

# The John Birch Society: The American Far-Right's Struggle for Respectability

By

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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION..... 1-16

CHAPTER 1: THE ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE OF THE JOHN BIRCH SOCIETY ..... 17-41

CHAPTER 2: THE JOHN BIRCH SOCIETY’S IDEOLOGY: OFFICIAL AND IMPLICIT ..... 42-64

CONCLUSION. .... 65-66

BIBLIOGRAPHY ..... 67-70

## Introduction

### Thesis Statement

The formation of the anti-Communist John Birch Society in 1958 marked a turning point in how the American far right organized, both with regards to its organizational structure, and in its public relations strategy. The John Birch Society relied on the conservative ideology of meritocracy to encourage incentive-based organizational staff labor from its membership, in a strategy reflective of its leadership's business nationalist background. The Society's organizational structure of small, localized chapters directed by the staff of a tightly controlling centralized leadership was explicitly inspired by Communist organization and served to facilitate both tight top down control from an authoritative central leadership, and widespread grassroots recruitment. Also serving this top down control were policies in place to vet and curate a respectable membership in line with the Society's public relations strategy, and to quickly expel dissidents, suspected subversives, and individuals who hurt the public image.

The leadership of the Society sought to avoid the label of radicalism and to cultivate a respectable public image that would appeal to mainstream America. However, the race-neutral economic conservatism of the Society's official ideology existed in tension with the socially conservative, white supremacist undertones of its implicit ideology, and each appealed to various parts of America's conservative and far right populations. While the Society's official ideology disavowed bigotry and claimed a neutral, educational mission with the simple, inoffensive motto of "Less government, more responsibility, and – with God's help – a better world,"<sup>1</sup> the racist and sexist subtext of their publications and political campaigns attracted extremist individuals. These extremists contributed to the Society's reputation as radical and created a feedback loop as

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<sup>1</sup> 1974 April 17 letter, Carton 9, Folder 6, *John Birch Society records 1928-1990*

more extremists sought out community and purpose in the Society. Furthermore, unavoidable in the Society's official ideology was the apocalyptic, unabashedly alarmist, and paranoid-conspiratorial view of Communism as an omnipresent, malevolent force, which was considered radical and controversial. This conspiracy theory was understood as being wielded as a dangerous continuation of McCarthyism, which quickly resulted in condemnation and distancing from mainstream conservatives and contributed to the Society's negative reputation.

My analysis will maintain that Welch and the rest of Society leadership use propaganda and psychological manipulation through Society communications to grow membership and encourage volunteer labor and donations. However, it is entirely possible that Welch's apocalyptic worldview was not cynically manufactured, but was genuinely held, despite not reflecting reality. It is not within the scope of my project to attempt an analysis of Welch's inner intentions; my focus remains on the Society's strategies to recruit and retain members, and the consequences and byproducts of those strategies.

### Methodology

My primary source research involved extended analysis of collections at Brown University's University Archives and Manuscripts at John Hay Library in Providence, Rhode Island, and at Tufts University's Digital Collections and Archives at Tisch Library in Somerville, Massachusetts. At the John Hay Library I conducted research with the collection *John Birch Society records 1928-1990*, which were collected by members of the social justice think tank Political Research Associates (based in Somerville, Massachusetts) as the materials were discarded during the Society's 1989 move to Appleton, Wisconsin from Belmont, Massachusetts. At the Tisch Library I conducted research with the collections *Political Research Associates records 1908-2011*, of the above-mentioned think tank which had collected materials and

research regarding the John Birch Society, amongst other far-right groups, and the *Institute for First Amendment Studies records, 1920-1999*, of another Massachusetts-based organization which sought to combat the American Religious Right's political activism and which also included materials on the John Birch Society. I also used *The Blue Book of the Birch Society*, the manuscript of the two-day presentation Robert Welch gave at the founding of the John Birch Society in 1958, as a primary source, as it served as the most official representation of the Society's ideology. In the case of all of these materials, I attempted to sift out information about the Society's organizational structure over the years and conducted a close reading of the language in Society publications and internal communications to develop my analysis of the Society's public relations strategies, and challenges to the public image they attempted to craft.

### Background

The John Birch Society was founded on Tuesday, December 9, 1958 in Indianapolis, Indiana, by Robert H.W. Welch Jr. and a selection of his prospective Council members, after a two-day session that had begun on Monday. Of the seventeen associates Welch invited, eleven joined him, and ten of these eleven joined his founding Council.<sup>2</sup> This two-day session consisted almost entirely of Welch delivering a monologue that was recorded, published by the Society's Western Islands publications branch, and distributed to all future members as *The Blue Book of the John Birch Society*.<sup>3</sup> Gathered at this founding meeting were "11 of the nation's richest businessmen," described by Welch as "all...influential and very busy men."<sup>4</sup> <sup>5</sup> The original

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<sup>2</sup> Mulloy, D. J. 2014. *The World of the John Birch Society: Conspiracy, Conservatism and the Cold War*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 9.

<sup>3</sup> Welch Jr., Robert W. *The Blue Book of the John Birch Society*. Boston: Western Islands, 1961, i.

<sup>4</sup> Welch, i.

<sup>5</sup> Savage, John. "The John Birch Society Is Back." *POLITICO Magazine*. (2017): 3.

twenty-six Council members consisted of: “three medical doctors, three lawyers, one retired General, one syndicated columnist, a priest and seventeen executives of medium-sized corporations.”<sup>6</sup> Notably, Welch had cultivated a sense of drama and urgency around this founding meeting, not telling the invitees of its purpose until their arrival. He states, “[They came at my invitation, without knowing the reason why.”<sup>7</sup> The intentionally mysterious calling of this meeting was representative of Welch’s understanding of the significance of his purpose in founding the Society. At the beginning of the meeting he told his audience with the same dramatic undertone: “. . .Before tomorrow is over, I hope to have all of you feeling that you are taking part, here and now, in the beginning of a movement of historical importance.”<sup>8</sup>

The formation of the Society took place in the historical context of an anxious moment for conservatives; Democrats had won the recent 1958 midterm elections handily, removing many conservatives from Congress.<sup>9</sup> Also contributing to a sense of anxiety for conservatives was the recent death of their leader, Senator Robert Taft, in 1953, after serving 14 years in Congress, and the discrediting of the now-notorious Senator Joseph McCarthy, who had been central to the spread of paranoid around an alleged conspiratorial infiltration of the United States government by Communists.<sup>10</sup> At this time in 1958, Barry Goldwater, the United States Senator from Arizona, was emerging as a new leader with strong criticisms of the Republican President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s administration, a President whose policies and character were also

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<sup>6</sup> Diamond, Sara. 1995. *Roads to Dominion: Right-Wing Movements and Political Power in the United States*. New York: Guilford Press, 55.

<sup>7</sup> Welch, i.

<sup>8</sup> Welch, 3.

<sup>9</sup> Himmelstein, Jerome L. 1990. *To the Right: The Transformation of American Conservatism*. University of California Press, 65.

<sup>10</sup> Himmelstein, 65.

condemned by Welch.<sup>11</sup> These criticisms centered around a desire to combat the labor movement and the legacy of the New Deal, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's domestic program which increased economic relief and government regulation of the economy between 1933 and 1939, as a response to the hardships of the Great Depression.<sup>12</sup> Conservatives sought to push back against this expanded government role and to restore a more traditional *laissez-faire* economy.

The anxiety of white conservatives in 1958 was also fueled by the rise of the civil rights movement in the United States, which destabilized the security of their social privilege under white supremacy. This movement saw its beginnings in 1948 with President Truman's signing of Executive Order 9981, granting equal rights to members of the military, and gained visibility in 1954 when the Supreme Court ruled segregation unconstitutional in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kans.*, and in 1955 when Rosa Park was arrested for refusing to move to the back of a bus. Furthermore, the year before the Society's founding in 1957, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference was founded and Martin Luther King Jr. was made its president.<sup>13</sup> The Society's reaction to the civil rights movement was to condemn it as part of the Communist conspiracy that supposedly sought to fan the flames of racial conflict.<sup>14</sup>

Demographic changes also contributed to this white anxiety. Berlet notes, "...Black and Mexican Americans were moving from the countryside to the cities, from farm and service labor into industry, and, to a much smaller extent, into white-collar and professional work...rapidly growing communities of color in major cities...were a political force to be reckoned with."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Himmelstein, 66.

<sup>12</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "New Deal."

<sup>13</sup> Brunner, Borgna and Elissa Haney. "Civil Rights Timeline." *Infoplease*. April 3, 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Diamond, 55.

<sup>15</sup> Berlet, Chip, and Matthew Nemiroff Lyons. 2000. *Right-wing Populism in America: Too Close for Comfort*. New York, NY: Guilford, 168.

However, non-White Americans remained economically disenfranchised in the face of systematic racism.

The Society was largely defined by its belief in a Communist conspiracy internal to the United States, often referred to in vague and ominous terms. This ambiguity around who was a Communist and who was simply an unaware puppet of Communist interests points to the Society's much broader condemnation of all collectivism, and distrust of any government regulation of American life or economy.<sup>16</sup> Historian D.J. Mulloy points out that businessmen were an ideal audience for this aspect of the Society's ideology and political organizing, as they were "worried about high taxation rights or the expansion of workers' rights..."<sup>17</sup> Indeed, businessmen were specifically targeted for recruitment as part of the Society's "Businessmen's Chapters," to be discussed further in Chapter 1.

The demographics of the Society, as analyzed in a study by Barbara Stone in 1974, reflected a more highly educated and higher economic class of members than expected. Stone points out, "...The over-all category of irrational, uneducated, lower-status groups on the extreme right seems to be generally accepted."<sup>18</sup> However, studies of the Society revealed that the membership was relatively young. "The median age was 44... 58% were under 40 when they joined the organization."<sup>19</sup> The members were most often "housewives or men with white-collar, upper-status occupations."<sup>20</sup> The uncharacteristically upper-class nature of Society membership may be partially understood by the previously mentioned appeal of conservative economic

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<sup>16</sup> Mulloy, 11.

<sup>17</sup> Mulloy, 11.

<sup>18</sup> Stone, Barbara S. "The John Birch Society: A Profile." *The Journal of Politics* 36, no. 1 (1974): 185.

<sup>19</sup> Stone, 188.

<sup>20</sup> Stone, 189.

policies to businessmen. Stone's study also identified an association between Birch Society membership and membership in fundamentalist religious organizations, reflecting the social conservatism of the group.<sup>21</sup>

The Society's membership "peaked in the mid-1960's, when it had nearly 100,000 members in clubs around the nation; a budget of \$8 million a year and 270 paid employees;" membership dropped off significantly into the 1990s, although it remains active today.<sup>22</sup> It has consistently been difficult for researchers to determine the exact size of membership or conduct demographic studies of the Society's membership, as those records are almost entirely kept private. Stone noted that "The Society does not release its membership lists, and other efforts to identify Birchers are blocked by both the organization and the members themselves."<sup>23</sup> This policy has contributed to a public understanding of the organization as secretive, although this is a perception that the Society attempts to push back on.

One notable aspect of the Society was its highly active membership, organized in localized Chapters but directed by a centralized Headquarters in Belmont, Massachusetts. The Society regularly produced and distributed publications, both in the form of regular communications to members, and promoted books and media with a price tag. The Society had two publishing arms, the *American Opinion* magazine (founded by Welch in 1956 and originally titled as *One Man's Opinion*) and Western Islands which published books.<sup>24</sup> Mulloy notes, "Each issue of the Society's monthly Bulletin contained a list of specific activities for Birchers to

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<sup>21</sup> Stone, 195.

<sup>22</sup> McFadden, Robert D. "Robert Welch Jr. Dead at 85; John Birch Society's Founder." *The New York Times*. January 8, 1985.

<sup>23</sup> Stone, 185.

<sup>24</sup> Mulloy, 8.

engage in, for example, and this too was part of the organization's appeal."<sup>25</sup> On top of the constant organizing and activities which made members feel purposeful, the Society offered their membership the option of a "Member's Monthly Message," forms which gave members room for feedback and an optional financial contribution in addition to their membership dues. Office Coordinator Tom Hill wrote in 1973, "Please do what you can to encourage more of your members to use their Member's Monthly Messages... This unique, completely voluntary, two-way communication system is basically a personal link between the individual member and our offices."<sup>26</sup> All of this engagement served to create more a more motivated membership for the Society, and gave psychological reward to members.

Robert Welch was born in North Carolina on December 1, 1899 and had a remarkable childhood as he advanced through school at a much quicker pace than his peers, graduating from the University of North Carolina at age sixteen. Next, Welch enrolled in, and subsequently dropped out of before graduating, the United States Navel Academy (1917-1919) and Harvard Law School (1919-1922).<sup>27</sup> Welch had the aspiration of starting a candy making business, and went through a persistent, if unsuccessful, series of attempts during which he worked part-time as a candy salesman. When his third company, the Midwest Candy Company of America, went under in 1935, Welch joined his younger brother's candy company, the James O. Welch Company, where he was Vice President "in charge of sales and advertising," skills which later directly translated into his strategy for managing the public image of the Society.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Mulloy, 12.

<sup>26</sup> 1973 January memorandum, "Memos re: position on political issues," Carton 9, Folder 25, *John Birch Society records 1928-1990*

<sup>27</sup> Mulloy, 5.

<sup>28</sup> Mulloy, 5.

During this period of years, Welch gained many positions of influence, from directing a local bank to acting as director of the Boston and Cambridge Chambers of Commerce. In 1949 Welch ran an unsuccessful campaign for lieutenant governor of Massachusetts, wherein he honed his political strategy. From 1950 to 1957 Welch served on the board of directors of the National Association of Manufacturers, where he met a number of his future Council members.<sup>29</sup> In 1952 Welch published his first political book, regarding U.S. foreign policy, *May God Forgive Us*. This was followed by the publication of his manuscript *The Politician*, which later drew heavy criticism for calling President Dwight D. Eisenhower a “conscious agent” of Communism.<sup>30</sup> Welch retired from the James O. Welch Company in 1956, before founding the John Birch Society in 1958.<sup>31</sup> He remained the leader of the Society until his resignation in 1983 when he was succeeded by Larry McDonald, a congressman from Georgia.<sup>32</sup> He passed away two years later on January 6, 1985.<sup>33</sup> In the years after his death, the Society under its new leadership underwent changes which resulted in the “[alienation of] Welch’s widow [Marian Probert], who denounced the new leadership from her retirement in Weston, Massachusetts.”<sup>34</sup> It is due to the timing of this organizational shift that this thesis focuses predominantly on the period between the organization’s founding in 1958 to the death of Welch in 1985.

### Historiography

The John Birch Society has been the focus of academic dissertations, books, and articles beginning in the early 1960s. At that point the Society was relatively newly formed but had

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<sup>29</sup> Mulloy, 5.

<sup>30</sup> Diamond, 53.

<sup>31</sup> Mulloy, 8.

<sup>32</sup> Mulloy, 187.

<sup>33</sup> Mulloy, 187.

<sup>34</sup> Berlet and Lyons, 185.

begun receiving media attention due to their public campaigns. The most visible of these campaigns was in support of Barry Goldwater's 1964-1965 presidential campaign. They had also received largely negative news media coverage over their controversial messages about the all-encompassing Communist conspiracy. Full-length books that analyze the John Birch Society frequently do so as part of a comparison with studies of other far-right groups like the Liberty Lobby and Christian Anti-Communism Crusade, or in a larger chronology of the rise of the far right or the conservative movement in the United States. Foci that arise across these works are: the tension between the radical right and traditional conservatives; the Red-Scare and larger anti-Communist movement; and the radical right's cognitive understanding of challenges to its ideology. Some books, and many specific articles and dissertations have been written exclusively on the John Birch Society itself, and these often address Society demographics and the motivation behind membership.

Scholarship with exclusive focus on the John Birch Society:

The first example of a work that delved into the sociological and psychological aspects of the John Birch Society and its leader, Robert Welch, was John Broyles 1963 dissertation for his Sociology and Social Ethics PhD from Boston University. Broyles places the Society within the context of the radical right and gives an American social philosophy context before presenting his analysis. He goes into great depth regarding the organization, ideology, and leadership of the Society before providing his more theoretical analysis regarding the "appeals and activities" of the John Birch Society. Broyles' dissertation has been uniquely useful to the authors that followed, in part because he conducted field research in 8 different cities across the United States, surveying and interviewing members to gain particular insight into the Society's membership in its early years of growth.

In January 1968, Paul Friedman's article, "The Metaphysics of the John Birch Society," similarly attempts to understand the psychology behind JBS recruitment, membership and ideology. Friedman presents an assertion crucial to understanding the JBS as an extremist organization, arguing that they not only see the world in black and white, at the extremes of good and evil, but that they also equate all things evil with Communism and all things Communist with evil. He argues that this perspective creates an inability to follow logical arguments that would complicate or destabilize the JBS worldview. Friedman presents an analysis that the JBS' defensive arguments against the label "radical" are born of a genuine self-perception that they are representing mainstream American values.

In his 1971 article "Mode of Resolution of a "Belief Dilemma" in the Ideology of the John Birch Society," Stephen Earl Bennett presents an analysis of the JBS ideology that echoed parts of Friedman's article. Bennett argues that American intervention in Vietnam under President Lyndon B. Johnson, presented as combatting Communism abroad, threw a wrench in the JBS conspiracy (and broader radical-right) theory that the United States government was being subtly controlled by Communists. Bennett uses "cognitive consistency" theory to analyze the JBS' attempts to make the Vietnam War fit their narrative. He points to the way the JBS relies on simplified, black and white understandings of morality and politics (similarly to Friedman) and analyzes when this worldview is threatened, how the JBS adapts.

Also in 1971, Fred W. Grupp publishes a study with a research question similar to Broyles' investigation into the appeals of JBS membership: "Personal Satisfaction Derived from Membership in the John Birch Society." For this study he conducted surveys of JBS members to investigate why members joined the Society (using the categories: "become informed; associate with like-minded people; ideological; need for political commitment; religious, and other.").

Like Friedman and Bennett, Grupp raises the theory of cognitive dissonance as a framework for understanding the results, in the context of JBS members expending effort towards the Society's ideological goals but achieving minimal success. He points out that finding personal satisfaction in the effort itself can make unsuccessful results easier to process and rationalize. He compares members with chapter leaders, and even extends the cognitive dissonance theory to the leadership of the Society.

In 1974, Barbara S. Stone also attempted to provide psychological, and in this case demographic, insight about JBS members, in her article "The John Birch Society: A Profile." She references Grupp's study as initiating analysis of the JBS membership, as opposed to its leadership. Stone attempts to distinguish the radical right from traditional conservatism and uses a questionnaire to determine where JBS members fall on the McClosky Scale of Conservatism. She also presents data as to the religion, number of organizational memberships, family incomes, occupations, age and educational level of members, finding that most JBS members were of a higher economic class than expected, and had few if any other group affiliations. Her analysis raises questions as to how the individualism of ultra-conservatives plays into organizational memberships, and how the radical right fits in with the broader conservative movement.

Historian D.J. Mulloy's 2014 study, *The World of the John Birch Society: Conspiracy, Conservatism and the Cold War*, focuses on the period between 1958 and 1968. Mulloy wrote this book in two parts, the first taking "a narrative and chronological approach" to telling the story of the Society.<sup>35</sup> The second part addresses the themes the Society's response to the civil rights movement, the Cold War and other United States foreign policy, and the role of the Society's conspiracy theories. Mulloy focuses on the Society's ideology; he analyzes the

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<sup>35</sup> Mulloy, 13.

Society's "key ideas and beliefs, the articulation and dissemination of those ideas and beliefs, and the reaction to them..."<sup>36</sup> His book situates the first decade of the John Birch Society within a context of conventional conservatism and argues against dismissing the significance of the organization due to its fringe beliefs. His analysis of the broader American response to the Society provides a history of not only the organization, but also the United States at the time.

Scholarship placing the Society in the context of the rise of the American far right:

One of the first truly comprehensive studies of the American far right is Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab's classic and frequently referenced 1970 book, *The Politics of Unreason: Right-Wing Extremism in America*. Lipset and Raab place the JBS into a long chronology of the evolution of extreme right wing groups and provide many tables with demographic and ideological data about JBS membership. Lipset and Raab argue that over time and across organizations, there exists an alliance between religious conservatives of lower economic and social status who are motivated by sociocultural factors, and high status or elite conservatives who are economically motivated. They argue that the JBS was part of a "preservatist" backlash against social changes like the civil rights movement.<sup>37</sup> Lipset and Raab present the argument that the vagueness of the conspirators' in Robert Welch's Communist conspiracy theory presents a dilemma for organizing and maintaining membership. They also present an analysis of the JBS' public statements and policies that exposes the tension between their supposed racial neutrality and the racist undertones of their campaigns and communications.

In 1990, Jerome Himmelstein published *To the Right: The Transformation of American Conservatism*, which provides essential background to understanding the JBS in the historical

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<sup>36</sup> Mulloy, 14.

<sup>37</sup> Lipset, Seymour Martin and Earl Raab. 1970. *The Politics of Unreason: Right-Wing Extremism in America, 1790-1970*. New York: Harper & Row, 248.

context of American conservatism through his sociology perspective. Himmelstein analyzes how conservatives view any and all collectivist policies as a threat to America and differentiates conservative isolationist anti-Communism from liberal internationalist anti-Communism. Himmelstein traces the transformation from the Old Right of the 1950s and 60s, to the New Right of the 1970s and 80s, and points to the continuous paradox (returning to cognitive dissonance) of conservatives claiming an anti-establishment platform and rhetoric while relying on establishment money and power, a theme that is highly relevant to internal conflicts within the JBS.

Sara Diamond's 1995 book, *Roads to Dominion: Right-Wing Movements and Political Power in the United States*, provides a broad historical analysis of right wing movements from the end of World War II to the 1990s. She provides a useful analysis of Producerism, an ideology held by the JBS which ties productivity and economic success to morality, framing the elites and the poor as parasitic. Diamond discusses the JBS in the context of the anti-Communist movement, and Americanism as a variation of racist nationalism.

*The Conservative Revolution: The Movement That Remade America* is a 1999 book by Lee Edwards that presents a glorified history of the conservative movement. He largely focuses on, and praises, mainstream figures and institutions like the Republican Party itself. Edwards does not devote much of his history to the John Birch Society or other radical groups, but he does acknowledge the JBS and Robert Welch as a kind of anomaly representative of the "dark side" of the conservative movement. He groups it together with hate groups like the KKK, something the JBS would have resisted, and defensively maintains that they were not representative of conservative ideology.

Chip Berlet and Matthew Lyons book, published in 2000, *Right-Wing Populism in America: Too Close for Comfort*, places the JBS in the context of populism. They argue that Americans' legitimate grievances with elites have been purposely channeled to target scapegoats (in the case of the JBS, the establishment "Insiders" of the Communist conspiracy), which served to actually reinforce structures of power and oppression. Like Lipset and Raab, they frame right wing populism as a reactionary backlash to social progress. They reference Diamond's definition of Producerism and argue that Producerism and business nationalism are central to the Society's ideology; this argument is relevant to my analysis of the incentivized marketing role of JBS members. Berlet and Lyons also use the far right organization the Liberty Lobby as a contemporary mirror of the JBS, with comparable ideology but more explicit racism and anti-Semitism, providing a contrast to the JBS public relations efforts.

Clive Webb's 2010 book, *Rabble Rousers: The American Far Right in the Civil Rights Era*, focuses on the evolving role of racism in the history of the American far right. Webb points to the diminished public acceptance of explicit racism, or biological essentialism, after the atrocities against Jews and other minorities during World War II came to light and argues that this affected how far right groups strategically packaged their racist policies. He argues that far right organizations like the JBS used supposedly racially neutral language, framed as rejecting federal government overreach, to argue against the civil rights movement, desegregation, and the Equal Rights Amendment. Webb connects racial anxieties with the declining status of middle and lower-class whites and argues that it is essential to analyze the motivations and actions of the low-level grassroots supporters as well as the leadership figures.

Academic scholarship around the John Birch Society lacks any fervent internal conflict and authors tend to build off of previous studies and arguments. The variations between works

seem to be affected by which particular lens the author chooses to take in their analysis; anti-Communism, racism, conspiracism, the far right in America, and so on. Certain arguments, such as the cognitive dissonance required by JBS ideology, the essential role of business nationalism and Producerism, and the strategic obscuring of racist undertones, recirculate and seem to be agreed upon. A psychological and sociological curiosity as to the internal motivations and beliefs of JBS leaders and members underlies many of the studies of the JBS.

My intervention in the historical literature regarding the John Birch Society seeks to provide an analysis of the tension between Society leadership's attempts to claim mainstream respectability, and the widespread public understanding of the organization as radical and bigoted. I will present this argument by examining the Society's distinctive organizational structure and authoritative top down leadership in my first chapter. My second chapter will move on to analyze how, within the context of the organization's hierarchical structure, the Society's official and implicit ideologies were in tension, and how the official ideology and controlled public image put forth by the Society's leadership were overall ineffective in repressing the Society's underlying radicalism.

## Chapter 1: The Organizational Structure of the John Birch Society

In *The Blue Book of the John Birch Society*, in essence a transcription of the notes of Robert Welch from the founding meeting of the John Birch Society in 1958, Welch addresses the strict top-down organization of the Society. He explicitly argues for authoritative leadership, comprised of himself as the charismatic leader, and to a lesser extent, the more tangential Council members. He argues to his audience, “What is not only needed, but is absolutely imperative, is for some hardboiled, dictatorial, and dynamic boss to come along and deliver himself...”<sup>38</sup> With his word-choice of “dictatorial,” he does not shy away from communicating the role he envisions for himself. This statement follows a metaphor imagining a scattered, unorganized mass of individuals working to hold back the rising tide of the ocean with no coordination; he envisions himself as the enlightened leader capable of directing the hopeless, disorganized mass to coordinate strategically and achieve success.

Without Welch’s leadership, he argues, they are useless and headed towards disaster. This theme is constantly reinforced throughout the Blue Book. He explicitly asks the founding Council and membership for personal loyalty to him, while playing at bashfulness: “This plea for personal loyalty is always embarrassing for me to make before any group...as it would be for any other man of conscience and common sense. Yet it is as necessary and as important as had been foreseen...It is the cohesive force that reaches across passing doubts and disagreements...”<sup>39</sup> This statement establishes something important about the Society; every member below Welch in the hierarchy is expected to trust him, above all other rational arguments or their own misgivings. Welch dismisses Society members’ “doubts and

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<sup>38</sup> Welch, 117.

<sup>39</sup> Welch, xii.

disagreements” as temporary, to be overcome, not addressed. By painting all dissidence towards his beliefs and methods as misguided and likely influenced or directed by the omnipresent Communists seeking to divide his followers, he reinforces his central authority and silences challenges. Welch also uses a rhetoric of urgency and fear not only to motivate his followers, but also to discourage criticisms or debate. Playing at humbleness again, he claims, “It is not that you would choose me, or that I would even choose me, against other possibilities. It is simply that, under the pressure of time and the exigencies of our need, you have no other choice, and neither do I.” In this claim he downplays his own substantial ego, insisting that there simply is no time before an apocalyptic Communist takeover to consider any other leadership but his. This continued pointing to his supposed humbleness, while asking for millions of Americans for unquestioning personal loyalty to his cause, is related to the far right leadership’s efforts to use anti-elite, individualist rhetoric while relying on authoritative power structures and elite financial support.

Part of Welch’s argument for dictatorial central authority of the organization touches on an assertion that was instantly controversial and referenced in public criticisms of Welch and his Society. He argues that “democracy, of course...is merely a deceptive phrase, a weapon of demagoguery, and a perennial fraud.”<sup>40</sup> In a return to this controversial point, in the footnotes for the fourth printing of the *Blue Book*, he goes on to blame Liberals for “working so long and so hard to convert our republic into a democracy, and to make the American people believe that it is supposed to be a democracy.”<sup>41</sup> He claims that “Nothing could be further than the truth,” and goes even further to assert that “[the founding fathers] visibly spurned a democracy as probably

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<sup>40</sup> Welch, 159.

<sup>41</sup> Welch, xv.

the worst of all forms of government.”<sup>42</sup> First, the assertion that Liberals have insidiously been working to deceive the American people about democracy implies that Liberals are not truly part of the American people; they are either true Americans who have been duped, or they are Communist-aligned deviants working against the true Americans. In the same way as he describes Communists, Welch paints Liberals with the brush of the powerful elite, envisioned as deceitful puppet masters pulling the strings. His assertion that democracy is “probably the worst of all forms of government” points to another shift in politics as the immediate post-World War II period in America turned into the Cold War period. Fascism ceased to be considered the greatest evil, particularly in the eyes of the right, with collectivism and Communism superseding it.

Even a republic is considered too weak of a political system to model the John Birch Society on. Welch states, “A republican form of government or of organization has many attractions and advantages, under certain favorable conditions. But under less happy circumstances it lends itself too readily to infiltration, distortion and disruption.”<sup>43</sup> Welch makes clear his distaste for dissidence, and significantly, his mistrust in the American people’s capability to form political and social beliefs on their own. Chip Berlet has observed: “...Birchites distrust the idea of the sovereignty of the people and stress that the United States is a republic, not a democracy – which they dismiss as a “mobocracy.” This perspective explains how the Society can criticize the alleged secret elites and yet retain an elitist point of view: Birchites want to replace the “bad” elites with “good” elites – presumably their allies.”<sup>44</sup> Welch does not compel the general American populace to reject propaganda and manipulation by the

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<sup>42</sup> Welch, xv.

<sup>43</sup> Welch, 158.

<sup>44</sup> Berlet and Lyons, 176.

establishment elite and to think for themselves; he intends to replace the elite with himself and his own allies, and spread his own ideology using similar methods to the Communists themselves. Welch maintains that “The John Birch Society is to be a monolithic body...[it] will operate under completely authoritative control at all levels.”<sup>45</sup> Due to his mistrust of the judgment of essentially everyone but himself, he not only maintains central authority with (theoretically) no room for bottom-up influence but also insists that this central authority be enforced tightly at all levels, in all circumstances. Welch envisions the Council and the membership of the John Birch Society as an extension of himself; his leadership and his ideology.

Even at the time of the Society’s founding meeting in 1958, before the public criticism of his disdainful attitude towards democracy arose, Welch established a defense for his preference for a dictatorial leadership style. He argues, “The fear of tyrannical operation of individuals, and other arguments against the authoritative structure in the form of governments, have little bearing on the case of a voluntary association...and what little validity they do have is outweighed by the advantages of firm and positive direction of the Society’s energies.”<sup>46</sup> He makes the valid point that if members are uncomfortable with, or in absolute disagreement with, the Society’s political positions and methods, they are free to discontinue their membership. It is of note that this repression of critical feedback or dissent is directed at the already specifically curated and largely agreeable membership of the Society; Welch points out, “the men who join the John Birch Society...are going to be doing so primarily because they believe in me and what I am doing and are willing to accept my leadership anyway.” His language in this passage is telling; Society

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<sup>45</sup> Welch, 158.

<sup>46</sup> Welch, 159.

members will not just believe in his political ideals, but also believe in *him* as the designated charismatic leader.

By explicitly building in the expectation for members' obedient compliance with Welch's leadership in the primary official document of the Society, Welch further cultivates a membership comfortable with authoritative leadership. He makes it clear that any disloyalty from members will be cause for removal: "Those members who cease to feel the necessary degree of loyalty can either resign or will be put out before they build up any splintering following of their own inside the Society."<sup>47</sup> Members' voluntary status cannot dismiss the significance of the authoritarian structure of the organization. Furthermore, even the voluntary status of membership is called into question when taking Welch's fear-mongering rhetoric into account. He tells his audience, "As I see it, I am afraid you have just two alternatives. Either you, and tens of thousands like you, come into The John Birch Society and, without giving it the whole of your lives, still devote to its purposes the best and most you can offer, with money and head and heart as well as hands; or in a very few years you will, by force, be devoting all to the maintenance of a Communist slave state."<sup>48</sup> When an individual is presented with slavery to Communists as a likely alternative to membership, membership seems more compulsory than voluntary. This use of fear and urgency to encourage compliance with, and devotion to, the Society, occurs frequently in publications and communications.

Welch's argument surrounding the organizational structure demonstrates his lack of appreciation for the essentially American democratic process, and his lack of interest in having his ideas challenged or learning from people with different experiences and perspectives than

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<sup>47</sup> Welch, 161.

<sup>48</sup> Welch, 168.

himself. It also demonstrates something fundamental about the John Birch Society; the paranoid, conspiratorial root of Welch's ideology makes enemies out of all dissidents and trusts no one but Welch and his chosen advisors to correctly carry out organizational goals without falling prey to division or distraction. The Society purports to represent a traditional, nostalgic imagining of America but for all their emphasis on the importance of American individualism, Welch explicitly wanted to create a "monolithic body" and not reflect the diversity of people and opinion that comprises America.

The structure of the John Birch Society starts, top-down, with Robert Welch as the authoritative leader who defines official ideology and policy; next in the hierarchy is the John Birch Society Council. In *The Blue Book*, Welch defines the purpose of the Council: "(1) To show the stature and standing of the leadership of the Society; (2) to give your Founder the benefit of the Council's advice and guidance, both in procedural or organizational matters, and in substantive matters of policy; and (3) to select, with absolute and final authority, a Successor to myself as head of The John Birch Society..."<sup>49</sup> The first listed purpose speaks volumes about the image-conscious strategy of the Society. The Council members are meant to validate the organization in the public eye. While the identities of the general membership are kept very private, the Council members serve as the public face of the organization.

Notably, the aspects of the Society that Welch seeks to emphasize with the Council members are its "stature and standing;" these individuals are meant to lend prestige, respectability, and an aura of power to the organization. Sara Diamond notes that the original Council of 1958 "consisted of three medical doctors, three lawyers, one retired General, one syndicated columnist, a priest and seventeen executives of medium-sized corporations," all of

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<sup>49</sup> Welch, unnumbered page with list of JBS Council members.

whom were white men.<sup>50</sup> From the demographics of Welch's strategically chosen Council members one can gauge what types of people he found respectable and prestigious, and worth of representing the Society's public image. After Welch's death in 1985, his wife Marian Probert Welch briefly served on the Council before distancing herself from the new leadership, but otherwise the Council has consistently been filled almost entirely by white men.

To revisit the demographics, 23 years after the Society's founding, a 1981 pamphlet titled "Responsible Leadership Through the John Birch Society" indicates that the Council consists of 31 white men.<sup>51</sup> The first member of the John Birch Society Council from outside of America is represented in this document: a military veteran of the Royal Canadian Air Force and podiatrist from Ontario, Canada, serving as an exception from the Society's isolationist nationalism. Notably, the Council members do not only hail from red states, and they are distributed across the country, facilitating the national, grassroots-level recruiting Welch desires.

On the whole, these men have predominantly high-income occupations, and would be considered socially upper class.<sup>52</sup> They exercise influence in their communities, through trusted and respected roles such as doctor, religious leader, business leader, or political representative. Also pointing to the upper class, highly educated, elite status of the Council members, are the

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<sup>50</sup> Diamond, 55.

<sup>51</sup> These Council members are dispersed across America; Massachusetts (3), Washington (2), Virginia, Ohio, Iowa, Missouri, California (5), Wisconsin (2), Colorado (2), Texas (2), Alaska, Georgia, Alabama (2), South Carolina, Florida, Minnesota, North Dakota, New Hampshire, and Arizona. ("Responsible Leadership Through the John Birch Society," 1981, Box 13, [unsorted] *Chip Berlet Research Files, Political Research Associates records 1908-2011*)

<sup>52</sup> The occupations of the 1981 council include: military background (14), surgeon (3), medical director of a life insurance company, business executive (19, many are family businesses), physician, farmer in the cattle industry, Roman Catholic priest, podiatrist, Executive Vice President of the JBS, Georgia Democrat Congressman, lawyer and bank director, bank president, California Republican state senator and congressman and college professor, lawyer and Governor of New Hampshire. ("Responsible Leadership Through the John Birch Society")

many advanced degrees held, including M.D, J.D., M.S., MBA, M.A, S.T.L., and D.P.M., from schools including Columbia, Stanford, Harvard, Yale, and Oxford Universities. The 31 Council members hold 46 degrees altogether, representing a highly privileged slice of society.

Council members' community involvement and positions of influence are emphasized in their biographies.<sup>53</sup> It is notable that these community roles relate to business and the manufacturing industry in particular, as is reflected in the professions of the Council members and of Robert Welch himself. These roles also reflect positions of influence in the Christian religious community, with a distinctly conservative and political bent. Ties to the military appear again, as does involvement in education, which is fundamental to the Society's official mission.

One fundamental role of the John Birch Society Council members presented by Robert Welch to his audience in *The Blue Book* but not enumerated in the Council's three official purposes is that of fundraising, and more directly serving as donors and investors in the business-side of the Society. He tells the gathered potential-Council members, "As to what is expected of you, in either effort or money, if you are thinking of half-way measures we might as well quit now."<sup>54</sup> He clearly communicates that not only does he expect funding from these men, but he expects it in great amounts and frequency, which he rationalizes with his urgent and apocalyptic

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<sup>53</sup> Roles include: Deacon, member of the Association of American Physicians and Surgeons, City Council Member (Washington Court House, Ohio), President of the Missouri State Chamber of Commerce, President of Associated Industries of Missouri, founder of the Wanderer Forum Foundation (a conservative Catholic organization), director of the National Economics Council, member of the Foreign Relations Committee of the National Association of Manufacturers, member of the Business and Education Committee of the National Association of Manufacturers, former President and Chairman of the Board of the National Association of Manufacturers, California State Commandant of the Marine Corps League, founder of the Traditional Catholics of America organization, co-founder of a private Christian school, member of the Board of Directors of the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago, President of the Wisconsin Manufacturers Association, President of the National Council of YMCAs, and many more. ("Responsible Leadership Through the John Birch Society")

<sup>54</sup> Welch, 170.

anticipation of Communist takeover. In the postscript for the fifth printing of *The Blue Book*, Welch presents the new goal of multiplying the organization's size by one hundred. He acknowledges that this ambitious goal will "require colossal amounts of money and of labor. But both are cheaper than blood, and far smaller sacrifices than freedom."<sup>55</sup> Approaching the founding of the Society with his business background informing his planning, Welch's strategy is focused on maintaining the funding to continue growing the organization, and he uses the rhetoric of fear and urgency to encourage large donations. This is certainly relevant to Welch's strategy in selecting many upper-class men and business owners in particular to have leadership roles on his Council.

As representative of his fastidious leadership style, Welch had planned the specifics of the organizational structure of the Society before the first meeting, although it did undergo developments and modifications over the next two decades. General membership of the John Birch Society is organized by local chapters, numbering up to twenty people, run by a Chapter Leader appointed by the Society Headquarters in Belmont, Massachusetts or a designated staff member in the field. Chapter leaders are expected to hold, at a minimum, monthly meetings. Where local chapters have not been created, interested Americans have the option of joining the "Home Chapter," which essentially means being a remote member who does not convene with a group but receives regular publications and bulletins from Headquarters, staying up to date on their campaigns, et cetera. Next in the hierarchy above local Chapter Leaders are the Coordinators (sometimes referred to as Section Leaders), who are considered staff of the Society, and are tasked with "handling the organizational mechanics of the Society, and for helping to

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<sup>55</sup> Welch, 177.

form new chapters...for each area of the appropriate size.”<sup>56</sup> Ranking above these Coordinators are Major Coordinators, with similar roles but more supervisory responsibility and a larger geographic area to cover.

Initially, only Coordinators and Major Coordinators were meant to receive a salary for their work, and as the organization grew not even all Coordinators received salaries. As of 1961, the staff consisted of twenty-eight people running the Headquarters (or Home Office), thirty fully paid Major Coordinators, and one hundred Coordinators who “work on a volunteer basis as to all or a part of their salary, or expenses, or both.”<sup>57</sup> Welch states, “neither the chapter members nor even the Chapter Leaders who form the base of the Society, and who cumulatively do most of the work that counts, nor I myself and other top officers, will receive any pay whatsoever.”<sup>58</sup> While Welch did retire from his job to form the Society, he remained an upper-class businessman, similarly to many of the Council members whom, as mentioned above, Welch intentionally recruited to be able to financially underwrite the Society. The lack of a salary for work undertaken by Welch and the other “top officers” for the Society is not comparable to the lack of compensation for Chapter Leaders who, as Welch openly admits, do the majority of labor for the Society. As part of the dedication and personal loyalty expected from Society members, Welch asked for many hours of labor to be volunteered for the Society’s goals with no compensation. As of 1963, the Society *Leader’s Manual* differentiated the lower level Coordinators (referred to as Section Leaders) from salaried Major Coordinators: “Section Leaders, as do Chapter Leaders, serve as volunteers and receive no compensation from the Society except where authorized by a Coordinator for such major expense items as the Section

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<sup>56</sup> Welch, 164.

<sup>57</sup> Welch, 175.

<sup>58</sup> Welch, 165.

Leader is unable to absorb.”<sup>59</sup> It is important to note that what the Manual refers to as compensation in this case is actually just coverage of business expenses that are otherwise paid out of the pocket of the Section Leader.

Society leadership used psychological tactics (a sense of superiority, a fear of the omnipresent Communist conspiracy) to encourage, or manipulate, members to volunteer their work as well as to give regular donations to the Society. For example, in *The Blue Book*, Welch tells his followers that “unless [we stop the Communists], the war for a better world will again be carried on through long and feudal Dark Ages, after we have been killed, our children have been enslaved, and all that we value has been destroyed. That is not rhetoric, and it is not exaggeration. It is a plain statement of the stark danger that is rapidly closing in on us right now.”<sup>60</sup> This passage is a prime example of the combination of the urgency, scare-tactics, and apocalyptic worldview that Welch uses to light a fire under his followers. His claim that he is neither being rhetorical nor exaggerating speaks more to his mentality than the reality facing America at the time.

A form letter signed by Welch, sent to Society members encouraging payment of another year of dues, sent in 1972, emphasizes a sense of looming anxiety and pressure of participation: “We are growing very rapidly, but the pervasive strength of the enemy becomes daily more visible. And it is not just a trite metaphor when we say that the most ultimate outcome of this race will depend on how consistently and how hard everyone on our team pulls at the oars.”<sup>61</sup> Just as he claims to not use rhetoric or exaggeration in the imagined apocalyptic scenario he

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<sup>59</sup> Circa 1972 form letter, “Do not reinstate,” Folder 1, Carton 9, *John Birch Society records 1928-1990*

<sup>60</sup> Welch, 170.

<sup>61</sup> Circa 1972 form letter, “Do not reinstate,” Folder 1, Carton 9, *John Birch Society records 1928-1990*

presents in *The Blue Book*, in this form letter he inserts a defensive denial of manipulating the reader with scare-tactics and emphasizes the individual's implied moral responsibility to contributing to the Society's mission.

A Society pamphlet titled "Responsibilities of Membership" outlines some of the duties expected from Society members, giving an impression of the dedicated effort and loyalty required.<sup>62</sup> "Attend Meetings Regularly" is the first responsibility listed, requiring members to give "personal, intelligent, active, and continuing support of Society projects." This emphasis on active support is continued with the overarching responsibility #3, "Live Up to the Duties of Membership" which tells members to "participate as fully as possible... What you do (or do not do) helps (or hurts) every member." Remembering that Welch intends the Society to be a "a monolithic body" informs the way this pamphlet frames the mutual responsibility of all members, as part of one united cause.<sup>63</sup> This motivating sense of obligation to the rest of the Society in working towards their shared cause goes hand in hand with the sense of community that serves as a psychological incentive to membership.

The same message is repeated in responsibility #4, "Show a Personal Interest," which reminds members "the ultimate success of the John Birch Society depends on our activities," and encourages participation in the constant "action-education programs," information about which is distributed in monthly bulletins. Responsibility #8 is "Do Your Homework for Each Meeting," which mentions the "many hours" Chapter Leaders spend preparing for meetings, and points to "agenda items completed for the preceding month," membership dues, and "Members' Monthly Message" feedback form to Society Headquarters as materials necessary to be prepared for the

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<sup>62</sup> "Responsibilities of Membership," undated, Carton 13, [unsorted] *Chip Berlet Research Files, Political Research Associates records 1908-2011*

<sup>63</sup> Welch, 158.

meeting. This demonstrates how the Society expects and to some degree requires a devotion of volunteered hours and funds from its members. Once again, the need for volunteer labor is repeated in Responsibility #10, “Don’t Dodge Thankless Jobs That Must Be Done,” which reminds members that “the success of any chapter depends on the willingness of members to tackle with enthusiasm the sometimes-tedious tasks which must be undertaken.” Responsibility #13 “Back Up Words with Deeds” also emphasizes the need for labor: “We are an action body and we mean business every step of the way. Make sure that your “good intentions” are followed by “solid performance.”” Out of the 13 Responsibilities outlined, nearly half directly address the need for dedicated volunteer labor. As Welch acknowledges in *The Blue Book*, the lowest ranking members are tasked with undertaking the bulk of the Society’s work for no compensation, which necessitates more creative forms of motivation like the psychological tactics mentioned above.

There is a tension between the level of devotion expected from all levels of Society membership, and the far right’s emphasis on individualism. In a preemptive defense of his organizational style, in *The Blue Book* Welch acknowledges the similarities in the Society’s proposed structure to that of the Communists, in particular with regard to Lenin’s concept of “the dedicated few”: “We are... willing to draw on all successful human experience in organizational matters...But the Communists have asked their followers to devote to the cause “the whole of their lives.” We assuredly do not...That is exactly the kind of collectivism, of submerging the individual in the whole, against which we are fighting.”<sup>64</sup> This statement comes into contrast with Welch’s earlier expression of intent that the Society would “be a monolithic body,” with

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<sup>64</sup> Welch, 166.

suppressed dissent and tightly controlled membership.<sup>65</sup> As earlier introduced, Welch warns Council members against “half-way measures,” and repeatedly emphasizes the drastic, horrific outcome for Americans which will result from inaction on the part of his followers.<sup>66</sup> Given the explicit organizational similarities, directly inspired from Communist grassroots organizing strategies, this one distinction would seem to be essential as a meaningful dividing line between the Society and their nemeses, but in Welch’s leadership and the practice of Society membership, individualism is certainly not prioritized.

In the years after the Society’s founding and initial period of growth (beginning in 1965 and occurring again later in 1976), Society leadership responded to the challenge of getting many hours of labor from unpaid members, and policies were adjusted to allow for a minimal level of incentive-based compensation for the un-salaried Coordinators.<sup>67</sup> This incentive-based program was reliant on two related parts of the Society’s ideology: Producerism and meritocracy. Briefly: Producerism has been defined in the context of the American far right as “...a doctrine that champions the so-called producers in society against both “unproductive” elites and subordinate groups defined as lazy or immoral.”<sup>68</sup> This is related to the ideology of meritocracy: that ability, skill and effort should define a hierarchy of power.

Given that Producerism and meritocracy are tenants of the John Birch Society’s (and most far right and conservative groups’) ideology, an incentive-based program of compensation for Society Coordinators is particularly effective and reduces the expense of fair pay for labor from a level of membership originally intended to be fully paid staff. Due to their conservative

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<sup>65</sup> Welch, 158.

<sup>66</sup> Welch, 157.

<sup>67</sup> “Birch Chapter Reorganizations and Incentive Program,” Folder 27, Carton 22, *John Birch Society records 1928-1990*

<sup>68</sup> Berlet and Lyons, 6.

ideology, unpaid or unfairly and disproportionately paid staff of the Society are highly unlikely to argue for fair wages or unionize. Robert Welch and multiple of the founding Council members were affiliated with the National Association of Manufacturers, a prestigious business nationalist association which had “helped write the harshly anti-labor Taft-Hartley Act” of 1947. This association set a precedent for the way the Society leadership approached staff and volunteer labor.<sup>69</sup> The blurred line between volunteer work and staff labor is exemplified in the reduction of the position of Coordinator from a designated paid staff role as proposed in *The Blue Book*, to members who, as previously mentioned, “work on a volunteer basis as to all or a part of their salary, or expenses, or both.”<sup>70</sup> Even the incentive programs expect an increase in labor and effort from Coordinators for an indeterminate and minimal reward.

The incentive programs focused on sale of Society literature and media, and memberships. In 1965, the Field Activities Director of the Society, Thomas N. Hill, distributed a memorandum to all Society Coordinators outlining the program, claiming to “present to each of you many opportunities to increase your earnings.”<sup>71</sup> Before discussing the program it is necessary to explain how Coordinators had acted as salesmen of Society literature previously. They had sold literature on a consignment basis, which is defined as: “An arrangement in trade in which a seller or the consignor sends goods to a buyer or consignee without getting payment for the goods then itself. The consignee or the buyer pays the amount only when the goods are sold... The seller retains the ownership of the goods until the payment is made in full by the

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<sup>69</sup> Berlet and Lyons, 164.

<sup>70</sup> Welch, 175.

<sup>71</sup> 1965 December 28 memorandum, “Handling and Distribution of Literature,” Folder 25, Carton 15, *John Birch Society records 1928-1990*

buyer. The unsold goods will be taken back after some period.”<sup>72</sup> Essentially, the Society headquarters maintained ownership over the literature until it was sold, whereupon the Society received the payment; the Coordinators acted only as a middleman, conducting the actual work of selling the material to members or prospective members but not owning or receiving payment for the goods. In this previous scenario, the Coordinators had no motivation to devote time and labor to acting as salesmen other than the personal activism and loyalty they felt to the Society and its mission which Welch so valued. While they did not financially benefit from the sales, they also did not face expenses for unsold goods; the Society maintained both the expenses and the profits of the literature sales.

The incentive programs presented a new, limited possibility for Coordinators to profit their work as salesmen of the Society, and at the same time guaranteed the Society higher sales, even if they predominantly were made to the Coordinators themselves. Abandoning the consignment basis meant that Coordinators would need to buy the literature from the Society out of their own pocket, at a discount, with the hopes of reselling it at a profit to members or other interested parties. This was essentially betting that they would be able to resell the materials, and meant facing a possible loss of their own money to that end. Field Activities Director Thomas N. Hill explained, “All literature of American Opinion and Western Islands will be purchased by you at the retail price, less forty percent (40%) discount, and the literature thus becoming your property...we believe that you can add substantially to your weekly earnings by selling the literature at the retail price, and that the incentive this program provides, will greatly increase our

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<sup>72</sup> US Legal, Inc. “Consignment Sale Law and Legal Definition.” *US Legal, Legal Definitions*. 2016.

ability to reach greater numbers of Americans...”<sup>73</sup> American Opinion and Western Islands were the publishing arms of the Society.

This change in sales strategy indicates that previously the sales of Society literature were low enough to motivate headquarters to take a 40% loss (Coordinator discount) on the retail value of the materials in order to raise sales. The undetermined factor is whether the low sales were simply due to low effort by the Coordinators who had been consigned the literature, or due to a limited interest in the Society and its publications. If the former, there would be real opportunity for Coordinators to turn a profit and increase circulation of the Society’s message, all in one mutually successful venture. However, given that by this point in the mid-1960s the Society had already received some notoriety for its conspiratorial ideology and association with right-wing extremists, it is likely that the Coordinators were faced with a challenging sales environment. Even if the latter was the case, this incentive program was essentially shifting the financial burden from the Headquarters to the Coordinators themselves, who were now expected to purchase and maintain an inventory of the Society’s publications. If Coordinators did not make sales, it would mean personal financial hardship; the ideology of meritocracy and Producerism would create a strong sense of personal responsibility to succeed in making sales, and a sense of self-worth tied to their success or failure. If they had trouble making sales to non-members, it is likely that their main audience for sales would be the members in the Chapters underneath them, and therefore most sales and the resulting funds would come internally, from within the Society membership, on top of dues and other donations. This is not a sustainable business model without continued growth in membership and high levels of enthusiasm and interest in the Society’s message.

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<sup>73</sup> 1965 December 28 memorandum

The Society's leadership made the financial success of Coordinators in this new program even more limited by applying certain stipulations to their sales methods and reducing other forms of compensation. Thomas N. Hill wrote: "Let me also make clear that by proceeding in this manner, raises in salaries for Coordinators will be discontinued as a result of the opportunities which are being presented to you... Let us make absolutely clear that we do not want you to compete with the bookstores in any way."<sup>74</sup> The forbidding of competing with the Society's bookstores "in any way" emphasizes the lack of a market for these materials. Coordinators were also expected to always sell at full retail price, to avoid creating competition amongst each other. As part of this change in sales strategy, Coordinators were also made responsible for "submitting your own tax reports with regard to these sales,"<sup>75</sup> adding a requirement of a level of records management and administrative effort to their jobs. Perhaps most telling with regards to the disadvantages of the program for Coordinators is the requirement that they hold an inventory; "Now we will expect you to make delivery of literature right on the spot and not place the Society or American Opinion in the position of filling orders for you. For instance, at a "TRUMPET Seminar", we will expect you to have ample quantities of the item on hand for sale at the meeting..."<sup>76</sup> Whereas previously any unsold materials would simply be returned to the Society at no personal cost, the Coordinators are now expected to purchase an "ample" supply and foot the bill for unsold literature themselves, saving the Society costs but endangering their own finances and forcing more aggressive sales methods. That the materials were most often sold at Society meetings like the seminar Hill mentions, again

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<sup>74</sup> 1965 December 28 memorandum

<sup>75</sup> 1965 December 28 memorandum

<sup>76</sup> 1965 December 28 memorandum

emphasizes how most of these sales and the absorption of the Society message in the literature would circulate internally to existing Society membership.

The incentive program initiated in July 1976 expanded on incentives for Coordinator labor. The program for commission on literature sales initiated in 1966 remained in place, and the new program added incentives for Life Membership sales, advertising sales, and subscription sales. This change was made in part to increase the number of Society field staff; a memorandum circulated around Society leadership explained: “What we are talking about is appointing a few men on an incentive or commission basis...” Instead of taking on the expense of new salaried workers, the Society opted to increase the responsibilities of unpaid Coordinators while offering only the new incentive program as compensation. The memorandum outlines the areas viable for commission: “5% on all contributions including Life Memberships and Continuing Support Clubs...A commission, therefore, on a fully paid Life Membership, will be \$100 – based on the new Life Membership cost of \$2,000. Commissions from the sale of advertising will be 10%... We will provide a 20% commission on the sale of subscriptions made in the assigned territory.”<sup>77</sup> The memorandum also notes that all business expenses will be the financial responsibility of the Coordinator; like the program in 1966, this move gives more financial and administrative responsibility to the Coordinator. The memorandum emphasizes the importance of selecting men for the Coordinator position whose first priority is not compensation: “We must find for these positions excellent men – that goes without saying. And they must be committed first to winning the battle and not just making money.”<sup>78</sup> The cultivation of personal loyalty and motivation

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<sup>77</sup> 1976 July memorandum, “Birch Chapter Reorganizations and Incentive Program,” Folder 27, Carton 22, *John Birch Society records 1928-1990*

<sup>78</sup> 1976 July memorandum.

through fear of Communist takeover are all the more important to the Society's strategy due to their reticence to motivate staff through payment.

However, in this program there is less necessary expense as a prerequisite to making sales, since subscription, membership, and advertising sales do not require the initial purchase of inventory at the expense of the Coordinator, as did the literature sales. Therefore, this program offers greater chances to increase income and fewer financial risks. It does, however, only apply to unpaid Coordinators whereas the 1966 program applied to all Coordinators, of a various range of salaries. While recruitment and an emphasis on growing membership had been a fundamental part of the Society's mission from the founding, this new incentive program changed the organizational structure, reminiscent of the multi-level marketing business model in which "distributors earn commissions, not only for their own sales, but also for sales made by the people they recruit."<sup>79</sup> Essentially, the Coordinator is motivated to recruit new Society members in their designated area not only because of potential commission on sales to those members, but because sales made by members underneath the Coordinator in the business model will contribute to their profit. The memorandum explaining the new program states, "The following commissions or percentages will be paid on all contribution received directly from the Coordinator *or from members in his area...* we will provide a 20% commission on the sale of subscriptions made *in the assigned territory.*"<sup>80</sup> [emphasis mine] While this incentive program model is effective in motivating Coordinators to more aggressively recruit members and act as a salesman for Society literature and other media, the financial motivation it introduces affects the "voluntary" nature of membership for otherwise unpaid Coordinators. Their motivation to

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<sup>79</sup> Federal Trade Commission. "Multilevel Marketing." *Federal Trade Commission Consumer Information*. March 13, 2018.

<sup>80</sup> 1976 July memorandum

participate in the Society and introduce others to the Society is in part driven by financial reward. Unlike a salaried staff-person of the Society, these Coordinators are only compensated when their sales pitch is successful, contributing to the Society's emphasis on strategic, persistent, and personal recruitment and sales methods.

Internal Society communications present a defense of the incentive program revealing an awareness of potential disapproval from the public or from other staff. The 1976 memorandum reads: "The likelihood of salaried Coordinators finding out about this new arrangement is very great. Which presents no problems. And our members will also probably get wind of it. We do not intend to broadcast it simply because it strictly on a trial basis at this point. But by the same token, there is nothing to hide or nothing unethical about it... After all, we believe in incentive and every one of our members is working to save a system where incentive abounds."<sup>81</sup> As mentioned earlier, this sort of business model is supported in the particular context of the Society because of the ideology of Producerism and meritocracy. The memorandum acknowledges that incentive-based compensation is central to their conservative view of the free-market economy, and their vision of America as a place where if one works hard and smart enough one is rewarded, in a "pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps" mentality. This places the burden of success or failure solely on the individual, shaming government subsidies and welfare, and turning an intentionally blind eye to systematic disenfranchisement of certain groups in America who are not given an equitable chance at success.

In a letter sent in 1976 from the Home Office Coordinator John Fall to a prospective incentive-program Coordinator, the sentiment of Producerism is made explicit: "The incentive referred to, of course, is prospective earnings directly proportionate to achievement. Any

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<sup>81</sup> 1976 July memorandum

salesman with faith in himself and in the product or service he is promoting, would view such an arrangement as a challenging and stimulating one.”<sup>82</sup> The mention of earnings being “directly proportional to achievement” holds the Coordinator personally and financially responsible for any hours of labor that do not result in a successful sale. Like in a multi-level marketing business model, salespeople are not compensated for their time, only for their successful sales. In the case of members acting as salespeople under the incentive-program Coordinators, their labor is still considered volunteer work, and no compensation is offered, but successful sales contribute to the income of the Coordinator of the member’s region. The phrase “any salesman with faith in himself and in the product or service...” again shifts personal responsibility onto the Coordinator, minimizing the effect of a challenging market for Society materials whose “brand” has been tainted by association with radicalism. As well as hinging the Coordinator’s self-worth on his success in recruitment and sales, this phrasing implies that a Coordinator who takes issue with the incentive system lacks faith in the “produce or service,” namely the Society and its message, and thus is unfit for membership. When taking into account the psychological motivations for membership and the expectation of personal loyalty, this language used to defend the incentive-based program effectively manipulates unpaid Coordinators into participating despite their compensation not being on par with their salaried counterparts, and preemptively silences critiques.

To close out discussion of the Society’s organizational structure, it is necessary to analyze the role of Businessmen’s Chapters that arose as part of the Society’s development strategy circa 1978. The formation of Businessmen’s Chapters shed light on the Society’s attempts to not only cultivate financial support from upper class supporters, but to also maintain

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<sup>82</sup> 1976 July memorandum

a respectable public image, by using business leaders as public facing representatives.

Throughout the document “Businessmen’s Chapters of JBS – Guide” it is made clear through pronouns and description of the target population that these chapters are intended strictly for men.<sup>83</sup> The Guide explains that these chapters “help us reach an important segment of Society.” Society leadership understands businessmen as being particularly ripe for recruitment given the Society’s anti-Communist agenda, pushing back against policies like government regulation of business. “As collectivists intensify their drive for total control over our population, a growing number of independent businessmen are seeing the negative effect of regulation... Anticipating and accelerating this development, the Society has been sponsoring hundreds of seminars in recent years for business and professional people in cities around the country.”<sup>84</sup> The formation of Businessmen’s Chapters is not only a result of that segment of the population being predisposed to support the Society’s conservative economic agenda, but also a result of intentional cultivation through targeted outreach and strategic messaging.

The Guide clarifies why businessmen are particular targets of the Society’s recruitment tactics: “It is important to keep in mind who we are trying to attract and why. An established, independent businessman should have the ability to give us the time, the influence, and the money that we need to implement our program and create an informed electorate in his community...”<sup>85</sup> Money and time are two things the Society expects, and pushes for, throughout its various levels of membership, although fundraising may be more fruitful amongst a financially successful group of businessmen. However, what is most notable about the role of

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<sup>83</sup> “Businessmen’s Chapters of JBS – Guide,” Carton 2, Folder 14, *John Birch Society records 1928-1990*

<sup>84</sup> “Businessmen’s Chapters of JBS – Guide”

<sup>85</sup> “Businessmen’s Chapters of JBS – Guide”

Businessmen's Chapters is that of cultivating influence over communities. This concept of influence ties directly back to the Society's attempts to portray a respectable, honorable image to the public, and why the association with radicalism and extremist organizations was one the Society found to be so confounding to their strategy. Similarly to how the biographies of the Council members emphasized community leadership and successful careers, the creation of Businessmen's Chapters was intended to bolster the reputation of the Society and validate Welch's ideology.

A 1987 JBS Bulletin makes explicit this recruitment strategy, under the heading "Reaching Opinion Molders." It reads "The John Birch Society was never designed to recruit the masses. Our intention has always been to mobilize and energize a sufficient number of opinion molders in our communities. Opinion molders include those individuals (no matter what their economic level or vocation) who will carry our message to others. Once opinion molders understand what is going on, they will influence enough additional voters to bring about needed changes."<sup>86</sup> The parenthetical acknowledgement that influencers need not be upper class to serve their purpose explains the role of the priest and retired General in the original 1958 Council. While these men may not have been able to offer the same financial support to the Society as the business executives in the Council, their respective community roles were trusted and respected; they would wield effective influence in spreading the Society's message.

A 1988 JBS Bulletin highlights the importance of personal contact with prospective members to successful recruitment, a point which highlights how Society recruitment took a psychological tactic, recognizing that their conspiratorial political message alone would not

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<sup>86</sup> "October 1987 JBS Bulletin," Carton 21, Folder 22, *John Birch Society records 1928-1990*

suffice to “recruit the masses.”<sup>87</sup> Under the heading “Recruitment,” the passage reads: “Provide *personal attention* [emphasis his, and hereafter] to a small, constantly updated group of prospects...Overwhelming experience shows that the key to getting anyone to join The John Birch Society is *personal attention*. That is why we advise that you work on six prospects, or some other reasonable number, to whom you can provide this *personal attention*...*Personal attention* means that you call, but preferably meet, a prospect face-to-face...”<sup>88</sup> [emphasis theirs]

Receiving this personal attention from a recruiter is part of the sense of specialness and self-importance that is one of the psychological incentives to Society membership. It allows for recruiters to both leverage their social influence and infect the prospect with the sense of apocalyptic urgency fundamental to the Society’s worldview.

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<sup>87</sup> “October 1987 JBS Bulletin”

<sup>88</sup> Vance, Cyrus. “April 1988 JBS Bulletin,” Carton 21, Folder 22, *John Birch Society records 1928-1990*

## Chapter 2: The John Birch Society's Ideology: Official and Implicit

There is a tension between the official ideology and mission put forth by the Society's leadership, in the form of Society publications and in particular *The Blue Book of the John Birch Society*, and the personal beliefs held and acted upon by the broader membership of the Society. This chapter will address the official ideology, which is radical in various ways but avoids explicit support of white supremacy and aligns itself with mainstream conservative Americans, and the Society's attempts at enforcement of this ideology. This chapter will also analyze the ways in which the broader membership of the Society diverged from this carefully curated ideological message in ways which contributed to the perception of the Society as an extremist group, often associated with explicitly anti-Black, anti-Semitic, or violent far right organizations such as the Liberty Lobby, the militant Minutemen, and the Ku Klux Klan.<sup>1</sup> Chip Berlet and Matthew Lyons have noted, despite the Society's defenses: "That the Birch Society clearly attracted members with a bigoted (even fascistic) personal agenda is undeniable, and these more zealous elements used the Society as a recruitment pool from which to draw persons toward a more neo-fascist or neo-Nazi stance."<sup>2</sup> Despite the Society's claims to be racially neutral, the subtext of its publications, campaigns, and internal communications reveal implicit racism, and a tolerance for bigotry amongst its membership as long it does not cross a line into tainting the organization's public image. The perception of the Society as radical was also due to their association with McCarthyism and the paranoid conspiracy fundamental to their worldview about Communist agents pulling the strings within the United States Government.

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<sup>1</sup> Edwards, Lee. *The Conservative Revolution: The Movement That Remade America*. New York, New York: The Free Press, A Division of Simon & Schuster Inc. 107.

<sup>2</sup> Berlet and Lyons, 183.

Welch and the Society leadership did not understand the Society's ideology to be radical or extremist, instead understanding it to be representative of a traditional, idealized America. In his founding presentation, Welch claimed that "There are a million such men and women in America who would join The John Birch Society tonight if they knew as much about it as you men in this room do right now."<sup>3</sup> They attempted to convey that understanding to the public, dismissing claims of bigotry and radicalism within the Society as external smear attacks by Communists and collectivists. The Society claims that race does not factor into its evaluation of potential members; "There is no anti-Semitism in the Society... There has never been anything remotely resembling a racial, religious or ethnic test in the Society."<sup>4</sup> The Society goes even further to qualify itself as "one of the best friends that Jews have ever had."<sup>5</sup> Often pointed to in this defense of the Society's tolerant position on race is Robert Welch's essay, "The Neutralizers," which was regularly distributed to members and derided anti-Semitism as another tool of conflict used by the Communist conspiracy which hinders the Society's purpose.<sup>6</sup> In one letter from a Society staff member to an applicant that advocated for violent action, the staff member rebukes him: "Our membership comes from all walks of life and we accept into our ranks all men and women of good conscience and religious ideals and of all races, colors and creeds."<sup>7</sup> This was consistently the official stance of the Society on issues of race and religion, although other Society publications make mention of Judeo-Christian religion and Christianity in

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<sup>3</sup> Welch, Robert, 165.

<sup>4</sup> April 1981 memorandum from JBS Public Relations Department, Carton 22, Folder 23, *John Birch Society records 1928-1990*

<sup>5</sup> 1981 April memorandum

<sup>6</sup> 1981 April memorandum

<sup>7</sup> 1974 April 17 letter, Carton 22, Folder 23, *John Birch Society records 1928-1990*

particular as fundamental to the Society's understanding of morality.<sup>8</sup> One publication, "The John Birch Resolutions," claimed that:

"The John Birch Society has been founded in a time and place where the people are – *or were* – predominantly Christian...it is natural, therefore, that we should lean most heavily on the moral customs and beliefs which are associated with Christianity, and with the Judaic commandments and traditions that preceded it...We believe history clearly shows that there *was* a victory march of Christian ideals well on the way towards acceptance by all peoples everywhere..."<sup>9</sup>

While the Society claims to be accepting of all religious ideals, it holds Christianity as fundamental to its vision of an ideal, moral America.

The Society did remove from its membership those individuals who were openly anti-Semitic in a way that leaked into the public sphere. In 1963, Robert De Pugh who was openly anti-Semitic and the leader of the militant Minutemen organization had his John Birch Society membership revoked.<sup>10</sup> In the Society's files of rejected and terminated memberships, many internal notes indicate that affiliation with anti-Semitic organizations was a reason for rejection or revocation of membership. One member and his wife left the Society after it was discovered that he had joined the National Socialist White People's Party; the husband resigned and the wife "wanted to drop out to save the Society from any possible embarrassment."<sup>11</sup> Despite the frequent overlap in membership with racist and fascistic groups, these members were often excised in an effort to maintain the official public image of the Society. One membership application was rejected when the housewife writing to the Society noted that she had worked

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<sup>8</sup> "The John Birch Society Pamphlet," circa 1987, [unsorted] John Birch Society 1972-1994 folder, *Institute for First Amendment Studies*

<sup>9</sup> "The John Birch Resolutions," undated, Carton 21, Folder 21, *John Birch Society records 1928-1990*

<sup>10</sup> Lipset and Raab, 265.

<sup>11</sup> 1979 June 25 letter, Carton 9, Folder 1 "Do Not Reinstate," *John Birch Society records 1928-1990*

with the KKK and, as well as being a staunch anti-Communist in line with the Society, “did every thing within [her power] to...keep our white race pure.”<sup>12</sup> In her letter she asserts that she “[understands] that [the John Birch Society’s] goals are the same...”<sup>13</sup> In spite of the Society’s efforts to push back against perceptions of the organization as bigoted, the reputation remained.

Revilio P. Oliver was a prominent individual who resigned from the Society at the prompting of Robert Welch after making “anti-Semitic and White supremacist comments at a 1966 Birch Society rally.”<sup>14</sup> He serves as an example of extremism existing within the Society’s leadership. Oliver was a classics professor with increasingly public anti-Semitic views, who had been a member of the Society’s National Council and an associate editor of *American Opinion*. Oliver had been responsible for the introduction of the Illuminati into the Society’s conspiracy theory, publishing the Society’s first mention of the Illuminati in a June 1962 *American Opinion* article.<sup>15</sup> Although Oliver was effectively removed from membership in 1966 when his bigotry became public, for years he had had an influential role in Society leadership and the formation of the Society’s ideology. His extremist, anti-Semitic worldview can not be cleanly extricated from the Society’s leadership during its formative early years of existence.

Anti-Semitism was, at the time, more of a poison in terms of public image than other forms of racism, and thus received the most explicit pushback by the Society.<sup>16</sup> All explicit racism was no longer as broadly accepted in mainstream American society as it had been in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Historians have pointed to the exposure of the horrific consequences of anti-

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<sup>12</sup> 1965 July 1 letter, Carton 9, Folder 10, “Applications Not Acceptable,” *John Birch Society records 1928-1990*

<sup>13</sup> 1965 July 1 letter

<sup>14</sup> Berlet and Lyons, 182.

<sup>15</sup> Lipset and Raab, 252.

<sup>16</sup> Webb, Clive. 2010. *Rabble Rousers: The American Far Right in the Civil Rights Era*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 7.

Semitism after the Holocaust as a factor in this shift. “Racism, [historian David Chappel] argues, did not possess the same cultural and intellectual credibility after World War II as it had only a generation earlier.”<sup>17</sup> However, internally there was a greater tolerance for anti-Semitism than official statements would claim. As explained in a 1974 letter from John Fall, the Home Office Coordinator of the Society, to a staff member:

“On this matter of anti-Semitism, Dave, there is a further distinction to be made. There is a fine line between personal prejudices, which everyone has the right to form, and open advocacy which could in effect neutralize other members and create a false impression of where the Society stands. We would not necessarily bar a person from membership merely because that person disliked a particular group of people... On the other hand an individual who goes around identifying himself as a Bircher and then launches into an anti-Semitic tirade creates a false impression of the Society...”<sup>18</sup>

The letter concludes that the member in question “is somewhat anti-Semitic” but is discreet enough about it that she remains “an asset to her chapter.”<sup>19</sup> The distinction the Society sets between “personal prejudices” which are acceptable, and “open advocacy” which is not, reveals that the Society’s motivation in eradicating open anti-Semites from its membership is based in public relations interest, and not moral condemnation.

On anti-black racism the Society claimed similar neutrality but revealed white supremacist ideals in the subtexts of its publications, campaigns, and communications. Berlet notes that at this historical moment, there was a move away from explicit biological racism, but implicit racism remained: “In a more subtle form of racism and anti-Semitism, the Birch Society promotes a culturally defined White Christian ethnocentrism as the true expression of America... The group’s ideology is suffused with implicit racism and anti-Semitism, but the latter are not

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<sup>17</sup> Webb, 4.

<sup>18</sup> 1974 March 29 letter, Carton 22, Folder 6, *John Birch Society records 1928-1990*

<sup>19</sup> 1974 March 29 letter

explicitly articulated as principles of unity.”<sup>20</sup> The Society campaigned vigorously against federal civil rights initiatives, under the premise of combatting federal overreach and artificial racial conflict created by the Communist conspiracy, but with the direct consequence of hindering social progress and attempting to block protections against racial discrimination.<sup>21</sup> Michelle Nickerson observes, “Although racism complemented political attitudes across the entire left-right spectrum, antistatism and anticommunism allowed conservatives much greater opportunity to act on their racial fears while denying that those fears existed.”<sup>22</sup> The Society takes this tact and denies a racial motivation.

One explicit example of the racist subtext of supposedly racially-neutral language against the civil rights movement is the circa 1965 flyer from the Society’s publishing arm, *American Opinion* in Belmont, Massachusetts, titled “What’s Wrong with Civil Rights?” This flyer is entirely dismissive of the hardships of racism that black Americans face; it begins by acknowledging racial injustice “in some places,” and moving on to describe all of the ways in which black Americans have a better quality of life than people in foreign countries, comparing their standards of literacy, material standard, freedom of religion, and claiming without any citations that black Americans have it better than most of the world. The flyer essentially denies the existence of racism, claiming that the average black American has a “security of person, and assurance of honorable treatment by his fellow citizens in all of the utilitarian relationships of living... exactly on a par with those of white neighbors,” and framing the above-mentioned injustices against black Americans as outliers. The author follows up this comparison with the

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<sup>20</sup> Berlet and Lyons, 171, 176.

<sup>21</sup> Diamond, 148.

<sup>22</sup> Nickerson, Michelle. “Politically Desperate Housewives: Women and Conservatism in Postwar Los Angeles.” *California History* 86, no. 3 (2009): 16.

audacious question, “So what is all of the complaining about?”<sup>23</sup> Turning a blind eye to the centuries of traumatic degradation and oppression under slavery, the author goes on to frame white Americans as benevolently superior, claiming that black American’s higher quality of life than foreign citizens is due to “opportunities originally provided by the economic enterprise of the American white through emulation by the American Negro of his white neighbor’s ways.”<sup>24</sup> This assertion that white Americans are more advanced and to be emulated is blatantly white supremacist, and willfully ignores the historical context of the enslavement and subsequent social, legal, and economic disenfranchisement of black Americans by white Americans. The author acknowledges racial inequality in the “economic, literate, and social levels” of these groups and blames this inequality on a lack of achievement of black Americans: “he has not yet achieved a par with the very leadership he was emulating.”<sup>25</sup> The author dismisses the civil rights movement as “almost wholly *created* by the Communists,” [emphasis theirs] and denies black Americans their political agency by claiming that they “as a whole did not plan this, [and] have not wanted it...”<sup>26</sup> If any doubt remained about the author’s white supremacist understanding of history, they assert that European colonists of Africa were “enlightened and benevolent,” and that it is false that “the colonial peoples of Asia and Africa wanted and deserved their “independence.””<sup>27</sup> This example serves to demonstrate that, while the Society may not have officially organized around race, or even would have self-identified as racist, its policies and worldview absolutely were, and therefore would attract racists to its membership.

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<sup>23</sup> “What’s Wrong with Civil Rights?” *American Opinion* flyer, circa 1965, *John Birch Society records 1928-1990*

<sup>24</sup> “What’s Wrong with Civil Rights?”

<sup>25</sup> “What’s Wrong with Civil Rights?”

<sup>26</sup> “What’s Wrong with Civil Rights?”

<sup>27</sup> “What’s Wrong with Civil Rights?”

The Society's attempt to claim an official race neutrality for public relations reasons, while condoning and holding racist beliefs, can be seen in other instances. In a 1964 letter from the assistant to Robert Welch, D.A. Waite to a prospective member, Waite responds, "Thank you for sharing your ideas on keeping the White and Negro races from mixing sexually. In many quarters this has been a problem, and it is hoped that some solutions can be worked out. This goes beyond the aims and purposes of the Society, however..."<sup>28</sup> This language of confirming to members that Society leadership personally views interracial relationships as a problem, while simultaneously distancing that racism from the official goals of the Society, feeds into the Society's doomed attempts to maintain a respectable public image.

Similarly, a 1965 letter from D.A. Waite gives a tepid response regarding anti-Black literature circulated by a member. He writes:

"I also looked over again the "Racial Facts" put out May, 1964...I feel White Supremacy and Negro inferiority is pushed strongly. While some of these statements might be honestly debated as to truth or falsity, the question I have is what is the net effect of them... However, do what you feel best and proper in this, as in other activity. Best wishes to you and keep up your good work!"<sup>29</sup>

He acknowledges the strong racism in the document, which was put forth as factual, implies ambiguously that the racist assertions may be true, and opts not to give direction against this bigoted behavior, closing with a commendation of the member's "good work." The repeated occurrences of Society staff, high in the organizational hierarchy and with close proximity to Robert Welch, tolerating or implicitly encouraging racist beliefs and messaging amongst the membership, makes the official claims to racial neutrality and tolerance particularly unconvincing.

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<sup>28</sup> 1964 July 14 letter, Carton 26, Folder 11, *John Birch Society records 1928-1990*

<sup>29</sup> 1965 January 19 letter, Carton 26, Folder 11, *John Birch Society records 1928-1990*

One of the Society's most persuasive defenses against the public perception of it as a radical and racist organization is the claim that an original misleading association between the Society and violent, bigoted far right groups contributed to a cycle of more extreme right-wing individuals joining the ranks and thus validating its bad reputation. In a 1981 memorandum from the Society's Public Relations department expressing this defense, the author makes reference to two reports from the California State Senate Un-American Activities Committee: one from 1963 which expressed that the Society was not anti-Semitic, and a second from 1965 which acknowledge a "growing incidence of anti-Semitism."<sup>30</sup> The memorandum reads, "What had happened was that widespread repetition of the lie that we were anti-Semitic led some anti-Semites to seek us out and join our organization... The 1965 Report was not incorrect, but the "growing incidence of anti-Semitism" that it noted was the result of falsehoods being aired about us, not any change in our fundamental position."<sup>31</sup> While this cycle of increasingly radical members joining the Society due to its association with bigotry (as the KKK-affiliated housewife mentioned above attempted to do) likely was a factor in its negative reputation, the Society was also responsible for feeding this loop by privately and implicitly validating the racist and extremist worldviews of its members. The perception of the Society as racist did not stem from an external false and malicious smear campaign, but from the racist dog-whistles embedded in the Society's worldview, publications, and campaigns.

The 1965 report had found that "Robert Welch's organization "has attracted a lunatic fringe that is now assuming serious proportions" and has been "beset by an influx of emotionally unstable people, some of whom have been prosecuted in the courts for their hoodlum tactics in

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<sup>30</sup> 1981 April memorandum from JBS Public Relations Department, Carton 22, Folder 23, *John Birch Society records 1928-1990*

<sup>31</sup> 1981 April memorandum

disrupting meetings, and heckling speakers with whom they disagree.”<sup>32</sup> Despite the Society leadership’s desire to project respectability, the radical undertones of their ideology attracted individuals that did not share the same concern for public relations. Occasionally these individuals demonstrated their instability early enough that the Society was able to effectively cull them. For example, an internal note on one rejected membership application from 1969 read: “The correspondence that she forwarded with her application was unbelievable. She is quite obviously unbalanced. I would guess from her wordy comments that she has been in a mental hospital...”<sup>33</sup> However, the 1965 report shows that the Society’s processes around weeding membership were not effective enough to prevent open participation by the “lunatic fringe” that they attracted, and the resulting damage to the Society’s reputation.

Aside from racial bigotry, another aspect of the Society’s ideology which contributed to the public perception of the group as radical was the conspiracy theory fundamental to Welch’s message, and the fear-mongering, apocalyptic, Good vs. Evil rhetoric inherent to it. Welch portrays Communists as nearly omnipresent in American society: “...Almost every day I run into some whole new area, where the Communists have been penetrating and working quietly for years, until now they are in virtual control...”<sup>34</sup> Welch also estimates them to be nearly omniscient; in a 1966 letter, Welch writes: “...the Communists know exactly what they are doing at all times... where their total opposition is hopelessly divided, embittered, and confused.”<sup>35</sup> This tendency of Society leadership to frame the Society’s mission and the political

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<sup>32</sup> Epstein, Benjamin R. and Arnold Forster. 1967. *The Radical Right: Report on the John Birch Society and Its Allies*. New York: Random House, 93.

<sup>33</sup> 1969 February 14 rejected application, Carton 9, Folder 9, *John Birch Society records 1928-1990*

<sup>34</sup> Welch, 5.

<sup>35</sup> 1966 June 8 letter from Robert Welch, Carton 22, Folder 6, *John Birch Society records 1928-1990*

situation in the United States in dramatic terms of extremes ties into the Good vs. Evil rhetoric which is widely understood to be a marker of radicalism. Friedman states, “Whatever evil the Society finds in the United States could easily – and logically – be explained by the Society if the Society would see the United States as something other than the land of Absolute Good. But the Society must cling to that sight for that is their vision: looking backward, looking forward: a pure white America. Gray cannot enter the picture, Absolute can not yield to relative.”<sup>36</sup> This inability to fit complicated “gray” realities into the Society ideology falls into an ideology common to extremist movements, as explained by Lipset and Raab: “Simplism [is] the unambiguous ascription of single causes and remedies for multifactored phenomena.”<sup>37</sup> In the case of the Society, this single cause ascribed is almost always the Communist conspiracy, as seen in the above discussion of the civil rights movement which the Society dismisses as a tool of the conspiracy.

The extreme extent of Welch’s conspiracy theory of Communist agents in United States institutions was the reason for the eventual condemnation and distancing the Society received from mainstream conservatives. Allegations made in Welch’s 1954 manuscript, *The Politician*, that the Republican President Dwight D. Eisenhower was a treasonous Communist, were published and condemned by the *Chicago Daily News* reporter Jack Mabley, at the same time as the Republic national convention took place in Chicago.<sup>38</sup> Mabley’s report resulted in negative media attention covering Welch’s conspiracy theory, casting the Society in a radical light. Traditional conservatives were unsettled by the breadth of Welch’s paranoia. Diamond points

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<sup>36</sup> Friedman, Paul. “The Metaphysics of the John Birch Society.” *The North American Review*, 253, no. 1 (1968): 4.

<sup>37</sup> Lipset and Raab, 10.

<sup>38</sup> Mulloy, 15.

out, “If former President Eisenhower – a venerated World War II General and a leading figure in the Cold War – could be labeled a Communist, what government official could feel safe from the Birchists’ smear tactics?”<sup>39</sup> The Society’s conspiracy-driven ideology was seen as a new evolution of red-baiting, a “post-McCarthy McCarthyism.”<sup>40</sup>

By the mid-1960s, the Society was receiving public condemnation from mainstream conservatives, which doubtless contributed to its reputation as a radical organization. In 1962, William F. Buckley, the founder and editor of the conservative magazine *National Review*, published an editorial “reading Robert Welch out of the conservative movement.”<sup>41</sup> Barry Goldwater, whose 1964 Presidential campaign was supported by the Society, later wrote a letter to the editor of *National Review* “calling on [Welch] to resign...” due to his extreme claims about the extent of Communist infiltration of the United States.<sup>42</sup> Although Welch understood the Society to be aligned with mainstream conservative American values, mainstream conservatives had a different opinion. Welch felt betrayed by these condemnations but carried on undeterred; in a 1961 edit of *The Blue Book of the John Birch Society* he had declared that “we have no intention of being distracted by the carping of our friends, or of those who should be our friends and we hope will be our friends in time,” and he followed that intention after these denouncements, not striking back, but the Society’s reputation nevertheless suffered a blow.<sup>43</sup>

Part of the Society’s conspiracy theory is the anticipation of a fast approaching culmination of the conflict between these absolutes of Good and Evil, which is framed in an apocalyptic way. Lipset and Raab note that in right-wing American politics, Communism “is

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<sup>39</sup> Diamond, 57.

<sup>40</sup> Savage, 4.

<sup>41</sup> Edwards, 105.

<sup>42</sup> Edwards, 107.

<sup>43</sup> Welch, ii.

often used as the broad, general reference by which to counter identify the body of bad intentions and bad character in the world.” Welch makes this claim explicitly: “Communism is not [an ideology,] a political party, nor a military organization...[it] is wholly a conspiracy, a gigantic conspiracy to enslave mankind...”<sup>44</sup> The use of fear as a motivating political tool is a related attribute of extremism which relies on this sense of impending doom brought on by Communism, and the acceptance that Communism is an absolute evil. Welch describes Communism in monstrous terms: “[The Communist] octopus is so large that its tentacles now reach into all of the legislative halls, all of the union labor meetings, a majority of the religious gatherings, and most of the schools of the whole world... The human race has never before faced any such monster of power which was determined to enslave it.”<sup>45</sup> The Society leadership not only puts forth this terrifying imagery, but also explicitly leverages the fear it inspires to gain supporters. A promotional leaflet with the innocuous title “May We Ask You Some Questions?” proceeds to ask questions which aggressively frame participation in the Society as a moral obligation, and the only escape from Communist doom: “Which do you value more, your present “non-controversial” status of drawing room conventionality, or the future freedom of your family? ...When your children are living under the same cruel tyranny that has already befallen Cuba, China, Czecho-Slovakia, and the Congo, how are they going to appraise what they did to prevent it?”<sup>46</sup> This series of loaded questions is followed up with a donation form.

Another element of the conspiracy theory at the center of the Society’s ideology is the implicit elitism and intellectualism behind Welch’s claim to be the only reliable source of

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<sup>44</sup> Welch, 30.

<sup>45</sup> Welch, 72-73.

<sup>46</sup> “May We Ask You Some Questions,” undated, Carton 21, Folder 27, *John Birch Society records 1928-1990*

knowledge, to be trusted in the face of all other arguments, and uniquely able to enlighten a brainwashed public. In speaking of his leadership, Welch states:

“...Entirely without pride, but in simple thankfulness, let me point out that a lifetime of business experience should have made it easier for me to see the falsity of the economic theories on which Communism is supposedly based...while a lifetime of interest in things academic, especially world history, should have given me an advantage over many business men, in more readily seeing the sophistries in dialectic materialism.”<sup>47</sup>

This passage highlights Welch’s status as both a business elite, and a highly educated and well-read intellectual, and argues that this elite status grants him a superior understanding of the conspiracy inaccessible to the average individual. This relates to a paradoxical phenomenon within conservative politics, of villainizing establishment elites while relying on elite power; Himmelstein argues that “the great strength of the conservative movement was that it...combined many of the resources of a member with the capacity to talk like a challenger. Even as it railed against a political and cultural establishment, it drew on significant established sources of power...”<sup>48</sup> In many of the Society publications, an underlying message is the patronizing encouragement to “trust us,” with “us” referring to the elite leadership of the Society. In a 1966 letter written by Welch, the sentiment of superiority is repeated: “I could write you a hundred pages on without pause on this subject, showing you right out of the statements and actions of Marx and Lenin themselves...but if I had to write even five pages to each one of our tens of thousands of members...you can readily see how hopeless my task would be.”<sup>49</sup> Welch and the Society leadership rely on the rhetorical tool of ethos to convince their audience of their message, while often neglecting to actually lay out a logical, cited argument which could would

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<sup>47</sup> Welch, 5.

<sup>48</sup> Himmelstein, Jerome L. 1990. *To the Right: The Transformation of American Conservatism*. University of California Press, 64.

<sup>49</sup> 1966 June 8 letter from Robert Welch, Carton 22, Folder 6, *John Birch Society records 1928-1990*

then be vulnerable to refutation. As well as painting all dissenters with the brush of the Communist conspiracy, this rhetorical tool and reliance on elite identity serves to silence questions or challenges to the Society's ideology. The ultimate message to followers is that they need not think for themselves because they lack the superior qualities of Welch and the Council, who are happy to do the thinking for them.

However, this reliance on the mostly blind trust and loyalty of the membership while fueling paranoia of malicious Communist agents lurking everywhere has occasionally backfired on the Society. This backfiring is best encapsulated in the scandal dubbed "The Belmont Brotherhood." Having cultivated their own elite identity as a reason to be trusted, the Society leadership's own tools of paranoid fear and suspicion were handily turned on them by a disgruntled ex-staff member, Nicholas J. Bove, Jr., who had been Robert Welch's research assistant.<sup>50</sup> In 1974, Bove circulated a booklet to all members of the Society accusing Welch and the Council members of themselves being pawns of Communists. Bove pointed out, with great suspicion, the association of Society Council members with institutions of the establishment elite, such as the Council on Foreign Relations, the Federal Reserve Bank, the Newcomen Society and the National Council of YMCA.<sup>51</sup> Bove doubled down on the Society's conspiracy theories, alleging that the Council was merely manipulating the Society membership in the interest of the Communists as part of an even larger Illuminati conspiracy, and behind the Illuminati conspiracy were nefarious Freemasons.<sup>52</sup> He deftly used the Society's own paranoid language to unsettle his readers: "Our greatest problem, however, has been...the difficulty of

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<sup>50</sup> Bove, Nicholas J. "Re: The Belmont Brotherhood," Carton 27, Folder 25, *John Birch Society records 1928-1990*

<sup>51</sup> "Re: The Belmont Brotherhood"

<sup>52</sup> "Re: The Belmont Brotherhood"

getting the ordinary Bircher to sit up and take an honest look at what is really happening... They have accepted and believed so much Belmont propaganda in the past that they must now defend it as their own.”<sup>53</sup> In a 1977 letter addressing concern over the allegations, John McManus, the Society’s Public Relations Director writes to a member: “When a young lady begins to wonder “whether or not there’s anyone to trust any more,” I guess it’s safe to say that trouble is brewing. So, let me start off my response to you by telling you that there is just as much reason as ever to trust The John Birch Society. Included in that statement, of course, is my recommendation that you trust me.”<sup>54</sup>

Interestingly, the allegations in “The Belmont Brotherhood” closely parallel a publication fundamental to the Society’s vision of the Communist conspiracy which was written by John McManus nine years later in 1983, titled “The Insiders: A look at the powerful few who really dictate America’s policies...”<sup>55</sup> While directed externally, and not internally, “The Insiders” also pointed to the corruption by Communists of elite and government institutions like the Council on Foreign Relations and the Trilateral Commission. Despite the stretch in logic it required, the leadership of the Society continued to leverage their own intellectualism and elitism as a reason to be trusted, while portraying other establishment elites as Communist puppets or conscious conspirators.

Where the Society’s ideology aligned the most with traditional conservatism was its business nationalism and emphasis on Producerism and meritocracy, as defined in Chapter 1. The ideology of business nationalism in particular contributed to the suspicion and animosity

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<sup>53</sup> “Re: The Belmont Brotherhood”

<sup>54</sup> 1977 June 20 letter from John McManus, Carton 27, Folder 25, *John Birch Society records 1928-1990*

<sup>55</sup> McManus, John F. “The Insiders,” 1983, Carton 21, Folder 21, *John Birch Society records 1928-1990*

towards particular institutions seen as globalist, or business multinationalist, such as the Council on Foreign Relations which was often a target of the Society's conspiracy theories.<sup>56</sup> Business multinationalists more often supported "active government intervention in the economy, including social welfare programs for the sake of social peace, foreign aid to develop international markets," which were anathema to the Society's resistance to "big government" and any form of aid, derided as Communist-aligned collectivism.<sup>57</sup> The concept of Producerism, which condemns "[unproductiveness]...and subordinate groups defined as lazy or immoral," and meritocracy, which dictates that ability and achievement should directly correlate to power and social status, in the case of the Society rely on historical revisionism which attempts to erase the context of oppression and disenfranchisement of non-white Americans and women.<sup>58</sup> As analyzed previously, the Society's stance on racial inequality blames an oppressed class of people for a lack of "achievement," without engaging with the systemic barriers that had been, and remain, in place limiting opportunities for this achievement.<sup>59</sup> The ability to achieve, and assert oneself in the Society's ideology of meritocracy, is limited to a narrow segment of America. In the Society's publications protesting against the Equal Rights Amendment, they take the position that women should not be put in the position of competing with men: "Keep all women from suffering the effects of equality...the Amendment would destroy existing protective labor legislation for women and force women to compete with men;" one publication refers to women's rights activists as "the gals who would rather be equal than special."<sup>60</sup> These points are

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<sup>56</sup> Berlet and Lyons, 164.

<sup>57</sup> Berlet and Lyons, 164.

<sup>58</sup> Berlet and Lyons, 6.

<sup>59</sup> "What's Wrong with Civil Rights?"

<sup>60</sup> 1974 *The Birch Log* "Here We Go Again!" Carton 21, Folder 20, *John Birch Society records 1928-1990*

relevant because they demonstrate that the ideologies of Producerism and meritocracy, as understood by the Society, reject the prerequisite of an equitable playing field for achievement, as they simultaneously attempt to deny and maintain white male supremacy. This denial of the oppression of women and non-white people, and efforts to uphold white male supremacy, are the reasons why even the Society's official ideology is inherently racist and sexist.

The Society took dedicated steps to ensure the top-down enforcement of the official Society ideology on its membership in order to keep tight control of the Society's public image. Webb has argued that "concentration on the leaders of the far right can create the false impression of a compliant group of followers who uncritically accepted their political strategy and philosophy. The way grassroots supporters interpreted the rhetoric...is therefore as significant as the rhetoric itself."<sup>61</sup> Certainly, Society members did push back against Society leadership, in the forms of outwardly extremist members, or rebels like Nicholas Bove. However, Welch had built into the Society's organizational structure an expectation of unquestioning loyalty, and ways for staff members to curate and easily purge dissident members. The Society's application forms required up front payment, and listed the disclaimer, "If my application is accepted, I agree that my membership may be revoked at any time, by a duly appointed officer of the Society, without the reason being stated, on refund of the pro rata part of my dues paid in advance."<sup>62</sup> Membership applications and existing memberships were also vetted by staff members who would deny or remove members that did not fit the Society's desired respectable public image. This did not only mean removing those affiliated with hate groups, but also avoiding or cutting members who otherwise did not fit the mold. One

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<sup>61</sup> Webb, 10.

<sup>62</sup> Membership application form, Carton 13, [unsorted] *Chip Berlet Research Files, Political Research Associates records 1908-2011*

membership filed as “Do not reinstate” listed a reason as “He wears buttons and bows and is simply too different;” another membership had listed the reason: “bounced a \$10,000 check.”<sup>63</sup> One rejected membership lists the cause: “Obscene at chapter meetings, offends men and women, brings girlie magazines,” and another: “This person is a drug user and not what we want in the Society.”<sup>64</sup> <sup>65</sup> This strict culling of undesired members ensured minimal opportunity for members to push back against Society leadership.

The organization of the Society into small local chapters was also meant to minimize opportunity for any subversive activity. A 1962 letter from Thomas N. Hill, the Director of Field Activities, expresses concern that Chapter Leaders have met together, and explains “...we have made it clear to our Coordinators and to our Section Leaders throughout the country that our chapters should remain independent of each other and that this procedure is one of the reasons why we are being so successful... [Friction between Chapter Leaders] was the very thing that Mr. Welch was trying to eliminate when he established the Society as he did.”<sup>66</sup> This isolation between chapters added to the ability of upper level staff and Society leadership to control the broader membership.

Society leadership also enforced strict adherence to official ideology and policy through the dispersal of detailed instructions for Chapter Leaders on how to conduct meetings, and for all members as to how to conduct recruitment, often using scripts. One 1973 memorandum sent to Society members with instructions on how to conduct a filmstrip presentation, used in part for

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<sup>63</sup> 1971 December 3 letter from Home Office Coordinator Anne W. Dennison, Carton 9, Folder 1, *John Birch Society records 1928-1990*

<sup>64</sup> 1971 April 13 letter, Carton 9, Folder 1, *John Birch Society records 1928-1990*

<sup>65</sup> 1975 September 3 letter, Carton 9, Folder 1, *John Birch Society records 1928-1990*

<sup>66</sup> 1962 March 8 letter from Thomas N. Hill, Carton 2, Folder 3, *John Birch Society records 1928-1990*

recruiting prospective members, gave a script and these instructions: “If a question is raised, try to answer it briefly and directly. It is of paramount importance that questions not serve as a point of departure from the subject of the evening – The John Birch Society... Your task immediately after your remarks is to “keep the need for a decision present.”<sup>67</sup> Questions, or real engagement with the messages put forward, was discouraged, and pressure to join the organization was a top priority of the meeting. Letter writing campaigns also presented detailed instructions as to tone, subject, and structure, and templates were provided.<sup>68</sup> A 1966 memorandum from Thomas N. Hill to all Major Coordinators and Coordinators gave pointers on “selling by telephone,” one of which was to use “Intelligence and common sense (to explain the necessity for the Society but not to overstate our position and sound like those “right-wing extremists”).”<sup>69</sup> Welch and the Society leadership were constantly aware of how Society staff and members could affect public perceptions of the organization, and put strategies in place to limit the possibility of individuals straying from the official ideology and curated image.

Another method by which the Society attempted to control its public image and defend its ideology was to severely limit the release of public information about the demographics of its membership. This was often perceived as secretive and actually backfired in this regard. The Society published defensive claims of transparency: “The John Birch Society is not a secret, or even semi-secret, organization, but an organization which works above board in every respect, calling a spade a spade and openly telling the world what it wants and what it hopes to

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<sup>67</sup> 1973 January memorandum, Carton 9, Folder 26, *John Birch Society records 1928-1990*

<sup>68</sup> “Letter Writing (Strategy),” Carton 15, Folder 34, *John Birch Society records 1928-1990*

<sup>69</sup> 1966 May 5 memo from Thomas N. Hill (Field Activities Director) to all Major Coordinators and Coordinators, Carton 22, Folder 27, *John Birch Society records 1928-1990*

achieve.”<sup>70</sup> Despite this claim, it was openly understood that membership lists, numbers of chapters and members, and all financial information, was held tightly to the Society’s chest. Berlet has observed: “The society has never intentionally disclosed much information about its inner workings: local chapters are designated by four-letter codes and membership is secret. The society’s financial reports are denied even to most members and restricted to its small National Council.”<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, in *The Blue Book of the John Birch Society*, Welch explicitly outlines his intention for the Society to have “fronts — little fronts, big fronts, temporary fronts, permanent fronts, all kinds of fronts...” to obscure the Society’s activities<sup>72</sup> This propensity for front organizations gave the impression that the actual ideology and agenda of the Society was something radical to be hidden, as opposed to being mainstream.

A 1989 interview with a Society member gives some insight into why the membership lists were so private. The member explains, “Some members are very prominent and it is still sort of gauche, in certain circles, to be a member of the Birch Society. Because there are leftists in business as well as Conservatives, so if members choose to keep it private, the Society respects that.”<sup>73</sup> The secrecy around membership not only helps Society leadership control public perception, but it also serves to protect its prominent members from facing the social and economic consequences of belonging to an organization perceived as radical, and allows them to promote the Society agenda insidiously. This reluctance for members to openly acknowledge

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<sup>70</sup> Draskovich, S.M., “The JBS is a threat to whom?” undated *American Opinion* reprint, Carton 21, Folder 21, *John Birch Society records 1928-1990*

<sup>71</sup> Berlet, Chip, “Trashing the Birchers, Secrets of the Paranoid Right,” *The Boston Phoenix*, July 14-20, 1989, Carton 2, [unsorted] John Birch Society 1972-1994 folder, *Institute for First Amendment Studies records 1920-1999*

<sup>72</sup> Welch, 88.

<sup>73</sup> “The John Birch Society is Alive and Well and Living in Wisconsin” [Interview with JBS member Tom Eddlem] *Door No. 3* Winter ’89-’90, Carton 13, [unsorted] *Chip Berlet Research Files, Political Research Associates records 1908-2011*

their role in the Society contributes to the perception of the Society as extremist and secretive, with something to hide. Furthermore, the reluctance of the Society to publicly address the demographics of its membership fed into perceptions that only white people were attracted to its ideology, reinforcing the idea that its agenda was fundamentally white-supremacist. In a 1981 memorandum put out by the Society's Public Relations department denying anti-Semitism, the author claimed that "...it would be demeaning to our Jewish members, and to Jews everywhere, to publish a list of the names of some Jewish John Birchers. So we never do..."<sup>74</sup> Without guessing as to the truth or falsity of this reasoning, it was not effective in counteracting the perception that the secrecy around Society membership concealed a less diverse membership than the Society claimed. Furthermore, internal communications revealed that the Society did in fact have trouble recruiting non-White members, when the attempts were made. A 1975 letter between the Society's Home Office staff and a member acknowledged the lack of appeal of the Society to black Americans in particular: "We sure could use some Negro anti-Communists here... 48% of Memphis' population is Negro... HELP!"<sup>75</sup>

Given the negative consequences that members could face for belonging to the Society as its reputation as a radical organization grew, and the high and strict expectations members faced from Society leadership, it is important to revisit why members were motivated to join and remain in the Society. In discussing the parameters for her study of the demographics of Society members, Barbara Stone notes that: "Neither the professional staff nor the top leadership was considered representative of the general membership;" although the demographics of the Society were better educated and high class than some other far right groups, most were not of the same

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<sup>74</sup> April 1981 memorandum

<sup>75</sup> 1975 April 17 letter, Carton 26, Folder 11, *John Birch Society records 1928-1990*

elite class as Society leadership.<sup>76</sup> The higher class top leadership, largely coming from business backgrounds, may have been more motivated by factors of economic conservatism and small government, while the less elite membership may have been more motivated by social conservatism and white anxiety, contributing to the disruption of the leadership's presentation of race neutrality. The broader membership had a variety of motivations, from the psychological fear-based desire to avoid the encroaching Communist Dark Ages, as often threatened by Society publications, to a sense of purpose in political activism.<sup>77</sup> Fred W. Grupp conducted a 1971 study of a small sample of Society members to determine reasons for joining, and reasons for personal satisfaction in the Society. He concludes that most the most common reasons to join were to "become informed, associate with like-minded people," or "ideological."<sup>78</sup> Grupp makes the observation that "the leaders and followers can be expected to place their emphasis on the activity associated with membership rather than on the actual achievement of symbolic Society goals."<sup>79</sup> Despite the potential downsides of Society membership, most members desired the sense of a community of others who shared their ideology. However, as this analysis has shown, there is a dynamic tension as to how that ideology may be interpreted.

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<sup>76</sup> Stone, 188.

<sup>77</sup> Stone, 193.

<sup>78</sup> Grupp, Fred W. "Personal Satisfaction Derived from Membership in the John Birch Society." *The Western Political Quarterly*, 24, no. 1 (1971): 80.

<sup>79</sup> Grupp, 82.

### Conclusion

The organizational structure of the John Birch Society reflects the ideology of its authoritative leader, Robert Welch, whose life experience has resulted in a fervent conservative business nationalism and a deep paranoia about the existence of Communism and collectivism in American political life. The Society itself mirrors the structure used by Communists in a twisted sense of admiration, consisting of small Chapters controlled by a strict central authority, but reliant on growth through grassroots activism. Welch's experience in sales and marketing can be seen in the way members are assigned the duty of salesmen, both metaphorically selling the Society's ideology and message, and literally selling memberships, advertising, and publications. The economic conservatism which disdains the labor movement can be seen in the inconsistent and scarce compensation of levels of membership originally considered staff, and the constant push for volunteer hours and donations from the general membership. The Society's pyramidal structure and use of incentive-based payment for both the sale of products and recruitment are reminiscent of a multi-level marketing business model and provide some added financial incentive for participation.

Other draws of membership are the superiority felt by sharing in Welch's enlightened knowledge of the creeping Communist conspiracy, and the fear and paranoia imbued by belief in this conspiracy. For businessmen, the Society's fight against government regulation rationally aligns with their interests. For whites anxious about their slipping grasp on social status in the face of demographic change and the civil rights movement, the Society provides a reassuring vision of an idealized white, Christian America, and an opportunity to work against progress towards equality. Both the Society's more extreme implicit ideology, conveyed through the personal admissions of Welch and Society staff, and apparent through a close reading of Society

publications, and the official ideology which ties itself to a race-neutral economic conservatism and anti-Communism, carry an appeal for different segments of conservative America. Although the Society sought to distance itself from its radical label, its embrace of paranoid conspiracy theory and failure to repress the bigotry within its membership and leadership contributed to its alienation from mainstream conservatism.

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