an organized movement.”¹²⁷ As late as 1962, just two years before Barry Goldwater’s presidential nomination, Bell simply echoed Lipset’s prediction: “For the time being, there seems no reason to suppose that its future holds anything more than its present.”¹²⁸ Even presidential memoranda were prone to downplaying the role of the Birch contingent, concluding its anatomy of “pre-World War II isolationism and the remnants of a 19th century rugged individualism” had no place in modern American culture and would not likely impact the mainstream political process. The events of the following years would prove them wrong.¹²⁹

¹²⁶ Westin, “The John Birch Society (1962),” in Bell (ed.), 67.

¹²⁷ Lipset in op. cit, 369.

¹²⁸ Bell in op. cit., 6.

¹²⁹ “Statements from the Center,” 4.

The mischaracterization of Birch activism as a political anomaly or an extremist fringe, has led to its underestimation in terms of what it could offer the young, conservative movement. Certainly, Welch's conspiracism alienated more Americans than it could impress, but it put his Society on the map and helped attract thousands of likeminded Americanists to its ranks. Through hands-on projects that applied locally as well as nationally, members could gain invaluable organizational experience and feel increasingly united against the sinister forces they sought to expose. It also gave Birchers an identifiable aim and enemy, and united anti-communism with conservative preoccupations – internationalism, constitutionalism, economics and social issues. Clearly, the Society was more than a conspiracist, isolationist group stuck in the past, but recruited thousands of affluent, suburban citizens eager to fight back. Concerned conservatives took their cues from the Birchers' grassroots strength and strategically avoided alienating its membership as far as possible.

Chapter 3: An Americanist Dilemma: Race and Civil Rights

Over the summer of 1963, Robert Welch warned anyone who would listen that the Communists were planning to create a “Soviet Negro Republic” in the Deep South, with Atlanta as its probable capital and Martin Luther King, Jr. as its first president. The scheme, supported by naïve liberals and “fellow travelers,” he claimed, was only part of a greater design to divide and enslave the population of the United States and ultimately, the world. “And while, if and when the Communist plotters break away the Southeastern corner of the United States to form a Negro Soviet republic, and the eastern provinces of Canada to form a Canuck Soviet republic,” Welch prophesied, “there will still be plenty of idealistic dupes shouting about how wonderful it is for these people to have their ‘independence,’ nevertheless we hope that just the shadows of these forthcoming events will bring enough people into the John Birch Society to help mightily in keeping such events from ‘forthcoming’ at all.” In the same breath, the Birch leader outlined a \$250,000 program to attract more members and raise more funds ahead of the 1964 election campaign.¹

While the JBS enjoyed tremendous exposure in the early 1960s and its numbers continued to swell, the focus of the national political agenda began to shift increasingly towards civil rights and racial inequality. The 1963 Birmingham campaign that further enhanced the profile of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the visibly violent response to it, urged President Kennedy to call for substantial reform and within little over a year, Lyndon Johnson made history by signing the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Thus the struggle over civil rights and equality was intrinsically linked to the development of liberalism and would form a cornerstone for Johnson’s Great Society initiatives. That same struggle however proved just

¹ Gladwin Hill, “Welch Says Reds Plot Negro Republic,” *The Miami News*, August 16, 1963, 9.

as crucial for the development of modern conservatism, and the Birchers were no exception. In the same way that mutual enmity towards Communism – and liberalism by association – had brought moral traditionalists, former left-wing radicals and classical liberals together against the New Deal and the welfare state, the issue of racial inequality united conservatives against federal reform. Southern segregationists traditionally promoted white supremacy, on biological and/or cultural grounds, which blended with traditionalists' belief in natural, divinely ordained hierarchies and their distaste for (too rapid and enforced) social progress. At the same time, classical liberals resisted the idea of federal intervention on grounds of constitutionalism, self-determination and property rights, and instead put their faith in a “colorblind” marketplace to even out societal inequities. Fearing federal enforcement of integration or even external Communist manipulation, all could rally behind state sovereignty and states' rights, suspicions of radical subversion and anti-statist resentment in their opposition to demands for government-sponsored racial justice.

The John Birch Society's response to civil rights is significant for several reasons. First of all, by the pivotal year of 1963, the Society had emerged as a grassroots organization with *national* significance and had, unlike visible racist resistance groups such as the White Citizens' Councils (WCC) or the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), a very strong presence in areas well beyond the Deep South. This nationwide reach crucially facilitated a shift away from overtly racist opposition to civil rights. The majority of the Society's membership resided outside the Jim Crow states, and its agenda reflected a much wider set of concerns than racial integration and equal voting rights. The success and growth the JBS enjoyed both in and outside the Deep South showed various strands and degrees of resistance and opposition could be connected under a broader framework. To achieve this, the Society took a particular position between non-conspiratorial conservative factions and overtly racist movements, and even promoted through its official literature and front group operations a

“colorblind” approach to civil rights. While distancing itself from overtly racist motivations and even supporting the *purpose* if not the means of integration, the JBS built on redbaiting strategies that defenders of segregation had started to adopt during the post-war years.²

By doing so, the Birchers helped raise complex segregationist strategies linking integration to Communist subversion onto a nationally viable de-racialized or “colorblind” right-wing critique of liberal reform initiatives that would emerge primarily in the 1970s, including desegregation busing, affirmative action, and welfare. Even before that time, they helped set the stage for the rise of politicians like Barry Goldwater, Ronald Reagan, George Wallace and even the “Southern Strategy” of Richard Nixon, whose populist conservative campaigns relied heavily on *racial coding* and targeted mostly Caucasian conservatives and former New Deal Democrats disillusioned with the “excesses” of liberalism, social unrest, the New Left and radicalized civil rights groups. As part of this transition, the Birchers helped develop a Southern opposition to civil rights reform that was primarily based on constitutionalism and anti-communist association, into a greater focus on social dimensions such as law and order, reverse racism and freedom of association.

Robert Welch applied the same unyielding conspiracism to the Society’s official position on the issue of racial inequality as he had done with most political matters that concerned him. His hardline opposition to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965, as well as his earlier impeachment campaign against Earl Warren, earned his organization countless supporters in the South, while inviting associations with extremist and racist groups. A number of scholars have correctly pointed towards the collusion of the

² Clive Webb, *Massive Resistance: Southern Opposition to the Second Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) complicates the image of a “solid White South” and offers an in-depth study on how defenders of Jim Crow used complex tactics to oppose integration; for Jim Crow defenders and anti-communist strategies specifically, see George Lewis, *The White South and the Red Menace: Segregationists, Anticommunism, and Massive Resistance, 1945-1965* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004).

Society's conspiratorial positions and openly racist individuals and organizations. Frank Mintz and Lisa McGirr have both shown how the Birchers' opposition to civil rights in particular brought some of its members closer to Willis Carto's anti-Semitic, white supremacist Liberty Lobby, while much of the Society's early growth ran parallel with Southern racist groups that defended segregation on racialist grounds, like the Citizens' Councils. In her study on right-wing groups in Michigan, JoEllen McNergney Vinyard identifies similar connections between Birch membership and racist and/or paramilitary groups that enjoyed significant growth in the aftermath of *Brown*.³

However, it is important to emphasize that such cases did not follow the official line of the JBS, and its stance and influence on U.S. race relations is in need of nuance and revision. While it is true Welch's conspiratorial views and position on civil rights often interacted with white supremacy and even anti-Semitism on the ground, he actively discouraged and corrected such behavior among the membership. His alarmist anti-statism was complemented by a strong belief that racial bigotry and conflict were in fact Communist tools of disruption and dissent, and that conservative, patriotic Americans harbored no such divisive views of themselves. Informed by a strong background in business conservatism, Welch was very receptive to pro-market arguments and felt a truly free market would ease tensions between the races and, ultimately, if minorities were willing to work for it, provide equality of opportunity for all. As part of its educational strategy, the Birch founder even hired a number of African American former Communists to write and speak for the JBS on how Communists were planning to exploit racial tensions and the civil rights cause. Though the Society failed to attract significant numbers of African Americans to its cause, and its cast

³ Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, 222; Frank Mintz, *The Liberty Lobby and the American Right: Race, Conspiracy, Culture* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1983), 144; JoEllen McNergney Vinyard, *Right in Michigan's Grassroots: From the KKK to the Michigan Militia* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011).

of disenchanted black former Communists and FBI informants was often dismissed as a publicity stunt, their inclusion can already be seen as a vanguard for the black and “multicultural” conservatisms that would emerge during the subsequent decades.

The Society’s anti-civil rights activism brought more than just a *reactionary* counterforce against alleged Communist infiltration and the radicalization of civil rights movements towards the end of the decade. Much of the scholarship on the decline of 1960s liberalism has pointed towards popular uneasiness with the emergent New Left, as well as Black Power and other civil rights groups moving away from non-violent resistance. It is true that the Birchers exploited these phenomena to tie liberals to radical subversion and chaos. Growing urban unrest and violent riots erupting over fundamental inequality across various American cities provided Welch and his followers with “proof” that a hidden Communist agenda was out to destroy civil society from within and that civil rights was the perfect Trojan horse to accomplish it. At the same time, their insistence on law and order closely matched the concerns and propaganda of non-conspiratorial conservatives, which again undermines a clear mainstream-extremist categorization of the Society. Also, Birchers continued to link liberal attempts to address de facto racial inequality with well-established, “colorblind” free-market values, as illustrated for instance by members’ participation in the drive to repeal the Rumford Fair Housing Act in California in 1964. In sum, much of the Birchers’ activism against civil rights helped the broader conservative movement in developing a more palatable critique of liberal reform and left-wing resistance against racial equality, while pitching its conservative message to a national audience.⁴

⁴ Eugene J. Dionne, *Why Americans Hate Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 37; see also William L. O’Neill, *Coming Apart: An Informal History of America in the 1960s* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971); Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1989); John M. Blum, *Years of Discord: American Politics and Society, 1961-1974* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1992); Hugh Pearson, *The*

I. Making Men See Right: Redefining the Civil Rights Debate

Though the experience of the Second World War galvanized civil rights activism on various fronts and dealt a great blow to the legitimacy of scientific racism, the climate of the Cold War stalled progressive reform, as opponents habitually tied promoters of racial equality to Communist subversion. As early as 1924, the Comintern had issued instructions to its American affiliates to step up organization of black workers, and from 1928 to the beginning of the Popular Front period in 1935, the CPUSA actively pushed for a Soviet state carved out of the Black Belt and populated by Southern blacks. Though this strategy was abandoned in the mid-1930s, anti-communist conspiracy theories kept the fear of a Negro Soviet Republic alive and even moderate civil rights reforms faced virulent attacks from red baiters. After *Brown*, massive resistance quickly escalated, and the South succumbed to a new wave of white racist resentment. McCarthyist conspiracy theories linking the Court's decision as well as general civil rights drives to Communism abounded, and racially moderate politicians like Big Jim Folsom in Alabama suffered defeat at the polls as a result of segregationist indignation.⁵

As well as highlighting the importance of pre-1960s resistance to racial equality with regard to the development of modern conservatism, historians have rightfully pointed towards the connections between Southern defiance and conservative Northern responses to civil

Shadow of the Panther: Huey P. Newton and the Price of Black Power in America (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1994); Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *American Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Kevern Verney, *The Debate on Black Civil Rights in America* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006); Allen J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: University of Georgia Press, 2009).

⁵ See Richard M. Fried, *Nightmare in Red: The McCarthy Era in Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Jeff Woods, *Black Struggle, Red Scare: Segregation and Anti-Communism in the South, 1948-1968* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004); Clive Webb (ed.), *Massive Resistance: Southern Opposition to Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

rights. As Michael Klarman has suggested in his *backlash thesis*, it was only after brutal violence against peaceful civil rights protesters in the South had been broadcast nationally, that Northern sympathy for enforced racial equality started to gain significant momentum, revealing an underlying reluctance to challenge the status quo without such direct, emotional incentives.⁶ In fact, historians have progressively recognized the power and relative success of anti-integrationist drives outside the South. As Thomas Sugrue argues: “Though the differences between North and South were real, our emphasis on southern exceptionalism has led historians, journalists and political commentators to overlook the commonalities across regions.” By connecting manifestations of post-industrial crisis in Northern cities to race and inequality, Sugrue reveals remarkable regional parallels in terms of conservative backlash against civil rights reform.⁷

Similarly, authors like Robert Self and Ronald Formisano have provided useful studies of civil rights opposition with regard to public housing measures in Oakland, California and desegregation busing in Boston, respectively, and have effectively pointed out the obstacles and limitations of progressive civil rights reforms well beyond Dixie. However, these studies have achieved more than the mere debunking of “Southern exceptionalism”. By pointing towards powerful popular campaigns exploiting white resentment throughout the post-war period – including well before the alleged mid-1960s “white backlash” phenomenon – they have been able to highlight the centrality of key issues other than urban chaos and radicalism, such as property rights, education, economic redistribution, etc. Studying the perpetually defiant George Wallace, who caused controversy by outperforming expectations

⁶ Michael J. Klarman, “How *Brown* Changed Race Relations: The Backlash Thesis” in *The Journal of American History* 81.1 (June 1994), 81-118.

⁷ Thomas Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008), xiv; see also Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

in the 1964 Democratic primaries across several Northern states, Dan Carter has offered the interesting conclusion that while Southern populist and racial conservatism may not have emerged unscathed from its struggle with civil rights activism and progressive reform, the eventual coming of age of modern American conservatism seems all but unthinkable without a powerful right-wing rebuttal of liberal and radical left-wing answers to race and civil rights.⁸

As Thomas Edsall observes in *Chain Reaction*, race became absolutely crucial to right-wing strategies of undermining the march of American liberalism: “In the struggle for government and private-sector resources, race has become a powerful wedge, breaking up what had been the majoritarian economic interests of the poor, working and lower-middle classes in the traditional liberal coalition.” Edsall continues, “[o]f the four issues – race, rights, reform and taxes – race has been the most critical, and the most powerful in effecting political change.” In essence, the conservatives became increasingly adept at tying such issues together through *racial coding* rather than explicitly racially charged rhetoric. Similarly, defenders of segregation started to wed their defense of racial apartheid to conservative values shared with Midwestern Taft-style nationalists and burgeoning libertarian strands, forging powerful alliances beyond the Deep South and laying foundations of a Sun

⁸ See Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Ronald P. Formisano, *Race, Class, and Ethnicity in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, The Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995); see also Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich: Race in the Conservative Counterrevolution, 1963-1994* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1999).

Belt variety of conservative politics that would launch figures like Barry Goldwater, Ronald Reagan and Richard Nixon into the national limelight.⁹

Writing about the dynamics of race in the post-New Deal period, Joseph Lowndes does not reject the importance of “backlash” entirely, but offers a caveat, arguing right-wing opposition to civil rights should not be seen as merely reactionary, but as “contingent, mobile, and highly adaptive, constantly responding to changing conditions on the ground.” Charles Wallace Collins’ Dixiecrat manifesto *Whither South*, Lowndes points out, was already calling for an alliance between Southern Democrats and Northern Republicans, stressing mutual suspicions of equalitarianism and executive federal power. Southern segregationists, in other words, were actively seeking commonalities with Northern conservatives and couched their defense of the Southern racial system not merely in racist terms or conspiracy theories, but linked it to broader conservative principles. Strom Thurmond’s 1948 Dixiecrat campaign for instance, downplayed theories of white supremacy, but instead claimed to represent state sovereignty. “The displacement of racism onto other political issues,” Lowndes concludes, “had long been a staple of southern political discourse.”¹⁰

Similarly, Stephanie Rolph’s case study of the White Citizens’ Councils, formed as a response to the *Brown* ruling, points toward the collusion of segregationist resentment and conservative values. Studying the Councils’ publications, rhetoric and outreach initiatives, Rolph concludes Council members were increasingly considering race “as having meaning only within the landscape of broader, conservative principles,” and as a movement

⁹ Thomas B. Edsall and Mary D. Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights and Taxes on American Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1992), 3-4.

¹⁰ Joseph E. Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right: Race and the Southern Origins of Modern Conservatism* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2008), 4-5, 16, 30, 36.

“deliberately situated [their] defense of segregation within a hierarchy of conservative values.” Meanwhile, Southern segregationists established ideological connections to the conservative movement, and even received invaluable support from right-wing icons like William Buckley and the *National Review*. Naturally, the Councils still relied heavily on racist classification and vowed to thwart integrationist efforts of “mongrelizers” and “stand fast and preserve an unsullied race.” But the conclusion for Rolph remains the same: defenders of the Southern racial system, while still relying heavily on explicitly racist views, learned to look for allies not just beyond the South, but beyond the realm of scientific racism. “The conservative label,” she concludes, “became a more sophisticated, structured and marketable version of white resistance.”¹¹

Considering the focus both Lowndes and Rolph put on the amalgamation of conservative positions on racial inequality, it is striking that the John Birch Society receives no attention in their work. On the one hand, the development of a broader right-wing appeal against civil rights reform was indeed well underway before Welch founded the JBS. Then again, at the time when the Society emerged, interestingly between *Brown* and the culmination of the civil rights era, its national presence as a right-wing grassroots organization was unparalleled. Welch himself had strong ties to North and South, and though members were encouraged to act locally, he remained adamant about implementing a single, national credo, which could connect Southern defiance and opposition to integration to a broader, constitutionalist, conservative and libertarian attack on civil rights. Even before

¹¹ Stephanie R. Rolph, “Courting Conservatism: White Resistance and the Ideology of Race in the 1960s,” in Laura Jane Gifford & Daniel K. Williams, *The Right Side of the Sixties: Reexamining Conservatism’s Decade of Transformation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 22-24, 30; Joseph Crespino, in his study on Mississippi conservatives’ struggles against civil rights, illustrates the flexibility of segregationists in strategically cooperating with federal instances demanding integration to maintain a large degree of self-determination and power, see Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

founding his organization, Welch sponsored writers for his *One Man's Opinion* and later *American Opinion* magazine to cover interracial conflict in the South, usually lambasting the Warren Court's judicial activism and ardently defending states' rights from federal intervention over integration. One particularly interesting contribution was authored by African American pundit Clennon Washington King, Sr., a former organizer for the Georgia NAACP who would later come to condemn the organization for supposedly promoting Soviet-orchestrated racial agitation as well as being "democracy-baiting" and "certainly not anti-communistic."¹² In his 1958 article for *AO*, King zoomed in further on the theme of racial unrest and set out much of how the Society would approach racial conflict and calls for social justice in the segregated South:

We have stated repeatedly in this magazine our belief that the trouble in the South over integration is Communist contrived; that Communist agents, working behind the scenes, are using every trick and skill in the Communist repertory to foment bitterness between black and white members of communities where no bitterness existed before; and that the Communists thoroughly intend to fan and coalesce small flames of civil disorder into the conflagration of civil war if possible.¹³

King's attack on "racial agitation" and federally mandated integration was not built on a defense of segregation in its own right, i.e. as an *a priori* naturally superior system that should not be challenged at all. On the contrary, King viewed peaceful integration as an ultimate goal, but expressed concerns that Communists and political opportunists might exploit such desires to bypass states' rights and institute federal encroachment and social turmoil. While he believed the people of the South could organically develop a system of mutual respect and equality, it was these "alien agitators" that introduced, encouraged and magnified actual tensions and racially motivated discrimination.

¹² Clennon King, "Negro Americans Back to Africa?" in *One Man's Opinion* 1.4 (May 1958), 21.

¹³ King, "I Speak as a Southern Negro," in *The American Mercury*, January 1958, 23-33.

The *Brown* decision and immediate fallout clearly seized Welch's attention. While the future Birch leader had initially set out his career as a conservative spokesman with a growing national reputation, his focus mostly remained on matters that concerned likeminded business nationalists, such as internationalism, trade policy, finance and organized labor. Even as his conspiracist conservatism hardened over time, Welch seemed to steer clear of race-related issues altogether and instead followed an essentially Old Guard Republican and McCarthyite line of attack on the New Deal and its socioeconomic legacy. Yet, *Brown* changed everything. In late 1956, almost exactly between the ruling and the Society's founding, he decided to weigh in on the subject himself. In "A Letter to the South on Segregation," an article he wrote for his own *One Man's Opinion*, he criticized the Warren Court, focusing predictably on states' rights and constitutional originalism.

Concretely, Welch criticized contemporary trends in social studies and their influence on the court. In doing so, he decried the establishment of "the doctrine that the meaning of our laws and of our constitution itself change[d] – without any new legislation being needed for that purpose – with changes in psychological and sociological theories, and according to the preferences for particular theories on the part of the current justices." As a profound skeptic of progressive social justice reformism, the future Birch leader proved an anxious observer of intellectual critiques of segregation. Though couched in calls for judicial restraint, the rhetoric bore a significantly populist edge. No doubt he was aware of the pathological focus the Frankfurt School and affiliated intellectual currents had applied to the Right as a response to the rise of totalitarian regimes in Europe; and Welch eagerly returned fire. Not unlike McCarthyism's profound distrust of the intellectual left, Welch made a point of dismissing left-wing critiques of the racial status quo as Communist propaganda. Authors like E. Franklin Frazier, who had contributed heavily to UNESCO's condemnation of racism in "The Race Question" statement, or Gunnar Myrdal, whose "An American Dilemma"

categorized southern racial bigotry as anomalous to American democracy, to Welch symbolized the peril behind the judiciary's watershed departure from the *Plessy* doctrine. Rather than promoting social order and constitutionally mandated individual liberty, the businessman from Massachusetts feared an opportunist class of crony appointees, with Earl Warren at the helm, had caved in to an alien, internationalist agenda oblivious to the particularities of the Southern way of life, or worse, to an outright evil concoction of enforced equalitarianism aimed at sowing dissent over a what he saw as a balanced racial hierarchy.¹⁴

Whereas Welch the Old Guard nationalist in his defense of Jim Crow relied heavily on constitutionalism, states' rights and opposition to federal intervention therein, Welch the transplanted North Carolina native turned to his fellow Southerners in a remarkably emotive appeal not to succumb to Communist agitation and racial hatred: "Do not blame your neighbors, the colored people of the South," he pleaded. "They had nothing to do with the Supreme Court decision, did not seek it, and as a class have not been the ones to bring the racial issue to a boil. Most of them would be just as embarrassed as you would at forced integration, and are just as opposed to the whole idea." Welch made a point of projecting the trope of mob violence onto the external Communist hand carefully manipulating Southern blacks and whites into mutual fear, distrust and hatred. He was quick to "concede" that the "ordinary colored people of the South can easily be misled by clever agitators," with some potentially identifying as "martyrs to a newly acquired oppression complex." Convinced the Communist agitators were attempting to instill chaos and dismantle civil society, Welch added: "But truly, in most cases, they know not what they do; and if there was ever a time

¹⁴ Quoted from a later reprint, distributed by the JBS: Robert Welch, *A Letter to the South on Segregation* (Boston: American Opinion, 1965), 6.

and place when patience and charity and a huge reservoir of deep good will were needed, it is in the South today.”¹⁵

The *externalization* of racial conflict not only allowed Welch to disjoint legitimate popular discontent from Jim Crow as a system, but simultaneously provided a *de-racialized* scapegoat. An astute political observer, Welch was well aware of the complications of defending a rigid racist system on a national level, and disagreed fundamentally with mob justice and violence as a vehicle for redress. Rather than calling for increased racial oppression – which he more often than not denied was a real factor to begin with – Welch joined redbaiting segregationists with enthusiasm in pointing towards a sinister Communist conspiracy behind social discontent with Jim Crow, i.e. a vague, yet omnipresent and threatening enemy against which American anti-Communists of all stripes could align themselves. By tapping into a powerful supply of populist resentment on behalf of “ordinary Americans” vis-à-vis the image of uncaring, apathetic or even malicious, meddling elites, Welch seemed to follow a similar pattern as observed by Rolph and Lowndes in marrying racial conservatism to more palatable conservative themes like republicanism, judicial restraint, a romantic acceptance of natural social hierarchies, law and order and self-reliance. As will be illustrated, the John Birch Society would, as a key player in the grassroots Right revival of the 1960s, make its contribution to the gradual crystallization of right-wing thought on racial inequality under a wider conservative “ethic” that by and large decentered race from its discourse and inverted the oppressor-oppressed role distribution in a counterattack on liberal and radical reformism.

Electrified by Eisenhower’s dispatching of federal troops to Little Rock, populist conspiracy narratives became an established line of attack on integration. Prominent Birch-

¹⁵ Op. cit., 23.

affiliated commentators such as Dan Smoot and Clarence Manion used their presence on radio and television to “expose” the Communist conspiracy behind civil rights, while others, like the Courtneys in Louisiana forged alliances with pro-segregationist groups like the WCC. However, it was not until the James Meredith incident at the University of Mississippi at Oxford in 1962 that the John Birch Society formally began to “educate” on matters of racial conflict on a significant scale. Meredith, a black student who had unsuccessfully applied to Ole Miss, had his right to enroll confirmed in a series of NAACP-supported court cases, but was physically barred from entering on September 20 by Governor Ross Barnett. Under pressure from Attorney General Robert Kennedy, Barnett agreed to back down, but Meredith’s enrollment on October 1 caused segregationist protests on and around campus, even causing two deaths. To protect Meredith and quell disorder, Washington had sent several hundreds of federal troops, which to enraged onlookers seemed all too reminiscent of Little Rock, and reeked of federal tyranny.¹⁶

One such observer was Earl Lively, Jr., a former fighter pilot turned political commentator from Dallas who, over the weeks following the developments, published a series of scathing columns, accusing the Kennedy Administration of unlawful, dictatorial disregard of Mississippi’s state sovereignty in dealing with the matter. The Texan’s writings gained such a growing segregationist readership that the young author was quickly encouraged to compile his findings into a book-length study on the entire incident, which he finalized within a few months’ time. Robert Welch purchased the rights and eventually launched the book, titled *The Invasion of Mississippi*, which he distributed to the general public through the Society’s network of *American Opinion* bookstores for the price of \$1 per

¹⁶ See Earle Johnston, *Mississippi’s Defiant Years, 1953-1973: An Interpretive Documentary with Personal Experience* (Forest, MS: Lake Harbor Publishers, 1990); Nadine Cohodas, *The Band Played Dixie: Race and the Liberal Conscience at Ole Miss* (New York: Free Press, 1997); Charles W. Eagles, *The Price of Defiance: James Meredith and the Integration of Ole Miss* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

copy. In his twelve-chapter exposition, Lively decried the “occupation” and “provoking [of] violence” by federal troops as a dictatorial move by Washington to impose its intrusive rule on the South. The accusation of “provocation” is crucial to the argument; and Lively, no doubt aware of how the image riotous segregationists and physical retaliation against civil rights activists was hurting their cause nationally, emphatically depicted the source of conflict as *external*, just as both Clennon King and Welch himself had.¹⁷

Neither racial bigotry, nor genuine discontent among African Americans, Lively believed, had caused rising tensions, but rather a contrived intervention of a powerful, overbearing and illegitimate authority, cleverly “waving a red flag before a bull” and acting in an alliance of intrigue with the “unholy collusion of civil rights agitation groups.” From the NAACP and CORE to SDS and SNCC, all were mere Communist fronts, simply out to stir conflict between the races and sway African Americans into the red column. The book particularly targeted SCLC leader Martin Luther King, Jr., who had long since attracted the universal ire of white supremacists and segregationists, and his adherence to Gandhi-inspired nonviolent resistance and Christian love posed a problem for opponents eager to tarnish equal rights drives as violent agitation. Hence, his treatment in *The Invasion* relied predictably on indirect deductions concerning King’s character and accusations of hypocrisy and provocation: “Behind his façade of religiosity,” Lively reasoned, “is a troublemaker who gambles the lives and fortunes of his fellow Negroes, for self-glorification and the fulfillment of what has the earmarks of deep hatred for his white brethren.” Lively contrasted King’s alleged treason with words and actions of Governor Ross Barnett, the Magnolia State’s populist champion of segregation, who had condemned the “illegal usurpation of power by the Kennedy Administration” and called upon public officials in the state to “join hands with the people and resist by every legal and constitutional means” all enforcement of

¹⁷ Earl Lively, Jr., *The Invasion of Mississippi* (Boston: American Opinion, 1963), 3.

desegregation imposed upon them. The Governor's eventual concession towards Meredith and Robert Kennedy, Lively assured, was but a noble attempt to maintain the peace and protect the state from further harassment. Alongside Barnett, Lively hailed the ubiquitous Gen. Edwin Walker – by then a martyred hero among Birch circles – who joined the Governor in criticizing the federal intervention at Oxford and vowed to help stage “a national *protest* against the conspiracy from within.”¹⁸

Predictably, the Oxford stand-off between federal troops and protesters for segregationists like Lively was but the tip of the iceberg, and the theme of a vast collectivist conspiracy consistently connected the entire account. Using the same populist trope of the decent, ordinary folk of Mississippi being defied and overpowered by the federal behemoth, Lively connected the dots all the way to *Brown* and the alleged Communist cabal in tracing back the evolution of the race question: “With the Court’s 1954 school segregation decision,” the Texan concluded, “the web of subversion on race relations had come full circle. The Communist party, the NAACP, opportunists in both major political parties, and the Supreme Court all contributed to placing the Federal Government in an area it had never dared enter.” In other words, the federal executive and judiciary branches had only acted as *intermediaries* in stirring up racial unrest in order to federalize local and state law enforcement, establish a veritable police state and ultimately, handing over the country to Communist control. Unimpressed with the Kennedys’ anti-Communist credentials – even the Right’s fallen hero Joseph McCarthy had been a frequent political collaborator of both John and Robert Kennedy and remained a close friend of the family until his death – Lively was quick to dismiss their Northeastern Cold War liberalism as snobbish and antithetical to Southern interests. Rather than bringing solid anti-communism to the national agenda, he accused the President of having been handpicked by the “liberal establishment” to introduce the illusion of

¹⁸ Op.cit., 26, 3, 105, 81, 66.

conservative reason and moderation and give New Deal socialism “a *laissez faire* complexion.”¹⁹

Lively’s treatment of race itself fitted neatly into Welch’s perspective. First of all, the lack of attention devoted to racial bigotry and white supremacism is striking. At no point did Lively defend the Southern racial system on the basis of white biological superiority. On the contrary, he even acknowledged the desirability of a racially equal society *in theory*: “Integration is a legitimate viewpoint, up to the point where its installation by force is advocated.” In other words, the problem was not the *idea* of integration as much as the *enforcement* of it by an illegitimate federal authority. This observation is fairly consistent with the views expressed by both Clennon King and Welch and, interestingly, moves toward accepting philosophical and moral challenges to Jim Crow while projecting the crux of the argument onto the same, race-neutral theme of states’ rights and self-determination.²⁰

Another interesting theme at the root of Lively’s treatment of the race question is that of *reverse racism* and *white victimhood*. In the same section, he argued: “At this point, the segregationist – who never violated anyone’s rights by keeping to himself – is denied freedom of association. No man has a right to associate where he is not wanted; every man has a *right* to his privacy.” The segregationist therefore is presented as an individual merely making a choice not to associate. As such, the inequality of result emanating from *de facto* segregation becomes irrelevant and the roles of oppressor and oppressed inverted: “If anyone is oppressed in the South today, it is the white man. His laws are violated and struck down by edicts of a judicial oligarchy, his rights are trampled, and his land is repeatedly invaded by the brute force of a tyrannical federal Administration.” Subscribing to notions of producerism and economic supremacy, Lively reasoned that whites, being “by and large, the producers”

¹⁹ Op. cit., 38, 105.

²⁰ Op. cit., 114.

would only logically suffer from “collectivist ‘sharing’” as the federal government and the Communist conspiracy behind them would adopt equalitarian and redistributionist rhetoric to confiscate and socialize private property: “Possibly the most preposterous demand of all is the insistence upon integration of *private* business,” Lively added. “This is a denial of the basic concept of property rights; the businessman has the right to dispose of his property as he sees fit.” Again, the issue of race itself is pushed aside, and a classical liberal defense of private property, as supposedly honestly earned by the white population, brought forward. With regard to social injustices suffered by African Americans, Lively echoed familiar accusations of Communist manipulation and exploitation of deluded blacks as “propaganda potential.” For him, both white and black Southerners were equally victimized by federal encroachment and sinister Soviet-controlled schemes, and while he claimed differences between the races had actually been “gradually disappearing” and society had been organically and peacefully moving towards relative equality, the racial agitators had filled the black population with a false class consciousness in order to destroy society from within and establish a Soviet Negro Republic, directly controlled from Moscow.²¹

The Oxford incident provoked a similar backlash to Little Rock, and allowed segregationists and conservatives to further blend their narratives of self-determination and white victimhood, while claiming to speak on the behalf of Southern blacks as well. With the Birch Society steadily growing in members and influence, Welch recognized the events in Mississippi as an opportunity to capitalize on anti-integration sentiment and gain a foothold in the South without alienating racial moderates. Among the first twenty states with organized chapters, seven were in the South - Virginia, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Louisiana, Tennessee and Texas – and local pro-segregation activists swiftly welcomed the

²¹ Op. cit., 114-116; see also Susan Weill, *In A Madhouse's Din: Civil Rights Coverage by Mississippi's Daily Press, 1948-1968* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2002).

Society's national outreach potential.²² Kent and Phoebe Courtney of New Orleans for instance, had established a reasonably successful right-wing propaganda network and published *The Independent American*, which often reported favorably of Welch and the Society. The Courtneys were avowed members and on two occasions – in 1959 and 1961 – even suggested Welch as leader for a potential third party to challenge the political status quo. In any case, accounts of racism among the membership would at time certainly plague Welch and his efforts, but race as a political rallying point remained a clear contributing factor to the Society's early growth.²³ By 1965, the JBS boasted over 100 chapters in Birmingham, Alabama and its suburbs alone, while employing three full-time coordinators across the state. B'nai B'rith, of the Birchers' closest observers, concluded the South "represented the most solid growth of Birch strength, as a region."²⁴

Across the nation, the election of Kennedy provided a clear boost in membership. The Birchers experienced a period of sustained growth during the Democrat's tenure, even though it was Eisenhower's "modern Republican" rule that had prompted its founding. Welch was well aware of the young politician's ties with McCarthy and the conservative wing of the Democratic Party, but the cynical Birch leader refused to adapt his pessimistic outlook when Kennedy, whom Welch had described as no more than "[Walter] Reuther's stooge," defeated the ill-fated Richard Nixon by the narrowest of margins. Conservatives, incensed by the same Nixon, who just before the 1960 GOP convention had agreed to Nelson Rockefeller's civil rights plank, were banking on a moderate approach to integration by a Democratic administration reliant on Southern support. By 1963, JFK had earned universal suspicion after failing to remove Castro and opening up to peace negotiations with the Cubans.

²² Robert Welch, *JBS Bulletin*, March 1960, 7-8.

²³ "Birch Leader Plans Forming Political Party," *St. Petersburg Times*, April 14, 1961, 2.

²⁴ Roy Reed, "Birch Society Is Growing in the South," *New York Times*, November 8, 1965, 1.

However, after two qualified African American students had been barred from enrolling at the University of Alabama, Kennedy recognized the momentum of civil rights activism and addressed the issue on national television on June 11, 1963. In his address, the President bemoaned the refusal of the Alabama state authorities to abide by the law and let James Hood and Vivian Malone enroll peacefully. He conceded professional and economic opportunities were substantially lower for African Americans anywhere in the country, as was general life expectancy. Though Kennedy emphasized racial equality was first and foremost a *moral* issue – “law alone cannot make men see right” – he emphasized the urgent necessity for substantial civil rights legislation, including “giving all Americans the right to be served in facilities which are open to the public – hotels, restaurants, theaters, retail stores, and similar establishments” as well as “greater protection for the right to vote.”²⁵

The backlash materialized immediately. The morning after Kennedy’s address, civil rights organizer Medgar Evers was brutally murdered by segregationist and White Citizens’ Council member Byron De La Beckwith, who later joined the Ku Klux Klan and would remain a free man for over three decades. Simultaneously, white Southern resentment towards the President skyrocketed and endless streams of vitriolic propaganda flowed forth. Days before Kennedy made his fatal visit to Dallas, a hotbed of right-wing activity, “Wanted for Treason” handbills were distributed on the streets. The handbills featured two mug shots of the President headed by the caption “Wanted for Treason.” The pamphlet accused the President of engaging in a number of “treasonous activities against the United States,” including giving “support and encouragement to the Communist inspired racial riots” and “illegally invad[ing] a sovereign State with federal troops.” The man behind the “campaign” turned out to be a Robert A. Surrey, a JBS member and confidant of Walker, who also lived

²⁵ Robert Welch, *The Blue Book of the JBS*, 119; see also Judy L. Hasday, *The Civil Rights Act of 1964: An End to Racial Segregation* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2007), 81.

in Dallas. Another avowed Bircher, Bernard Wiessman, had purchased an advertisement in the *Dallas Morning News* on the day of the assassination, sarcastically welcoming the President to the city that would witness his violent death.²⁶



Fig. 8: An illustration of the infamous JFK mugshot pamphlets disseminated in anticipation of the President's fatal visit to Dallas – AP IMAGES

The death of the President, as well as the white backlash escalating in the South, created a vast upsurge in interest in political extremism, and the Society's presence in the South and connections with vocal opponents of Kennedy placed its activities firmly on the radar. Following the Welch-Eisenhower controversy, political journalists had already joined social scientists like Daniel Bell and Richard Hofstadter – and Theodor Adorno before them – in carefully mapping the excesses of the American Right, and the Society's opposition to civil rights only raised suspicions of organized racial bigotry. In the mid-1960s, the Jewish-

²⁶ Claire Conner, *Wrapped in the Flag: A Personal History of America's Radical Right* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013), 100-106.

American Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith funded a series of studies on the "Radical Right," among which an investigative report on the John Birch Society of Robert Welch and its allies. In their study, Arnold Forster and Benjamin Epstein analyzed a body of publications, pamphlets, internal communications and intra- as well as inter-organizational connections on the far right of the early 1960s, focusing heavily on tendencies towards anti-Semitism and racial, ethnic or religious bigotry. After exposing concrete ties to racist activists like Willis Carto and his anti-Semitic, conspiratorial Liberty Lobby as well as the White Citizens' Councils in the South, the study condemned the Birch Society as a dangerous rallying point for hatred and bigotry on the hard right: "It is a fact that organizations of the Radical Right have been marching shoulder to shoulder with the hard-core segregationists of the White Citizens' Councils in the war against the civil rights movement," Epstein and Forster observed. "In exploiting racial tensions and violence, and the fears that flow from them, the Radical Right is, like the Communists, seeking to fill its coffers and its meeting halls from the fonts of human grief and human misery."²⁷

In her overview study on right-wing organizations, Sara Diamond highlights the rise of racist groups in the period, from Christian Identity and Aryan Nations to the Minutemen and Liberty Lobby. International developments from the "loss of China" to the Cuban revolution and unfolding decolonization movements often bore racial implications to those who saw the rise of international Communism as a threat not only to American power and values, but to white supremacy. Meanwhile, Old Right anti-Semites continued to rely on elaborate conspiracy theories linking the forces of internationalism and global financial

²⁷ Benjamin Epstein and Arnold Forster, *The Radical Right: Report on the John Birch Society and Its Allies* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967) 39-40.

control to primarily Jewish scapegoats.²⁸ Although historian Martin Durham has pointed out that the “strand [...] of the overtly anti-Semitic extreme right” was never quite fitted into the broader modern conservative movement, it was clear to see disconcerting parallels and connections emerge under the umbrella of anti-communism.²⁹ For example, during the Summer of 1963, the American Nazi Party issued the following accusation at the address of Martin Luther King: “We think you are well qualified to judge for yourself whether this black agitator is a genuine ‘Christian’ Reverend or whether he is a conscious part of the despicable and deadly Communist conspiracy to destroy our Christian Constitutional Republic and our White Race.”³⁰



Fig. 9: Birch propaganda claiming MLK attended a “Communist training school” in the 1960s. WILLIAM LOVELACE/GETTY IMAGES

²⁸ Sara Diamond, *Roads to Dominion: Right-Wing Movements and Political Power in the United States* (New York & London: The Guilford Press, 1995), 85-91.

²⁹ Martin Durham, *White Rage: The Extreme Right and American Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2007) 3.

³⁰ “Is Martin Luther King a Communist? The Shocking Record!” in *The Rockwell Report* 2.20 (August 1963), 139.

However, the Birch Society operated differently. To Robert Welch's frustration, his efforts more than ever risked being grouped together with organized racism in opposing popular civil rights drives. What is more, following widely publicized violent putdowns of civil rights activism in the South as well as the death of Kennedy, the momentum seemed to be firmly on the new Administration's side in pushing for significant reform. Within months, the chance of passing comprehensive civil rights legislation lay before Congress, while the new President harnessed the momentum and eventually oversaw the passage of an expanded civil rights package. Additional provisions banning racial discrimination in employment were added, as well as protections for voting rights and the elimination of segregation of all public facilities. In his diatribe on the federal government's intervention at Ole Miss, Earl Lively had already placed the blame with "public acquiescence" and "apathy" in allowing for the incident to occur, and Welch's response to growing popular support for civil rights took the same perspective. With the Civil Rights Act of 1964 squarely on the agenda, the time had come for an ambitious (re-)education campaign.³¹

In March 1964, Welch met with his Council advisors in Pasadena to discuss the Society's strategy on civil rights. A few days later, Western Region Governor John Rousselot was sent to hold a press conference at the Statler Hilton in Los Angeles, announcing the Society's official position on the matter. On behalf of Welch, Rousselot warned against the CRA as a "serious threat to both the freedom and property of American citizens of every creed, color and economic status." The former congressman called on members to purchase ads in their local newspapers and write their representatives in Washington en masse.³² In the meantime, Welch was making similar recommendations in his *Bulletin* and urged Birchers across the country to start "the most massive protest – by mail, by telegram, by advertising,

³¹ Lively, 105.

³² "Birchers Blast Civil Rights Bill as 'Dangerous,'" *Los Angeles Times*, March 13, 1964, 17.

by the distribution of literature, by personal conversations and in every other practical way – that we have ever undertaken with regard to any legislation.”³³ A sample ad was included for members to place in their local papers, with the ominous heading; “Every Vote for the Civil Rights Act of 1963 is a Nail for the Coffin of the American Republic.” Interestingly, the ad made no mention of the Society itself, and merely suggested members to write in name of their local “citizens committees to preserve the American republic.” The pre-fabricated advert alluded to familiar fears of Communist infiltration and warned that “when future generations look back through the eyes of history at this legislation they will recognize 10 per cent of ‘civil rights’ and 90 per cent extension of raw Federal power.” If the bill were to pass and be signed into law, it predicted, it would surely unleash “turmoil, rioting, bitterness and chaos as benefits only the communists.”³⁴ By April, Rousselot claimed that Birch members had placed their anti-CRA ads in hundreds of newspapers, with particular concentrations in but not limited to the South and Southwest, and that Birchers were steadily flooding Congress with letters urging to defeat the bill: “[I]t is our guess that our members are responsible for pouring more than half a million messages into Washington during the last month and will pour in that many more before this fight is over.”³⁵

In order to steer public opinion towards appreciating the supposedly totalitarian intentions behind civil rights reform, it was important for Welch and his following to make a *semantic* distinction. Convinced the Communist conspiracy had hijacked the term “civil rights” from its actual constitutional meaning, Rousselot authored and distributed a pamphlet titled *The Third Color*, alluding to the *red* conspiracy that was pitting racial groups against one another. After emphasizing school integration was never a federal matter, but a state

³³ Welch, *Bulletin*, February 1964, 4-14.

³⁴ “Birch Society Urges Fight on Rights Bill,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 22, 1964, 21.

³⁵ Ben. A. Franklin, ““Birch Drive Seeks Rights Bill Death,” *New York Times*, April 21, 1964, 1; see also Robert Welch, *The Time Has Come* (Boston: Western Islands, 1964), 5-7.

issue under the Tenth Amendment, Rousselot attacked the “abuse” of the Fourteenth Amendment to push through reform. Equal rights, he maintained, were simply not applicable to groups and the federal government did not have the constitutional right to “impose” equality upon individuals. “Civil rights,” he argued, “usually relate to individual rights, not group dynamics.” In other words, by enforcing integration upon the public, the government actually violated the “civil rights” of American citizens, whatever their racial background. “It is for this reason,” he concluded, “that many of us are very gravely concerned that the Communist Party of the United States and other left-leaning groups have been actively trying to redefine what by law and tradition have been our American concept of civil rights, and who shall enforce and protect those rights.” Accusing the established media, progressive ecclesiastical groups and “so-called” philanthropic organs of joining in the “perversion” of the term, the Birch representative made it clear the Society intended to reclaim the “constitutional meaning of ‘civil rights’” and unmask the sinister Communist forces that had been plotting to indoctrinate the American public “by sheer cunning, long-range planning, patient manipulation, and more important, a coordinated strategy of infiltration.”³⁶

The legislative battle over civil rights quickly contributed to race becoming a wedge between ideological camps within both main parties, severely affecting the future of partisan politics. By that time, many Southern Democrats had started to abandon the party of their fathers and formed a new, powerful bloc within the Republican camp, which in turn, sought to root out liberal and moderate influences. John Tower’s 1961 election to the Senate as the first Republican since Reconstruction was one of the first major indicators of a significant party reconfiguration. Strom Thurmond’s switch to the GOP three years later became another. Birchers, too, had become politically “visible” in their own communities and, soon, the national stage. Their uncompromising position on civil rights reaped the approval and

³⁶ John H. Rousselot, *The Third Color: A Look at Civil Rights* (Boston: American Opinion, 1964), 1-3.

encouragement from far right-wing politicians, like Mississippi segregationist Jim Eastland in the Senate and neo-McCarthyite James B. Utt, a congressman from Southern California – both reflecting the ideological amalgamation of Sun Belt conservatism on the race issue. Thurmond himself, probably one of the most recognizable faces of the conservative Sun Belt, had reservations about the Birchers' far-reaching conspiracy theories, but still came to their defense when publicly challenged: "In order to get any sympathetic consideration in this country any more," he fumed, "one must be either black or red [...] no other color seems to matter."³⁷

The conservative champion of the Sun Belt was none other than Barry Morris Goldwater, the firebrand Senator from Phoenix, who combined hard-nosed conservatism and unyielding anti-communism with an undeniable charm and consistently libertarian voting record. Goldwater would maintain an ambiguous relationship with Welch and the Birch membership, but the Arizonan often provided inspiration to the burgeoning Right, and his opposition to parts of the proposed civil rights legislation converged sufficiently with that of Birchers to attract them to his 1964 campaign. Nevertheless, Goldwater had voted in favor of civil rights reform in the past and had been among the first entrepreneurs in Phoenix to integrate his own business and remained a loyal contributor to his local NAACP. In his 1960 bestseller, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, Goldwater explained his position and emphasized his opposition to racial bigotry and discrimination. However, he did not see any contradictions between *civil rights* and *states' rights* and maintained it was wrong to "look to politicians, or sociologists – or the courts – to correct the deficiency."³⁸ Discussing

³⁷ Joseph Crespino, "Strom Thurmond's Sunbelt: Rethinking Regional Politics and the Rise of the Right," in Michelle Nickerson and Darren Dochuk (eds.), *Sunbelt Rising: The Politics of Space, Place, and Region* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 67.

³⁸ Barry M. Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007), 27.

integration of the schools, Goldwater pointed to the Tenth Amendment and repeated the familiar constitutionalist argument that the federal government had no say in the matter:

It so happens that I am in agreement with the *objectives* of the Supreme Court as stated in the *Brown* decision. I believe that it *is* both wise and just for negro children to attend the same schools as whites [...] I am not prepared, however, to impose that judgment of mine on the people of Mississippi or South Carolina, or tell them what methods should be adopted and what pace should be kept in striving toward that goal.³⁹

To conservatives, Goldwater offered an attractive mix of constitutionalism, populist opposition to Washington and a classical liberal appeal – defending property rights, individualism and self-determination. When by the summer of 1964 the Arizonan had been crowned the Republican nominee for President, he voted against the pending civil rights legislation listing key sections desegregating public accommodations and employment as incompatible with his free market views. Goldwater insisted the bill constituted illegitimate intrusions upon individual rights and dismissed it as bearing the “hallmarks of the police state in the destruction of a free society.”⁴⁰ In his controversial nomination acceptance speech, he addressed the issue only indirectly: “Equality, rightly understood as our founding fathers understood it, leads to liberty and to the emancipation of creative differences; wrongly understood, as it has been so tragically in our time, it leads first to conformity and then to despotism.” The candidate’s move on civil rights quickly gained him sufficient support to carry the Southern states of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina – in addition to his home state – in the election.⁴¹

³⁹ Op. cit., 31

⁴⁰ Peter Schweizer and Wynton C. Iall (eds.), *Landmark Speeches of the American Conservative Movement* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2007), 34.

⁴¹ Goldwater quoted in Robert C. Lieberman, *Shaping Race Policy: The United States in a Comparative Perspective* (Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 2005), 161; on Goldwater and the South, see Elizabeth Tandy Shermer (ed.), *Barry Goldwater and the Remaking of the American Political Landscape* (Phoenix: University of Arizona, 2013).

While countless Birchers ended up throwing their weight behind the Goldwater campaign, many enlisted in local battles as well, most notably that over the Rumford Fair Housing Act of California, enacted in 1963 by the Democratic legislature to combat discrimination in the selling or renting of housing. The law prohibited property holders and real estate agencies from discriminating on basis of ethnicity, sex, familial situation, physical ability or religion, but its primary objective was to counter racial discrimination and prevent further *de facto* exclusion of non-whites. In 1964, the California Real Estate Association launched a counteroffensive and managed to get a referendum on the law's repeal on the ballot, listed as Proposition 14. As an educational organization, the JBS refrained from openly endorsing a decision either way, but sponsored speakers that unequivocally recommended repeal. John Rousselot, still the Society's main representative in the West, made a tour of campuses, Birch chapter conventions and Republican and non-partisan organizations, denouncing the law as "tyrannical" and calling on Californians to stand up for their property rights. Predictably, Rousselot insisted neither he nor the Society opposed integration in any way, but that the anti-discrimination provisions were unconstitutional violations of property rights and that "segregation is best handled at the local level."⁴²

As Kurt Schuparra has argued, the Rumford debate became an apt illustration of how the New Right in California came to tackle the issue of racial discrimination: "Opposition to the Rumford Act [...] unlike the reaction to *Brown* in the South, generally was not publicly predicated on overtly racist themes."⁴³ Rather, it became a matter of *racial coding* – law and order, property value and the right to manage one's private property without government intrusion. Though Lyndon Johnson handily won the state's 40 electoral votes, Proposition 14

⁴² "Rousselot Calls for Repeal of Rumford Act," *Los Angeles Times*, May 7, 1964, 15.

⁴³ Kurt Schuparra, *Triumph of the Right: The Rise of the California Conservative Movement, 1945-1966* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1998), 106.

was passed by an overwhelming two-thirds. An enthusiastic Birch member from Burbank wrote to Massachusetts boasting about the Society's share in the victory: "Elections have proved how strong we are. In pre-election days I had the honor to work with many young people of 15 thru 18 years of age who helped out on our FORCED housing repeal here in Calif." It had become clear that while the civil rights movement had succeeded in making discrimination very much a national conversation, conservative opponents were on their way of achieving the same.⁴⁴

II. Striking the Blow for Liberty: TACT and the Re-Education Campaign

With the Civil Rights Act of 1964 enacted on July 2 and Goldwater soundly defeated by Johnson on November 3, a hopeful year had ended in disaster for conservatives, including Welch and his followers. The Republican candidate had been successfully tarnished as an "extremist" and his opposition to the enacted civil rights legislation had confined him to concentrated pockets of resentful whites, mostly Southern. The next year, atrocities unleashed upon peaceful civil rights protesters in Selma, Alabama led to the passage of the momentous Voting Rights Act of 1965, handing liberals two major legislative victories on civil rights within the course of a year. In early 1964, the President had already announced his "War on Poverty" agenda and by the next year, the Economic Opportunity and Food Stamp Acts were passed. Legislation put forward to create both Medicare and Medicaid was in full development, much to the dismay of the right.

⁴⁴ Letter from Lester P. Johns to Robert Welch, November 8, 1964, John Birch Society Records, John Hay Library, Brown University, Box 7, Folder "64"; Earlier that year, Welch had his personal aide Waite write a letter to Massachusetts lawyer Louise Day Hicks "to commend [her] for her forthright stand in the past during the Boston School Boycott" as well as her "deep feeling of concern for the Negro;" quoted from letter from D.A. Waite to Louise Day Hicks, March 5, 1964, *ibid*.

The JBS observed these developments with particular dread. After the enactment of the CRA of 1964, Welch complained Congress had allowed the passage of “an extension of Federal power entirely beyond the limits imposed [on the political process by the Constitution].” Again, with no mention of race, he bemoaned the progressing Communist assault on American sovereignty and vowed to strike back: “It is our intention to provide plenty of materials during the next few months for tackling this ‘civil rights’ problem in many ways and from many angles.” The leadership in Belmont had observed the relative effectiveness of using front groups or *ad hoc committees* in the past – notably the *Movement To Impeach Earl Warren* and *Get US Out of the UN* had raised the Society’s profile and extended its influence beyond the hard core membership. Frustrated with and unwilling to accept growing popular support of liberal civil rights reforms, Welch decided to launch an initiative primarily aimed at the issue of civil rights activism, in his view still the persistent manipulator behind the upsurge in increasing sympathy, besides the media. Over the summer of 1965, the Birch leader announced the formation of *TACT* or *Truth About Civil Turmoil*, a front dedicated to informing Americans of the “true nature” of civil rights and to unmasking the “agitators” responsible. In the July *Bulletin* he formally introduced the membership to his new initiative:

We come at last to the proposed new and major approach to exposure of the hand known as ‘civil rights’. We suggest, and hope to see started soon, the starting up throughout the country of hundreds of local or regional ad hoc committees for the specific purpose of telling the truth about the civil turmoil which is now being made so usual and unhappy a part of the whole American scene.⁴⁵

Welch made no bones about the need to organize citizens beyond the Society’s own cohorts, which he estimated at around 100,000. Aware of the bad press the Society had received during and after the Goldwater campaign, he was determined to extend his influence far beyond: “These committees should become the means of having hundreds of thousands of

⁴⁵ Welch, *Bulletin*, July 1965, 25-26.

good Americans, who are not now members, or ready yet to become members, of the John Birch Society, carry out exactly those same recommendations which are urged upon our members themselves.”⁴⁶

In other words, Welch ordered his troops to do what they did best, namely to organize and educate. “Fully expose the ‘civil rights’ fraud and you will break the back of the Communist conspiracy,” he encouraged them only a few months later.⁴⁷ In essence, TACT committees were typically launched by Birchers around the country, who invited members as well as non-members to readings, public speakers, film viewings, etc. aimed at educating the general public about the “truth” behind civil rights. For example, *The Milwaukee Journal* reported in early 1966 on one such local committee, not coincidentally in the state where George Wallace had won an impressive third of the vote in the Democratic presidential primary two years earlier. William Huegel, a Milwaukee Birch member, had founded a local TACT group, with permission from Belmont, specifically to attack the local *Milwaukee United School Integration Committee* (MUSIC) with film viewings, pamphlets, petitions and a wide array of propaganda warning his fellow citizens about the dangers of “forced” integration of education. Huegel freely told the press about his activities and boasted it had reached hundreds of citizens already. From Connecticut to Orange County, dedicated Americanists started showering their communities with propaganda and unrelenting zeal.⁴⁸

Considering the purpose of the TACT committees was informing Americans about civil *turmoil*, a disproportionate focus remained on urban unrest and violence. Thus, the Birchers shifted their attention away from a constitutionalist lens and towards divisive social

⁴⁶ Robert Welch, *A Stick of Dynamite* (Boston: American Opinion, 1964), 20;

⁴⁷ Welch, *Bulletin*, November 1965, 44.

⁴⁸ “Group Formed to Tell About ‘Rights Fraud’”, *The Milwaukee Journal*, March 13, 1966, 2; see also “New TACTics by the Birchers,” *Newsweek*, February 1967, 13-15.

issues. The summer riots of 1964 in Harlem, Rochester, Philadelphia, and other cities, as well as protests at universities, with Berkeley at the helm, provided the Birchers with easy targets. Whereas legalism and a constitutionalist defense of states' rights had traditionally formed the crux of uniting anti-integrationist sentiment with broader conservative values, right-wingers could warn against the breakdown of moral and social order, applaud the failure of liberalism and appeal on a more emotional level to fellow Americans worried about the fraying fabric of society. Bill Richardson for example, Birch member and former California state assemblyman, ran a company called Richardson Graphic Advertising, which produced *The Berkeley Revolution*, the first film shown to TACT committees in California and a report on Communist indoctrination of students at liberal campuses. Shortly after, RGA produced *Civil Rights/Communist Construction*, a reiteration of civil rights Communist conspiracy theories, which was also distributed among TACT committees. Richardson, still influential in Southern California politics as former board member of directors of the Arcadia Young Republicans and Director of the Republican Education Program operating under the Los Angeles County Republican Central Committee, even had the films shown during training sessions for local Young Republicans branches, United Republicans of California, the California Republican Assembly and the Republican Women's Federated Clubs. A Costa Mesa businessman called Donald Mackey, head of Publius & Associates, former West Coast Director for the American Opinion Speakers Bureau and a member of the Society, often acted as intermediary in the region and sold individual committees copies and the right to stage public viewings.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Donald Mackey, "Notice" (untitled), American Opinion Library at Costa Mesa, May 4, 1966, Margaret Meier Collection of Extreme Right Ephemeral Materials, 1930-1980, Dept. of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford University, Box 29, Folder 1.

The Berkeley Revolution was shown a total of 19 times in California between March 28 and April 29, 1966, and was accompanied by a talk by Birch contributor Gary Allen, perhaps one of the Society's most prolific writers throughout the second half of the decade. By means of introduction to the film, Allen would deliver talks based on his writings regarding the Watts riots of 1965. In May 1967, *American Opinion* published his "The Plan to Burn Los Angeles," which was also released as separate reprint available for purchase. In the article, Allen claimed the riots had been completely orchestrated from without, and that "40-50 Negroes [had been] sent by the Communists" to provoke the masses to wreak havoc in an essentially "planned, engineered, and instigated [...] rebellion." Allen had previously authored a similar account along with Richardson, also published by *AO*, as "Los Angeles – Hell in the City of Angels," which made similar points about Communist agitation behind the August uprising that had left 34 dead and millions in damage. A year after the riots, Ronald Reagan won his first elected office as Governor in the state, heavily banking on popular outrage at a perceived loss of social order.⁵⁰

Southern California indubitably remained the Society's unofficial capital, and the enthusiasm for TACT on the ground reflected exactly that. In January 1966, a journalist for *The Washington Post* noted the growing presence of local committees and their capacity for exploiting "the potent political factor" created by Watts and Berkeley.⁵¹ Within a year, Welch announced "several thousand ad hoc committees" were active nationwide, among which several hundreds of TACT committees. The West provided the highest growth numbers by far. In California alone, 180 committees had been created. Another year later, 151 were operative just in the Southern part of the state, compared to 280 in the Arizona-New Mexico-

⁵⁰ Gary Allen, *The Plan to Burn Los Angeles* (Boston: American Opinion, 1967), 2-3; see also William J. Rorabaugh, *Berkeley at War: The 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

⁵¹ Julius Duscha, "Birch Campaign Formed To Oppose Rights Drive," *The Washington Post*, January 8, 1966, 1.

Colorado-Utah-Idaho region, 130 in central California and Nevada, 110 in Washington and 100 in Oregon and Northern California. Estimates ran up to a network of 490,000 individual mailing addresses, one third of which were based in Southern California. Welch reckoned an average total of 180 people attended each meeting, with around 65% being non-members. Doing the math, the Founder concluded that if only 1% of those ended up joining the Society afterwards, Western TACT groups alone could bring in little under 1,000 new members each year.⁵²

Another key publication circulated by TACT networks was Alan Stang's *It's Very Simple: The True Story of Civil Rights*. Published in July 1965 by Welch's Western Islands publishing arm – and so just before the Watts riots – *It's Very Simple* spelled out the history of civil rights and anything remotely related from African independence struggles to Bolshevik directives on race relations and from Black Muslims to the NAACP. In the preface, Stang posed his readership the seemingly straightforward question: “What is the *real* purpose of the Negro revolution?” The answer, he guaranteed them, was in fact “very simple”: Not only was the civil rights movement “planned by the Communists, but [it] was begun, staffed, and [...] conducted by the Communists – and has only one real purpose: the destruction and communization of America.” By drawing comparisons to National Liberation movements in Algeria, Kenya, Indonesia, Tanzania, Communist regimes in China and Cuba, and even “socialist” states like Canada, Stang unfolded his worldwide narrative of deception and violence, incessantly drawing connections with unfolding events in the United States: “[T]he whole point to the war of national liberation is to create the impression that it isn't what it actually is in fact – a play for power [...] – but that it is a ‘mass movement’ of a

⁵² Welch, *Bulletin*, May 1966, 10; “Project Knowledge As of April 1, 1967,” Margaret Meier Collection, Box 32, Folder 10 “TACT mailings/announcements.”

‘heroic people,’ ‘united as one,’ etcetera and so on, and that it has something to do with self-determination.”⁵³

According to Stang’s theory, African Americans were both duped into believing they were actually oppressed in American society and that the Communists, conveniently taking all sorts of shapes and disguises were simply mounting a false campaign of equality: “In other words, keep the Negroes under the impression that the campaign has something to do with what they want, when all along it has only to do with communism.” Meanwhile, government, he argued, profited from the artificially inflated need for redistributionist policies and the War on Poverty was cunningly designed to create millions of dependent lowlifes and destroy the American work ethic. Not unlike classical liberals heralding a revival of capitalist celebration – for example, Milton Friedman in *Capitalism and Freedom* – Stang went on to claim true racism was simply incompatible with individual liberty and the profit motive: “Racism, in short, can prosper only if the government can force a man to do what it likes – only under some sort of socialism.” Capitalism on the other hand, Stang maintained, “not only discourages racism – it punishes it.” As such, the racist is rectified by the market. “His private neurosis remains a private neurosis.”⁵⁴

Another key feature of *TACT* was its extensive use of touring speakers. The American Opinion Speakers’ Bureau had compiled an impressive array of travelling “experts” re-educating Americans across the land on matters of internationalism, fiscal policy, subversion in the schools and churches, and so on. With *TACT* networks well established by 1966, dozens of speakers, including Baptist minister Wes Auger, Tom Anderson, John Rousselot, Billy James Hargis, Edwin Walker, Jim Clark, Clarence Manion, Fred Koch or Robert Welch himself, completed ambitious speaking tours across vast regions, filling school auditoriums,

⁵³ Alan Stang, *It’s Very Simple: The Story of Civil Rights* (Boston: Western Islands, 1965), 11-13, 52.

⁵⁴ Op. cit., 99, 142; on the War on Poverty as a Communist conspiracy see pages 162-183.

community centers, churches and indoor sports arenas with eager anti-Communist audiences ready to take down the collectivist conspiracy behind civil rights. Here, too, speakers would move away from explicit treatment of race itself, and even claim the Society was the bastion of freedom for disfranchised African Americans against conniving Communist agents trying to question the colorblind nature of the market and break down social order.⁵⁵

Again, the Birchers' defense of the market and focus on law and order, constitutionalism and socioeconomic issues ran alongside the conservative line on race and civil rights that helped define the political paths of Goldwater, Reagan, Wallace and Nixon. Racial coding and a "nationalization" of Southern populism connected both Birchers and non-conspiratorial conservatives, but the JBS went a step further. Whereas the new conservative contingent within the GOP, first led by Goldwater, gradually accepted its failure to attract African American voters and instead learned to "hunt where the ducks are," the JBS actively promoted an "inclusive" conservatism, seeking to attract a racially diverse body of members and collaborators. A particularly significant feature on the speaking tours were a group of African American "experts" on the Communist peril, touring the country and recounting their experiences as former Communist dupes and warning against "respectable" civil rights leaders such as King, Roy Wilkins or Ralph Abernathy. The most significant among the Birchers' black speakers were Julia Brown, Leonard Patterson, Lola Belle Holmes and the Reverend E. Freeman Yearling of Harlem. Brown had been an FBI informant within the Cleveland branch of the CPUSA and later served as "Honorary Chairman" of the city's TACT committee. While touring the speaker circuit in 1966, she authored – though the book was ghostwritten – *I Testify: My Years As An FBI Undercover Agent*, a recollection of

⁵⁵ "Is the 'Civil Rights' Movement Directed from the Kremlin? For the Answer HEAR WES AUGER, PASTOR on The Church and Civil Turmoil," Arcadia TACT Committees, October 28, 1966, Margaret Meier Collection, Box 32, Folder 10 "TACT mailings/announcements."

Brown's alleged discoveries as an informant within the CPUSA, published and publicized by the Birch Society. TACT committees would typically sponsor talks by Brown in towns where Martin Luther King was scheduled to appear shortly afterwards, which led the Society to make rather bold claims on the reverend's speaking schedules:

Now we are always very careful about claiming credit for anything. We do not want to deceive ourselves or anybody else. But we clearly can claim a tremendous amount of credit for our part in exposing the Communist hands and plans behind the "civil rights" movement. Let us remind you, for instance, of just how much we had lessened the value of M.L. King to his Communist bosses. During the last few months of his life he was repeatedly cancelling out speaking engagements because of one of our Negro speakers had appeared in the same city just ahead of him, exposing his pro-Communist record and the whole "civil rights" fraud.⁵⁶

Leonard Patterson, who gave regular lectures and interviews on his experiences as a Communist, emphasized the violent techniques he had been taught as by the reds, "the very tactics that we saw used right here in Harlem and Watts." He also warned against the Communists' schemes to infiltrate "the existing Negro organizations like the NAACP, the negro churches, the Elks, the Masonic Lodges, the trade unions."⁵⁷

Yearling did not claim any inside CPUSA expertise. Instead, the pastor reveled in dissecting Harlem's street violence, which he attributed to Communists, Black Muslims, Panthers and "non-violent" hypocrites like King. Yearling was a fervent critic of War on Poverty programs and pitched a libertarian message of self-reliance, freedom of association and hard work in his "Riots – Cause and Cure" lectures. In doing so, he sought to "encourage American Negroes to spurn the 'free' handouts of the welfare statists for what they really are: the crassest form of economic slavery." Nothing but hard work, Yearling prescribed, could

⁵⁶ Message of the Month (MOM), July-August 1968 transcript, JBS Papers, Box 5, "MOM," 6.

⁵⁷ "John Birch Society Report," February 1966, interview transcript, JBS Papers, Box 39, "JBS Report," 1.

set the African Americans free, while reliance on government handouts only served to spin them into a “downward spiral of misery and dependency.”⁵⁸

A fellow defender of “black capitalism” was Manning Johnson, who had already passed away in 1964 and never had the chance to appear on the TACT speakers’ circuit. His experiences still proved useful for Welch’s endeavors, since Johnson had been active as a Communist coordinator in the railroad dining-car service industry from 1930 until 1940 in Pennsylvania and Western New York, and acting as District Organizer from 1932 to 1934.⁵⁹ In fact, Johnson testified alongside Patterson in 1953 and 1954 against African American Nobel Peace Prize recipient Ralph Bunche regarding the latter’s involvement with the National Negro Congress, a Communist subdivision mobilizing African Americans in the United States.⁶⁰ Johnson authored *Color, Communism and Common Sense*, an anti-communist celebration of Booker T. Washington’s conservatism and a manifesto for self-help:

The Negro business man has always been a chief target of the reds. They despise him because of his conservatism. They label him a “tool of the white imperialists” and an “enemy of the Negro masses.” Such labels are reserved for those the reds plan to liquidate and since the Negro business man is an inspiration and example to other Negroes to take advantage of the free enterprise system, he is therefore an object of derision by Communists.⁶¹

After Welch acquired the rights for Johnson’s book, he had it added to the civil rights reading list and consistently promoted the book in the Society’s *Bulletin*. Interestingly, to

⁵⁸ “Riots in U.S. Seen Red-Inspired,” *Spokesman-Review*, April 19, 1968, 8; “TACT Presents Rev. E. Freeman Yearling Speaking On RIOTS - - CAUSE AND CURE,” July 31, 1967, Margaret Meier Collection, Box 32, Folder 10 “TACT mailings/announcements.”

⁵⁹ “Subversive Influence in the Dining Car and Railroad Workers Union,” Hearings before the Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and other Internal Security Laws of the Committee on the Judiciary United States Senate, 82nd Congress, First Session, August 10, 1951, 37-45.

⁶⁰ Charles P. Henry, *Ralph Bunche: Model Negro or American Other?* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 179.

⁶¹ Manning Johnson, *Color, Communism and Common Sense* (Boston: American Opinion, 1958), 58.

commemorate the late anti-communist, the Birch Society in 1964 named an annual scholarship after Johnson, through which the Society would donate \$1,000 to an African-American student submitting a short essay on conservative values to support their education. A Gwendolyn Kyle of Richmond Virginia, a 17-year old medical student at Contra Costa College in San Pablo, California became the first to win the grant after submitting a favorable piece on Proposition 14 against the Rumford Act in California.⁶²

From the start, Welch had openly welcomed members of all colors and creeds – provided they were devout, motivated individualist Americanists, and he maintained that membership had never been subject to racial profiling. In fact, Southern members wrote their headquarters with great frequency to encourage induction of “good Negroes” to improve interracial dialogue on conservative principles. One member from South Carolina quite openly urged Welch to “intensify [the] campaign for [segregated] Negro chapters” as early as 1961.⁶³ A few days before the 1964 election, another member from Mississippi, while requesting mobilized support for a Mississippi Constitutional school desegregation nullification amendment “so that control of the schools can be returned to local communities and the states,” warmly recommended a local conservative, anti-communist African American organization called the Negro Citizenship Association of Mississippi to be lauded in the Society’s literature.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, at the peak of its powers Welch admitted his

⁶² John Rousselot, July 2, 1964. JBS Papers, Box 3, folder “John Birch Society Takes the Position”; see also “Negro Is Winner of Birch Grant,” *Spokane Daily Chronicle*, September 24, 1967, 7; “Birch Society Sets Up Grant for Negroes,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 7, 1964, 24.

⁶³ E.G. Schuler in Member’s Monthly Message, September 1961, John Birch Society Papers, Box 6, Folder “MMM”.

⁶⁴ Mrs. G. F. Wilson in Member’s Monthly Message, October 26, 1964, John Birch Society Papers, Box 7, Folder “64”; the NCAM was an initiative founded and sponsored by the segregationist State Sovereignty Commission of Mississippi.

organization had only been able to attract between 80 and 100 black members, all in *de facto* segregated chapters.⁶⁵

Judging from its internal communications, Belmont seemed determined to counteract any forms of racism among its membership, notwithstanding which ethnic group might be on the receiving end of it. Though many Southern members belonged to both organizations, Welch was even cautious in expressing approval of the White Citizens' Councils and withheld formal endorsements. On October 11, 1963 for instance, Welch's assistant D.A. Waite responded to a letter from a James D. Bulmer of San Mateo, California asking about the Birchers' relationship with the Councils. Waite pointed out in a letter, dictated by Welch a week before, that Birchers' involvement within the Citizens' Councils proved a "conflict to the best interest of the JBS." Welch stressed he believed the Councils boasted many fine patriots but "due to the varied quality found in different local branches of these groups, we would be better off not to involve the Society with the movement." With regard to the Nazi and States Rights' Parties, Welch was even more explicit in his denunciation.⁶⁶

Keeping a lid on manifestations of racism among the membership was no easy task. A Mrs. Neely from Gulfport, Mississippi wrote Welch in September 1961 in a Members'

⁶⁵ On African Americans in JBS, see Phil Casey, "Welch Denies Birch Society Far Right, Declares It Keeps the People Informed," *The Washington Post*, November 6, 1965, B2.

⁶⁶ Letter to James Bulmer, October 11, 1963, John Birch Society Papers, Box 7, "Negro Prospects or Problems." See also reply to MMM from Marilyn Allen of Salt Lake City on January 3, 1964 on American Nazi and National States Rights Parties, JBS Papers, Box 7, "Negro Prospects or Problems"; reply to MMM from James Bulmer of San Mateo, California on October 11, 1963, *ibid.* It should be pointed out similar studies on the Citizens' Councils have pointed towards a wider array of conservative issues including taxes, federalism and opposition to the social gospel movements, thus placing the CC's within a similar continuum of conservative backlash as the JBS, see William Simmons, "Race in America: The Conservative Stand," in Huston Smith (ed.), *The Search for America* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1959), 62; Neil R. McMillen, *The Citizens' Council: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction, 1954-6* (Urbana: Illinois University Press, 1994), esp. 92-135, and chapter 10: "Race and the Radical Right," 189-206.

Monthly Message to recommend Carleton Putnam's white supremacist *Race and Reason – A Yankee View* for the Birch reading lists, which at that point featured no literature specifically on the race question yet: "I think every American should know about this book," Neely wrote in her plea, "[i]t is the best documentation of Race [sic] I have ever read."⁶⁷ A month later, Mr. and Mrs. Curtis from Tyler, Texas make the same recommendation: "RACE AND REASON by Carleton Putnam explodes egalitarian theory... Should be read by all."⁶⁸ Such suggestions were usually ignored, and needless to say, Putnam never made it to any of the approved reading lists, but some cases demanded more direct action. Waite again, asked about the Society's views on racial classification, responded to a member from Salt Lake City with strong disapproval:

Your claim to being 'an AMERICA FIRSTER ... is quite contradictory. The United States Constitution simply does not support your concept of (a) limiting the rights of citizens only to those who are white; (b) limiting the rights of citizens of citizens only to those who are Christian; (c) opposing and/or hating those citizens who are either black or Jewish.⁶⁹

Welch did not make a habit of tolerating openly racist comments or assumptions among his flock, and believed it was very much an "un-American" Trojan horse technique employed to upset an otherwise relatively harmonious social order. Racism and bigotry, he claimed, were not just despicable, but a result of Communist agitation in an attempt to divide the races and thus, the freedom-loving American people:

[A] dislike for other races or creeds is a kind of unfortunate weakness to which human nature has a sad and too general vulnerability. It has been used by the Communists with tremendous energy, skill, and determination in America to stir up hatred and distrust among innocent people; between Gentiles and Jews; of Protestants for

⁶⁷ Mrs. Neely in MMM, September 1961, John Birch Society Papers, Box 6, Folder "MMM".

⁶⁸ Mr. and Mrs. Curtis in MMM, September 1961, *ibid*.

⁶⁹ D.A. Waite to Marilyn R. Allen, January 9, 1964 (dictated January 3), John Birch Society Papers, Box 7, Folder "64".

Catholics and vice-versa; of white people for colored and of our colored citizens for their white neighbors; and in a dozen lesser ways and opportunities.⁷⁰

In a pamphlet titled *The Neutralizers*, Welch addressed long-standing anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, from the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and writings of Nesta Webster, to hard-nosed Old Right racists like Charles Coughlin and Gerald L.K. Smith. Welch naturally subscribed to most of the recurring conspiracy theories concerning the rise of Marxism, the establishment of the U.S. Federal Reserve or America's internationalist turn on the global stage, but the native Southerner refused to adopt racist narratives leading back to Jewish complots or race mongrelizers out to destroy the white race. Instead, Welch explained how a Jew exactly had to *cease* being a Jew, and renounce his true identity to become a Communist. The Communist, by definition, lost all right to an individual identity, and betrayed not only his own faith and ethnicity, but all of mankind in equal measure. It was the collectivists who sought both to erase all individualism by first playing out different groups against each other: "It is possible for clever enough agitators to stir up almost as much hatred by some Protestant groups for Catholics, or by Negroes for whites, as of Christians for Jews."⁷¹

When dealing with instances of anti-Semitism within the Society, Welch proved equally resolute and ordered his staff to carefully monitor such dubious activities. On March 2, 1962, Tom Hill, director of Field Activities reports to a research assistant, Harry Browne, on a message he had received from a Ronald Carnes of Gardena, CA, Birch chapter 899, on "discussion periods of the Zionist question" at chapter meetings and some of Gerald L.K. Smith's writings being circulated:

He pointed out that several people came to this chapter as guests and were quite upset to see the material being circulated. He also went on to state that he did not want to get anyone into 'hot water' but he felt that he was expressing the opinion of several of

⁷⁰ Welch, *Blue Book*, 89.

⁷¹ Op. cit., 9; see also Leo Ribuffo, *The Old Christian Right: The Protestant Far Right from the Depression to the Cold War* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983).

the local members when asking for a solution to the problem. Again, this is a ticklish situation for we do not know how serious the problem is.⁷²

Though Welch's claims of rising Jewish membership were usually backed up with little or no evidence given the secrecy of the membership database, a core of Jewish Birch members organized the affiliated Jewish Society of Americanists, which by 1967 counted around 250 members, including however non-Jews as well.⁷³

In late October 1964, a Mr. Walter Kaufman from the Bronx wrote the Belmont headquarters:

Before joining the JBS, I had heard rumours [sic] to the effect that it was nothing but a bunch of anti-Semites. Being Jewish this worried me. I decided to look and see for myself. After being a member for about 6 months, and a chapter leader for 3 [...] I don't have to read the California (Report) to find out that anti-Semitism doesn't exist in the JBS.⁷⁴

Just two months earlier, Waite had replied to an interested conspiracist who had asked about the Society's position on Jews and the Catholic Church. Waite dismissed the latter's allegations and pointed out that such conspiracies were "only part of the entire picture": "We're fighting Communists, NOT former Jews, former Roman Catholics, former Protestants who have forsaken their real loyalties to these groups and sold themselves to this evil system first and foremost."⁷⁵

⁷² Tom Hill to Harry Browne, March 2, 1962, JBS Papers, Box 7, "MMM".

⁷³ Epstein and Forster, 113.

⁷⁴ Letter from Walter Kaufman to Robert Welch, "Member's Monthly Message," October 26, 1964. JBS Papers, Box 7, "64."

⁷⁵ D.A. Waite to John Baker, Jr., August 20, 1964, JBS Records, Box 7, Folder "64"; on the subject of religion and conspiracies, Welch himself had written in the Blue Book: "Far from founding a religion, we are merely urging Protestants, Christians, Jews, or Moslems to be better Protestants, better Christians, better Jews, or better Moslems, in accordance with the deepest and most humanitarian promptings of their own religious beliefs. And we are simply trying to draw a circle of faith in God's power and purpose, and of man's relationship to both, which is broad and inclusive enough to take each man's specific faith into that circle without violation," see *Blue Book*, 155.

Still, many of Welch's close collaborators and advisers were renowned racists or at least frequently expressed racially and culturally intolerant views. Executive Committee member Augereau Heinsohn, a former supporter of the States' Rights Party of Tennessee, at one point had Welch publish his piece "Free Lunch and Boobus Americanus," a tirade against New Deal liberalism in which the Southern industrialist brusquely complained:

Personal freedom is rapidly vanishing in America. A citizen can no longer enjoy the full fruits of his own labor and be protected in the possession thereof from the mewling bureaucratic thieves who seek to distribute his wealth to spear-toting Bantu, three-toed Caribs with thumbs on their feet, assortments of Communist gorillas, and every foreign thug or domestic indolent who comes begging.⁷⁶

Fellow Southerners Clarence Manion and Tom Anderson, as well as prominent members such as Kent and Phoebe Courtney, often expressed openly racist views undergirding their defense of segregation, but when speaking on behalf of the Society, usually refrained from airing such views in public. One controversial episode however, chronicled by Epstein and Forster, turned decidedly sour for Welch when National Council member and avowed white supremacist Revilo Oliver gave a speech titled "Degeneracy or Conspiracy?" at the annual New England Rally for God, Family and Country in Boston on July 2, 1966, which was an annual Birch-sponsored event. Oliver was discussing the Zionist influences within the Communist conspiracy and openly contemplated "the beatific vision" of "all the Jews being vaporized at dawn tomorrow." The speech caused such controversy Oliver was forced to resign within a month before joining the anti-Semitic Liberty Lobby. Welch immediately released a statement on behalf of the Society declaring "we do not subscribe at all to Dr. Oliver's 'racial superiority' theories, nor his views concerning the basic degeneracy of the human race." After trying to nuance Oliver's words, he reiterated what he felt separated his Society from the many racist movements on the far right: "the most basic principle of the

⁷⁶ Augereau Heinsohn, *Free Lunch and Boobus Americanus*. (Boston: American Opinion, 1966), 1.

Society is that every man is to be treated and judged entirely as an individual, and not as a member of some group.”⁷⁷

The rhetoric coming from Belmont grew increasingly open to the *idea* of civil rights reform, at least from an individualist perspective. No doubt public relations mattered to Welch and, aware of rising popular outrage at explicit racial bigotry, he made sure any attack on civil rights activism and legislation made a clear distinction between “civil rights” as an objective and the deceptive use of it by the Communists. In August 1965, the Society ran full-page ads in a number of newspapers under the heading “What’s Wrong With Civil Rights?” The ad repeated many of the familiar accusations, but made a point of recognizing civil rights itself as a “good cause,” merely betrayed by conniving Communists. “The answer is, nothing! But there is a great deal wrong with what is being done today in the name of civil rights.” A recommended reading list was included featuring the works of Stang, Allen, Lively, Rousselot and Welch himself.⁷⁸

By far the most prolific African American contributor on the Belmont payroll was conservative convert George Samuel Schuyler, Welch’s personal “expert” on Communist infiltration in Africa, as well as civil rights issues at home: “I had opposed all the Marches on Washington and other mob demonstrations,” Schuyler wrote in his 1966 autobiography, “recognizing them as part of the Red techniques of agitation, infiltration, and subversion.” Schuyler grew up in Providence, Rhode Island and was confronted with *de facto* racial barriers from a Northern perspective rather than a Southern. Starting out as a left-wing intellectual, Schuyler became increasingly influenced by Booker T. Washington and, disillusioned with the promises the Left held for blacks, came to embrace Washington’s

⁷⁷ Epstein and Forster, 112-4; on Oliver and Carto, see Mintz (1983).

⁷⁸ “What’s Wrong With Civil Rights?” *Palm Beach Post*, October 31, 1965, 10; see also John H. Rousselot, *Civil Rights: Communist Betrayal of a Good Cause* (Belmont: American Opinion, 1965).

vision of self-realization of the black race, not through struggle or challenge of the authority of whites, but through following the white man's example and availing themselves of the honest, color-blind capitalist system he established. Schuyler frequently criticized fellow African-Americans for petitioning the Federal government for compensatory action, instead of availing themselves of opportunities provided by the free market to improve themselves and their lot. Because of his outspoken Rightist views and vocal contempt for Civil Rights leaders like Martin Luther King, Schuyler eventually lost his job with the *Pittsburgh Courier* in 1966 and turned exclusively to addressing conservative audiences, at one point sharing a speaker platform with segregationist Sheriff Jim Clark of Selma, Alabama at a Birch Council dinner on December 4, 1965.⁷⁹



Fig. 10: George S. Schuyler debating civil rights leader Malcolm X in 1964 – HULTON-DEUTSCH COLLECTION/CORBIS

For the occasion of Thanksgiving 1965, Schuyler wrote an essay titled “For America Let Negroes Give Thanks,” which would later appear in *American Opinion*. Schuyler decried the events in Watts and elsewhere and blasted black rioters and looters outright, lamenting

⁷⁹ George S. Schuyler, *Black and Conservative: The Autobiography of George S. Schuyler* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1966), 341.

“the genocidal threat inherent in the Marxist ideological and physical challenges to the body politic in general and the Negro mass in particular.” Without exception, the “black Mencken” – as he was often referred to – blamed civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King, James Farmer, A. Philip Randolph, Bayard Rustin, James Forman, Jesse Gray, Malcolm X “and their white counterparts” for instigating rebellion over “alleged Negro distempers and grievances.” Instead, he called for constructive patriotism and gratitude and emphasized how African Americans were still better off than the vast masses behind the Iron Curtain, or their brothers and sisters on the African continent. Not unlike other Jim Crow apologists, Schuyler compared the lot of African Americans to that of the Irish and Italian immigrants in the 19th and early 20th centuries, experiencing fierce discrimination and “Know Nothing” hatred until they had earned a fair shot to work their way up the ladder. “Let us be thankful that we Negroes have been able to achieve prominence in every field of endeavor,” he rejoiced, “that we have had the stamina, education and enterprise to forge ahead in the world’s most exciting and complex civilization,” stressing throughout the essay blacks should be grateful and mindful that the advances already made were the result of a cooperative effort, “an interracial enterprise.”⁸⁰ Attacking Johnson’s “War of Poverty” initiatives, Schuyler wrote: “Where once poor people shunned acceptance of charity as demeaning,” he concluded, “they are now demanding it as a civil right.”⁸¹

Schuyler’s role in the Birch Society’s take on race and civil rights merits more attention in its own right. The writer’s alliance with Welch and the Birchers – as well as perhaps the deployment of several black speakers and writers on behalf of the Society’s opposition to civil rights – implies an important step in the development of modern

⁸⁰ George Schuyler, “For America Let Negroes Give Thanks,” September 15, 1965, Box 6, “American Opinion Transcripts,” 1, 11.

⁸¹ “Hellfare,” October 30, 1967, Schuyler Papers, Box 6, “American Opinion Transcripts.”

conservatism and race. When joining Daniel Bell and Richard Hofstadter in scrutinizing right-wing support initially for McCarthy and then the John Birch Society itself, Austrian-born conservative intellectual Peter Viereck remarked a certain transition had been going on within right-wing thought. McCarthyism, and Birchism after it, seemed to move increasingly away from racial classification as a crucial criterion for inclusion/exclusion within/from prevailing conceptions of “Americanness.” With anti-Communism dominating post-war political culture, Viereck noticed the importance of racial purity increasingly gave way to a broader sense of “ideological” conformity:

In the old days, racial and intellectual intolerance went hand in hand. Today racial and religious intolerance often decrease in proportion as intellectual intolerance increases. Since our vocabulary lacks any term for this new relationship, why not coin the word “transtolerance”? Transtolerance gives all racial and religious minorities their glorious democratic equality – provided they accept mob conformity against all intellectual minorities.⁸²

Viereck’s analysis is intriguing, if perhaps bordering on the simplistic. It is nevertheless clear that a certain shift had been set in motion. Even a much more nuanced study like Gary Gerstle’s landmark *American Crucible* traces an unmistakable, if frustrated struggle between an American “racial” and “civic nationalism” with the latter progressively posing challenges to the former. The complex dynamics between racial exclusiveness and civic inclusiveness offer no clear path for the historian of the Right, and in an appropriately sober section on civil rights and civic nationalism, Gerstle illustrates compellingly how race has never been fully removed from the equation. So too the Birchers, betrayed strong, underlying racial and cultural assumptions, for instance when critiquing worldwide post-war decolonization struggles, openly siding with the white minority regimes in South Africa and Rhodesia, or

⁸² Peter Viereck, *Unadjusted Man in the Age of Overadjustment: Where History and Literature Intersect* (Edison, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2004), 219; Schuyler and Welch corresponded frequently, and were on cordial terms. Usually Welch wrote Schuyler to thank him for a written contribution or solicit a new piece, e.g. letter from Robert Welch to Schuyler, December 17, 1965, Schuyler Papers, Box 1, “Correspondence American Opinion.”

former colonial powers in Indonesia, Algeria and the Congo, on basis of alleged cultural superiority.⁸³

Nevertheless, something remains to be said for the growing role of what Angela Dillard puts forward as “multicultural conservatism,” a loose collection of *conservatisms* increasingly liberated from a male WASP-dominated standard. Dillard includes an overview of black conservative voices, with Schuyler playing a not unimportant part, and perhaps rightfully so. It is difficult to gauge to what extent the Society’s inclusion of black voices against civil rights was a merely tokenistic gesture, but Dillard makes a compelling case for Schuyler as a truly self-defined black conservative, venturing far beyond the mere repetition of pre-formulated conspiracy theories, but constructing his own complex value system, tailored for African American self-empowerment and peaceful integration. It would be problematic to consider the Society’s position on civil rights as truly “multicultural,” let alone “post-racial,” but with scholarly interest in non-traditional conservatism and libertarianism steadily on the rise, it is worth noting how the John Birch Society’s links with black conservatism has been significantly overlooked.⁸⁴

One of the most widely distributed pieces of Birch propaganda against civil rights was an 80-minute film called *Anarchy, USA: In the Name of Civil Rights*, produced in 1966. Public viewings were held around the country, primarily organized by TACT and other Birch-sponsored groups. Often viewers claimed they did not realize the film had been commissioned by the John Birch Society. The film opens with footage of the chaotic

⁸³ Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 270-286; see also Chapter 3: “The Boundaries of the Nation.”

⁸⁴ Angela Dillard, *Guess Who’s Coming To Dinner Now?: Multicultural Conservatism in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 60, see also, See also Sidney Blumenthal, *The Rise of the Counter-Establishment: From Conservative Ideology to Political Power* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).

aftermath of the summer riots in Los Angeles, while an unidentified African-American adolescent warns the audience about violent riots in Inglewood, Los Angeles:

We the Negro people down here have gotten completely fed up and you know what they goin' do tonight? They goin' they not goin' they not goin' fight down here no more. You know where they goin'? They after the white people. *Now* they after the white people. They goin' congregate [...] They goin' do the white man in tonight.⁸⁵

As the title screen appears, a narrator explains the central theme of anarchy: “the breakdown of law and order; a chaotic reign of terror, mob rule and rioting; the collapse of government authority.” In an ominous tone, the exposition continues:

These phrases ring strange in the ears of Americans and for good reason. Through the years America has stood as the world's symbol for law and order. Our government is responsive to the will of the people. Our courts and legislatures provide the mechanics for a peaceful redress for grievances, and the policeman on the corner has traditionally been looked upon as a friend, not as the instrument of a tyrant. Anarchy, well, that was always something we read about in our newspapers that was always happening in *other* countries.

The rest of the film raced through scenes of urban violence and wove together the sense that lawlessness, instigated by a hidden collectivist, had been brought about deliberately as a step toward an inevitable Marxist revolution: “Divide the people, create the appearance of popular support, neutralize the opposition, get the masses into motion by precipitating mob violence, create the semblance of revolution.” Additional footage was shown of riots in Harlem, Rochester, Newark, Philadelphia, New Jersey, Chicago, Cleveland, and again, Watts. “It was as though an unseen hand had given the signal,” the commentator muses, to unleash such “monstrous madness.” “This time it wasn't a foreign country, this time it was *Anarchy USA*.”

Subsequently, the film turns back towards street violence and claims the chaos caused by both “violent” and “non-violent” Civil Rights protests had been aimed at provoking

⁸⁵ *Hidden Agenda, Vol.4: Anarchy USA: In the Name of Civil Rights*, DVD, directed by G. Edward Griffin (1966; Los Angeles: UFO TV, 2004), the date to this quote reads August 12, 1965; the date to this quote reads August 12, 1965; see “Birch Film Hits Rights Drive,” *Appleton Post-Crescent*, October 22, 1966.

backlash amongst Southern racists and thus provided the federal government with “police state powers” to step in, disregard states’ rights and impose a military hold on the South. “Then accordingly,” the viewer is told, “the Federal Government intervened and a vicious legislative step on the road to tyranny was enacted in the form of the Civil Rights Bill of 1964.” The same conclusion follows regarding the Voting Rights Act of 1965, another tiny step in the direction of the Communists’ alleged underlying objective: “The goal of the international Communist conspiracy is world domination. They have so far been successful in accomplishing the step-by-step objectives necessary for reaching that goal.” In America, more specifically, the film recognized “Two Revolutions at Once:”

A revolution of a supposedly oppressed proletariat or working class against a capitalistic system that is supposed to breed waged slavery, unemployment, poverty, crises and war. The second revolution is a revolt of the supposedly poor and oppressed Negroes of the Black Belt against the supposed lynching, segregation, social ostracism and exploitation of the white man.

Post-war demographic developments and specifically African American migration into Northern cities continued to contribute to racial tensions. Rapid suburbanization and the disproportionate exodus of whites from the racially more diverse urban centers to more homogenous suburban and exurban centers – or “white flight” – exacerbated the financial health and living conditions in the inner cities. Urban renewal, police brutality, political exclusion and severe economic inequality increased tensions within urban communities. The emergence of the New Left, including that of civil rights leaders like Stokely Carmichael at SNCC and Huey Newton and the Black Panthers, reflected a growing impatience with liberal reform and exacerbated social tensions. In 1967, the cities of Newark, Detroit and Toledo, Ohio fell to violent rioting and clashes with law enforcement, further undermining popular

support of civil rights initiatives nationwide and opening up prospects for conservatives to exploit the growing alienation.⁸⁶

Considering the growing backlash against radicalized civil rights groups and urban conflict, it became evidently crucial for the Birchers to solidify perceived connections between the various streams of resistance and virtually equate integrationist, non-violent factions with more radical instances. This had obviously been a well-established strategy in the past – e.g. Clennon King and the NAACP or Earl Lively’s diatribe against Martin Luther King – and the Birchers merely stepped up its approach toward the latter stages of the decade. Martin Luther King remained a primary target as TACT committees distributed leaflets and organized talks linking the civil rights leader to Communist agitators. “Mr. Non-violence” they claimed, entertained “close connections with Communists” like Bayard Rustin, Hunter Pitts O’Dell, Bettina Aptheker and Karl Braden. Committees circulated outtakes from FBI files on King and other civil rights leaders, as well as Gary Allen and Alan Stang’s “exposés” on the civil rights leader. One particular piece of “evidence” that proved popular was a picture of King attending a leadership seminar at Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee in September 1957. Edwin Friend, a Georgia Klansman, had taken the picture, after which the segregationist Georgia Commission of Education distributed it as proof of King attending a “Communist training school.” Though the FBI thoroughly investigated and falsified the charges, the picture maintained a spectacular circulation among right-wing circles.⁸⁷ Even after King’s assassination, the Society refused to reconsider its accusations

⁸⁶ See Max A. Herman. *Fighting in the Streets: Ethnic Succession and Urban Unrest in Twentieth Century America* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2005); Kevin J. Mumford, *Newark: A History Race, Rights, and Riots in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2008); David A. Goldberg and Trevor Griffey, *Black Power at Work: Community Control, Affirmative Action, and the Construction Industry* (Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, 2010).

⁸⁷ “Martin Luther King and His Communist Affiliations,” TACT (undated), Margaret Meier collection, Box 32, folder 10.

and, commenting on the Roxbury riots in Boston following King's death, George Schuyler posthumously blasted the civil rights "agitator" for leaving a legacy of hatred and violence.⁸⁸

The turbulent year of 1968 turned out to be pivotal for the American right wing. The assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy not only left millions in mourning, but added to a profound sense that the nation had been sidetracked by war, violence, discord, a growing generational divide and the failed promise of liberal reform. As will be shown in the following section, the John Birch Society would continue to make its presence felt politically not just through the lens of race and civil rights, but through the construction of a sophisticated assault on the liberal order consisting of various interlinked issues. So too, it continued to link up racial tensions with a variety of conservative talking points appealing to an increasingly uneasy electorate. In the summer issue of *American Opinion*, contributor Hans Sennholz, a classical liberal follower of Ludwig von Mises, connected the dots following the particularly chaotic events surrounding the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. "We are all only too aware that from the summer of 1967 through the spring of 1968 the Communists have shifted their street revolution into high gear," Sennholz wrote, "in their increasingly successful efforts to force general insurrection in the United States." Quoting ultra-conservative James Utt, the article attacked liberals and radical civil rights protesters under the same umbrella, dismissing the "doctrine of 'non-violence' as phony as a three dollar bill" and nothing more than a Leninist tactic to "disrupt government and society." Sennholz concluded Americans had been presented with "two false alternatives from which to choose," i.e. "Brand X" or "provocative non-violence promoted by the late Martin Luther King," and "Brand Y" or "the fiery destruction led by Stokely

⁸⁸ George Schuyler "A Riotous Time in Boston," in *The Review of the News* 3.24 (June 1968), 26; Michael W. Flamm, *Law and Order: Street Crime, Civil Unrest, and the Crisis of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

Carmichael.” Furthermore, the piece claimed, African Americans themselves were in fact the ones who “have and will suffer most from these revolutionary activities,” while the federal government merely hid behind Johnson’s Riot Commission, which “blamed the upheavals on ‘poverty’ and ‘white racism,’ and exonerated looters, arsonists, and murderers from all blame.”⁸⁹

III. Conclusion

“Riots don’t just happen,” conservative activist and Republican strategist Phyllis Schlafly observed in her 1967 book *Safe – Not Sorry*, “they are organized by outside agitators and armed guerillas, by various civil rights and New Left groups saturated with Communists and pro-Communists.”⁹⁰ Undeniably, the 1960s oversaw the escalation of demands for equal rights and an end to racial discrimination, which in turn spilled over into independent, yet concomitant social justice movements challenging the societal status quo on matters of gender inequality, sexual orientation, religious and cultural norms, Cold War foreign policy, corporate capitalism and environmentalism. At the same time, race provided a powerful rallying point for conservatives to present a nationally viable counteroffensive on liberalism, bringing conservative Republicans and Southern Democrats together under the banner of Goldwater’s campaign in 1964. Populist right-wingers like Ronald Reagan and George Wallace took advantage of the growing sense of disorder emanating from civil rights conflicts and appealed to voters disillusioned with liberal policies directly affecting them and their communities. In 1966, Californians would turn to the candidate that made the connections between urban unrest, left-wing student protests and redistributionist policies,

⁸⁹ Hans Sennholz, “America: The Budget And Coming Catastrophe,” *American Opinion* 11.7 (July-August 1968), 11-12, 18, 20.

⁹⁰ Phyllis Schlafly, *Safe – Not Sorry* (Alton, IL: Pere Marquette Press, 1967), 23.

using a clever strategy of racial coding. Richard Nixon wooed disenchanted whites through “benign neglect,” delaying of court orders of school busing and integration and a sophisticated “Southern Strategy,” dealing a permanent blow to the Democrats’ hold on Dixie. Sun Belt conservatism had swept the nation.⁹¹

The seeds of conservative amalgamation with anti-integrationist thought and defense of the racial status quo – or at least the tempering of government-sponsored measures to counteract that status quo – had been present well before conservatives found unity as a movement. However, gaining national prominence at a crucial time in the history of civil rights, the John Birch Society could use its growing grassroots presence to exploit inherently conservative attitudes to race and socioeconomic equality early on, and thus expand its reach across the country. Though the Society’s position within the conservative field would remain problematic, its solutions to racial inequality combined a conspiracist fixation on Communist agitation and infiltration with essentially conservative appeals to constitutionalism, classical liberal views regarding government intervention in the market and increasingly social issues such as law and order. Propaganda put forward by the Society’s leadership as well as its organized membership more often than not relied on palatable, conservative concerns – federal overreach, fiscal responsibility, self-determination, property rights and civility – and would enable Birchers to weigh in on political debates and steer especially the Republican party rightward.

⁹¹ Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007).

SECTION 2

POWER AND DECLINE

Chapter 4: A Grand Old Purge: The Issue of ‘Extremism’ and the Conservative Capture of the Republican Party, 1962-1964

Barry Goldwater’s nomination in 1964 fundamentally reshaped the history of modern US conservatism, and it is impossible to imagine the Senator’s campaign including the grassroots mobilization behind him without the John Birch Society. At no other point in its history would the JBS enjoy more visibility and growth, or receive more virulent criticism and public ridicule, as when the conservative Republican secured his party’s nomination for President, only to suffer a landslide defeat to Lyndon Johnson. Since the Eisenhower controversy and the Birchers’ initial mobilization efforts, Robert Welch’s educational organization had continued to attract new members, expand its infrastructure and maintain an iconic presence on the national stage. From Bob Dylan to *Dr. Strangelove*, the Birchers through their unrelenting alarmism and incessant, idiosyncratic moral crusading had carved their niche in Cold War popular culture. Besides inviting satire, the images of “extremism” and of a rampant, “radical” right commonly associated with the Birchers, unsettled the political establishment sufficiently to accelerate its attacks on the JBS. Commentators sought either to boot the organization out of the political mainstream altogether or to sink the whole conservative movement by drawing clear associations with Welch’s controversial organization.

The connections between the Birch Society and Goldwater’s controversial and ultimately unsuccessful run for the White House are diverse and important. The centrality of the Goldwater campaign to the rise of modern conservatism has become a broadly recognized and emphasized feature within the historiography of the Right. “If there had been no Barry Goldwater, there could have been no Ronald Reagan,” Mary Brennan observes in her

overview work on the Republican Party's evolution throughout the 1960s.¹ Biographer Robert Goldberg has noted how the Arizona Senator's blunt yet colorful personality enabled him to appeal to a large right-wing base and take the Republican Party to the right, and exercise a continuing influence on contemporary politics despite his disastrous defeat in 1964.² Political journalist Rick Perlstein has used the period from Goldwater's first re-election as Senator to his failed presidential campaign (1958-1964) as a lens to investigate the conservatives' rise to power within the GOP and the undoing of the liberal consensus, singling out the charismatic Senator as the key figure that could harness the energy and dedication of a new generation of right-wing activists. After all, the 1964 convention launched the political career of Ronald Reagan, who delivered his keynote address, "A Time for Choosing," in support of Goldwater's staunch conservative persona. Goldwater could do as a candidate what the Birch Society had been doing as an educational organization. Beyond the figure of Goldwater himself, the Arizonan's nomination drive has been highlighted as a revolutionary development for the American Right.³ For William Rusher, 1964 has remained "the most important and truly seminal year for American conservatism since the founding of *National Review* in 1955." As Rusher maintained in *The Rise of the Right*, the Draft Goldwater initiative introduced innovative methods to raise funds and construct vital networks across the country, while the enthusiasm and discipline of thousands of Goldwater supporters on the ground helped turn a maturing conservative political theory into a full-fledged political movement.⁴

¹ Mary Brennan, *Turning Right in the Sixties: The Conservative Capture of the GOP* (Chapel Hill & London: University of Carolina Press, 1995), 141.

² Robert Alan Goldberg, *Barry Goldwater* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

³ Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001).

⁴ William A. Rusher, *The Rise of the Right* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1984), 161, 177.

On various levels, the JBS and its membership had a significant impact on the conservative consolidation of the Republican Party as epitomized by Goldwater's rise. Most conspicuously, the mobilization efforts of individual Birchers helped shift the party rightward, both through infiltrating volunteer groups – most notably in California – and by forcing fellow conservatives to aggressively defend their values from liberal and moderate attacks within the party. The role of the Birchers with regard to the consolidation and emergence of a conservative electoral bloc was inherently paradoxical, as the Society formally refrained from interfering with partisan politics and focused exclusively on anti-Communist education. Naturally, the fierce campaigns Welch designed or approved for his loyal followers carried strong political implications and more often than not targeted specific political outcomes. “We shall have to use politicians, support politicians, create politicians, and help the best ones we can find to get elected,” Welch had declared in his founding oration, while urging future members to infiltrate local organizations like school boards and PTAs. Though the Society claimed to stay outside electoral strife, the many connections its individual members shared with partisan politics, especially the Republican Party, made that claim problematic.⁵

To be sure, Goldwater's hopes for election were fatally damaged by the issue of extremism, and therefore by the image of the John Birch Society as a racist or authoritarian organization. Liberal Republican Senator Tom Kuchel openly refused to campaign for Goldwater, and days before the election lashed out at the JBS for being a “neo-Fascist organization” in a speech to the Columbia Young Republicans Club.⁶ Jonathan Schoenwald highlights the 1964 election as the breaking point after which a Republican “popular front”

⁵ Robert Welch, *Blue Book*, 95.

⁶ Christopher Friedrichs, “Kuchel Blasts Birch Society As ‘Fascists,’ Alerts Republican Club To Radicals’ Threat,” *Columbia Daily Spectator*, October 28, 1964, 4.

between moderates, “respectable” conservatives and “extremist” right-wingers no longer remained viable. In a way, Schoenwald argues, the Birchers sufficiently polarized the political culture for the conservative movement to reinvent itself and emerge as an electable alternative to liberalism and “modern” Republicanism, of which Ronald Reagan would become the primary example. It is however equally important to stress how the JBS and the issue of extremism actually *contributed* to the conservative consolidation that led up to Goldwater’s nomination. First of all, the failed attempt led by the *National Review* to isolate Welch from his own membership and undermine the Society’s growth, suggests conservatives were not generally ready to prioritize purging the “kooks” to their Right while they felt underrepresented in a major political party. On the contrary, the fact that the Goldwater campaign allowed for such collusion between “mainstream” or “respectable” conservatives and Birchers and Southern segregationists illustrated how reservations towards civil rights reform, the United Nations, controversial decisions by the Supreme Court, etc. could be shared across a wider spectrum, ranging from white supremacist resistance to libertarian opposition to federal intervention in the marketplace. The Birchers were a perfect example of how even far-reaching conspiratorial opposition to civil rights could blend with a constitutionalist, “colorblind” approach to racial inequality. As a result, the “mainstream” versus “extremist” dichotomy remained relative in 1964, and conservatives were eager to find common ground to achieve their goals.⁷

One of the primary challenges for the burgeoning conservative movement was to wrest control of the Republican Party away from the “Eastern Establishment” and the moderate and liberal forces that dominated its agenda. Establishment Republicans wary of a right-wing takeover turned to the Birchers as a scapegoat to try and break the conservative

⁷ Jonathan Schoenwald, *A Time for Choosing: The Rise of Modern American Conservatism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 70, 125.

rebellion, which initially had an adverse effect. The extremism issue encouraged conservatives to go on the counteroffensive. When the Rockefellers, Scrantons, Romneys, Nixons and Eisenhowers of the party, who symbolized for conservatives their perceived exclusion from power, attacked the JBS as a harmful appendix of the right, they were forced to defend their positions on social, racial, economic and foreign issues. Even Goldwater himself, defended the “extremists” and their desire to see conservatives gain a foothold within the party establishment and beyond the local level. From the Birchers’ point of view, liberals and moderates were duped into smuggling left-wing radicalism into the political mainstream and had to be purged from the party.⁸

I. A Failed Purge: Robert Welch and the National Review

From 1960 onward, the Birch Society had been a thorn in the side of William Buckley. The man behind the *National Review* had with great concern observed the general outrage over Welch’s conspiratorial allegations and wild-eyed alarmism – especially the fallout over the latter’s allegations towards Dwight Eisenhower. Unsurprisingly, Buckley began to wonder if it was worthwhile accommodating the Birchers within the wider

⁸ Sheilah Koeppen, “The Republican Radical Right,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 382.1 (March 1969), 73-82; see also Kurt Schuparra, *Triumph of the Right: The Rise of the California Conservative Movement: 1945-1966* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1998); Michael Rogin, *The Intellectuals and McCarthy: The Radical Specter* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1967); Nicola Rae, *The Decline and Fall of the Liberal Republicans: From 1952 to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Jack Bass and Walter De Vries, *The Transformation of Southern Politics: Social Change and Political Consequence Since 1945* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995); David Reinhard, *The Republican Right Since 1945* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1983); Niels Bjerre-Poulsen, *Right Face: Organizing the American Conservative Movement, 1945-65* (Copenhagen: Museum Tuscalanum Press, 2002); Geoffrey Kabaservice, *Rule and Ruin: The Downfall of Moderation and the Destruction of the Republican Party, From Eisenhower to the Tea Party* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

conservative spectrum. He dreaded the thought of internal strife, yet handing his political opponents the opportunity to turn Welch and his followers into an embarrassment of the Right seemed a gloomier prospect. In early 1962, he met with a number of right-wing luminaries, including Bill Baroody, Kirk Russell, and Goldwater in Palm Beach, Florida to discuss the “Birch question.” Goldwater had become agitated by the Birchers, and found their unyielding conspiracism disturbing, but remained reluctant to risk alienating key voters in his home state and the Southwest.⁹

When the controversy around Robert Welch and his allegations towards Eisenhower became public knowledge, Buckley was frightened that the JBS would tarnish the cause of conservatism and with Goldwater’s star rising, he was determined to defuse Welch lest the future candidate be damaged in 1964. As Buckley’s biographer John Judis explains, by 1961 Buckley was “beginning to worry that with the Society growing so rapidly, the right-wing upsurge in the country would take an ugly, even Fascist turn rather than leading toward the kind of conservatism *National Review* had promoted.”¹⁰ What is more, he and other conservatives were worried that Welch’s McCarthyite alarmism would actually help Communists by damaging the anti-communist movement’s credibility. The result was a first, cautious repudiation of Welch rather than the entire JBS. In fact, Buckley praised the Society’s membership for accommodating “some of the most morally energetic, self-sacrificing and dedicated anti-Communists in America”. On Welch, the editorial was significantly harsher: “Robert Welch is damaging the cause of anti-Communism,” Buckley wrote. Eager not to alienate the Birch founder unnecessarily, Buckley had sent Welch a

⁹ William F. Buckley, Jr., “Goldwater, the John Birch Society, and Me,” *Commentary*, March 1, 2008, <http://www.commentarymagazine.com/article/goldwater-the-john-birch-society-and-me/> [accessed 26 May 2013].

¹⁰ John B. Judis, *William F. Buckley, Jr.: Patron Saint of the Conservatives* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 195.

private letter beforehand to try and convince him to either step down or temper his conspiratorial tirades, all to no avail. “Mr. Welch,” Buckley continued, “has revived in many men the spirit of patriotism, and that same spirit now calls for rejecting, out of love of truth and country, his false counsels.”¹¹ Goldwater, as well as Texas Republican Senator John Tower agreed cautiously. Shortly after, Buckley denounced Welch at a Princeton seminar, dismissing his leadership as “terribly misguided.”¹² In the same week, Russell Kirk expressed his personal admiration for Welch as a “likeable, honest, courageous, energetic man,” who “by silliness and injustice of utterance” had nevertheless become the “kiss of death” to the right and should no longer be taken seriously as a conservative leader.¹³

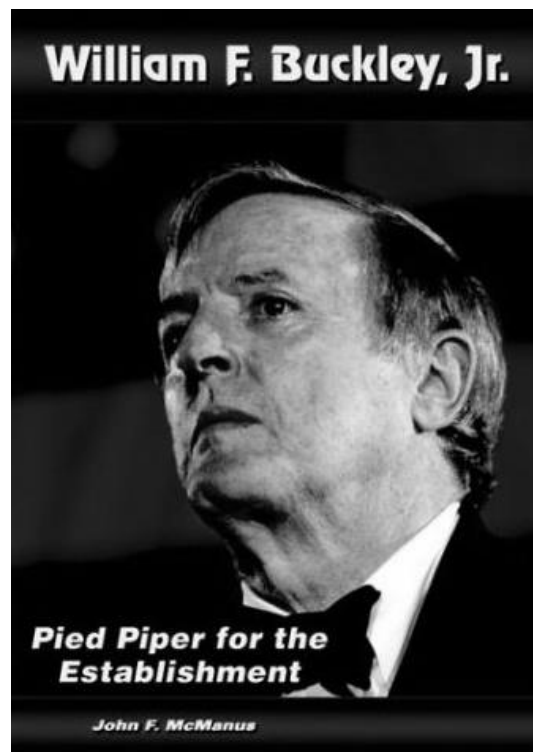


Fig. 11: In his 2002 monograph on Buckley, JBS President John McManus accuses the conservative leader of betraying the cause by gradually marginalizing the Birchers and expulsing them from the right.

¹¹ “The Question of Robert Welch,” *National Review*, February 13, 1962, 83.

¹² “Tower Hits Birchers,” *New York Times*, February 17, 1962, 20.

¹³ James Reston, “The GOP Takes On the Welchers,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 13, 1962, A5.

The attack, aimed at isolating Welch within his own organization, achieved mixed results. Welch had financially supported Buckley in starting the *National Review* (*NR*), and called on his followers to subscribe. After reading the editorial, JBS chapter leader and small business owner John R. Miles of Milwaukee wrote National Council member T. Coleman Andrews to express his support for their leader. Miles reported he had promptly cancelled his subscription to the *NR*, and pledged an extra \$1,000 to the Society to become a full life member.¹⁴ Even before the *NR* article was published, Buckley had made critical comments to select conservative audiences in Los Angeles and Houston, both significant hubs of Birch activity. The retired Gen. Charles B. Stone, who also served on the Council, wrote Buckley a letter he forwarded to Andrews and Welch to confront him directly: “Please [...] refrain from slamming these folks in the nose, so to speak, by disparaging their leader whom they may not always agree with 100%, or all of the time, but who are convinced that we would not have an effective organization except for his leadership!”¹⁵

Welch responded with caution, but became immediately convinced the string of attacks were part of the same Communist-coordinated strategy that had targeted the JBS two years before. In his reply to Stone, he assured his friend the attack was “merely one of the surface parts of a huge, many-fingered, and to some extent organized campaign, not just to discredit and get rid of me, but actually to destroy The John Birch Society or at least reduce it to the level of another innocuous and frustrated debating society.” Nevertheless, Welch did not see the time as fit to break with Buckley and the *NR* and isolate himself and the Society, which he was sure was exactly what Buckley, and the Communist conspiracy behind him, were hoping for:

¹⁴ Letter from John Miles to T. Coleman Andrews, February 23, 1962, T. Coleman Andrews Papers, Box 1, “Folder 3,” Special Manuscripts Division, University of Oregon.

¹⁵ Letter from Charles Stone to William Buckley, January, 29, 1962, *Ibid*.

Although I am bringing one aspect of the present attack out into the open in our February bulletin – but without mentioning any names or doing anything to increase the friction – I shall do all I can to avoid any open break with Buckley from my side, and we shall certainly continue to support both his magazine, NATIONAL REVIEW, and any other worthwhile anti-Communist efforts engaged in by him and his associates.¹⁶

Buckley, who arguably was just as anxious to limit the Birchers' negative effect on moderates as he was concerned with losing the support of highly motivated conservatives within the organization, ostentatiously tried to isolate Welch from his members, but in his failure underestimated the Society's cohesion. The Society's headquarters started to receive countless letters from members expressing their support for the Birch leader. A George Cull from Peekskill, New York wrote to Andrews saying: "Nearly everyone reads National Review [...] and they all are strong for Goldwater and Towers [sic]. One couple was told by their priest that Buckley is right etc. They all saw the films of Mr. Robert Welch. They all still joined The John Birch Society."¹⁷ Elizabeth R. Benning of Atlanta wrote JBS Council member Tom Anderson "to express my deepest respect for and loyalty to Mr. Robert Welch" and decried the "assaults coming from unexpected sources." As for Welch's leadership, Benning proclaimed: "I cannot believe that there could be any real question in the minds of the Council members regarding the importance of Mr. Welch's remaining as head of the Society".¹⁸

Within the JBS Council, challenges to Welch's leadership were rare, but not unheard of. Clarence Manion, who would become a major force behind the Draft Goldwater movement, openly dissented with Welch over Eisenhower and the Warren impeachment drive, yet did not distance himself from the Society until after the 1964 election, saying he "refused to run out on the selfless thousands who have found [the JBS] a rallying point for

¹⁶ Letter from Robert Welch to Charles Stone, January 31, 1962, Ibid.

¹⁷ Letter from George Cull to T. Coleman Andrews, February 10, 1962, ibid.

¹⁸ Letter from Elizabeth Benning to Tom Anderson, February 10, 1962, ibid.

‘right’ thought and action when both are so badly needed.”¹⁹ Council member and California physician Granville Knight in late November wrote General Edwin Walker to ask him, unsuccessfully, to succeed Welch as soon as he could be convinced to step down: “I have told Bob Welch, as have others, that he should retire into the background and attain [sic] a national figure willing and able to be in the forefront of The John Birch Society movement. You may be that man.”²⁰ Council members often reminded each other they did not have to agree with Welch on everything, as long as his leadership did not damage the Society’s overall interests. Ben MacMillan found himself discussing the matter with Andrews, and concluded the Society still profited more than it suffered from Welch’s leadership. Macmillan still conceded: “We who were at Indianapolis know full well that Bob’s statement with respect to Eisenhower was never accepted by those present and was never a part of The John Birch Society by specific action at that time.”²¹

In the meantime, Buckley and the *NR* continued receiving a myriad of angry letters that defended Welch and the Society, along with an alarming rate of subscription cancellations. Conservative non-Bircher Annalee Stratemeyer of Winter Park, Florida sent an open letter to Buckley, and carbon copies to Senator Goldwater, Richard Nixon, Walter Judd and other “so-called conservatives,” in which she expressed her disbelief and disappointment: “Why should be so concerned over Mr. Robert Welch as leader of The John Birch Society? You are not members. As I see it, it is no concern of yours. I am sure that the members of The John Birch Society are very pleased with Mr. Welch’s leadership. And it seems to me that is the only important thing.” On the increasingly tense relationship between Welch and the

¹⁹ Schermer, *Barry Goldwater*, 131.

²⁰ Letter from Granville Knight to Gen. Edwin Walker, November 20, 1961, Granville Knight Papers, Box 2, Folder 8 “Correspondence 1961, November”, *ibid*.

²¹ Letter from William MacMillan to T. Coleman Andrews, March 16, 1962, T. Coleman Andrews Papers, Box 1, “Folder 3.”

Republican Party leadership, Stratemeyer added: "I have never heard that the members of The John Birch Society have told the Republicans to get rid of Eisenhower and Rockefeller because they are hurting the G.O.P. Although, I am sure some of them would like to do so."²² Augereau Heinsohn, Executive Committee member and intimate of Welch, expressed his outrage in less diplomatic terms: "So, Little Blue Boy [i.e. Buckley] could no longer restrain his ego-manical impulses," he railed. "Little Blue Boy tries to split the conservatives with the divide and conquer strategy of the Communists." After blasting Buckley for stabbing Welch in the back and neglecting his supposedly conservative priorities, the Tennessee textile manufacturer severed his ties with the *NR*: "Remove my name from your hand-out list. Then when you next start out your little tin cup begging for contributions, save yourself some post. Don't even try to extract another thousand bucks from me, as I have no appetite for irresponsible, juvenile egotism."²³

What was remarkable was the extent to which Welch could count on sympathy beyond his own ranks. Though many, if not most, conservatives agreed with Buckley and viewed the Society with a degree of skepticism and unease, it seemed counterproductive to attack a dedicated fellow right-winger like Welch, rather than go after Walter Reuther or the Kennedy Administration. What is more, Welch could easily suggest the criticisms were yet another concoction of the "modern" Republican establishment, and Liberal-Socialist-Communist troika behind it, eager to wipe out any conservative dissent within the party, which he did in his *Bulletin* for the same month. He warned his readers that "there has gradually been getting underway an attack on us from the forces of the right, which is just now growing so extensive an affair that we simply cannot afford to ignore it any longer." Far

²² Open letter by Annalee Stratemeyer to Buckley, Nixon, Goldwater, Judd et al., March 5, 1962, Granville Knight Papers, Box 2, Folder 11 "Correspondence 1962 March-April".

²³ Letter from Augereau Heinsohn to William Buckley, March 13, 1962, *ibid*.

beyond the liberals and moderates within the Republican Party, Welch saw an ominous conspiracy behind Buckley's attacks: "So the Communists are attempting, exactly as they did with regard to McCarthy's methods and Taft's vote-getting magic and many smaller problems, to convert this greatest danger into their most potent weapon."²⁴

Furthermore, Welch used his monthly outlet to reassure the membership he was not remotely considering stepping down, even if he could find himself in disagreement with his closest advisers more than occasionally:

I am glad to listen, and frequently to be overruled in my views or proposals. [...] We have an executive committee with which I meet regularly every month. One of its duties is to review these *Bulletins* with me in advance of publication. If they object to any or all of these paragraphs you will never see what I have written here. Their advice has caused me to discard some proposed projects, modify others, and add still others which I had not planned. [...] But the ultimate responsibility in all of these matters is one I neither can, nor wish to, escape.²⁵

In the short run, Buckley's attempted purge of Welch remained unsuccessful. Over a year after the initial skirmish, fellow *NR* editor James Burnham lamented the continued growth of the Society and its loyal embrace of Welch as its unquestionable leader: "But instead of the John Birch Society declining in membership (and most of its former members gravitating to NR, as Buckley hoped), the movement continued to grow, with no change whatsoever in Welch's general line." In July 1963, Burnham reluctantly conceded to Buckley: "When you come down to it, our anti-Welch strategy has not proved to be so hot...about all it accomplished was, to a certain extent, to keep our own skirts moderately clean, and there were certain attached disadvantages." Not to be outdone, Buckley's responded: "I think it is probably wise to rethink our position [...] even if the result is merely to confirm us about the

²⁴ Welch, *Bulletin*, February 1962, 2,5.

²⁵ *Op. cit.*, 9.

rightness about our previous position [...] It looks to me as if there is no stopping these bastards. We did not break the back of the movement [...] it is growing in strength.”²⁶

II. Staging a Counteroffensive: Nixon and Shell in California

Especially in the Southwest, the Birchers' hardline creed enjoyed significant appeal. National Council member Paul “Tex” Talbert refused to disclose the exact number of chapters or members the Society had attracted to the press, but was eager to boast: “The chapters are growing rapidly. We have a growing pains problem. A co-ordinator is coming from Massachusetts to go into the matter of getting districts set up and distribution of authority.” Talbert continued: “We’ve grown too fast. In the Houston area they’ve had to call a halt...”²⁷ In California, *Los Angeles Times* contributor Gene Blake devoted a five-part series of articles to the rise of the Society and its increasing influence in the state. As early as March 1961, Blake reported that at least eight chapters in Pasadena, Los Angeles, Beverly Hills, Santa Barbara “and scores of other communities” had been formed. California Attorney General Mosk’s 1961 report on the Society, proved a gross underestimation of the Birchers’ potential for organization.²⁸ Mosk had famously reported the Society would amount to very little as a political threat, and dismissed its general membership as “formed primarily of wealthy businessmen, retired military officers and little old ladies in tennis shoes”.²⁹ Two years later, Albert “Mickey” Lima, state leader of the CPUSA, criticized Mosk’s comment, urging both left and mainstream audiences to beware of the Society’s strength and intensions:

²⁶ Kevin J. Smant, *How Great The Triumph: James Burnham, Anticommunism and the Conservative Movement* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1992), 121-2.

²⁷ “Birch Group Lists Units in 34 States, Society Says It Has One to 100 Chapters in Each Area – Members’ Total Secret,” *New York Times*, April 2, 1961, 62.

²⁸ “Birch Program in Southland Told,” *Los Angeles Time*, March 8, 1961.

²⁹ Albert J. Lima, “California Rejects Anti-Communism,” *Political Affairs*, April 1963, 21.

“The reality is far different. They are a serious political movement with long-range objectives.”³⁰ At the time of the Mosk Report, the Birchers claimed chapters in 34 states.³¹ J. Allen Broyles, judging by the amount of *Bulletins* and weekly newsletters sent around to members from the home office in Belmont, estimated the total membership between 12,000 and 18,000, also citing the Society’s financial report filed with Massachusetts Attorney General and Democrat Edward J. McCormack in 1962, which reveals a revenue of \$296,326.³²

Actual Communists, like Lima, had every reason to observe the Birchers’ steady growth with unease, but the Birchers’ primary targets were often “closer to home.” Milton Young, conservative Republican Senator of North Dakota warned his colleagues as early as 1961 that “[s]trangely enough, most of [the radical Right’s] criticism is leveled not against liberal public officials, but against the more middle-of-the-road and even conservative Republicans.” Young explained that accusations “far beyond anything the late Sen. Joe McCarthy ever thought of,” were aimed at liberal Democrats by default, but a bloodier, fiercer siege was laid against the Republican Party establishment, as conservatives of various stripes understood the need of a unified party structure to convert their growing institutional and intellectual prowess into hard-hitting electoral victories.³³ Officially, Welch had founded his Society as a nonpolitical, educational organization that simply could not endorse candidates standing for office. As Gerald Schomp wrote in his memoirs on working for the Birchers in the early sixties, “[the Society] has never publicly endorsed a political candidate,

³⁰ J. Allen Broyles, *The John Birch Society: An Anatomy of Protest* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 47.

³¹ Bill Becker, “Right-Wing Groups Multiplying Appeals in Southern California,” *New York Times*, October 29, 1961, 3.

³² Benjamin Epstein and Arnold Forster, *The Radical Right: Report on the John Birch Society and Its Allies* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 88.

³³ “Prominent Republicans Lead Fight Against Birch Society,” *Baltimore Sun*, April 2, 1961, 3.

given financial assistance to a political party, or told its members how to vote [...] The Society is strictly bi-partisan, accusing both Republicans and Democrats of treason.” Around election time, Schomp adds, “[t]he Society sometimes becomes a political football and is kicked back and forth unmercifully [...]“Politicians can always shake hands after the campaign, but the Birch Society is a loser every election day.”³⁴

Welch’s decision to found the Society had been at least as much motivated by the frustration towards the “modern” Republicanism that saw right-wing icons like Taft and McCarthy marginalized, and instead perpetuated Roosevelt’s New Deal and Truman’s Fair Deal policies. At the founding meeting in December 1958, Welch had told his guests: “We are at a stage, Gentlemen, where the only sure political victories are achieved by non-political organization,” Welch had proclaimed, while warning his listeners: “[p]ut not your faith in politicians!” Further on in his *Blue Book* speech, he had explained:

The thorough and painstaking organization and work at the precinct levels, which wins elections, is not going to be done and can’t be done by the Republican Party. It can be done in one state, under the personal leadership and management of a Barry Goldwater for his own campaign. It might have been done in California by Bill Knowland, if he could have got himself disconnected from his ‘modern Republican’ duties as minority leaders of the Senate in time and if he had known what he was up against. But it cannot be done nationally by the Republican Party.³⁵

Two years later, Welch decried what he regarded the lack of conservative alternatives in the 1960 election to Kennedy and the Democrats, hinting at Nixon’s association with Eisenhower’s modern Republicanism and last-minute surrender to Nelson Rockefeller’s civil rights plank demands. As a result, Welch lamented “the basic indistinguishability of the two programs, the impossibility of the voters’ repudiating either one,” and claimed that while the JBS had stayed out of the race, growing conservative Republican sympathies among the

³⁴ Gerald Schomp, *Birchism Was My Business* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1970), 155-7; see also Fred J. Cook, “The Real Targets,” *The Nation*, February, 17 1962.

³⁵ Robert Welch, *Blue Book*, 94-5, 115.

membership were apparent:³⁶ “In the 1960 campaigns The John Birch Society, as an organization, took no part. Our official job was to supply our members more information about, and a better understanding of, both men and issues, to the best of our ability.” At the same time, Welch conceded that “[u]nofficially and as individuals our members were quite active in the campaigns. I personally supported Goldwater for the Republican nomination. About two-thirds of our Republican and Independent members did the same, while about one-third supported Nixon.”³⁷

Some Birchers openly looked for electoral alternatives outside the two main parties. Kent Courtney of New Orleans, who ran his own ultraconservative *Independent American* with his wife Phoebe, used his local influence to advertise JBS events and events as well as heavily supporting the Liberty Amendment and General Edwin Walker. Frustrated with the political status quo, the Courtneys staged a “convention of conservatives” in April 1961 to launch an independent conservative party, believing the Republican Party could not be saved from the tentacles of the Eastern Establishment and the collectivists, whom they often regarded inseparable to begin with. Courtney, who thought Goldwater had “tainted himself with socialism when he backed Richard Nixon in 1960,” invited 500 conservatives and even if less than half showed up, representatives of the National Right-to-Work Committee, Trades Policy Committee, National Apartment Owners Association, as well as Birch speakers attended with enthusiasm. Courtney proposed nominating Welch for President in 1964, or if need be J. Bracken Lee or Tom Anderson, both Birch Council members. Welch politely declined with a “thank you” note.³⁸

³⁶ Welch, “If You Want It Straight,” *American Opinion* 3.10 (December 1960), 1.

³⁷ Welch, *Blue Book*, 101.

³⁸ Austin C. Wehrwein, “A Birch Leader Plans 3rd Party,” *New York Times*, April 14, 1961, 19.

Often Birchers would write Belmont asking for information or recommendations on individual races. Right before the 1962 mid-term elections, a Henry Forster of New York wanted to know how the JBS rated Robert Thompson Pell, who had emerged as the Conservative Party's candidate for the U.S. Senate in an attempt to unseat moderate Republican Jacob Javits. "The John Birch Society has never been in a position to enthusiastically and strongly endorse any political party," Research Department head Francis Gannon replied. "Many of our members were writing to us and urging that we endorse [...] Mr. Pell. We explained then that we have never endorsed any candidate of any political party since this would be about the easiest way we could find to lose our charter as an educational institution. [...] "I am sure you will find, however, that many very active members of The John Birch Society have been equally active in the Conservative Party of New York."³⁹ Others were more drastic, like Vera Enloe of Glendale, California who suggested not waiting for the elections and impeaching President Kennedy: "As a Socialistic Communist we certainly need to get rid of him out of the Presidency. Is this possible?"⁴⁰

Control over the Republican Party remained an inevitable objective, especially in California where Progressive Era reforms enacted under Hiram Johnson had made its structure relatively easy to penetrate. Tracing back the conservative takeover of the California Republican Party, Kurt Schuparra situates this pivotal moment during the 1958 elections, when Edmund "Pat" Brown defeated Senate minority leader William Knowland, leaving a great gap in leadership.⁴¹ Though Schuparra is correct in pointing out how growing GOP disunity opened doors for conservative infiltration, it was not until 1962, when none other than Richard Nixon ran for Governor on the Republican ticket, that the division between

³⁹ Letter from Francis X. Gannon to Henry Forster, November 5, 1962, JBS Records, Box 7, "MMM 62".

⁴⁰ MMM from Vera I. Enloe, October 1962, JBS Records, Box 6, "T/m Welch".

⁴¹ Kurt Schuparra, "Freedom vs. Tyranny: The 1958 California Election and the Origins of the State's Conservative Movement," in *Pacific Historical Review*, 63.4 (November 1994), 537-560; see also Schuparra,

moderates and conservatives became decisive. Initially, the odds seemed strongly in Nixon's favor. Right before the 1960 election, he indirectly beat Brown in parallel California primary "favorite son" contests by nearly 200,000 votes. Late 1961 polls had Nixon leading Brown by a solid sixteen points. In a survey held amongst prominent Republicans to restore party unity, Nixon prevailed with a convincing 70% of the vote. The primary seemed but a formality. Former governor Goodwin Knight contracted hepatitis and was forced to throw in the towel as early as January. Lieutenant governor Harold "Butch" Powers, unable to garner sufficient monetary support, quickly followed suit. Thus Nixon's sole competitor for the nomination was Joseph Claude Shell, a Washington-born oil businessman and State Assemblyman who since his election in 1953 had accumulated a consistently conservative voting record. He distrusted Nixon's ties to Eisenhower and launched his campaign, courting both Democrats and Republicans who adhered to "a commitment to individual liberty limited only by those powers clearly enumerated in our constitution without reducing our ability to develop private property and free individual enterprise."⁴² He was quoted in *Time* magazine stating he had "gotten sick and tired of calling people liberals when they're basically socialists."⁴³

Shell polled at an abysmal two percent upon entering the race, but campaigned himself into the picture. He denounced Nixon as a "weak middle-of-the-roader," and added that "middle of the road is 75 percent socialism" For Shell, the only credible alternative to Brown's liberal agenda was unyielding conservatism: "The people of California are not going to accept the continued degradation of individual enterprise as expressed by the Brown administration. Neither are they going to fall for the warmed-over middle-of-the road concept of Nixon Republicanism which would merely be a little slower approach to the same result –

⁴² Kurt Schuparra, *Triumph of the Right*, 59-60.

⁴³ "Progressive Conservative," *Time*, June 15, 1962; see also Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America* (New York: Scribner, 2008), 59; Totton Anderson and Eugene Lee, "The 1962 Election in California," *The Western Political Quarterly* 16.2 (June 1963), 399-400;; Anderson and Lee, 402.

socialism.”⁴⁴ A couple of days later, Shell shared a campaign platform with Birch member and Congressman John H. Rousselot and Max Rafferty, at which Rousselot identified Brown with the Democratic policies of the State Department’s program for disarmament on terms favorable to Khrushchev.⁴⁵

Running on a staunchly right-wing platform of opposition to federal taxation, Social Security, civil rights reform and softness on Communism, Shell’s fiery “crusader” rhetoric deeply resonated with ultraconservative values. Nevertheless, Shell was not a member of the JBS, and, whilst boasting the support of 10,000 registered Republican cooperators, declared he did not seek “the support of the extreme right or left but I do want the individual votes of those seeking conservative economical government.” When asked where he stood on the Society and its membership, Shell boasted he knew many Birchers personally and had read the *Blue Book*. “What I found there,” he concluded, “is anti-communism, and I’m for that.” Though weary of Robert Welch – the JBS’ founder – and his allegations, Shell did not repudiate the movement and even claimed the support of between 2,000 and 4,000 Birch members as well as non-affiliated ultraconservatives in the state.⁴⁶ By April, political scientists Totton Anderson and Eugene Lee estimated Shell’s support consisted of about 25% JBS members and supporters, while polling 19% overall against Nixon. The former Vice President’s projected support contained only about 6% of pro-Birch Republican voters.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Quoted from John A. Andrew III, *Young Americans For Freedom and the Rise of Conservative Politics* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 169.

⁴⁵ “Shell Fears Socialism if Nixon or Brown Win,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 13, 1962, A1.

⁴⁶ “Brown, Nixon and Shell Debate Campaign Issues,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 1, 1962, B1; see also “Shell Scores Brown, Nixon on Communism,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 22, 1962, 20; Brennan incorrectly identifies Shell as a Birch member, 54; “10,000 Workers Aiding Campaign, Shell Says,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 10, 1962, 13; “Arcadia’s Voice of the People: Answer to Shell,” *Arcadia Tribune*, June 3, 1962, 4.

⁴⁷ Anderson and Lee, 402.

By 1962, registered Democrats outnumbered Republicans by over a million in the state, or by a 3:2 ratio. In order to beat Brown, Nixon would have to reach across the aisle and court at least a fifth of moderate Democrats. It was clear that in order to win over Democrats, he would have to take a firm stand against the hardline right wing of his own party, especially the growing JBS contingent.⁴⁸ In fact, a February poll of 1962 would show that Nixon's acceptance of the society's support would lose him seven times as many votes as he would gain. Only 4% of Democrats and 9% of Republicans would be more likely to extend their support to the candidate, while 60% and 42% respectively would withdraw their support. Conversely, 51% of Democrats and 30% of Republicans would be more likely to vote for a candidate that openly refused Birch support, while a meager 4% and 11% respectively would be less inclined to do so.⁴⁹



Fig. 12: A 1962 political ad for Joe Shell – SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA TV GUIDE

⁴⁸ Ethan Rarick, *California Rising: The Life and Times of Pat Brown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 234.

⁴⁹ Mervin Field, "The California Poll: Statewide Survey of Public Opinion," Field Research Corporation, February 16, 1962; Anderson and Lee, 400.

Nixon's relationship with conservatives had been "lukewarm" for years. His efforts to get the California Republican leadership behind Eisenhower in 1952 and his disavowal of McCarthy in 1954 had angered party conservatives. Understandably, his role in the electorally disastrous Knowland-Knight switch in 1958 had caused great frustration among California Republicans, moderates and conservatives alike.⁵⁰ In 1960, Robert Welch, who had attended the 1952 GOP convention as a Massachusetts Taft delegate, urged his followers to back Goldwater rather than Nixon for the Republican nomination:

"What good would such a man be to us, even as president, unless outside forces and accomplishments made it opportunistic and expedient for him to ride an anti-Communist wave which those outside forces had created? As for being a leader, the sad truth, hard for many hopeful and wishful conservative Republicans to realize, is that Richard Nixon, a most engaging personality and clever politician, has never been a *leader* in connection with any event or development, or at any stage in his career. He had been a rider of waves, so far as public support was concerned, without caring whether the particular wave at any given time was moving left or right; and a manipulator, of uncanny skill, behind the scenes."⁵¹

The primary proved a disaster for Nixon. Much had changed in California politics during his absence. Many of the state's Republican auxiliary structures had become beckoning targets for far right influence. The Los Angeles County Young Republicans (LACYR) was the first volunteer group to turn against Nixon. Their ultraconservative chairman Robert Gaston distrusted Nixon deeply and commented that "the difference between a 'liberal' Republican and a 'liberal' Democrat is the difference between creeping socialism and galloping socialism."⁵² In mid-March, Nixon responded by urging the California Republican Assembly to issue a resolution denouncing the John Birch Society and urging its members to resign either from the Society, or stay out of Republican politics. Within 48 hours, LACYR had

⁵⁰ Edward G. Griffin, *The Life and Words of Robert Welch, Founder of the John Birch Society* (Thousand Oaks, CA: American Media, 1975), 148, 158-9.

⁵¹ Robert Welch, *Blue Book*, 111.

⁵² Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 60.

issued a statement criticizing Nixon's "recent attack on Republicans for being members of some patriotic organizations" and publicly backed Shell.⁵³

Nixon had aired criticisms of the Society before, virtually in sync with Buckley and the *National Review*. Throughout February and March, the former Vice President criticized the "irresponsible tactics of Robert Welch and others like him [who] have hurt the fight against communism." Nixon assured the members of the GOP state assembly: "It is essential that Republicans disassociate themselves from any organizations whose members are required to take dictation from a man who has attacked President Eisenhower as a '*dedicated conscious agent of the Communist conspiracy*.'" The assembly, he noted, had the opportunity to salvage the Republican Party's leadership "not only in California but the nation as well". Demanding a formal condemnation, he declared: "The California Republican Assembly, acting in the great tradition of our Party for individual liberties and civil rights, should use this opportunity to repudiate, once and for all, Robert Welch and those who accept his leadership and viewpoints."⁵⁴

The infiltration of volunteer groups such as the CRA and LACYR by far right-wing conservatives eager to "purify" the party had been underway for some time, and threatened to turn the extremism issue that Nixon wanted to tackle against the candidate. In December of 1961, Arcadia Young Republicans president Roger Withrow and Vice-President Joe Dana resigned from their posts, decrying "a vocal, well-organized minority is taking over the club leadership". Withrow complained about the uncompromising nature of Birch Society in the group, urging the YR to introduce the controversial Liberty Amendment or endorse

⁵³ "The State: Action on the Far Right, Including a Left Hook," *Los Angeles Times*, March 11, 1962, I5.

⁵⁴ "Nixon Speaks Out," *Centralia Daily Chronicle*, March 16, 1962, 3; see also "Nixon Endorsed, Birch Issue Fought," *Hayward Daily Review*, May 3, 1962, 1; "Statement by Richard Nixon concerning Robert Welch and THE John Birch Society," Margaret Meier Papers, Box 14, "Folder 14".

withdrawal from the United Nations. “I have tried to coalesce with the Birch Society members in the club,” Withrow declared, “but they won’t stand for any opinion but their own and they will tolerate no other philosophy.”⁵⁵ Just a week before, Robert Gaston had been elected chairman of the Los Angeles County Young Republicans, which would herald a major shift to the right within the organization, one which moderates like Withrow and Dana attributed to local Birchers active within the organization: “It was unfortunate – it heralds an era of ultra-conservatism”.⁵⁶ Withrow also complained proposed education planks had been inspired by Birch-sponsored literature and that “the slate of officers for 1962 in the Young Republican organization is comprised of two JBS members and we can assure you that the rest of the officers are Birch sympathizers.”⁵⁷ A week after resigning, Withrow and Dana wrote a caustic statement of complaint: “You have demonstrated, along with the Arcadia Republicans, Inc., that the only kind of people you want in your organization are John Birch members, and/or ultra-conservative members of the John Birch type.”⁵⁸

The Birch issue was becoming a real problem for Nixon, as conservative opponents could turn the argument on its head and reproach him for undermining Republican unity against Brown and the Democrats. Congressman Edgar Hiestand did exactly that and argued it was the candidate, and not the Birchers, that was hurting the party’s interests: “I don’t agree with many of the things Bob Welch is reported to have said, nor do I agree with some of his conclusions. However,” Hiestand added, “I hope the Vice President didn’t mean he would turn down the support of that host of loyal and patriotic citizens or any patriotic society

⁵⁵ “GOP Birch Ties Flayed: Officers Bolt Arcadia Young Republicans,” *Pasadena Star-News*, December 11, 1961, 3.

⁵⁶ “Birch Domination Of GOP Charged: Young Party Officers Resign in Protest,” *Arcadia Tribune*, December 11, 1961, 7.

⁵⁷ “Arcadia Republicans Split Over ‘John Birch Label,’” *Arcadia News-Post*, December 13, 1961, 3.

⁵⁸ “Left More Doubt: Third Birch-Charge Salvo Is Fired by GOP Leaders,” *San Gabriel Valley Tribune*, December 18, 1961, 3.

dedicated to fighting the Communist conspiracy.” Emphasizing the need for party unity, Hiestand warned: “all Republicans should be careful not to be caught in the carefully laid New Frontier trap of trying to pin the fascist tag on the Republican Party.”⁵⁹ The Birch congressman’s view found support elsewhere, including Mrs. Grace A. Goodfellow, chairwoman of GOP County Central Committee for his 27th District. Goodfellow released a critical statement of Nixon saying: “But Dick, as congressional chairman, I must ask you to refrain from criticizing or making any adverse comment about our congressman Edgar W. (Eck) Hiestand.” Goodfellow pointed out to Nixon that Hiestand had been unanimously endorsed by both his assembly districts, adding: “Congressman Hiestand has served his district [...] with distinction and we must re-elect him.”⁶⁰

The anti-Birch resolution did not fare well in the CRA, and caused great anger among its more conservative members. Though the organization was still largely in moderate hands, it already faced vocal challenges from right-wingers – mostly from the Southern part of the state – who would play a key role in the nomination of Barry Goldwater two years later. Nolan Frizzelle, the CRA’s future president, openly declared his approval of the Birchers: “I don’t consider the John Birch Society extremists. Except maybe extremely American.”⁶¹ Nixon’s resolution was co-sponsored by U.S. Senator Tom Kuchel, another clue for conservatives that the party’s established, more moderate leadership was still firmly pulling the strings. Nixon called Welch “dictatorial and totalitarian,” and was met with a chorus of catcalls.⁶² Finally, Nixon and Kuchel agreed to settle for a compromise resolution that merely

⁵⁹ “Action on the Far Right, Including a Left Hook,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 11, 1962, 8; see also “Rep. Hiestand Chides Nixon on Birch Stand,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 10, 1962, 3.

⁶⁰ “Hiestand Backer Asks Nixon Not To Criticize: Woman Writes Ex-Vice President Not to Attack Congressman in Birch Society,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 10, 1962.

⁶¹ Perlstein, *Before the Storm*, 166.

⁶² Carl Greenberg, “Republican Committee Hits Welch,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 4, 1962, F1.

denounced Welch and his conspiratorial ideas, and encouraged vocal rank-and-file Birchers to challenge his leadership.⁶³

Congressmen John Rousselot and Edgar Hiestand, both Birch members running for reelection in highly conservative districts, refused to denounce their leader and turned their backs on Nixon.⁶⁴ Many other influential conservatives were equally defiant. Congressman James B. Utt called Nixon's initial denunciation of the organization "ridiculous," and Walter Knott, the wealthy Orange County entrepreneur and generous sponsor of far-right endeavors, wrote the candidate and told him "to lay off the John Birch Society and refrain from depreciating the conservative movement."⁶⁵ Even Ronald Reagan, by then a rising star of the conservative movement, and keynote speaker at a fundraising dinner for Congressman Rousselot the year before, withheld his endorsement for Nixon until after the primary.⁶⁶ After fierce infighting, the resolution passed narrowly and Nixon received the CRA's endorsement by 263 to 176 votes. Nevertheless, revisiting the episode in his memoirs, Nixon would refer to the resolution as a "no-win proposition."⁶⁷

The damage had been done. Before the CRA debate was over, Shell was quick to join in the criticism, commending the JBS's "dedication and patriotism". After Nixon was endorsed by an embarrassingly narrow margin, Shell declared the outcome to be "a major move in breaking the old established party machine in California." Shell continued campaigning passionately, holding a massive rally in late May in Los Angeles Sports Arena before a crowd of 15,000, calling Nixon a "loser" and insisting conservatives would refuse to

⁶³ "Text of GOP Resolution Rapping Welch," *Los Angeles Times*, March 5, 1962, 11.

⁶⁴ Perlstein, 64.

⁶⁵ McGirr, 120.

⁶⁶ Matthew Dallek, *The Right Moment: Ronald Reagan's First Victory and the Decisive Turning Point in American Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 2000), 38.

⁶⁷ Richard Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 298;

campaign and vote for him in the general election. More importantly, Shell attracted many sponsors in Southern California, financially hurting Nixon's primary campaign badly and forcing him to campaign in the most remote locations of the state. Though Nixon's nomination never seemed in serious danger, it was starting to look like a pyrrhic victory.⁶⁸

Though Welch had vowed not to get involved in electoral politics, JBS members wrote to him for comments on Shell and Nixon, which he refrained from giving. However, a number of right-wingers across the state, including a few prominent Birch organizers, were more upfront about their preference. Council member Granville Knight corresponded with Republican Congressman Charles M. Teague from California's 19th District, expressing his belief in Shell's chances, to which Teague responded: "I, too, think highly of Joe Shell and believe that he will make a good showing."⁶⁹ Tex Talbert, whilst writing to conservative industrialist Cola G. Parker for support, bluntly declared: "I am doing everything possible to rid California, as well as the Nation, of Richard Nixon. I am convinced he can't beat Brown in the finals – as bad as Brown is – but I am hopeful Shell can eliminate Nixon in the primary June 5. It may take a miracle to accomplish it, but I would say Shell has a good, fighting chance." Talbert, who sat also on the Council, clearly saw the state GOP as a viable vehicle for the Birchers to get their creed disseminated, and was optimistic the Society's growth would be reflected in the polls:

We should have three members of the John Birch Society running for Congress in this area after June 5; namely, Edgar Hiestand, John Rousselot, and Bill Richardson (a non-incumbent who will be facing an extremist of the lunatic left). No Republicans of

⁶⁸ "Birch Society Stirs Debate Over CRA Endorsement," *Los Angeles Examiner*, February 12, 1962, 8; "Text of GOP Resolution Rapping Welch," *Los Angeles Times*, March 5, 1962, 1; Schuparra, *Triumph*, 67; Stephen Ambrose, *Nixon: The Education of a Politician* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 656-7.

⁶⁹ Letter from Charles Teague to Granville Knight, May 7, 1962, Granville Knight Papers, Box 3, Folder 12 "Correspondence 1962: May-June"; see also MMM from Mr. and Mrs. Albert R. Bellerue from Azusa, CA, October 1962, JBS Papers, Box 7, "MMM 62".

any consequence have attacked the John Birch Society, except Nixon and Senator Kuchel. Kuchel will probably win the primary because two Conservatives, Jarvis and Wright, are splitting the Conservative vote wide open. I am sure the eyes of the Nation will be focused on California after June 5.⁷⁰

Even the Courtneys in Louisiana availed themselves of their relatively wide audience and growing sphere of influence to weigh in on the Nixon-Shell showdown as early as March: “*The Independent American* recommends Joe Shell, Republican candidate for governorship of California. If you wish to write letters, ring doorbells, or offer financial support on behalf of this Conservative candidate contact Joe Shell’s headquarters”⁷¹

On June 5, Nixon secured the Republican nomination, though the actual results looked ominous. The divided CRA endorsement had been an accurate bellwether. Nixon’s 761,973 votes didn’t even give him a two-thirds majority and they were dwarfed by Pat Brown’s 1,031,780 votes in a four-man Democratic primary. With 399,295 votes and an impressive 35%, Shell had scored a moral victory and, Nixon’s dire need for restore party unity handed Shell a powerful bargaining position. Although he sent Nixon a personal congratulatory note, Shell refused to endorse the candidate unless he vowed to embrace true conservative principles. Concretely, Shell demanded control over a third of California delegates to the 1964 national Republican Convention and Nixon’s commitment to secure a \$200 million cut (7%) from the state’s budget. Unsurprisingly, the nominee ignored Shell and after Henry Salvatori, a founding stockholder of the *National Review* and respected conservative activist, intervened, Shell provided a tepid endorsement to the candidate.⁷²

In the general election, the Democrats eagerly turned the Birch issue against Nixon, trying to isolate him further. Having the luxury of a registered Democratic voter surplus,

⁷⁰ Letter from Paul Talbert to Cola Parker, May 17, 1962, *ibid*.

⁷¹ “Arcadia’s Voice of the People: Answer to Shell,” *Arcadia Tribune*, June 3, 1962, 11.

⁷² “Shell Backs Nixon as G.O.P. Nominee; Shell Cites Campaign View Called ‘Poor Loser,’” *New York Times*, June 20, 1962, 18.

Brown turned on Nixon and his “Stone Age ultraconservatives,” further pressuring the former Vice President to distance himself from the hard right and thus risk alienating his conservative base even more.⁷³ Nixon responded by accusing his opponent and the Democratic Party of being “soft on communism,” which was thwarted by President Kennedy’s apparent victory in the Cuban Missile Crisis in October. Another divisive issue on the agenda was the so-called Francis Amendment, listed as Proposition 24 on the ballot. Put forward by ultraconservative Republican Assemblyman Louis Francis, the legislative measure would give courts the authority to declare organizations and individuals “subversive” to control Communist subversion at home. Though enjoying heavy popular support at the beginning of the race, subsequent attacks and questions of constitutionality swelled opposition to the motion.⁷⁴ In a poll conducted right after the election, 30% of Democrats, 32% of independents and 51% of Republicans declared to have voted in favor of the measure. Again, Nixon was caught in the middle. Anxious to court Republican moderates and swing Democrats, he opposed the measure. Yet, equally worried about his trailing conservative support, he argued he did not think it “tough enough.” While the far right launched independent attacks on Brown and the CDC, which they dubbed the “California Dynasty of Communism,” these attacks provided the Democrats with additional proof that Nixon acted as a puppet of the far right.⁷⁵

All in all, the Birchers had ensured that Nixon remained isolated and that his campaign was ultimately doomed to fail. While Brown enjoyed strong party support, the Republicans were badly divided. A late write-in attempt to draft Shell was even staged,

⁷³ Jenniellen Ferguson and Paul Hoffman, “Voting Behavior: The Vote on the Francis Amendment in the 1962 California Election,” *The Western Political Quarterly*, 1.4 (December 1964), 770-776.

⁷⁴ Schuparra, *Triumph*, 67, 69-72.

⁷⁵ Fred W. Grupp, Jr., “The Political Perspectives of Birch Society Members,” in Robert Schoenberger (ed.), *The American Right Wing: Readings in Political Behavior* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc., 1969), 102-3.

arguably a scheme devised by hardcore Goldwaterites to deny Nixon a platform to run in 1964. Many voters had the persistent perception that Nixon envisioned the governorship as a springboard to a 1964 or 1968 presidential bid. A California poll taken on February 16, 1962 showed 40% of interviewees were convinced Nixon would seek his party's nomination in 1964. The faltering economy that had cost Brown much popularity in mid-1961 was in full recovery by late 1962 and the Birch issue had hurt Nixon's standing among conservatives. In the end, Nixon lost by 47% to Brown's 53%, or by 2,740,000 to 3,037,000 votes. Dejected, the Republican candidate concluded "Joe Shell and the conservatives [had] sat on their hands."⁷⁶

In the end, Shell went down, defeated by the established and more moderate Nixon. Congressmen Rousselot and Hiestand, who had secured the nomination with their party's backing, and ACA endorsements, narrowly lost in the general election, though only after heavy gerrymandering in the Democrats' favor and by narrow margins. Candidate H.L. "Bill" Richardson had similarly failed in the primaries. While Hiestand became active as a political adviser to upcoming right-wing candidates within the formal party structure, Rousselot took on G. Edward Griffin's job as Director for the Western Region for the Birch Society, taking up office in San Marino, California and organizing speaking tours, mass recruitment sessions

⁷⁶ Schuparra, *Triumph*, 76; see also Anderson and Lee, 399; Rarick, 230; McGirr, 120; Miss Irma Bethune, a young Southern Californian Republican community organizer was among the select few to receive this note as a token of appreciation for political mobilization efforts on behalf of the local party establishment: "You are cordially invited to meet Mr. Richard M. Nixon at the home of Mr. and Mrs. George L. Forman in Arcadia on Friday Eve May 11, 1962, at 7 pm." The event was in fact no more than a private fundraiser for Nixon and one of many whistle-stops in Southern California. The meet and greet session was coordinated by Herbert Meier, an Orange County Nixonite and moderate Republican wary of much of the far right-wing activity increasingly simmering in the area, and Patrick J. Hillings, former Chairman of the Los Angeles County Republican Central Committee. Within a few days, Meier received Bethune's reply scribbled on the original invitation stating: "Thank you for your invitation but Richard Nixon would not welcome me – I am a member of the John Birch Society (undated) Original note held at Margaret Meier Special Collection, Box 14, Folder 12 "John Birch Society."

and overlapping Republican-Birch events. Rockefeller aide Arthur Richardson afterwards commented: “The John Birch Society cannot be underrated in Southern California [...] They are young, emotional and well-financed. They see in Nixon’s defeat a way to show their own strength.” No admitted Birchers entered Congress in 1963, but conservative Republicans’ growing resistance to efforts to isolate the JBS and reluctance to get moderate candidates elected, pointed towards an opening into the state party system that would enable Birchers to spread their influence and unyielding opposition to the party’s establishment, pushing for radical anti-labor planks, condemnations of civil rights reform and public housing schemes, the Birch-supported Liberty Amendment and the utter eradication of “modern” Republicanism within GOP ranks. Also, the defeat of Nixon was a clear signal that conservatives could seriously damage candidates they distrusted and visibly unite behind an alternative of their choosing.⁷⁷

III. Vice or Virtue: The Goldwater Momentum

At the National Republican convention at San Francisco in July 1964, Barry Goldwater shocked the nation by making a bold statement that would haunt his campaign. Upon accepting the nomination in front of thousands of supporters shouting “We Want Barry!” Goldwater triumphantly rejected the “dark alleys of tyranny” and “the dead-end streets of collectivism,” and reminded the nation that “extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice” and that “moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue.”⁷⁸ Though he did not name the John Birch Society, the reference could hardly have been clearer. In the eyes of the

⁷⁷ Kabaservice, 61.

⁷⁸ Anthony Lewis, “Goldwater Foes Falter in Quest for Winning Issue,” *New York Times*, July 8, 1964, 1.

political establishment, Goldwater had basically exonerated the Birchers, and likeminded far right activists from posing an unwelcome threat to his conservative coalition.⁷⁹

In a 1966 radio interview broadcast by the JBS, Robert Welch looked back on the interactions the JBS had had with electoral politics. “As good citizens,” Welch explained, “[members] may take an active part in politics. But each member does so entirely on his own, working in the party of his choice for the candidate of his choice.” Welch conceded how the Society might actually exert a direct influence over elections, should its members to throw their weight behind candidates or decide run themselves. “That weight,” he continued, “is usually felt, of course, on the side of the conservatives of either party. So the liberals of both parties naturally raise all the clamor they can against Birchers in politics.” Far from discouraging members from getting directly involved in local, state or national politics, Welch considered it an evitable consequence of his educational efforts and the increasing “stranglehold of the liberals in both parties” that exercised “unceasing pressures” on conservative politicians to attack the JBS.⁸⁰

Welch interpreted Goldwater’s ambiguous stance on the Society accordingly, and in an unpublished manuscript co-authored with Medford Evans on William Buckley’s alleged betrayal of Welch and the conservative cause, he dismissed the Senator as an unaware collaborator of the global collectivist cabal: “Barry Goldwater never has begun to grasp the nature, the methods, and the menace of the Communist conspiracy [...] which makes him a perfect patsy for the plausible sounding counsels of “moderation” and “respectable Conservatism” by a sophisticated schemer like William Buckley [...] I have tried to stay

⁷⁹ Lawrence E. Davies, “G.O.P. Moderates Fearful on Coast: Expect a Swing to the Right,” *New York Times*, June 7, 1964, 76; see also Tom Wicker, “Negro Bloc Questions Arizonan’s Fitness – Rockefeller Booed,” *New York Times*, July 15, 1964, 1; “Inaction on Birch Society,” *New York Times*, July 17, 1964, 26.

⁸⁰ “The John Birch Society Report,” January 1966, JBS Records, Box 39, “Birch Report,” 3-5.

completely out of his hair since the fall of 1960 [...] rather than cause him any embarrassment.” In fact, one of the bitter few endorsements Welch had published of Goldwater, was a book review on his *Conscience of a Conservative*.⁸¹ Contributing in the June 1960 issue of *American Opinion*, Council member Revilo Oliver wrote: “Barry Goldwater is the most conspicuous conservative in the Republican Party today [...] The most rigorous conservative critic will find little in this book to which he can take exception.”⁸²



Fig. 13: Mary Kraychy of Northbrook, Illinois working at the JBS-sponsored People’s Opinion Library in Glenview, outside of Chicago, where the Society established a Midwestern regional headquarters. This picture was taken in January 1965, in the wake of Barry Goldwater’s campaign, and an *American Opinion* issue with the candidate on the cover – AP IMAGES

⁸¹ Robert Welch and Medford Evans, “False Leadership: William F. Buckley, Jr. and The New World Order,” JBS Papers, Box 36, 76.

⁸² Revilo Oliver, “Review of Reviews,” *American Opinion* 3.7 (June 1960), 41.

Welch himself remained reluctant to comment directly on electoral politics, presumably lest the JBS lose valuable tax exemptions as an educational organization. Meanwhile, individual Birchers continued to organize and infiltrate their local Republican Party establishment so they could help get Goldwater's nomination secured and purge liberal and moderate opponents. Edwin Thomley of Decatur, Illinois wrote to one of Welch's staffers in late 1963, to report the progress he and other members had been making in the area: "In addition to the many projects and tasks of local Decatur chapters, we have managed to infiltrate the newly formed conservative club of the twenty second congressional district of Illinois. The most important item on the agenda is the drive to draft Mr. Goldwater [...] We fully realize that one man will not save the nation, and are also cognizant of our great task."⁸³ Still, nowhere were Birchers more politically organized than in California and even Welch himself conceded that in the state "a preponderant percentage [of our membership] are active in the Republican Party."⁸⁴ Emily Pike, a moderate Republican organizer, recalled in a 1977 interview how visible Birch Society members had become after Nixon's defeat, and how fiercely they were vying for control over the party leadership: "The Birch people were beginning to infiltrate very heavily in the beginning of '63, headed toward '64 and the whole conservative movement."⁸⁵

The convention of the Young Republicans, held in February 1963, saw ultraconservative Robert Gaston elected President and defeat moderate Kevin Davis, whom Pike referred to as "our candidate against the Birchers."⁸⁶ Gaston was not a Bircher, but his

⁸³ Letter from Edwin J. Thomley to William Dunham, October 8, 1963, JBS Papers, Box 6, "T/m Welch".

⁸⁴ Robert Welch, "Introduction to the 1963 California Report on the John Birch Society," *American Opinion Reprint Series*, August 1, 1963, i.

⁸⁵ Emily Pike, Mirriam Stein (ed.), "Republican Campaign Organizer: From Volunteer to Professional: An Interview," Regional Oral History Office, University of Berkeley, 1983, 208.

⁸⁶ "Birchers Accused Of Power Grab," *Lodi News-Sentinel*, January 25, 1963, 2.

positions easily matched the Society's profile. The young insurance executive favored U.S. withdrawal from the United Nations, opposed all foreign aid and maintained Kennedy's intervention at Ole Miss was unconstitutional and implied the establishment of a police state. Incumbent Harry Keaton accused Gaston of striking a deal with Birch member Ron Garver, who had allegedly retracted his candidacy to boost Gaston's chances against the moderate Davis. Once the conservatives had captured the YR, an enthusiastic endorsement of Barry Goldwater for President was passed.⁸⁷

Again, Nixon's failure to unite the party around his candidacy had already highlighted that dedicated conservatives saw an opportunity to cleanse the party infrastructure of political opponents. Since most of the state's party structures disproportionately relied on volunteers, the right-wing momentum turned moderates away and electrified the "true believers."⁸⁸ Throughout the entire process, Goldwater remained consistently ambiguous on the JBS. Earlier the prospective candidate had joined Buckley – albeit cautiously – in criticizing Welch for his "unwise" remarks. Still, Goldwater refused to disavow the Society at large and was careful not to alienate enthusiastic voters and organizers. "Members [of the JBS] have a constitutional right to take the position they choose even though I might disagree with them," he declared. "I don't agree, for example, that Earl Warren should be impeached [but] "I can't bring myself to disavow a group that is exercising its constitutional rights."⁸⁹ Some high-profile Birch insiders were helping Goldwater's campaign manager Cliff White lay down the groundwork for his presidential run. Tex Talbert raised money and organized volunteers in California, while Clarence Manion had helped conceive of the Draft Goldwater initiative and told campaigners not to denounce the JBS as it would cost them support. Finally, right-wing

⁸⁷ Lawrence E. Davies, "Republicans Pick Birch Supporter," *New York Times*, February 18, 1963, 1.

⁸⁸ "Birch Society's Right To Speak Is Defended," *Pittsburgh Press*, November 20, 1963, 13.

⁸⁹ Shermer, *Barry Goldwater*, 148.

businessmen such as H. L. Hunt, Roger Milliken, Walter Knott and J. Howard Pew both supported the JBS and Goldwater, and the campaign could not afford to alienate generous right-wing sponsors.⁹⁰

The increasing collusion between the far Right – with the Birchers at the helm – and the Goldwater machine – as well as the candidate’s refusal to denounce the Society’s membership – made it clear to observers that Birchers and likeminded conspiratorial conservatives had a strong influence over a man who had a solid chance to capture the nomination of one of the two major parties. Once again, the issue of extremism resurfaced in public debate and a wave of studies in political science and sociology comparable to that of 1960-61 emerged. A study commissioned by B’nai B’rith in early 1963 concluded the JBS was “dangerously growing” and warned that Welch and his followers had assumed a position to exert “real political muscle.” The defeat of Rousselot, Hiestand and Amarillo Mayor Jack Seale had not discouraged Birchers from running for office and the Society had members in all states and enjoyed particular growth in Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi, as well as Washington, Idaho, Arizona, Long Island and evidently, Southern California. The study estimated a national membership of between 50,000 and 60,000 with nearly one hundred *American Opinion* bookstores operational around the country.⁹¹

The Bircher-Goldwater connection was growing in the Deep South as well, adding to hostile speculations that the Republican Party was becoming infested with racism and

⁹⁰ Alfred S. Regnery, *Upstream: The Ascendancy of American Conservatism* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2008), 126; see also Irving Spiegel, “Aid to Right-Wing Laid to Big Firms,” *New York Times*, September 20, 1964, 1.

⁹¹ Bernard Eismann and David Jansen, *The Far Right* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963); see also Mark Sherwin, *The Extremists* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1963); Harry and Bonaro Overstreet, *The Strange Tactics of Extremism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1964); Morton Mintz, “B’nai B’rith Reports Birch Society Grows Stronger,” *Washington Post*, January 31, 1963, C21.

bigotry. Goldwater's libertarian opposition to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 attracted a new generation of Southerners to the G.O.P., thus accelerating the realignment of both parties. Like Goldwater, the Birchers were successful in the South, and within a year after the 1964 election, the city of Birmingham, Alabama alone was estimated to have over one hundred chapters, typically counting between ten and twenty members each. Three full-time coordinators were active throughout the state and Montgomery, Mobile and Huntsville were reported to make significant gains. Many were still Democrats, firmly behind George Wallace, who would court many of the Society's members in his 1968 run. The Birchers' position on civil rights enjoyed great appeal in the South, and it would help channel many voters towards Goldwater's standard.⁹²

The crucial contest to decide the Republican nomination fight of 1964 was without a doubt the California primary on June 5. Nelson Rockefeller emerged as Goldwater's primary rival, and had already won the Oregon contest. Rockefeller embodied everything conservative Republicans detested. A wealthy East Coast liberal, Rockefeller espoused social and economic progressive ideas and had, to the dismay of religious conservatives, just entered into a second, controversial marriage. Both candidates needed to win California in order to tip the balance in their favor and send its 82 delegates to the National Convention in San Francisco six weeks later. Rockefeller had virtually limitless resources and accused Goldwater of inviting extremists like the Birchers into his campaign. California Senator Tom Kuchel, who a year before had called the Birchers "fright peddlers" and "originators of hoaxes," became the Governor's campaign manager and expressed his suspicions Welch was ordering his members to capture the entire Republican Party, which could only happen through a Goldwater victory. Joseph Martin, Rockefeller's state-wide coordinator, speculated

⁹² Roy Reed, "Birch Society Is Growing in the South," *New York Times*, November 8, 1965, 1; see also Raymond Moley, "Revitalization of GOP in South Due to Youth," *Los Angeles Times*, April 28, 1964, A5.

Californian Republicans had seen enough of the JBS and were about to reject Goldwater because of them.⁹³

Local Birchers certainly made themselves visible in the run-up to the primary. Republican Jack Alex of Covina, running for a congressional seat, complained the Society had become a “very present threat” to his nomination chances: “They follow me around with a good squad, call me a Socialist and say I must be a Democrat.” Alex claimed John Rousselot had offered to have local Birchers campaign for him if he agreed to run on an anti-U.N. platform and campaign against the federal income tax, which Alex refused. A number of avowed JBS members ran for office as well. William Van Mastrigt of Orinda ran successfully for the Republican nomination for State Senator (17th District), only to lose to his Democratic opponent in November. Southern Californian John G. Schmitz battled off five other candidates for the nomination and was carried into office, running primarily against the controversial Rumford Open Housing Act. Both Jack Azevedo of Walnut Creek and Donald R. St John of Pasadena won their respective nominations for the State Assembly, but lost to Democrats. If most JBS candidates were indeed incapable of carrying majorities in general elections, it is still significant they could capture their party’s nomination and contribute to the conservative takeover of the GOP on a local level.⁹⁴

More importantly, Barry Goldwater defied the odds and defeated Nelson Rockefeller by little under 60,000 votes with over two million ballots cast between both of them. Again, the extremism charges did not pay off. On the contrary, in Southern California, Goldwater won by a 2:1 ratio, as the region reached a record number of 68% turnout. Over 50,000

⁹³ “Birch Aid Called Harm to Goldwater,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 7, 1964, 2.

⁹⁴ Paul Beck, “Is the Militant Right Trying to Seize Control of GOP?” *Los Angeles Times*, May 24, 1964, E1; see also Beck, “How the Ultra-Conservatives Could Take Over State GOP,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 25, 1964, A1.

volunteers had campaigned for Goldwater across the state.⁹⁵ Conservatives recognized their opportunity to capture the party infrastructure and regarded the East Coast party leadership with deep distrust. In her 1964 bestseller *A Choice Not an Echo*, Phyllis Schlafly accused a select group of “kingmakers” behind the G.O.P. leadership of consistently rigging presidential selection procedures and denying conservatives a fair chance at representation: “How did it happen that, in four major Presidential campaigns, Republicans were maneuvered into nominating candidates who did not campaign on the major issues? It wasn’t any accident. It was planned that way.” Schlafly’s musings were representative of conservatives’ frustrations – and not just the Birchers – with the Eastern Establishment’s dominant grip on the party. Schlafly did not share most of Welch’s conspiratorial views, but did give legitimacy to the belief that Republican “kingmakers” had advertently sidelined conservatives in the choosing of a presidential nominee. Rockefeller’s attacks on the JBS reminded conservatives like Schlafly of the smear campaigns against Robert Taft and Joe McCarthy, both politicians conservative Republicans admired and were convinced had been silenced by the party establishment.⁹⁶

When after the general election Goldwater finally repudiated the JBS and its members, many of his supporters, including non-members, felt he was targeting the wrong group and merely submitting to the same “kingmakers” that could not stop him from clinching the nomination and so helped destroy his hopes for election. Joan C. Phillips, a Californian Goldwater volunteer, wrote the former Senator expressing her disappointment: “You offered us a hope. That hope of electing you as President was destroyed by the same

⁹⁵ Lawrence E. Davies, “Goldwater, Narrowly Beating Rockefeller, Sets California G.O.P. on a New Course,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 4, 1964, 22; see also “Orange County: Goldwater Leads 2-1 in County Vote,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 3, 1964, E8.

⁹⁶ Phyllis Schlafly, *A Choice Not an Echo* (Alton, IL: Pere Marquette Press, 1964), 25.

smear artists [...] seeking to destroy the John Birch Society.”⁹⁷ Frank Lowe, a former Dixiecrat, expressed similar disapproval: “I am not a Bircher,” he wrote, “but certainly appreciate all they have done, and are trying to do, to keep this great country of ours free and under Constitutional government.”⁹⁸ Ruth Cook, a Mormon conservative from Escondido, forwarded Goldwater a letter she had written to Michigan Gov. George Romney, in which she warned Romney against alienating the Birchers: “When you attack the Birch Society you attack the whole conservative strength [...] The louder you boys shout and attack the Birch Society, the more you are hurting yourselves. Just who sat on their hands in ’64 to help lose the election?”⁹⁹

It was the same suspicions that turned Goldwater’s delegates at the convention in July against the two proposals put forward to mollify his platform. With the support of Romney, Rockefeller, Mark Hatfield and other Republican leaders, Pennsylvania Governor William Scranton proposed a resolution accepting the constitutionality of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which Goldwater had just voted against. The resolution was rejected by 897 to 409. An additional plank was suggested by Scranton, which formally denounced the John Birch Society as extremist, alongside the Ku Klux Klan and other hate groups. Not only was the resolution shouted down twice, but Nelson Rockefeller was treated to a chorus of catcalls when trying to defend the proposal. Then, upon accepting the nomination, Goldwater

⁹⁷ Letter from J.C. Phillips to Barry Goldwater, October 15, 1965, Barry Goldwater Papers, 1964-1965, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library, Reel 8 ‘Letters on the John Birch Society.’

⁹⁸ Letter from Frank L. Lowe to Barry Goldwater, October 15, 1965, *ibid.*

⁹⁹ Letter from Ruth Cook to George Romney, October 14, 1965, *ibid.*; voter turnout in 1964 remained constant with regard to 1960, but it is evident that many moderate and liberal Republicans made the switch to Johnson. Some Republican politicians, like Kuchel, did refuse to campaign on behalf their party’s candidate.

famously stood up for the “extremists” in his camp, dealing a fatal blow to any serious attempts to get a resolution of condemnation passed.¹⁰⁰

It was clear that, while the extremism issue united conservatives behind Goldwater more than it divided them, it would become nigh-on impossible for the Republican to come back to the center for the general election. As with the Nixon gubernatorial race, by taking their stand against the liberal and moderate forces within their own party, conservative Republicans had made it relatively easy for the Democrats to exploit the image of Goldwater as a warmongering extremist. Goldwater’s shoot-from-the-hip rhetorical style only exacerbated the problem. While he accused Johnson of being a “radical liberalist” who was taking the country “down the road to socialism,” the President barely acknowledged his opponent and remained dominant in the polls, ultimately beating Goldwater in a landslide.¹⁰¹

The JBS struggled with the same problem. Whereas the exposure it had received in the run-up to the nomination battle boosted its image among conservatives, to centrist and liberal voters it remained a frightening symbol of right-wing extremism. A 1964 election study revealed only five percent of Americans who knew of the JBS, approved of it.¹⁰² The aftermath of the Kennedy assassination had severely tainted the Society, especially after Revilo Oliver authored an article for *American Opinion*, in which he speculated Kennedy had

¹⁰⁰ Anthony Lewis, “Goldwater Foes Falter in Quest for Winning Issue,” *New York Times*, July 8, 1964, 1.; see also Lawrence E. Davies, “G.O.P. Moderates Fearful on Coast: Expect a Swing to the Right,” *New York Times*, June 7, 1964, 76; Tom Wicker, “Negro Bloc Questions Arizonan’s Fitness – Rockefeller Booed,” *New York Times*, July 15, 1964, 1; “Inaction on Birch Society,” *New York Times*, July 17, 1964, 26.

¹⁰¹ “Goldwater Feels He’s Found Victory Formula” *Washington Post*, October 9, 1964, A7; see also Stephen Shadegg, *What Happened to Goldwater? The Inside Story of the 1964 Republican Campaign* (New York: Holt, Rineheart and Winston, 1965), 134.

¹⁰² Clyde Wilcox “Sources of Support for the Old Right: A Comparison of the John Birch Society and the Christian Anti-Communism Crusade,” *Social Science History* 12.4 (Winter 1988), 431.

been killed after angering his Communist paymasters.¹⁰³ A David Lewis from Sherman Oaks, CA wrote the *LA Times*, saying: “They carry with them the stench of an appeal to violence and prejudice, a rejection of the processes of a democracy, and an ugly and recurrent faithlessness in the good will, motives and patriotism of any American who disagrees with them.”¹⁰⁴ Two months before the election, John Rousselot was invited onto ABC Radio along with Billy James Hargis to talk about grassroots conservative movements. When asked if it was true that Welch had claimed the United States was 50-70% Communist-controlled, Rousselot confirmed, and elaborated: “It isn’t just the Government. It’s the influence in education. The influence in some areas of the Communication media. In many other areas, in religion sometimes. And I don’t think there’s any doubt about the effectiveness of the Communist Conspiracy in penetrating.”¹⁰⁵

After the defeat, many Birchers only felt more motivated, angered that their candidate had been betrayed, but hopeful they could help secure future conservative victories through tireless campaigning and educational efforts.¹⁰⁶ Alfred Mierzejewski of Willingsboro, New Jersey wrote in his Monthly Members’ Message how the election had encouraged his 16-year old son to join the JBS and organize a teen age Republican club with 50 members: “They were working with more zeal toward the election of conservative republicans than most of the adults.”¹⁰⁷ Xena Kandal, a Bircher from Glendale, California wrote to Goldwater to complain after his denouncement of the Society a year after the election: “I do know this, Mr. Goldwater, that had it not been for the work of the John Birch Society, your name would

¹⁰³ Revilo Oliver, “Marxmanship in Dallas,” *American Opinion* 7.3 (March 1964), 65-78.

¹⁰⁴ “Reaction to John Birch Society Advertisement,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 3, 1964, B4.

¹⁰⁵ “Hargis and Rousselot Talk Issues and Answers,” *Southern Illinoisian*, October 11, 1964, 16.

¹⁰⁶ Fred W. Grupp, Jr., “The Political Perspectives of Birch Society Members,” in Robert Schoenberger (ed.), *The American Right Wing: Readings in Political Behavior*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc., 1969, 102-3.

¹⁰⁷ MMM from Alfred Mierzejewski, November 2, 1964, JBS Papers, Box 7, “64”.

have never been on the ballot in California. I, for one, worked like a dog to get your name placed there, because we wanted you.”¹⁰⁸

IV. Conclusion

Despite the harrowing defeat at the polls, the Goldwater campaign was a crucial step forward for the American right. His Southern sweep heralded a new electoral order of Sun Belt conservatives that Republicans could successfully court in the future. The campaign brought solidly right-wing positions on states’ rights, small government, law and order, aggressive anti-communism and social conservatism to the party platform and despite the stunning defeat, handed the conservative movement a much greater degree of legitimacy. It turned Ronald Reagan into a superstar overnight, and put him on his way to win the governorship of the most populous state in the union just two years later. Both Goldwater and Reagan profited from the work of the JBS and its suburban warriors, but the latter would learn to avoid direct association with its extremist label so as not to lose his appeal to the center. In a way, more so than Goldwater, he would become a symbol of the Birchers’ strengths and limitations.

The John Birch Society played an important part in the consolidation behind Goldwater’s coup. Welch’s educational network provided thousands of dedicated conservatives with the experience vital to make their mark on the political landscape. What is more, the Birchers became a symbol of resistance to the “modern” Republicanism of Eisenhower, Dewey and Rockefeller. Whereas the extremist label damaged Goldwater in the general election against Johnson, as it had done for Nixon against Pat Brown, it acted as a

¹⁰⁸ Letter from Xena Kandal to Barry Goldwater, October 14, 1965, Barry Goldwater Papers, Reel 8.

catalysing factor upon the right-wing capture of the Republican Party, spearheaded from the areas where the JBS was at its strongest. If Goldwater's nomination and subsequent defeat was an essential jump to pave the way for future conservative victories, then the John Birch Society, both as a political tool and scapegoat as well as an organization of highly motivated right-wingers, had been essential to that evolution.

Chapter 5: A Strident Minority: Challenging History in Post-Consensus America, 1964-1968

The controversial role the John Birch Society assumed around the 1964 election would permanently alter its position within the conservative movement. Historians typically regard the election as a coming of age of postwar American conservatism while pointing towards the Republican defeat as the onset of the Birch Society's decline on the national stage in terms of influence, membership and cohesion. In doing so, the definitive ousting of the JBS from the conservative mainstream is often seen as a parallel development or even a *sine qua non* for the eventual rise of the New Right. Looking at California and the ascension of Ronald Reagan in particular, Mary Brennan, Kurt Schuparra and Matthew Dallek have identified the former actor's 1966 gubernatorial race as "the right moment" for conservatives to exploit the right-wing shift that Goldwater had produced within the Republican Party, as well as shed the cumbersome extremist image and "guilt by association" invoked by political opponents looking to equate the entire conservative movement with the Birchers, Minutemen and even the Klan. In a historical study of the rise of Southern Republican conservatism in Texas, Sean Cunningham has illustrated how savvy political leaders with Senator John Tower at the helm had learned to reap the benefits of grassroots networks put in place by Birchers and likeminded anti-Communists, while escaping direct association and playing down ideological ties when the time would come to battle for the center. Reconciling similar observations into a national narrative, Jonathan Schoenwald has identified the Goldwater campaign as well as Robert Welch's ambiguous stance on Vietnam as the proverbial final straw for conservative architects like Bill Buckley and the *National Review*, who decided the occasion had arisen for responsible conservatives to break ranks with the Birchers entirely and unequivocally.

To a certain extent, these conclusions have been proven correct. By the end of the decade, the Birch Society would lose the vital momentum and aura of novelty it had been able to provide thousands of conservatives disillusioned with Eisenhower's modern Republicanism and frightened of Kennedy's Cold War liberalism just a few years earlier. After experiencing an undeniable peak at the time of the Goldwater campaign, the JBS would be faced with an unsurmountable barrage of criticism, ridicule and, possibly worse, lukewarm neglect and avoidance even by those ideologically sympathetic to its cause. Though the Society officially stayed out of electoral contests and partisan politics, its members remained highly politically active, which meant that for those who were eager to make an impact in mainstream party politics their associations would pose a serious dilemma. In the meantime, Welch's exuberant conspiracy theories had consistently embarrassed conservatives and handed their opponents a valuable weapon. Though the Southern-born businessman had made sure his organization would avoid resorting to the explicit racial bigotry of white supremacist factions in opposing civil rights activism and legislation, its insistence on a conspiratorial interpretation of history and contemporary developments would keep it attractive to far right-wing xenophobes and paramilitary extremists. Even if Welch did monitor members' activities and associations constantly and execute occasional purges if individual cases became too embarrassing, the Birchers ultimately risked being increasingly isolated between respectable – i.e. electable – conservatives on one side, and racist conspiracy theorists on the other.

Still, there are a number of important observations to be made that can shed a clearer light on the post-Goldwater stage of the Society's development and at the same time offer a link between its struggle for political relevance and the New Right's victories over the liberal New Deal coalition during the latter half of the decade. First of all, the extremist charges hurled at the JBS by pundits and politicians alike consistently still betrayed strikingly similar assumptions to those that had preoccupied the liberal consensus commentators caught off

guard by Goldwater's meteoric rise. Clearly, in many if not a majority of cases the vilification of Welch and the Society offered critics a strategic pathway either to undermine or solidify the conservatives' electoral base, depending on where they stood politically. While skeptical conservatives were primarily preoccupied with purging the Republican Party of harmful elements that could imperil their chances at the ballot box, liberals still regarded the Birchers more often than not as anti-democratic, authoritarian, and even Fascist fundamentalists unfit to partake in the nation's political dialogue.

The problem here lies both in the overestimation of the cohesion of the liberal consensus, and in the underestimation of conservatives' potential to form a relatively unified front and exploit the cracks that were showing in the liberals' hold on the national agenda. Even considering that the inevitable William Buckley called on Birchers to resign from the Society and urged other conservatives to regard them as a threat to their cause, it would be a mistake to view the JBS as an activist organization significantly divorced from conservatism's attack on the New Deal order. The various projects and front groups headed by motivated Birchers around the nation – from opposing universal healthcare and liberalized sex education to desegregated busing and citizens' police review boards – ran by and large parallel with the New Right's populist attack on liberalism, which conservatives conveniently argued had invited the chaos of urban rioting, the conspicuous excesses of the counterculture and the white backlash against redistributive policies such as welfare and affirmative action.

It is vital to map the gradual decline of the JBS alongside the tangible successes it achieved through its tireless activism and vocal dissent. The most significant of these was the successful drive to disband New York City's civilian police review board in 1966, a concerted effort by the NYPD as well as conservative interest groups, including the JBS. With its *Support Your Local Police* program, the Society could appeal to public skepticism towards the review board and tie their opposition to it together with issues of crime, race,

urban decay, states' rights and similar areas in which public opinion was rapidly shifting towards more conservative approaches. As such, Birchers could significantly contribute to an important conservative victory that transcended the boundaries of the city and had vast implications for the direction national politics was evolving towards. Even if Welch said so himself, the Society "helped create the atmosphere that elected Ronald Reagan as Governor of California and defeated the Civilian Complaint Review Board referendum in New York."¹

It is also important to accord a degree of agency to the Society with regard to its receding from the mainstream party system. The Draft Goldwater movement had brought countless Birchers, especially in the South and West, into the Republican fold; and the attitudes prominent Republicans would adopt towards them, as a result, would drive many back out. While this often meant high-profile campaigns dealt with the JBS more cautiously, it was not simply a matter of straightforward exclusion. The independent, third-party campaign of George Wallace, which depended on the zeal and hands-on mobilization efforts of many who belonged to the Society, offered a viable populist alternative to many from the two main parties who had been sufficiently disillusioned and alienated to consider either mainstream candidacy worth supporting.

The developments of the end of the decade, including the victory of Richard Nixon, left Robert Welch and the JBS in a paradoxical position. A great part of the Society's strength and appeal had relied on the sense that "true conservatives" had been pushed out of or silenced in both main parties and that therefore the public needed to be properly reeducated on the perils of creeping Communism in mainstream politics. It also relied on the image of a liberal establishment that hid behind exaggerated social injustices to impose an oppressive set

¹ Gene Blake, "Welch Claims Birch Members Helped Reagan Win Election," *Los Angeles Times*, December 8, 1966, 3; see also "Inside Report: Right Extremism Dead As California Issue," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, September 24, 1966, 17; "Welch Links War to More Controls," *New York Times*, December 10, 1966, 25.

of values harmful to American sovereignty and constitutional integrity. The election cycles of 1966 and 1968 revealed a growing popular rebuttal of – or at least skepticism towards – Great Society reform programs and the nascent New Left. As a result, the JBS would see national politics shift substantially to the Right, leaving them with a much weakened and divided Left to rally against. Wallace provided an excellent channel for the Birchers' conspiratorial mindset and outsider syndrome, but the election of Richard Nixon left them in an awkward position. They had played a significant part in shaping the discourse of the Right over the course of the decade, fueling populist indignation over liberal initiatives and what they saw as the surrender of true conservative values to pointless compromise and moral corruption. With Nixon at the helm, whom they bitterly distrusted, their persistent protest became increasingly marginalized. While the nation hungered for peace at home and détente abroad, the Birchers' refusal to accept compromise and fixation with global conspiracy narratives would isolate them further, reflected by the embarrassing third-party candidacy of John G. Schmitz in 1972.

I. Growth after Goldwater

Barry Goldwater's resounding defeat to Lyndon Johnson shook the American Right profoundly. Not only did the election humiliate the fragile national conservative movement that had solidified around the Arizonan, but it also handed the sitting President an apparent endorsement of his domestic reform efforts, including the milestone civil rights law passed the previous summer. The nation, still in mourning over the slain Jack Kennedy, embraced his constitutional successor by a staggering 16 million votes over the Republican challenger. Johnson carried all but six states and the extent of his victory at last seemed to usher in the triumph of the liberal consensus. With the battle for the White House wrapped up and the congressional elections playing out to the Democrats' advantage, liberals could confidently

pursue an even more ambitious legislative agenda, of which the “War on Poverty” would become the most significant manifestation. It seemed the era of inner turmoil and division was finally winding down and the nation could come together around the vital center. “I ask all those who supported me and all those that opposed me to forget our differences and stand united before all the world,” Johnson pleaded with the electorate.²

While Johnson called for national unity and prepared for his first full presidential term, conservatives were marching to a different tune. Successful grassroots efforts to rally the Republican Party around a “true blue” conservative candidate had resulted in a landslide defeat for the Right, but Goldwater’s electrifying triumph at the Cow Palace over the party’s moderate and liberal wings did not leave his dedicated followers despondent and prepared to surrender. On the contrary, Goldwater’s veritable coup had convinced conservatives around the country they were not isolated in regional pockets or hamstrung by division over issues such as civil rights and the threat of international Communism. The networks that had been established or infiltrated by conservatives to nominate Goldwater could now be perfected to carry future candidates into office or mount successful campaigns on a variety of issues, from crime and law enforcement to housing and education.

Robert Welch and the Birch Society had officially stayed out of the election, but many of the Society’s members had helped mobilize support for Goldwater, and rallied against the Eastern Establishment within the Republican Party. The Birchers had in fact provided the Right with a mixed blessing. To the conservative movement’s benefit, Welch had created a powerful national right-wing organization with the potential to connect dedicated citizens in their individual fights against domestic liberalism and international Communism. Their experience drawn from chapter meetings, front group projects and

² “Johnson Thanks the People for Victory,” *Pittsburgh Press*, November 4, 1964, 18.

national crusades had paved the way for many Goldwater enthusiasts to help steer the GOP significantly to the right. Welch's refusal to compromise on practically all issues he cared about and the intricate conspiracy theories he typically laid out behind them, was reflected by the zeal with which members and sympathizers wrestled moderate and liberal opponents within the party for control, thus triggering Goldwater's watershed victory and eventual defeat.

On a 1965 speaking tour in Southern California, Robert Welch proclaimed local Birch activists had formed a "hard core of strength" that helped get several "true blue" conservatives on the ballot, especially in California. Welch estimated national membership at over 80,000 – up at least 15,000 from before the election.³ Among other factors, the Society's opposition to federal civil rights legislation ensured that its appeal to disgruntled Dixiecrats could run parallel with Goldwater's Southern sweep, earning the Birch brand significant Southern advances at a time of partisan realignment. If anything, the election seemed to energize the Society and encouraged its leadership and membership base to step up their educational efforts. Thousands of pamphlets were distributed across the country through local chapters saying: "If you are one of the 27,000,000 then read this... [...] We are in no way connected with Goldwater. [...] But we have something worthwhile to say to those good Americans who voted for him in the last election." Belmont pitched its usual "outside of politics" message, but was eager to tap into the potential of Goldwater's disillusioned millions waiting to be enlisted for duty: "Massive education, not political ballyhoo, offers the only means of again electing enough Conservatives to office in this country to save it from collectivist tyranny." Welch had understood the time was ripe for aggressive expansion and,

³ Carl Greenberg, "Birch Society Helped Win Primaries – Welch," *Los Angeles Times*, January 14, 1965, A1; see also Jack Nelson, "Goldwater Republicans Tighten Grip in South," *Los Angeles Times*, September 27, 1965, A1; Roy Reed, "Birch Society Is Growing in the South," *New York Times*, November 8, 1965, 1.

profiting from the Draft Goldwater momentum, expressed his ambitions for growth up to “three or four times our present size,” which he saw as a minimum requirement to “play the role of David realistically against the Communist Goliath.”⁴

Unsurprisingly, he welcomed the Goldwater debacle as an opportunity and a necessary wake-up call to the nation’s dormant, conservative populace, and the definitive proof that the country was slipping down the road to a socialist dystopia. Determined to turn the severity of the Republicans’ defeat in November to his advantage, he heightened his alarmist rhetoric even further: “In November 1964, forty-two million supporters of Lyndon Johnson voted for repeal of our Declaration of Independence, and for gradual surrender of United States sovereignty to international control,” he warned. Also, the Republican leadership’s repeated attempts to unseat Goldwater and their reluctant embrace of the Senator’s candidacy after the nomination to Welch presented undeniable evidence that an evil conspiracy had taken hold of the GOP’s machinery to wrest it away from true constitutionalist Republicans.⁵

What is more, widespread insistence on the “extremism” issue across and beyond both parties basically boiled down to condemnations of Welch and the Society. Thus, attacks from influential syndicated columnists like Drew Pearson and Carl Greenberg, moderate Republicans like Tom Kuchel, George Romney and Mark Hatfield and even prominent conservatives such as George Sokolsky and William Buckley, contributed heavily to the Birchers’ sense of political martyrdom, and from their perspective all but confirmed suspicions of an alarmed conspiracy they were firmly closing in on. With a pronounced sense

⁴ “Now Will You Join THE JOHN BIRCH SOCIETY” Pamphlet, 1964, Clark Norton Right Wing Publications, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library, Box 5, “Assorted, Separate Right-Wing Publications, Envelope E (1964).”

⁵ Op. cit.

of pride, Welch proclaimed the only viable reason such a wide campaign had been mounted against his cause had to be “that the John Birch Society ... *can* conduct an educational campaign which will expose and defeat the Communist conspiracy!” Finally, he called upon fellow travelers to reach the same conclusions and join the struggle: “*Now* will you join The John Birch Society?”⁶

John Rousselot, by then the Society’s newly appointed national Public Relations executive, announced more members had joined during November 1964 than at any other time, “[a]nd California led the nation in new chapters and members.” In the Golden State alone, the Society sought to add 38,000 members over the course of 1965, and, boasting leadership over organized chapters in all 435 congressional districts, Rousselot revealed the objective of attracting a total of between 325,000 and 500,000 members by late 1966.⁷ Though the Society would never remotely attain that number, Rousselot earlier on in 1966 would claim a staggering 100,000 organized Birchers, aided by 250 staff members, of which 80 were paid organizers.⁸ As for the Society’s sister project *American Opinion*, Rousselot placed its national subscribed readership at no less than 46,000: “As more people attack us,” he gloated, “more people become interested in us and make inquiries about our activities.”⁹

⁶ Op. cit.; long after the election, Drew Pearson remained adamant about the role of the Society in mobilizing racist and militant agitators like Minutemen leader Robert DePugh, as well as the risk of Bircher infiltration of local GOP structures, see Drew Pearson, “Noise on the Right: Extreme Right Wing Is Conducting Drives Trying to Show That It Can Lead GOP,” *Washington Post*, November 7, 1965, E7.

⁷ “Rousselot Cites Gains by Birch Society,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 9, 1964, 26.

⁸ Julius Duscha, “Birch Campaign Formed To Oppose Rights Drive,” *Washington Post*, Jan 8, 1966, A1.

⁹ Carl Greenberg, “Birch Society Planning to Add 38,000 in State,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 4, 1965, A1.



Fig. 14: Robert Welch and John Rousselot at the JBS-sponsored “New England Rally for God and Country in June 1963” – UPI Images

Donald Janson, political journalist for the *New York Times*, in mid-1965 reported the Society had doubled its financial intake from \$1.6 million in 1963 to \$3.2 million at the end of 1964. Benjamin Epstein and Arnold Forster concluded in their 1966 report on the JBS that Welch had expanded the payroll over the period 1963-65 with an additional thirty-five full-time coordinators as well as several Research Department staffers, representing an annual investment of at least one million dollars. The disproportionate national exposure the Birchers had received as a result of the 1964 election even helped extend its presence into areas it had struggled to gain a foothold in, such as New England and the Mid-Atlantic. Reports were coming in from New Hampshire about a sudden post-Goldwater boost in right-wing activism, spurred on by local Birch affiliates: “All of a sudden, Nashua was a town full

of subversives,” a local writer lamented.¹⁰ In New Jersey, another journalist claimed, the JBS managed to quadruple its membership between the time of the election and April 1966.¹¹

Looking back from 1968, sociologist David Riesman reconstructed the growth of the Right after the defeat it had suffered four years earlier: “Goldwater’s 27 million votes represent an enormous potential base to which the right wing can appeal.”¹² Riesman had judged correctly. Beyond the JBS, right-wing groups enjoyed similar growth in the wake of the senator’s defeat. Liberty Lobby chief strategist Curtis Bean Dall mused the Republican tally represented a huge opportunity for conservatives: “I am firmly convinced that many hundreds of thousands of voters – even 27 million of them – are convinced that their voices are not being heard. Our delegation will be prepared to speak for this disfranchised, neglected minority.”¹³ Donald Janson reported how the prolific Billy James Hargis’ Christian Crusade in 1964 had taken in \$834,000 or a 22% rise from the previous year.¹⁴ Fred Schwarz’s Christian Anti-Communist Crusade had seen its income rise by nearly 10% to a total of \$612,000. As Wesley McCune, director of Group Research, Inc. observed, “the right wing of American politics and economics has grown strong stronger and/or more effective in every measurable way.”¹⁵

With the JBS expanding further, it would become clear to uneasy conservatives, who had tolerated the Birchers in the midst for strategic reasons, that soon it could develop into an uncontrollable problem. Welch’s ceaseless emphasis on a sinister, global conspiracy lurking

¹⁰ Benjamin Epstein and Arnold Forster, *Report on the John Birch Society*, 63-66; Joseph Sake, “A Birch Grows in Nashua,” *The New Hampshire Churchman*, 18.5 (May 1965), 12.

¹¹ Robert Sullivan, “New Jersey’s Birchers Quadruple in Numbers,” *Arizona Daily Star*, April 20, 1966, 9B.

¹² David Riesman “America Moves To the Right,” *New York Times Magazine*, October 27, 1968, 34.

¹³ “Liberty Lobby Complains It’s Ignored,” *The Arizona Daily Star*, September 25, 1966, 3A.

¹⁴ Donald Janson, “Right-Wing Groups Gain in Drawing Financial Aid,” *New York Times*, June 28, 1965, 22.

¹⁵ McCune quoted in Group Research, Inc., *The American Right Wing During 1966*. Washington D.C.: National Education Association, 1967, 500.

behind the nation's ills proved especially problematic. To make matters worse, he simply continued to extend his conspiracy theories further into the depths of history. Back in 1964, Welch had made a first indication that the problem was not just with Communism. The Communists themselves, Welch believed, were only part of a much more insidious "Master Conspiracy" that stretched its tentacles across the centuries and had deceptively taken the form of Bolshevism when it first defeated the tsarist regime of Nicolas II and established the Soviet Union.¹⁶ Two years later, Welch followed up on his earlier address, now connecting the Soviet revolution to the establishment of the Federal Reserve Bank and ratification of the Sixteenth Amendment in 1913. Exposing what he believed as "the truth in time," Welch set forth to provide "simply an outline of the progress of this organized evil force, from its beginning up to the present." The Birch founder repeated his earlier conclusions that the Communists themselves were "only a tool of the total conspiracy." The real cabal, he charged, or "the Insiders" went all the way back to the French Revolution and Bavarian Illuminati founded by Adam Weishaupt in 1776, which drew heavily on the works of eighteenth-century conspiracists Abbé Barruel and John Robison. "As secret as the Communist activities and organizations generally appear," Welch explained "they are part of an open book compared to the secrecy enveloping some higher degree of this diabolic force." Finally, dismissing as false the Cold War polarity between the Soviet Union and the United States, Welch warned that "today Moscow and Washington are, and for many years have been, but two hands of one body controlled by one brain."¹⁷

¹⁶ Robert Welch, "More Stately Mansions," in *The New Americanism and Other Speeches* (Belmont, MA: Western Islands, 1966), 115.

¹⁷ Robert Welch, "The Truth in Time," *American Opinion* 9.10 (November 1966), 1-30.; though Welch often used foreign developments from decolonization, European social democracy to international Communist advances as justification for its alarmist agenda, the emphasis remained mostly internal. In its 1965 "Scoreboard" mapping the stage of collectivist infiltration around the world, *American Opinion* estimated Communist "influence or control" in the United States at 60 to 80%, proclaiming beyond doubt that the

The natural implication of Welch's "principle of inversion" was that whatever policy the federal government pursued, had to amount to treason and thus had to be deceitful – which is where William Buckley vehemently disagreed and had consistently drawn the line between Welch and himself. When the Johnson Administration escalated its military commitments against the Communist regime in North-Vietnam and committed to full-scale ground war, Welch concluded this could be no exception to his rule of thumb. Convinced that the war effort was a mere decoy and deliberate bloodletting of American financial and military strength, the old Taft Republican refused to support the intervention. Supplying the introduction to Hilaire du Berrier's *Background to Betrayal*, Welch instead dismissed the Vietnam War as "a carefully stagemanaged [...] fraud," with Communist agents pulling the strings at both ends.¹⁸ While addressing a Chicago convention in 1965, the Birch leader called for "a touch of sanity" in assessing the "actual" purposes of what was going on in Southeast Asia. Skeptical as to why the conflict hadn't been brought to a conclusive end, Welch suggested only a conspiracy could explain the impasse: [W]hen are we going to win this war – and why not? Is it possible, after our spending forty to fifty billion dollars per year on our military forces, since the memory of man runneth hardly to the contrary, that we cannot lick a puny bunch of half-starved guerrillas in a country about the size of Missouri?"¹⁹

Instead, he believed Vietnam had to be a smokescreen, a costly distraction from the international conspiracy reaching further into the American political system. In addition, he accused the federal government of boycotting its own military success by knowingly

country was now "being converted into a totalitarian dictatorship" and its largely ignorant citizenry "commanded by their enemies;" see "Scoreboard," *American Opinion*, 8.7 (July-August 1965), 58.

¹⁸ Welch quoted in Hilaire du Berrier, *Background to Betrayal: The Tragedy in Vietnam* (Boston: Western Islands, 1965), iii.

¹⁹ Welch, *A Touch of Sanity: Role of The John Birch Society in Opposing Collectivism* (Boston: Western Islands, 1966), 1-39.

siphoning off financial aid to Communist regimes, which Welch claimed went right into the pockets of Ho Chi Minh and Mao Zedong. Hence, he believed, the United States essentially pursued a “no win” policy and a self-sabotage mission staged to impose price and wage controls and quietly drain its own strength: “What are we fighting for? What are we trying to accomplish? What are our goals? *What is our real purpose?* [...] To be at war!” As with the United Nations before, Welch’s denunciations bordered on isolationist indignation: “What on Earth is wrong with the United States simply minding its own business, or with having its foreign policy function primarily for the safety and benefit of the American people?” Anticipating indignation among anti-Communists, the Birch founder in his June 1965 *Bulletin* asked “our good friends in the American Conservative movement not to get mad with us over our publication of *Background to Betrayal*,” and to respect his dissent.²⁰

Welch had pleaded in vain. The “no win” rhetoric coming out of Belmont caused a definitive rift between interventionist conservatives and the JBS. In October 1965, William Buckley and the editors at *National Review* decided to once and for all repudiate the Society and its membership, in a lengthy editorial titled “The John Birch Society and the Conservative Movement.” Staunch interventionist James Burnham accused the Society, under Welch’s leadership, of having taken off “in directions where no conservative can prudently venture.” Its refusal to unequivocally endorse military intervention in Vietnam for Burnham simply proved, “not for the first time, that any American who seriously wants to contribute to his country’s security and well-being and to oppose Communism will have to stay clear of the JBS.”²¹ Russell Kirk joined in Burnham’s criticisms, dismissing the Society as “totally ineffectual in resisting Communism and socialism” and attacked “the violent

²⁰ Welch, *John Birch Society Bulletin*, June 1965, 27; see also “Welch Links War to More Controls,” *New York Times*, December 10, 1966, 25.

²¹ James Burnham in “The John Birch Society and the Conservative Movement,” *National Review*, October 19, 1965, 925.

language and unreal views” found in its literature.²² Frank Meyer, the architect of “fusionism,” decried Welch’s “unrolling psychosis on conspiracy,” and urged Birchers who identified as serious conservatives to discontinue their activities: “It is no longer possible to consider the Society merely as moving toward legitimate objectives in a misguided way.”²³

Vietnam would become a significant problem for Welch and the Birch logic. Whereas the JBS could find common ground with non-conspiratorial New Right interventionists on issues like the United Nations, Katanga and Cuba, Welch’s ambiguous position on Vietnam was fatally incompatible with the greater right’s preoccupations with annihilating Communism in Southeast Asia. By questioning the federal government’s intentions in the conflict, Welch threatened to undermine the cause of anti-communism itself. As Senator Tom Dodd of Connecticut declared in a congressional session: “The John Birch Society has been a real windfall for the Communist conspiracy because it provides them with a convenient caricature of anti-communism which they skillfully exploit to encourage the spread of anti-communism.” Dodd decided the United States could not afford Welch’s extravagances and called for the JBS to be “put down as an unwitting abettor of the Communist conspiracy.”²⁴ The senator was joined by a chorus of outraged conservatives, most notably by the *National Review*. The editors at the *NR* could count on influential allies in their final repudiation of the JBS. In his *Wall Street Journal* column, William Henry Chamberlin immediately followed suit, recapping *NR*’s conclusion that Welch’s leadership had become “a handicap, not an aid, to the conservative movement in general and the Republican Party in particular. And they

²² Russell Kirk, *ibid.*, 928.

²³ Frank Meyer, *ibid.*, 920.

²⁴ Sen. Thomas Dodd, “How the JBS Abets the Communists,” *Congressional Record*, September 20, 1965, 23594-5.

make out a pretty good case for their point of view.”²⁵ So too, Barry Goldwater, worried about Birch members in Maricopa County trying to take over the local Republican Party leadership, finally decided to weigh in. Whereas the former Senator had been careful not to alienate Birch members and sympathizers in the past, he now echoed the call for self-respecting Birchers to turn their backs on Belmont and agreed that Welch’s statements had “generally been wrong, ill-advised and, at times, ill-tempered.”²⁶

In addition to Vietnam, conservatives were concerned about electoral campaigns, and wanted to avoid another humiliation at all costs. In state elections, political power was at stake. In the same scathing *NR* editorial, Buckley himself warned Bircher extremism and Welch’s conspiracy theories might, as they had done in 1964, seriously hurt conservatives at the polls:

Political contests of major significance are coming up involving important anti-Communist conservatives [...] in which the John Birch Society will figure. It is important to win victories in Texas and California – and elsewhere; and important, therefore, to raise the question explicitly whether the activities of Mr. Robert Welch and of some of the members of the John Birch Society are at the margin helpful to such men as Tower and Reagan, or hurtful to them.²⁷

Buckley had cause for concern, as Birchers had indeed been getting involved in important campaigns around the country. In the 1965 Virginia gubernatorial race between Democrat Mills Godwin and liberal Republican Linwood Holton, a third-party candidacy under the auspices of the short-lived Virginia Conservative Party caused a minor upset. Its nominee, former Dixiecrat and proud Birch member William J. Story, ran on a no-compromise

²⁵ William Henry Chamberlin, “John Birch Society No Help To Conservatism,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 9, 1965, 18.

²⁶ Goldwater quoted in “Goldwater Hints Certain Birchers Should Resign,” *The Southeast Missourian*, October 13, 1965, 5; see also “Goldwater Battles Birchers,” *Arizona Daily Star*, September 26, 1966, 3A; Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, “The Birchite Republicans,” *Arizona Daily Star*, July 29, 1966, 12D.

²⁷ William Buckley, “The John Birch Society and the Conservative Movement,” *National Review*, October 19, 1965, 914.

segregationist platform, accusing both main party nominees of accommodating too much to African Americans. Story eventually captured 13% of the vote, signaling a shift in Southern party identification.²⁸ In Ohio, where Republican Robert Taft, Jr. was preparing his 1966 run against Democratic incumbent congressman John Gilligan, Birch member William Flax first forced the Harvard-educated Taft into a costly primary. In South Dakota, a group of Birchers were reported as helping organize a Republican primary campaign of Richard Murphy, himself a member, who tried to unseat Senator Karl Mundt, whom he opposed as a “dangerous liberal, blind to the Communist threat.”²⁹

Murphy’s challenge to Mundt triggered a renewed attack on the Society, this time specifically from the Republican camp. As late as September 1965, Kentucky Senator Thruston Morton charged that the Birchers were “as dangerous as the Ku Klux Klan and the Communist Party” and had to be kept out of partisan politics. Senate and House minority leaders Everett Dirksen and Gerald Ford echoed Morton’s frustrations, in a coordinated public rebuttal. “In the American political scheme,” Dirksen declared to the press, “there is no place for an organization operating in secret like the know-nothings of Lincoln’s day.” Ford, who agreed that Welch and the Society posed a danger to intra-party unity, simply stated: “There is no place for that organization in the Republican Party.”³⁰ Ultimately, Mundt proved a shoe-in and handily beat Murphy four to one on his way to reelection.³¹ Rousselot,

²⁸ On Virginia, see Ralph Eisenberg, “Gubernatorial Politics in Virginia: The Experience of 1965,” *The University of Virginia Newsletter* 45.7 (March 15, 1969), 25-28.

²⁹ Fulton Lewis, “Washington Report,” *Reading Eagle*, February 21, 1966, 17; see also Jacob Javits, *Order of Battle: A Republican’s Call to Reason* (New York: Pocket Books, 1966); it seems Goodwin, who won the race, ultimately profited from the JBS rogue candidacy. Holton, who reached out to moderates, was squeezed as Storey split the conservative vote.

³⁰ Morton, Dirksen and Ford quoted in “Republican Chiefs Reject Birchers,” *The Spokesman-Review*, October 1, 1965, 29.

³¹ “Sen. Mundt Wins 4th Straight Bid In South Dakota,” *The Dispatch*, June 8, 1966, 2.

who commented on behalf of the JBS, merely explained the Society was not responsible for its members launching primary challenges to politicians they felt failed to live up to conservative standards. The Society's spokesman promptly denied accusations of secrecy and was quick to stress the positive side of the entire affair: "We are delighted that more and more political activists are joining the long, long line of 'Birch watchers'. Each time another individual speaks out on this subject, more people come to our meetings, read our material, and join The John Birch Society. It helps our growth tremendously, and for this we are indeed grateful." The Birchers reached their absolute apex around the 1964-1966 period, so it is likely further vilification of the JBS by Republican insiders continued to push disenchanted conservatives towards the Society.³²

In Texas, Senator John Tower was determined not to make the same mistake as Goldwater and alienate centrist voters by remaining ambiguous on Birchers and the Radical Right. The state had had a rich history in right-wing activism, encouraged by a libertarian business climate and rapid suburbanization. Dallas especially had been a hotbed of far right-wing activism and the association with the Kennedy assassination had made the Birch issue only more controversial. Tower sensed this tension and while the conservative Republican enthusiastically supported retaining the state's right-to-work laws and lowering taxes, he balanced his pronounced hostility to organized labor with a degree of moderation on more emotional issues like race and welfare. His "colorblind conservatism" and libertarian streak shared much with the Sun Belt conservatism of Southwestern Birchers, even though he followed Buckley and Goldwater in denouncing Welch's conspiracy theories. In his reelection campaign, he managed to neutralize his opponents' charges of extremist sympathies and was quick to repudiate the JBS as "a liability to the conservative cause" in

³² "Comments by JOHN H. ROUSSELOT, National Director – Public Relations, The John Birch Society," October 1, 1965, John Birch Society Records, Box 4, "Public Relations."

two newspapers. As a result, the Bircher tag never stuck. Tower won reelection handily, beating the Democratic Attorney General by just under 200,000 votes.³³

Perhaps more so than Tower's, Reagan's campaign is regarded as one of the watershed developments in the coming of age of the New Right. Successfully challenging liberal Democrat Pat Brown for the governorship of the most populous state in the nation provided the Right with a huge moral victory. More significantly, the Republican challenger had done so relying solidly on conservative principles and staunchly anti-communist rhetoric. At one point, he had referred to universal healthcare as "one of the traditional methods of imposing statism or Socialism on a people has been by way of medicine." When campaigning for Goldwater, Reagan invited conservatives to a "rendezvous with history" and hailed the Senator as "the last best hope of man on Earth" against "the last step into a thousand years of darkness." Joining the nominee in opposing the 1964 Civil Rights Act from a constitutionalist perspective, Reagan warmly received accolades from staunch segregationists such as Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus, Mississippi's Ross Barnett, and South Carolina Senator and fresh Republican convert Strom Thurmond. His staunchly anti-communist views were often couched in alarmist rhetoric reminiscent of Welch's, and the candidate would have to balance his unrelenting conservatism with an appeal to the center.³⁴

³³ Tower quoted in Sean P. Cunningham, *Cowboy Conservatism: Texas and the Rise of the Modern Right* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2010), 76-77; see also Don E. Carleton, *Red Scare! Right-Wing Hysteria, Fifties Fanaticism and Their Legacy in Texas* (Austin: Texas Monthly Press, 1985); Chandler Davidson, *Race and Class in Texas Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

³⁴ See "Ronald Reagan Speaks Out Against Socialized Medicine," quoted in Matthew Dallek, *The Right Moment: Ronald Reagan's First Victory and the Decisive Turning Point in American Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 39. Reagan's dystopian attacks on liberal healthcare initiatives ran remarkably close alongside Welch's, see Robert Welch. "Medicine Leads the Way: The Poison and the Antidote." The John Birch Society. KLP-850, Key Records, 1965, LP. On Reagan and segregationist support, see Jules Tygiel. *Ronald Reagan and the Triumph of American Conservatism* (London: Longman Publishing Group, 2004), 80; on Reagan and Human

Kurt Schuparra has made an excellent case for Reagan's invaluable ability to find that balance. Using his "actor-honed ability" and "breezy and disarming charm," he could invigorate right-wing enthusiasts with fire and brimstone condemnations of liberals and the welfare state, while reassuringly celebrating the "all-American way" of hard work, law and order and Christian values to more moderate voters. More so than Goldwater, Reagan could woo those on the far Right, including many Birch members, without falling into the trap of being equated with them.³⁵ What is more, it should also be pointed out that as with Goldwater and Joe Shell before him, the Birchers actually worked to Reagan's advantage, at least in securing the Republican nomination. Reagan's main competitor for the nomination, San Francisco Mayor George Christopher, was a moderate who had been dismayed with the recent surge in right-wing fervor in the party. At the California Republican Assembly, Christopher echoed Nelson Rockefeller's condemnation of extremism two years earlier, repudiating the John Birch Society and warning his fellow Republicans: "If the Republican Party goes into the general election with an extremist albatross around its neck, let us not blame anyone but ourselves for a certain defeat." Christopher was met with vocal disapproval, and Reagan snapped up the assembly's endorsement with ease.³⁶

As many Birchers and other conservatives found their way into local politics through the state party's system and took over key volunteer organizations, the statewide Republican Party was pushed rightward. Goldwater's nomination would have been impossible without developments in California and, even after the 1964 defeat, hardline conservatives sympathetic to the JBS's cause, were taking the party infrastructure by storm. The Young

Events, see Ronald Lora and William Henry Longton (eds.). *The Conservative Press in Twentieth-Century America* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999), 449-457.

³⁵ Schuparra, *Triumph*, xviii.

³⁶ Richard Bergholz, "Conservatives Warned by Christopher on Extremism," *Los Angeles Times*, January 16, 1966, B1.

Republicans had just held internal elections, and three self-admitted Birchers were picked to join the ranks - Martin Carlson as executive vice president, Stanley Kompst as national committeeman and Norman Mark as treasurer. State Chairman Dr. Gaylord Parkinson had noticed the developments, and was worried by what seemed “the first concrete evidence that there may be conspiratorial activity by the John Birch Society to take over the Republican Party.” The United Republicans of California, another volunteer organization that had backed Goldwater two years earlier, elected Joseph Crosby of Pasadena as their new Chairman. Crosby and his wife organized Birch chapter meetings at their suburban home and Crosby successfully pushed UROC to pass a resolution to withdraw all U.S. financial aid from the United Nations. Both the YR and UROC handpicked Reagan as their preferred nominee with overwhelming numbers.³⁷

Naturally, Brown was determined to keep extremism a central issue all the way through the 1966 campaign. The opening salvo came from State Controller Alan Cranston, who over the summer of 1965 authored an op-ed in the *Los Angeles Times* with the unequivocal title “Extremism – Its Definition.” Cranston made no bones about what he saw as California’s gravest problem: “There is a virus in our land. Highly contagious, it has existed throughout history, throughout the world – often dormant, sometimes epidemic, and occasionally fatal. [...] That virus is extremism.” Without directly naming Welch or the Birch Society, Cranston alluded to the grassroots activities in which many of its members engaged, as well as their influences upon local schools, press staffer and communities at large, associating its membership squarely with para-militarism and violence:

³⁷ Richard Bergholz, “GOP Leader Suspects Birch YR Conspiracy,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 26, 1966, 3; see also “Reagan Bans Tilt With Rivals On TV,” *Pasadena Star News*, April 29, 1966, 4; Richard Bergholz, “UROC Endorses Reagan, Finch as Session Closes,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 2, 1966, 3; Peter Bart, “Conservative United Republicans of California Swing Militantly to Right-Wing Program,” *New York Times*, May 2 1966, 21

From hounding librarians and teachers, to bullying editors and public officials, to forming cell groups and secret platoons, to boycotting businesses and infiltrating organizations, to breaking up meetings and training in the hills. Actually, to the extremist, this is simply patriotism of the highest order – well meant, but deadly dangerous.³⁸

Cranston's charges were launched in tandem with an updated State Senate report on the Society's activities in the state. Though the Fact-finding Subcommittee on Un-American Activities could not formally indict the Society or its members as formally subversive, a stark change in tone from the last report was clearly visible:

We are more critical of the Society now than we were then for the reason that it has, in our opinion, merited such criticism by reason of its activities as exemplified by the irresponsible articles by a member of its National Council, the re-publication of *The Politician*, the inexcusable actions of its minority of irresponsible members, and dangerous increase of anti-Semitism among a minority of the membership.³⁹

Robert L. Coate, chairman of the Democratic State Central Committee, issued a report "Ronald Reagan, Extremist Collaborator," listing members of Friends of Ronald Reagan who also belonged to the JBS, including John Rousselot. The report concluded Reagan had "collaborated directly with a score of top leaders of the super-secret John Birch Society" and that "his campaign organization is riddled with members of the society."⁴⁰

Reagan had anticipated the Democrats' strategy and decided to beat Brown to the punch. At a GOP fundraiser dinner in September 1965, Reagan formally distanced himself from Welch, declaring he was in "great disagreement" with his charges towards former President Eisenhower: "I think the society should feel a responsibility to take a stand on his statement," he declared. To this Reagan added that a "lunatic fringe" was trying to infiltrate

³⁸ Alan Cranston. "Extremism – Its Definition," *Los Angeles Times*, July 18, 1965, G2.

³⁹ Hugh M. Burns, *Thirteenth Report of the Senate Factfinding Subcommittee on Un-American Activities* (Sacramento: Senate of the State of California, 1965).

⁴⁰ Robert L. Coate, "Ronald Reagan, Extremist Collaborator, An Expose." (1966), Margaret Meier, Box 25, "R. Reagan – R.L. Coates [sic]," 19; see also Richard Bergholz, "Coate Says Report Proves Extremists, Reagan Are Linked," *Los Angeles Times*, August 12, 1966, 3; Jerry Gilliam, "Wealthy Birch Society Member Backs Reagan, Brown Says," *Los Angeles Times*, October 11, 1966, 3.

the Society, which otherwise consisted of fine patriots and conservatives. Nevertheless, he assured: "I am not a member. I have no intention of becoming a member. I am not going to solicit their support." In the same breath, the undeclared candidate aimed his arrows at the Johnson Administration and his Great Society initiatives: "The wraps are off The Great Society, and we are to have the welfare state with an unprecedented federalization of American life." Then, after criticizing the federal anti-poverty program, Reagan turned on Brown, quipping: "When there's a sneeze in Washington, you can hear the 'gesundheit' in Sacramento."⁴¹ The candidate had already issued a 500-word statement saying he intended "to seek the support of individuals by persuading them to accept my philosophy, not by accepting theirs," avoided the defensive and refused to "blanket indict" the John Birch Society. Taking the fight to Brown, Reagan assured the Governor "there are no members of the Birch Society to my knowledge anywhere in my organization," but pointed at what the polls were revealing to be the "real issues" of the campaign, i.e. the "cost of government, narcotics and crime, civil rights, the situation at Berkeley and education in general and the cost of living, including the labor situation and the farm problem."⁴²

After analyzing state polls, independent as well as partisan, journalists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak concluded Reagan was on the right track. The extremism charges hurled at him by the Brown campaign had had little effect: "Polls taken by both camps show Californians [...] couldn't care less about the John Birch Society or right-wing extremism issue. What bothers them much more is the Negro revolution and high taxes." By the time

⁴¹ "Reagan Criticizes Birch Society and Its Founder," *Los Angeles Times*, September 24, 1965, 3; see also Gladwin Hill, "Gov. Brown Opens Undeclared Campaign for 3d Term With Attack on G.O.P. Right Wing," *New York Times*, November 22, 1965, 23.

⁴² "Times Editorials: The Time for Plain Talk," *Los Angeles Times*, August 21, 1966, F6; see also "Disclosure of Birch Membership List Backed by Reagan" October 27, 1966; 3, "Reagan Denies He's Extremist, Raps Brown Political Tactics," *Los Angeles Times*, August 25, 1966, 3.

Brown realized his tactics had been ineffective, it was too late. Reagan beat Brown by over one million votes, getting nearly 60% of the vote and thus winning the crucial battle over the political center.” Brown had been so badly fixated on tarnishing Reagan’s personal image that the actual issues of the election had eluded him. As Matthew Dallek remarks, “before 1966 Reagan’s victory would have been unimaginable” [...] only civil rights, Berkeley, Watts, and Vietnam made it possible.” Whereas Brown tried to link Reagan to the extremism of the Birch Society, Reagan pledged to “clean up that mess in Berkeley,” restore law and order in the state’s inner cities and universities, defeat the reinstated yet unpopular Rumford Act and throw the “bums” off welfare.⁴³

If Reagan had learned to maintain enough distance from the JBS, it is important to stress how the Society was not altogether invisible, and did not need to be. As established, the Birchers had directly and indirectly helped Reagan in the primary by sufficiently polarizing the party from within and tipping the balance into the conservatives’ favor. When prompted to comment on how he viewed Reagan’s candidacy, John Rousselot declined to disclose his personal thoughts: “Because of my position in the society, if I stated my personal choice it might just possibly be misinterpreted.” The Birch official went as far as admitting that “in some cases” a Birch endorsement might hurt a candidate’s chances. Then again, American Opinion Bookstores frequently distributed reprints from Reagan’s speeches, e.g. his “Losing Freedom by Installments” address, delivered back in 1961, and materials bashing Brown’s record. Two avowed Birchers strode into office on Reagan’s coattails. Southern Californians John G. Schmitz and Bill Richardson were both comfortably elected to the State Senate.

⁴³ “Inside Report: Right Extremism Dead As California Issue,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, September 24, 1966, 17; see also “Welch Links War to More Controls” *New York Times*, December 10, 1966, 25; Dallek, x; Aaron Bady and Mike Konczal, “From Master Plan to No Plan: The Slow Death of Public Higher Education,” *Dissent* 59.4 (Fall 2012), 10; see also Seth Rosenfeld, *Subversives: The FBI’s War on Student Radicals and Reagan’s Rise* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2012).

Schmitz would go on to take the lead on drafting an amendment to nullify the Rumford housing act, before running in George Wallace's stead on the American Party ticket in 1972. Richardson faced a write-in challenge from moderate Republican Pat Hillings to stop the Bircher. Richardson won 65 percent of the vote, ten times more than his challenger.⁴⁴

The election may have lacked the national platform Barry Goldwater had enjoyed two years before, but the victory was no less significant. As John Karaagac points out, Reagan's triumph in California stood out as "perhaps the most conspicuous in a string of Republican upsets that year."⁴⁵ Even before the general election, Russell Kirk predicted conservative candidates would perform consistently better than they had done in 1964. In fact, Kirk regarded Reagan's nomination as a portent of greater things to come: "Ronald Reagan's thumping victory in the California primaries has opened the eyes of some people to what anyone might have noticed earlier: Public opinion, across the country, is shifting in a conservative direction." Kirk dismissed concerns with right-wing extremism and stressed liberals were now on the defensive, as Americans felt increasingly alienated by radicalized social movements shaking up the social status quo from the Left: "Far from being extremist in character, this revived conservatism is a reaction, in part, to the extremism of the New Left and its eccentricities."⁴⁶

Reagan's maneuvering had kept the Birchers a non-issue, but the sheer ineffectiveness of Brown and Cranston's extremism charges suggested the public was more concerned with matters of law and order. David Riesman argued against the blindness of liberals who proved

⁴⁴ "Reagan Criticizes Birch Society and Its Founder," *Los Angeles Times*, September 24, 1965, 3; see also "Losing Freedom by Installments Reprint," distributed by American Opinion bookstore Costa Mesa, June 27, 1966, Margaret Meier Collection, Box 25, "Reagan – Speeches."

⁴⁵ John Karaagac, *Between Promise and Policy: Ronald Reagan and Conservative Reformism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2001), 32.

⁴⁶ Russell Kirk, "New Direction In the U.S.: Right?" *New York Times*, August 7, 1966, 193.

all too keen to dismiss Birchers and their affiliates as hopeless “extremists” or “monists” who, in the words of Earl Raab and Seymour Martin Lipset, “have a greater stake in yesterday than today.” Instead, Riesman noted popular moods swinging rightward still ran within a continuum from Bircher conspiracism. Whereas Birchers, for instance, denounced public water fluoridation as “an interference with God’s water, a conspiracy between the Communist party and the aluminum company to poison good Americans,” Riesman pointed out, for non-conspiratorial opponents, it was still an “example of the intrusion of the national scientific *élite* into local affairs.” Even without elaborate conspiracy theories linking liberalism to deliberate efforts to destroy the nation’s morals and impose totalitarian control, voters increasingly responded to “the widespread and not wholly unrealistic feeling that there is no one in charge in America – that the country faces dissolution and anarchy.” Predominately white workers, blue and white collar, became increasingly volatile within the New Deal coalition that had dominated national politics for decades, feeling caught in a “pincers movement” between socially mobile minorities and a liberal establishment, and became further alienated by images of urban unrest and a militant New Left: “It is at this point that the calls for law and order,” Riesman concluded, “if not themselves too strident, strike home.”⁴⁷

II. “Doing What We Do Best”: SYLP, TACT and TRAIN

In March 1964, Robert Welch received a letter from John Henry Norton, a lawyer from Fairfield, Connecticut who was also a JBS member. Norton’s message was little more than a warning that John O. Gilbert, the General Manager of WABC-TV had been

⁴⁷ Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab, *The Politics of Unreason: Right Wing Extremism in America, 1790-1970* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 460.

“promoting the cause” of Police Review Boards made up of civilians in New York City during broadcasts on Channel 7. The city had already implemented a Civilian Complaint Review Board as early as 1955, under pressure to address the problem of police brutality often directed at racial minorities. However, the board had been highly limited in its capacity for redress as it remained subservient to the NYPD. With the 1965 mayoral race on the horizon, proposals for an independent committee that included actual citizens and would answer directly to the mayor instead of the police commissioner could become a sudden reality.⁴⁸ Especially the events surrounding Harlem riots of 1964 made reform of the current review system more urgent than ever. John Lindsay, the liberal Republican candidate who would rely heavily on non-white voters to win office, favored a civilian review board and posed a very real threat to its opponents. By the summer of 1964, Birchers had joined the Patrolmen’s Benevolent Association (PBA) in fighting the boards in New York and around the country.⁴⁹

In order to maintain a positive message, the JBS quickly popularized the slogan “Support Your Local Police” (SYLP) often followed by “And Keep Them Independent.” By late 1964, ads sponsored by Birch chapters started appearing in newspapers, even outside New York City. Birchers in New York City set up one of the first *SYLP* front groups around that time and by mid-1965, the *New York Citizens Committee To Support Your Local Police* had gathered 50,000 signatures to hold a referendum against a civilian board, which the PBA would achieve the following year once newly elected Mayor Lindsay had established it.⁵⁰ Even within weeks of the 1964 Harlem riots, an assistant of Welch wrote Belmont to boast

⁴⁸ John Henry Norton to Robert Welch, March 13, 1964. JBS Papers, Box 40, “SYLP”.

⁴⁹ Fred C. Shapiro and James W. Sullivan, *Race Riots, New York, 1964* (New York: Crowell, 1964); see Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Race, Space, and Riots in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁵⁰ “Display Ad 159,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 27, 1964, D10.

that between 150 and 180 Birchers had distributed 80,000 flyers against review boards on various public locations in Manhattan, Brooklyn, the Bronx and Western Long Island. He assured Welch the local police had given them “overwhelming cooperation” and that as a result the police department was “in love” with the Society. In addition, the Birch leader was told, letters had already come in from “about 25 to 30 letters from people” expressing their interest and “ordering additional quantities of the reprint, quantities of the stickers and asking for detailed information about the Society.”⁵¹



Fig. 15: Even today, the JBS campaign *SYLP* is active and running – JBS.ORG

The review boards were generally received by the right with skepticism and resistance. Conservatives decried them as a pointless shackling of law enforcement in times of urban unrest. Buckley, who in 1965 ran for Mayor of New York on the Conservative Party ticket, made no bones about his opposition: “The protection of the individual against the criminal is the first and highest function of government,” he protested. Traditionalists like Buckley feared that weakening the authority of the police force might backfire while racial

⁵¹ Letter from W. E. Dunham to Robert Welch, August 17, 1964, JBS Records, Box 40, “SYLP.”

tensions were mounting and crime was on the rise.⁵² Welch agreed, and urged more members nationwide to warn the public against the risks. The *SYLP* committee in Philadelphia was facing the same challenge and trying to get the police advisory board in the city dismantled. Not only did Birchers agree that the board “undermines local law enforcement” and “demoralizes individual policemen and places the rights and safety of the entire community in jeopardy,” but the Society went – as usual – a step further and warned review boards were nothing short of a Communist tool to “promote chaos” and “facilitate the ongoing Communization of America” by first disarming the police force and allowing for complete anarchy, after which the country could easily be subjected to a centralized police state.⁵³

With the new civilian review board introduced by Lindsay, consisting of police officers as well as citizens from various racial backgrounds, the PBA quickly succeeded in leading the drive towards a referendum, for which it received donations and support from a wide variety sources including from outside the state. Welch too, stepped up his efforts and made sure members from East to West were getting the word out. The Society maintained contact with hundreds of police departments, from New York and Los Angeles, so it could coordinate its propaganda drives accordingly. A significant number of policemen and women ended up joining the JBS, leading to a handful of investigations as to whether Birchers could actually serve, all of which confirmed they could. David Farber has estimated about 3% of Birchers were police officers, which, assuming law enforcement officers represented about 0.2% of the U.S. population at the time, is a significant share.⁵⁴

⁵² Jeremy Lott, *William F. Buckley* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 72.

⁵³ Philadelphia Committee To Support Your Local Police, “Abolish The Philadelphia Police Advisory Board,” (undated pamphlet), JBS Records, Box 40, “SYLP”; see also Welch, *JBS Bulletin*, May 1966, 25-26.

⁵⁴ Thomas R. Brooks, “No! Says the PBA,” *New York Times Magazine*, October 16, 1966; see also David Farber, *Chicago '68* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 130; Lon Tuck, “Birch Society Ad to Law Officers Investigated by Fairfax Police,” *Washington Post*, December 12, 1964, A7.

SYLP gained in visibility from 1966 onwards, no doubt heavily encouraged by the upcoming city-wide referendum. Interestingly, Welch encouraged members to coordinate sessions with *Truth About Civil Turmoil (TACT)* meetings and circulated materials relevant for both. Chapters were required to have screenings of *Civil Riots/USA* when setting up their *SYLP* committees, and reprints of Gary Allen and Bill Richardson's "Hell in the City of Angels" on the Watts riots were recommended as introductory reading. It was obvious for Welch to link the police review controversy with civil rights. Police brutality, he felt, was yet another tool devised by the Communists to both undermine the law and exonerate civil rights agitators. Welch understood how public outcry against televised images of violent police action against protestors in places like Birmingham and Selma had paved the way for sweeping civil rights legislation, and so unmasking the "civil rights fraud" became essential to restoring the image of the police force. The Birchers also understood there was a powerful connection between racial unrest and public demands for law and order, and that that the summer riots of 1964 and 1965 had undermined general support for liberal programs.⁵⁵

The referendum was a triumph for the Right and a disaster for Lindsay, who had hoped to rely on the support of his electoral coalition. In a desperate attempt to sway voters, the Mayor pointed towards the John Birch Society's conspicuous role in the matter. A month before the referendum was held Senators Robert Kennedy and Jacob Javits accused the Birchers of polluting the debate with their extremist propaganda. Some went further and drew analogies with the Edwin Walker controversy a few years before, claiming the close relationship the Society had been developing with law enforcement was proof of Fascist

⁵⁵ Welch, *Bulletin*, May 1966, 25-26.

tendencies.⁵⁶ *People's World* invoked the image of the JBS recruiting its own American version of “storm troops.”⁵⁷

The civilian review board was recalled by 63 percent over 32, which seems to suggest that again, liberal charges of extremism had lost their firepower. Instead, the Birch Society found itself squarely on the side of a majority that was overwhelmingly sympathetic to conservative objections with the civilian review board. However, the real importance of the referendum lies, as Michael Flamm observes, in its “national implications.” The matter had been closely followed throughout the country, as conservatives were looking for symbolic victories over liberals. As with Reagan, liberal momentum on civil rights and redistributive economics had reached a tipping point, and the civil unrest, as well as growing economic competition from non-whites, was quickly driving a wedge through the New Deal coalition.⁵⁸ As such, the referendum was about more than the civilian review board, or even the city of New York. It was a validation of the conservative halt to the Great Society. The John Birch Society had, through its immense grassroots networks, tapped into growing resentments regarding urban rioting and the Warren Court’s rulings on criminals’ rights, as well as very tangible concerns such as public housing schemes and real estate prices. Welch understood the importance of the victory and predicted the Communists would be forced to reconsider their tactics. “The point is that we have won – and I mean really won.”⁵⁹

⁵⁶ “Birch Society Intrusion in Police Row Charged,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 28, 1966, 4.

⁵⁷ “Editorial: Cops and Birchers,” *People's World*, December 5, 1964, 8.

⁵⁸ Michael Flamm, “‘Law and Order’ At Large: The New York Civilian Review Board Referendum of 1966 and the Crisis of Liberalism,” in *The Historian* 64.3 (Summer 2002), 643.

⁵⁹ Welch, *Bulletin*, March 1966, 1, original emphasis; see also David W. Abbott, Louis H. Gold and Edward T. Rogowsky, *Police, Politics, and Race: The New York City Referendum on Civilian Review* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969); Woody Klein, *Lindsay's Promise: The Dream That Failed* (London: Macmillan, 1970).

If the Birchers' efforts on police review boards could bring them more closely aligned with a broader conservative effort to change the course of history, they could not afford to be cornered on other issues. Facing a tremendous backlash over Vietnam, especially from the right, Welch launched a new project called *TRAIN* or *To Restore American Independence Now*. Through *TRAIN*, Welch sought to reconcile his strong doubts regarding the effectiveness of the war, with the hawkish interventionism that dominated modern conservatism. Concretely, members were asked to inform the public on the "sabotage" and "treason" behind the campaign, while more actively demanding victory over the Communists. "Is victory possible?" a sample question sheet asked, "Of course victory is possible!"⁶⁰ Under Welch's supervision, activists drew up petitions and collected signatures demanding the Johnson Administration "remove the restrictions now handicapping our fighting men," and deny Communists "privileged sanctuaries." By September 1967, the Society claimed it had collected 26,000 petitions bearing at least 460,000 signatures. The Society's renewed emphasis on victory in Vietnam allowed Welch to distance himself from the New Left's anti-Vietnam protests, which he claimed sought to establish the illusion of left-wing dissent, as well as promote general chaos and anarchy.⁶¹

In the meantime, the Society continued to expand and modernize its infrastructure. Researcher Laurence Stern in early 1965 conducted a study mapping far right radio and television exposure, discovering that right-wing commentators, from Billy Hargis to Dan Smoot and Clarence Manion, were transmitted over hundreds if not thousands of radio and television stations.⁶² Welch, who had always had a preference for "the written word,"

⁶⁰ "Sample Question Sheet: What About Vietnam?" (undated), JBS Records, Box 5, "TRAIN manual and publicity kit"; Morton Mintz, "Viet Moves Mar Birch Society Recruit Drive," *Los Angeles Times*, September 11, 1966, A4.

⁶¹ "TRAIN Memo: Newsletter #2," (1967), *ibid.*; "Analysis: School for Treason," *The Review of the News* 3.46 (November 15, 1967), 15.

⁶² Laurence Stern, "The Far Right Regroups," *The Progressive*, 29.1 (February 1965), 13.

understood he could not lag behind and in late 1967 established “Are You Listening, Uncle Sam?” an informative program “aimed at the vast majority of American people who are uncommitted,” featuring “guest experts” who contributed on issues ranging from Medicare and Social Security to civil rights reform and Vietnam. Within weeks, the program aired on over one hundred radio stations.⁶³ In addition, the Society still enjoyed a prominent position among allied groups and a central platform through which right-wing conspiracists reached a wider public. Not only did Welch invite popular speakers to fundraiser dinners, hire prolific pundits for written contributions or speaking tour engagements and reprint esoteric literature, the Society also invested heavily in publicity events emphasizing a sense of cohesion among its peer groups.⁶⁴ In 1967, Birch sponsors launched the fourth “New England Rally for God, Family and Country,” a three-day right-wing convention dedicated to General Edwin Walker and featuring speakers such as Reed Benson, Billy James Hargis, Edward G. Griffin, Dan Smoot, and Robert Welch himself. A convention hall was installed and featured exhibitions promoting several Birch fronts as well as “friendly” associations, as well as Western Islands, *American Opinion* and *The Review of the News*.⁶⁵ From outside the JBS, volunteers and paid staffers promoted the Manion Forum, Dan Smoot Report, Christian Crusade, Congress of Freedom, Bob Jones University, the Liberty Amendment Committee, and Liberty Lobby.⁶⁶

III. Stand Up for Americanism: George Wallace and the John Birch Society

⁶³ Tom Hill, “Memo To All Section Leaders: *Are You Listening Uncle Sam*,” November 10, 1967, JBS Records, Box 4, “Radio Program Are You Listening Uncle Sam”.

⁶⁴ “Birch Society Notes Birthday – Renews Attack on Communism,” *Corpus Christi Caller Times*, December 8, 1968, 66.

⁶⁵ Neil Hickey, “They Call Themselves Patriots,” *TV Guide*, April 15–21, 1967, 14–17.

⁶⁶ “From ’76 to ’67: The Spirit of Independence calls you back” (1967), JBS Records, Box 40, no folder.

When, in 1965, Goldwater too repudiated the JBS, many of his supporters felt frustrated that he was attacking the wrong enemy and that instead of respecting zealous, patriotic Americans, many of whom had supported his candidacy, he had been approached by the more moderate forces in the party to wrest control away from conservatives. Rockefeller, Scranton, Romney and even Eisenhower had used the image of the Birchers as a scapegoat to undermine Goldwater before, and now it seemed the man who had defended extremism “in the defense of liberty” was submitting to the old Eastern Establishment’s will. As Geoffrey Kabaservice has shown, the infighting over Goldwater’s nomination was but a renewed eruption of intra-party friction that went back at least to Robert Taft and Dwight Eisenhower, but with the Arizonan’s nomination the party’s right wing achieved such an upset victory that the more moderate leadership strove to pull the party back to the center to ensure the 1964 debacle would not repeat itself. Even conservative candidates like John Tower and Ronald Reagan were clearly intent on not losing their appeal to the center, even if it required repudiating the Birch Society and its conspiracy-obsessed leader. At the same time, it should be pointed out that after Goldwater’s defeat, Birchers would look of their own accord for alternatives to the Republican Party, and that their gradual exclusion from the party was often a mutual desire.⁶⁷

The reason for the Society’s existence had been Welch’s disillusionment with the two-party system and the lack of a truly conservative platform, and the JBS’s initial success lay in the fact that thousands of conservatives around the country felt neglected by the mainstream political process. Barry Goldwater’s staunch anti-communism and uncompromising rhetoric encouraged conservatives, including conspiracists and racists, to bring their zeal back into the national GOP. Many Birchers could combine their loyalty to

⁶⁷ Robert Kabaservice, *Rule and Ruin: The Downfall of Moderation and the Destruction of the Republican Party, From Eisenhower to the Tea Party* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 87-102, 112-6, 137-8, 155-173.

Welch with sincere trust in and admiration for the Republican candidate, who chose to defend their fundamentalism and welcomed their support. Nevertheless, the JBS itself officially remained outside of partisan politics, and the extent of Goldwater's defeat and its divisive aftermath convinced many that the party had become too infiltrated by collectivists and "me too" Republicans to make it entirely theirs.⁶⁸

Fred Grupp's sociological analysis of the JBS confirmed a number of suspicions. His respondents turned out to be mainly white, suburban, professional and Protestant Republican conservatives, with more Democrats in the South, and a strong minority of Catholics. Grupp also concluded the Goldwater race had indeed given the Society a boost, with approximately 27,000 members joining over the course of 1964. Unsurprisingly, nearly 60% of the respondents listing Goldwater as their preferred presidential candidate, followed by Strom Thurmond at 10%. The results also confirmed that 81% considered the Society the "most important organization" to which they belonged. Unsurprisingly, Grupp found Birch members accorded immense importance to the Society's structural advantages to achieve political victories, educate the public, and forge social ties between members.⁶⁹

If the JBS remained an essentially educational organization capable of forging strong networks consisting of conservatives with a fluid partisan identification but strong inclination to involve themselves in political activism, then George Wallace's third-party bid in 1968 presented an attractive project for Birchers. The Alabama Governor had caused an upset victory in the Democratic Michigan primary four years before, and several Birch members

⁶⁸ Incidentally, at the 1966 God and Family rally, opposite stalls dedicated to *American Opinion* and *The Review of the News*, an undercover journalist writing for a left-wing magazine noticed a special booth set up to promote a potential third-party candidate for the following year's election. All that was missing, was the candidate, "Buyers Bullish at Birchism Market," *Homefront* 1.4 July-August, 1967, 1.

⁶⁹ Fred W. Grupp, Jr., "Personal Satisfaction Derived From Membership in the John Birch Society," *The Western Political Quarterly* 24.1 (March 1971), 79-83.

were reported to have campaigned for him. This time around, Wallace decided to break with both major parties, and criticized the political establishment's refusal or inability to tackle the social disorder that alienated millions of voters. The candidate publicly agreed with the JBS that Communists had been behind the civil rights movement and that liberals were in fact socialists in sheep's clothing looking to destroy the American way of life, just as they had done to the Deep South.⁷⁰

With Wallace's Southern populism, Birchers could rekindle their affection for Goldwater's shoot-from-the-hip style. His decision to venture outside the two-party system and run on the American Independent Party ticket seemed intellectually satisfying and consistent with the Society's conspiratorial views. In late 1967, Willard S. Voit resigned as vice president of Robert Welch, Inc., the Society's official publishing arm, to volunteer for Wallace in California, where the Governor needed 66,059 signatures to qualify for the ballot. Voit, a 29-year old businessman from Newport Beach, emphasized there had been no breach with Welch or the Society, but given the Birch founder's stance on direct political activism, he decided to step down from his paid position while maintaining life membership. Upon registering for the American Independent Party, Voit also resigned from the Republican State Central Committee and UROC, disillusioned with national GOP leadership: "It seems clear to me that the Republican Party will not provide the conservative, anti-Communist alternative in the 1968 presidential election to the Johnson ticket." Voit, who had backed Reagan in 1966 but said he wanted to "wait and see more of what he does in California" before expressing any judgment, hailed Wallace's candidacy as a suitable alternative: "This is our weapon and

⁷⁰ Richard C. Haney, "Wallace in Wisconsin: The Presidential Primary of 1964," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 61.4 (Summer 1967), 261-2; see also Kenneth Lamott, "'It Isn't a Mirage They're Seeing,' Says George Wallace," *New York Times Magazine*, September 22, 1968, 32; Howard Seelye, "Voters Explain Switch to Wallace," *Los Angeles Times*, December 10, 1967, OC3; Charles D. Hadley and Lewis Lowman (eds.), *Southern State Party Organizations and Activists* (Wesport, CT and London: Praeger, 1995), 118.

our only political chance.” Wallace would eventually make the ballot in California with ease, and win 7.5% of its total vote in November 1968.⁷¹



Fig. 16: George Wallace seated at Welch's right during the annual JBS banquet in December 1970 in New York. Wallace is picture shaking hands with Charles Smith, one of two new African American anti-civil rights speakers on the Birch circuit – HOMEFRONT INSTITUTE FOR AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

In Nevada, where GOP Governor Paul Laxalt had told an estimated 2,000 Birchers in the state to choose between the Republican Party and Belmont, Wallace's top campaigners recognized the Birchers' usefulness to their candidate's cause. William Shearer, Western liaison for the Wallace campaign, in September 1967 ordered Birch chapter leader and Reno urologist John DeTar to take over the reins from Margaret Dyer, chairwoman of the state's *Wallace for President Committee* and not a member of the JBS. When Dyer, who had already collected about 1,000 out of the necessary 6,393 signatures to get Wallace on the ballot,

⁷¹ "Voit Quits Birch Society Job to Join in Wallace Campaign," *Los Angeles Times*, November 21, 1967, 3.

complained to Shearer, she was told to hand over her paperwork and financial resources to DeTar without further ado. A disgruntled Dyer made way for his successor, who had walked out of the state convention after Laxalt's repudiation of the Society, but not before burning her petitions and complaining to a *New York Times* correspondent that the Birchers were "trying to destroy the campaign." Not only would Wallace gain a place on the ballot, he would eventually carry an impressive 20,432 votes or 13.25% of the Silver State vote.⁷²

In Florida and Texas, Wallace campaign managers similarly encouraged local Birch activists, who often had pre-existing recruitment and propaganda distribution networks at their disposal, to organize volunteers and petition drives on the ground. In Texas, committee chair and Bircher Bard Logan dismissed party Treasurer Margaret Bacon and Secretary Jane Sumner after they had complained about screenings of the John Birch Society's anti-civil rights *Anarchy USA* film at party meetings. "It's not the Birch people that are causing the trouble," Logan explained, "It's the anti-Birch people. [...] They use the Birchers as an excuse [...] to get power." Logan claimed approximately 15 out of 31 executive committee members were Birchers, which he dismissed as irrelevant considering the Society itself remained "nonpolitical."⁷³

The Wallace campaign remains an important example of a populist protest movement that cannot simply be reduced to the Governor's appeal. Rejecting explanations of status deprivation and voter apathy, Jody Carlson instead suggests in her "power theory" that what lured voters was their perceived powerlessness within the political establishment: "Where there once was no federal government, they now see federal policy as influencing every aspect of their lives – the economy, their access to jobs, the kinds of houses they can afford to

⁷² "Wallace Forces in Nevada Split," *New York Times*, September 16, 1967, 51.

⁷³ "American Party Divided in Texas," *New York Times*, August 25, 1968, 60; Martin Waldron, see also "Birchers in Texas Head Wallace Bid," *New York Times*, September 22 1968, 56.

live in, and the kinds of schools their children can go to. In short, governmental decisions affect them greatly, and they have no input.”⁷⁴ Carlson’s emphasis on “powerlessness” finds parallels with the analysis of contemporary commentators, most notably David Riesman: “The extreme right [...] is often in the anomalous position of being stronger than it feels. It feels persecuted because many positions of influence in Washington, New York and Hollywood are outside its control.”⁷⁵

Dan Carter suggests that the “fundamental differences between the public rhetoric of the Alabama governor and the new conservatism [of Goldwater, Reagan and Nixon] is sometimes seem more a matter of style than substance.” On issues of crime, Communism and taxes, Wallace barely struck new ground, and neatly followed the credo of republican conservatism. What Wallace brought to the table was the celebration of those being left out of the bargaining process by the two main parties: Wallace supporters – North and South – felt psychologically and culturally isolated from the dominant currents of American life in the 1960s. Like the Birchers, who often described themselves as truly at the “center” of American politics and constitutionalist republicanism, Wallace the Populist hinted at a conspiracy between the bureaucratic elites and the poor and often black underclass, who conspired to squeeze the middle man. Playing on Birchist themes on an infected/infiltrated state apparatus, Wallace rejected the establishment’s social and economic interventions. “We don’t have a sick society,” he proclaimed, “we have a sick Supreme Court.”⁷⁶

These analyses draw an important parallel with the appeal of Birchism. The JBS had traditionally operated from an alarmist, outsider perspective endeavoring to educate the

⁷⁴ Jody Carlson, *George C. Wallace and the Politics of Powerlessness: The Wallace Campaigns for the Presidency, 1964-1976* (New York: Transaction Publishers, 1981), 16.

⁷⁵ Riesman, op. cit.

⁷⁶ Dan Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich: Race in the Conservative Counterrevolution, 1963-1994* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), xiv, 12, 20.

public on the moral corruption and illegitimacy of the political mainstream. As David Horowitz argues, the Society instead “spoke to the powerlessness of nationalists and anticollectivists in an era in which their message appeared marginalized.” In turn, Wallace’s firebrand defense of traditional American values could connect this perceived marginalization with a populist rebuttal of the “excesses” of the 1960s.⁷⁷ Writing for *American Opinion* over the summer of 1968, Gary Allen captured the mood quite aptly. While “thousands of tons of marijuana went up in smoke as did numerous cities and draft cards,” Allen saw the United States driven to the brink of bankruptcy by the “fiscal and monetary insanity of our Marxist leaders” – the Johnson budget had gone up from \$114 to \$188 billion. Allen continue: “we are asked to believe that we have more ‘poverty’ than ever [...] What they’ve actually done, of course, is to create a vast army of freeloaders which increasingly threatens to destroy the country if its booty is not increased.” Convinced the government was playing out a class war to undermine small to medium-scale capitalists, he dismissed the War on Poverty as nothing more than “a hoax being used by the Far Left as a rationalization for expanding government expenditures and control as a part of the Marxist package.” Meanwhile, Allen believed, the poor were seduced by generous welfare packages “as a permanent way of life,” which only contributed to the birth of more fatherless children and hence the breakdown of the American family, the last bastion of freedom.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ David Horowitz, *Beyond Left & Right: Insurgency and the Establishment* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 282-4.

⁷⁸ Gary Allen, “America, 1968: Why The Score Is So High,” *American Opinion* 11.7 (July-August 1968), 1-21.

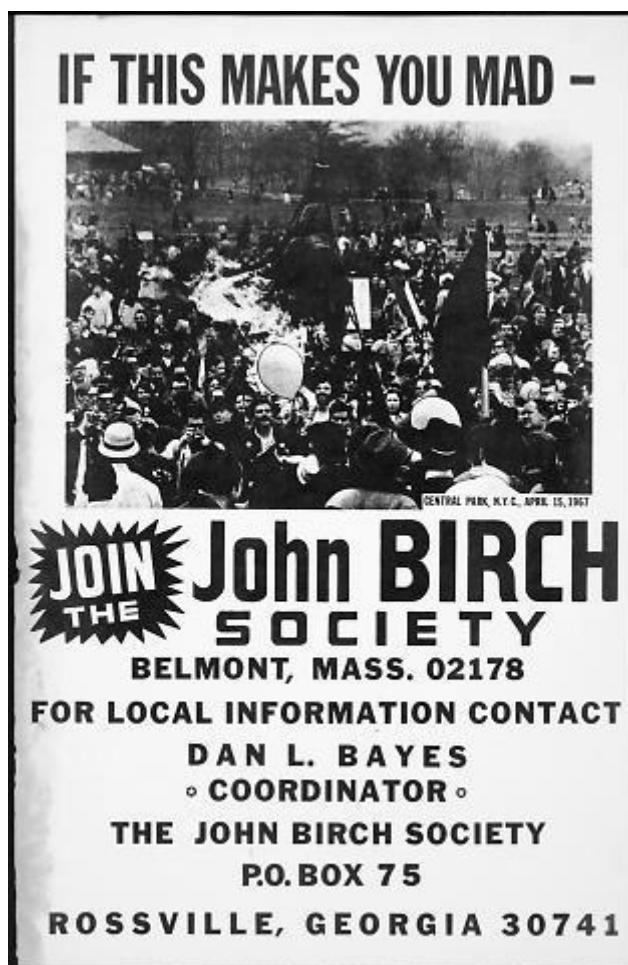


Fig. 17: A 1967 poster sponsored by a Georgia Chapter using a picture of an anti-Vietnam protest in New York City as propaganda – AUTHOR'S COLLECTION

Robert Welch echoed Allen's concerns, and went at great lengths to dismiss the New Left, with Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) at the helm as a dangerous vanguard of the international conspiracy. In a message to all members on the advances of the "Insiders" in May 1969, he placed SDS squarely in the same column: "The whole agitation is visibly plotted and carried out as a part of the total Communist program for eventually seizing control of the United States." Back in 1968, Welch, without naming Wallace or any other candidate, acknowledged his members' desire to participate politically in the upcoming election, but, reminded them of the Society's *real* purposes:

In this extremely political year of 1968 [...] let's keep clearly in mind what we are trying to do. And that is, to save our country from enslavement by the Communists. A great many Birchers, acting as good citizens, are and will be taking part in politics. But we are not interested in electing any candidate to office except as such election will help carry out our real purpose. So let's not try to engage in smart politics, but use any political campaign itself as a means of making our educational efforts more far reaching and more effective. If the candidate you are working for is really and truly anti-Communist, such efforts will clearly help him to be elected. If not, they will still help.⁷⁹

In Wallace, Welch saw great potential. Nevertheless, to uphold the “non-political” status of the Society, he had to be careful not to overtly make recommendations or endorsements. Any casual follower of the Belmont line had but to read between the lines. In the September issue of *American Opinion*, Welch ran two comparative stories on Republican nominee Richard Nixon and Wallace – though the Society consistently claimed equal Democratic membership, Humphrey seemed too obvious an evil to even consider.

Offering a “hard look at the candidate,” Gary Allen emphasized how the anti-Communist redbaiter Nixon had changed into a political opportunist, ready to sell out whenever politically expedient: “A man's motives are always mixed, and no doubt it is true that Nixon changed his political style after 1954 in part for purely political reasons.” Allen recounted how Nixon had refused to back the Bricker Amendment, “caved in” to Nelson Rockefeller in 1960, refused to back California Proposition 24 in 1962, and criticized the “nonpolitical” John Birch Society from then on. Allen, a “New World Order” conspiracy theorist, noted how Nixon had belonged to the Council on Foreign Relations and the Institute for Pacific Relations, two internationalist think tanks that Welch regarded with great suspicion: “It is, you see, to the field of foreign affairs that Nixon has devoted his primary Leftist efforts.” Within the context of the campaign, Allen noted how Nixon had opened a dialogue with the “revolutionary black power fanatics” of CORE, led by “violent Marxist” Floyd McKissick, who the Birchers believed had willfully stirred racial violence to terrorize

⁷⁹ Robert Welch, “Message of the Month,” July-August 1968, 6, JBS Records, Box 5, “MoM.”

law-abiding citizens into submission to the State: “The Insiders and their puppets know that during the psychological shock of a disaster the public is willing to accept measures which would not otherwise be adopted.” Finally, the article scored Nixon for endorsing “Republican by accident” Jacob Javits of New York and “ultra-Liberal” John Lindsay and hiding behind a hypocritical centrism: “Nixon placed himself squarely on the ‘center,’ but failed to comment on the fact that the middle of the road had been moving Left for thirty-five years.”⁸⁰

In the same issue, Welch ran a complimentary story on Wallace, written by Susan B. Huck, who often contributed on racial issues and education. In sharp contrast to the Nixon piece, Huck ran through Wallace’s biography, emphasizing the Governor’s unlikely “against all odds” life story meticulously and commending him for his “bravery” in standing up to “federal tyranny” and his “consistent adherence to principles of freedom and constitutionalism.” Compared to Nixon (and Humphrey), Huck warmly endorsed Wallace as “the only candidate in the race who is genuinely, outspokenly anti-Communist.”⁸¹ In turn, Wallace, who understood the value of Society members at the grassroots level – even in northern states like Washington more than half of his local campaign committee were members – consistently refused to repudiate the Society: “I am not going to denounce the John Birch Society. I know a few of its members in Alabama and they are some of our finest citizens.”⁸²

Richard Nixon, taking advantage of a divided Democratic Party and its Vietnam-scarred candidate, won an overwhelming 301 electoral vote majority compared to Humphrey’s 191. In the popular vote, the two were more evenly matched, with Nixon taking

⁸⁰ Gary Allen, “A Hard Look at the Candidate: Mr. Nixon,” *American Opinion* 11.8 (September 1968), 14, 18, 20-21.

⁸¹ Susan Huck, “A Hard Look at the Candidate: Mr. Wallace,” *American Opinion* 11.8 (September 1968), 32-6.

⁸² “Warren Weaver, Jr., “Wallace Refuses to Score Birchers,” *New York Times*, April 28, 1967, 28.

43.4% versus Humphrey's 42.7%. The major upset however, was Wallace, who had conquered five Southern states – Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia – and an impressive 13.5% of the popular vote, performing strongly in Northern industrial hubs as well. One electoral college voter from North Carolina, a Dr. Lloyd Bailey, even defected from Nixon and cast his vote for Wallace. The Nixon campaign had not known he was a Bircher. To the present day, Wallace would be the last independent candidate to carry states. Even with Nixon winning, the trend was clear: national politics had undergone a definitive rightward shift.⁸³

The story of Wallace, the Birch Society and the conservative revival of the late 1960s is inextricably connected to that of the decline of liberalism and ultimately, the collapse of the New Deal with it. Tepid social vision, ineffective anti-poverty programs, and a disastrous conflict management in Vietnam all contributed heavily to its downfall. As Daniel Patrick Moynihan observed, “the great failing of the Johnson Administration, was that an immense opportunity [...] was lost while energies were expended in ways that very probably hastened the end of the brief period when such options were open.”⁸⁴ Journalist Peter Shrag opined in a 1969 *Harper's Magazine* column that where liberals fell short, is where the loyal New Deal worker increasingly felt unrepresented and gradually became an easy prey to right-wing populists: “[F]or a decade he is the one who has been asked to carry the burden of social reform, to integrate his schools and his neighborhood, has been asked by comfortable people to pay the social debts due to the poor and black.”⁸⁵ Much of the literature addressing the

⁸³ Thomas Foley, “Renegade Vote For Wallace Upheld,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 7, 1969, A1.

⁸⁴ Moynihan quoted in Ira Katznelson, “Was the Great Society a Lost Opportunity?” in Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle (eds.), *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 185.

⁸⁵ Peter Shrag “The Forgotten American,” *Harper's Magazine*, August 1969, 30; Samuel Lubell, *The Hidden Crisis in American Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1970).

failure of liberalism in the late 1960s, has projected much of the responsibility onto liberals themselves. Scholars have criticized Cold War liberalism of having become “imprisoned within an anachronistic and increasingly elitist New Deal ideology” that failed to anticipate a hostile popular response to the shortcomings of its own programs. At the same time, the failure of Johnson’s anti-poverty initiatives to attack social and racial inequities at the root went hand in hand with the rise of New Politics and the New Left, whose vocal and radical dissent further undermined its moral authority and alienated uneasy voters.⁸⁶

Then again, Wallace’s strong performance and Nixon’s eventual victory highlight the vitality and success of alternatives to liberal Democrats. The activism of the JBS could never sway a majority of Americans, but through the campaign of Wallace, as well as its own programs targeting police review boards, civil rights and Vietnam, it could help create the climate for the New Right’s march to power. Wallace posed a greater threat to Nixon in the general election than to Humphrey, but the Republican drew inspiration from the third-party candidate. Nixon’s victory, Republican strategist Kevin Phillips, declared “bespoke the end of the New Deal Democratic hegemony and the beginning of a new era in American politics.” To achieve his victory, the candidate had mastered the crucial technique of exploiting the disillusionment of an increasingly suburban populace with the liberal establishment through the racial and cultural coding of social and cultural resentments that the Society had helped develop through its tireless populist appeals to the American public. Though the advent of Nixon would not bring about the end of New Deal liberalism, the triumph of his election

⁸⁶ Gareth Davies, *From Opportunity to Entitlement: The Transformation and Decline of Great Society Liberalism* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1999), 217; see also George Rising, *Clean for Gene: Eugene McCarthy’s 1968 Presidential Campaign* (Wesport, CT: Praeger, 1997); Jeffrey Bloodworth, *Losing the Center: The Decline of American Liberalism, 1968-1992* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2013).

strategy still signaled a seismic shift towards the modern conservative movement's coming of age.⁸⁷

IV. Out with a Whimper: A Society in Decline

A month after the election, the Society marked its tenth anniversary at the Manufacturers Building on the Indiana State Fairgrounds, literally a mile from the suburban home where Welch had founded the Society a decade before. Addressing an audience of 2,000 devotees, Welch started off by proudly listing his organization's accomplishments: a membership of around 60,000 to 100,000 spread over 4,000 chapters nationwide, the opening of around 450 American Opinion bookstores, the "Are you Listening, Uncle Sam" program heard on over 100 stations, a thriving speakers bureau, around \$5 million in annual revenues and a myriad of vibrant projects. Over the next decade, the retired candy manufacturer proclaimed, the Society would use those resources to finally "expose and rout the Communist conspiracy."⁸⁸

In a post-election report on the Society's strength, Wesley McCune remained ambiguous about where the Birchers stood as a political force: "I don't think they are growing in size and money," the analyst speculated. And yet, recognizing their part in recent high-profile campaigns, he cautioned: "[W]hen you've got a Ronald Reagan or a George Wallace, big national figures, who refuse to repudiate the Birch Society, they've got some clout somewhere."⁸⁹ Nevertheless, after the significant boost the JBS had received from the Goldwater campaign, its growth began to stagnate, which even Welch conceded was true. With the 1968 election on the horizon, reports were coming in of "a steady drop in

⁸⁷ Kevin Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1969), 25.

⁸⁸ Douglas Kneeland, "Birch Society, Age 10, Vows Red Rout," *New York Times*, December 8, 1968, 1.

⁸⁹ "Birch Society Fades," *The Miami News*, January 10, 1968, 11.

membership,” and even William Buckley remarked how long it had been since he had felt the need to keep the Society’s growth in check. Meanwhile, circulation of *American Opinion* remained at a disappointing 33,600 or nearly 170,000 short of its initial objective. Welch had already decided to bring his ambitious one million member target down to 200,000, still at least twice the Society’s actual strength. Conceding the Society’s shortcomings after a decade on the ground, he laconically added: “[W]e don’t need a million.”⁹⁰

Halfway through the decade, signs of trouble and internal discord were already showing. Internal discord amongst the leadership became an issue when, after his controversial speech at the 1966 New England Rally, Council member and *American Opinion* contributor Revilo Oliver was ushered out of his position and asked to leave. Oliver’s anti-Semitic remarks and beliefs – he would later assume a high-profile position with Liberty Lobby – were irreconcilable with Welch’s belief that biological racism was itself a Communist tool to instill chaos and discord. Shortly after Oliver left, Slobodan Draskovich, the Society’s Eastern Bloc connoisseur followed suit, convinced Welch’s top-down leadership lacked vision and efficiency. Spokesman Rousselot commented Oliver and Draskovich had left voluntarily out of disagreements with Belmont’s policies and that by stepping down, they had merely “expressed themselves.”⁹¹ Over a year later, Tom Davis, East Coast public relations director and close ally to Welch, stunned Belmont by offering his resignation. Disgusted with racist factions collaborating with Birchers in their drive to secure

⁹⁰ William F. Buckley, Jr., “On The Right: The Decline of Birchism,” *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, November 14, 1967, 3

⁹¹ John Fenton, “Birch Society Is Shaken by ‘Acrimonious Disputes,’” *New York Times*, August 28, 1966, 68; see also Richard Stone, “John Birch Blues: Many Top Aides Quit Right-Wing Group, Say Funds, Members Decline,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 6, 1967, 8.

George Wallace's appearance on state ballots, Davis merely confided: "I do not know of anything that could make the John Birch Society rise to any position of importance."⁹²

Investigative journalists would do much in demystifying grassroots operations coordinated from Belmont. Tom Buckley, writing for the *New York Times*, in 1966 joined one of the relatively few Manhattan chapters around the police board review referendum drive. Having observed his "fellow Birchers" for weeks and noting their local achievements and national shortcomings, he admitted: "Despite its tiny membership, it can stir up mischief in small towns – 'capturing' a parent-teacher organization, trying to oust a librarian who buys 'leftist' books or declines to buy 'patriotic' ones, picketing a United Nations seminar in deepest Kansas." Still, Buckley concluded: "But in larger places it exerts no real influence" and [n]ationally too, the society is losing momentum."⁹³

In 1968, political scientist Robert Schoenberger analyzed the New York Conservative Party and noticed that while its members were primarily preoccupied with "a powerful and conspiratorial domestic communist threat," their "mainstream" counterparts were seriously interested in "questions of economic and social policy." In the "radical right," Schoenberger recognized a self-isolated demographic "hostile toward many of the social forces of the era and less able to keep their social-psychological balance when confronting them." Schoenberger's classification, as demonstrated, reveals a problematic tendency to view conspiracist conservatives as profoundly divorced from a "mainstream" right and fails to

⁹² Gordon Hall, "Top Is Falling Out of the Birch Society," *Washington Post*, December 24, 1967.

⁹³ Tom Buckley, "When Good Birchers Get Together," *New York Times*, June 5, 1966, 265; see also Howard Seeleye, "Birch Strength Called Overrated," *Los Angeles Times*, November 12, 1967, OC 1.

account analytically for the synergy between both in constructing a conservative challenge to liberalism.⁹⁴

Still, the *National Review*'s definitive repudiation of the Society over Vietnam and the involvement of many Birchers in the Wallace campaign and had made their position on the Right inevitably more problematic. Though Welch had maintained a policy of shunning explicitly racist views and when necessary expelling members and staff officials who espoused such views, his readings of history continued to attract anti-Semitic conspiracy theorists and white supremacist segregationists. Beside Birchers, the American Independent Party attracted a significant number of Klansmen, National States' Rights Party members, Minutemen and, in some cases, even Nazis. William Shearer, top campaigner for Wallace, had long been a member of the White Citizens Councils, and encouraged Birchers to run the campaign on the local level. Ben Klassen, the party's Florida chairman, later joined pronounced anti-Semitic groups, but at the time still volunteered for the Society, as did Klansman Tom Metzger. Of Colorado's six electors pledged to Wallace should he win the state, two were Birchers and two other served on the local Citizens Council.⁹⁵ In Georgia, Governor Lester Maddox, segregationist and Wallace supporter, in 1969 declared August 25th, the day John Birch was killed in China, as official "John Birch Day." Flanked by Birch's parents as well as Lawrence MacDonald, later Democratic congressman and Birch Society President, Maddox hailed Birch as the "first known American casualty," who had "represented so well and faithfully, in his life and by his death, all of the noblest ideals of the

⁹⁴ Richard Schoenberger, "Conservatism, Personality, and Political Extremism," *American Political Science Review* 62.3 (September 1968), 876.

⁹⁵ Jack Nelson and Nicholas C. Chriss, "Far Right, Racists Found Among Wallace Workers," *The Milwaukee Journal*, September 17, 1968, 2; on Klassen, Quintin Ellison, "Seeds of One Group's Hate Sown in Western North Carolina," *The Dispatch*, July 21, 1999, 4; on Metzger, Marty Gitlin, *The Ku Klux Klan: A Guide to an American Subculture* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2009), 97.

young manhood of his State and of his country, that a national patriotic organization has been named in his honor.”⁹⁶

The organization that perhaps profited the most from the Wallace campaign was Willis Carto’s Liberty Lobby, which disseminated ultraconservative and conspiratorial propaganda through its publications *The Liberty Letter* and *The Spotlight*, couched in explicit white supremacism and anti-Semitism. As the Institute for American Democracy concluded, both the Birch Society and Liberty Lobby enjoyed a post-Wallace “boost,” with subscriptions to American Opinion going up 14% from 34,098 in 1968 to 39,352 in 1969, and the Liberty Letter from 197,512 to 221,456, or a rise of 12%. While the Society’s income was reported to have gone up from \$3.8 million to slightly over \$4 million, Carto’s Lobby had taken in \$850,000 over 1968 and just under a million the year after.⁹⁷

In view of Liberty Lobby’s racist views, Welch had always remained ambiguous about its influences on his own followers. With factions of the two groups eager to keep the American Independent Party fully organized for 1972, Belmont tried to distance itself diplomatically as Welch sent out instructions to coordinators and chapter leaders with standardized responses to queries about the Society’s stance on Carto and his following: “Liberty Lobby’s way of fighting the Communists has always been quite different from ours. We have never been connected with it [...] and don’t feel the Society should get into the picture one way or another.” Nevertheless, as with the WCC, KKK and NSRP, a considerable “overlap” in membership had become visible between the two, not unrelated to Welch’s

⁹⁶ Executive Department of the State of Georgia, “Proclamation: John Birch Day,” August 20, 1969, Thomas J. Anderson Papers, Collection of Conservative and Libertarian Materials, Manuscript Collections, University of Oregon, Box 116, “Subject Files: John Birch Society.”

⁹⁷ “Who’s Who on the Far Right,” *Homefront* 3.7 (July-August 1969), 51; see also “Who’s Who on the Far Right,” *Homefront* 4.7 (July-August 1970), 55.

elaborate cabal narratives.⁹⁸ According to Sara Diamond, “[t]he expansion of Birchist conspiracism was a key factor in the coalition that developed.”⁹⁹ Similarly, Lisa McGirr notes how Birchers and Lobbyers “increasingly moved into an alliance” under the auspices of Wallace’s third-party run, which continued long after the 1968 campaign.¹⁰⁰

Frank Mintz correlates the Society’s relative decline after its Goldwater-Wallace peak, to a veritable “symbiosis” with Liberty Lobby’s own membership. Welch’s “Insider” conspiracy logic and emphasis on monetary manipulation and internationalism linked up neatly with classic anti-Semitic conspiracy theories espoused by demagogues like Carto or Gerald L.K. Smith. Welch had tried to keep racial hatred and violence out of his creed, thus catering to a new powerful class of middle class suburban conservatives and allowing them to play important parts in “respectable” partisan organizations and influence local political initiatives, e.g. California and New York in 1966. And yet, the Society’s unyielding conspiracism invariably alienated right-wingers who saw its unwillingness to compromise as a burden to the cause. On the other side, influential conspiracists like Oliver, Metzger or Robert DePugh, felt Welch did not take his theories “far enough” or criticized him for not acting upon his conclusions and thus making his efforts obsolete and self-defeating. As a result, the Society could only become increasingly isolated on both sides, and depended on the charisma of powerful iconoclasts like Wallace to promote its cause on a national level.¹⁰¹

Richard Nixon’s rise to the presidency provided the Birchers with an additional problem. The election of the second Republican president in 36 years severely threatened to undermine the resonance of the Society’s polarizing dissent. With a Republican in office –

⁹⁸ Tom Hill to Home Office Coordinators, May 15, 1969, JBS Records, Box 3, “Miscellaneous Memos”.

⁹⁹ Sara Diamond, *Roads to Dominion*, 148.

¹⁰⁰ Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, 222.

¹⁰¹ Frank Mintz, *The Liberty Lobby and the American Right: Race, Conspiracy and Culture* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), see especially Chapter 7 “The Lobby-Birch ‘Symbiosis,’” 141-162.

even if the genuineness of his conservatism was generally questioned – the willingness of conservatives to openly criticize the administration with the same fervor as they had done with Johnson dramatically diminished for fear of disunity. In California, political journalists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak noted the “diminished political prowess [...] particularly of the John Birch Society and its fellow travelers” even before the election. Rowland and Novak reported how the election of Ronald Reagan had deprived Birchers of their cause in the state and with many moving from the GOP to Wallace’s standard, the Society was now losing its influence in the state’s political infrastructure.¹⁰²

The election of Nixon had a similar effect. The fact that Welch refused to accept Nixon’s anti-communist credentials altogether made him reluctant to prioritize the same sense of ideological unity that more temperate right-wingers tried to defend. Convinced that Nixon had simply been put in place by the same conspiracy that had controlled every presidency since FDR, Welch ruled out the option for reconciliation. As a result, the JBS refused to acknowledge Nixon’s victory as a constructive evolution and attacked his policies with the same passion as Johnson’s. Welch was convinced Nixon secretly held welfare expenditures at a status quo to bankrupt the nation, established the Occupational Health and Safety Administration to undermine free enterprise, and sought for ways to weaken America’s position in the world, especially in Vietnam. Harvey Schechter, a spokesman for the Anti-Defamation League, offered a similar theory in 1982, looking back on the Society’s gradual disappearance from the political mainstream: “right-wing groups do well mainly when liberal Democrats are in the White House.” Schechter continued: “In the case of the Birchers, the date the bullet was put to their ear was November, 1968, with the election of

¹⁰² Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, “Inside Report: The Decline of the Right,” *The Victoria Advocate*, May 30, 1968, 5.

Richard Nixon. There was this fellow who had his career on being an anti-Communist, and all the Birchers could do was say he was soft on communism as everybody else.”¹⁰³

Throughout Nixon’s presidency, the Birch Society faced a growing problem of irrelevance. Public discourse had shifted significantly on race, crime, redistributive policies and American power, but the Birchers’ zeal continued to go hand in hand with a conspiratorial worldview that kept it from taking an active part in the New Right’s established position of power. It also alienated a public that had grown tired of social chaos and international tensions and looked toward their president to bring the nation together through compromise and constructive dialogue. When, Nixon successfully sought rapprochement with Maoist China, Rex Westerfield, who had succeeded John Rousselot as Public Relations Director, issued a statement saying Birchers were “appalled,” and that Nixon’s decision to “fraternize with a criminal government [...] “humiliated the American people and betrayed our anti-Communist ideals.”¹⁰⁴

It would be an exaggeration to conclude the JBS was to spend the remainder of its days in complete isolation of the greater conservative movement. Birchers could still rally

¹⁰³ “Birch Society Founder Has Doubts on Nixon,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 8, 1969, 15; the JBS even produced a film on Nixon’s unwillingness to win in Vietnam narrated by John Wayne, see Chip Wood “To: All Coordinators; Subject: John Wayne film” December 31, 1970, JBS Papers, Box 4, “No Substitute for Victory”; see also “Put OSHA Out of Business” (undated), JBS Records, Box 4, “Nix On O.S.H.A.,” Dan Smoot, “Beware of O.S.H.A.,” *The Review of the News* 9.6 (February 7, 1973), 31-2, 37-9; Thomas J. Hagerty, “Birch Society Takes Aim on OSHA,” *Milwaukee Journal*, March 28, 1973, 26; on Barlow, see Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Businessmen’s Crusade Against the New Deal* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2009), 208. Gary Allen with Larry Abraham, *None Dare Call It Conspiracy* (Rosamond, CA: Concord Press, 1971), 124-5; Allen, *Richard Nixon: The Man Behind The Mask* (Boston: Western Islands, 1971), 126; William Overend, “Birchers Continue to Keep the Faith,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 19, 1982, H1.

¹⁰⁴ “Correction, Please!,” *The Review of the News* 5.4 (January 22 1969), 13; see also “Birch Group Raps Nixon’s China Trip,” *Ocala Star-Banner*, March 5, 1972, 16; Evelyn Goh, *Constructing the U.S. Rapprochement with China, 1961-1974: From ‘Red Menace’ to ‘Tacit Ally’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), chapter 9.

behind causes they shared with other conservatives, such as the movement to stop the Equal Rights Amendment and a moral crusade against gay rights, abortion and sex education. And yet, it would be no longer in the Birchers' capacity to interfere with the political process as they had done so in the past. When in 1972, Birch insiders John Schmitz and Thomas Anderson ran an independent campaign in an attempt to emulate George Wallace's efforts, the Society explicitly endorsed the American Party ticket as the only valid alternative to the Nixon Administration's Communist-led destruction of American liberty. Schmitz earned around 200,000 votes in Southern California and received close to 10% in the state of Idaho, with Jefferson County as strongest county result at 27%, second after Nixon. Disillusioned, the Society refused to accept the legitimacy of Nixon's second mandate and answered with cynicism. "I thought the American people would be outraged," Medford Evans wrote, "I thought they would resent the obvious betrayal [...] I admit I was wrong." With modern conservatives significantly better organized than a decade before and increasing access to the political mainstream, partially due to the JBS's efforts, Welch and his followers were becoming increasingly obsolete.¹⁰⁵

V. Conclusion

Students of conservatism have reached a consensus over the importance of Barry Goldwater's failed campaign in reconfiguring partisan politics and raising the profile of conservative challenges to the New Deal order. The John Birch Society's controversial

¹⁰⁵ Medford Evans, "What Kind Of Mandate, Mr. Nixon?" *The Review of the News* 8.46 (November 15, 1972), 31; see also Reed Benson and Robert Lee, "Mr. Nixon Is No Dick Tracy," *The Review of the News* 8.50 (December 6, 1972), 31-40; "Campaign 1972 – the American Party," *The Review of the News* 8.45 (November 8, 1972), 13; "Campaign 1972 – the Republicans," *ibid.*, 19, 35; Medford Evans, "What McGovern Says Nixon Does," *The Review of the News* 8.38 (August 2, 1972), 31; Americans for Schmitz Ad, *ibid.*, 3.; "John Schmitz: America's Conservative Congressman," *American Opinion Reprint Series*. Belmont: Robert Welch, Inc., 1972.

presence around that campaign worried a number of prominent conservatives, including Goldwater himself, not just because of the effectiveness with which Lyndon Johnson could tarnish his opponent as a dangerous extremist, but because of the Society's capacity to connect members and motivate them to infiltrate local political structures and mobilize, established conservatives formally excluded the JBS from interfering with electoral campaigns. At the same time, the JBS remained a powerful organization that could still align itself with conservative protest movements, as best illustrated by *SYLP* and the Birchers' opposition to civil rights. The populist campaign of George Wallace not only proved to be an accurate bellwether of the direction in which political discourse was moving, but it also illustrated the capacity for political mobilization and ideological zeal that the Society had instilled in its national membership.

Nevertheless, the election – and reelection – of Richard Nixon as President revealed the Society's limitations and long-term incapacity to remain a stable factor within the conservative landscape. Welch's uncompromising adherence to conspiracy theories had helped connect deeply frustrated conservatives who felt politically marginalized within the liberal consensus, but as the New Right became increasingly successful at exploiting the weaknesses of liberalism on a national scale, the JBS would be confronted with its own unwillingness to recognize the validity of the conservative counterrevolution that it had helped bring about. Not unlike a reagent accelerating a chemical reaction, the prominence of the John Birch Society would be largely consumed in the process.

Conclusion

When Robert Welch in 1958 wondered aloud "why people became Communists," he advanced a primarily psychological explanation, and linked left-wing radicalism and idealism with profound emotional disorders, feelings of hatred and a paralyzing lack of self-esteem. Ironically, as Welch's contemporaneous observers wondered why people became Birchers, and what it was that attracted them to the retired businessman's quixotic struggle against international collectivism, many turned to similarly clinical language and speculated these people suffered from status deprivation, serious mental anxieties to outright paranoia and a pseudo-Fascist personality. In doing so, serious scholars like Daniel Bell, Richard Hofstadter, and their fellow writers who subscribed to the liberal consensus school, failed to grasp the strengths and accomplishments of Robert Welch's enigmatic organization. As a result, satisfying answers to what attracted ordinary citizens to the Society, and what the organization provided for them and the greater conservative field, remained lacking.

First, the timing was crucial. As the JBS emerged in the late 1950s, it could offer anxious Cold War citizens a set of explanations and remedies for a dualistic world and the dissonance between living in the world's most powerful state and the realities of international conflict and a perceived worldwide Communist conspiracy. The JBS responded to the desire on behalf of conservatives to feel represented in national politics and helped push the Republican Party, at a time of significant partisan realignment, to the right. Most importantly, though the JBS remained an essentially well-coordinated top-down structure, it connected ordinary people, representing an emerging Sun Belt variety of conservatism, and gave them a clear enemy and a mission. Birchers had access to inexhaustible bodies of literature that tied the establishment of the Federal Reserve together with the French Revolution and the

Montgomery Bus Boycott with sinister plans to establish a “Soviet Negro Republic” in the Deep South. Through its countless Ad Hoc Committees, Members’ Monthly Messages, speaking tours and various other mutual engagements, the Society retained close control over its members and provided them with a sense of community and accomplishment. In a 1965 speech, Welch boasted that the only danger to the Communist conspiracy was exposure through education and that “in this undertaking, we [the JBS] have become a new form of opposition to the Communists, which they have never faced before in any of the vast areas they have already taken over.” Though Welch’s claims were possibly somewhat overblown, it remains true that the Birch Society provided motivated citizens with an organizational platform, and clear answers to growing social turmoil. As such, it linked the problem of civil rights to sophisticated conservative counterarguments including free-market liberalism, an originalist defense of constitutional supremacy and an emphasis on law and order.¹

The historiography of modern American conservatism has come a long way since Samuel Huntington in 1957 posed the question “Does conservative political thought have a place in America today?”, or even since Alan Brinkley declared the study of the U.S. right “something of an orphan” almost four decades later.² Accomplishments in the field have painted a different picture from the “liberal consensus” school that was dominant at the time of the Birchers’ inception. The alleged “vital center” upon which American politics was based no longer seems viable, and Louis Hartz’s dictum that liberalism remained the “master assumption of American political thought,” has been falsified. What this thesis has argued is

¹ Taken from Robert Welch’s “What is the John Birch Society” speech, delivered in 1965 and published as an ad in hundreds of local newspapers around the country, e.g. *San Marino Tribune*, December 9, 1965, 16; see also *The Tuscaloosa News*, December 13, 1965, 7; *Delaware County Daily Times*, December 14, 1965, 7; *Reading Eagle*, January 23, 1966, 31.

² Samuel Huntington, “Conservatism As an Ideology,” *American Political Science Review* 51.2 (June 1957), 454, 471; Alan Brinkley, “The Problem of American Conservatism,” *American Historical Review* 99.2 (April 1994), 409-410.

that the modern conservative movement emerged from the 1960s emboldened by electoral victories and superior organization skills, and that the John Birch Society through its visible presence and capacity for mobilization made it ultimately stronger. As such, the study of the Birchers transcends the problem of mainstream versus extremist movements, and puts a greater emphasis not merely on the importance of grassroots movements, but on the interaction, conflict and synergy of ideas and resources into a dynamic picture of the development of modern conservatism in the United States. The persistent conspiratorial worldview that defined the organization eventually left the JBS obsolete on the greater political scene, but during the crucial period where the New Right transitioned from an intellectual movement to a powerful, popular and electable force, relying on newly emerging demographic realities and partisan realignment, it profited from the achievements and failures of the John Birch Society.³

This thesis has made the argument that the role of the JBS needs to be reconsidered in terms of significance and influence. At a time when the liberal order seemed dominant, the Birchers created a professional and efficient platform for national organization around a variety of issues, all key to the development of modern conservatism. At the crucial time of Barry Goldwater's rise and nomination, the Birchers acted as a catalytic factor, pushing the right wing of the party over the threshold, though increasingly marginalizing themselves in

³ Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1955), 62; see also Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: NYRB Classics, 1950), ix; Leo P. Ribuffo, "Why Is There So Much Conservatism in the United States and Why Do So Few Historians Know Anything about it?" *NHR* 99.2 (April 1994), 438-49; Jerome Himmelstein, *To the Right: The Transformation of American Conservatism* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1992); William B. Hixson, *Search for the American Right Wing: An Analysis of the Social Science Record, 1955-1987* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Darren Dochuk "Revival on the Right: Making Sense of the Conservative Moment in Post-World War II American History," *History Compass* 4 (2006), 975-999. Donald Critchlow and Nancy MacLean, *Debating the American Conservative Movement: 1945 to the Present* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009).

the process. The thesis has provided an essentially organizational history connecting the dots between the business elites who supported its cause and a new, burgeoning conservative populace that the wider conservative movement would learn to incorporate.

Concretely, the thesis has discussed the Birchers' importance for the connection between strands of Old Guard business conservatism to the more modern Sun Belt right-wing variety that would usher in crucial figures like Goldwater and Reagan, and that would seriously compete with liberalism for dominance over mainstream American politics. In addition, the Birchers helped popularize right-wing alternative narratives to issues such as civil rights, international affairs, redistributive economics and even the counterculture, thus contributing to the amalgamation of a conservative challenge to the liberal order. Although the Society's uncompromising conspiracism would become by and large incompatible with most established strands of conservative thought, it helped muster and mobilize an attack on that same liberal order and appealed to the frustrations and patriotism of thousands of motivated citizen activists.

In terms of periodization, the thesis has suggested the years from 1958 to 1968 to be by far the most crucial and defining for the Society and its efforts, though the link up to the present has shown its impact still reverberates today. Therefore, it is here that more research can and should be done. More in-depth studies focusing on the ideological and organizational links between the JBS and Tea Party politics as well as contemporary conspiracy culture and right-wing business astroturfing are necessary to further understand the odyssey of the post-Cold War right. There is room for comparative studies with the rise of European populist and nationalist politics, the development of neoliberal interest groups and the internal struggles of contemporary conservatism in an increasingly diverse and globalized political culture. Though the JBS has only occupied a modest space within modern American political history,

it is clear the implications of its innovative and yet divisive tactics and activities remain highly relevant in our present-day world.

Even today, the John Birch Society remains in existence, although it has never attained the prominence and significance it enjoyed during its first decade. As Sara Diamond has illustrated, the 1970s and 1980s brought more competition from Posse Comitatus, Christian Identity groups and other conspiratorial organizations such as Liberty Lobby, while most conservatives struggled to identify with groups on the far right. The Society faithfully continued to campaign on issues ranging from sex education to environmentalism, and from affirmative action to the Panama Canal Treaties, but it could rarely find an entrance into the public debate or attract enough attention to regain significant political leverage. While the Republican Party accommodated an increasingly resilient coalition of fiscal conservatives, adherents to the Christian Right and neoconservative supporters of an aggressive anti-communist foreign policy, growing social liberalism on other fronts as well as declining McCarthyism in American political culture rendered the Society increasingly marginalized.⁴

It is not clear how the actual membership of the JBS has exactly evolved over the years, but it seems unlikely the Society has been able, either before or after Robert Welch's death in 1985, to maintain the extent of its visibility, let alone expand it. A California JBS member and spokesman for the Society's tax reform project *TRIM* ("Tax Reform Immediately") in 1979 claimed there were an estimated 3,000 chapters nationwide "with 25-30 members each," thus bringing its total to 80,000 or perhaps even 100,000 members.⁵ During the following election year, the retired Welch mentioned he expected most of what he

⁴ Sara Diamond, *Roads to Dominion*, 147, 159.

⁵ Jean Mickle, "Meeting Held By John Birch Society: Committee Works for Tax Reform," *Sarasota Herald Tribune*, August 1, 1979, 16.

estimated to be 50,000 members would support candidate Ronald Reagan for president.⁶ Only two years later, a spokesman placed national membership of somewhere “in excess of 40,000.” Observers of the right have questioned this and ADL-employed Harvey Schechter, who had been monitoring the JBS for over a decade, suggested a total following of 15,000 to 20,000 might be more realistic.⁷

What is more, Schechter speculated the election of Reagan, a self-avowed conservative whose rise to the presidency had depended immensely on Christian conservatives as well as a wider electorate skeptical of the role of government, would hurt the Society even more than the election of Richard Nixon had, which proved correct. Whereas Nixon accepted and expanded several liberal programs and actively sought détente on the international scene, Reagan banked heavily on aggressive anti-communist rhetoric, anti-labor sentiment and populist backlash against civil rights programs. Thus the new administration severely undercut the Birchers' unyielding claim that the federal government was still in the hands of collectivist conspirators and that Americans were still in need of alarmist groups like the John Birch Society to safeguard against Communist subversion. When the Society started to criticize Reagan for compromising on taxation and government spending with a Democratic-controlled Congress, or budged on his campaign promise to abolish the Department of Education, the Birch leadership remained unsure as to how fiercely Reagan should be criticized, leading to internal strife and a severe drop in subscriptions to its flagship magazine. Meanwhile, due to its emphasis on government infiltration and global Communist subversion, the JBS could not exploit the rise of Christian fundamentalism to the same extent as for example *STOP ERA* and the growing pro-life movement could. Finally, when during the George H.W. Bush Administration the Berlin Wall came crashing down and the Soviet

⁶ Joe Magruder, “Birch Founder hits Reagan lackey label,” *The Telegraph*, October 29, 1980, 2.

⁷ William Overend, “Birchers Continue to Keep the Faith,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 19, 1982, H1.

Union collapsed under its own weight, it seemed Birchism had all but lost its purpose in a post-Cold War world.⁸

Then again, the Society simply proceeded to incorporate subsequent developments into its dualistic, Manichean program, and with modest success. The increased visibility of the United Nations in international conflicts such as the US-led Gulf War, as well as Bush's clarion call for a "New World Order" contributed heavily to renewed interest in and popularity of conspiratorial thought. Radio pundits, church leaders and even ambitious politicians recycled many of the long-standing cabal narratives, from mass-scale financial manipulation plots to alleged UN plans to invade and enslave the United States, all to question the legitimacy and intent of the federal government. Transnational organizations and elite discussion groups ranging from the Trilateral Commission, Bilderberg Group to even NAFTA and the European Union invited the suspicion of professional conspiracy theorists and anti-statists, leading to increased cynicism and sometimes even acts of violence such as Timothy McVeigh's 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. Playing on such anxieties and sentiments, Berlet has speculated the Society - now operating from Joe McCarthy's birthplace Appleton, Wisconsin - might have seen its membership shoot up from under 20,000 to nearly 60,000 between 1988 and 1995.⁹

More recently, the events surrounding and following the September 11th, 2001 attacks on New York City and Washington D.C. have unleashed veritable waves of conspiratorial thought, often characterized by suspicions of treason within the American political elite and plans for an installment of a dictatorial "One World Government," both

⁸ "John Birch Society Struggling," *The Argus-Press*, August 16, 1986, 82.

⁹ See also Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) and Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

central themes to Bircher logic. The subsequent “War on Terror” escalated by the George W. Bush Administration and subprime mortgage crisis only heightened and accelerated such tendencies and helped raise the profile of anti-statist protest groups and politicians, such as Texan libertarian and Liberty Amendment supporter Ron Paul.¹⁰

In her introduction to *Wrapped in the Flag*, Claire Conner argues how although the Society had lost much, if not most, of its clout by the time of the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, influential figures that had been active within the JBS, simply took their expertise and resources elsewhere, rather than disappear from the political landscape altogether. During those few years when Birchers could positively measure the scope of their impact on the political mainstream, they had been trained to organize small chapters, aggressively recruit members, effectively mount local campaigns, gather invaluable resources and politically pressurize their environment. Conner's own parents threw their weight behind local right-wing Catholic organizations to fight abortion, school prayer rulings, gay rights and the Equal Rights Amendment, alongside Phyllis Schlafly.¹¹

However, the most prominent examples are indubitably Charles and David Koch, sons of Fred Koch, the influential JBS Council member and confidant of Robert Welch. Known widely as the Koch Brothers, Charles and David inherited and expanded their father's industrial empire, amassing enormous wealth and channeling vast amounts of resources into a variety of right-wing causes. In 1974, Charles helped found the influential libertarian Cato

¹⁰ Paul is an interesting figure, given his prominent status within the anti-interventionist and small government-minded community. Though he has consistently professed not to be a member of the JBS, the obstetrician turned politician has often come out speaking favorably about the Society's efforts and has made regular appearances on its speaking circuit; see Brian Farmer, “Ron Paul Addresses John Birch Society,” *The New American*, October 8, 2008, retrieved from www.thenewamerican.com/usnews/constitution/409; also “Letters to the Editor: John Birch Society, Putnam Gain in Effort Against United Nations,” *Lakeland Ledger*, September 25, 2003, 10.

¹¹ Conner, *Wrapped in the Flag*, x-xi.

Institute, which has played a significant role in conservative economic policy. Similarly, both have consistently supported the Heritage Foundation, which lobbies extensively for right-wing positions on social issues. Up to this day, the Koch Brothers are known to spend millions every year funding electoral campaigns and supporting right-wing, pro-business causes, ranging from the American Enterprise Institute to the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research.¹²

In recent years, both the Koch Brothers and the John Birch Society have attracted significantly more attention when put in connection with what has been dubbed the “Tea Party Movement,” a loosely connected series of protests grown partly out of the Ron Paul presidential campaign in 2007, as well as popular conservative resentment over the Bush Administration's TARP bailout package and the election of Democrat Barack Obama in 2008. The Tea Party's most prominent targets have included government spending, affirmative action, healthcare reform and even the validity of Obama's own birth certificate. Its impact has been virtually immediate, with the Republican Party recapturing the House of Representatives in 2010 in a sweeping landslide reminiscent of the 1994 “Gingrich Revolution.” As a result, congressional politics has been defined by gridlock, protracted battles over healthcare reform, immigration and fiscal matters. On a state level, “right-to-work” legislation and electoral reform, targeting organized labor and Democratic voter turnout have been launched by Republican legislatures, spurred on by Tea Party forces and a renewed right-wing climate. More recently, the refusal of Republican lawmakers to support

¹² Daniel Schulman, *Sons of Wichita: How the Koch Brothers Became America's Most Powerful and Private Dynasty* (Wellesley, MA: Grand Central Publishing, 2014).

the raising of the U.S. debt ceiling, again under pressure from Tea Party-esque fundamentalists, caused a 16-day government shutdown and spending freeze.¹³

While political observers and scientists are still debating the validity of the Tea Party as an actual “grassroots” movement, similarities with the JBS abound. As Darren Mulloy observes, the Birchers can be seen as a “kind of bridge between the older Right of the 1940s and 1950s – including the McCarthyite Right – and the New Right of the 1970s and 1980s, and on into the Tea Party of the twenty-first century, to a time when ‘anti-government’ rhetoric and attitudes have become so central to American conservatism they almost seem to provide it with its sole reason for existence.”¹⁴ If the Tea Party thus can be seen as an extension or natural successor to the Birchism of Welch and his allies, historian Sean Wilentz seems to agree, as he explicitly traces back the conspiracism and alarmist anti-government rhetoric of key Tea Party figures such as Glenn Beck and Sarah Palin to influential Birch authors, such as Mormon writer W. Cleon Skousen in Beck’s case, and obviously the Koch brothers taking up their father’s mantle.¹⁵

The connection with business lobbyists is obvious. Charles and David Koch, sons of Birch insider Fred, remain the best example. Through their projects FreedomWorks and Americans For Prosperity, the Koch Brothers have become the definition of right-wing “astroturfing” or the funding and coordinating of supposedly spontaneous grassroots protests. Tea Party manifestations and friendly political candidates, including Wisconsin Governor

¹³ Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 78; see also Christopher Parker and Matt Barreto, *Change They Can’t Believe In: The Tea Party and Reactionary Politics in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein, *It’s Even Worse Than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided With the New Politics of Extremism* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).

¹⁴ D.J. Mulloy, *The World of the John Birch Society*, 11.

¹⁵ Sean Wilentz, “Confounding Fathers: The Tea Party’s Cold War Roots,” *The New Yorker*, October 18, 2010, retrieved from <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/10/18/confounding-fathers>.

Scott Walker during his 2012 recall election, continue to receive large contributions from organized business lobbies, who help steer the political mainstream rightward and in opposition to government regulation, universal healthcare and progressive taxation.¹⁶

Also, not unlike the Birchers of the 1960s, most of the controversy the Tea Party has been causing can be situated *within* the conservative camp. Since the 2010 midterms, Tea Party-backed candidates have threatened to oust more moderate Republicans in vicious primary contests. As a result, the more established leadership of the party has moved significantly to the right and intraparty tensions severely disrupted and encumbered the nomination process for the 2012 presidential elections, with Mitt Romney finally emerging against populist candidates such as Michelle Bachmann, Rick Santorum and Herman Cain, as well as libertarian Ron Paul. Only a few months ago, prominent Congressman Eric Cantor was surprisingly defeated by Tea Party-supported Dave Brat in the Virginia primary, an illustration of the schism between the GOP establishment and the fundamentalist insurgency on the right.¹⁷

The rise of the Tea Party has again raised the profile of the Birchers, many of whom have joined Tea Party protests and organizations all over the country. In 2010, the JBS was even invited to the 2010 CPAC convention and the year after to its rival LPAC, a sign perhaps that the Birchers might be recovering their long lost political capital. In states like Michigan, local Birchers have even been working together with Tea Party organizations

¹⁶ Ronald Formisano, *The Tea Party: A Brief History* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2012), 8; see also Skocpol and Williamson, 102-4.

¹⁷ Bart Verhoeven and Martin Walter, "The Tea Party Strikes Again: The Fall of Eric Cantor," *C'era Una Volta l'America*, June 29, 2014, retrieved from <http://www.ceraunavoltalamerica.it/2014/06/the-tea-party-strikes-again-the-fall-of-eric-cantor>; see also David Lightman, "Tea Party Stuns GOP Leader Eric Cantor," *Charlotte Observer*, June 11, 2014, retrieved from <http://www.charlotteobserver.com/2014/06/10/4968350/tea-party-stuns-gop-leader-eric.html#.U5s5By8Wdt8>.

allied groups to ensure the passing of right-to-work legislation. Though it is unsure to what extent the Society itself will emerge as a visible and resilient force, it remains clear to see its message – or at least powerful remnants of it – continues to be carried forward into present American political culture.¹⁸

¹⁸ Rich Lowry, "CPAC and the John Birch Society," *National Review Online*, February 10, 2010, retrieved from <http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/195191/cpac-john-birch-society/rich-lowry>; on the JBS and right-to-work in Michigan see Sam Antonio's interview with Tony Demott at LPAC 2011, retrieved from <http://www.ibs.org/news/working-on-right-to-work-in-michigan> [last accessed on April 13, 2012].

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