The John Birch Society:
A New Perspective on Far-Right Conservatism

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This essay analyzes the John Birch Society (JBS), a far-right, anti-communist group, within the historical context of American anti-radicalism. It also examines the intellectual influences, ideology, organization, and activism of the JBS while suggesting explanations for the political and policy failures of the organization. Unlike previous historians who portrayed the JBS as a paranoid, almost pathological fringe group, I view the organization as an important, intellectually serious force within the conservative movement. This study analyzes the ideas of the group by utilizing JBS newsletters, magazines, books, correspondence, and interviews.

This investigation finds that the JBS followed a long tradition of American anti-radical movements, dating back to the early twentieth century. The JBS appealed to conservatives on a social, political, educational, ideological, and intellectual basis, attracting disaffected Republicans, religious fundamentalists, conservative intellectuals, and wealthy business interests. The group was inspired by a wide variety of intellectual traditions, including the Bible, Thomas Jefferson, Russell Kirk, Friedrich von Hayek, and contemporary conspiracy
theorists. These influences helped to create an anti-government, anti-collectivist JBS ideology. Members of the John Birch Society viewed the world through a prism of conspiracy theory and believed that a cabal of "Insiders" plotted behind the scenes to manipulate the U.S. government and thereby create a "one-world dictatorship."

The JBS was a monolithic, authoritarian group that mimicked the organization of the Communist party. Various JBS front groups worked to impeach Chief Justice Earl Warren, remove the U.S. from the United Nations, and defeat the Negro civil rights movement. While the group attracted a core of educated, wealthy, and committed activists, the JBS was largely unsuccessful in achieving its goals. This failure resulted from several factors: 1) the behavior of JBS founder Robert Welch, who attracted scorn for accusing President Dwight Eisenhower of being a Communist; 2) the JBS penchant for alienating conservative allies, including Senator John Bricker and William F. Buckley; and 3) the group's loss in a landmark libel case, Gertz v. Welch. Despite these failures, the group looms important in American political history as a serious challenger to liberalism.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Historians have long struggled to explain and understand American Conservatism. Accounts of the twentieth century United States tend to place conservatives outside of the political and cultural mainstream or ignore them altogether. For those who characterize the Right wing as an irrelevant and extremist factor in history, conservative figures and movements have been unfortunate obstacles to reform and at war with modernism. This "paranoid" interpretation does not, however, serve to advance a sophisticated synthesis of American history.\(^1\) Recent scholars have contributed a body of work that demonstrates the complicated and nuanced nature of conservatism in U.S. history.\(^2\)

It is not surprising that scholars have experienced difficulty in analyzing far right movements. A large percentage of American historians are politically liberal, and their historiography has traditionally analyzed the history of the U.S.


through a framework that assumes a pattern of progress and reform prompted by a commitment to liberal values. In this vein, the New Deal was a triumph of progressive political thought over reactionary forces, World War II a victory against isolationist and fascist impulses, and the Civil Rights movement a moral strike against racists and demagogues. The historical record left behind by right wing activists does not easily lend itself to empathetic or dispassionate analysis. Conservative "superpatriots" tended at times to use overheated rhetoric and demonstrated a distinct lack of humor or even, a sense of irony in their writings. To an intellectual, the primary sources left by rightists smacked of paranoia and a willingness to subscribe to bizarre conspiracy theories. Many historians would be challenged to sympathetically recount the story of groups and individuals who held racist, anti-Semitic, or reactionary views.

Nevertheless, it is a mistake for historians to automatically dismiss the importance of right-wing groups in the history of modern America. Upon careful examination, many of these groups can be understood within their historical context and can help to provide a valuable and sophisticated synthesis of history. The United States has a long tradition of anti-radicalism and at times has demonstrated a very conservative political culture. Groups thought to be "extremist" have occasionally been allied with "mainstream" political parties and leaders, and far-right ideas have at times found a receptive audience in the American polity.

This essay will attempt to grapple with the problem of American conservatism in history by examining the John Birch Society (JBS), a right-wing anti-Communist group founded in 1958. The JBS was one of the most
notorious far right organizations in history, making claims of widespread communist subversion within the U.S. government and participating in numerous schemes to expose and crush radical influences in American society. The JBS received widespread attention from the media and academia during the 1960s, but the scholarship lacked objectivity and suffered from an almost hysterical tone. The main purpose of this paper is to analyze the JBS dispassionately and to consider it within a long tradition of American anti-Communist movements.

The John Birch Society, seen in this light, was a manifestation of pressures within the American conservative movement and within the larger political system. The story of the JBS provides an illuminating glimpse into the larger history of the American right wing tradition and provides insight into the social and political culture of the U.S. during the twentieth century. The JBS was in many ways a spectacular failure as far as achieving its goals. It threatened at times to tear apart the Republican Party, generated an enormous amount of negative press coverage, alienated its natural political allies, and demonstrated a profound inability to wield influence in public policy. Despite this lack of success, the JBS is a subject worthy of study by historians. It grew out of a long tradition of American animus to leftist political groups and enunciated conservative political principles that still have resonance in current partisan discourse. As recently as the 1994 midterm national elections, anti-internationalism, anti-intellectualism, and religious fundamentalism, all ideological staples of the JBS, played a prominent role in numerous campaigns. Shortly after taking office, the Republican Congress initiated actions to cut foreign aid and reduce the power of the United Nations to command American troops in peacekeeping missions. It also announced plans
to seek a constitutional amendment to restore prayer to the public schools. I am not claiming that the GOP Contract with America was Birch-inspired; I merely cite these recent developments to demonstrate that conservative issues and ideas have staying power. JBS activism during the Sixties was often dismissed as extremist "tilting at windmills"; in the GOP Congress of 1995, many of these same issues have the approval of a majority of Republican lawmakers. The John Birch Society had a role in shaping the modern GOP, despite the fact that Birchers were effectively expelled from the conservative movement in 1965. The JBS is a useful subject for understanding modern political protest movements in particular, and for discussing social and cultural history in general.

Another purpose of this essay is to demonstrate that intellectual forces in American political history matter. A conservative intellectual tradition inspired the JBS. But most scholars have either ignored or misunderstood this tradition. When I began this project, it was with the determination to explain why an educated, middle-class, and in some respects, elite group of Americans found the JBS ideology attractive. Previous accounts of Birch members almost universally attributed JBS membership to mental instability, an affinity for "authoritarian" structures, or an inability to cope with the stress of modernity. Historian Richard Hofstadter described the Rightist impulse as the "paranoid style in American politics." He attempted to analyze the Far Right through a psychological model. As a result, Hofstadter labelled conservative thought as distorted, fantastic, and incredible. Members of Far Right groups like the JBS

could not be taken seriously, according to Hofstadter and others, because they
suffered from delusional fantasies. Hofstadter made little attempt to specifically
refute rightist arguments; he simply dismissed rightist scholarship as a "style."
He also claimed that Birchers and their ilk suffered from status anxieties and
class resentments. In his view, the Far Right was a pathology, not a
respectable, intellectual challenge to liberalism. This study rejects all of these
explanations. I will show that the JBS was inspired by a long tradition of
conservative history, thought, and scholarship. Scholars who dismissed the
JBS as mere "crackpots" failed to appreciate the complexity of the group.

To meet the purposes, this paper will address several specific questions.
First, how has the American hostility toward Communism/radicalism manifested
itself in history? How was the JBS a result of this legacy? Was the JBS unique
in this tradition? Why did this organization appear in 1958, four years after the
censure of Senator Joseph McCarthy, well into the second term of a moderate-
conservative President, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and seemingly at a time when
the second Red Scare had abated? What were the most prominent and primary
policy goals of the JBS? What was the organizational history of the Birch
Society? What intellectual traditions (specifically, writers, books, etc.)
influenced the JBS? Finally, how did this organization attempt to achieve its
goals, and why did it fail so miserably? I propose to answer these questions,
utilizing the monthly bulletins of the JBS, the group's magazine, American
Opinion, interviews with JBS leaders, letters by JBS members to politicians, and
previous studies and secondary works on the JBS and other right wing groups.

4Hofstadter, The Paranoid Style in American Politics, 3-5, 8, 35-38, 82-85.
The paper will be organized into five sections: First, I will present a brief history of anti-Communism/radicalism in twentieth century America, including the founding of the JBS by Robert H.W. Welch in 1958. Second, the reasons for the appeal of the JBS to conservatives will be considered. Thirdly, I will analyze the intellectual traditions and reconstruct the ideology of the JBS. Next, I will survey the history of the JBS organization and its activism. Finally, I will posit some explanations for the failure of the JBS to implement its policy goals and to achieve a dominant position of influence within the Republican Party.

I contend that the John Birch Society failed for several reasons. First, Robert Welch's bizarre behavior and extremist views reflected poorly on the JBS. Welch's conspiracy theories attracted scorn and derision and resulted in unflattering portrayals of the JBS by the national media. Eventually, even conservatives found it difficult to take the JBS seriously. Secondly, the JBS alienated many potential allies within the conservative movement. Welch and other JBS members engaged in public battles with fellow conservatives, disparaging prominent rightists like William F. Buckley and Ohio Senator John W. Bricker. By the mid-Sixties, the JBS was a pariah within the conservative movement. Republican Party leaders and prominent conservatives repudiated the JBS, and cut off its access to political power. Thirdly, I argue that JBS attacks on political opponents backfired, resulting in unfavorable press coverage of the group. Ohio Senator Stephen Young was a frequent target of the JBS, attracting thousands of letters from angry Birchers. The senator attracted positive press coverage for his caustic responses to JBS letters. Conversely, the media portrayed JBS activists as mean-spirited crackpots. Fourthly, I argue that JBS fortunes suffered from a devastating loss in a 15 year-long libel case. Despite these failures, I believe that the JBS occupies an
important place in the history of American conservatism. The JBS paved the way for modern rightists to seize control of the Republican party and posed a serious intellectual challenge to liberalism.
CHAPTER 2

ANTI-RADICALISM AND THE ANTECEDENTS TO THE JOHN BIRCH SOCIETY: FROM THE WOBBLIES TO THE 1950s

One of the first case studies in the history of American anti-Communism/radicalism centered on the activities of the International Workers of the World (IWW). Known popularly as the "wobblies," the IWW embraced an ideology of anarcho-syndicalism and pursued violent confrontations with American capitalism. The IWW attempted to organize workers in the poorest industries of the United States, targeting unskilled laborers in the logging, mining, and textile industries. The Wobblies became known for their violent rhetoric and advocation of industrial espionage, as well as their commitment to free speech drives, where they risked imprisonment and death in efforts to organize workers in industrial cities.5

State and federal authorities, as well as private vigilante groups, began to target the IWW for repression in the early years of the twentieth century. The Wobblies, questioning the fundamental values of capitalism, and threatening violent confrontation with industrial leaders, seemed to present a real threat to

American security. In fact, however, the IWW never achieved the influence or power that its rhetoric suggested. Its highly publicized involvement in a series of violent labor clashes convinced its foes to confront the Wobblies. State and federal authorities imprisoned hundreds of IWW leaders during World War One and IWW agitator Frank Little was lynched by a Montana mob in 1917. By 1918, the IWW had been rendered impotent as a force in the American labor movement.6

World War One was a watershed event in the history of American anti-radicalism. The Wilson Administration, determined to successfully prosecute the war, engaged in a series of efforts to stifle domestic critics. The Wilson Administration not only helped to wipe out the IWW, but also targeted alien radicals, the Socialist Party, the agrarian Nonpartisan League, and militant pacifists. The government even prosecuted insignificant dissenters, guilty of no more than distributing pamphlets against the war. The U.S. Supreme Court sanctioned the actions of the Wilson Administration, consistently upholding government prosecutions of anti-war protestors and refusing to punish super-patriot vigilante groups that engaged in violence against dissidents. Critics of American policy found few defenders of civil liberties within the government during the war years.7

Anti-radicalism also flourished outside of government during the war years. American public libraries played an important role in the suppression of

6Ibid.
radical thought and books. Public libraries across the nation engaged in hunts for "subversive" books, sponsored book burnings, banned anti-war speakers from their assembly halls, and removed German music from their collections. In one of the most candid disclosures of library policy during the war years, Cleveland public library director William Howard Brett mounted a crusade to make his institution "an active instrument of propaganda" on behalf of the Allied war effort. This phrase aptly describes the role of many libraries during wartime, when dissidents and radicals were tarred as disloyal and intellectual freedom had no sanctuary within public-supported libraries.8

The end of the war did not bring about the cessation of anti-radicalism. The state and federal governments, drawing on the wartime experience, initiated a postwar crackdown on radicals that became known as the First Red Scare. Reacting to both the triumph of Lenin and the Russian Communists abroad and a series of domestic labor disputes, government officials passed criminal syndicalism statutes9, sedition laws, and red flag laws in an effort to curb radical speech. The Lusk Committee in New York staged raids on radical headquarters, seizing files and publications deemed subversive. Participation in almost any organization critical of the government and the red scare was proof of guilt by association in the view of anti-Communist vigilantes.10


9Paul L. Murphy, World War I and the Origin of Civil Liberties in the United States (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1979), 87. Criminal syndicalism statutes made it a crime to belong to certain "subversive" organizations. The IWW was an early target of such legislation.

10Murphy, The Constitution in Crisis Times.
The most notorious event of the First Red Scare was the brainchild of U.S. attorney general A. Mitchell Palmer. On January 2, 1920, federal Marshalls conducted midnight raids on the headquarters of radical groups nationwide. Rounding up almost four thousand people, the "Palmer Raids" went forward without warrants. Even the most basic guarantees of due process were denied to those arrested. Many were held incommunicado in cramped jail cells, denied counsel, and subjected to deportation proceedings. The excesses of the Palmer raids eventually backfired on the Attorney General as public support for the Red Scare waned. Prominent legal figures like Felix Frankfurter and Zecharian Chaffee denounced the raids and Secretary of Labor Lewis Post cancelled thousands of deportation orders. Contrary to his hopes, the raids derailed Palmer's political career. He failed to secure the prized Presidential nomination, and a conservative Republican, Warren G. Harding, assumed the White House, later remarking that "too much has been said about Bolshevism in America."11 Leadership of the anti-radical movement now passed to the private sector as a group on the fringe of American politics achieved prominence in the Twenties.

The second Ku Klux Klan was founded in 1915 and inherited the mantle of anti-radicalism. New Klan founder William J. Simmons initially focused his attention on the superpatriot causes of WWI, leading his small membership in attacks against draft-dodgers and striking shipyard workers. After 1920, KKK

membership increased dramatically as new leaders turned their attention to the "defense" of America's Anglo-Saxon heritage and Protestant ideals. The KKK sounded the alarm against radical aliens and their alleged Marxist schemes, and while not renouncing the violence of its ancestor organization, relied to a greater extent on political action. It achieved political power on a large scale in Indiana and other states from Pennsylvania to Oregon during the Twenties and emphasized its commitment to a moral order, repudiating the "amoral" sympathies of Catholics, Jews, Blacks, and Bolshevists. By 1928, the KKK's power had diminished, the organization torn apart by scandal and factionalism. Indiana leader D.C. Stephenson was arrested for murder and sexual misconduct. Leadership of the anti-radical cause in the U.S. passed to a new figure in the Thirties.

The Great Depression shook the U.S. to its political and economic core. With massive unemployment, the collapse of the banking industry, and the threat of foreclosure facing millions of citizens, the federal government struggled to provide relief for the crisis. President Franklin D. Roosevelt initiated a series of government programs aimed at stabilizing the economy and saving American capitalism. Right-wing critics of the Roosevelt administration, infuriated by the unprecedented scale of government intervention in the economy, denounced the New Deal as socialist and vowed to topple FDR from power.

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12Ibid., 208-237.

A curious mix of circumstances led to the creation of a new force against Communism and radicalism. Factional warfare within the Democratic party, coupled with the rise of Fascism and Communism in Europe, gave birth to the special House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) in 1938. Democrats on the Left were appalled by the appearance of domestic fascist groups like the German American Bund and the Silver Shirts. With the rise to power of Adolf Hitler in Germany, liberals feared the possibility of fascist subversion in the U.S. and some, like Representative Samuel Dickstein of New York City, called for the investigation of domestic fascists. Dickstein advocated the formation of a congressional committee for the purpose of investigating and exposing the activities of right-wing extremists. Southern demagogues immediately saw this proposal as an opportunity to harass and embarrass Roosevelt by investigating the liberal allies of the administration. Conservative Texas Democrat Martin Dies led the charge against the liberals and chaired a special committee to investigate the labor movement, then engaged in a series of controversial strikes against the automobile and steel industries. HUAC was the product therefore, of a partnership between liberals and conservatives. This held a great irony, as conservatives ultimately utilized the committee as a vehicle for political attacks on the Left and little else. Conceived by a liberal (Dickstein), HUAC became a crucial tool of right-wingers bent on the destruction of the New Deal and the suppression of radicalism.14

The Dies Committee, as the first HUAC was termed, investigated the alleged subversive activities of domestic Nazis and Communists, often failing to distinguish between Fascism and Communism. The Committee established procedures for investigating and identifying individuals and groups charged with subversive activity. Evidence often consisted of little more than hearsay or association with a group accused of being a Communist front, the latter an epithet pinned to many liberal organizations. The Dies Committee promulgated a doctrine of "guilt by association" that tarred many non-Communists with the stain of treason for daring to sympathize with the New Deal or other liberal causes.  

HUAC investigations invariably targeted the political allies of the Roosevelt Administration and rarely provided convincing evidence of genuine subversion. An occasional political victory, however, such as the exposure of Communist Party Chief Earl Browder for the use of false passports, was sufficient to justify the excesses of the committee in the eyes of Congress, which dutifully appropriated HUAC's operating expenses year after year. When Martin Dies retired in 1944, he left behind a legacy of legally questionable tactics and dubious evidence, including thousands of pages of testimony containing the names of "Communist" organizations and individuals. While many of the accused were innocent of any ties to the Communist Party, inclusion on the "Dies List" proved devastating to many liberals during the second Red Scare.  

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15Ibid., 27-30.

16Ibid., 35-42, 65, 158-166.
The next wave of American anti-Communism occurred after World War II. The Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union resulted in an era of suspicion and fear. The Truman Administration, shocked by Soviet aggression in Eastern Europe, announced its determination to contain Communist expansion around the globe. Fears of domestic subversion surfaced in 1946, with a series of revelations concerning Soviet spy rings in Canada and New York. The FBI raided the offices of Amerasia, a leftist periodical focusing on Far Eastern affairs, and uncovered hundreds of classified State Department documents. The Amerasia affair and reports of a huge spy ring uncovered in Ottawa, seemed to suggest the possibility of a vast Communist conspiracy within the United States. Republicans seized this opportunity to attack the Democratic administration, charging it with appeasement abroad and weakness at home.  

Cold War shocks continued in the years that followed the Amerasia affair. In 1948, former Communist Party member Whitaker Chambers accused former State Department official Alger Hiss of secretly belonging to the Communist Party during the Thirties. In 1949, Chambers expanded his claim and charged Hiss with participation in a Soviet espionage ring. In a bizarre twist, Chambers led members of HUAC on a tour of his Maryland farm, revealing a roll of microfilm hidden in a pumpkin. The film contained a series of classified State

Department documents, allegedly passed to the conspirators by Hiss. In 1950, after two trials, Hiss was convicted of perjury.\textsuperscript{18}

While the case against Hiss proceeded, the government began a campaign to destroy the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA). On October 14, 1949, eleven top leaders of the CPUSA were convicted of violating the Smith Act of 1940. CPUSA General Secretary Eugene Dennis and ten cohorts were found guilty of conspiring to advocate the violent overthrow of the government. After a spectacular trial in Foley Square, New York, which featured orchestrated outbursts by the defendants, the convictions were upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1951.\textsuperscript{19} With the sanction of the Supreme Court, the federal government prosecuted hundreds of lower level CPUSA leaders and effectively crippled the Party by the end of the decade. The CPUSA helped to seal its own doom, by deliberately fomenting chaos in the Dennis trial. Seeking a propaganda victory, Dennis and his cohorts confirmed the suspicions of conservatives, and created the illusion of a powerful Communist conspiracy. In fact, the CPUSA was a pathetically inept band of malcontents, with barely any popular support, but their behavior during the trial lent credibility to their Rightist foes.\textsuperscript{20}

Out of these tumultuous times emerged a charismatic flagbearer for the anti-Communist cause. Senator Joseph McCarthy, a Republican from

\textsuperscript{18}Ibid., 269-290.


Wisconsin, built a political career out of anti-communism. From 1950 to 1954, McCarthy emerged as the most visible anti-Communist in the nation. Hurling accusations of subversion and treachery at his liberal opponents, McCarthy used anti-Communism as a politically powerful weapon. Republican leaders, frustrated by years of exile in the political wilderness, saw the reckless Senator as an asset in their campaign to recapture the White House in 1952. GOP leaders were more than willing to countenance McCarthy's antics in exchange for political success.21

After the GOP victory in the 1952 elections, Republican leaders assigned McCarthy to the chairmanship of the obscure Committee on Government Operations, hoping that the bombastic Senator would labor in anonymity. This was a miscalculation, for McCarthy created a Subcommittee on Investigations and set out to continue his crusade against the Reds. He tormented his opponents and recklessly selected targets for investigation. His modus operandi was the "multiple untruth," the practice of hurling preposterous charges of Communist subversion and following this with bigger, more outrageous lies, calculated to generate headlines and occupy his foes with the task of refuting numerous, detailed accusations. McCarthy proved to be a skillful manipulator of the national press, providing it with entertaining copy in

exchange for publicity, which in turn fueled his reputation as a political giant. His recklessness was to be his undoing, however.22

In 1954, McCarthy appeared in a series of nationally televised hearings that exposed the Senator as a ruthless bully, and effectively destroyed his political career. The Army-McCarthy hearings captivated viewers as accusations of scandal and subversion permeated the Senate. McCarthy accused the Army Quartermaster Corps at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey, of harboring Communists. The Army charged McCarthy and his committee counsel, Roy Cohn, with pressuring military officials to grant special treatment to Private G. David Schine, an investigator for the Subcommittee on Investigations. McCarthy's harsh treatment of Army officers embarrassed his fellow Republicans, and many began to reconsider their support for the mercurial Senator.23

After McCarthy's embarrassing performance in the Army-McCarthy hearings, his opponents in the media and the Senate set out to end his political influence. A movement began to censure McCarthy in the Senate for his actions. His abuse of Senate privileges and colleagues would no longer be tolerated. On December 2, 1954, the Senate voted 67 to 22 to censure McCarthy for his abuses. His political career was effectively over; while he remained in office, the press and his colleagues ignored him. His drinking,

22Bennett, The Party of Fear, 297-310.

23Ibid.
always heavy during his time in Washington, increased after the censure vote, and McCarthy died in 1957. 24

Joseph McCarthy's political career paralleled the rise and fall of anti-Communism as a movement in the United States. His influence peaked during the Korean War and the apex of the Cold War, but crumbled as the U.S. moved toward coexistence with the Soviet Union. At home, the U.S. Supreme Court began to repudiate the ant-Communist legacy of the early Cold War, striking down state sedition statutes and adopting a libertarian judicial philosophy. As with previous anti-Communist movements, McCarthyism declined when the threat it identified no longer resonated in the consciousness of the American citizenry. 25

The link between anti-Communism and electoral politics is vital to an understanding of why American history is replete with anti-radical movements. In the twentieth century, when anti-radical movements have emerged, there has generally been some political advantage sought by Red-baiting proponents. Joseph McCarthy was tolerated and encouraged by Republican leaders when his antics aided their quest to recapture control of the White House and Congress. McCarthyism reached its zenith during the last years of the Truman administration, when it was a useful method of weakening the electoral strength of the Democratic Party. After the election of 1952, McCarthy's recklessness

24Ibid.

was no longer desirable or healthy for the GOP. His penchant for alienating even his GOP allies after 1952 sealed his fate. After the GOP lost control of the Senate in 1954, McCarthy became an insignificant political player, an "anti-Eisenhower Republican in a Democratic Congress."26 Eisenhower's success in uniting the bulk of his party around a progressive, moderate agenda rendered McCarthy powerless and isolated. The far right-wing slowly grew powerless and marginalized in the GOP. This development fed the growth of a new, almost flamboyant, anti-Communist movement in the late 1950's.

26 Ibid.
CHAPTER 3

THE JOHN BIRCH SOCIETY

Retired candy manufacturer Robert Welch was obsessed with the issue of Communism. From 1956 to 1958, he devoted his life to intense study of the Red menace, immersing himself in right-wing literature and admiring the work of Joseph McCarthy. Over time he accumulated a substantial library of anti-Communist works and nourished a network of relationships with like-minded businessmen and politicians. His stint as President of the anti-radical National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) brought him into contact with a large group of wealthy, anti-government figures. Welch formulated a plan to unite his fellow conservatives in an organization devoted to the destruction of Communism and the creation of revolutionary changes in American government and society.27

On December 8-9, 1958, Welch and eleven other men gathered at the home of Miss Marguerite Dice in Indianapolis, Indiana, for a two-day presentation on the "international Communist conspiracy." Welch's guests included Colonel Laurence Bunker, former personal aide to General Douglas MacArthur; Dr. Revilo P. Oliver, a professor of classical languages and literature at the University of Illinois; and T. Coleman Andrews, one-time U.S. Commissioner of Internal Revenue.28 For two days, Welch delivered a


28Ibid.
monologue on the history of Communist subversion. He described a conspiracy of spectacular dimensions bent on the destruction of U.S. sovereignty and the enslavement of the West under Soviet masters. Woven into this tale of intrigue was a curious mix of history, religion, moral instruction, economic theory, and a call to concerted political action. Welch attempted to cast himself as a political oracle, predicting peril for Americans if efforts to resist Communism were not forthcoming. His antidote for the coming apocalypse was the formation of an organized intellectual and political resistance group, the John Birch Society.29

The society was named after a former Baptist missionary and Army Captain who perished in China at the hands of Red Army soldiers in 1945, ten days after the end of World War II. Welch resurrected the memory of Captain Birch and made the latter a symbol of the fight against Communism. Birch, a young, idealistic, fundamentalist Baptist with a patriotic fervor, symbolized to Robert Welch all that was admirable in the United States; his "murder" at the hands of Communist soldiers seemed a fitting metaphor for the struggle against Red heresy. The JBS had little to do, however, with the late John Birch; the organization revolved around the ideas and actions of Robert Welch. He wrote the group's monthly Bulletin, edited the magazine American Opinion, designed the JBS structure, and accepted lionization from JBS members. He also authored the two quintessential books of the JBS.30

The Blue Book of the John Birch Society was simply the transcript of the two-day monologue delivered by Welch in Indianapolis. Bound between two pieces of blue cardboard, it became the Bible of the JBS and required reading

for initiates. In it, Welch described the path to power of the Communist conspiracy, alleging that Vladimir Lenin deliberately planned a conquest of Eastern Europe, followed by Asia, and finally, the United States. The JBS founder claimed that Communists controlled the U.S. government and were guiding its foreign policy purposefully towards Soviet domination. Welch cited the United Nations as evidence of a conspiracy to surrender U.S. sovereignty to international organizations controlled by the Communists. Welch claimed that the State Department was filled with Soviet agents; the Atomic Energy Commission was supplying the U.S.S.R. with parts for nuclear weaponry; and the New Deal was a stealthy imposition of socialism. The United States was losing the battle against Communism precisely because government leaders engaged in duplicity and traitorous conduct.31

Having diagnosed the problem and identified the culprit, Welch offered an evaluation of the factors that rendered the U.S. vulnerable to the Red threat. A primary cause of U.S. decline was the citizenry's loss of fundamentalist religious faith. The clear and concise moral teachings of fundamentalist faith were replaced by an ambiguous, corrupted theology that encouraged "amoral man." Only a return to an older, purer faith would prevent the destruction of the American paradise. The tainting of faith coincided with an American drift towards collectivism, and Welch claimed that collectivism was a sign of the decay of civilization. The growth of the welfare state slowly eroded the American ideals of self-reliance and state's rights, and numbed the citizenry to the onslaught of "creeping socialism." Welch recited his conspiratorial view of

history with a barely-repressed rage, and encouraged his recruits to engage in
a spirited contest against the Communists and their liberal allies.\textsuperscript{32}

Welch did not summon his followers to an actual war; he did not
advocate the use of violence to resist Communism. He wanted to enlist
conservative activists in an intellectual and political battle for the minds of
Americans. He did not believe that the triumph of the "Conspiracy" was
inevitable; Communism could be resisted and ultimately defeated if the
"apathetic" American people responded to conservative action. Welch outlined
a plan for fighting the Communists that included the establishment of
conservative reading rooms, stocked only with the best works of anti-
communism. Welch believed that Communist "pressures" were responsible for
the paucity of conservative books in print, and that history was treacherously
distorted by the absence of a rightist viewpoint. Welch also called for a
campaign to increase the circulation and audience of conservative periodicals
and radio shows, singling out \textit{National Review}, \textit{Human Events}, and Fulton
Lewis as examples of an "Americanist" point of view. He felt that a reeducation
of the American people was crucial to his task of repelling the Communist
onslaught.\textsuperscript{33}

Welch also proposed the initiation of grassroots political activity against
his foes. He called for letter-writing campaigns aimed at legislators, newspaper
editors, television and radio sponsors, educators, foundation leaders, and
businessmen. Welch wanted his followers to expose and criticize Communist
sympathizers; congratulate and cajole allies on the Right; denounce
businesses engaged in commerce with the Soviet bloc; and persuade

\textsuperscript{32}Ibid., 57-71.

\textsuperscript{33}Ibid., 77-84.
politicians to resist all Communist actions. Welch envisioned the JBS as a letter-generating machine, capable of flooding its targets with a torrent of correspondence designed to alter policy.\textsuperscript{34}

In an ironic twist, Welch called for a mimicking of Communist tactics by urging the creation of front groups. He engaged in what Gary Wills termed "preemptive ideologizing, the attempt to thwart an enemy by strenuously imitating him." This was ironic, for Welch thereby embraced the tactics of those he despised.\textsuperscript{35} He believed that conservatives needed to focus their organizational efforts, targeting specific policy goals. Suggestions for action included the withdrawal of diplomatic recognition from Russia and its satellites; the investigation of Communist influences at various universities; exposure of Communist violence within organized labor; and the formation of a committee advocating the impeachment of Chief Justice Earl Warren of the U.S. Supreme Court. Welch also called on conservatives to gather petitions to protest the leftward drift of policy. He noted that the CPUSA utilized petitions and that a conservative response could counter the disproportionate impact of leftist efforts.\textsuperscript{36}

Welch also called for the use of "bombshells," public exposure of domestic Communists aimed at shocking the American people into awareness of leftist subversion. Legislators, government workers, professors, labor organizers, and writers had to be denounced for their "treason," regardless of the "smears" Welch predicted would come from liberals. No tactic could be dismissed in the name of civility; Welch even suggested that conservative

\textsuperscript{34}Ibid., 84-86.


\textsuperscript{36}Welch, \textit{The Blue Book of the John Birch Society}, 86-94.
activists infiltrate leftist lectures, lying in wait to heckle liberals and shout "loaded questions." The JBS would be ruthless in its battle against Communist foes.\textsuperscript{37}

In the \textit{Blue Book}, Welch outlined a political role for the JBS. He envisioned the creation of a wealthy and powerful political action committee that would seek to influence the Republican Party. The GOP leadership was tainted by Communist influence, according to Welch, and any national strategy to combat Communism would necessarily originate from outside of the GOP hierarchy. Welch saw the JBS as a conservative counterweight to organizations like the AFL-CIO, the Democrats' most powerful non-party influence. A rejuvenated GOP under the direction of the JBS was Welch's implicit goal.\textsuperscript{38}

Welch concluded the \textit{Blue Book} with an appeal calling for the unification of anti-Communist activists and groups under his own "dynamic personal leadership." He had little patience for the chaos and compromise of democratic rule; the JBS was to be a monolithic organization under the direction of Robert Welch. Membership could be terminated at his discretion and policy was his domain. He viewed dissent as counter-productive and inappropriate to the war-like endeavor he proposed. Welch wanted disciplined troops, not a "debate society." The semi-secret, anti-democratic, and authoritarian leadership of the JBS founder proved to be very controversial. It was his authorship of another book, however, that earned Welch and the JBS its notoriety during the early

\textsuperscript{37}ibid., 94-107.

\textsuperscript{38}ibid., 107-112.
1960's. This book provoked a firestorm of criticism and derision that followed the JBS and Welch for years.39

*The Politician*, or Black Book, was Welch's account of the career of Dwight Eisenhower. It was a stunning tale that accused the moderate-conservative Republican President of treason. Welch traced Ike's rise through the Army to his capture of the White House in 1952. He portrayed Eisenhower as a calculating, ruthless politician who subverted American policy to benefit Soviet Russia. Welch accused Ike of betraying Eastern European refugees during World War II by handing them over to Stalin for liquidation; of conducting military campaigns solely for the purpose of augmenting Soviet power; and of supporting unjust prosecutions for war crimes at Nuremberg. Welch seemed to suggest that the Nazis responsible for the Holocaust were merely pawns in Eisenhower's political strategy. Eisenhower's capture of the Republican nomination for President in 1952 resulted from the efforts of calculating leftists who managed to sell the GOP on a "crypto-Communist" in order to finally win the White House back from the Democrats. Welch claimed that Ike's victory over staunch anti-Communist Robert Taft was the result of a whispering campaign, designed by Communists to discount the possibility of a Taft victory, and persuade otherwise patriotic Republicans to support a stealth Red. Welch pondered whether Ike was simply an opportunistic politician, or a "conscious agent of the Communist conspiracy," opining that the latter was more likely. He angrily concluded that "...we...have a Communist...sitting right in the chair of the President of the United States."40

39Ibid., 113-177.

This portrayal of an American war hero understandably elicited outrage from members of the press and public who found Welch's account preposterous. The JBS operated in near anonymity prior to the press's discovery of *The Politician* in 1960. On July 26, 1960, *Chicago Daily News* reporter Jack Mabley published the first expose of Welch's shocking thesis. This was followed by two articles by Hans Engh on January 22-23, 1961, in the *Santa Barbara News-Press*. Scathing editorials soon followed that denounced the JBS as a far-right, "lunatic-fringe" group. One book generated more notoriety for the JBS than any other action taken by this collection of conservative anti-Communists.41

In the remainder of this essay, I will focus on a detailed study of the John Birch Society. I shall analyze its appeal to conservatives, the JBS ideology and intellectual traditions, the organization of the group and its activities, and its failure to significantly achieve the aims set out by Robert Welch.

CHAPTER 4

APPEAL OF THE JBS TO CONSERVATIVES

Why did the JBS appear in 1958? Joseph McCarthy was dead, his domestic crusade lay in tatters, and the Republican Party now controlled the White House. Anti-communism, while alive and well in U.S. foreign policy, had waned as a domestic political issue. Americans were weary of the Red Scare, and the U.S. Supreme Court now took a dim view of government-sponsored crackdowns on alleged communists. Why then did a new, assertive, and politically ambitious anti-communist organization appear in 1958, challenging the moral reputation of an immensely popular American President?

Conservatives like Robert Welch, and the anti-communist dean of the Notre Dame Law School, Clarence Manion, felt betrayed by the new, moderate-conservative Republican Party. In their view, Eisenhower had jettisoned years of GOP policy and principle, all in the pursuit of power. Ike's willingness to tolerate and even expand the New Deal infuriated far-right conservatives. The President represented a retreat within the Republican Party from traditional, conservative anti-communism, and in Welch's view, was actively working on behalf of the global communist conspiracy. Many Republicans felt disfranchised by the GOP's move toward moderation, and harbored a deep resentment toward party leaders. Many of these old guard Republicans had supported Robert Taft for the GOP nomination in 1952, and were stunned by Eisenhower's triumph. Feeling alienated from the party hierarchy, some
renegade conservatives supported the creation of a third party to challenge the "socialist" Democrats and Republicans. On September 15, 1956, Robert Welch attended the National States Rights conference in Memphis, Tennessee, and openly called for the formation of a third party. Unsuccessful in achieving his aims, Welch began to explore ideas for a new organization aimed at reclaiming the initiative in the U.S. political system.42

In order to attract conservatives to his new group, Welch attempted to exploit rightist anxieties and to appeal to economic and social interests. JBS opposition to the activist Warren Court was a particularly effective recruiting tool. The Supreme Court's landmark ruling in Brown v. Board of Education (1954), which ordered the racial desegregation of public schools, outraged many conservatives and increased the appeal of an organization pledged to impeach the Chief Justice. Racists opposed to integration (despite Welch's professed lack of toleration for bigots) and proponents of "states rights," viewing Brown as a usurpation of state sovereignty, flocked to the JBS. Welch and other JBS leaders denounced the Brown decision as an intolerable encroachment on states rights, an outright violation of the Tenth Amendment, and a cynical ploy by communist forces to exploit racial fears and tensions. Disaffected conservatives found the JBS broadsides against the Warren Court to be convincing and appealing. The JBS provided these alienated citizens with a voice, proclaiming the refusal of rightist citizens to be ignored by domestic politicians.43

The JBS also held a partisan attraction for many of its members. According to one study, the JBS was overwhelmingly populated by

42Griffin, The Life and Words of Robert Welch, 254-256.

Republicans. Sixty-five percent of the members surveyed described themselves as "conservative Republicans," "independent Republicans," or some other variation of disaffected GOP members. Only two percent of the respondents in the study identified themselves as Democrats. For a large group of conservatives, the GOP had become too moderate or liberal, and the JBS represented a vital new path for right-wing activism. Composed largely of Republicans, the JBS offered a comfortable home for GOP activists alienated from their party leadership.44

Prospective Birchers also were attracted by the economic affluence of the JBS and the educational achievements of the membership. JBS members as a whole enjoyed a higher standard of living and more prestigious job status than most Americans. By 1967, the JBS National Council of 24 members included 14 company presidents, 3 physicians, and one banker. The JBS also managed to elect two of its members to Congress in the early 1960s.45 A significant portion of the JBS membership came from the highest economic strata of the American public. This fact conveyed a certain respectability upon JBS membership, at least in the early years of the organization. The relative educational achievement of JBS members was also higher than the U.S. national average. Thirty-one percent of the membership held college degrees or graduate titles, thirty-three percent of the JBS had some college education, twenty-four percent held at least a high school diploma, and only twelve percent


had failed to receive a diploma. Common educational achievements increased the appeal of the JBS to potential recruits.\(^{46}\)

One analyst of the JBS postulated that the membership's educational backgrounds reinforced the collective political beliefs. This theorist believed that the Birch belief in "individual responsibility" stemmed from a general lack of exposure to the social sciences. A majority of Bircher's held degrees in natural science or technical fields, while only 10% of the membership had any exposure to social sciences. This author speculated that the dearth of social science knowledge contributed to the JBS reluctance to consider alternative explanations for human behavior. This may have influenced the rigid political views of the average JBS member. Regardless, membership in the organization provided little exposure to dissenting political views. A culture of conformity reigned supreme in the JBS.\(^{47}\)

Religious conservatives also found the JBS attractive. Members of the JBS were twice as likely as the population at large to identify themselves as "fundamentalist Protestants."\(^{48}\) Many of the religious conservatives within the JBS held a dim view of modern institutions like organized labor, big government, the United Nations, and the National Council of Churches. These fundamentalists were suspicious of mainline, moderate, Protestant sects, and the JBS provided a forum for the social concerns of the Christian right. In a period of tremendous social turmoil, when many religious institutions were involved with the civil rights movement, fundamentalist Protestants were

\(^{46}\)Grupp, "The Political Perspectives of Birch Society Members," 93-95. Note: In 1967, 11% of the U.S. population held a college degree or higher, 13% had some college experience; Bennett, The Party of Fear, 322-323.

\(^{47}\)Grupp, "The Political Perspectives of Birch Society Members," 94-95.

\(^{48}\)Ibid., 92. In 1967, 20% of JBS members identified themselves as "fundamentalist Protestants," compared to 10% of the U.S. population as a whole.
troubled by the liberal political ties of mainline religious leaders. Opposed to racial integration, big government, and accommodation with communist governments, many religious conservatives saw the JBS as a tool for combatting the "moral decline" of the United States.\footnote{bid., 91.}

In some instances, the JBS attracted new members through family ties. Orville Starkey, a young defense worker for General Electric who began building jet engines for the company in 1952, hardly seemed like a potential recruit for the JBS. He was a lifelong Democrat who had inherited from his grandfather a contempt for the Republican party and its perceived enmity for the working class. Starkey, raised on a farm in Delaware, Ohio, viewed the Democrats as the defender of the working man, and saw the Republicans as a consortium of wealthy business interests, unconcerned with the average American and willing, in his words, "to let poor people starve." From 1952 to 1964, Starkey voted exclusively for Democrats and belonged to a labor union. In 1965, Starkey encountered a dramatic challenge to his political beliefs.\footnote{Orville Starkey, State Coordinator for the John Birch Society, Ohio, Interview by Author, 6 February 1996, Columbus, Ohio. Tape Recording.}

At a family dinner that year, Orville Starkey's brother made a recruiting visit for the John Birch Society. The sibling asked Starkey if he had ever heard of the JBS; Orville replied that he had, and that his opinion of the group was poor. Through newspaper accounts and union contacts, Starkey perceived the JBS as a right-wing extremist organization, and he casually dismissed the group as "crazy" when questioned by his brother. The latter persisted in his sales pitch, however, and persuaded Starkey to read the JBS "Sunday supplement" in the \textit{Columbus Dispatch}. He was intrigued by the advertisement and proceeded to mail in a post card to JBS headquarters, indicating his
interest in learning more. A JBS recruiter subsequently visited Starkey and recommended several books. His interest piqued, Starkey read JBS books and pamphlets, attended meetings of a local Birch chapter, and joined the organization within a few weeks of his initial contact. Starkey eventually rose within the JBS to become the salaried state coordinator for Ohio.\footnote{51}{bid.}

In addition to his familial ties to the JBS, Starkey was attracted by the group's attention to a deeply-held concern. During his years at General Electric, Starkey had grown puzzled by certain company policies. He was troubled by the presence within the factory of "Soviet engineers" who visited the plant occasionally for "tours through scientific exchange programs." Starkey was angered by the fact that he had to undergo a security background check to work at GE, but scientists from an enemy country were being permitted access to U.S. defense installations. He was astounded by this policy, and suspected that communists had infiltrated GE. The JBS tale of an immense communist conspiracy against the U.S. seemed to explain some of the strange events at Starkey's workplace, and he became determined to join the crusade against the Red menace.\footnote{52}{bid.}

It is fairly clear then, that the JBS was an inviting organization for some American conservatives. The JBS provided an outlet for right-wing activists frustrated with the direction of the Republican party, was socially appealing to an upper-class and well-educated portion of the Right, was composed of many religious fundamentalists disaffected by mainline Protestant sects, and at times recruited familiar faces from the families of members. To these varied groups, the JBS provided a political, social, and religious attraction. In addition, the
John Birch Society distinguished itself from other far-right groups by emphasizing an ideological and intellectual appeal to conservatives. Leaders and members of the JBS shared a common vision of the world, a set of assumptions governing their collective perceptions. Assessing the world, the JBS identified one specific problem, and offered concrete solutions.

The JBS diagnosis of American ills centered on a conspiratorial view of history. As Robert Welch and his followers recounted the events of the past, they described history as a struggle between good and evil. A sinister force, which Welch first labelled as Communism but later identified as the "Insiders," was responsible for American failures at home and abroad. The Insiders were a "hidden government," a small group of unelected power brokers working in the "shadows" to influence U.S. policies. According to the JBS, the Insiders were obsessed with power and dedicated to world domination, at any cost. In this vein, these shadowy figures manipulated U.S. foreign and domestic policy in an effort to weaken the nation and subject Americans to a "one-world government." The conspirators intended to crush dissent and create a totalitarian state. At the same time, the Insiders planned to weaken the sovereignty of the U.S. government, turning over military, monetary, and fiscal power to international organizations like the United Nations in an effort to impose a one-world dictatorship. The JBS believed that all of the Insiders' actions were aimed at consolidating power in a single entity, while weakening possible forces of resistance.53

The conspirators were an elite group of international bankers, business leaders, lawyers, military leaders, journalists, academics, and billionaire industrialists. In an effort to organize these varied groups, the Insiders

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established organizations aimed at influencing U.S. policy. Among these were the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) and the Trilateral Commission. Although publicly professing to be no more than advisory bodies or foreign policy think tanks, the CFR and other Insider organizations attempted to control U.S. foreign policy, infiltrating government agencies, dictating personnel decisions, engaging in espionage, and deliberately involving the U.S. in overseas conflicts. Among the early conspirators identified by the JBS were John D. Rockefeller, J. P. Morgan, Colonel Edward M. House (advisor to Woodrow Wilson), and international banker Paul Warburg.54

The JBS conspiracy theory held that U.S. involvement in World Wars I and II and Vietnam was a conscious effort by the Insiders to weaken the U.S., strengthen world communism, and create a new, all-powerful world government. A consistent use of duplicity and treachery characterized Insider actions. In World War I, the Insiders deliberately dragged the U.S. into a European conflict, discarding a U.S. tradition of neutrality by aiding Great Britain against Germany, and secretly arranging for a passenger ship, the Lusitania, to carry munitions and thereby provoke a German submarine attack. The resulting tragedy, with the deaths of American passengers, drew the U.S. into WWI. Russian Communism, according to the JBS, was the child of WWI as Tsarist Russia, weakened by its involvement in the conflict, fell first to the Germans, and ultimately, to Vladimir Lenin. The elaborate conspiracies elucidated by the JBS, continued in WWII, as the Insiders successfully involved the U.S. in yet another war with the aim of establishing a world government. Despite the reluctance of the American public to become involved in another war, the Insiders manipulated the federal government into embracing dangerously provocative

54 Perloff, The Shadows of Power, 22.
policies, including the provision of military aid to Great Britain and the imposition of economic sanctions against Japan. The resulting attack on Pearl Harbor was deliberately calculated to enrage the American public and force U.S. entry into the war. According to the JBS, American leaders even had prior knowledge of the Pearl Harbor attack, but acquiesced in the death of innocent soldiers to achieve Insider aims. In Vietnam, the Insiders involved the U.S. in a limited war, designed to end in defeat. The purpose of the Vietnam conflict was threefold. First, the war was aimed at distracting anti-communists by pitting the U.S. in battle against the Red Menace. By involving the U.S. in a reputed struggle against communism in Southeast Asia, the Insiders could bolster the Cold War credentials of its chosen leaders in the White House, while deflecting attention away from Soviet gains elsewhere around the globe. Secondly, by pouring American financial resources into the war effort, the Insiders could weaken the U.S. economy and permit the Soviet Union to catch up to the U.S. in military strength. Thirdly, by purposely limiting the war and ensuring a crushing defeat for the U.S., the Insiders hoped to discourage future offensives against Communism. The Insiders tailored all American military efforts to the goal of strengthening totalitarian forces and absorbing the U.S. into a one-world government.55

JBS leaders, from national figures like Robert Welch and Clarence Manion, to local leaders like Orville Starkey, interpreted foreign and domestic events through the lens of this elaborate conspiracy theory. Seen through Welch’s eyes, the American civil rights movement was not an effort to secure

55Ibid., 30-31, 67-68, 121-135.
equal access to housing, employment, and the vote. Rather, it was an orchestrated plot by Communists to sow dissension among Americans and provoke violence:

...Unless the Communist plans now beginning to take visible shape are thwarted, you are likely to see a brutal, ambitious, and heavily armed, but actually very tiny percentage of the Southern Negroes operating in guerilla bands, perpetrating vicious atrocities on their fellow Negroes in order to terrorize these peaceful and patriotic citizens into supporting their movement for the "independence" of a Negro Republic to be carved out of the southeastern states.56

The JBS ideology rendered Welch incapable of understanding the civil rights struggle. He consistently drew parallels between domestic political battles and Third World "communist" revolutions, comparing civil rights demonstrators to Maoist agitators in China. He claimed that few black Southerners supported the civil rights movement and compared the situation to that in Algeria: "...Until the Communists came along to make trouble, the Moslems of Algeria were getting along as splendidly with the French settlers there as were the Negroes of the South with the white people there only ten years ago."57

Robert Welch was not exceptional in his penchant for diagnosing conspiracy. Clarence Manion, a member of the JBS National Council, viewed the U.S. Supreme Court as a conscious agent of communism. He saw the Warren Court's string of decisions expanding civil rights and liberties as communist-inspired. Manion also viewed the New Deal as one of a series of "despotic inroads on the rights of property and on the conditions of


57 Ibid., 17.
production." Manion was alarmed by what he perceived as the penetration of communism in American government. Communism was a frightening threat to American freedom, and Manion saw limited government as a bulwark against the red menace.

Communism is not a hunger in human nature for equality and justice. It is not a demand for the redistribution of wealth, land, and property. Communists represent communism as a crusade for social justice precisely to distract its victims into administering the wrong medicine, while the ravages of their deliberately propagated disease take a firm hold. Communism is a malignant conspiracy for power. Its target is the tight concentration of complete control of all persons and all things into the hands of godless gangsters. The deadly germs of this disease are cultured and developed only in a climate of power concentration. Where governmental control over human beings is minimized, dispersed, disintegrated, and effectively kept that way, the germs of Communism can never take hold.  

Manion saw the work of the communist conspiracy everywhere, from Supreme Court decisions to U.S. foreign policy. The conspiratorial view of history colored his analysis of actions ranging from Supreme Court decisions to American foreign policy.

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58 Clarence Manion, Let's Face It! (South Bend, Indiana: The Manion Forum, 1956), 51-52.

59 Ibid., 68-69.

60 Starkey Interview. Ohio JBS Coordinator Orville Starkey still views events through the prism of conspiracy theory. The rise of ultra-nationalist Zladimir Zhirinovsky in Russia was, in his view, a ruse calculated to generate sympathy for "Communist" Boris Yeltsin. Conspirators hoped to encourage U.S. economic aid to Russia by convincing American leaders and the public that a "fascist" threat existed, one that required the U.S. to support "moderate" forces. These alleged moderates were communists, according to Starkey. He also viewed domestic events as "insider-controlled." A 1996 "Federalism summit" in Cincinnati, convened by conservatives favoring the devolution of power from the federal to state governments, came under attack from Starkey. He viewed the summit as a crude ruse, designed to engender popular support for a constitutional convention, where Insiders could further undermine the ideal of limited government and work for the creation of a one-world dictatorship. Starkey saw Insider and communist influence as a widespread problem, permeating the U.S. Congress, the White House, and the federal bureaucracy.
JBS ideology identified a variety of threats to American freedom, but a favorite target of the organization's ire was the U.S. media. Welch and other JBS spokesmen continually decried alleged efforts by American journalists to discredit conservatives and suppress rightist books. The JBS accused the news media of smearing conservative groups while deliberately distorting news coverage in an effort to aid the communist conspiracy. Welch often complained that his polemic against Eisenhower, *The Politician*, suffered from liberal attempts to "smother" it.\(^{61}\) Liberal/communist domination of book review media assured the failure of conservative books. Welch harbored a deep distrust of the press and exhorted JBS members to avoid all contact with the media:

"When you are unarmed, in a long-range and deadly contest of total strength with a ruthless enemy who is armed with pistols, swords, and daggers, you don't engage in physical battle with him every time he temptingly offers to lend you one of his shortest daggers."\(^{62}\) Declaring that "the enemy owns the air," Welch was loathe to provide journalists with any opportunity to interview JBS members.

JBS members consistently railed against alleged bias and slanted coverage in the press. In an effort to substantiate this claim, Welch pointed to specific examples of media "deceit." In 1961, he claimed that the liberal Fund for the Republic, a media foundation, deliberately downplayed conservative critics of "FAPs, or Fifth Amendment Pleadars." The JBS referred to those witnesses subpoenaed before the House Committee on Un-American Activities who refused to testify on Fifth Amendment grounds. Welch, crying conspiracy, claimed that the Fund for the Republic had distributed 35,000 copies of a

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pamphlet, written by Erwin Griswold, that defended FAPs. When pressured by conservatives to air a right-wing critique of Griswold authored by Dickerman Williams, the Fund responded by distributing "only" 1,000 copies. The fact that a liberal organization willingly provided a forum to conservatives apparently had no impact on Welch's distrust of the press. He viewed the event as yet another example of the conspiracy in action.\(^\text{63}\)

Another favorite target of JBS ire was organized labor. The JBS exhibited disdain for "collectivism," flaying big government and collective efforts on behalf of American workers. Welch, in particular, displayed an animus for blue-collar workers and unions, possibly related to his experiences in the virulently anti-labor group, the National Association of Manufacturers. In one revealing outburst, Welch attacked a strike by airline pilots in Indianapolis, saying that these once-respected professionals had lowered themselves "to the level of...mineworkers." He castigated the pilots for "put[ting] themselves in the same category as chauffeurs and truckdrivers." Welch also suggested that the JBS begin a counter effort entitled "Petition to the Airline Pilots Association to Grow Up." Welch's anti-unionism and contempt for the working class stemmed in large part from his belief that labor unions were yet another tool of the communist conspiracy.\(^\text{64}\)

JBS ideology, in addition to identifying problems and enemies, also suggested solutions. Many in the JBS believed that the United States suffered from a loss of religious faith, that the gains made by the communist conspiracy had occurred largely because the U.S. was spiritually unfit. Clarence Manion saw the "Christian tradition and the Ten Commandments" as a viable, vigorous

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\(^{63}\)Ibid., 25.

\(^{64}\)JBS, Blue Book, 92.
alternative to socialism. He was fond of quoting William Penn, who said "those people who will not be ruled by God will be ruled by tyrants." Manion also cited Alexis de Tocqueville's observation that "while the law permits Americans to do what they please, religion prevents them from conceiving and forbids them to commit what is rash or unjust."65 Robert Welch also stressed the importance of religious faith in his anti-communist crusade. He believed that Americans had drifted away from a fundamentalist faith, tolerating liberal theologians or rejecting religion altogether. Welch spoke longingly of the past, holding up the years 1815-1914 as a blessed time, marked by the "humanizing effect of Christianity." He longed for a past when "belligerent blasphemy was unheard of;" condemning modern American intellectuals like Langston Hughes for encouraging this trend. Welch believed that the diminishing influence of religion in the U.S. contributed to a moral decline and toleration of "moral monsters" like Krushchev, Castro, and Tito. Religious faith was crucial to the success of the JBS crusade against communism.66

Welch, in countless writings and speeches, clearly outlined the ideas and aspirations of the John Birch Society. In an essay published during the early years of the group, he summarized the JBS ideology:

In the United States of 1961 we do know what we want: The destruction of the Communist conspiracy, the restoration of the independent American republic, and then a better world than man has ever known before through a firmer adherence to the principles of less government and more responsibility.67

65Manion, Let's Face Itl, 82-83.
67JBS, Bulletin (May 1, 1961), 27.
The core ideas of the JBS were clear and provided an analysis of both the United States and the world. Members clearly found this ideology attractive, for it offered an alternative explanation to the turmoil of the twentieth century. Any attempt to seriously understand and explain the organization, however, demands an inquiry into the origins of these ideas. What intellectual traditions influenced the JBS?

A variety of sources influenced Welch, Manion, and other leaders in developing a vision for the JBS. These ranged from the Bible and historical works to contemporary right-wing conspiracy literature. One of the distinguishing features of the JBS, compared to other right-wing movements, was the organizational emphasis on education. JBS members were highly literate, and were encouraged to read books and magazines deemed relevant to the group's anti-communist mission.

Fundamentalist Christians played a prominent role in the John Birch Society and consequently, the Bible was a very important influence on the ideology of the group. Welch portrayed the effort against communism as a Manichean struggle of good versus evil: "This is a world-wide battle, the first in history, between light and darkness; between freedom and slavery; between the spirit of Christianity and the spirit of anti-Christ for the souls and bodies of men."^68

In his desire to appeal to a wide range of conservatives, Robert Welch did not emphasize his own religious beliefs. Although he was raised as a fundamentalist Baptist, he made a conscious effort to recruit Birchers across denominational boundaries, and even made overtures to Catholic and Jewish conservatives. As a result, he did not often refer to the Bible in his writings on

behalf of the JBS. Nevertheless, observers of Welch commented on the importance of the Bible in his worldview.69

Clarence Manion, in contrast to Welch, frequently cited the Bible in his writings on conservatism. In an essay condemning big government, Manion complained about Americans' fixation on self-interest and entitlements. He believed that Americans were forsaking God and turning to the federal government. Manion sternly warned against this folly, quoting Proverbs 29:18: "where there is no vision, the people perish." In order to drive home his advocacy of limited government and add Biblical sanction to his argument, Manion quoted from Matthew 22:20-23: "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." The importance of the Bible to Manion's conservatism was abundantly clear.70

Leaders of the JBS were also fond of invoking the wisdom of secular figures like Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Abraham Lincoln to buttress their claims. In arguing for limited government and against the income tax, Clarence Manion approvingly quoted Thomas Jefferson: "A wise and frugal government [is one] which shall restrain men from injuring one another, which shall leave them otherwise free to regulate their own pursuits of industry and improvement and shall not take from the mouth of labor the bread it has earned."71

In another essay, Manion encouraged Russians to overthrow the communist government and referred to Jefferson's language in the Declaration

70Manion, Let's Face It!, 2-3.
71ibid., 13.
of Independence. Manion was highly selective in his use of Jefferson however; he did not refer to the Virginian's writings on the separation of church and state, as the JBS was contemptuous of the Supreme Court's *Schempp* decision in 1963, which struck down prayer in the public schools. Where Manion found historical sanction for his views, he openly lauded and quoted the Founders. Where he found cases where Jefferson or Madison seemed to contradict the JBS, he conveniently omitted those historical arguments from his essays.

As a legal scholar, Manion was familiar with the Framers' concept of "republican virtue." James Madison predicted that the survival of the American republic would hinge on the capacity of the American people to assume the responsibilities of self-government. The JBS made frequent use of this theme in its quest to force a moral regeneration of the United States. Manion and his cohorts strongly believed that a return to "traditional morality" was essential for Americans to regain control of the government from the communist conspiracy. He believed that American foreign policy leaders exhibited a disturbing amorality, tolerating the aggressive actions of an expansionist and totalitarian Soviet Union. Manion was incensed by the Yalta agreements, accusing the U.S. of abandoning Eastern Europe to Soviet domination and dictatorship. He saw Yalta as evidence of a sickly moral condition in the U.S., and repeatedly warned conservatives that America was abandoning its commitment to Madison's theory of Republican virtue. Alarmed by this, Manion called for a

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72 Ibid., 48-49.
renewed commitment to Madisonian ideals. Failure to do so would continue the
decline of the U.S. as a moral authority and threaten the very existence of the
American republic.73

The concept of decline was very important in the intellectual world of the
JBS. Robert Welch believed in a cyclical pattern of history in which great
civilizations were like organic beings, experiencing birth and death. Welch
credited German historian Oswald Spengler for influencing his vision of history.
At the founding meeting of the JBS, Welch repeatedly referred to Spengler's
Decline of the West (1918) to buttress his personal views regarding the alleged
decline of Western Europe and the United States. Welch believed that Decline
of the West demonstrated the culpability of "collectivism/socialism" for the
decline of civilizations. The Roman empire, for example, achieved remarkable
accomplishments until the growth of big government and corruption precipitated
a decline and collapse. Welch believed that the Roman empire "started dying
from the cancer of collectivism from the time Diocletian imposed on it his New
Deal." Welch's reading of Spengler convinced him that civilizations flourished
in a condition of limited government, and perished from "the cancer of
collectivism" in the form of intrusive government.74

Attempting to apply Spengler, Robert Welch declared that Western
Europe and the United States were succumbing to the cancer of collectivism.
He pointed to the adoption of welfare states and government regulation of the
economy as symptoms of the emerging "cancer." Welch also believed that the
"disease" of Marxism had infected the U.S., and only an aggressive effort
against communism could cure the sick American patient. In Welch's

73Ibid., 55.
74JBS, Blue Book, 42-55.
interpretation, the decline of the U.S. had already begun, triggered by the emergence of big government and the evaporation of American moral standards.

The Birch interpretation of Spengler was flawed, a point made by JBS critics Harry and Bonaro Overstreet. In a study of right-wing extremism, the Overstreets demonstrated that Spengler's real "villain" in *The Decline of the West* was the modern city, created by emerging economic forces, not collectivism/socialism. Welch distorted Oswald Spengler to fit his ideological prejudices and attempted to provide a scholarly cover for his extremist views. Welch also used Spengler to justify JBS attacks on British historian Arnold Toynbee, whom he dismissed as a "meretricious hack." Welch viewed Toynbee as a pawn of "international socialists," claiming that the Left hoped to discredit Spengler by overshadowing him. Toynbee's work, viewed in this sense, was an attempt by leftists to distract attention away from Spengler's thesis of decline and thereby aid the communist conspiracy. This is ironic, for Toynbee viewed the loss of religious faith as an important factor in the cyclical decline of civilizations, an interpretation many in the JBS shared.75

JBS leaders were also influenced by the literature of an emerging American conservative movement. American conservatism underwent great changes during WWII, as a group of writers appeared on the Right to challenge liberal assumptions and explain conservative values. Among the writers approvingly recommended in the pages of the JBS monthly bulletin were Friedrich von Hayek and Russell Kirk. Hayek, author of *The Road to Serfdom* (1944), argued that the West was in danger of succumbing to the same totalitarian fate as that of Nazi Germany. Hayek claimed that Western

governments were abandoning the values of individualism, liberalism, and freedom in favor of socialism and socialized planning. The massive intervention by government into the Western economies posed a serious threat to individual liberty, according to Hayek. In his view, the removal of economic competition and abandonment of laissez faire during the war years represented a "road to serfdom." Economic controls led to totalitarianism and threatened freedom. Given the animus of the JBS for government regulation of the economy, Welch had nothing but praise for Hayek, and he recommended *The Road to Serfdom* for JBS readers. This was ironic, for Hayek was more of a classical liberal than a true conservative. The Austrian was not opposed to all government intervention in the economy; in fact, he favored the public regulation of utility companies. His main concern was the freedom of individual man, much like the classical liberal John Stuart Mill. Hayek would likely have been disturbed to have his book linked with the John Birch Society, but Welch wholeheartedly praised his work and introduced *The Road to Serfdom* to thousands of conservative readers.

Russell Kirk was another influential member of the emerging conservative intelligentsia that influenced the founders of the JBS. Kirk authored *The Conservative Mind* (1953), an interpretive history of conservative thought. This was an extremely influential book within conservative circles, as Kirk attempted to define the values and ideas of conservatism. Among these were the belief in 1) a "divine intent" ruling society and 2) the idea that property and freedom were inseparable, 3) support for societal orders and classes, and 4) a distrust of change and innovation. Welch

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admired *The Conservative Mind*, and regularly entered the book in a JBS list of recommended works, published monthly in the JBS Bulletin.

Far more influential than the conservative intelligentsia, however, were the accumulated works of right-wing conspiracy theorists. The American Far Right, much like extremists on the Left, had a long tradition of flamboyant, hyperbolic, and polemical literature. Right-wing tracts tended to demonize all political factions that differed with the extreme Right. Conspiracy writers shared a penchant for portraying policy disagreements as diabolical cabals against the American republic, and created apocalyptic visions of the future. Exiled in the American political wilderness for much of the first half of the twentieth century, the far right thirsted for political power and its rhetoric grew wilder and more desperate during the Eisenhower years. Furiously repudiating the "middle path" of moderate and liberal Republicans, and accusing Democrats of outright treason, far right writers produced an enormous volume of pamphlets, books, and articles alleging a conspiracy against American freedom and morals.78

One of the most influential works of the conspiracy genre actually predated the JBS by 160 years. In 1798, Scotsman John Robison published an exposé of the Bavarian Illuminati, alleging a conspiracy against all of the established institutions of Europe. The Illuminati were founded in 1776 by University of Ingolstadt law professor Adam Weishaupt as a liberal reaction to religious intolerance and Catholic domination of European politics. The Illuminati were a manifestation of Enlightenment rationalism, with members taking a "secret" oath to battle for utopian goals of human equality and fraternity.

Conservatives in Europe held a radically different impression of Illuminism,

accusing the group of plotting against organized religion, European monarchy, and property rights. Although the Illuminati had disbanded by 1787, Robison's *Proofs of a Conspiracy Against All the Religions and Governments of Europe* accused the group of fomenting revolution in France and attempting to "destroy Christianity." Robison claimed to have evidence of a devious plot by an amoral enemy to sow disorder on the Continent and weaken public morality. Robert Welch, in a 1964 JBS *Bulletin*, referred to Robison's tract in an essay linking the Illuminati to the modern communist conspiracy. For Welch, the communists were merely a modern manifestation of an ancient conspiracy.  

Right-wing conspiracy books proliferated during the Cold War. Topics ranged from U.S. policy in Eastern Europe to the U.S. Supreme Court, and universally suggested the existence of a leftist conspiracy. The John Birch Society actively promoted hundreds of right-wing books through advertisements, reviews in the group's monthly magazine *American Opinion*, and through lists of recommended books published in the JBS *Bulletin*. Three influential authors in this group were Rosalie Gordon, John Stormer, and James Perloff.

Rosalie Gordon authored *Nine Men Against America* (1958), an attack on the Warren Court and its judicial activism. Gordon was a longtime research assistant for another right-wing conspiracy theorist, John T. Flynn, and believed that the U.S. Supreme Court was involved in a conspiracy to usurp political power from the legislative and executive branches of the U.S. government. Gordon's book attacked the NAACP's legal battle against segregation, tarred W.

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E. B. Du Bois with the brush of "Communism" and decried the Warren Court's usurpation of state power. She purported to show conspiracy even among the Justices' law clerks, quoting former clerk William H. Rehnquist as saying "[their] political and legal prejudices were by no means representative of the country as a whole nor of the Court which they served." Gordon also reviewed recent decisions of the Court, analyzing their alleged harmful impact on American law.81

*Nine Men Against America* was an important book in the early history of the JBS and was featured prominently in the group's billboards advocating the impeachment of Chief Justice Earl Warren.82 Robert Welch regularly cited the book in the JBS list of recommended literature, and the JBS monthly magazine, *American Opinion*, published several reviews of Gordon. Gordon echoed the JBS position on judicial activism and accused the Warren Court of subversion. In Welch's view, the Court was purposefully working to undermine anti-communist efforts by striking down state "red flag" laws. He also believed that the Court's school desegregation case was wrongly decided. In Welch's view, the Court had usurped the state power to regulate education. Gordon's book provided Welch and the JBS with a "scholarly" justification for their attacks on the Court. JBS members portrayed themselves as defenders of federalism, states rights, and individual liberty.83

Another important book in the conspiracy tradition was John Stormer's *None Dare Call It Treason* (1964). Stormer, a member of the Republican State Committee of Missouri, a fundamentalist Christian, and a former Air Force


82JBS, *Bulletin* (October 2, 1961), Last Two Pages, Unnumbered.

historian, left his editorship of a technical magazine in 1962 to pursue anti-communist activities full-time. *None Dare Call It Treason* was a modern version of John Robison's Illuminati conspiracy literature. Stormer purported to demonstrate an intricate conspiracy by communists and fellow travelers to undermine American morals and institutions. Among his various charges, Stormer claimed that American political leaders were purposely aiding the spread of communism, weakening the U.S. national defenses, sabotaging public education, undermining traditional morality, and working to discredit anti-communist leaders. Stormer linked together disparate events and policies in an effort to demonstrate the workings of an immense conspiracy within the United States against capitalism, morality, and patriotism.84

*None Dare Call It Treason* was regularly cited in JBS literature and recommended to members by Welch in the monthly *Bulletin*. The book played an important role in Orville Starkey's decision to join the JBS in 1965. A JBS recruiter suggested that Starkey read it, and he eagerly devoured the book and was inspired to read several other rightist titles. He began attending JBS meetings regularly and decided to become a member.85 Stormer's conspiracy theory struck a chord within Orville Starkey. The book analyzed, among other things, the influence of educational theorist John Dewey on American public schools. Stormer claimed that Dewey was a "Fabian Socialist," bent on manipulating American education for propaganda purposes while working to destroy the values of individualism inculcated in public schools. Stormer claimed that Dewey was responsible for weakening standards governing grammar, geography, and reading. Dewey's pedagogy focused on the

84 John A. Stormer, *None Dare Call It Treason* (Florissant, Mo.: Liberty Bell Press, 1964).

85 Starkey, Interview by Author.
destruction of competition between students and an acceptance of mediocrity. As evidence of this, Stormer offered Dewey's support for a de-emphasis on grades. Stormer alleged a conspiracy by educational theorists to destroy the effectiveness of American public education and to transform the school into a tool of socialist subversion.86

Starkey harbored resentment for years over what he deemed his own "poor education." Stormer's book seemed to provide an explanation for Starkey's struggles in school, namely, a conspiracy by elites to cripple the American educational system and "dumb down" the population. Starkey now viewed John Dewey and Horace Mann as collaborators in the communist conspiracy. In his view, American public schools were yet another device to undermine American national strength, by creating a large population of apathetic, poorly-educated citizens, and siphoning off large amounts of U.S. tax revenue to support an incompetent school system. Stormer awakened Starkey to a disturbing new view of the world, in which nearly all events were the result of the communist conspiracy.87

*None Dare Call It Treason* was an enormously influential and successful book within the far-right conservative movement, particularly the JBS. Right-wing activists obsessed with the alleged communist conspiracy routinely referred to Stormer's book in letters directed to United States Senator Stephen Young of Ohio, a persistent critic of Robert Welch and the JBS.88 In 1997, 33

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86Stormer, *None Dare Call It Treason*, 99-101.

87Starkey Interview.

88Mrs. Ivan Black to Stephen Young, 22 September 1964, Mrs. Jo Komminsk, To Stephen Young, 3 August 1964, MSS 3670, Box 43, Folder 1535, Stephen M. Young Papers, Western Reserve Historical Society (hereafter cited as Young Papers).
years after the first edition, the JBS still listed Stormer's book in its catalog of recommended conservative books.  

The John Birch Society originally identified Communism as the greatest threat to American freedom, but eventually came to view the conspiracy as an older and broader phenomenon, encompassing a wider, more varied group of conspirators. Robert Welch referred to this cabal as the "Insiders," and contemporary conspiracy authors identified a new villain as the cause of American decline. The most influential of these authors was James Perloff, a former anti-war activist turned right-wing columnist. Perloff, a contributing editor to the JBS monthly news magazine, *The New American*, authored *The Shadows of Power* (1988), an attack on the Council on Foreign Relations.

Founded in 1921 and headquartered in New York City, the CFR loomed large in the conspiracy theories of the Far Right. Perloff believed that the CFR was "the establishment's chief link to the U.S. government." In his analysis, conspirators were behind the U.S. decision to enter World War I, aiming at involving the U.S. in a purely European conflict for the purpose of establishing a world government through the institution of the League of Nations. The U.S. Senate's refusal to ratify the Treaty of Versailles and enter the League after WWI prompted the conspirators to found the CFR and work to change American public opinion, in the hope that the U.S. would become involved in an international governing body. According to Perloff, conspirators in the CFR worked behind the scenes to aid the rise of Bolshevik Russia and forged ties with the emerging fascist powers in defeated Germany. The CFR actively

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sought U.S. involvement in a second global conflict with the aim of successfully establishing a world government.90

Relying largely on secondary works by other rightist conspiracy theorists, Perloff analyzes American foreign policy from 1921 to 1987 and claims that the United Nations is an active agent of communism and a tool of the Insiders. Perloff sees all American military involvement abroad as a carefully designed plot to institute a world government through the surrender of U.S. national sovereignty, the weakening of the U.S. economy, the support of foreign dictatorships, and the destruction of the U.S. Constitution.91

The Shadows of Power was a crucial book for the JBS, serving as yet another "scholarly" justification for the group's views and activism. Perloff touched upon many of the themes trumpeted by the JBS, including the existence of a secret conspiracy against American freedom, the duplicitous nature of American foreign policy, the manipulation of U.S. leaders by unelected figures, and the culpability of the national media in the conspiracy. Effectively outlining the nature of the "one-world" conspiracy and identifying many of the alleged conspirators by name, The Shadows of Power is the primary book distributed by JBS recruiters today to prospective members. Perloff's book is the first title listed on the JBS online catalog of conservative books, and is praised on the dust jacket by several former right-wing Congressmen, including recently defeated North Carolina Republican David Funderburk. 92


91 Ibid., 67-68,71-72.

It is clear then, that the John Birch Society was influenced by a long tradition of disparate intellectual influences. JBS leaders quoted the Bible to justify a crusade against communism, relied on historians to formulate a theory of Western moral and economic decline, and claimed to be representatives of the republican spirit enunciated by Jefferson and Madison. Robert Welch sang the praises of conservative intellectuals like Friedrich von Hayek and Russell Kirk, utilizing these theorists to provide intellectual respectability for the JBS. Finally, the JBS resurrected old conspiracy theorists like John Robison and promoted the works of contemporary rightist authors like Rosalie Gordon, John Stormer, and James Perloff. The JBS, by establishing its own far right publishing firm, Western Islands, helped to resurrect the works of many obscure conservative conspiracy theorists. Welch viewed the JBS as an educational movement, dedicated to puncturing the myths allegedly created by liberal and communist journalists, historians, and public officials. By re-educating prospective members of the JBS, Welch hoped to create a formidable conservative counterforce, dedicated to the destruction of communism and big government. His goals would require a rigidly organized group, committed to radical conservative activism.
CHAPTER 5

ORGANIZATION OF THE JBS

One of the most ironic features of Robert Welch's anti-communist crusade was the group's adoption of a communist-front style organization. Like the Communist Party, the JBS was hierarchical, with one powerful leader, Welch, and a governing body of unelected elites, the National Council. The JBS was organized into smaller, local groups known as chapters, and these operated much like Communist cells, engaging in study groups and taking orders from the JBS headquarters in Belmont, Massachusetts. The JBS mimicked communist-front techniques by organizing into various committees for specific policy goals, like the ill-fated Movement to Impeach Earl Warren. The JBS also observed a determined policy of secrecy, refusing to release any accounting of its actual membership totals. The identities of individual members were closely guarded, with only the Founder, the National Council, and various JBS employees being publicly identified. Local chapters (ten to twenty members) reported to section leaders (for four to eight chapters), and in turn to coordinators, district governors, and the National Council, all under the command of Robert Welch. The JBS operated as a monolithic body, obedient to the orders of the Founder.93

The JBS was not a democratic body, subject to compromise and negotiation. Welch despised democracy, viewing it as "mob rule" and taking

pains to stress the republican foundations of the American state. He published essays in the JBS monthly magazine outlining the differences between a republic and a democracy, claiming that the U.S. was never intended by the Framers to be a democracy. Welch sneered at the idea of debating principles and courses of action for the JBS, seeing unified, unitary action as crucial to the success of the group's mission:

The John Birch Society is to be a monolithic body. A republican form of ... organization has many advantages...under certain favorable conditions. But under less happy circumstances it lends itself to infiltration, distortion, and disruption. And democracy...is merely a deceptive phrase, a weapon of demagoguery, and a perennial fraud. ...[T]he John Birch Society will operate under completely authoritative control at all levels. The fear[s] of tyrannical oppression of individuals...have little bearing on the case of a voluntary association, where the authoritative power can be exercised and enforced only by persuasion. [Any objections are] ...outweighed by the advantages of firm and positive direction of the Society's energies. [...] It is imperative that all the strength we can muster be subject to smoothly functioning direction from the top.94

In the view of Robert Welch, the war against communism was too important to permit his organization to become bogged down in debate. Members could be dismissed at the sole discretion of Welch, and dissent was not tolerated. JBS participants were required to pay annual membership dues, and were expected to regularly attend meetings and engage in activities conceived by the Founder. Failure to faithfully execute the duties of JBS membership could lead to dismissal from the group. In Robert Welch's view, his organizational design would result in a well-disciplined, orderly group, focused on definite goals and united action. These actions proved to be diverse, ambitious, and ultimately, unsuccessful.

94JBS, Blue Book, 158-159.
CHAPTER 6

JBS ACTIVISM

The John Birch Society advocated numerous changes in U.S. domestic and foreign policy, often pursuing several major goals at once. The most prominent policy goals of the JBS, however, were the impeachment of Chief Justice Earl Warren from the U.S. Supreme Court, the removal of the U.S. from membership in the United Nations, resistance to the Negro civil rights movement, and the proliferation of conservative thought in American society. In order to achieve these goals and resist the communist menace, the JBS focused its efforts primarily on education, namely, providing written materials to the public explaining the JBS position on issues and suggesting corrective actions. JBS activities also included campaigns to stock public libraries with rightist books, and economic boycotts of businesses involved in commerce with Soviet-bloc nations.

The most quixotic mission of Robert Welch and the JBS was the Movement to Impeach Earl Warren. The Warren Court's constitutional revolution, which saw the expansion of civil liberties, judicially-imposed limitations on law enforcement, and the striking down of Jim Crow laws, enraged far-right conservatives. Robert Welch was so incensed by the conduct of the Warren Court that he pledged to devote himself to the destruction of Earl Warren's career.

At the founding meeting of the John Birch Society on December 8-9, 1958, Welch first suggested the formation of a committee to work for the
impeachment of Earl Warren. In the years that followed, Welch distributed Warren Impeachment Packets, consisting of several anti-Warren books and pamphlets, including Rosalie Gordon's *Nine Men Against America*. Welch distributed bumper stickers advocating Warren's impeachment and large billboards began to appear across the U.S., proclaiming, "Save our Republic! Impeach Earl Warren!" In the monthly *Bulletin*, Welch repeatedly called on members to gather petition signatures urging the U.S. House of Representatives to begin impeachment proceedings against Warren.\textsuperscript{95}

Welch even went so far as to sponsor an essay contest on college campuses, offering $2500 in prizes to the undergraduate who could best argue the grounds for the impeachment of Warren. He encouraged JBS members to publicize the contest on college campuses through the use of bulletin boards and conservative student organizations. The JBS hoped to stir debate on campuses across America and Welch wanted youths to think about the fundamental American values allegedly threatened by the Warren Court.\textsuperscript{96}

For Welch and other members of the JBS, the Warren Court represented a genuine threat to the conservative vision of America. Welch believed that the Court was becoming a potentially tyrannical force in U.S. politics, assuming legislative powers and disregarding judicial precedent. His criticisms of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision centered on the Warren Court's refusal to follow the precedent of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), the case that established the principle of "separate but equal" facilities for blacks. Welch refused to acknowledge the possibility of a constitutional basis for desegregation; in his analysis, the Court was simply substituting the "psychological theories of a


\textsuperscript{96}JBS, *Bulletin* (August 1, 1961), 5-6.
Swedish socialist* (Gunnar Myrdal) for the original intent of the Framers. He further declared that the Supreme Court was ignoring the sovereign powers of the states embodied in the Tenth Amendment and attempting to impose its own policy preferences in the traditionally state-controlled realm of education. The audacity of the Warren Court simply could not be tolerated, and only the removal of the Chief Justice from power would stem the threat of judicial activism and restore the principle of limited government.97

The campaign to impeach Earl Warren was, of course, a dismal failure. The JBS swiftly became the target of political satirists, who mocked the group's call to "Save Our Republic! Impeach Earl Warren!" In Salt Lake City, a local radio station erected a sign directly adjacent to a Birch billboard, imploring its audience to "Save Radio! Impeach Will Lucas* (a morning radio personality). Even conservatives were embarrassed by the JBS effort, fearing that the publicity generated by the campaign was damaging the credibility of the conservative movement. In a 1965 editorial, the National Review warned that Welch was repelling, rather than attracting a large conservative following, and that his JBS was "growing no faster than the movement to impeach Earl Warren, who remains as unimpeached today as when Mr. Welch first launched that ill-conceived campaign." Frank Meyer, writing in the same issue, described the effort against Warren as a "puerile attack." The JBS effort to strike against the Chief Justice suffered an ignominious death.98

Unsuccessful in its attempt to remove Earl Warren, the JBS turned its sights to an even more formidable target, the United Nations. At the founding meeting of the JBS, Welch denounced the U.N. as a communist tool designed

97JBS, Bulletin (January 1, 1961), 16-17.

to strip away U.S. sovereignty.\textsuperscript{99} In the years that followed, Welch and the JBS engaged in a campaign to drive the U.N. from the U.S., distributing anti-U.N. literature, gathering petitions calling for U.S. withdrawal from the organization, displaying bumper stickers proclaiming "Get U.S. Out!," and orchestrating a letter-writing campaign aimed at persuading Congress to support the JBS aims.

JBS literature accused the United Nations of being a front organization for international communism. Birch pamphlets derisively referred to the U.N. headquarters in New York as the "House that [Alger] Hiss Built." The JBS pointed to the roles of accused communists Hiss and Harry Dexter White as evidence of the subversive nature of the United Nations. Literature distributed in later years purported to demonstrate an unbroken chain of "socialist one-worlders for leaders" of the United Nations, as the JBS accused Daj Hammarskjold, U Thant, Kurt Waldheim, Javier Perez de Cuellar, and Boutros Boutros-Ghali of membership in leftist groups. In addition to attacking the leadership of the U.N., the JBS cast aspersions on the values of the organization, accusing it of advocating "abortion, sterilization, and controlled human breeding" while condoning the "murderous" conduct of Communist China. JBS literature also accused the U.N. of supporting the rise to power of African "Communists" Robert Mugabe and Nelson Mandela. The JBS rarely offered any evidence of the alleged subversive ties of Third World independence leaders, smearing figures like Mandela with impunity. Through persistent attacks on the legitimacy of the U.N., the JBS hoped to discredit and destroy the international organization.\textsuperscript{100}

\textsuperscript{99}JBS, \textit{Blue Book}, 29.

In addition to disseminating an enormous volume of anti-U.N. literature, the JBS also organized a massive letter-writing campaign against the group, hoping to persuade the U.S. Congress to abandon its support of the organization. In Ohio, U.S. Senators Frank Lausche and Stephen Young, among others, received numerous letters from Birchers protesting U.S. involvement in and aid to the international group. One letter excoriated the U.N. as a "pipsqueak Pink-Red organization," and a "Commie front." The same writer declared that he "strongly resent[ed] the giving away of our gold to foreign nations."\(^{101}\) Another letter to Young declared that "...I think this whole U.N. is anti-American and has grossly taken advantage of our country for years."\(^{102}\) Ohio Senators found themselves increasingly occupied with answering JBS diatribes against the United Nations.

Much like the effort to impeach Earl Warren, the JBS offensive against the U.N. failed. Despite the avalanche of anti-U.N. literature and letters produced by the JBS, the United States government never seriously considered withdrawal from the international organization and despite frequent rhetorical battles between the Congress and the U.N., the latter continued to operate on American soil and bedevil its antagonists within the JBS.

Another important episode in JBS activism centered on rightist resistance to the Negro civil rights movement. Welch, as discussed previously, had little sympathy for black civil rights activists or their cause. Welch and others on the right believed that the civil rights movement was nothing more than an attempt by communists to sew dissent and create disorder among the American people.

\(^{101}\) John Luckett to Stephen Young, 23 April 1963, MSS 3670, Box 41, Folder 1105, Young Papers.

\(^{102}\) Dale E. Fox to Stephen Young, 3 April 1963, MSS 3670, Box 41, Folder 1105, Young Papers.
According to Welch, the communist conspirators aimed to spark a civil war among whites and blacks in the Southern states, critically wounding the U.S. and creating the conditions for a Soviet seizure of power:

The whole slogan of "civil rights," as used to make trouble in the South...is an exact parallel to the slogan of "agrarian reform" which they used in China. And the Communists, who are pulling innocent and idealistic Americans into promoting this agitation for them, have no more real interest in the welfare of the Negroes and no more concern about the damage they actually do to our colored population, than the Chinese Communists had with regard to the welfare of the Chinese peasants.103

Robert Welch was convinced that the communist conspiracy was directing the civil rights movement. As evidence, he pointed to a pamphlet published in 1928 by Soviet communist Joseph Pogany. Writing under the alias of John Pepper, Pogany authored American Negro Problems. This small pamphlet allegedly outlined a plan by communists to exploit U.S. racial tensions to foment anti-capitalist revolution in the name of "negro national liberation." Welch pointed to anti-colonial rebellions in Indonesia and Algeria as examples of communist-inspired violence, and predicted that the civil rights movement in the U.S. would follow the same bloody script.104

While Welch was suspicious of the motivations behind the U.S. civil rights movement, he was also ideologically opposed to the goals enunciated by Black Americans. He and others on the right believed that segregation was a natural phenomenon, that "it [was] more natural and more comfortable for human beings generally to be with their own kind." He defended segregationists, claiming that it was "...white people, mostly of the South, who

103 JBS, Blue Book, 29.

104 JBS, Bulletin (September 1963), 69-71.
did so much to help Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver...in their noble efforts to help members of their own race to get ahead, and to become more useful and prosperous citizens." Welch claimed that American Negroes were more prosperous and had more opportunities to succeed in the U.S. than their counterparts in Africa. In his view, Jim Crow laws did not constitute any appreciable restriction on the liberties of Black Americans. Civil rights demonstrators were simply the deluded victims of communist agitators, pawns in an immoral conspiracy.\textsuperscript{105}

At times, Welch displayed a spectacular ignorance of the existence of Southern racism and violence against the civil rights demonstrators. His reactions to the violent images broadcast on national television from Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963 were typically colored by his conspiratorial view of the "liberal press." Believing that local law enforcement groups posed a tremendous threat to the communist conspiracy, Welch consequently believed that the Left was engaged in an effort to weaken and destroy the local police. As viewers nationwide were treated to the spectacle of Birmingham Police Commissioner "Bull" Connor unleashing a wave of violence, turning fire hoses and police dogs on black demonstrators, Welch claimed that the events were a fraud, orchestrated by communists for propaganda purposes:

The police chief of Birmingham was doing a superb job of maintaining law and order in the midst of a hot situation, while letting thousands of Negroes march and hundreds of white people protest all they wished. He merely set up a line of police, protected by their police dogs, to keep the two groups apart. And peace was maintained...while the level heads of the city...got together and tried to solve the problems underlying the turmoil. But this was the last thing that the instigators...wanted; and when incidents didn't arise, incidents had to be created. So a carefully planned tableau was enacted. While cameras were poised and ready to catch the show...one or more hotheads or

\textsuperscript{105}ibid., 76-79.
Believing the civil rights movement to be a fraud, Welch and the JBS devised a program of action to resist and expose the communist conspiracy.

First, Welch called for JBS members to actively oppose the civil rights program of the Kennedy administration. Writing in the JBS monthly Bulletin, he approvingly quoted from the pro-segregation speeches of Georgia Senator Richard B. Russell and encouraged Birchers to flood congressmen with letters opposing all civil rights legislation. He also called for members to submit editorial letters to their local newspapers, decrying the civil rights "fraud." Welch believed that the "insidious" pressure and strength of the Executive Department (as represented by Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy) had to be resisted by a massive effort on the Right. Welch warned JBS members that Gus Hall, the head of the CPUSA, was actively supporting the Kennedy civil rights effort, proving that this entire conflict was a "communist advance." 107

In Ohio, Senator Stephen Young was the target of numerous JBS letters calling for resistance to civil rights. He was a peculiar target for such efforts, being a firm supporter of the civil rights movement. One writer, identifying himself as a JBS member, called on Young to uphold the dictates of the U.S.

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106 JBS, Bulletin (July 1963), 12-14. This is one instance where Welch was partially correct in his evaluation. The Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. and his fellow civil rights activists had hoped for a provocative photo, demonstrating Southern violence against peaceful demonstrators. The violent confrontations in Birmingham constituted a significant victory for King. His advocacy of non-violent resistance, juxtaposed with the brutal actions of Sheriff "Bull" Connor, generated new support for the cause of civil rights.

107 JBS, Bulletin (September 1963), 83.
Constitution. This constituent, reacting to federal intervention in Mississippi after violence erupted over the admission of James Meredith to Ole Miss, demanded that Young oppose such action in the name of federalism. The author claimed that states' rights were being trampled in the name of the civil rights movement. Young was decidedly unsympathetic in his response to this letter. This episode was symptomatic of the entire JBS letter campaign, as numerous Birchers failed to persuade Congress to block civil rights legislation. Many of the letters were insulting and mean-spirited in tone, alienating their targets. This aspect of Birch activism will be examined in greater detail in a later section.\textsuperscript{108}

Welch also called for JBS members to read and distribute anti-civil rights literature in an attempt to resist the movement through education. He arranged for Birchers to distribute samples of "communist" civil rights propaganda, such as Pogany's \textit{American Negro Problems}, in order to demonstrate the "true" nature of the civil rights movement. The JBS also distributed anti-communist literature by Blacks opposed to the civil rights movement. One example of this genre was Manning Johnson's \textit{Color, Communism, and Common Sense} .\textsuperscript{109} Welch also utilized the JBS monthly magazine, \textit{American Opinion}, as a forum for obscure and controversial right-wing black intellectuals. In one issue, it carried an essay by Clennon King, professor of history at Alcorn College, who advocated the emigration of Black Americans to Africa.\textsuperscript{110} Welch advertised a wide range of anti-civil rights literature in the various JBS publications, and even promoted documentary films claiming to expose federal violence against

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\textsuperscript{108}Mr. John McCarty, To Stephen Young, 6 April 1965, MSS 3670, Box 43, Folder 1537, Young Papers.
\textsuperscript{109}JBS, \textit{Bulletin} (September 1963), 84-85.
\textsuperscript{110}Clennon King, "Negroes Back to Africa?", \textit{American Opinion} (May 1958), 21.
\end{flushright}
white Southerners. "Oxford, U.S.A." was a forty-five minute film compiled by a white demonstrator during the Ole Miss riots and Welch arranged for JBS state coordinators to obtain and show the film to prospective members. The JBS crusade against the civil rights movement spared no expense.\footnote{JBS, \textit{Bulletin} (September 1963), 84.}

Despite a multi-media effort, Robert Welch and the JBS failed miserably in the effort to resist civil rights. A series of civil rights bills passed after the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963, and the Birchers could do little more than lash out at their opponents in print. The JBS now set out to spread conservative thought by increasing the volume and accessibility of far-right publications.

Robert Welch and other spokesmen for the far-right had long complained about the domination of American intellectual and cultural life by Leftists. According to this critique, American education, entertainment, and the media were controlled by liberals, relegating conservatives to the margins of American society. This was, of course, by design, as the communist/one-world conspiracy relied on deception and misinformation in order to operate. Any effort to resist the Red Menace would require a massive effort to re-educate the American public, to alert concerned citizens to the threat of a communist cabal against American freedom. Accordingly, Welch set out to create an intellectual counterforce to the conspirators.

Welch believed that his efforts would have to be carefully targeted. In his view, most Americans were "instinctively opposed to communism." Therefore, JBS educational efforts should be aimed at a narrower audience, so as to maximize time, financial resources, and effort. Welch wished to preach the conservative gospel to "men who read and think and study, and are themselves
opinion-molders." In order to reach and re-educate this elite segment, Welch decided to create and promote conservative alternatives to the liberal/communist-dominated libraries, bookstores, and mass-media.¹¹²

Unconsciously borrowing a tactic from the super-patriots of the WWI era, the John Birch Society set out to manipulate the nation's public libraries. JBS members pressured local libraries to purchase conservative books. Welch called on his cohorts to search library stacks for specific authors and demand the purchase of far-right titles. In doing this, Welch believed that conservatives were merely countering the conspiratorial efforts of communists. He believed that communists and socialists had long used the public libraries as a weapon in their collective propaganda offensives. By calling on libraries to stock conservative titles, Welch believed that his organization was helping to balance the ideological tilt of American public libraries and resist the diabolical designs of the Left: "They [the communists] have been allowed, practically by default, to keep their hands on the rudder which determines the ideological slant of these libraries. Members of the John Birch Society must get their hands on the rudder too."¹¹³

Robert Welch was not content to merely target and infiltrate libraries. He also exhorted JBS members to pressure local newsstands to both carry far-right magazines and cease distributing leftist titles. In Warren, Ohio, Birchers pressured newsstands to remove The Progressive, The New Republic, The New Leader, and Liberation. Such efforts often had the unintended effect of alienating local residents and increasing demand for the allegedly subversive magazines. One woman was moved to write her Senator to decry the heavy-

¹¹²JBS, Blue Book, 83-84.

handed methods of the JBS, complaining of Birch attempts to intimidate newsstands. Birchers, believing that they were combatting subversion, persisted in their efforts to sanitize local media markets.\textsuperscript{114}

Robert Welch saw endless possibilities for spreading the conservative message. In attempting to boost the circulation of right-wing magazines and thereby further resist the leftist onslaught, he called on members to pressure national airlines to carry \textit{Human Events}. JBS members were encouraged to write letters to American, United, and Eastern Airlines, demanding that these businesses provide a conservative magazine, so as to provide a "trustworthy" interpretation of the news for air travellers. If this JBS effort proved successful, Welch promised that the organization would next turn its attention to the American railroad industry. JBS efforts to manipulate the reading material on airplanes were logical, given Welch's stated desire to target a more affluent, elite class of Americans.\textsuperscript{115}

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\textsuperscript{114}Mrs. Vincent DeSanti, To Stephen M. Young, 9 April 1964, MSS3670, Box 42, Folder 1396, Young Papers.
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\textsuperscript{115}JBS, \textit{Bulletin} (December 31, 1959), 13-14.
\end{flushright}
claimed that it was impossible to obtain the JBS *Blue Book* or his earlier work, *The Life of John Birch*, in any library or bookstore in a typical American city. To combat the leftist offensive against conservative books, Welch proposed the creation of a network of far-right bookstores, to be designated as "American Opinion Libraries."\(^{116}\)

Under this plan, JBS members were encouraged to become far-right book proprietors. Birchers rented out small storefronts and sold right-wing books and pamphlets carefully chosen from a JBS-approved list. American Opinion libraries served as the intellectual armories of Robert Welch's offensive against communism, offering a variety of titles to conservative consumers. JBS offerings included the memoirs of far-right heroes like Whitaker Chambers and Congressman Martin Dies, and the conspiracy theories of writers like Rosalie Gordon, John Stormer, Senator Joseph McCarthy, and of course, Robert Welch. The JBS reading rooms also sold the organization's monthly magazine, *American Opinion*, a regular forum for far-right journalists and theorists.\(^{117}\)

*American Opinion* was one of several conservative magazines that Robert Welch regularly touted in the JBS monthly *Bulletin*, along with *Human Events*, *National Review*, and the *American Mercury*. *American Opinion* was distinctive, however, in that it was the personal creation of Robert Welch. In his quest to spread conservative thought, Welch viewed the magazine as a crucial tool. Welch often used the magazine to reprint far right books in their entirety, thereby rescuing many works from obscurity. The magazine was yet another attempt by Welch to provide conservative answers for American problems. In a nation dominated by liberal culture, Welch was attempting to provide a


conservative counter-culture. *American Opinion* libraries and the JBS monthly magazine offered conservative prescriptions for national policy, provided conservative reviews of rightist books, and attempted to inject right-wing humor into mainstream culture through editorial cartoons and columns featuring Welch-inspired witticisms. Welch prided himself on his "common sense" approach and in each issue of *American Opinion*, printed a feature entitled "Bullets." This was a mixture of folksy sayings that one might have found in a *Reader's Digest*, but there were always several political barbs in the feature to distinguish it from a mainstream magazine. One read: "Modern Republicanism—an elephant trying to make a jackass out of itself."118

Every month's edition of *American Opinion* contained a section of book reviews. Since the Leftist media could not be trusted to either acknowledge or fairly review conservative books, the magazine devoted its entire review section to short treatments of right-wing books. Among those reviewed was Edgar C. Bundy's *Collectivism in the Churches*.119 Bundy was the founder of the Church League of America, based in Wheaton, Illinois. This organization was dedicated to exposing Communists and fellow travelers in the American Clergy. The Church League also set up shop as an amateur investigative service, compiling files on thousands of alleged Communists in the nation.120 *Collectivism in the Churches* claimed to expose the influence of liberal theologians who were rendering the teachings of Jesus Christ..."indistinguishable from the rantings of Karl Marx."121 Such claims


120Overstreet, *The Strange Tactics of Extremism*, 172.

struck a chord in Robert Welch, and he was anxious to disseminate them among his fellow conservatives. *American Opinion* proved to be a relatively successful tool for spreading the conservative gospel according to Welch.

Another weapon in the JBS arsenal, conceived and created by Welch, was the American Opinion Speakers Bureau. In late 1961, Welch announced the formation of a JBS-sponsored speakers bureau, composed of prominent conservative rhetoriticians, located in Brookfield, Massachusetts. Welch's aim was to spread conservative thought and "Americanist" ideas among a more mainstream segment of the public, offering his speakers to PTA groups, service clubs like Rotary and Kiwanis, Women's organizations, and Church groups.\(^{122}\) Welch wanted to spread the language of conservatism through dynamic speakers, claiming that liberals had effectively utilized this approach for years to dominate the national political and intellectual debate.\(^{123}\) The Speakers also served a public relations function, according to a former Bircher. Harshly criticized by the press for its resistance to the civil rights movement, the JBS attempted to combat charges of racism by recruiting Black anti-communist speakers for the bureau. The JBS made progress in this P.R. campaign until it hired Sheriff Jim Clark, the notorious segregationist made infamous by his clashes with the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. in Selma, Alabama. This move, according to former JBS organizer Gerald Schomp, harmed the image of the Speakers bureau and rendered it ineffective.\(^{124}\)

While the JBS focused a disproportionate amount of its efforts on education and the spread of conservative ideas, the group did occasionally

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\(^{122}\)JBS, *Bulletin* (October 2, 1961), 11.


engage in other forms of activism. The JBS frequently engaged in economic boycotts of businesses, hoping to bring down Communism through economic pressure. Welch and the JBS were adamantly opposed to trade with Communist-bloc nations, and were outraged by U.S. businesses daring to stock and sell communist-produced goods. In one case, JBS members were prosecuted by Klein's Department Store in Yonkers, New York, for throwing a "card party." This referred to the Bircher practice of placing anti-communist postcards on merchandise produced by Warsaw Pact nations, exhorting consumers to boycott the goods. After the court case, Welch wrote an editorial urging JBS members to flood Klein's with letters of protest, and demands to stop selling communist merchandise. He ominously warned the store that it risked being linked in the public mind with communism, subversion, and Alger Hiss.125

Welch also lashed out at Robert E. Lee, U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, for his criticism of groups boycotting Communist-made goods. Lee had decried these pressure tactics, as well as local ordinances discouraging the sale of such goods, claiming that these actions were adversely affecting U.S. foreign policy and commerce. Welch attacked Lee in the JBS Bulletin, defending conservative boycotts and decrying the unfair competitive advantage enjoyed by communists utilizing "slave labor." He characterized Lee's toleration of communist trade as "plain economic murder of American industry." Welch also predicted that Lee and his ilk would soon mobilize United Nations troops to protect the "right" of local stores to sell "communist slave labor merchandise." In Welch's view, the refusal to purchase communist-made goods

was a moral and economic necessity, and boycotts of complicit stores were a legitimate exercise of political activism.126

In addition to launching boycotts against politically offensive companies, Welch believed in publicly congratulating those businesses that pursued an economic nationalist/anti-communist trading policy. Businesses deemed by Welch to be patriotic were showered with laudatory letters from JBS members. Ralph's Grocery in Los Angeles was congratulated for its refusal to sell Polish hams; Safeway Stores in San Francisco was praised for its rejection of all goods "made behind the Iron Curtain."127 The Beckman Instrument Company in Fullerton, California, was lauded for its staunch refusal to supply Cuba with machine tools.128 The Warner-Swasey Company in Cleveland, Ohio, was singled out for praise by Welch for its advertising campaigns on behalf of the American free enterprise system.129 Welch praised his perceived capitalist allies with almost the same vigor he exhibited in condemning his communist enemies.

Despite all of these efforts, including the massive anti-communist education campaign, the attempts to impeach Earl Warren, abolish the United Nations, and resist the Civil Rights movement, the John Birch Society was ultimately unsuccessful in achieving its policy goals. By 1967, the JBS had grown to an estimated eighty thousand members, with four hundred chapters coast to coast. The JBS had a staff of 220, with 75 coordinators in the field, and was spending over $5 million a year. The group operated two magazines,

126ibid., 21-26.
129JBS, Bulletin (May 1, 1961), 22.
American Opinion and Review of the News, owned its own publishing house, Western Islands, and produced a national radio show. Various studies of the JBS revealed its membership to be well-educated and wealthier than most Americans. The JBS National Council in 1967 included fourteen company presidents, three physicians, and one banker. The group appeared to have all of the crucial resources required to exercise influence in the American political system. Why then, was the JBS so unsuccessful in achieving its aims? The next section will suggest and examine several explanations for this ultimate failure.

130 Bennett, The Party of Fear, 319-322.
CHAPTER 7

WHY DID THE JBS FAIL?

A primary reason for the failure of the JBS to achieve any of its political objectives was the often bizarre behavior of founder Robert Welch. His penchant for overheated rhetoric, and a disturbing tendency to categorize all of his critics as crypto-Communists led to unflattering portrayals of the JBS in the national media. Welch's amazing conspiracy theories, in which President Dwight D. Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles were accused of being active agents of the Communist party, attracted scorn and derision and resulted in popular portrayals of the JBS as a group of "crackpots." Welch made wild, unprovable accusations that severely strained the credibility of his organization and at times, made the JBS appear as a caricature of anti-communism.

Each year, the JBS monthly magazine, American Opinion, published an issue known as the "Scoreboard." This was Welch's annual attempt to rate the worldwide spread of communism. Elaborate tables purported to show the "percentage of communist control" in each nation of the world, focusing particularly on the United States. It was efforts like these that dismayed Welch's fellow conservatives and invited the ridicule of critics. In one issue of the
"Scoreboard," Welch estimated that the U.S. was 60-80 percent controlled by communists. This was an astounding charge, even by the standards of an anti-communist activist.\(^{131}\)

Robert Welch, occupying the most prominent position in the JBS, displayed a staggering ignorance of public relations, and frequently aired his conspiracy theories in print. He publicly declared that communists were responsible for the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and Lee Harvey Oswald. Welch also claimed that the Warren Court was working for the establishment of a "domestic dictatorship." He stated that "the conspiracy can now produce a total economic collapse any time that it decides to pull the chain." Welch angrily opined on other occasions that U.S. policy in Vietnam was designed to strengthen communist control and distract Americans from the conspiracy at home. These statements, publicly reported, made Welch and the JBS appear comical even to conservatives like William F. Buckley, and helped to confine the group to the fringes of the American political system.\(^{132}\)

Another important factor in the failure of the JBS was the group's penchant for alienating its potential allies. Prominent leaders of the John Birch Society engaged in public battles with fellow conservatives, questioning the patriotism and intelligence of numerous figures. JBS members and leaders handled their conservative critics roughly, often damaging relationships with prominent Americans on the Right. A few examples are illustrative.

Clarence Manion enjoyed a close relationship with Ohio Senator John W. Bricker, attributable in part to his personal crusade on behalf of the Bricker Amendment (this was a proposed amendment to the U.S. Constitution that


would have curtailed the President's treaty-making powers and ability to enter into agreements with foreign powers; the amendment was defeated in the U.S. Senate in 1954). Manion was fired from his position in the Eisenhower Administration because of his zealous advocacy for the amendment. Having infuriated his centrist bosses, Manion proceeded to anger his onetime ally, Bricker.  

The event that caused friction between the two men centered on a disagreement over the Eisenhower doctrine for the Middle East. Bricker was willing to concede the power to commit U.S. troops abroad to the President, seemingly contradicting his whole case for a constitutional amendment to limit Presidential power. Manion was fervently opposed to this concession, and was even more outraged by a Senate resolution that appeared to surrender control of American troops to the United Nations. In a testy exchange of letters, he demanded that Bricker remain true to the principles outlined in the Bricker Amendment. In a gesture that stung Bricker, Manion turned over his correspondence with the Senator to the Chicago Tribune, which proceeded to publish what had been intended to be a private letter.

Bricker fired off one last angry letter in the exchange on March 5, 1957, saying: "I am sorry that you turned my letter of February 12th over to the Chicago Tribune with your comments thereon, and without consulting me or seeking any clarification of my position. This action, it seems to me, is not

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134 Mr. Clarence Manion, To John Bricker, 14 February 1957, MSS 340, Box 128, Folder 8, John W. Bricker Papers, Ohio Historical Society (hereafter cited as the Bricker Papers).

135 Editorial, "Are We Under the UN Thumb?," Chicago Tribune (February 17, 1957), 14.
conducive to the free and frank exchange of views between friends." Bricker went on to criticize Manion and others of his ideological bent, chastising them for disseminating conspiracy theories and sewing division among conservatives:

Ever since the beginning of the Korean War, I have observed a strategical blunder on behalf of many staunch pro-Americans. What they have done is to confirm the dangerous propaganda of the One-Worlders to the effect that Korea was a United Nations war...that the General Assembly...has enforcement powers with respect to acts of aggression. I hesitate to say anything more without first being advised whether or not my letters to you, and your comments thereon, are available for publication in the medium of your choice and without notice to me.

Bricker obviously felt betrayed by Clarence Manion. The latter used his close relationship with the Senator to obtain candid comments on a divisive policy issue and proceeded to turn all of the letters over to a conservative newspaper. The Chicago Tribune blasted Bricker for his apparent willingness to abandon principle. Bricker, a man generally described as a "rock-ribbed anti-communist," who delivered the eulogy at Joseph McCarthy's funeral, was suddenly under attack from the Right. Manion had succeeded in alienating an influential ally, something that JBS leaders and members would do time and again in the future.

A particularly damaging public feud with William F. Buckley was yet another example of the JBS propensity for infuriating fellow conservatives. Buckley, who many credit with the founding of the modern right, was deeply concerned with the public reputation of mainstream conservatism. His founding

136Senator John W. Bricker, To Clarence Manion, 5 March 1957, MSS 340, Box 128, Folder 8, Bricker Papers.

137Ibid.
of the *National Review* in 1955 was an effort to provide an intellectual voice to the conservative movement, an ideological alternative to the opinion journals of the Left. Buckley was alarmed by the spectacular charges of Robert Welch, fearing that the latter's condemnation of former President Eisenhower threatened to relegate mainstream conservatism to "crackpot alley." He began a subtle campaign to distance the Right from Robert Welch, publishing an editorial in 1961 that condemned attacks on Ike and suggested that members of the JBS could not be presumed to agree with Welch's bizarre assertions. Buckley, not wishing to alienate the grass-roots conservatives involved in the JBS, wished the organization well, and suggested that responsible members repudiate Welch's conspiracy theories.138

One year later, Buckley published another criticism of Robert Welch, analyzing the JBS leader's recent writings and concluding that his "distortions disqualified him from effective services as an anti-Communist leader." *National Review* writer and conservative icon Russell Kirk accused Welch of dividing the conservative movement and reducing its chances for success in electoral politics. "Cry wolf often enough, and everyone takes you for an imbecile or a knave, when after all there are wolves in this world." Kirk further criticized Welch's "intemperance of utterance" and called on JBS members to begin to "dissipate the fog of confusion that issues from Mr. Welch's smoking typewriter."139

In 1965, Buckley's feud with Welch and the John Birch Society exploded into prominence. The intellectual conservative movement, chastened by the crushing electoral defeat of Barry Goldwater in 1964, began a public

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repudiation of the radical right fringe groups that were now being blamed for the political failure of the Republican Party. Buckley wished to purge the conservative movement of its less attractive and respectable elements. This was a move entirely in character for Buckley, who formed *National Review* partly in response to his own dismay at the anti-Semitic turn taken by the *American Mercury* (a prominent Rightist opinion journal) during the 1950s. Buckley devoted an entire issue of his magazine in 1965 to a public repudiation of Robert Welch and the John Birch Society. In this special feature, *National Review* painstakingly recounted the history of the JBS and its ideology, focusing on the strange theories of communist conspiracy circulated by Robert Welch. *National Review* columnists Frank Meyer and James Burnham hammered away at the reasoning behind JBS principles, opining that the organization was damaging the conservative movement and exaggerating the actual influence of communists in the United States. They also claimed that Welch and his followers were obliterating the distinctions between communism and liberalism, allowing their minds to become "warped by an adherence [to a] psychosis of conspiracy."  

The most damaging component of the National Review feature was Buckley's publication of angry, intemperate letters he had received from JBS members after a critical column he wrote about Welch. The letters made for unflattering portrayals of the organization, revealing JBS members to be uncivil and at times, irrational.

Mr. Arthur Barksdale of San Mateo, California, questioned Buckley's commitment to anti-Communism. "I have always believed you to be a true conservative. However, since you seem categorically to accept most of the left-

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wing programs I'm beginning to doubt your sincerity." Other writers expressed outrage at any criticism of Welch. Mr. and Mrs. John Dalziel of Brooklyn said "when you attack Robert Welch, you attack every member in the John Birch Society." Other writers were childishly and alarmingly abusive. Robert Jonas of Oyster Bay, NY, proclaimed that "I am unable to understand whether in this latest attack, you are just being officious, or whether you just suffer from hot flashes, in some form of male menopause?" James Oviatt of Los Angeles posed the question "I am just wondering what Zionist Jew wrote this article? Could it have been Lippmann, Goldberg, or even Abe- Johnson's attorney [Abe Fortas, appointed to the Supreme Court by Lyndon Johnson] ? I have known Bob Welch for over fifteen years; I think he told the truth about Eisenhower."141

The letters were appalling to many conservative readers and the image they conveyed of an out-of-control, paranoid band of rightist extremists helped to further damage the reputation and diminish the political effectiveness of the JBS. Prominent conservative politicians, including Barry Goldwater and Senator John Tower, added commentaries at the end of the National Review feature, imploring conservatives to reject the message of Birchism. Once again, Welch and the JBS had succeeded in alienating a powerful force on the Right.142

Michael Lind, an influential conservative writer who began his career as a research assistant to William F. Buckley, has written that the latter's repudiation of the JBS during the Sixties was crucial to the organization's ultimate failure. Lind claims that Buckley's actions drove the most extreme zealots of the Right out of the mainstream conservative movement by publicly

141 Ibid., 917.
142 Ibid., 928-928.
exposing and condemning the most extreme conspiracy theories of Robert Welch. Buckley stripped the JBS of intellectual respectability and made the organization a pariah among mainstream conservatives. Lind suggests that Buckley's early action to discredit the JBS slowed the group's membership drive, depriving it of the numbers required to exercise political power.143

The JBS also attracted unfavorable publicity from its attacks on political opponents. The letter-writing campaigns promoted by Welch often had the unintended effect of making liberal politicians appear to be victims of mean-spirited political attacks. Ohio Senator Stephen Young demonstrated proficiency in turning Birch attacks to his political advantage. The senator attracted positive press coverage for his witty and caustic responses to the insulting letters directed to him by JBS members.

Young began to draw the ire of JBS members in 1961 when he made several speeches on the floor of the U.S. Senate attacking the conspiracy theories of Robert Welch. Young was infuriated by JBS broadsides against Eisenhower, Earl Warren, and John Foster Dulles. He accused Welch of heading a secret, conspiratorial, organization, and labelled him a "little Fuhrer." Young denounced the JBS Blue Book as Welch's version of "Mein Kampf" and belittled the JBS founder as a failed political candidate given to fits of temper. Senator Young believed that the JBS obsession with domestic Communism was distracting U.S. attention from the real threats to American security posed by China and the Soviet Union. He declared that extremists of the "lunatic fringe" were poisoning the political system through unjustified attacks on patriotic Americans.144 Young likened the JBS to another, earlier group of

143Lind, Up From Conservatism, 1, 67, 110, 117.

144Congress, Senate, Senator Young of Ohio Speaking on the John Birch Society, 76th Cong., 1st Sess., Congressional Record (20 April 1961), 5985.
extremists, the Know-Nothings, and warned that the group was a twentieth century version of those conspiracy-obsessed extremists.145

Welch immediately called on JBS members to flood Young with letters protesting the anti-JBS speech.146 This proved to be a tremendous miscalculation on Welch's part, for the onslaught of letters did not have the effect of muting Stephen Young. The Senator delighted in tormenting angry Birchers, reprinting their outraged letters in his monthly newsletter to constituents. One letter was fairly typical of the JBS responses:

Your insipid reference about lunatic right wing fringe reactionaries is so offensive to those of us who support Robert Welch, we are working with a considered, righteous, centered activity to see that you will never embarrass the people of Ohio in public office again.

Young reprinted the letter under the headline "Orchid From Constituent."147

In the years following his first comments on Welch and the JBS, Senator Young continued to receive a heavy dose of correspondence from Birchers. These letters almost always had the unintended effect of energizing Young in his crusade against the minions of Robert Welch. The insulting tone of these letters reflected poorly on the JBS and Young's impassioned responses generated favorable media coverage. Robert Bolt of Westerville, Ohio, afforded Young an irresistible target with a letter in 1962 in which he referred to the Senator as "a standing joke," and referred to Young's support for civil liberties as "an apologetic manner for communist causes." Bolt asserted further that

145Ibid., (3 April 1961), 5097.
146JBS, Bulletin (May 1961).
Young's "lunatic, left-wing stigma and stature have been established and well-documented by... [the] superpatriots you abhor."\textsuperscript{148} The Senator responded in typical fashion: "Acknowledging your insulting letter, Buster, you surely have an inflated opinion regarding yourself. Your letter amused some members of my staff who open my mail. It was filed with a few letters from other crackbrains."\textsuperscript{149}

Senator Young's written skirmishes with the JBS provide an excellent case study of the failure of Birch activism. JBS members hoped to mute Young's criticism of their organization while rallying political opposition against the Democratic Senator. Instead, Young became a minor media celebrity for his colorful letters, in which he referred to one JBS member as "a liar" and deemed him "lower than a snake's tail in a wagon rut." Young, who narrowly won election to the Senate in 1958 over Republican conservative John Bricker, was easily reelected in 1964 and continued to sting the JBS for the duration of his career.\textsuperscript{150}

Another possible factor in the failure of the JBS was a 15 year-long libel case. The John Birch Society regularly attacked liberals in its publications, referring to Martin Luther King Jr., President John F. Kennedy, poet Carl Sandburg, and CBS news anchor Walter Cronkite, among others, as Communists or subversives. More often than not, liberals dismissed the JBS as "crackpots" and ignored the organization's charges. In 1969, however, one target of the JBS decided to strike back.

\textsuperscript{148}Mr. Robert E. Bolt, To Stephen Young, 11 August 1962, MSS 3670, Box 40, Folder 1034, Young Papers.

\textsuperscript{149}Stephen M. Young, To Robert E. Bolt, 28 August 1962, MSS 3670, Box 40, Folder 1034, Young Papers.

\textsuperscript{150}Stephen M. Young, To John W. Brown, 29 May 1963, MSS 3670, Box 41, Folder 1134, Young Papers.
As Mary Giampietro, the wife of a young Chicago lawyer, exited a supermarket on March 22, 1969, she encountered a woman distributing pamphlets. The enthusiastic volunteer dropped a flyer into Giampietro's bag. It was a reprint from *American Opinion* titled "Frame-Up: Richard Nuccio and the War on Police." The leaflet commented on a controversial murder case involving a Chicago policeman.\(^{151}\)

Mrs. Giampietro was familiar with the case. The events had occurred near her home. Moreover, her husband Wayne's law firm was involved in the dispute. In fact, the article included a picture of her husband's boss, attorney Elmer Gertz. Underneath the photo, the caption read, "Elmer Gertz of Red Guild harasses Nuccio." The article charged Gertz with involvement in a "Communist conspiracy" to discredit and destroy the Chicago Police Department. Giampietro called her husband and showed the essay to the two lawyers.\(^{152}\)

Angered by the attack on his reputation and worried that the article might damage his legal career, Gertz sued the JBS for libel. Thus began a nearly fifteen year odyssey through the federal court system, culminating in a victory for Gertz. In targeting Elmer Gertz, the JBS had once again miscalculated. While JBS claims and charges of Communist conspiracy were regularly lampooned in the national press, few criticized by the Birchers had been willing to take legal action. Gertz was. He was feisty, proud, and experienced in the field of libel law. As a successful attorney and longtime resident of Chicago, he valued his reputation and was incensed by the JBS charges against him. Gertz had already sued rightist columnist Westbrook Pegler and the Hearst newspaper chain. He had vociferously criticized the Red-baiting of *Chicago Tribune*


\(^{152}\)Ibid.
publisher Robert McCormick. After reading the *American Opinion* article by Alan Stang, he was determined to both defend his reputation and damage the John Birch Society.\textsuperscript{153}

After two trials and an appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court in 1974, Gertz and his attorney, Wayne Giampietro, successfully proved that the JBS had falsely and maliciously accused the plaintiff of being a Communist. Gertz was therefore entitled to collect damages. In 1981, at the conclusion of the second trial, Gertz was awarded $100,000 in actual damages and $300,000 in punitive damages.\textsuperscript{154} Following two years of dilatory tactics and the loss of an appeal to the Supreme Court, the John Birch Society paid Gertz more than half a million dollars in damages after interest was added to the original award.\textsuperscript{155}

The JBS was shocked by the outcome. It never truly expected to lose the case. John F. McManus, the current (1997) President of the John Birch Society, claimed that the Supreme Court "had to overturn all previous libel precedents in order to find the JBS guilty. This is why it [Gertz v. Robert Welch, Inc.] is referred to in all of the law schools. We were terribly surprised." The JBS had never before lost in court. It had engaged in legal battles with the Federal Elections Commission and survived over thirty lawsuits without losing prior to 1983.\textsuperscript{156}

Some observers predicted the demise of the JBS because of the size of the award. Historian David H. Bennett claimed that the JBS was on the verge of bankruptcy during the 1980s. The Anti-Defamation League, which sparred with


\textsuperscript{154}Gertz, *Gertz v. Robert Welch, Inc.*, 121.

\textsuperscript{155}Ibid., 209-210.

\textsuperscript{156}John F. McManus, President of John Birch Society, Interview by Author, 22 January 1996, Wakefield, Mass.,(Phone).
the JBS throughout the Sixties, charging it with anti-Semitism, claimed that the group was defunct as of 1993. These claims proved to be mistaken.¹⁵⁷

The judgment awarded to Elmer Gertz, coupled with the legal fees amassed by the JBS, could have bankrupted the organization. Gertz himself reported that the JBS had to sell an office building to pay the judgment.¹⁵⁸ This was inaccurate. In an amazingly successful fundraising effort, the JBS sent out personal appeals from Robert Welch to approximately fifty of its wealthiest members. Requesting contributions of $10,000 and up, the JBS quickly raised the money to pay Gertz.¹⁵⁹ The adverse court decision actually served to energize a portion of the JBS membership, convincing them of a leftist effort to mute conservative political groups. One $10,000 donor wrote Welch a note, urging him to "please continue to give 'em hell."¹⁶⁰ The JBS organization, which published two magazines, operated its own publishing house, and managed its own summer camp, Robert Welch University, seemed to be financially healthy.

While John F. McManus has claimed that the Gertz lawsuit did not cripple the JBS, there is evidence suggesting that the group has experienced financial difficulties. In 1983, before the Gertz judgment was paid, the JBS published two magazines, *American Opinion* and *Review of the News*. It merged the two titles in September of 1985 into one bi-weekly magazine, *The New American*. In the summer of 1989, the JBS relocated its offices from Belmont, Massachusetts, and San Marino, California, to Appleton, Wisconsin, the


¹⁶⁰Robert Welch, To Unnamed JBS Member, March 1983, (Fundraising Letter), John Birch Society, Appleton, Wisconsin.
birthplace of Joseph McCarthy. McManus claimed that the JBS simply made a decision to close down offices on the east and west coasts in favor of a more centralized location. While the move saved money, permitting the JBS to reduce its fulltime staff from 75 to 30 employees, the president claims that the move was not motivated by a budget shortfall. As for JBS membership figures, it has always been the policy of the organization to keep the number of members a secret. McManus would not hint at the group's totals, but did claim that membership was unaffected by the Gertz decision.161

One change resulting from the Gertz case is the editorial practice of The New American. While McManus has insisted that the JBS is as tenacious as ever in its reporting, he admitted that writers are now more cautious. It would appear that the JBS has engaged, to some degree, in self-censorship. The Gertz case had a significant effect on libel law and a subtle, but no less important, effect on the right-wing politics practiced by the Birch Society.

A final explanation for the ultimate failure of the JBS is its gradual loss of publicity and media coverage. The JBS exploded into public consciousness in 1961 when Welch's charges about Dwight Eisenhower in The Politician were exposed in the press. The JBS continued to attract media scrutiny throughout the Sixties as it battled with the ADL over charges of anti-Semitism, and participated in the Presidential campaigns of Barry Goldwater and George Wallace. Journalists were fascinated by the bizarre charges of the JBS and scholars from the fields of history, political science, sociology, religion, anthropology, and communications published studies of the group. By the end of the 1960s, however, interest in the JBS began to diminish. A new grass-roots conservative movement began to emerge in the mid-Seventies, as Protestant


American Opinion Libraries, once visible throughout the nation's cities, were virtually non-existent by the Nineties. While the organization entered the modern communications age with a web page on the Internet, it was laboring in relative obscurity. The John Birch Society, once the most feared and reviled of rightist political groups, now exists in near anonymity, with its fiercest foe, the Anti-Defamation League, preoccupied with other extremist threats. 162

162 Bennett, The Party of Fear, 430.
CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

The story of the John Birch Society is a useful case study for understanding the importance of conservative ideas and the anti-radical impulse in American history. The JBS, contrary to earlier scholarly opinion, drew upon a long heritage of American and European intellectual traditions. It built upon the efforts of earlier anti-communist and anti-radical organizations and attempted to create a countervailing intellectual and ideological force in American politics. The JBS did not consist merely of crackpots and mentally unbalanced individuals. Its membership included Americans of wealth, education, and social prestige, and the JBS managed to elect two of its members to Congress in the early 1960s. The JBS was the wealthiest, best-organized, and most-educated rightist group of its era.

Yet, it failed to achieve almost all of its political objectives, as the United States dramatically increased the size of its central government, expanded social programs, passed numerous civil rights laws, and experienced a constitutional revolution under the leadership of Warren Court. The United States continued to participate in the United Nations and American voters elected Richard Nixon, a politician reviled within the JBS, to two terms.

And yet, the influence of the JBS continues to be felt within American politics. The decision by the United States to participate in U.N. peacekeeping efforts in Bosnia came under severe attack from the JBS in late 1995. JBS
leaders saw the proposal to place U.S. soldiers under a U.N. military command as a thinly-veiled effort to surrender U.S. national sovereignty and "transform the U.S. military into an adjunct of the United Nations." The JBS magazine, The New American, began a vigorous defense of U.S. soldiers refusing to serve under the U.N. command, singling out U.S. Army Specialist Michael New for praise. New was court-martialed for his refusal to accept an assignment to a U.N. mission in Macedonia. He became a hero to many on the right, claiming that his oath to protect and defend the U.S. Constitution did not include service under the U.N. command. New claimed that service in a U.N. force amounted to pledging his allegiance to a foreign power. The JBS featured New in a cover story in late 1995, blasting U.S. officials for allegedly persecuting a "patriotic" American soldier. JBS writer William Norman Grigg touted the case as yet another example of the "New World Order" conspiracy, where "patriotism is treason." By providing a steady barrage of anti-U.N. propaganda, the JBS was determined to resist and weaken the organization.163 Michael Lind has observed that: "The ideology of the grass-roots Right has hardly changed since the 1950's- it is anti-civil rights laws, anti-New Deal, anti-foreign aid, anti-federal government, anti-secular, anti-gay, anti-modern art, anti-public education- in a word, anti-liberal.164

The JBS has faded from public view, but its issues still occupy a prominent role in American politics. Where Robert Welch once attracted the scorn of liberals, the Reverend Pat Robertson now monopolizes the attention of critics on the Left. Michael Lind has noted the similarities between the JBS of

164Lind, Up From Conservatism, 76.
the 1960s and the Christian Coalition of the Nineties.165 Both Robertson and Welch have commented on the role of the Bavarian Illuminati; both have been accused of anti-Semitism; Robertson and JBS writer James Perloff have written about the conspiratorial designs of the "Rothschilds and Bilderbergers" and shadowy international bankers; and both have decried the influence of organizations like the United Nations, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the Trilateral Commission.166

Lind, writing as a moderate conservative partisan, has called on conservative intellectuals and politicians to repudiate Pat Robertson much like Buckley and others encouraged repudiation of Welch in the 1960s. He has commented that the only difference between the JBS and the Christian Coalition is the superior number of members in the latter group. In this vein, Lind suggests that the Republican Party and conservative intellectuals have tolerated Robertson largely because of his ability to deliver right-wing votes.167

It has not been my purpose in this study to advocate any actions in the American political system. I have simply tried to demonstrate that the issues and ideas raised by the John Birch Society still play an important role in American life today. The JBS was a new version of the anti-radical impulse found in American history, drawing social elites to its organization and emphasizing the importance of a conservative re-education of the citizenry. The group consciously drew inspiration from a wide range of conservative intellectual sources, and attempted to put its ideas into action through various political activities. The JBS failed to achieve its objectives because of its inability to work effectively within the political system, alienating its allies and

165Ibid., 110.


167Lind, Up From Conservatism, 117.
attracting negative publicity. Nevertheless, the issues championed by the JBS remain prominent to this day. The JBS therefore provides an excellent model for understanding the importance of conservatism in American history.
CHAPTER 9

EPILOGUE

The space limitations of a thesis necessarily limit the depth and detail of this essay. However, because the John Birch Society is a fascinating subject for study, I would like to suggest some additional topics for future research.

Scholars have devoted little attention to the John Birch Society since the late 1960s. Consequently, little is known about the group's activities from the 1970s to the present. In those years, the John Birch Society underwent significant changes in leadership, as founder Robert Welch died in 1985, and was succeeded by several men, including the late Georgia Congressman Larry McDonald, and the present President, John McManus. Future studies of the JBS could focus on the group's history since 1970. Scholars should pay particular attention to JBS activism in those years, and the fallout surrounding the Gertz libel case.

I also believe that future studies should incorporate the manuscript collections of prominent JBS leaders and opponents. Clarence Manion's papers are available to scholars through the Chicago Historical Society. U.S. Senator Howard Metzenbaum served as Chief of Staff to Stephen Young during the late 1950s and early 1960s. His papers, available through the Western Reserve Historical Society in Cleveland, could serve as a valuable
insight into the mindset of JBS opponents. It would also be useful to study the importance of various opponents in rendering the JBS politically impotent. While this essay chronicled rightist opposition to the JBS (William F. Buckley), future work could study the role played by the National Council for Civic Responsibility, a moderate foe of the JBS.

Another possible area for research would be the personal backgrounds of JBS members. The group's appeal to various conservatives could be further explained through the compilation of a psychological profile of the "typical" JBS member.

I would also be intrigued by a study that attempted to establish links between the JBS and current far-right groups, including the Christian Coalition and various militia organizations. The Christian Coalition presently supports many of the issues championed by the JBS thirty years ago. I believe that a detailed study of Christian Coalition members would reveal strong links between the two organizations. Current members of the Christian Coalition may have had past contact with the JBS, and some may still belong to the organization founded by Robert Welch.

Finally, scholars should seek to interview more members of the JBS. Interviews are an invaluable method for unearthing new information about this neglected but important group. JBS leaders and staff, as well as local members could provide a wealth of new insights into the ideology and mindset of the Far Right. The John Birch Society is a worthy and interesting subject for future scholars.
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